Summary

Gibbs plus Tony's moms - how does it all work out?
Chapter 1

As much as Gibbs vehemently claimed to both Director and Ducky alike that he most certainly did not play favorites amongst his team-members, with Abby being the only notable exception, the frustrating truth of the matter was that he did, in fact, have a favorite agent. Said man being, of course, the one and only Tony DiNozzo. An individual who had, over the course of several long years, inexplicably managed to wriggle his way into his heart and commandeer the unofficial title of cherished son. And while Gibbs would never dare utter such sentiments aloud to anyone other than Tony, as such a confession might very well jeopardize both their careers, he did take great measures to make certain his boy understood the extent of his affections by occasionally committing a labor of love for him.

Which was the only reason Gibbs was currently on the road before the sun had even risen, necessity having dictated he travel to some obscure airport in order to pick up one Henrietta Paddington – her own son unfortunately unable to fulfill such an important task by virtue of having infuriated the Director profusely enough to be refused any time off in the distant future. And while Gibbs would have normally left the cheeky boy to suffer the consequences of his own actions, his favoritism not lending itself to spoiling of any kind, he found he had been unable to keep from intervening as the Director really had earned himself the sass after having been so audacious as to suggest that Gibbs had acted too aggressively with a perp that had been disemboweling female officers at random.

And so, it was with that mind, as well as the promise of a large cup of coffee upon his return, that Gibbs had set off into the predawn morning to collect a woman who had spent the greater portion of her life in Witness Protection overseas – her former husband, of course, having been the one responsible for such isolation by virtue of trifling with the business affairs of those who really not to have been trifled with.

“‘The things I do for that boy.’” Gibbs grumbled to himself, swiping the sleep out of his eyes as he carefully navigated his way into the airport parking garage. “‘God help me, I don’t even do this much for Abby.’”

Granted Abby did have a fully-functioning family of her own, as well as McGee now, to do her bidding and see to it that she was happy. But still, Gibbs ruminated, Tony did seem to receive an awful lot of indulgences from him of late. Something that Ducky seemed more than just a little keen of reminding him about whenever Gibbs began take a particularly harsh tone with the resident Autopsy Gremlin.

“‘Rotten.’” Gibbs mumbled, making his way into the airport. “‘Spoiled rotten.’”

And although he was not at all in so bad a humor as he might have been, given the fact that he had been compelled to both rise early and miss out on work, Gibbs still found himself moving toward a shoddy little café near a dimly-lit bathroom, thinking he ought to at least get a little more caffeine into his system if he was going to be forced into being somewhat sociable with a relative stranger. If not for his sake, Gibbs thought, then at least for hers.

“‘Give me the largest and blackest cup of coffee you have.’” Gibbs instructed the skinny redhead behind the counter. “‘Please.’” He added, upon seeing that she was very comely and presumably single.

Defying all logic by appearing to be wide-awake at such an absurd hour, the freckled barista quickly complied with his wishes and delivered unto him a steaming cup of coffee, the small smile on her face gradually turning into a flirtatious grin after she tried, and failed, to give him a discrete
“Picking up a wife today, Sir?”

“No.” Gibbs readily assured, noticing her own lack of a wedding band. “Just a friend.”

“Do you have a long wait ahead of you?” The smiling woman inquired, her voice taking on a hopeful tone. “I’m off in ten minutes…”

Understanding a request for an impromptu date when he heard one, such tactics very reminiscent of the way he had met wife number three, Gibbs was sorely tempted to ask the curvy woman to share a coffee or two with him in the relative privacy of a deserted alcove he had passed on his way to the shop. But before his smaller head could do all the thinking, and thus lead him into trouble with yet another woman, Gibbs regained his senses and reluctantly came to the conclusion that he must needs refuse to engage the friendly barista – both needing to be prepared to receive Henrietta in a polite manner as well as needing to abstain from any potentially violent redheads after his most recent tryst with his divorce lawyers ex-wife had left him with a scar on his knee.

“I really need to be going.” Gibb apologized, more than just a little reluctant to take his leave.

“You could leave your number.” The stranger suggested, not one to be so easily deterred from what she wanted.

His resolve rapidly declining, as the presence of a pretty redhead always affected him to a certain degree, Gibbs stole a quick glance at the barista’s nail in search of motivation to refuse the request for more time – having long since learned that the presence of manicured nails, filed down into vicious talons, would always put him off a woman straight away.

“I’m sorry, Ms.” Gibbs apologized. “But I really should be going.”

Because even though it would take but little time to scribble his name down on a piece of paper, or napkin, Gibbs knew he would never be down that way again.

And, not knowing what was to be said after such an awkward refusal to engage, Gibbs shrugged and left the pretty woman alone to stew over the fact that she had been turned down by a man at least twice her age – something that likely happened very seldom given her good lucks and curvy physique. But wishing not to ruminate on such a matter too long, as it had been no easy feat to turn down a redhead, Gibbs hurried off in mock urgency, not wishing for the barista to think that he was a liar atop of being awkward and unsociable.

It was only once he was certain that he was out of her view that Gibbs slowed his steps and allowed himself a sip of coffee, the awkwardness gradually leaving his body the further he retreated into the poorly-lit airport. As it turned out, it was a markedly good thing that he waited so long to steal a drink. For both burnt and metallic-tasting, the foulness of such a brew actually prompted him into spitting the garbage straight from his mouth and into a nearby garbage can.

It was only after he had finished cursing the establishment that had ever dared sell him such a steaming cup of garbage, as well as washed his mouth out with several mints from his pocket, that Gibbs felt sufficiently recovered enough to take a seat on a nearby bench to await the imminent arrival of his future passenger.

But rather than sit back in leisure and rifle through the unappealing magazines scattered all throughout the airport at random, Gibbs sat straight and looked out at the airport with a keen eye, not knowing anything more about Henrietta Paddington other than the fact that she had promised her son
to wear her “favorite green sweater.”
Chapter 2

Despite having been given precious little to go on when it came time to deduct the presence of Henrietta Paddington, the color of a sweater being woefully inadequate in such matters as it was very likely his passenger wouldn’t be the only woman wearing green that morning, Gibbs felt confident that he would able to spot the woman well enough given Tony’s prudence in sharing (years ago) that his mother had *markedly* long black hair with a bit of a curl to it.

And so, it was with black hair and green sweaters in mind that Gibbs sat and kept vigil, his keen Marine eyes darting from one disembarking passenger to the next as he patiently awaited the arrival of Tony’s mother. Easily removing from his consideration all those that did not fit the son-ascribed criteria, which was remarkably easy once he realized the majority of those exiting the plane were young students on tour of their nation’s capital, Gibbs sat up a little taller and narrowed in on a portly woman wearing a green sweater. But just as he realized, to his great irritation, that said woman’s hair was neither black nor long, he was taken off-guard by a timid hand tapping his shoulder from behind.

And not at all familiar with the concept of being taken unawares, as really his Marine senses were quite superb, Gibbs jerked ungracefully in his seat before whipping his head around to investigate the identity of such an unwelcome surpriser.

“Excuse me,” The interrupter hummed, “But are you Agent Gibbs?”

It was a petite woman who addressed him, one with absurdly long hair and dazzling green eyes that sparkled with light despite the serious lack of proper lighting within the dingy airport terminal.

“Yes.” Gibbs managed, rising to his feet. “And you are?”

“I’m Henrietta Paddington.” The short woman explained, dimples and perfect teeth all on display as she announced what Gibbs already knew. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Very much distracted by the alarming similarities between Henrietta and Tony, as the facial similarities did not stop at just hair and eyes, Gibbs blinked stupidly a few times and worked to convince himself that he had only *imagined* the woman’s friendly smile and mischievous expression to be the same as her son’s.

“I’m Gibbs.” He needlessly introduced, immediately feeling the awkwardness of such a lack of poise as he grabbed the carry-on from her hands. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Magnanimously choosing to ignore his social blunder, either from a spirit of good-will or pity, Henrietta grinned openly and rested a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, good, I found you.” DiNozzo mother expressed, no hint of mockery in her mild exclamation. “For a moment, I was worried I wouldn’t. All Tony told me was to look for…”

“An angry-looking man?” Gibbs supplied, wordlessly beginning to steer them through the airport.

Blushing quite prettily, but otherwise seeming perfectly unalarmed at being so swiftly caught out, Henrietta giggled softly and refused to contradict him.

“How ever did you guess?” She inquired, opting for a bit of playful ignorance.
“Because that’s how he usually describes me.” Gibbs shrugged, the merest suggestion of a
smirk turning of the corner of his lips. “But don’t go getting angry at him, now.” He quickly insisted,
catching site of a scandalized expression in her eyes. “It’s the truth.”

Once properly appeased that her child had not been behaving in an impolite fashion, as was
every mother’s great worry, Henrietta relaxed her shoulders and somber expression and fixed him
with yet another infectious smile.

“Oh, I could never stay angry at my little boy for too long.” The divorcee assured, effortlessly
keeping stride with her chauffeur. “Especially not when it’s been so long since I’ve seen him.”

Feeling all the awkwardness of not knowing what to say to a mother who had been so long
separated from her only child, and feeling all the worse for it, Gibbs shuffled his feet awkwardly
before defaulting to a bit of brusqueness.

“Well, I know he’s just as eager to see you.” Gibbs informed. “So let’s get your stuff and
go.”

Not so much as blinking an eye at the sudden unfriendliness of her companion, perhaps
because she had been forewarned of such a characteristic, Henrietta nodded eager and doubled the
pace of her feet.

“No need to rush.” Gibbs interjected, feeling no great desire to speed-walk. “We still need to
grab your bags.”

“But I haven’t brought any other bags.” Henrietta dismissed, reluctantly slowing her pace to
match his own.

Unable to believe that anyone so closely-related to Tony had brought along only one bag on
an international flight, as said man packed two for simple overnights out of town, Gibbs looked
down in disbelief at the semi-hyper woman.

“You just brought the one?” He repeated, taking no care to hide the doubt in his tone.

“You don’t really have a lot of opportunities to shop when you’re put into protection.”
Henrietta teased, her smile wide but forced. “They barely even let you out into your backyard.”

Feeling every bit the asshole after making so blasé a comment, Gibbs resolved to keep as
quiet as he could on the ride back into the city.

“I suppose they wouldn’t.” Gibbs agreed, feeling the need to say something. “But you did
bring a coat along, right?”

“A coat?” Henrietta frowned, looking very much like the word was foreign one. “Oh! A
c Coat! I forgot how cold it got here!”

Seeing as the woman had been ensconced somewhere in Spain for the last several years, and
was not just a stubborn hater of jackets like her son, Gibbs took compassion on the woman and
slipped off his own coat before thrusting it at her.

“Slip in on.” He requested.

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“I was a Marine.” Gibbs interrupted. “I can take a little chill.”
Thus assured, Henrietta quickly donned the jacket without another word of protest, her word of thanks garbled on the small giggle that had escaped her lips upon realizing his coat all but dwarfed her and left with her all the looks of a child playing dress up.

“We’re you really a Marine?” Henrietta inquired, expertly rolling up the sleeves of his jacket.

“Yes.” Gibbs nodded. “I was.”

“You’ll have to forgive my baby his lack of description.” Henrietta obliged. “We were only allowed so many pages a letter.” Frowning deeply only for the space of a second, if that, Henrietta quickly shook her head and replaced the somber expression with a more palatable one. “Oh, I can’t wait to see my baby again.”

“He feels the same way.” Gibbs assured. “I don’t think he’s sat still since he got the news you could come back home.”

It was no exaggeration either, for Gibbs had several times been forced to order the boy back into his chair after his incessant pacing had nearly driven the entire team into madness-induced homicide.

“To be fair, neither have I.” Henrietta confessed, not at all bashful. “It’s a hard thing for a mother to be kept from her child, you know.”

“I could imagine.” Gibbs allowed, thinking painfully of his Kelly. “But you’ll see him soon enough. Before supper, if we’re lucky.”
Chapter 3

“I’m so glad to be back home before the Holidays began.” Henrietta expressed, glancing pensively out at the billboards advertising a myriad of Halloween candy. “Don’t you just love this time of year?” She inquired, sparing a glance away from the scenery to smile at her taciturn driver.

Never once removing his shrewd blue eyes from the road, the man assigned to escort her home gave a marginal nod of his head, the action so reserved and precise in nature that she almost began to wonder if she had imagined it.

“I suppose it’s nice when the bugs die off.” He allowed, effortlessly merging through traffic. “I can’t say much for the snow though.”

Herself having a great love for that specific feature of winter, Henrietta found she could not agree with her somber-faced companion. For not only did she have many cherished memories of sledding with her favorite sister in Aspen, and sharing with her hot cocoa and secrets afterwards, so too had she formed many great remembrances with her boy during snowman building and impromptu ice-skating at the nearby lake.

“I know it sounds silly, but I actually did miss the snow.” She confessed, hoping to draw her companion into conversation. “I always thought it looked so pretty.”

Because even on the days it had been much too cold to go outside and frolic it such a seasonal amusement, the nights spent curled up in front of the fireplace watching the snow as it fell were some of the best as well.

“To each their own, I suppose.” Said the unsmiling Marine. “Do you mind if we stop for coffee?”

Herself feeling a great desire for the selfsame brew, as it had been ages since she had been given a proper cup, Henrietta eagerly nodded her assent to the idea and inwardly hoped that he would not direct them toward a substandard facility that merely offered only water-flavored coffee. Because as much as her manners served to convinced her to allow the driver of the vehicle to select the venue, her coffee-snobbery was a fierce thing that forbade all inferior brews to touch her tongue without much reluctance on her part.

“Heaven’s no.” Henrietta obliged. “I could use a coffee after such a long flight.”

Because as much as her energy levels had remained high throughout the whole affair, wavering only once during a particularly long stretch without any interaction from her neighbors, the fact still remained that she had spent the later portion of her trip trying not to breathe in the bacteria from the hacking woman behind her – which was quite the exhaustible affair as the infectious women seemed all but determined to spread whatever illness she had to the entire congregation of flyers.

“Is a Bongo’s okay?” Her driver inquired, expertly avoiding collision with a distracted teen driver. “There’s one nearby.”

“That depends.” Henrietta quipped, waggling a finger at the texting driver even as her counterpart flipped him off. “Does Bongo’s keep their coffee in urns in all day?”

Painfully aware of how pretentious such an inquiry made her sound, but otherwise too concerned with the quality of her future beverage to give her appearance much mind, Henrietta maintained a neutral expression and hoped for the best as she patiently awaited an answer.
“They brew their coffee fresh.” Her son’s boss answered. “I don’t drink garbage.”

“Good.” Henrietta smiled, once more able to relax. “Neither do I.”

They passed the next ten minutes in companionable silence then, neither one of them saying so much as a word until the truck had been parked in the crowded and misshapen lot of Bongo’s.

“You wouldn’t mind if we drank our coffee inside, would you?” Henrietta pestered, schooling her expression into one of innocence and honesty.

Because even though her silent companion had not mentioned feeling any symptoms of weariness or fatigue, Henrietta had not failed to notice him stifling a yawn on more than one occasion. Nor, she inwardly fussed, had she failed to notice him trying to subtly stretch out his legs in the unforgiving space between knee and dashboard.

“If that’s what you want.” Gibbs allowed, his expression unwavering even as a relieved gleam shone in his eyes.

“It is.” Henrietta assured, eager to see her new acquaintance rested. “Airplanes don’t give you a lot of room to stretch your legs.” She added, much for emphasis.

Failing to hide an amused grin at the notably incorrect insinuation that she needed a lot of space for her tiny legs, and seeming greatly mortified because of it, her temporary chauffeur quickly slipped out of the truck and left Henrietta alone to briefly consider how best to assure her shy companion that her feelings had not been hurt in any way. But before she could so much as concoct a number of solutions, much less select one, the passenger door was being opened by the bashful driver himself.

“Well,” Henrietta purred, “Aren’t you a gentleman?”

“I try.” He modestly dismissed, holding out a hand to help her with the descent.

“You succeed.” Henrietta corrected, grateful for the assistance as it was quite some ways to the ground.

Shrugging away the compliment as any shy man might have done, the blue-eyed Marine waited patiently for her to readjust the oversized coat protecting her from the elements before silently leading her inside the redbrick establishment.

“You’ll have to tell me what’s good here.” Henrietta requested of her reluctant friend.

“I’m sure you know your tastes better than I do.” He refuted, polite yet brusque as they idled into line.

“Perhaps,” Henrietta agreed, “But I always appeal to authority when trying a new place.”

Such a practice was, after all, the best way to assure that nothing exceedingly foul ever assaulted her tongue with its vulgar taste.

“I like the Jamaican Me Crazy.” Her travelling companion confessed, coloring a bit as he mumbled the name of the variety.

“Then that is what I will have.” Henrietta decided, eager to boost her companion’s confidence by accepting his suggestion. “Thank you for the recommendation, Mr. Gibbs.”

Cringing violently at the latter part of her short speech, the Marine in question shook his head and
looked at her as if she had just insulted his mother.

“Gibbs.” He corrected, firm yet even-toned. “Just Gibbs.”

“I’m not going to call you by your last name.” Henrietta refused, suitably scandalized by the very suggestion. “Come now, what’s your first name?”

Looking just as embarrassed as he had when uttering the name of his usual coffee selection, her chauffeur grumbled something beneath his breath before responding.

“Jethro.” He sighed, clearly believing the name to be an embarrassment. “It’s Jethro.”

“Well, Jethro.” Henrietta smiled. “Now that we’re in each other’s confidences, you can call me Hen.”

And while that allowance didn’t seem to take all the awkwardness and shyness out of her new friend, it certainly did seem to take a portion as evidenced by the stern-faced Marine smirking at the idea of addressing a woman by the name of a barn-yard animal.
Although Tony understood that he must needs be driving his team crazy with his relentless pacing of the bullpen, as even the forever jovial Tim was beginning to grow agitated with his childish theatrics, he found (to his great consternation) that he could not help but keep moving as such frenetic action was very likely the only think keeping him relatively sane as he awaited the arrival of his mother. Because while said woman wasn’t as of yet technically late, he had foolishly allowed himself to be deluded into thinking Gibbs would somehow be able to circumvent all laws of traffic to get her to him sooner than predicted.

“You’re going to put grooves in the floor.” Abby cautioned, looking upon him in concern from her perch atop her fiancé’s lap.

Whilst the gothic-girl in question would normally have been happily ensconced in her lab, doing only God knew what, she had found the temptation to meet her best friend’s mother to be of insurmountable proportions. And boasting of immense pride in the woman that was Henrietta Paddington, Tony had happily allowed the caffeine-addict her impromptu break from working on cold-cases. But whilst that action alone had garnered immense appreciate from both halves of the affianced McGee couple, it had only seemed to aggravate the unusually moody Kate into a sullen silence – said brunette only deigning to speak when it was to issue a directive or insult.

“You’re going to get stabbed.” Kate warned, narrowing her bloodshot eyes at him.

Long since having grown weary of his teammate’s increasingly sour attitude, especially after such vitriol had been directed at his fiancée, Tim scowled in disapproval upon the surly brunette and finally spoke up.

“Leave him be.” Tim chastised, earning himself a timid nod of agreement from his future wife. “He hasn’t seen his mother in ages.”

No doubt empathizing deeply with Tony on such a matter, as Tim had not too long ago been obligated into helping his beloved younger sister move into a college dorm several hours away, the literature-enthusiast seemed all to unwilling to play a party to Kate’s unsympathetic grumblings.

“Well pacing the floor isn’t going to make her come any quicker!” Kate snapped, violently resuming the typing of her report. “And it’s not helping my headache either!”

Not at all used to such venom from Kate, as her form of chastising usually took form via eyerolls and sarcasm, those currently in the bullpen stiffened at the raised voice and exchanged concerned glances with one another.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you had a headache?” Tony inquired, reluctantly sinking back down into chair. “Do you need an Advil?”

“I don’t need an Advil.” Kate growled, pressing her slender fingers to her temples.

“Kate.” Abby fussed, a wounded frown on her face. “Maybe you should lie down on my cot for a while. I’m sure Tony wouldn’t mind giving you a break.”

Such an assessment being in fact true, as Kate had only taken ten minutes for her lunch break and had returned suspiciously red-eyed and sullen, Tony eagerly nodded his assent.

“I don’t need a nap, Abby.” Kate refused, grimacing from the effort of holding back tears.
“I’ll be fine.”

And seeing as how the combined efforts of both he and McAbby had failed to deduce the problem without being met with significant resistance and hostility, Tony kept himself silent and finally resigned himself to the fact that he would simply have to wait for Kate to come to him with whatever trouble was plaguing her.

“When was your mom supposed to arrive?” Tim awkwardly inquired, clearly quite eager to break the tension of the room.

“Because those flowers are going to wilt soon.” Abby advised, glancing at the peonies she had helped him pick out the previous evening.

Sparing a moment to glance at the fragrant blooms, and seeing indeed that they were beginning to lose some of their liveliness, Tony frowned and glanced at his Rolex.

“They should be here any minute now.” He announced with a sigh. “But knowing both of them, they’ve probably stopped for coffee seven times since leaving the airport.”

“Is your mom a coffee-addict too?” Kate queried, clearly keen to reconcile.

“She outpaces Gibbs two-to-one.” Tony quipped, perfectly serious.

Obviously and understandably in disbelief that any such person could exist, Kate snorted and opened her mouth to debate the veracity of his statement. But before she could so much as move her tongue, much less form one single word, Ducky was behind her, having casually strolled into the bullpen whilst they chatted with a report in his hand that needed Tony’s signature.

“Has your mother not arrived yet, Anthony?” The Medical Examiner inquired, depositing the report unto his desk.

“Not yet.” Tony frowned, scribbling his name on the report without reading it. “But she’ll be here soon.”

Hastily retrieving his report from the mess swamping Tony’s desk, as several items of variable importance had been known to disappear within its perimeter, Ducky nodded to show he was listening as he carefully folded the paper and slipped it into the pocket of his lab coat.

“Have you tried calling and making inquiries as to their whereabouts?”

“My mother is as bad at technology as the Boss.” Tony dismissed, making no moves to grab his cellphone. “I’d never reach them.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.” Tim scoffed, gently repositioning his girlfriend so that he could better type away at his manuscript.

“I don’t think you’ll have long to wait.” Abby opined, cartoonishly titling her head. “I think I hear the Bossman.”

And sure enough, when Tony stopped to listen, the sounds of Gibbs’s rare booming laughter could be heard reverberating through the building – the unharmonious noise softened only by the accompaniment of a softer and airier giggle.

“That’s my mom!” Tony exclaimed, recognizing the sound from anywhere. “She’s here!”
Despite having been in the midst of sharing a rousing bit of laughter with her newest of friends, such mutual amusement and mirth having stemmed forth from her arsenal of absurd jokes, Henrietta found she could not help her rudeness in cutting their comradery short upon seeing her son for the first time in years.

“Monkey!” She squealed, all at once far too overcome to move.

“Mom!” Tony returned, throwing wide his arms in boyish enthusiasm.

And just like that, Henrietta recovered herself, the sound of such a cherished title on her child’s lips sufficient enough a remedy to unstick her feet and send her flying into the outstretched arms of her veritable giant of a son. And not at all content enough to leave the displays of affection at that act alone, as she really was quite an affectionate person, Henrietta then profusely plastered her only child’s face with a copious and obnoxious smearing of her favorite cherry-colored lipstick.

“You’ve let your hair grow.” Henrietta remarked, lovingly running her hands through the partially-tamed curls. “It suits you.”

Given that modesty was no virtue either one of them could reasonably lay claim to, Tony grinned openly at the compliment and reluctantly released her from his very exuberant bearhug. But while Henrietta was quite pleased at being able to breath properly once more, as well as glad to be off the tip of her toes, she found she wasn’t quite ready to relinquish a physical hold of her son and grabbed one of his hands to remedy such a situation.

“You’re wearing the Bossman’s jacket.” Tony prattled, still unable to look away from her face. “How’d you manage to steal something like that?”

Briefly concerned that the garment she had commandeered held a certain sentimental value for its proper owner, but otherwise far too preoccupied with the greeting of her son to give it much thought, Henrietta resolved to later apologize from the imposition even as she swatted playfully at her child’s shoulder.

“I didn’t steal it, I borrowed it.” She calmly corrected. “How can you accuse your own mother of theft?”

“You were the one who stole a goat.” Tony reminded her, green eyes all aglow with mirth and mischief.

Blushing mildly at the blunt reminder that she had once broken unto a dilapidated farm with her younger sister and stolen an abused goat, both of them having been hellbent on releasing it back into the wild before being caught, Henrietta swallowed down a giggle and tried (and failed) for some semblance of contrition.

“A goat?” Jethro inquired, not at all familiar with her levels of impulsiveness.

“There’ll be time for that story later.” Henrietta was quite to evade. “But for now, Tony has to introduce to me everyone.”

Because even though the story in question was one she liked to tell, it was also quite a lengthy one that required at least an hour to be told properly. And, that trifling matter aside, she really did wish to be introduced to all of her son’s friends and colleagues.
“Right!” Tony eagerly obliged, yanking a young woman from the lap of her apparent boyfriend. “Mom, this is Abby!”

Already feeling as if she personally knew said young woman as the result of all her honorable mentions in Tony’s letters, such paragraphs almost always highlighting the character of her person and beauty, Henrietta felt more than just a little entitled to stroll forward and pull her into a hug.

“So, you’re the Abby I’ve heard so much about!” Henrietta hummed, pleased to find her hug being returned with gusto.

“And you’re the mom I’ve heard so much about!” The bubbly girl giggled, all but reverberating with energy.

Touched to the very core that her son still seemed fond of singing her praises to anyone who would listen, as it was not often that adult children were so openly affectionate, Henrietta beamed at her child over Abby’s shoulder and blew him a kiss.

“Oh, and congratulations!” Henrietta sang, pulling back from the embrace to cup the girl’s face. “You must be so excited!”

“I am!” Abby nodded eagerly, bouncing on her toes. “I can hardly wait until Halloween!”

Thinking of her own nuptials, and the lack of enthusiasm in which she had greeted the preceding planning, Henrietta was inwardly very relieved to find that the engaged woman in front of her seemed to be extremely overjoyed about her own.

“Halloween is only a couple of weeks away, of course you are!” Henrietta assured, mindlessly smoothing down the gothic-girl’s hair. “And you just let me know if you need any alterations before then, too.” She advised, fussing at the hair until it cooperated. “Brides tend to lose a bit of weight before the big day, you know.”

Herself having absolutely loathed the idea of marrying Senior, especially after being coerced by her parents to accept the engagement, Henrietta had lost a full fifteen pounds from all the stress and anxiety that had come with being forced into a shotgun wedding with a man whose smile never did quite reach his eyes.

“Oh, I wouldn’t impose!” Abby squeaked, looking scandalized at the very idea.

“Nonsense.” Henrietta dismissed, kissing her white cheek. “If you’re a friend of Tony, you’re already special to me. Now,” She grinned, only reluctantly surrendering her hold of the girl, “Let me see your future groom.”

Because even though she was fairly positive she could pick out the man for herself, Tony having oftentimes sang his praise in his letters, Henrietta felt it would be far more appropriate to let the future-bride introduce her own man.

“Timmy!” Abby squealed, impatiently beckoning her fiancé over. “Come and say ‘hi’ to Tony’s mom!”

Already having been making his way toward them since the moment his future-wife had been released from her hug, Tim smiled awkwardly at her and foolishly stuck out his hand in the misguided assumption he would be receiving a friendly handshake in lieu of a hug. But rather than chastise him for such silliness, and thus run the risk of embarrassing Tony’s more reserved friend, Henrietta settled for disabusing him of such notions via action.
“I’m sorry, Tim.” She laughed, wrapping her arms about his neck. “But I’m a hugger.”

Not at all as averse to such unabashed friendliness as Tony might have led her to believe, Tim smiled good-naturedly and didn’t so much as flinch when she kissed his cheek.

“Don’t worry,” He obliged, glancing at his fiancée. “I’m used to it.”

“Good.” Henrietta smiled, patting his cheek. “Because they’ll be more of those in the future.”

Looking as if he actually looked quite forward to such a thing, Tim nodded his consent before awkwardly disengaging from the hug.

“How was your flight?” He politely inquired, clearly eager to not be seen as rude for pulling so quickly away.

“Horrendous.” Henrietta laughed, utterly unphased by his confusion. “The ride home was much better, though. Even if I did have to do most of the talking…”

“That’s a given with anyone, Mom.” Tony quickly quipped, in clear defense of his beloved and respect boss.

And seeing as how her earlier teasing had provoked the response she had hoped for in Jethro, that being a slightly-embarrassed frown, Henrietta didn’t dare press the matter, understanding that there was only so much teasing that men such as he could endure in front a crowd.

“Now we know where Tony gets it from.” A beautiful brunette sassed, partially hidden behind her computer.

“Oh, and you must be Katie.” Henrietta smiled, mindlessly resorting to the use of a pet name and she stalked behind the young woman’s desk to wrap her in a hug. “And aren’t you such a pretty thing?!”

Taken off guard by the impromptu embrace, even though she ought to have seen it coming given the pattern, Katie initially startled as the arms touched her but gradually relaxed the longer they remained and the more Henrietta spoke.

“And I hear you’re to be married, too!” Henrietta cooed, squeezing her tight. “How lovely! Let me know if you need any help with your dress.”

“Of course.” Katie agreed, quite clearly savoring the hug. “Thank you, Ms. Paddington.”

Grimacing at the use of such formality, as not only did it make her feel old as well as remind her of familial connections she’d rather forget, Henrietta shook her head and gently squeezed Katie’s shoulders.

“Henrietta.” She mildly corrected. “There’s no need for such formalities with me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Katie promised, perfectly earnest.

“Good girl.” Henrietta praised, kissing her cheek before moving unto the remaining individual in the room.

Even without the process of elimination, Tony’s letters had been more than sufficient in providing Henrietta an adequate idea as the individual remaining.

“And you must be Ducky, of course!”
“You are correct, Henrietta.” The bespectacled man agreed, politely accepting her hug but breaking away from it all too soon.

“I think I must owe you a thousand thanks for keeping my boy alive.” She expressed. “I’m sure he didn’t make it easy.”

Because as sweet-natured and easy-going as her son usually one, she knew all-too-well what sort of beast he could evolve into when faced with needles of hospitalization.

“I think that accolade lies more with Jethro.” The Scottish man refuted. “I only tended to the occasional scrape and cut.”

Knowing perfectly well that the extent of Tony’s work-injuries were not at all simply regulated to such minor injuries, as her son had confessed to her the more grisly ones, Henrietta smiled in amusement at the needless protectiveness of the ME and graciously allowed him such an indulgence.

“Well, you have my thanks all the same.” She promptly assured. “But where’s your assistant?”

“I’m afraid Jimmy has been left to tend with a visitor.” The older man apologized. “We tend to get a bit backlogged near the Holidays.”

“I’ll have to meet him another time.” Henrietta smiled, understanding from Tony’s letter that said man was painfully shy. “When he’s not so busy tending to guests.”

“Yes, of course.” Ducky agreed. “I’ll send him your regards.”

“Please do.”
Having finally settled herself into her son’s apartment, the sheer size of which had thankfully allowed for a comfortable guest room, Henrietta sat in leisure at the foot of her new bed and carefully began to go about the tedious process of combing out her impossibly thick hair. Because even though she was suitably exhausted after spending half a day on a cramped plane, the trauma of such having only been exacerbated by a decidedly long care ride, Henrietta knew that there would be hell to pay in the morning if she did not now take the time to coax the snarls free from her hair.

“Mama,” Tony yawned, brazenly poking his head into her room, “I’m going to watch a movie before bed. Are you coming?”

Inwardly beaming at her child’s casual usage of the moniker Mama, as it confirmed for her that said child still valued her affections and feelings more than his dignity, Henrietta beamed openly at her son for the longest of moments. But as much as she would have liked to remain in such a fashion, preferably forever, necessity dictated that she break the moment in order to tend to the angry snarl she had been working away at for a quarter of an hour.

“I need to finish my hair first, Monkey.” Henrietta answered, frowning as the incorrigible knot remained. “I’ll join you afterwards.”

Despite such relatively reasonable terms, Tony frowned impatiently and sighed aloud his frustrations at being forced to be wait, the pains of being away from his newly-returned mother clearly of unendurable proportions. And in much the same way feeling those exact same emotions, Henrietta did not raise so much as a small protest as her child took the liberty of planting himself behind her with the clear motivation of helping her finish the arduous task of untangling.

“Why’d you let your hair get so knotted in the first place?” Tony mildly scolded, grabbing up a comb to begin his unassigned labor.

While Henrietta would have normally bristled at the merest prospect of someone other than herself touching her curls, as anyone who possessed such a feature knew of the dangers unskilled hands possessed, she indulged her child in his selflessness as his curls were very much the same make and variety as hers.

“It was the wind.” Henrietta explained, smiling mildly as she conquered a knot. “I ought to have put my hair up before leaving the airport.”

“You think?” Tony jibbed, making expert work of the tangle he had just claimed.

“I did have more pressing things on my mind, you know.” Henrietta returned, gently elbowing his gut. “Things like seeing my son, for example.”

Exhaling theatrically at the harmless blow, and earning for himself an eyeroll for the effort, Tony suddenly slowed his untangling and became somber.

“I hope I lived up to your expectations.”

Seldom serious, at least where regarded his personal life, the marked change alarmed Henrietta to her very core.

“Of course you did, Monkey.” Henrietta promptly assured, twisting about to look him directly in the eyes. “You’re my baby.”
“Mom,” Tony blushed, “I’m – “

“I know how old you are, Anthony.” She readily confirmed. “I was allowed to keep a calendar, you know.”

Looking prepared to deliver a sarcastic response, one that likely involved disparaging the Spanish government for allowing her a calendar but no phone calls, Tony opened his mouth to speak only to be cut off by the sounds of frantic knocking on his front door – the discordant hammering far too heavy to belong to that of a man and likewise far too frenetic to belong to anyone with good intentions. And though a woman was far less dangerous than a man in certain regards, especially where regarded criminal behaviors, the energetic pounding was more than enough to convince Henrietta that it was some Mafia wife come to finish her off.

“Mama!” Tony exclaimed, catching her startled expression. “It’s just Kate!”

“Are you sure!?” Henrietta whispered, glancing fearfully out her bedroom door.

Smiling widely in a manner that might have reassured her had it not been for her lengthy stint in a foreign witness protection program, Tony shook his head and rose eagerly to his feet.

“That’s her knock, Mama.”

“Are you sure!?” Henrietta pressed, fully prepared to shield her son from gunfire.

“I’m sure, Mama.” Tony promised. “That’s Kate’s knock. I promise.”

And though Henrietta would have loved to do nothing more than coax her child beneath the relative safety of her bed, as she herself prepared to play the sacrificial lamb, she knew that in doing so she would only be victimizing herself and feeding into the terrorism of those who had once wished her dead.

“You had better go to her, then.” Henrietta reluctantly agreed. “It must be important if she’s here at this time of night.”
Despite his great reluctant to be forced away from his newly-returned mother for any amount of time, especially so for matters that clearly promised to take more than an hour or two, Tony couldn’t help but forget his selfish desires as he flung open his door and saw a horrifically distraught Kate sobbing openly on his doorstep. Because as much as he loved and idolized his mother, the extent of which he would never adequately be able to convey, he loved his teammate as well – in much the same way he assumed a younger brother would always love the older sister he didn’t quite always get along with. And whilst his mother was keen on having him close by as of late, an incessant and merciless anxiety a major factor in such, Tony knew that the older woman would be able to tolerate his absence long enough for him to tend to the weeping Kate.

“Kate.” Tony frowned, taking in her disheveled appearance with no small amount of concern. “What happened?”

Seemingly far too upset to speak, at least for the moment, Kate desperately shook her hand choked down a sob as she dramatically threw herself into his arms. And while Tony was initially more than just a little overwhelmed at such close contact, as she was seldom so openly affectionate with him, he quickly pushed away his surprise discomfort and wrapped her in a massive bearhug that would’ve made Abby proud if not just a bit jealous.

“Kate.” Tony implored, gently leading her by hand to his sofa. “What’s wrong? Is it Seamus?”

Still far too choked up to speak, or at least not coherently, Kate shook her head in the negatory and begin anew a fresh wave of violent sobs – the sounds and intensity of which soon had him very concerned that she would pull a muscle or vomit from all the strain she was putting on her body.

“You need to calm down, Kate.” Tony implored, terribly concerned. “Do you want some wine? I’ve got a vintage from Italy.”

As Kate was never one to turn down wine, especially a fine vintage, Tony’s great concern only magnified when she shook her head in the negatory and looked offended at the very suggestion.

“Well, now I’m worried.” Tony nervously jested, trying to defuse the tension with a bit of humor.

Grimacing as the joke fell flat, as that was seldom a reaction he received from any of his audiences, Tony inwardly sighed and narrowly resisted the urge to keep from trying harder – knowing all too well that forced humor simply wasn’t what Kate needed at the moment.

“I don’t know what to do, Tony!” Kate suddenly cried, greatly startling him from his gloomy contemplations of what had gone wrong. “I – I…I – “

Stuttering as badly as Jimmy did whenever Gibbs took to visiting the morgue, Kate opened and closed her mouth in intervals more suited to a fish out of water.

“Kate, do you need a Valium?” Tony asked seriously.

Because as much as his mother needed such a prescription to deal with all the trauma that resulted from her forced stint in witness protection, Tony felt confident enough that his magnanimous mother wouldn’t mind sharing a pill or two with someone who so clearly needed such a calming
medication.

“I can’t.” Kate sniffled, finally recovered well enough to speak.

“We have to something.” Tony protested, completely at a loss as to what to do.

Because whilst he was certainly close with the woman currently sitting upon his couch, their relationship was such that it was completely shocking for her to be showing so much raw emotion in front of him.

“Tony.” Kate hiccupped, suddenly serious. “I need to talk to you.”

“I would assume that’s why you’re here in the middle of the night.” He quipped, unable to stop himself.

Rather than roll her eyes at his playful sarcasm, as always she did, Kate scowled and looked fully prepared to rip his throat out with her teeth.

“Can you be serious for one fucking moment, Anthony?!”

Highly offended at the unwarranted waspishness, as it had clearly been unwarranted, Tony frowned to show his displeasure but otherwise remained mum and tolerant of the momentary lapse in his friend’s character.

“Of course.” He obliged, all but forcing the words out. “What did you need to talk about?”

Taking several deep breaths, in clear pursuit of getting her emotions into check, Kate stiffened beside him and stubbornly took to starting at the carpeted floor rather than his face.

“Do...Do you remember the Ari...the Ari Haswari incident?”

Blood turning ice-cold at the very mention of such a soulless man, as his actions had traumatized Kate and had very nearly resulted in her untimely death, Tony stiffened beside his troubled friends and clenched his fists into balls.

“If that thing has escaped, I swear to God I will – “

“No, Tony.” Kate interrupted, lips all awobble with emotion. “He’s still in prison.”

“Then – “

“Tony.” Kate breathed, voice cracking pitifully. “I’m pregnant.”

There settled, then, in his living room a silence so profound that he actually began to fear that the shock of the unwelcome news had rendered him deaf. Such a theory, if one could call it that, only disproven by the periodic cries that escaped Kate’s throat as she tried (and failed) to stifle her fresh sobs.

“No.” Tony finally managed, settling for complete denial. “No.”

“Yes.” Kate refuted, face crumbling as she touched her flat stomach. “I’ve tried...I’ve tried pretending I’m not...But...But I can’t pretend anymore, Tony. I’m pregnant.”

Shaking his head vehemently at the news, even though he knew such an action would do no good, Tony opened and closed his mouth in much the same manner as Kate had earlier done in his frantic pursuit to think of something poignant to say.
“Are…Are you sure?”

Because as admittedly stupid as such a question was, Tony knew that Abby had experienced a pregnancy scare early on in her relationship with Tim – a phenomenon, which while admittedly terrifying the couple, had only turned out to be a mild bout of stomach flu.

“T’m pregnant.” Kate repeated, finally meeting his eyes.

“And you’re sure it’s not Seamus’s?” Tony inquired, grasping at straws.

“Yes.” Kate confirmed, choking on a sob. “Seamus is a virgin, Tony. And he wants to keep it that way until the wedding.”

Whilst normally the confession that anyone in this day-and-age was waiting to lose their virginity until they were wed, as such a practice was outdated and patriarchal at best, Tony kept his jibes to himself and resolved to save them for a more appropriate time.

“Oh, Kate.” Tony commiserated, pulling her into yet another hug. “I’m so sorry.”

Choking on yet another fit of sobs, Kate shuddered violently in response to his sympathy and despondently placed her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t know what to do, Tony.” She cried, swiping angrily at the tears on her cheeks.

“Have you…What does Seamus have to say about…this?”

Face crumpling at the mention of her beloved fiancé, Kate childishly buried her face in his shoulder and let out a horrific wail – the sound and nature of such filled with so much anguish and sorrow that Tony couldn’t help but momentarily think of a banshee.

“I can’t tell him, Tony. I don’t know how.” Kate sobbed, clinging tightly to him. “What if he left me?! I couldn’t…I couldn’t handle that atop all…this.”

He’s a good man, Kate.” Tony reasoned, gently rubbing her shoulder. “He wouldn’t leave you.”

Because even though Tony couldn’t claim to be great friends with the Irishman, he had meant the man more than enough times to determine his character and find it to be that of goodness and loyalty.

“You can’t know that, Tony.” Kate argued, sounding sufficiently miserable.

“Don’t you have faith in him?” Tony questioned, on the very of sympathetic tears himself.

“I don’t have faith in any man anymore.” Kate confessed, appearing completely broken.

Mature enough not to take the confession to heart, as he understood that his teammate was still currently grieving over her violent assault, Tony squeezed Kate tightly and ardently wished, all the while, that he could simply squeeze the grief right out of her body.

“What am I supposed to do?” She sobbed, desperately retuning the hug.

“What is your gut telling you to do?” Tony inquired, lovingly stroking her disheveled hair.

“Because…Because if you need money for…If you need – “

“I can’t get rid of the baby, Tony.” Kate cried, clutching at her stomach. “I already heard his
“heartbeat.”

Taking a long and greedy moment to take in the sheer magnitude of what had just been said, Tony remained silent for an unconscionable amount of time before he finally remembered the state of the friend on his couch.

“Kate, I don’t know what I could possibly say to you right now.” Tony expressed, giving her another tight squeeze. “All I know is that I’m sorry. I’m sorry and I promise to be there for you with whatever you need. With, or without, Seamus’s help.”

Because even though Tony was fairly confident that Seamus would stay, he could in no way adequately predict the future well enough to be assured of such a fact.

“I’m going to need it.” Kate sniffled, all but collapsing into him. “Because my parents are refusing to even acknowledge me now.”

“What!?” Tony barked, immediately indignant. “Why not!?”

For while he knew of the elder Todd’s great quarrel with their daughter, that being their abject protest against their youngest daughter marrying a green-card seeking foreigner, he had thought that enough time had elapsed for them to have acclimated themselves to the idea that the marriage was taking place whether they willed or not.

“Because I’m keeping him.” Kate clarified, protectively encircling her belly. “And they don’t want a bastard in the family.”

“Well, fuck your parents.” Tony declared, ever protective his ‘older sister.’ “And fuck your brothers, too. I’m your family now.”

Smiling for the first time since she had arrived, even if it was a broken and pitiful one, Kate swiped at her eyes and rolled her eyes.

“Thank you, Tony. I needed to hear that.”

Nodding his gratitude in a very Gibbs-like fashion, Tony patted her shoulder a few times before resting his head atop her own.

“Do you really think Seamus would stay?” Kate asked, sounding impossibly small.

“Of course I do.” Tony readily assured. “He stayed by your side for weeks after…after you were shot in the chest.” And, wising to hammer home his point, he then added for good measure: “He’s seen you at your absolute worst, Kate, and chose to stay. He loves you.”

“But is that going to be enough to convince him to stay?” She whispered, looking petrified of the answer she might receive.

Wishing for the billionth time that Ari Haswari was not in prison, so that he might geld him in his sleep and feed him his own cock, Tony sighed wearily and gave his friend’s hand a squeeze.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Closing her eyes wearily at the sage advice, as she so clearly did not wish to hear it at that moment, Kate sighed but otherwise remained composed.

“You’re right.” She admitted, reluctantly rising to her feet.
“Do you want me to come with you?” Tony pressed, fully prepared to do just that.

Looking touched at the offer, Kate smiled softly but nonetheless shook her head.

“I think I need to do this on my own.”

Understanding such a powerful need, Tony rose quickly to his feet and gave his teammate one last bone-crushing hug.

“You call me if you need me, alright.” He stipulated, the request more of an order as he reluctantly broke the contact.

“I will.” Kate promised.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

I need reviews, people.

Despite all observable rules of logic which stated she should be an absolute jet-legged mess given her international flight of the previous day, Henrietta found that Saturday morning came bright and early for his as always it did. And so, seeing no better way in which she might reasonably spend such uninterrupted time, as she had no great desire to leave the general safety of her apartment, especially not so with such a chill in the air, Henrietta happily took over her son’s kitchen and began to go about the tedious, yet rewarding, process of whipping up a batch of homemade cinnamon rolls – thoroughly wising to spoil her only child after so very many years of not being able to properly do so. Because no matter how many times her son might protest against such unrelenting babying, his concern for her being the only motivations behind such objections, Henrietta found that she just couldn’t help but give into the motherly instincts that had remained so dormant up until yesterday.

And so, with those selfless thoughts in mind, Henrietta hummed happily to herself as she stooped and removed the freshly-baked rolls out of her son’s inadequately-sized oven. And, promptly seeing that they had been crafted to perfection under her practiced hands, Henrietta increased the volume and intensity of humming as she placed the pan atop the counter and prepared to ice them with the coating she had once won a blue-ribbon for.

It was only as Henrietta came to the last roll, it being the biggest by virtue of its position on the pan, that her happiness was abated and replaced with horror. For minutes into her careless frosting, the front door began to rattle with the very distinct sounds of a key being jimmied into a lock, that act alone very nearly prompting her to scream for her sleeping son to awaken and grab his gun. In fact, had in not been for her absolute petrification, she would have done just that as she heard the door being pushed open with notable force. But, as it was, she was far too overcome with absurd amounts of terrors to do anything else but hide (foolishly) behind the oven and pray to whatever gods there might be that her would-be-assailant would prove far too lazy to properly investigate her current habitation.

“Tony!?” A familiar voice called out. “Where are you?!”

Immediately cursing herself for such foolish paranoia, Henrietta blushed profusely and sprang to her feet, the great desire not to be caught in such a silly position vastly outweighing any unforeseen consequences of such exuberance. Or, at the very least, she had certainly thought so.

“Jesus Christ!” Jethro loudly exclaimed, clutching at his chest as she sprang up a mere three inches away from his person. “You can’t jump out at people like that!”

Having been startled herself upon nearly crashing into currently-recovering Marine, Henrietta took several deep breaths before she deemed herself sufficiently recovered enough to speak without sounding a fool.

“I thought you were an assassin.” She defended, heart still hammering.

“And you thought the best course of action was to surprise your assailant?” Jethro queried,
still pale from his earlier shock.

Once more returning to her playful self once the initial fear of assassination had been dismissed, or at least diminished, Henrietta smiled bashfully and gently swatted the tall man’s shoulder.

“Of course not.” She mildly rebuked. “I was hiding before I realized it was you.”

“And you thought jumping out at a Marine was any better an idea?” Jethro groused, lips forever unsmiling.

“I wasn’t trying to scare anyone.” Henrietta insisted, eager to make amends. “It was just bad timing. Are you alright?”

Because as insipid as such a question surely was, given that said man no doubt needed to be in peak physical health to work in his current place of employment, Henrietta couldn’t help but worry as she realized he was still clutching his chest.

“I’m fine.” Jethro grumpily assured, immediately removing his hand when he noticed her concern. “Just don’t do that again.”

Charitably forgiving the man his shortness, as it was still quite early in the morning, Henrietta frowned apologetically and laid a reconciling hand on his shoulder.

“I won’t.” She promised, feeling terribly for ever having startled him so.

“Good.” Jethro sighed, still far too moody for her liking.

Because as much as she could reason away most of his brusque behavior as a side-effect of social anxieties, or perhaps shyness, she had never had it within her to allow a person to remain in her company without seeing to it that they smiled at least three or four times.

“Tony’s still asleep, Jethro.” She explained. “Could I help with something?”

“I just came to get a receipt from the pocket of that jacket I lent you.” Her houseguest explained, much more even-toned now that his shock had abated.

Having more than just a little guilty at commandeering the usage of such a warm garment, as it truly had been frigid outside the previous day, Henrietta had taken the liberty of both washing and mending the clothing to express her gratitude.

“Here you are.” She hummed, plucking the heavy coat off the kitchen chair she had draped it over. “Fresh out of the dryer.”

“I don’t need the actual coat.” Jethro insisted, clearly not keen on the idea of leaving her without any appropriate cold-weather gear. “I just need the receipt.”

Indulgently flattered at such gentlemanly manners, as well as encouraged by her guest’s sudden departure from brusqueness, Henrietta smiled but playfully rolled her eyes all the same.

“You might as well take the coat, too, silly.” She encouraged, pressing the garment into his hands. “Tony and I stopped at Burlington Coat Factory on our way home.”

“Good.” Jethro grunted, draping the coat over one of his strong arms. “We’re supposed to get a cold snap soon.”
Not at all pleased with such unwelcome news, Henrietta pouted theatrically before turning her attentions unto the coffee-pot she had insisted her son purchase before she arrived – the warmth of such a brew sorely needed for her to stave off the phantom-chills that had accompanied the Marine’s friendly forewarning.

“Don’t remind me.” She groaned, politely pouring him out a cup of his own.

“I already had a – “

“Don’t worry,” Henrietta interrupting, casting him a knowing wink. “I made this batch. Tony’s still asleep, remember?”

Now suitably assured that his tongue would suffer no undue damage, at least not where regarded the consumption of beverages, Jethro let loose some of the tension he had been holding in his shoulders and gratefully accepted the cup with what might have been the merest suggestion of a smile.

“Knowing that kid, he’ll sleep until noon.” Jethro knowingly quipped, pausing between phrases to steal a sip of coffee.

“Probably.” Henrietta magnanimously allowed. “But not today. Once he smells those rolls, he’ll be out of bed in a minute.”

Because while all the forces in hell couldn’t convince her child to leave his bed when he had no real mind to do so, as evidenced by the way he had once slept peacefully through a tornado, Henrietta knew that her homemade cinnamon rolls could summon her boy out of a coma should the need arise.

“I couldn’t say I blame him.” Jethro friendly remarked.

“If you could,” Henrietta stipulated, “You wouldn’t be able to after trying one. So sit.”

Always eager to showcase her baking prowess, as well as forever inclined to share that which she created from her heart, Henrietta did not so much wait for an answer as she firmly pushed the retired Marine into a chair at the kitchen table.

“I wouldn’t want to impose – “

“I made a dozen rolls, Jethro.” Henrietta assured. “And, contrary to populate belief, my son is capable of sharing food. So long as you don’t try and lick the bowl, you’ll be fine.”

Clearly still highly uncomfortable with the idea of sharing breakfast with a ‘stranger,’ but otherwise unwilling to pass up the opportunity for a good a breakfast, Jethro grimaced his confliction but otherwise raised no further concerns.

“Well, if you insist.” He shrugged, behaving unconvincingly nonchalant.

“Oh, I do.” Henrietta was quick to assure.

And, having made her assurances thus known, Henrietta then deposited two of the fattest rolls unto her houseguest’s plate.

“Careful,” She automatically cautioned, taking the seat right beside him with a roll of her own, “They’re fresh out of the oven.”
Nodding to show he took her precautions into consideration, but nonetheless biting into one of his rolls without reserve, Jethro held the baked good in his mouth for several long seconds before finally going about the ingratiating process of chewing.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.” Jethro praised, when at long last he had finished his large mouthful.

“Thank you, Jeth – “

Before she could so much as finish thanking her fledgling friend, much less offer to top off his nearly depleted coffee, Tony came stumbling into room – still half-asleep and more than just a little bleary eyed.

“Mama?” He asked, rubbing at his eyes. “Who’re you talking to?”

“Good morning, Monkey.” Henrietta sang, rising to her feet to kiss his cheek. “Jethro and I were just having breakfast.”

“Morning, Mama.” Tony yawned, blinking several times before he realized his employee was seated. “Morning boss.”

Pausing only a moment in between bites, Jethro nodded at his employee.

“Morning, Tony.”

Seemingly familiar with such reserved greetings from the retired Marine, Tony remained unaffected as he sank down into the remaining chair and greedily claimed three rolls for himself.

“Did you save the bowl for me? Her son inquired, glancing about the kitchen for said treat.

“Of course, Monkey.” Henrietta assured, kissing his hair. “But you’ll need to eat your rolls first before you devour all that extra icing.”

“But – “

“Don’t argue with your mother.” Jethro casually responded, seeming to issue forth the reprimand almost by instinct.

And, likewise obeying the edict like a child would obey their parental figure, Tony frowned but compliantly began to go about the self-assigned task of devouring the delicious breakfast his mother had created for him – his earlier disgruntlement all but forgotten as the tastes washed over his tongue and soothed his petulance at having ever been scolded so early in the morning.

“I really ought to get going.” Jethro reluctantly stated, watching in horror as Tony shoved an entire roll into his mouth.

“So soon?” Henrietta frowned, not at all keen to lose his company.

“I have a lot of errands to run.” Jethro apologized, already rising to his feet.

“Oh.” Henrietta softly exclaimed, rising to accompany him to the door. “You’ll have to stop by again. I’ve really enjoyed your company.”

“Yeah,” Jethro nodded, going a bit pink in the cheeks, “I’ll stop enjoying your company.”

Eyes going wide as he realized the extent of his mistake, Jethro colored deeply and looked
ready to flee from the spot.

“No!” He exclaimed, a bit too loud. “Not…I’m late.”

And before Henrietta could so much as assure him that his slip of tongue had not offended her, by any means, the mortified Marine was out the door and hurrying away.

“Only you could get the Bossman so flustered.” Tony praised, mouth full of icing.

“That’s good to know.” Henrietta mumbled to herself. “That’s good to know.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

I just love writing flustered Gibbs.

Despite having harbored a great reluctance to face Henrietta again so soon after the disastrous breakfast of the previous day, in which he had mistakenly promised to stop enjoying her company due to nerves, Gibbs inevitably found himself picking up a bouquet of flowers for a hostess gift on his way to Tony’s apartment the following evening. Because as much as he would have loved to stay home and continue drowning his embarrassment in copious amounts of bourbon, and perhaps a bit of vodka, he knew perfectly well that Tony (as well as his mother) would never forgive him for such an unexcused absence. And though Gibbs might protest to anyone willing to listen that he gave no great consideration to what others might think of his person, much less his actions, he was not so delusional as to believe that such a philosophy included the man he had come to think of as a son. And so it was that Gibbs reluctantly marched up the steps leading to his senior field agent’s apartment, his stomach all knotted up with unexplainable nerves as he clutched his bouquet with sweaty fingers and worked to resist the urge to flatten his already board-straight hair.

‘I haven’t been this nervous in a while,’ Gibbs suddenly thought, upon his arrival at the door, ‘Must be all the bourbon.’

Because as much as he had resolved not to drink in the hours leading up to the impromptu dinner-party, a resolution he seldom made, Gibbs had found it more than just a little necessary to have a quick ‘pregame’ drink before heading out for the evening – such a decision, of course, being motivated by nothing other than his desire not to get ‘snippy’ in front of Henrietta when one of his agents inevitable made the mistake of pissing him off. Which, given Kate’s sudden proclivity toward sullenness and Tim’s stubborn habit of groping his fiancée whenever possible, was certainly a very acceptable precaution.

‘Well,’ Gibbs shrugged, knocking at the door, ‘Here goes nothing.’

To his great chagrin, it was Henrietta herself answered the door, her pale cheeks all aglow with excitement and mirth as she theatrically flung open the door to greet her latest arrival with an exuberant hug.

“Henrietta.” Gibbs softly exclaimed, tongue suddenly very heavy as he awkwardly returned the embrace. “What…What’re you doing here?”

Reluctantly breaking away from her self-imposed hug to reward his insipidness with an amused smile, Henrietta giggled softly and effortlessly wrapped one of her arms about his own to tug him inside the already-filled apartment.

“I’m the hostess.” She needlessly reminded him. “It’s only proper that I should be here.”

“Of course.” Gibbs spluttered, suddenly very warm as they entered the kitchen. “I didn’t mean, what I meant was…I – here.”

Blinking in surprise as a large bouquet was unceremoniously shoved beneath her nose, and
sneezing a bit as the scent of such blooms assaulted her nose, Henrietta stepped a few inches away from the space-violating bouquet but otherwise looked no worse for the ware as she beamed openly at the customized floral arrangement still in her houseguest’s hand.

“How pretty!” Henrietta squealed, finally snatching the milk-glass vase from his hand.

“Yeah, pretty.” Gibbs agreed, stomach all aflutter as he watched her dazzling eyes flood with warmth. “Very pretty.”

Although he had not meant to be quite so obvious with his admirations of her looks, Gibbs found to his great mortification that the loaded words had still fled his dry mouth without permission. And, worse yet, Henrietta, by no means foolish in any sense of the words, had most certainly not failed to realize that her guest was not speaking of the pink and white hydrangeas he had labored over half an hour to pick. But, rather than respond in a repulsed manner, as any gorgeous woman would do when faced with the flirtations of those without her league, Henrietta only flushed as prettily as the pink flowers now within in her hands.

“You’ll be glad to know that hydrangeas are my favorite.” The pink-cheeked woman quipped, much like her son quick to recover from and form of embarrassment. “They’re even enough to make me forgive you for your tardiness.”

Having already begun to think that his face could not possibly grow and hotter, Gibbs was promptly thrown off guard as even more blood rushed to his face in response to being called out for being an uncharacteristic and egregious eight minutes late – the shame of which was only doubly magnified when he considered, with no small amount of mortification, that such tardiness had only stemmed forth from his sudden and absurd inability to pick out an outfit he felt adequate enough to grace a dinner party with.

“Traffic.” Gibbs fibbed, the word more an expulsion of sound rather than anything even remotely human.

“Yes.” Henrietta somberly agreed, a poorly concealed expression of mirth brightening her comely face. “Traffic is horrendous this time of evening.”

Far too relieved to have been given an easy for such a clumsy lie, as there had not been so much as a taxi or stray dog to inhibit his progress, Gibbs nodded gratefully and all but forgot to feel wounded at such playful pity.

“We had better get you into the living room, Jethro.” Henrietta coaxed, a bashful look upon her face as she had clearly realized he was mortified beyond belief. “Poor Abby thinks you’ve gone and met your demise.”

Grimacing at such an announcement, as Abby would no doubt later interrogate him as to the nature of his delay, Gibbs inwardly sighed and avowed to come up with a better story before coming face-to-face with his forensics expert. Because if said girl even got a whiff of the notion that Henrietta’s company inexplicably made him so unsettled, she would do doubt jump to the absurd assumption that Gibbs was currently crushing on the decidedly non-redheaded woman currently hosting his team.


“Yes.” Henrietta agreed, her vivid eyes one more taking on a spectacular gleam. “And
they’re quite pretty, too. Thank you, Jethro.”

Wishing to remain somewhat modest when it came to accepting the gratitude, as there was no
way in hell he wished for the recipient of his gift to realize the depths of his labor when it had come
time to select a bouquet, Gibbs shrugged noncommittally and gave a very beastlike grunt.

“No welcome.” Gibbs hurriedly supplied, wishing to undo the damage of the grunt but only
exacerbating it. “Your problem.” He awkwardly corrected, only to further damage his pride.

“Jethro.” Henrietta giggled, once more winding her arm through his own. “Let’s get you into
the living room so you can have a drink.”

Not at all as annoyed with the pity as he should have been, given that such stemmed forth
from Henrietta and lacked all the usual condescension such a feeling conveyed, Gibbs nodded
gratefully and temporarily abandoned his fledgling thoughts of fleeing the scene.

“I might have four.” Gibbs frowned, the very tips of his toes still aflame with embarrassment.

“So long as you promise to keep room for supper, you can have all the wine you need to get
through tonight.” Henrietta magnanimously allowed, hugging her face to his sleeve and leaving
behind a bit of pink blush on the dark fabric.

Charitably ignoring the staining cosmetic, as he had no great love for the majority of his
clothing, Gibbs smiled his thanks and somehow found the courage to place his fingers over the
smaller ones currently encircling his bicep.

“You might live to regret that offer.” Gibbs teased, gradually coming to recover himself.

“So long as you’re here,” Henrietta effortlessly teased, tilting back her head to better meet his
eyes, “I’ll regret nothing about tonight.”

While Gibbs could’ve sworn his eyes had popped out of their sockets at such a blasé
flirtation, he was not given enough time at all to ascertain himself of such a fact for, moment’s later,
Abby poked her head into the kitchen and squealed loudly upon spotting his arrival.

“Gibbs!” Abby squawked, throwing herself into his arms. “You’re here. I was about to
send Timmy after you!”

Glad for Tim’s sake as well as Abby’s that she hadn’t, as Gibbs would’ve never been able to
permit McGee to live should said man have spotted him at the florists struggling over floral choices,
he hugged his pseudo-niece tightly and indulged her with a kiss to the cheek.

“I was just a little late, Abbs.” Gibbs shrugged. “Happens to everyone.”

Pulling away from her beloved boss to give him a quizzical look, one filled with knowing
and doubt all at the same time, Abby gave him a worrying smile and seemed all but prepared to
interrogate him on the very spot.

“Are you alright, Gibbs?” The Goth-girl inquired, suspiciously casual. “You look a
little…flushed.”

“He’ll feel better once he’s had a drink.” Henrietta announced, jumping quickly to his
defense. “Why don’t you take him into the living room, Abby, while I check on supper.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I'm hungry for some reviews, lovlies.

Despite having promised her son not to go overboard in making her preparations for that evening’s dinner party, good-natured concern for her health being the harbinger of such a modest request, Henrietta found she couldn’t help but ignore her child’s chastising looks as she brought forth to the dining room table a feast fit for the Queen of England. Provided, that was, said ruler had even a modicum of good taste. For it would, in Henrietta’s modest opinion, take a person nearly devoid of taste buds to find fault in her chosen meal.

An affliction which, thankfully, none of her guests seemed to suffer from. For if said diners had not been in raptures over the quality of the roast she had spent hours laboring over to the point of perfection, or else praising the creativity and taste of the myriad of side-dishes she had selected, they were, all of them, absolutely in fits of joy as they savored the Napoleon she had made for dessert.

“What was this called again?” Katie inquired, her initial glass of wine still quite full as she ignored it in favor of her dessert. “I’ve never had anything this good before.”

Such an innocent flattery made all the sweeter by its genuineness, as well as by the honest nature of its deliverer, Henrietta beamed at her appraiser and inwardly avowed to send her home with whatever dessert was leftover after the evening came to a natural close.

“It’s a Napoleon, Sweetheart.” Henrietta clarified, pleased to see the younger smile for the first time all evening. “I’ll send you off with the recipe.”

And, Tony’s fierce appetite willing, a slice or two of the dessert at well.

“We ought to have this at our wedding, Katie.” Seamus suggested, his heavy Irish accent only further compounded by the dessert in his mouth. “No sense in us having a cake if you don’t even like it.”

Baffled at the very idea that any person could dislike cake, as such was almost assuredly her favorite food, Henrietta frowned but nonetheless allowed the pretty woman her erroneous food abhorrences for the sake of keeping the peace.

“But…it’s tradition.” Katie protested, looking longingly at the alternative dessert on her plate.

“Some traditions are meant to be done away with.” Her opinionated fiancé wisely rebutted. “We aren’t planning on a hand-fasting, now are we?”

Ever the proverbial curious cat, it took every inch of reserve within Henrietta’s person to keep her from making inquiries as to the nature of such a cultural tradition, knowing, as she instinctively did, that it wasn’t quite the proper time for questions.

“Besides,” Tim quipped, already on his third slice of dessert, “You can’t get cake smashed in your face if there isn’t any.”
Only narrowly keeping a frown off her face as she recalled the harsh manner in which both father and father-in-law had forbid her from smashing cake into her new husband’s face, their reasons for such priggishness amounting to nothing more than spurious claims that both sides were far too decent for such boorish behavior, Henrietta sipped at her wine and was inwardly pleased to see that Seamus was so indulgent in allowing his fiancée to make known her preferences for the upcoming nuptials.

“I wouldn’t be daft enough to try that on Katie, regardless.” Seamus swiftly assured, earning himself a small smile from his fiancée. “I don’t much fancy being gelded on me wedding day, now do I?”

“Must you be so vulgar the table.” Katie scolded, giving her future-husband an exasperated eye-roll.

Lacking all the heat and vitriol with which Henrietta had once look upon Senior, said man having needlessly incensed her with his stubborn propensity of ogling whatever young woman happened to pass them by, Henrietta found she couldn’t help but smirk into her wineglass as she imagined carrying out the self-same assault on the chronically-irresponsible Senior. Because whilst she could forgive him for his negligible part in the arrangement of their shotgun wedding, his only part in such having been the foolish refusal of a condemn, Henrietta could, in no way, ever forgive the reprobate for having forced her into hiding.

“My apologies, Ma’am.” Seamus dutifully warbled, not at all contrite. “I forget myself when I’m having fun.”

Having been given great practice in forgiving all sorts of cheekiness via the raising of her own opinionated son, a labor she had tackled happily given her own propensity toward impertinence, Henrietta brushed off the playfully insincere apology with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

“I’m glad you’re having fun.” Henrietta obliged, before turning to the mortified woman seated beside him. “And Katie,” She advised, her motherly instincts taking over, “Don’t get too hung up about following traditions. I went through all of them Senior, after all, and look at how that turned out.”

And though she had not meant to allow some of the bitterness within her to escape and mar the playfulness of her words, Henrietta could tell by the concerned look in Jethro’s eyes that her negativity had not gone completely unnoticed. But whilst such a discovery was not at all palatable to her, as she was a woman who so greatly liked to keep herself and others happy, she was mildly comforted by the thought that the retired Marine had experienced a similar tumultuous marriage – if not three, was Tony to believed.

“It wasn’t all bad, Mama.” Tony protested, mockingly indignant. “You got me out of the deal.”

Unable to offer forth any real arguments, as her child’s remark was so unalterably true, Henrietta settled for playfully rolling her eyes at her son’s distinct lack of modesty.

“If following up on traditions means we get a Tony out of the deal,” Seamus razzed, giving his fiancée a very mischievous smile, “We had better not follow any.”

Knowing more than enough to understand that the Irishman was only teasing her child, something men seemed to particular enjoy, Henrietta allowed the comment to go unchastised even as her son picked up a gravy-coated fork and prepared to heatlessly launch at his antagonist. But whilst Henrietta was certainly indulgent when it came to fits of childishness, herself being guilty of
such a characteristic and, by virtue of such, a harbinger of several food fights in her lifetime, she was by no means so indulgent when it came to having her living quarters coated in gravy.

“– Anthony Angelo DiNozzo,” Henrietta cautioned, “If you so much as even think about throwing that fork, you will rue the day I birthed you.”

“– Don’t even think about it, Anthony.”

A peculiar warmth settling into the depths of the stomach upon the realization she had chastised her son in tandem with Jethro, as Senior had never permitted her to play a part in the disciplining of their shared son, said man erroneously believing any punishment other than spanking or banishment to boarding school to be ineffective, Henrietta cast the former Marine a grateful smile before turning to waggle a warning finger at her son.

“Oi, that’s right.” Seamus goaded, confidence now fully returned as he realized he would not soon be assaulted with cutlery. “You listen to Mummy and Daddy, Mister, before you get your ears boxed.”

Understandably bristling at the phenomenon of being spoken to like a naughty toddler, Tony scowled and looked fully prepared to lob the fork at him before Abby stepped in and hurriedly removed it from his hand.

“What the hell does that even mean?” Tony demanded, clearly annoyed at being so easily unarmed. “How can you box someone’s ears?”

Herself having no real idea, as her sensitive nature had stubbornly kept her from utilizing any form of corporal punishment in her parenting, Henrietta was somewhat inwardly relieved when Jimmy spoke up for the first time that evening and clued them in.

“It’s when you slap someone on the ear.” The bespectacled assistant provided, finishing with a mild glare to his supervisor as he subconsciously rubbed at the side of his head.

“I boxed your ear once.” Ducky sighed, shaking his head in exasperation. And you quite deserved it, might I add.”

Although it troubled her greatly to hear most parents casually referring to the instances wherein they had struck their children, Henrietta found that she was not quite so uneasy upon hearing Ducky’s pronouncement when she caught the calm, and untroubled, expression upon his ‘former victim’s’ face.

“What could Jimmy have possibly done to make you slap him?” Abby questioned, clearly all aghast at the thought her friend could warrant the need for any discipline, much less a slap.

“I did not slap him.” Ducky huffed, quite indignant at the very thought. “And as for the cause of such...ear-boxing, Jimmy knows what he did.”

Whether still embarrassed as the cause of his discipline, or elsewise far too shy to share with them the details, Jimmy frowned unhappily and blushed until Abby kindly stepped in and spared her friend the indignity of any impertinent questions.

“Speaking of weddings,” The Goth-girl babbled, turning the conversation back to earlier and more palatable topics, “Here, this is for you.”

Thus said, Abby pulled from the pocket of her sundress a purple rectangle and promptly thrust said shape into her face.
“Oh.” Henrietta exclaimed, pulling away from the assaulting square. “What’s this now?” She inquired, gently collecting the purple shape from the bubbly girl’s hand.

“It’s a wedding invite.” Abby squealed, nearly reverberating with energy. “You’ll come, won’t you?!”

Despite having no other plans in the near future, much less in the following two weeks, Henrietta couldn’t help but frown as she thought of the imposition a last-minute invite could bring to an affianced couple.

“Are you certain, Abby?” Henrietta fussed. “It’s a bit late to still be inviting people, isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s not.” Tim insisted, looking upon her as if she had just asked a very absurd question.

“Just last week I invited four more people.” Abby contributed.

Having frequently heard from Tony the extent of kindness and friendliness both future newlyweds imbued, the nature of which her child had likened to the cartoon Flanders, Henrietta guiltlessly, and finally, accepted the invitation.

“If you’re absolutely certain it won’t be an imposition, I’ll come.” Henrietta obliged, not failing to take note of the relieved look in Jethro’s eyes.

“Good.” The affianced couple declared in tandem, unsubtly linking hands beneath the table.

Smiling at the clear evidence of the existence of soul-mates, Henrietta prudently set aside the invite to where it was least likely to be coated in gravy and made a mental note to later coax her son into helping her order a dress on the Google.

“This should be a fun affair.” Henrietta announced, lovingly tapping the invite. “I wish I could say that about my own.”

“Were your own nuptials so very terrible?” Ducky politely inquired, protectively slapping a sugar-filled bite of pudding out of his assistance hands.

“I married Senior.” She reminded the older man. “Of course it was.”

Momentarily holding off his reply to glare warningly at his ‘child’ as said man made to reclaim his fallen fork, Ducky looked somberly at Henrietta and reached across the table to pat her hand.

“You have my condolences.” The Medical Examiner humored, making use of his own particular brand of humor.

Rewarding the Scottish man’s humor with a giggle, as she quite enjoyed it despite such a variety being so different from her own, Henrietta sipped at her wine and waited for the conversation to continue – wishing not, as she usually did, to dominate the speech.

“Was your own wedding really so awful?” Seamus genuinely inquired, looking bewildered at the very though. “You were marrying for love, weren’t you?”

All but forced into wedding Senior, if not by societal pressures than by copious amount of threats from both sides of the family, Henrietta grimaced and shook her head.
“I wasn’t.” She corrected, answering the latter question. “And so my wedding really was that awful.” And though she wished to elaborate, and explain just how awful the whole archaic affair had been, she kept the details mum upon seeing the worried expression on both affianced couples faces. “I’ll not bore you with the details, though.” She smiled. “I wouldn’t want anyone getting cold feet.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Seamus grinned, shamelessly kissing his future wife’s cheek. “There isn’t a force in hell hat could keep me from marrying this one.”

Crooning in tandem with Abby at such an unabashed display of love, as it warmed her heart to the very core to see that true love still existed, Henrietta beamed at Seamus and immediately forgot her earlier resolve to threaten said man with bodily harm should he even think of harming the woman she had decided to take under her wing.

“You know she snores, right?” Tony inquired, effectively ruining the moment as he snatched Kate’s untasted wine for himself.

“Tony!” Abby scolded, slapping his shoulder. “Be nice.”


Already blushing profusely before the vulgar word had even left the pale man’s lips, Henrietta’s mortification was but little relived as his fiancée cut him off before the last sound could be completed.

“Seamus Barney Walsh,” Kate hissed, thwacking him upside the head, “Not at the table!”

“I cannot help it, woman!” Seamus defended, rubbing at his assaulted ear. “I’m Irish.”

“Well,” Kate huffed, “Ducky is Scottish and he’s nowhere near as vulgar as you.”

Seeing as such a domestic dispute was relatively heatless, and that there was no real danger in anyone becoming physical, Henrietta allowed the squabble to go on until it reached its natural conclusion – not wanting to intervene and prevent the affianced couple from reaching their own accord.

“Okay, Ms. Katie,” Seamus retorted, still rubbing his ear, “Scots and Irishmen aren’t the same thing, are they?”

Before Katie could so much as respond to such a rhetorical question, much less box his other ear, Ducky butted in with his own particular brand of wisdom.

“Take heart, lad.” The older man insisted, patting his shoulder. “At least she didn’t go and compare us to the Great Colonizers.”

“Would that really be an unfair comparison?” Jethro questioned, purposely setting out to rankle his good-humored friend.

“Careful, Boss.” Jimmy cautioned. “Insinuating that Scottish people were the same as the British is what got me my ears boxed.”
Chapter 11

Ensconced quite comfortably in a leather loveseat beside his hostess, fifth glass of wine currently in hand and his nerves now appropriately settled, Gibbs leaned back against the plush cushions and listened, enraptured, to Henrietta’s absurd narrative – said woman’s excitement very nearly contagious as she took great care to alter her voice when switching character and made great effort, as well, to move about her slender hands to better convey her emotions.

“– And that, my dear audience, is the story of why I’m currently banned from Time Square.”

More than just a little familiar with such ridiculous dialogues, as Tony certainly had no shortage of the selfsame absurdities, Gibbs shook his head good-naturedly but otherwise refused to question the pretty woman’s narrative – past experience with said narrator’s son having taught him that even the most unbelievable of stories would prove, verifiably, to be inexplicably true.

“How?” Kate questioned, understandably befuddled. “How did you manage to steal the New Years Ball?”

Already bracing himself for the explanation, as it was sure to be a whopper, Gibbs hurriedly swallowed his drink in anticipation of the answer.

“It’s simply physics, Sweetheart.” Henrietta assured, addressing the engaged agent with her handpicked pet-name. “You can move anything if you have a long enough lever…and a forklift.”

While his seatmate was, technically correct, Gibbs highly doubted the abilities of a young person when it came time to securing a lever long enough to adequately move an object roughly the weight of a hippo.

“Where did you find the forklift?” Seamus interrogated, his accent made all the thicker with his slight drunkenness. “Do Americans just leave heavy machinery lying about?”

Arguably the only completely sober individual in the room, Kate was the only person who blushed in embarrassment at her boyfriend’s needlessly increased volume.

“I borrowed one from a nearby lot.” Henrietta casually clarified, behaving in a blasé manner that clearly conveyed the casual occasional theft of a vehicle was no big deal.

“Tell me,” Gibbs implored, “Are you allowed back on that lot?”

Not so much as blinking a bashful eye as all eyes in the room turned to survey her reaction to such a loaded question, such steadfastness in the face of embarrassment very reminiscent of her son, Henrietta grinned naughtily and shamelessly delivered forth her answer.

“As a matter of fact, Jethro, I’m not.”

And, appearing to hold no great regrets about receiving such a ban, Henrietta remained smiling even in the face of all the shocked expressions greeting her.

“How were you not arrested?” Tim demanded, more bewildered than indignant.

“Oh,” Henrietta grinned, “I knew the NYPD commissioner at the time.”
Powerless to stem the flood of jealously that assailed his body at the very idea that a young Henrietta had somehow made herself known to someone in so powerful a position, Gibbs frowned and prepared to make inquiries as to the nature of their relationship when a half-asleep Abby beat him to it.

“How?”

“Well,” Henrietta blushed, “Let’s just say that wasn’t the first time I was ‘apprehended’ in New York.”

Childishly relieved that the relationship between Henrietta and the Commissioner had been nothing more than business-related, Gibbs once more relaxed and found it within him to tease his hostess.


“Now were just arguing semantics.” Henrietta cleverly evaded, fixing him with a sassy smile.

Whilst normally such a smile would have thrown him off-guard at best, if not rendered him completely senseless, Gibbs had taken the wise provision of earlier fortifying himself with copious amounts of wine – thus rendering him completely capable of facing such an expression without dissolving into a complete mess of unintelligible babble.

“Semantics are very important.” He protested, simply for the sake of bantering.

“If you’re a literature professor, maybe.”

Reveling in the foreign experience of having someone challenge him, as it had been quite a while since anyone had so openly defied him, Gibbs actually smiled and very nearly startled Kate into dropping her glass of water as a result.

“You’re lucky Ducky already left.” Gibbs advised. “He’d never forgive you for a remark like that.”

“It would be his loss.” Henrietta frowned, putting on a playfully conceited air. “For when I fashion an opinion on a certain matter, I’m never one to let it go.”

Reasonably believing that such a particular brand of stubbornness laid more with himself rather than with his friendlier counterpart, Gibbs frowned and prepared to challenge her veracity of on such a statement. But, to his great frustration, his inquiry was stalled by one of Tim’s insipid questions.

“No!” The insulted movie-buff called out from the kitchen. “Not even close, you uncultured swine!”

“I’m sorry,” Tim sassed, “But I don’t spend the majority of my free time reading Victorian novels.”
“Regency, McIgnorant.” Tony easily returned, tossing a wet dishrag into the living room only to miss his target my several inches.

By now sufficiently recovered from her earlier shock that had stemmed forth from Tim’s clear ignorance of classical films, an attribute she had clearly believed to be a great failure, Henrietta huffed indignantly as the washcloth landed near her feet and turned stern – or more accurately, Gibbs thought, less amused.

“Anthony! Timothy!” The petite woman squawked, effortlessly stepping into the roll of mother. “Behave yourselves!”

“Tim started it.” Tony sassed, all too brave as he stood within with relative safety of the kitchen.

“And I’m finishing it.” Gibbs growled, more than happy to play the part of the proverbial bad cop. “McGee, go and help Tony with the dishes.”

Looking very much as if he had just been ordered to lop off his own arm and pleasure himself with it, Tim frowned and looked to his hostess for reprieve – only to be greeted by the unhelpful sight of Henrietta stubbornly pretending to straighten a non-existent crease in her black skirt.

“But – “

“That wasn’t a request.” Gibbs assured. “Go.”

And though it was not at all necessary, given the way that Tim was currently cowering on the weight of his glare, Gibbs snapped his fingers for emphasis until the timid man hurried off to obey.

“Now you’ve gone and done it, Timmy.” Seamus drunkenly goaded, unsteadily rising to his feet. “C’mon Katydid.” He slurred, gracelessly pulling the mortified woman to her feet, “Let’s get out of here before we get roped into vacuuming.”

Looking quite torn between ‘wanting to stay and assist with the cleaning’ and ‘getting her drunken fiancé home to sleep it off in time for work tomorrow,’ Kate frowned and looked to Abby for assistance, only to find said woman passed out in the recliner Tim had deposited her in earlier.

“Go on, Katie.” Henrietta indulged. “The sooner you get that one into bed, the better.”

Giving her hostess an exceedingly grateful look, Kate heartily expressed her thanks for the evening before graciously allowing her inebriated fiancé to ‘assist her’ over the doorstep – effectively leaving Gibbs alone with Henrietta as Abby was not likely to stir until sometime tomorrow morning.

“Ah,” Henrietta sighed, finally relaxing her impeccable posture, “Nothing like a little peace and – “

“Why should you get to do the washing?!” Tim groused. “That’s the easiest part.”

“Because I was already in here, at work, before you decided to help.”

Looking every part the weary mother, despite having only been home for the space of two days, Henrietta sighed aloud and took a long swig of wine from her glass.

“Let’s rock, paper, scissors for it.” Tim suggested, desperate to not be forced into drying.
“No can do, McWhiny.”

Not at all familiar with the casual way in which McGee’s last name was bastardized on a daily basis, something that seemed to increasing incense Abby the closer she came to taking it for her own, Henrietta frowned and unnecessarily took umbrage with her son’s perceived teasing.

“Anthony Angelo DiNozzo!” Henrietta scolded, raising her voice only an octave. “Stop being a bully!”

“And quit your whining!” Gibbs provided. “Both of you, before I have you scrub the floor, too.”

Feeling quite the natural when it came to disciplining members of his team, especially when it came to Tony, Gibbs was almost confused by the amused expression Henrietta sent his way after making his additional statement.

“I see you run a tight ship, Captain.” Henrietta all but purred, an exhilarating gleam brightening up her eyes.

A loud snore from Abby serving to reassure him that all subsequent flirtations would go unnoticed, as Tim and Tony were far too distracted with ‘negotiating’ labor division to eavesdrop, Gibbs summoned his courage and resolved to keep all traces of awkwardness at bay.

“Someone needs to keep law and order.” Gibbs shrugged, far too casual for his liking but thankfully not at all awkward.

“I agree.” Henrietta obliged, a mischievous expression overcoming her features. “Do you think I’ve been remiss in my duties in that regard?”

Quite blatantly trying to steer him into an uncomfortable situation with her question, as such was quite loaded and difficult to navigate, Gibbs resolved to stay strong and responded with the first thing that came to mind – trusting, as he did, in his usually superb instincts.

“I…You do a commendable job at keeping the peace.” He offered, cringing at the cheesiness of such an accolade.

“Careful, Jethro, I do believe you’re starting to get a bit forward with me.”

Whether Henrietta was teasing him in such a manner simply for her own sadistic pleasures, or elsewise doing so in the hopes that he would respond in kind, Gibbs could not truthfully discern. For he knew only one thing at that moment, and one thing only, which was that the confines of his jeans were fast-approaching a fullness he could not even hope to stave off.

“I…I – “

“Relax,” Henrietta giggled, lying a hand atop his knee, “I was only teasing you. I do hope that you’re not a man who can’t be teased.”

Blood having rushed to his ears at the sudden contact, it took several seconds before Gibbs could discern what his hostess had said.

“I’ll be whatever man you want me to be.” He blurted, immediately regretting the forwardness as he felt his face erupt in color.

“You’re in luck.” Henrietta grinned, charitably ignoring his redness. “Because I happen to
already like the man that you are.” And then, not at all satisfied with allowing words alone to convey her meaning, the bewitchingly pretty woman scooted nearer to him until their thighs were touching. “We’ll be great friends, Jethro, I’m sure of it.”

Suddenly all too aware of her intoxicating nearness, as well as the growing discomfort in his pants, Gibbs swallowed down a lump in his throat and not-so-discreetly pulled a throw pillow over the bulge in his lap.

“Friends.” He parroted, suddenly very warm. “Yes.”

“Good friends, perhaps.” Henrietta stipulated, squeezing the skin above his knee.

Having not felt nerves of such magnitude since introducing himself to Shannon all those years ago, Gibbs had to bite down hard on his tongue to keep from fleeing the very scene.

“Perhaps.” Gibbs babbled, very hard beneath the pillow. “It’s good…it’s good to have a good friend.”

“It is.” Henrietta agreed, green eyes boring into him. “Do you have any good friends, Jethro?”

Thinking with great distaste upon his myriad of exes, as each one had assaulted him in some fashion or other, Gibbs truthfully shook his head.

“No. But I did happen to become good friends with the mouser cat that lived in my attic. It’s a shame I couldn’t keep him.”

A bit disappointed that the conversation was once more taking on a playful edge, as he had only just begun to muster up the courage to respond in kind to her flirtations, Gibbs frowned inwardly but nonetheless indulged the woman her silliness.

“You’ll steal a goat but not a cat?”

“The goat never cut me deep enough to warrant stitches.” Henrietta explained, lifting the sleeve of her sweater a few inches to reveal three long scars in her pale skin. “He also smelled better, too, I’ll confess.”

Frowning slightly at the marring of her skin, as nothing that pretty deserved to be damaged in any fashion, Gibbs gently tugged the sleeve of her sweater back into place and tried not to seem so displeased with the sight of the pink scars.

“That must have been one disgusting cat.” He allowed, an amused smile creeping up on his face without permission.

“He was.” Henrietta giggled. “I’m almost positive he rolled around in the sewers before coming home every night.” Unscrunching her nose, she then added: “Thankfully you don’t seem to share such a fault.”
Himself never having been a fan of smelly individuals, especially those he dated, Gibbs took the compliment to heart and savored it a bit more than he reasonably should have.

“Neither do you.” He appraised. “What perfume are you wearing?”

“Vanilla extract and roast juice.” Henrietta giggled. “Tell me, Jethro, which scent do you prefer?”

Thrown off-guard by the absurd question, Gibbs blushed and stammered for an answer even though one clearly wasn’t required.

“I…I – “

“Perhaps you need a closer sniff.” Henrietta suggested, slowly removing her large mass of curls away from her slender neck.

It was at that very moment that the organ betwixt Gibbs’s legs stirred into overdrive, the sensitive flesh of such an appendage all put pressing painfully against his zipper as he tried, and failed, to think of anything that would take the swelling down to a more manageable level.

Thankfully, for the sake of his modesty as well as that of Henrietta’s innocence, the ‘men’ currently laboring away in the kitchen chose at that very moment to drop something markedly heavy.

“What was that?!” Gibbs demanded, both relieved and annoyed at being so frustratingly cock-blocked.

“– Nothing?” Tim feebly suggested.

“- That was just the heat kicking on.” Tony supplied, his lie only marginally better.

More than just a little capable of imagining all the nonsense those two ‘men’ could have gotten up to, having once walked in on both of them trying to ‘explode’ a watermelon with rubber-bands, Gibbs rolled his eyes and climbed to his feet.

“For the love of God.” He groused, already stalking off toward the kitchen.

“Slow your roll, Captain.” Henrietta intervened, hurrying to catch up with his longer strides. “I’m sure it wasn’t all that serious.”

Henrietta would, of course, come to greatly regret that erroneous assumption as they walked into the kitchen and promptly discovered the kitchen table topped over and, with it, the leftover gravy and roast juice.

“Congrats, you two.” Gibbs announced, speaking for the stunned Henrietta. “It looks like you’ll be scrubbing the floor after all.”

“But, Mom,” Tony appealed, looking to Henrietta for reprieve, “We didn’t – “

“You heard your D – Boss.” Henrietta stated, remaining firm. “Get to it.”
Despite having reassured Tony, as well as herself, that she would be perfectly alright spending Monday morning and afternoon all by herself, as really all threats against her person had been ‘neutralized’ according to the proper authorities, Henrietta still found that she couldn’t quite relax in the bathtub as much as she might have liked to. Because as much as she had greatly appreciated the lavender oil and bubble-bath her son had been thoughtful enough to purchase in anticipation of her arrival, alongside the morning glass of wine he had insisted she indulge in, Henrietta found, to her great consternation, that every *whoosh* from the plumbing or *thump* from the neighboring wall sent her into near histrionics. For as much as she had earlier proclaimed to feel perfectly safe in the apartment of her son, said man being a noted member of a respectable government agency, the frustrating fact still remained that she just couldn’t get the thought of masked assailants and mercenary snipers out of her head. Which was precisely why, when noon rolled around, the sound of screeching car tires outside the building all but prompted her to flee the bathroom and hide herself beneath the dubious safety of her bed. Much to her great embarrassment, as well as immense relief, it was precisely *there* that Jethro found her, a full half-an-hour later and in full-blown hysteric.

“Hey,” Jethro murmured, his face suddenly appearing beneath the bed, “*There* you are.”

Startling violently at the sudden appearance of the concerned man, as she had honestly not even heard his arrival given the volume of her sobs, Henrietta banged her head against the underside of the bed and turned bright red as she came to the realization that Jethro could very well see her in all her ‘entirety’ despite the relative darkness of her hiding spot.

“What…What’re you doing here?” She squeaked, trying for some semblance of modesty as she moved her hands to cover her breasts.

Wise enough to realize the reason behind her uncharacteristic mortification, as well as gentlemanly enough to produce a solution for said problem, Jethro modestly looked away from her indecent form and moved (momentarily) away from the bed to collect the robe she had left draped over the dresser. And whilst such an aged garment was currently in possession of a rather large rip in the sleeve, as well as several sizes too large for her by virtue of belonging to her son, Henrietta gratefully accepted the covering with an inclination towards modesty she had never before possessed.

“Tony asked me to check on you.” Jethro confessed, once more seating himself upon the floor but otherwise refusing to peer beneath the bed. “He said you’d been acting…squirrely.”

Letting loose a strangled little laugh at the concept of her child making such an accusation, as he had been the one in near panic at the prospect of leaving her behind, Henrietta hurriedly tied together the oversized robe and gracelessly army-crawled her way toward the edge of the bed – careful not to catch any of her damp curls on any part of the frame that might rip them out.

“*There* you are.” Jethro teased, reaching out a strong arm to assist her departure from the bed. “I thought I was going to have come in after you.”

Womanly passions stirring to life at the very thought of said man lying beside her in the dark, with or without clothes, Henrietta took several deep breaths before she felt recovered enough to speak without giving away any real evidence of her attraction.

“Here I am.” She agreed, gradually recovering her natural spark the longer she sat beside
him. “You’re not going to tell Tony you find me like this, are you, though?”

Because as much as she knew that her son was incapable of finding any fault within her, stubbornly believing his mother to be that of an unreprouachable being, Henrietta also understood that Tony worried far too much about his loved ones to ever be comfortable enough to consider leaving her alone again if he discovered just how poorly her first day along had gone.

“Nah,” Jethro magnanimously decided, “I’ll just tell him I had to fix the sink or something.”

Awarding her savior a large smile for his acts of valor, Henrietta swiped away the remainder of a few tears from her face and brazenly moved to rest her against his shoulder in an act of affection – frustratingly unable to issue forth a simple hug without needlessly exposing the somewhat modest man to all her naked glory.

“I must look an absolute wreck.” Henrietta grimaced, reluctant to even imagine how splotchy her face must be.

Plying her with a quizzical expression, one that seemed to very much convey that her earlier declaration was markedly stupid in nature, Jethro shook his head in disagreement and quickly set about to disabuse her of such an apparently erroneous opinion.

“I’ve been dealing with bloated corpses all day. You – you look fine.” Jethro appraised, somehow successfully turning such gruesomeness into an accolade. “But tell me, Henrietta, what the hell were you doing under the bed in the first place?”

Wishing very much that she was as skillful a bluffer as her child, as such a talent would be far from wasted in such a situation, Henrietta frowned in mild consternation but was, nonetheless, compelled to issue forth her confession after several long moments of silence had gone by.

“I heard car tires screeching, and I panicked.” Henrietta admitted, feeling all the more foolish as she spoke her explanation aloud.

Valiantly attempting to hide an amused smile behind a cough, and failing in a most spectacular and endearing fashion, Jethro somehow managed to deliver the cause of such a noise with only minimal amounts of laughter registering in his baritone.

“Some dumbass teenager crashed their car into a light pole.” Jethro explained. “She’s fine, but the car sure as hell isn’t.”

Majorly relieved that the girl in question was apparently perfectly fine, as well as minorly annoyed that said teenager’s carelessness had resulted in her being properly embarrassed for the first time in decades, Henrietta sighed aloud and shook her head against the strong shoulder currently tasked with supporting it.

“Tony wrecked Senior’s corvette once.” She helplessly reminisced. “That girl isn’t going to be ‘fine’ for long.”

It was then, with no small amounts of horror and revulsion, that Henrietta recalled the teary call she had received from her thirteen-year-old son sometime during the aftermath of a punishment that had apparently involved a brutal caning with an antique umbrella.

“Every day I just get more and more reasons to want to kill that man.” Jethro growled, having not failed to comprehend the hidden meaning behind her semi-cryptic words.

“Try living with that terrorist for eight years.” Henrietta groused. “And then losing custody to
him.”

Despite having resolved not to be bitter about the acrimonious divorce years ago, given the reasonably assumption that such negative feelings would bolster Senior’s already massive ego, Henrietta (as a mother) still found that the removal of Tony from her care still rankled her to no end. For given Senior’s propensity toward corporal punishment, as well as mercilessly shunning, it was quite clear to anyone with a modicum of decency that she should have been the one given full custody.

“I still can’t figure out how that happened.” Jethro expressed, suitably enraged on her behalf.

“Losing custody is remarkably easy when your own family testifies against you.” Henrietta scowled, heedlessly allowing old wounds to be ripped wide open. “Ungodly amounts of money also help.”

Frowning in sympathy to her plight, Jethro gently wrapped a strong hand about her waist and gave her a tight squeeze.

“You and Tony didn’t really get dealt a good deck of cards when it came to family, did you?”

“No.” Henrietta agreed, giggling at the folksy expression. “Did you?”

Thrown more than just a little off-guard as her rescuer stiffened at the innocent inquiry, as nothing Tony had told her about the man had led her to believe the topic was dangerous territory, Henrietta frowned immediately began to wonder how best to change the subject before things had a chance to become terse or awkward. But before she could so much as devise a solution, much less set it into action, Jethro had relaxed his posture to a minor degree and started speaking again.

“I was actually pretty lucky in that regard.” He mumbled, a noticeable sadness taking over his features.

Although she couldn’t help but notice the way in which he spoke of his family using the past tense, alongside the sorrow in his voice as he issued forth his explanation, Henrietta was wise enough to understand that any inquiries into the matter would only be met with resistance and resentment. And so, thus realized, she settled for doing that which she did best – changing the atmosphere of a room.

“We really ought to get up off the floor.” Henrietta suggested. “We’re too old to be sitting on the ground.”

“Old?” Jethro questioned, immediately taking the bait.

More than just a little relieved that her plot had worked out so well, as usually men of Jethro’s statue were harder to subvert, Henrietta’s exuberance couldn’t help but make itself known via a giggle as Jethro rose to his feet with the accompaniment of a loud pop from his knee.

“Yes, old.” Henrietta repeated, giggles only intensifying as her own bones popped upon her ascension.

Looking mildly relieved to have not been the only one betrayed by his skeleton, Jethro sighed and shook his head.

“Alright,” He grumbled, “Maybe we are a bit old.”
“Don’t worry.” Henrietta soothed, linking her arm through his. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“It’s a deal.” Jethro agreed, gifting her a small smile. “But do you mind if we go into the living room? Tony would have a fit if he knew I was alone with you in your bedroom.”

Laughing aloud merrily at the accurate assessment of her son’s character, as Tony was notoriously protective of her person, Henrietta nodded and took the initiative of leading the both of them from her bedroom and into the more ‘respectable’ area of the living room.

“Would you like any – “

Before Henrietta could finish her inquiries as to whether or not her guest would like some coffee, Jethro’s phone began to ring loudly, the noise fierce and grating in a way that a landline could never manage.

“Speak of the Devil.” Jethro grumbled, putting the object to his ear.

Figuring it to be only polite that she give her visitor some semblance of privacy for his conversation, even though it was her son he spoke to, Henrietta ambled into the kitchen and set to work brewing a cup of coffee – only half-listening to her houseguest’s discussion as it began to grow more diverting with time.

“Nah, she’s fine.” Jethro mumbled into his phone. “It was just a broken sink – that’s why she didn’t answer - No, don’t come.” Pausing a moment to allow his employee to speak, during which time he mumbled something markedly filthy beneath his breath, Jethro collapsed on a couch and shook his head in consternation as he listened. “Because what makes you think that you could fix a sink better than I could?” Smirking in response to whatever answer he received, Jethro then continued, taking on a more business-like tone. “Yes, you’re in charge, DiNozzo.” Rolling his eyes in annoyance at whatever reply he received, Jethro ran his hand through his hair before continued. “Well, assert yourself, damnit – Yeah, that’s fine. Just don’t headsnap him too hard, though. Abby doesn’t want any bruising for the wedding photos.” Smiling at the response he received from that line of topic, Jethro actually chuckled before respond. “Yup. Yup, you too. See you, later, Kiddo.”

Making her way into the living room with two steaming cups of coffee, one of which she handed to Jethro, Henrietta raised a brow at the phone in way of a silent inquiry.

“I would have put you on,” Jethro reasoned, mistakenly believing her curiosity to be an accusation, “But he made me promise that I wouldn’t let you know he was checking up on you.”

“I think you’ve done a rather poor job of that, Captain.” Henrietta teased, seating herself beside him on couch.

“I promise to get better at lying to you.” Jethro responded, mockingly somber.

Playfully swatting his shoulder in response to such impertinence, and nearly spilling her coffee all over his lap, Henrietta choked down a giggle and looked innocently at the television, perfectly content to pretend that she had never once endangered the well-being of his male organs as she turned the channel to one of the sports stations her son was keen on watching whenever not in the mood for a movie.

“How are you able to leave Tony in charge without worrying your bullpen is going to burn down?” Henrietta inquired, eager not to allow the atmosphere to elapse into silence. “I didn’t feel comfortable leaving that boy alone until he was seventeen.”
“It takes a remarkable strength of will.” Jethro confessed, perfectly serious.

Having learned from her earlier mistaken, wherein she had almost mutilated her new friend, Henrietta settled for a friendly eye-roll rather than a swat.

“All you could insult my child and get away with it.”

“Oh,” Jethro asked, “Why’s that?”

Almost certain that the man beside her already knew the answer to the question, but nonetheless eager to answer it, Henrietta smiled sweetly up into his face and confidently gave her answer.

“You’ve earned the right.”

“Fair enough.” Jethro agreed, looking more than just a little proud at such high accolades.

Deeply touched that her newest of friends seemed to take such great stock in being somewhat responsible for the well-being of her son, if not completely so, Henrietta swallowed down the lump in her throat with a bit of coffee and blinked back a few sappy tears.

“Are you hungry?” She inquired, eager not to cry for a second time in front of him. “I could heat up some leftover roast.”

“You won’t hear any arguments from me.” Jethro rapidly assured. “Can I help with anything?”

Inwardly grateful that Jethro’s mother had raised him so very well, as Senior’s most certainly had not, Henrietta smiled sweetly and lead him into the kitchen by hand.

“Could you set the table, please?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Jethro accented, inexplicably moving toward the appropriate cabinet.

“How…How do you know where everything is?” Henrietta inquired, already heating up the stove.

Because whilst one incident of said man picking out the correct cabinets was unremarkable, the curiosity-inducing fact still remained that Jethro had also been perfectly able to help put away dishes the previous evening after Tony had pleaded for assistance.

“Do you know how many times I’ve had stayed over after your kid got sick or broke a bone?”

“Tony told me he usually stayed with you.” Henrietta explained, flipping on a burner.

“Yeah, well, sometimes he’s a stubborn shit who doesn’t realize he needs help until after the fact.” Jethro groused, pleasing her by casually setting the table without any regard to proper napkin placement.

Suddenly realizing that Jethro’s affections for Tony were, perhaps, a bit more than that of mentor and mentee, and suitably touched by such a discovery, Henrietta dropped the spatula in her hand and hurried over the kitchen table – patiently waiting until Jethro had turned around to collect the silverware to kiss his cheek.

“What was that for?” Jethro smirked, touching his fingers to the stain her lipstick had created.
“For everything you’ve ever done for Tony.” She explained.

Nearing several moments to recover from the impromptu smooch, Gibbs blushed heatedly and shook his head.

“It was no big deal.” He dismissed. “That sucker grows on you after a while.”

“Don’t be so dismissive.” Henrietta insisted, grasping his hands for emphasis. “Tony told me about everything.”

“He told you all that and all I get is a peck on the cheek?” Jethro questioned, still overwhelmed by the earlier kiss but not so much so that he couldn’t tease.

“You’re right.” Henrietta agreed, stretching up to cup his cheeks. “How silly of me.”

And, with that, she planted a passionate kiss atop his chapped lips – their height difference necessitating that she stretch up to the very tips of her toes.

“You’re right.” Jethro stammered, sinking down into a chair when the seconds-long kiss had ended. “How silly of you.”
Despite having earlier made promises to himself, as well as to a hyper-intuitive Ducky, that he felt absolutely nothing towards Henrietta other than gentlemanly concern and regard, such feelings stemming forth from her close relation to that of his favorite agent, Gibbs was, finally, forced to confront the fact that perhaps he was beginning to feel a great fondness for the comely nymph of a woman. Such a sudden discovery being made, of course, sometime during their shared lunch wherein he had been helplessly unable to keep from laughing and smiling at all absurdities in a manner he had done since Shannon’s death. A realization which, while not unwelcome, had almost certainly been unwished for. For not only was Henrietta miles outside his own league, given her friendlier temperament and bewildering looks, so too was she inarguably off-limits by virtue of her close relation to his pseudo-son. And so, it was no small amounts of consternation that Gibbs sat beside her on the sofa and half-heartedly watched the foreign movie she had selected for their entertainment, horrifically conflicted and painfully distracted by the enticing aroma her freshly-washed hair.

“Don’t you just love French films?” Henrietta breathed, head still nestled comfortably against his shoulder.

Having, up until that moment, been thoroughly distracted by her nearness to his person, Gibbs could’ve honestly proclaimed himself to have thought the depressing movie to be an Italian or Spanish variety – himself having not even once glanced at the screen any longer than the space of a moment save for when his pretty friend compelled him to ‘watch carefully’ her ‘favorite parts’ of the dreary film.

“Yeah.” Gibbs mindlessly agreed, ardently struggling not become distracted by the vivacity of her bright eyes. “The French are…something alright.”

“What high praise.” Henrietta teased, green eyes all aglow with mischief as she tilted back her head to better meet his eyes.

Thoroughly unpracticed when it came to participating in such lively and playful banter, as Shannon had been more subdued and subtle in nature, Gibbs found himself entirely unprepared to match her own livelier wit with his own unimpressive arsenal of sarcasm and dullness. But, rather than give up and admit defeat, something he had always been loath to do, Gibbs summoned up his courage and forced himself to say something at least somewhat intelligent.

“You know me.” He jested. “Always full of praise.”

“You’re downright sappy.” Henrietta eagerly agreed. “One would think you’re a Who.”

Thinking that he might have misheard her, despite the great unlikeness of such, Gibbs frowned and raised an inquiring eyebrow at her.

“A what?”


As Kelly had never taken a great liking to any of said man’s narratives, she having found him to be impossibly difficult to read, Gibbs was utterly oblivious as to what exactly Henrietta was speaking of. Because while Tony had made him watch a number of classical movies, both children’s and adult alike, he was all but certain that the identity of Who’s had never come up in any of them.

“I haven’t.” Gibbs calmly confessed, feeling unreasonably chastised for such a dubious failure. “If Tony doesn’t make me, I usually don’t go to the movies.”

And, in all truth, it had been several months since the last hellish evening in which said man had all but forced him into attending the latest ridiculous movie geared toward those possessive of a more pretentious taste than their peers. A heinous act of psychological warfare, fit more for a terrorist rather than himself, that Gibbs had yet to forgive or forget.

“We’ll have to work on fixing your lack of appropriate cinematic experience.” Henrietta informed him, perfectly serious.

“So long as you leave me time to work on my boat,” Gibbs graciously allowed, “I’ll be fine with that.”

Seemingly appeased at his compromise, at least for the moment, Henrietta nodded her assent to the relaxed terms and moved their conversation along with a marked ease that Gibbs could not help but feel envious toward.

“I didn’t know you owned a boat.”

“I don’t.” Gibbs clarified. “I make boats.”

Clearly confused at his simple explanation, for her lips turned down in a most attractive pout, Henrietta looked at him questioningly and issued forth an amusing question.

“How on earth do you have time for a second job?”

“No.” Gibbs smirked. “I make boats as a hobby.”

Suitably appeased with such an answer, as it had clearly not failed to lull her curiosity back into a more manageable state, Henrietta smiled devilishly and boldly snatched up one of his hands.

“Oh.” She purred, giving his entrapped hand a squeeze. “That makes perfect sense. Tony did tell me that you were good with your hands.” And, taking his stunned stillness as permission to continue, Henrietta grinned quite wickedly before moving his hand to rest atop her knee. “I’d like to see that for myself someday, Jethro.”

“That’s your knee.” Gibbs softly exclaimed, going both stiff in posture and another more ‘private’ part.

Eyes twinkling brightly in amusement at his lack of grace, Henrietta edged his hand up several inches before looking him directly in the eyes – the effect of such being not at all dissimilar to those a Siren might have on a Sailor.

“It doesn’t need to be my knee.” Henrietta purred, her voice a most alluring music.
Chapter 14

While Henrietta was a woman seldom indulgent of negative feelings within her person, she believing in the concept of banishing most sources of pessimism in her life, she found that she couldn’t help but be quite disappointed when, mere moments before Jethro seemed sure to kiss her, said man’s phone had rung quite loudly and all but ruined the amorous mood she had worked so carefully to craft. That it was her own child who had done the calling, and was thus the culprit for such an unconscionable interruption, did but little to mitigate her disappointment. For whilst the company and conversation of her child was most certainly always welcome, it did not exactly follow that there were no exception to such a rule – such an exclusion being, of course, the understandable belief that such familial company was not exactly wished for when one was quite set upon having their new ‘good friend’ satisfy them in a way they had not been ‘satisfied’ in for years.

“I have to answer it.” Jethro groaned, looking as if he would much rather lop off his own arm. “It could be work.”

“Go on.” Henrietta sadly obliged, quickly pecking his chin. “Do your duty.”

Failing to respond appropriately to her quoting of Stannis Baratheon, or elsewise simply refusing to acknowledge it on some spurious principal she was not yet privy to, Jethro nodded his thanks and awkwardly began to go about the process of trying to remove his phone from his pocket without allowing her to see any of the evidence of his most recent attraction. And whilst Henrietta did, eventually, take compassion on her mortified friend and leave to the kitchen to allow him some semblance of dignity and privacy, she could not help but further embarrass him by smiling appraisingly at that which she saw outlines against the confines of his jeans.

“Ducky,” Jethro groaned into his phone, when at last he was mistakenly assured he would not be overhead, “This had better be good.”

Pausing a moment to allow his good friend to respond, during which time his cheeks turned as red as a cherry, Jethro coughed a copious amount of coffee from his lungs and set aside his mug before finding it within him to speak once more.

“What?!” Jethro spluttered, looking indignant and mortified all at once. “No. We were just watching a move – Yes, watching!”

Biting down on her tongue to keep from giggling aloud at the indecent-mocking her new friend was currently receiving, as eavesdropping was most certainly one of her less noble talents, Henrietta thought of disgusting fish to keep her amusement at bay and went about the dubious pretenses of preparing to make another pot of coffee.

“Keep it up, Ducky.” Jethro cautioned, a sharp frown taking over his features. “I’m not above telling Hamish it was you who put those scratches in his Corvette.”

Jethro’s smugness at his clever threat only lasting the length of time it took his sassier friend to devise a clever retort, the likes of which must have been exceedingly foul given the way his recipient’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head, Henrietta nearly drew blood from her tongue as she clamped down harder to keep from laughing outright at such an animated expression.

“Would you shut the hell up?” Jethro groused, looking highly scandalized. “My God, you’re evil.”
Struggling to imagine a scenario wherein the jovial Scotsman could ever convincingly play the part of a villain, but having great pleasure in doing so regardless, Henrietta made a great point of loudly opening the coffee-cabinet so that her stifled giggles would not be overhead.

“What – now?! But it’s only three.” Jethro argued, glancing quickly at his watch.

Suddenly just as unsure of the time as was her new friend, Henrietta turned to eye the clock in the kitchen and was, indeed, surprised to find that it was already very nearly five. A factoid that, whilst mildly alarming, was certainly amusing when viewed in the light that such lost time had only meant that they had passed the afternoon in absolute raptures of delight and comfort.

“Fine,” Jethro huffed, “But I swear to God, Ducky, if you make one comment like that during dinner, I’m going to – “

Clearly hung up upon, given the annoyed countenance that crossed over his handsome features, Jethro growled aloud his annoyance and stalked into the kitchen – his cross expression only marginally improving as she smiled at his arrival and stepped aside to show him that she had been hard at work making a fresh pot of coffee.

“Don’t go starting that.” Jethro grumbled, sadly turning the aged machine off. “Your son has set up a surprise dinner party for you at Le Lieu.”

Looking quite longingly at the no longer loudly-brewing machine, as she really had been in the mood for her seventh cup of coffee, Henrietta turned to pout at her guest only to be bet with an amused expression rather than the sympathetic one she had hoped for.

“Thanks for ruining the surprise.” She said, perfectly sweet and genuine.

“I may not be a smart man,” Jethro opined, shamelessly quoting one of her favorite movies, “But I do know enough about women to know that they don’t like being surprised without looking their best.” And, seemingly not satisfied to leave such a perfect sentiment alone, he then quickly added: “Not that you don’t look your best already, of course.”

Already more than just a little pleased at his earlier quotation, as it showed her that he was not beyond redemption when it came movie knowledge, Henrietta outright beamed at his kind, yet erroneous flirtation, and resolved to later thank him for such enjoyment in a more personal fashion whenever the opportunity might present itself.

“When am I supposed to be surprised?” She inquired, running her long fingers through her partially damp hair. “Because it’s going to take quite a while to tame this beast.”

“An hour.” Jethro announced, immediately frowning as he caught her worried expression. “But don’t worry,” He implored, “Ducky is always half-an-hour late. So long as we beat him there, nobody will mind.”

Immensely relieved that she would be given a somewhat adequate amount of time to prepare herself, as she really did not fancy the idea of going out into public with her hair a frizzy mess, Henrietta smiled sweetly at her benefactor and blessed her lucky stars that such a priggish man was somehow able to understand the concept of women wanting to look their very best when presented with the notion of being thrust into the center of attention.

“Would you be alright if I left you alone for a moment?” She pestered, feeling slightly guilty as she fudged the timeline of how long it would take her to prepare.

“Take all the time you need.” Jethro insisted, effortlessly calling her bluff. “I’ll wait.”
And, thus declared, Jethro made his way into the living room and switched the television unto a news channel, greeting such a dull and dreary program with far more enthusiasm than he had her selection of classical and foreign films. But rather than take the time to be sufficiently insulted at such a slight, as normally she might, Henrietta hurried off into the bathroom she currently shared with her son and rapidly began to fix her face – the process which, involving only lipstick and mascara, took only the space of a short three minutes.

It was only her gorgeous yet damnable curls that took up the majority of the allotted time, the still-damp mass of hair proving all but incorrigible as she had foolishly allowed it to half-dry without the benefit of a quick comb-through. But, rather than risk yet another broken comb, Henrietta settled for defeat and quickly tossed the unruly locks into a quick bun – figuring that it would be all too impolite to be tardy to an event thrown in her honor because of the state of her hair.

“Your ears are going to freeze.” Jethro advised, having politely assisted her into her coat and promptly found no hair-mussing scarf or hat to assist her with.

“Not if we run.” Henrietta returned, looping her arm through his own.
While he would never be able to rightfully claim that he was a socially graceful individual, his persistent public-anxiety often rendering his surly or downright hostile in the majority of social situations, Gibbs felt he was still at least marginally functional when it came time to enmesh himself in a crowded – a characteristic phenomenon which, thankfully, was made all the more possible by the presence of individuals far more vivacious and chattier than himself. That he so favored the company of the bubblier Abby and Tony over that of the more reserved Kate and Tim was only incontrovertible proof of such, the former duo’s liveliness and lack of emotional restraint all but vital in providing for him a buffer with which to mitigate the damages of his awkwardness and lack of grace. That Gibbs should not feel, at the moment, that such a buffer was not needed as he conversed with Henrietta was no real indictment on the part of his surrogate son and niece but, rather, an endearing endorsement on the part of his new friend’s affectionous and genial character.

“I’m moving back to Spain.” Said woman currently proclaimed, shivering quite violently beside him as they made their way to their awaiting table. “I mean, My God, how do you live this like?”

Being himself quite chilled, as he had chivalrously given up his own coat to further add to the warmth of her thinner outer-garment, Gibbs nodded in agreement but did so in a reserved fashion so that she might not be compelled to feel any guilt for the part she had played in his current chilliness.

“I told you,” Gibbs gloated, “You should have worn a hat.”

Putting on an alarmed expression eerily similar in nature to that of her own son’s, Henrietta reached a slender arm up to the bun in her hair and gave it a protective pat, the tenderness she displayed for her glorious mane of curled locks very reminiscent of the way in which Abby protected Bert the Farting Hippo.

“The static would destroy be hair.” Henrietta promptly dismissed. “As it is, it’s already going to take hours to fix this mess.” And, suitably worked up over the state of her currently bound-up hair, Henrietta frowned in exasperation and shook her head. “I ought to just lop it all off.”

Greatly alarmed at the very concept, as he had always found it quite difficult to feel any real attraction toward women with hair any shorter than a bob, Gibbs frowned deeply and quickly made known his feelings on such an unconscionable decision.

“No.” He insisted, a bit too quickly and passionately. “Don’t cut your hair.”

Looking markedly amused at such an animated effusion, an understandable response given his more reserved nature, Henrietta grinned wickedly and looked upon with a most mischievous twinkle dancing in her eyes.

“Why not?” The comely sprite challenged, a dangerous smile pulling up her lips. “Do you think that I wouldn’t look good with short hair?”

Startling at the very real trap he had just unwittingly stepped into, as there was no clear way in which to extract himself from the loaded without significant incident, Gibbs struggled in vain to come up with a clever retort or quip that might free him from the awkwardness of having to explain his hair-style preferences to the object of his admiration.

“Because it’s your trademark.” Gibbs finally managed, inwardly cringing at the triteness of
such a response. “And besides,” He quickly added, “If you cut your hair short, you’d look like your son.”

Rather than strike him senseless for the insinuation that she might possibly ever look like a man, as would the majority of women he knew, Henrietta laughed aloud at the notion until tears were dripping down her dimpled cheeks.

“That would make things between up quite awkward.” She allowed, voice still all aquiver with mirth.

“Us?” Gibbs parroted, immediately summoning up all his courage.

Because whilst Henrietta had most certainly been steadily flirting with him throughout the day, it stood to reason that such was simply a result of her affectionate personality. For, much like her son, she seemed to absolutely delight in provoking the opposite-gender into fits of passions.

“Yes.” Henrietta casually agreed. “I imagine it would be very difficult for you to date someone you thought looked like your agent.”

“Dating?” Gibbs spluttered, nearly tripping over his own feet in shock.

Kindly choosing to ignore his temporary loss of grace, something for which he was immensely grateful, Henrietta grinned lasciviously and nearly stopped his heart by pressing up close against him.

“Sooner or later, it’s bound to happen.” Henrietta declared. “Your lack of courage can’t possibly last much longer – not when I’m the one flirting with you.”

Despite understanding perfectly well that such hubris was only put on for a show, Gibbs found himself taking the bait so that the conversation might take on a more jesting manner rather than the serious one it was currently proving to be.

“That seems awfully vain of – “

But before Gibbs could so much as finish mock-scolding his newest of friends, much less garner any amusement from what was sure to be her witty reply, Abby was upon him – her enthusiasm all but palpable as she clumsily threw her skinny arms about his neck and kissed his cheek.

“Gibbs!” Abby squealed, sloppily kissing his cheek once more before reluctantly relinquishing him. “Henrietta! You’re here!”

“It’s nice to see you again, Honey.” Henrietta announced, eagerly accepting a hug of her own from the younger woman. “How are you?”

Ever much like a precocious child keen on announcing the first thing that came into their head, Abby spoke frankly and without any real regard to the social conventions which dictate a person much be more withdrawn and coy about their lack of patience.

“Starving!” Abby exclaimed, earning the ire of a particular priggish couple. “Come on, you two.”

And though Gibbs would have much preferred to escort Henrietta to the table himself, so that he might subtly secure a seat by her side at the table, Abby had him locked in a veritable death-grip that prevented all hopes of a gentle escape. And, so it was, that the gothic girl steered him
toward their awaiting her table, her good-natured enthusiasm rendering her soon forgiven even as he
heard Henrietta’s amused giggles trailing after them.

“Mama!” Tony beamed, the first to both spot and greet them. “Gibbs!”

“Monkey!” Henrietta squealed, gracelessly stretching across a mortified Tim to kiss her son
on the cheek. “You sweet boy!”

Magnanimously intervening on behalf of his more reserved friend, as any idiot with half a
brain could see that McGee was markedly uncomfortable with having Henrietta’s bosom pressed so
close to his face, Tony gently broke away from the embrace and pointed to a seat directly to his right.

“Sit, Mama!” He requested, having clearly reserved the space just for her.

As Henrietta eagerly hurried to obey the enticing request, Gibbs suddenly felt all the
awkwardness that often accompanied one’s inability to make known their innocent request in a non-
embarrassing manner. For having been keen on being seated beside his ‘good friend,’ and so quickly
and suitably prevented from doing so, he didn’t quite know how to request that Ducky scoot away
from Henrietta without making himself seem either desperate or militant.

“I say Jimmy, scoot down.” Ducky suddenly implored from Henrietta’s right. “I don’t much
fancy being seated atop a vent. My feet get far too warm.”

Immediately doing as bid, as the autopsy gremlin would never willingly disobey his father-
figure, Jimmy moved several inches down the table (in tandem with his supervisor) and effectively
left Henrietta with a suspiciously Gibbs-sized gap to her immediate right.

“I owe you, Duck.” Gibbs whispered to the medical examiner, eagerly accepting the spot for
his own as Henrietta launched into a lengthy appraisal about the thoughtfulness of her son to the
assembled crowd.

“I put another scratch in Hamish’s Corvette.” Ducky whispered back. “You’ll be taking the
blame for that one, too.”

“Naturally.” Gibbs agreed, far too relieved with his secured spot to feel any real annoyance at
being so easily coerced.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the gaps in posting - work and college have me very busy.
But keep the reviews coming, they make my day.

And, no, I am not Abby bashing.

Nestled up quite cozily betwixt her son and potential suitor, her head rested on the shoulder of the former whilst her hand rested quite cheekily on the knee of later, Henrietta smiled softly and diligently listened as an over-excited Abby began to regal them all with the endless details of her soon approaching wedding – the highlight of which was to be, according to the future bride, a massive candy bar that had been planned out almost immediately after the initial thrill of the proposal had subsided. But, whilst said conversation was more certainly diverting, if not admittedly a bit draining, Henrietta found much to her mild chagrin that her interest in the matter was currently being greatly overshadowed by the behavior and mannerisms of the other imminent-bride. For whereas most women would join in and share the details of their own wedding with the closest of their friends, Kate was stubbornly silent, a notable helplessness played up quite vividly in her dark eyes as she sipped at her water and smiled stiffly at the endless barrage of details she was now being bombarded with. And so, it was tempered enjoyment that Henrietta allowed the younger fiancée to prattle on, her concern more focused on the withdrawn Kate as she idly considered the notion that Tim really ought to have waited a few more years before proposing. Because whilst Abby was most certainly sweet to a fault, and markedly clever in certain regards, it was all to plain to Henrietta that said girl was a woman still more akin in personality to those in currently in college at the same time her soon-to-be-husband was firmly ensconced in a more advanced stage of maturity.

“By the time you’re finished with our wedding, you won’t have room left for the food at Kate’s.” Abby finally finished, eyes all aglow and slightly breathless.

Not failing to have noticed Kate’s distress whenever the conversation inevitably found itself focused on her, Henrietta smiled and spoke up so that the troubled girl would not feel compelled to do so.

“I’m sure it’ll be a fun affair.” Henrietta allowed. “Where are you honeymooning?”

Without even missing a beat, despite having used the lull in narrating to steal a bite of dessert from her fiancé’s plate, Abby answered for the both of them.

“We’re going to Romania!”

Blinking at the naming of such a unique destination, as its reputation certainly didn’t vouch for it being a noted honeymoon location, Henrietta forced her smile to remain but couldn’t help but think that such a decision had been decided with little, if any, regards to what the groom might have enjoyed.

“Oh.” She grinned, eyes still fixed on the distraught Kate. “How exciting.”

“You are coming, aren’t you?” Abby fussed, looking very alarmed at the slim possibility that
she might not.

Finally getting a sense of where Kate’s sullen mood had stemmed forth from after the innocent question had been delivered, as the former had glowered softly at her friend during the deliverance, Henrietta quickly stepped in and took action before the apparent jealousy could lead to any irreparably hurt feelings.

“Of course I am.” Henrietta promptly assured, sparing a quick smile for the bubbly girl before turning her focus unto Kate. I’m looking forward to both weddings.”

Greatly relieved that her actions had earned a smile from the left-out woman, even if said expression was markedly strained, Henrietta allowed herself to relax a bit before silently avowing to late pamper the prospective-bride with even more attention.

“It would have been nice if you had spaced them out, though.” Jethro grunted, the gruff reprimand more a tease than a serious indictment.

But rather than chuckle along with the rest of the assembled party, as would most when met with the rare phenomenon of their usually stern employee telling a joke, Kate frowned and looked near tears.

“I was proposed to first.” Kate needlessly defended, blinking quite rapidly. “Tim was the one who decided to set his wedding six weeks after proposing.”

Up until then having had no real idea as to the timeline of either bride’s relationships, Henrietta choked a bit on her wine upon hearing the news that the seemingly sensible Tim had thought it wise to rush into such an important decision – her own ill-advised nuptials no doubt playing their own invasive part in coloring her opinion on such a matter.

“Nine.” Tim corrected, not at all defensive. “And we’ve been dating for years, already. Why wait any longer than we need to?”

“Still,” Tony intervened, finally taking a break in his eating, “You’re lucky that Kate didn’t cut you for usurping her wedding.”

Herself being still quite angry at the paternal cousin who had been audacious enough to wear a white dress to her own nuptials so many years ago, Henrietta only narrowly resisted the urge to nod in agreement with her son.

“We didn’t usurp her wedding.” Abby pouted, highly indignant as she reached across the table to swat her friend’s shoulder. “Whose side are you on?”

Wisely deciding that it wasn’t at all prudent to take sides between two outspoken women on such a divisive issue, especially so when said ladies were both individuals whose company he greatly favored, Tony shoved a large forkful of chocolate mousse into his mouth before mumbling a noncommittal answer: “I’m on the side of finishing my dessert.”

“Your son is a troublemaker.” Kate groused, rolling her eyes.


For despite harboring a great reputation of being quite indulgent of her only child, Henrietta was not at all blind to the existence of his fault – no matter how few and mild those vices might be.

“I can’t imagine where he gets that from.” Jethro mumbled, purposely speaking loudly
enough to be overheard.

Beyond pleased to see that the withdrawn man was gradually coming out of his shell, as had not though such a thing would occur so very soon, Henrietta beamed openly into his handsome face before theatrically feigning ignorance.

“Whatever do you mean, Sir?”

Only marginally taken aback at her casual switch to Regency-Era speech, Jethro rolled his piercing blue eyes and opened his mouth to retort – the determination and mirth in his eyes all but promising a particularly invigorating retort. But, much to their mutual consternation, as well as that of the curious remainder of their party, such a promising rebuttle was cut preemptively short by the arrival of a shockingly-young waitress with small cake and wine in hand.

“What’s this?” Henrietta asked, puzzled at the presence of a cake so soon after they had ordered their own individual dessert.

Looking very much as if she had been forced against her well to participate in such an impromptu affair, for she sweated most profusely and all but shook in the weight of their combined stares, the prepubescent girl paled most alarmingly and stammered horrifically as she gave her answer.

“It’s a congratulations cake.” The timid girl managed. “The owner – My uncle…He told me I had to bring it over.”

“And what is it that he thinks we’re celebrating?” Henrietta questioned, knowing none of them to have shared the details of her recent freedom with the restaurant staff.

And, wishing for a partner with which to share her outright confusion, Henrietta turned to Jethro for sympathy only to be greeted by the sight of a man with a very red face and rage in his eyes.

“I think there had been some sort of mistake, Lassie.” Ducky hastily intervened, looking just as uncomfortable as his friend but nowhere near as hostile.

“Oh no, Sir.” The trembling girl persisted, now deathly white. “My Uncle Antoine pointed this table out specifically and ordered – requested that I offer our congratulations personally.”

Suddenly very concerned for both the underaged waitress and Jethro, for the former looked likely to faint at any moment and the latter looked ready to launch into a powerful verbal tirade that would only result in their removal from the establishment, Henrietta looked to the more level-headed Ducky for assistance only to find that said man was pointedly making direct eye-contact with Tony – as if he meant, by nonverbal communication, to convey that her boy’s assistance would be needed should Jethro need help leaving the restaurant somewhat peacefully.

“Congratulations.” The violently trembling piped up, when at long last she could tolerate the confused silence no longer. “May your engagement be a happy one.”

Seeing as the child had looked directly into her face as she delivered the well-wishes, Henrietta frowned and felt her face turn warm, all the feelings that came with being put on the spot without any warning serving to render her completely flustered in a manner she had not been in quite some time.

“Engagement?” She squeaked, utterly perplexed.
“Yes, Ma’am.” The cowering squeaked, smiling weakly at her before turning to Jethro. “I was told to tell you that, ’your fourth engagement was on the house.’”

Foolishly having decided not stop speaking the moment Jethro leveled a deadly glare upon her person, the poor child now stood rooted to the spot in fear as she watched her angry diner’s face turn all the redder with her rehearsed speech. But rather than allow the situation to further deteriorate, and thus run the risk of playing witness to said waitress’s unearned chewing out, Henrietta launched upon Jethro with a fierce anger all her own.

“Your fourth engagement?” She parroted, suddenly flooded with all the adrenaline that accompanied the feelings of anger and betrayal.

Because while she and Jethro were, by no means, currently classified as an exclusive couple, there had most certainly been an unspoken understanding that such a relationship was bound to happen sooner or later. But that Jethro had not only seen fit to conceal from her such an important detail as his many past marriages, especially after she had been so forthcoming with her own experience with Senior, certainly did bode well for either of them when it came to the chances of any prospective romances.

“I – I – I Was only doing what I was asked. I didn’t mean – “

And it was there that the middle-schooler promptly burst into tears, completely and utterly overwhelmed by the suddenly hostile situation was nowhere near old enough to navigate.

“Take the cake back, Lassie.” Ducky insisted, quickly taking pity and giving the young girl the ‘out’ she so clearly needed.

All but running off to do just that, and tearfully ignoring the outrage of all the priggish diners she passed, the overwhelmed waitress left all assembled at the table with a marked sensation of awkwardness and discomfort.

“What is going on, Jethro?” Henrietta demanded, when at last she felt the girl was far enough away to avoid overhearing the results of her mistake.

Still looking decidedly homicidal, Jethro glared after the retreating waitress but was otherwise unable to take any actions against her as he was effectively trapped in his seat by the proximity of Ducky – a man who, though seemingly frail, did not seem like to allow his friend to do anything too rash.

“I did not tell Antoine we were engaged.” Jethro insisted, completely missing the point of her question.

“Guys – “ Kate began, only to be cut off by her more effusive counterpart.

“Wait!” The Gothic-Girl cried. “You’re engaged!?”

Far too wrathful with Jethro to pay such a ridiculous question any real mind, Henrietta did not so much as turn to look at the bubbly woman.

“No!” Jethro barked, causing poor Jimmy to jump several feet in his chair. “And I don’t know why that idiot thought we were.”

Entirely unwilling to sit back and allow an innocent child to be lambasted, especially for something that had most decidedly not been her fault, Henrietta scowled and spoke without restraint: “You mean other than the fact that you’ve so clearly brought all your wives here.”
There descended upon the table a powerful silence then, with those assembled either trying
to avoid eye-contact with the offended parties or elsewise clearly wrestling with their inner selves as
to whether or not to intervene and try to play peacemaker. But rather than serve to soothe her
enraged spirits, the oppressive silence only further aggravated her, for such an uninterrupted time
only served to allow her to ruminate on all the times Senior had kept poignant secrets from her – such
actions, of course, only solidifying her the nature of his character. It was only when the perpetually
shy Jimmy pipped up, and thus distracted her, did Henrietta allow herself to vanquish such
unpleasant memories.

“Guys, I think Kate needs to – “

Jimmy was, unfortunately, interrupted in his narrative by the untimely effusion of a disgusting
torrent of vomit emanating forth from Kate’s mouth unto a mortified Tim’s lap.

“Oh my God,” The ill woman groaned, “I’m so – “

And it was, again, that the poor woman vomited, this time atop Tim’s shoes rather than his
dress pants.

Much to Kate’s evident relief, as well as that of Tim’s, Jethro acted quickly after the second
emesis and yanked the centerpiece-vase from the midst of the table, unceremoniously devesting the
vase of its expensive flowers before gracelessly shoving the ornament into the mortified woman’s lap
mere seconds before she dispelled from her mouth the remainder of her supper.

“I told you not to try the snails.” Abby unhelpfully opined, troublesomely trying to thrust a
large bunch of fabric napkins into her actively-vomiting friend’s hand.

“Would you shut up!” Kate understandably snapped, in between two garishly loud heaves.

As Abby visibly recoiled from such excusable testiness, and Tony passed over to the
scandalized Tim a large selection of napkins with which to remove a portion of the vomit from his
good-clothes, Henrietta finally sprang into action – her worth with Jethro all but forgotten as she
tended to her favorite of Tony’s friends.

“Oh, Katie.” She crooned, unceremoniously crawling over the others to tend to the mortified
woman. “Come along now, Sweetheart. To the bathroom.”

“I want to leave.” Kate argued, uselessly trying to hide her green face behind her hair.

“Not before you’ve cleaned yourself up.” Henrietta insisted, moving to block from her view
the visage of several outraged diners. “We’ll get you cleaned up a bit, first, and then we’ll call
Seamus to come for you.”

Seeing as how Kate had opted to ride with Abby, rather than drive herself and waste the gas,
Henrietta had quickly decided it would be best for an alternative ride to arranged for – as no doubt
any conversation between the two women would be markedly awkward for the next several days.

“I can’t possibly walk through all those people.” Kate cried, looking on the very of tears.

“You’ll have to at least once.” Henrietta pointed out, not at all unkindly. “And besides,
there’s a door near the bathrooms in the back. I’ll smuggle you out there.”

And, with that, Henrietta carefully began the unceremonious task of guiding a reluctant and
embarrassed Kate through the dining room of the restaurant – herself heartily glaring at all those who
dared to grumble against them even as Kate cried and tried (rather unsuccessfully) to hide her face in
Henrietta’s shoulder – a futile task, given their great height disparity.

“Ugh, I can’t believe I threw up on Tim.” Kate bemoaned, bonelessly allowing herself to be pulled into the lady’s room

“I’m sure he’s already forgiven you.” Henrietta soothed. “Tim doesn’t seem the type to hold grudges.”

And, with that sage advice administered, Henrietta then pulled a softly crying Kate over to the enormous sinks and tried, somewhat successfully, to dab away the vomit from her flushed face with the cotton towels the bathroom attendant now surely regretted giving them.

“I didn’t mean to throw up on him.” Kate tearfully insisted, long streaks of mascara dripping down her flushed cheeks. “It all happened so fast.”

“No one could blame you, Katie.” Henrietta crooned, dabbing away the last of the offensive vomit from her face. “Not given your…condition.”

Because even though nobody had outright told her that Katie was expecting, one mother was very often able to detect the presence of another in her presence. That said woman had been notably abstaining from wine, and vomiting at random, was only further proof of her hypothesis.

“Tony told you?” Kate cried, looking very betrayed.

“No.” Henrietta readily assured, using her thumbs to rub away the long streaks of mascara from her face.

“Then how?” Kate sniffled. “How did you know?”

Smiling affectionately at the naïve woman, Henrietta pulled her into a hug and began to rub circles unto her back.

“I was in the same position once, too.” Henrietta reminded, taking great care to keep the bitterness from her voice.

Because even though Henrietta had hardly been out of high-school when her own impromptu pregnancy had occurred, and Kate was currently well out of college, it still stood to reason that they had both been/were reasonably young and overwhelmed at the onset of their mutually unexpected pregnancies.

“The only difference,” Henrietta continued, “Is that you love Seamus and want to marry him.”

“I do love Seamus. With all my heart.” Katie cried, beginning to cry anew. “But - but the baby isn’t…his.”

Although Henrietta was an open-minded individual, and compassionate to a fault, even she could not keep from feeling some sort of scandalized at the very nothing that a woman so in love would be untrue to her fiancé – especially one that seemed so sensible and wise as Kate.

“I was…forced.” Katie choked out, clinging tightly to her person. “On a mission. He…He held a gun to my chest and – “Struggling quite awhile for breath, Henrietta was forced to remind her to take several deep breaths before she was able to speak again. “I did everything he asked – but he still shot me.”
Possessing no words that would could make such an agony even marginally better, Henrietta settled for compassionate silence and simply spent the next several minutes petting the distraught woman’s hair and letting her sob openly upon her person.

“Oh, Katie.” She commiserated, when at last the cries had abated to a more manageable level, “Does Seamus know?”

Taking several long moments to recover herself, during which time she was forced to use several napkins to take care of the discharge from her nose and eyes, Kate frowned in anguish but nodded her head.

“Yes.” She managed, blinking rapidly. “Tony talked me into it.”

Pushing aside the pride in her son, at least for the moment, Henrietta passed another towel to Kate before gently pulling her into a powerful hug.

“And he still wants to marry you?” Henrietta asked, needing to know the answer but dreading it all the same.

“Yes.” Kate responded, her smile a sad yet thankful one.

“Oh, Katie.” Henrietta hummed, rubbing her shoulder. “You do your best to keep that man. Men that good don’t come around as often as they ought to.”

For being wed to Senior a good portion of her life, Henrietta knew all too well how full the world was of scummy men.

“I – It’s just hard.” Kate bemoaned, clinging tightly to her person. “I…I don’t even know how to tell everyone else about the pregnancy.”

Despite having been greatly overjoyed by her own pregnancy, after the initial blow of the forced wedding had subsided, Henrietta was unfortunately unable to offer any real-life experience of such a phenomenon to the troubled girl. That was not to say, however, that she was completely deplete of any useful advice.

“Is Seamus willing to be this child’s father?”

“Oh course.” Katie sniffed. “He’s more excited then I am.”

“Well, then.” Henrietta smiled, stretching up to pat her hair. “I don’t see why you should treat this as something so scandalous. Women give birth to babies out of wedlock all the time, nowadays. Even, I was six weeks pregnant at my own wedding.”

Looking somewhat relieved at the confession, even though Henrietta’s forced marriage had certainly been no closely-guarded secret, Kate sniffled but immediately frowned again as another intrusive thought danced across her mind.

“Are you saying I should lie?”

“It’s not a lie to say that Seamus is the father – not if he’s willing to play the role. Blood isn’t the only thing that makes a family, you know.”

And so it was, that with a few more wise words and copious amounts of cuddles, that Kate was finally well enough to be deemed able to exit out the back – a sympathetic sous chef being their unlikely assistance as he compassionately disabled the alarms long enough for them to exit without
causing a scene.
Chapter 17

Having been forced, by necessity, into physically dragging his bewildered and livid friend out of the restaurant and into Hamish’s slightly-damaged Corvette, as Jethro had seemed veritably hellbent upon chewing out the poor lassie who had been ‘foolish’ enough to deliver the cake in the first ‘damn’ place, Ducky drove slowly so that said man’s fierce temper might taper off into something much more manageable before reaching his final destination.

“Fucking Antione.” Jethro growled, slumping quite petulantly in his seat. “That asshole did this on purpose to get back at me for Stephanie assaulting his nephew.”

Despite harboring the belief that such a hypothesis was certainly possibly given the reputation of impulsiveness and immaturity most American seemed to possess, Ducky just couldn’t find it within him to apply such malice to the French individual in current possession of his great-grandfather’s restaurant. Because whilst said man was certainly prone to fits of rage, namely whenever one of his staff was mistreated by guests, the Frenchman was usually more possessive of a calm and priggish nature.

“I honestly don’t think that Antione was being malicious.” Ducky lectured, choosing his words carefully so as to avoid further upsetting his friend. “I would think that embarrassing your repeat guests would make for a rather poor business model.”

Not failing to catch Jethro’s fierce frown from the corner of his eyes, as said man made no attempts at all to conceal his staunch displeasure, Ducky sighed and only narrowly resisted the urge to roll his eyes at his friend’s marked petulance.

“Well, I’m sorry Jethro, but you are a repeat guest.” Ducky insisted, firm yet kind. “How was Antione to know that the pretty little woman you brought along to his restaurant was anything other than another fiancée?”

Sitting up straighter to better glower into his face, the effects of which were heavily mitigated by Ducky’s distinct lack of fear of the notoriously gruff man, Jethro cursed under his breath for a spell before finally giving forth a markedly weak retort.

“I don’t think Antione knows you well enough to know of your hair preferences, Jethro.”

Unable to keep an annoyed sigh from escaping his lips at such a childish defense, as it was very reminiscent of the way he, himself, had once informed his mother that he couldn’t possibly have tracked in all that mud as he was no longer wearing his shoes, Ducky carefully rounded a bend and waited a few moments before turning to return his friend’s eyeroll with one of his own.

“Henrietta doesn’t have red hair.”

Despite having been delivered with a civil tongue, it was that particular bit of logic which seemed to finally deflate his friend’s anger, the inarguable wisdom of such thankfully managing to render his ire into the much more manageable state of irritated defeat.

“Henrietta is never going to speak to me again.” Jethro groused, much more downcast than he was angry or hostile.

“You’re being ridiculous.” Ducky responded mildly. “If she’s anything like Tony, and we know that she is, she’s likely already forgiven you.”
Because whilst Henrietta had, admittedly, at the time seemed quite enraged upon hearing the news that Jethro possessed a grand total of three ex-wives, Ducky did not think it was at all a stretch to believe that her fits of anger would be just as short-lived as those of her child.

“I still don’t see why I need to be forgiven.” Jethro groused, shaking his head in a dismissive manner that suggested the very idea was absurd. “It’s not like I lied to her.”

“That’s exactly the problem.” Ducky advised, quite weary of his friend’s outright ignorance when it came time to deal with any sort of unpleasant emotion. “If you’re not apologetic about keeping silent about such an important part of your life why should Henrietta feel as if she should trust you?”

Looking quite annoyed to be faced with such sound logic, as Jethro had likely only hoped to vent out his frustrations on ears heavily biased in his favor, the former Marine grumbled something uncomplimentary beneath his breath before promptly remembering his manners upon receiving a scolding pinch from his driver.

“But I didn’t lie.” Jethro persisted, rubbing at his rapidly-bruising skin. “I was going to tell her…just not immediately. Ex-wives aren’t just something you bring up right away.”

“No.” Ducky allowed. “I suppose you’re right about that.”

Seeming to gather no real amount of comfort upon hearing his reasonings receive credence, Jethro only frowned and slumped wearily against his seat cushions.

“Henrietta probably thinks I’m a sleaze now.”

“Perhaps she does at the moment.” Ducky agreed, earning for himself a troubled groan in response. “But, were you to explain the matter to her, I’m sure she would happily put this incident behind her.”

For whilst it was, admittedly, a bit of a character-flaw to have possessed a grand total of three ex-wives in so short of time, it certainly stood to reason that emotional trauma was an acceptable excuse for such behavior – provided, of course, that one worked to amend such maladaptive coping skills.

“Perhaps you ought to try explaining matters to her, Jethro.” Ducky pressed, after his closest of friends remained stubbornly silent.

“How the hell do I explain away three ex-wives?” Jethro demanded, looking slightly overwhelmed at the moment.

Figuring it best to rip the proverbial bandage off immediately, as it was not often his friend was so vulnerable and open to hearing that which he did not wish to hear, Ducky took a deep breath and immediately went for broke – figuring, hopefully correctly, that Jethro wouldn’t dare punch him whilst the both of them were in the confines of a moving car.

“Perhaps you could make mention of your trauma.” He suggested, bracing himself for a blow.

“Trauma?” Jethro parroted, weakly scoffing at the very idea.

Again bracing himself for the impact of a blow, as his friend had never been one to suffer mentions of his first-wife lightly, Ducky gripped the steering wheel tightly and all but forced himself to shoo away from his body all traces of self-perseveration.
“Yes, Jethro, trauma.” Ducky repeated. “From the loss of Shannon.”

Looking very much like he had been punched in the stomach at such a declaration, Jethro turned his head away from him to look out the window, the anguished expression on his face poorly concealed even as his half of his face remained concealed.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early to be bringing up Shannon?”

“Jethro,” Ducky frowned, reaching across the small expanse to grab his hand, “You can’t keep Shannon and Kelly bottled up forever. It’s not healthy for you. And,” added he, giving the fingers in his grasp a tight squeeze, “It might actually do you some good to talk to someone about those feelings.”

Because while Jethro had, on occasion, referenced the severe depression he had experienced upon losing his wife and daughter, he had all but stubbornly refused to elaborate when gently pressed for details. That Jethro might just be slightly more comfortable sharing such trauma with a therapist, or a woman, was an idea that had often crossed his mind as a result of such stonewalling.

“Yeah,” Gibbs mumbled. “Maybe.”

Frowning as he pulled up to said man’s home, and stubbornly refusing to unlock the doors, Ducky summoned up his courage and looked his friend straight in the eyes as he asked his next question: “Are you going to be alright by yourself?” He fusses. “Or are you going to go straight for the bourbon?”

Growling dangerously as he tried, and failed, to force the passenger door open, Jethro turned to him with annoyance in his eyes and grumbled out his response: “Does it matter?”

Remaining firm in his decision not to allow his troubled friend to leave without some sort of confirmation that he would be alright on his own, Ducky met his gaze unflinchingly and spoke firmly in reply.

“You’ve already had four glasses of wine, Jethro.” He reminded. “Atop of your blood pressure medication. So yes, it does matter. Because I can’t, in all good conscious, leave you alone if you’re planning to add even more alcohol into her body in addition to all that wine.”

“Ducky,” Jethro sighed, avoiding giving him a direct answer, “I’ll be fine. I – “

“Jethro.” Ducky implored, nearly pleading. “Stay the night at my place. For my sake, if not yours.”

Slumping against the cushions of his seat in sheer annoyance, Jethro sighed and shook his head.

“Are you going to attempt and stage a kidnapping if I refuse?”

“Yes.” Ducky promptly answered, already prepared for a battle of wills.

“Then I don’t really have a choice, do I?” He grumbled, already replacing his seatbelt.

“No.” Ducky grinned. “You don’t.”
Chapter 18

Despite having been allowed a precious quarter of an hour in which to calm her inflamed sense of betrayal and anger, a markedly terse card ride home being the harbinger of such an unsolicited reflection period, Henrietta found, much to her vast heartbreak, that such a stiff calm was only a temporary lull in the storm.

“You shouldn’t have yelled at Gibbs like that.” Tony huffed, angrily throwing his jacket unto the sofa as they stepped inside their apartment.

Startling a bit at the sudden presence of noise, as the car ride back really had been devoid of any sound, Henrietta blinked stupidly and looked upon her son in utter disbelief – scarcely daring to believe that her biggest supporter had inexplicably shifted alliances.

“Excuse me?” She questioned, maturely placing her own jacket on the coatrack near the door.

Giving her a look that seemed to very much convey that he would hold his ground in such an argument, the expression eerily similar to the time he had once refused to cut his hair for a solid two years, Tony crossed his arms and refused to be cowed by the stern expression he was currently receiving.

“It wasn’t his fault that waitress messed up.” Tony insisted.

Having never so much as raised her voice at said man, whether in anger or surprise, Henrietta found herself quite surprised at the increased volumes of her words.

“No, but it was his fault he lied to me!”

“He didn’t lie to you!” Tony responded in kind. “Gibbs isn’t a liar!”

Bewildered at such a ridiculous notion, as Jethro did most certainly conceal from her the existence of four ex-wives, Henrietta scoffed audibly as she indignantly went to gather her son’s coat and place it where it belonged.

“He deceived me, then.” Henrietta clarified, more than prepared to argue semantics.

“Not on purpose.” Tony grumbled, sounding very much like a petulant child.

By then more than just a little puzzled at her son’s staunch defense of his employer, as well as heartily wounded by such a decision, Henrietta frowned deeply and strived ardently to keep her temper. For, whilst said attribute was certainly possessive of a very long fuse, so too was it possessive of an explosive quality when detonated.

“What are you talking about, Tony?” She asked, voice completely even.

“I’m just saying, Gibbs had good reason for not bringing his wives up.” Tony persisted, collapsing into a recliner. “They were psychotic.”

Not at all enjoying her son’s display of gaslighting, for such was something Senior had frequently done to her throughout their tumultuous marriage, Henrietta shook her head and refused to back away from the newly presented challenge – herself being entirely unwilling to allow her son to continue believing that all failed marriages were the fault of the wife.
“All four of them, Tony?”

“No,” Tony argued, “Not the first one!”

“Well,” Henrietta huffed, “Why did she leave then? Tell me that, Tony!”

Face flooded with color, whether from rage or concealment of guilt, Tony stood like a deer caught in the headlights and refused to answer the simple question.

“You were being ridiculous.” Tony chastised, completely evading the question.

Pausing in her pursuit of the kitchen, and subsequently coffee, Henrietta spun around and levelled a powerful glower upon her child – the likes of such an expression having not been used since Tony had gotten it into his head to try and down a bottle of wine at eleven.

“I don’t like the way you’re speaking to me right now, Anthony Angelo.”

“Well, I don’t like the way you’re speaking to me right now!” Tony retorted, stomping his foot. “I’m not a little kid, Mom. I’m allowed to have opinions!”

“And what opinions are those, Anthony!?” Henrietta demanded, thoroughly exhausted with the argument.

“That you shouldn’t have yelled at Gibbs like that!”

Very much thrown of her parenting game at the moment, as she and Tony had never really quarreled so vehemently before, Henrietta couldn’t help but give into the flood of unfamiliar emotions coursing through her veins.

“Excuse me?”

“You weren’t being fair.” Tony protested, looking markedly petulant.

“He lied to me, Anthony.”

“He didn’t lie to you!” Tony snapped, stomping his foot again. “And it doesn’t matter anyways, because you’re not together. You’re not a couple, and you never will be!”

Entirely unable to keep from seeing the resemblance between her upset son and an overtired toddler, Henrietta found the next words leaving her lips without permission.

“You’re tired, Tony.” She asserted. “Go to sleep.”

“You go to sleep!” He retorted, by now highly indignant. “You’re the one being irrational!”

“I said go lie down!” Henrietta snapped.
Chapter 19

Despite having been highly distraught upon being faced with the aftermath of her first real argument with her only child, Henrietta found that it was nearly two in the morning before her outrage had subsided well enough for her to trust herself with the important mission of reconciling with her likely still upset child. Because as much as she had earlier asserted herself to be in the right of their ridiculous argument, some time spent reflecting in the clarifying heat of the bathtub had shown her that perhaps she was being a tad bit ridiculous when it came to harboring the expectation that a markedly new acquaintance must disclose such personal information to another immediately upon introduction. That was not to say however, that she was entirely irrational in her belief that a possessor of that many ex-wives was far from the paragon of an ideal boyfriend. But, rather than enter her child’s bedroom with the express intention of asserting such an indelible truth, Henrietta swallowed down her pride and stepped into the darkened bedroom with an air of honest contrition and unconditional love.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you.” Henrietta whispered, gingerly stepping into the lightless room. “I’m sorry, Baby.”

Motherly instincts allowing her to effortlessly deduce that her son really was still awake, for the rigid stiffness of his boy was all but unnatural and inconducive to a proper slumber, Henrietta decided to press her luck and stepped closer to the large bed in the midst of the room.

“Tony.” Henrietta implored, reaching out a loving hand to stroke his curls. “Talk to me.”

Wounded greatly by the stubborn way in which her only child kept his face concealed in his pillow, as she knew such an action to be a good indicator that her son was hiding tears, Henrietta frowned deeply and blinked back a great deal of moisture from her own eyes, the guilt which was currently assailing her nigh on unbearable.

“Monkey.” She whispered, voice cracking betwixt the syllables. “Please.”

Finally showing some semblance of consciousness at such an unnatural sound, as he had never been able to bare the sight of those he loved crying, Tony mumbled something incomprehensible into his pillow before turning on his side to face her.

“You yelled at me, Mama.” He accused, both face and eyes suspiciously red.

“I know I did.” Henrietta sighed, gently settling herself unto the bed. “And I’m sorry.” She added, returning her fingers to his curly hair. “So very very sorry.”

Gradually relaxing his stiff posture as she began to massage his scalp, body chemistry actively working against him, Tony closed his eyes in utter exhaustion and clutched at his pillow before speaking afresh.

“You never yelled at me before.” Tony mumbled, the tone of his voice conveying quite succinctly that he did not enjoy such a phenomenon.

“I did once,” Henrietta gently refuted, still massaging his scalp, “When you were four.”

And though she did not particularly enjoy returning her attentions unto such an unpleasant remembrance, Henrietta knew that her son would never let such an open-ended statement stand alone without some form of significant protest.
“You climbed into the lion pit at the zoo, do you remember?” She asked, her words a gentle hum in the relative silence of the room.

Smiling sheepishly at the question, as no doubt he did remember at least a fraction of such a hellish adventure, Tony nodded half-heartedly and spoke to prove the accuracy of his memory.

“Senior wouldn’t take me to see them,” Tony pouted, “And you were taking forever in the bathroom.”

Knowing that the cause behind such a lack of supervision had stemmed forth from a vicious flare of ulcers, the intensity of which had almost certainly driven her into the foolish decision of allowing Senior temporary supervision of their impossibly curious child, Henrietta felt but left blame for the even in question – her only real fault in such a matter being, of course, the ridiculous assumption that a father ought to be perfectly capable of watching their child for a quarter of an hour.

“I yelled at you then.” Henrietta informed, smoothing down the hair she had earlier ruffled. “Not a lot, but just a little bit.” And, upon seeing that her child looked needlessly guilty at such a reminder, she quickly made an honest addition to her short narrative. “I hit Senior, too, for that one.”

Chuckling softly at the images such a confession had surely put into his mind, as he really did have no great love of his father, Tony rubbed sleepily at his eyes but stubbornly refused to give into the temptations of sleep.

“I don’t remember that part.”

“Yes.” Henrietta agreed, indulging him with a kiss to the cheek. “That was because you were being treated to a personal tour around the zoo by one of the owners for all your troubles.”

And though Henrietta was still all but certain that such an indulgence had only stemmed forth from the desire not to have the bejesus sued out of them by indignant parents, the owner had been quite kind and nice about the whole affair – going so far as to allow Tony a glimpse into the bat caverns despite his being far too young to be allowed inside otherwise.

“My troubles.” Tony scoffed, rolling his bloodshot eyes at the ridiculousness of such a statement. “He ought to have bought you some wine.”

“He ought to have tossed Senior into the bear pit for letting you do something so stupid.”

But, though she did not speak with any vehemence in her voice, Tony seemed to detect the presence of such and frowned deeply – a great look of contrition showing in her expressive and beautiful eyes.

“I’m sorry.” He needlessly apologized, looking several years younger than he currently was.

“Honey,” Henrietta laughed, “That was decades ago.”

“No,” Tony frowned, “For yelling at you. I shouldn’t have.”

Deeply touched that he was being so forgiving of her earlier temper flare, as he had every reason to still be upset at such an unusual occurrence, Henrietta beamed openly into his face and placed a sloppy kiss atop his nose.

“I think we’ve both had a long night.” Henrietta counseled, standing so that she might better arrange the blankets about his large frame. “Let’s call it a night, hmm?”
Simultaneously rubbing his eyes and nodding at the same time, Tony smiled sleepily at the suggestion and yawned his response: “Goodnight, Mama.”

“Goodnight, Monkey.”
Finding himself in quite the self-pitying fog after the previous day’s disastrous supper, wherein he had been mercilessly outed as a serial-womanizer, Gibbs meandered throughout the workday in a haze, severely lacking any of his usual energy and passion. A sudden shift in personality which, whilst relatively harmless, had clearly not gone unnoticed by the members of his perceptive team, all of whom took great strides throughout the morning to avoid him, their evident fear that he was a ticking time-bomb just waiting to explode a rational concern despite being far from one-percent accurate. And whilst Abby would normally be very atop his person as a result of all his sudden sullenness, herself never being one to easily abide the suffering of her loved ones without taking steps to interfere and rectify the situation at hand, she was currently and understandably far too busy with putting the final details of her fast-approaching nuptials in place. And as for Ducky, who would have also been all up in his business and trying to console him as best as he could with unsolicited but appreciated advice, he was far too backed up in the morgue with a surplus of bloated bodies to do anything more than nod at him as they passed each other throughout the day.

And so, it was at one in the afternoon that Gibbs found himself stalking off to take a solitary lunchbreak, his desire to be left alone to dine easily achievable as both Tony and Tim had already taken their lunch with an overexcited Abby at some pizza place only a few blocks away. And whilst Kate had earlier declined to eat with the trio, citing an upset stomach as the cause for such a disclination, Gibbs harbored no belief whatsoever that the prissier woman would feel the need or the desire to join him for a shared meal atop the roof of the building. No doubt, Gibbs thought, she would be going off to join Seamus somewhere for a brief, yet well-deserved, date in the midst of all the chaos in both their high stress-level jobs.

And so, with all that in mind, Gibbs seated himself into the worn lawn-chair he kept hidden behind a large smokestack (privacy more his aim than concealment) and kicked up his feet unto an old cardboard box left behind by some negligent custodian or private. It was only as he was making to bite into his feeble lunch, such an action approached half-heartedly, that he heard the distinct and jolting sounds of muffled sobbing off in the distance. And whilst he was not at all a person inclined to prying himself into some private’s personal business, as surely it was precisely one of those individuals come foolishly hiding away from an enraged superior, Gibbs’s sense of sympathy overrode his gruffness and he paused, and considered, that he, too, had once been a distraught inferior overwhelmed with the unquenchable rage of his drill sergeant.

It was with precisely those thoughts in mind that Gibbs went to investigate the cause of the nose, his doughy muffin and cold coffee all but forgotten as he sought to hunt down the culprit that had unknowingly interrupted his pursuit for a little bit of peace and quiet. But, to his great surprise, it was not some chastised private he found hidden away behind another smaller smokestack, but rather a distraught Kate, her brown eyes alarmingly bloodshot as she looked, in shock, upon his face at his sudden arrival.

“Kate.” Gibbs frowned, taking in her bedraggled form with no small amount of concern and pity. “Are you alright?”

For while such a question was, admittedly, insipid in nature, Gibbs knew that there was a rather severe strain of flu currently going around at the moment. And, should Todd have caught such an ailment, which she very well might have given at the small puddle of vomit situated to her left, she ought to be at home recovering rather than seated atop a large building in the chill of October winds.

“I didn’t know anyone else came up here.” Kate frowned, pointedly deflecting focus away
from his earlier question. “I like to come and watch the ships as I eat.”

Once more glancing at the small puddle of steaming vomit near her side, Gibbs shook his head and slowly seated himself on her right, not wishing to spook the young woman into fleeing should he approach her too quickly.

“I don’t think you’ve been eating much of anything.” Gibbs suggested, politely ignoring the vomit as he passed her a handkerchief. “What’s up with that?”

“Lady troubles.” Kate hastily proffered, gingerly wiping her mouth with the fabric provided.

Despite not knowing of any womanly ailment that would result in such a chronically sour stomach, apart from pregnancy, Gibbs frowned but was otherwise entirely unwilling to pry into the uncomfortable matter for fear it might very well involve something to do with menstruation.

“How are things with you and Seamus, Kate?”

Because whilst such prying made him markedly uncomfortable, the well-being of his agents was, in fact, something he took greatly to heart – no matter what anyone else might believe of him and his treatment of said underlings. And, while Seamus did seem like an upstanding young man, given the okay by both himself and Tony, it stood to reason that there was a chance, no matter how slim, that they might have been wrong about his character.

“Seamus is great, Gibbs.” Kate insisted, a fierce protectiveness shining in her big, brown eyes.

“That’s not what I asked.” Gibbs calmly countered, fully prepared to wait the young woman out.

“We’re great, Gibbs.” Kate insisted, both voice and expression full of unaffected earnestness. “This…This isn’t about that.”

Clearly making reference to her sudden moodiness, a trait which had never affected her before, Kate glanced away from him with an embarrassed flush on her cheeks but otherwise stubbornly refused to elaborate on the matter.

“What is it about?” He patiently inquired. “I can’t help you fix ‘it,’ if I don’t know what ‘it’ is.”

“It can’t be fixed.” Kate evaded, her brown eyes suddenly flooding over with a large copious amount of salty water. “That’s what it is.”

“Kate – “ Gibbs began, fully prepared to offer his assistance once more, “Let me – “

“I think my lunch break is over, Boss.” Said she, quickly yet gracelessly rising to her feet. “I have reports to finish.”

And before he could so much as request that the troubled young woman stay, much less reach out a hand to halt her progress, she was gone – her youthful nimbleness having given her quite the advantage when it came to avoiding difficult conversations with men old enough to be her father.
Chapter 21

Overburdened with an obscene amount of guilt since the previous evening’s disastrous dinner affair, and all but left alone to suffer the consequences of her uncharacteristically temperamental outburst, Henrietta soon found that there was no comfort to be had save for that which her tiny kitchenette provided. And so, it was with great gusto that she set about creating an edible peace-offering, her inability to accurately deduce which cookie her intended might best enjoy leading her to bake up a rather generous selection of seven different kinds before she was finally satisfied. It was only once she had carefully plated up the goods upon a decorative plate, and securely wrapped up said display in plastic wrap, did she stop and consider that she had no real means by which to travel to Gibbs as, being a citizen of Spain for several long years, she no longer had a valid drivers license. Nor, she frowned, did she have any sense of how to drive on all the freeways and roundabouts surrounding her – having always been forced to rely upon the chauffeurs and men in her life for all her travelling needs. Thus realized, it was with a great air of annoyance that she seated herself upon a kitchen chair, her frown sullen and petulant as she tried her best to contemplate how best to achieve her mission. Certainly not by walking, she immediately dismissed. Such a reckless jaunt would only be exhausting, and dangerous to boot. And certainly not by taxi either, Henrietta readily conceded, having no real funds of her own and no inclination whatsoever to make use of any of the $300 dollars her son had given her for whatever needs and wants she might have – because while her son could certainly afford it, Senior Field Agent that he was, she had no real motivations to take advantage of her son’s unyielding kindness when she knew, all too well, that such money could easily be spent of a few pairs of Armani socks or, perhaps, even a clearance shirt with a retired design.

So intent was Henrietta upon devising a way in which to properly deliver her offering of peace to the man she had slighted, as her guilt would give her no rest until such a task had been completed, that she did not even hear the door to her apartment being opened until it was far too late and said man, looking rather sheepish, was standing before for with a toolkit in hand.

“I was supposed to meet Tony here.” Jethro immediately excused, holding up his free hand in a placating gesture. “He said he needed me to look at the dishwasher – the machine, not – I wasn’t making a sexist joke, I promise.”

“I didn’t think you were.” Henrietta happily obliged, hastily trying to wipe all the flour and better from her face and clothing. “But Tony stepped out to fetch me more butter. Are – Are you alright?” She added, upon noticing the worry in his eyes and the frown on his face.

Looking very much like a man thrice his age, Jethro sighed and placed his toolbox on the counter near the sink, his expression quite grim as he turned back to her and seated himself in a chair at the kitchen table.

“Did Kate seem “off” to you last night?”

“She threw up on Tim.” Henrietta frowned. “So yes, I would say she was a little off…Did something happen today to worry you?”

Because as much as she wasn’t said woman’s mother, or really any sort of relation to her, Henrietta couldn’t help but worry for the young woman who reminded her so much of herself at that age.

“She’s been crying again, is all.” Jethro sighed, shoulders sagging. “She never used to do that before.”
Despite being fully aware of the fact that Kate likely wouldn’t appreciate her private business being alluded to, especially after swearing her confessor to secrecy, Henrietta found that she just couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy upon seeing the troubled expression on the normally stoic Jethro’s face.

“Kate…Kate is going through a lot right now.” Henrietta proffered, carefully avoiding making any reference to the unexpected pregnancy. “She just needs some time is all.”

“Do you know something that I don’t?” Jethro questioned, latching unto the bit of hope her open-ended explanation gave.

“Yes.” Henrietta agreed, considerate to both Kate and himself. “But don’t worry. I’m doing what I can for her at the moment.”

Sighing aloud his frustrations at such an unsatisfying answer, Jethro shook his head but otherwise surrendered the matter, his concern for Kate, while still quite evident, promptly placed on the backburner whilst there was currently nothing he could do for her.

“Are you going to be alright?” He asked, gruffly changing the subject. “You look like you’ve been coated in arsenic.”

Not at all as self-conscious as she could be, yet still slightly so, Henrietta giggled softly and hastily swiped a smear of green frosting from her cheek.

“You won’t be so quick to tease me when you realize this is all your fault.” She insisted, gesturing at the general disarray of the kitchen. “Me?” Jethro parroted, looking completely taken aback by the mild accusation. “Yes, you.” Henrietta assured. “I spent all morning making this platter for you.”

This declared, she grabbed from the cluttered counter the selection of treats, her excitement all but uncontainable as she half-skipped back over to Jethro and thrust the platter into his calloused hands.

“What is this for?” Jethro inquired, carefully settling the selection unto the table before peeling back the plastic wrap to peer inside.

“It’s an apology.” Henrietta clarified. “I overreacted and I’m sorry.”

Because despite having been earlier adamant that her indignation had been justified, a little time spent mulling over the logistics of what a new acquaintance could reasonably be expected to share with a person had brought a little sense back into her head.

“This is one hell of an apology.” Jethro grumbled, charitably not milking her apology for all it was worth. “Probably the best I’ve ever had.”

“Does that mean we can be friends again?” Henrietta inquired, greatly desiring for such to be so.

Already having bit into a cookie whilst she was badgering him with such an ingratiating question, Jethro was forced, by all tenants of politeness and decency, to finish chewing and swallowing before giving her answer.

“So long as that friendship involves more of these, sure.” He agreed, the twinkle in his eyes
providing sufficient evidence that he was only *half* joking.

“That,” Henrietta grinned, “Is a Hallongrotta.”

“It’s delicious is what it is.”

“It’s even better with coffee.” Henrietta insisted. “Why don’t I start a pot while we wait for Tony? Knowing him, he’ll be flirting with that checkout boy for quite a while.”

Evidently, and foolishly, operating under the erroneous assumption that she, of all people, did not that her child was a homosexual, Jethro inhaled a rather large chunk of cookie and nearly choked on it before managing to get it back up and into a hastily-supplied napkin.

“I’m his *mother*, Jethro. I’ve known that boy was gay since he was *four*.”

Because, all stereotypes and prejudices aside, Tony *did* once have the proclivity toward dressing rather ‘flashily’ when a young child. And that, coupled with his strong preference for barbies and theatre music, had given Henrietta a more than sufficient amount of evidence as to where her son’s orientation lied *well before* he had come out to her.

“I suppose it would be kind of hard not to notice.” Jethro agreed, a slight blush to his cheeks.

“Not with *that* one.” Henrietta agreed, a slight laugh in her voice.

“It would have been nice if you had told him a little earlier.” Jethro groused, nibbling on a gingersnap. “It was quite the theatric affair when it came out a few years ago.”

*Everything* that boy does is theatric.” Henrietta replied. “I can hardly imagine where he gets it from.” And, before her friend could so much as make a witty retort to the last of her sentences, quickly she added: “But seriously, Jethro, *thank you* for being there for him when I couldn’t.”

Because having only been allotted a certain amount of letters a month, the number of pages of such being strictly enforced, Henrietta had been woefully unable to comfort her distraught boy in the way a mother ought to have been able. For when it came down to it, words on a page were but nothing when compared to a hug from a parent who loved you endlessly.

“It’s all a part of being a boss.” Jethro shrugged, full of false modestly.

“No.” Henrietta gently refuted. “It’s *not*.”

Because as much as she had never worked a day in her life, she knew enough from the many endless rants of her father and Senior to know that many employers, if not *most*, were not at all so keen on supporting and caring for their underlings. That Jethro seemed to so readily take his agents woes and plights to heart was only a further testament of his character, not at all something he should have been ashamed of.

“Yeah, alright, you got me.” Jethro grumbled. “I’m a big softy.”

“Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” Henrietta obliged, ignoring the sarcasm as she laid a hand atop of his own.

“Good, I’d hate to have to kill you.” Jethro smirked, placing his free hand atop her own only to quickly withdraw it once it came into contact with slimy dough.

“Don’t give me that look.” Henrietta cried, purposely ignoring the incriminating fingers he
held up. “That’s the aftermath of a labor of love.”

Glancing quite obviously at the two empty sugar bags left poking out of the garbage, Jethro gave her a pointed look and waggled his fingers at her.

“I’m thinking so is diabetes.”

“Well,” Henrietta grinned, “Should that happen, I’ll be glad to be your nurse.”

Despite blushing a bit at such forwardness, Jethro held his ground and admirably responded in kind.

“I wouldn’t be so eager to volunteer for the job.” He quipped. “I’ve been told I’m a very difficult person to get along with.”

“Don’t worry.” Henrietta purred, placing a hand above his knee as she leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “I’m very good at getting men to cooperate with me.”

“I – “

“Shh.” Henrietta breathed, sticking a cookie into his mouth. “Don’t spoil the moment.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Someone is starting to get a little jealous - guess who?

Still riding high on the success of finally receiving a phone-number from the friendly yet withdrawn Gavin, something that had taken a full four month to accomplish, Tony was all grins as he hastily hurried into his apartment to share the good news with his mother – said woman having, of course, been quite keen on badgering him lately about her distinct lack of any grandchildren to spoil. And whilst it was quite evident to anyone with a brain that he couldn’t exactly sire a child with another man, the restrictions of biology not allowing for such a feat, nobody could argue against him adopting a child once he was properly married. The only problem with that being, of course, his distinct lack of any acceptable suitors – a frustrating pattern he only dared dream would be broken by his latest spell of good luck.

So excited was he to share the good news his mother, she being one of the biggest champions of such a romantic cause, that he all but forgot about the appointment he had earlier made with his boss – his sheer excitement rendering him nearly foolish as he burst into his apartment without nary a warning rap on the door to warn his still-skittish mother that he was returned and not at all followed by a mercenary or assassin.

“Mama,” He hollered, stomping into the living room, “I’m home!”

Promptly startled by a large crash in the kitchen, and rightfully assuming his perpetually clumsy mother had once more fallen off a counter given the many past incidences of her doing just that, Tony hastily kicked off his muddy shoes and sprinted into the adjoining room. It was only once he arrived upon the scene, and deduced the cause for such a ruckus, did he hastily come to regret having been so swift in his attempted rescue. For there, lying upon the slippery flour-coated floor, laid both his mother and employer in an obscenely awkward tangle of arms and legs.

“Tony,” His mother giggled, cheeks flushed with pleasure, “I slipped on the flour and pulled Jethro down with me. Help him up.”

Crushed beneath the weight of the large man atop of her, Tony felt that the earnest plea was made more out of consideration for own well-being rather than that of the person currently pinning her to the floor as he clumsily tried, and failed, to withdraw from her person without wounding her further.

“Here, Boss.” Tony obeyed, holding out a hand.

Despite being much too proud to willingly accept the proffered hand with any degree of genuine appreciation, Gibbs reluctantly accepted the help – his desire to be gentlemanly and chivalrous far outweighing his need to be independent.

“Thanks, Kiddo.” Gibbs grunted, before stretching down a strong hand to assist his newest of friends up off the floor.

Accepting the offer of help far more graciously than her gruffer counterpart had, Tony’s
mother beamed openly into Gibbs’s face and all but swooned as he tugged her upright with one smooth motion.

“What’re you doing here, Boss?” Tony frowned, far more rudely than he had intended.

Earning himself a reproving frown from his mother, and an outright scowl from his employer, for such a jarring lack of manners, Tony cringed guiltily and was extremely relieved when he realized the presence of his mother had outright prevented an otherwise inevitable headslap to his person.

“You asked me to come and fix the dishwasher.” Gibbs grumbled, evidently quite put out that he hadn’t been able to issue forth a more physical rebuke.

Inwardly cursing his love-clouded mind for such a lapse in recollection, as it had most certainly made him look like a fool in front of the two people he loved most in the world, Tony frowned and made his attempt at making peace with those he had just assaulted with bad manners.

“Oh.” He pipped, glancing over at the broken machine. “How did that go?”

Looking suspiciously guilty at the innocent question, and thus alarming Tony, Gibbs shrugged his shoulders in forced nonchalance and mumbled out his reply.

“I haven’t started.” He reluctantly confessed.

Not all happy with such an unsatisfactory answer, as Gibbs had been given a full hour in which to examine the broken machine, Tony bristled inwardly and helplessly began to fret over the very real possibility that his mother and employer had been getting unacceptably closer in the brief period of time he had been away.

“Weren’t you supposed to get butter?” Gibbs inquired, glancing quite pointedly at his distinctly empty hands.

Unceremoniously interrupted from his uncharitable thoughts on how best to keep his mother and employer separated, Tony blinked stupidly at the sudden question and had to ask for it to be repeated.

“I – I forgot it at the store.” Tony exclaimed, surprised himself to note the distinct lack of butter in his possession. “I was…distracted.”

And though he did not make any real reference as to the nature of such a distraction, for such a juvenile amount of attachment embarrassed him greatly, Tony could easily deduct from the cheery expression of his mother and the heatless exasperation radiating off his boss’s person that they did, in fact, know of the cause behind his egregious neglect of the much-needed butter.

“Don’t look so somber, Monkey.” His mother implored, a knowing smile brightening up her face. “I can always substitute applesauce. And,” Added she, a mischievous gleam setting her green eyes all aglow, “I might even forgive Gavin, if my cookies turn out well.”

By then thoroughly embarrassed by all the carefree references to the object of his endless affections, as he had honestly believed himself to be behaving far more respectably and modestly in this courtship than in any of his previous ones, Tony scowled fiercely and only narrowly resisted the urge to stomp off into his bedroom and punish them both by depriving them of his company. Such a plot to punish, of course, being hampered only by the unwelcome realization that Gibbs would only order him out of the room so that he might assist in the fixing of the dishwasher by holding the flashlight and passing him the appropriate tools when needed. That such a setup would only assist
him in his desire to keep the two older individuals separated was only an unforeseen boon that made
the prospect of the possibility of getting his hands coating in dishwasher-slime seem far less worse
than it truly was.

“Go and get a flashlight.” Gibbs directed, sparing him the pain of anymore teasing from his
mother.

Quickly going off to do as he was bid, Tony skedaddled from the kitchen and hurried into his
bedroom, eager to retrieve the tool his employer had gifted him for Christmas before said man had
any further opportunity to fall prey to his mother’s inexhaustible charms and endless beauty. And so,
with that mission in mind, he unceremoniously threw himself unto his knees and thrust a probing
hand beneath his bed, the speed at which he searched only increasing tenfold as he heard the distinct
sounds of feminine giggles and manly chuckles emanating from the kitchen.

“Found it!” Tony yelled, hoping to distract the older duo from whatever they were doing.

Receiving no reply at all in response to his declaration, Tony frowned in annoyance and all
but stomped back into his kitchen, his desire to make known his outrage at being ignored promptly
superseded by the staunch jealousy he felt upon making his return and seeing his mother whispering
something into his grinning boss’s ear.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Tony groused, effectively shocking the two individuals into parting.
“I found the flashlight.”

Appearing to be quite annoyed with such an untimely interruption, despite being fully aware
that he was in another man’s house, Gibbs scowled openly and eyed Tony with a look that promised
future retribution for such unyielding rudeness.

“Great.” He grumbled, looking far from pleased. “Let’s get to it.”

“I’ll start supper.” His mother contributed. “I’ll try to keep out of the way.”
Chapter 23

Seeing as how the dishwasher he had been tasked was fix was a newer model, and apparently well-cared for despite Tony’s frustrating proclivity toward shamelessly abusing the garbage disposal, Gibbs was thankfully able to repair the damaged machine in no less than thirteen minutes – a relative success when he stopped to consider that a full ten minutes of such an ordeal had been fully dedicated to detecting the problem in the first place. But, rather than brag about the feat to two individuals he knew would be entirely uninterested in the affair, Gibbs simply removed his head from the dishwasher with all the grace he could manage and climbed to his feet – hoping against hope that the water that had dripped unto his face and hair had not contained anything exceedingly foul or harmful to his health.

“There,” He grunted, shutting the door the dishwasher, “That should do it.”

“What was wrong with the thing?” Henrietta politely inquired, not so much as turning away from the sauce she was currently stirring.

Understanding perfectly well that her interest was only an affair feigned in the name of good manners, and subsequently taking no real offense to such a lack of genuineness, Gibbs opted to give a very brief summary of the mechanical error in order to spare both DiNozzo’s any unearned boredom.

“The float bulb was a little loose, that’s all. Easy fix.” Gibbs explained. “Might want to test it out though, just to be sure nothing else is wrong.”

Because as much as he was gifted in the field of fixing things, it did not necessarily follow that such a task was rendered easy when the descriptions of such an issue were often unhelpful and garbled at best. For as much as Tony’s description of ‘the water not going away,’ had provided him with a general idea as to what the problem might be, the young man’s general inability to elaborate any further than that was certainly a hindrance of its own.

“We can test it after supper.” Henrietta allowed, giving them both a pointed look. “Go and wash up, boys.”

Already having wished to do just that, for the smell of stale water clinging to his hands embarrassed him greatly, Gibbs moved toward the kitchen sink and began to lather his befouled hands up with whatever floral soap had caught Tony’s attention that month.

“Tony,” Henrietta frowned, looking at the man who had not yet moved, “Go wash up.”

Looking quite sullen at the fact that his employer had opted use the kitchen sink, despite that being the most rational of choices given that he was a guest in the home of his agent, Tony grumbled something distinctly unflattering beneath his breath about bossy women before scurrying off to the relative safety of his bathroom.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into that boy.” Henrietta announced, not at all as offended as she might have been at the accusations of bossiness.

Wise enough to know that any jokes about her son being moodier than a hormonal woman would not be well-received, she being his mother after all, Gibbs settled for shrugging his shoulders and mumbling out his half-hearted assumption.

“He tends to get that way whenever Senior calls him.”
Bristling like an insulted cat at the reference to her despised ex-husband, Henrietta scowled frightfully and clutched the wooden spoon in her hand tightly enough to make her knuckles go white.

“Has Senior been calling him?” She demanded, looking every bit ready to hunt the man down and shove her spoon down his throat.

Resolving to never find himself the object of said woman’s wrath, as Henrietta really did look quite formidable with enraged, Gibbs took a step back and held his hands up in a placating manner – his previous experience with wives two, three, and four having all but proved to him that an angry woman with a weapon in her hand was a dangerous being indeed.

“No, not that I know of.” He answered honestly.

“Maybe he’s just tired.” Henrietta suggested, her anger quickly deflating. “He’s been doing a lot to help Abby and Kate with their weddings.”

Having seen for himself the amount of work that Tony was putting into helping his friends achieved their perfect nuptials, said man possessing a great deal of selflessness, Gibbs nodded and quickly voiced his assent to the suggestion.

“Yeah, that’s probably it.”

Relaxing visibly upon receiving such an earnest agreement from her houseguest, Henrietta smiled wickedly and moved closer to him.

“You know,” She began, inching closer, “He gets that magnanimity from me.”

Rather than backing away from such a very clear challenge, as he might have done just yesterday, Gibbs rose to the occasion and moved one step toward her, earning for himself a delighted giggle for all the effort such a move had caused him.

“I wonder what else he gets from you.” Gibbs inquired, allowing himself a small smile.

“My charm, for one.” Henrietta declared, boldly wrapping her skinny arms about his neck.

“For sure.” Gibbs readily agreed, allowing himself the pleasure of encircling his own hands about her slender waist.

“What else?” His hostess pressed, head tilted back to better look him in the face.

Reasonably assured that they were in no real danger of being discovered by Tony, for judging by the sounds coming from the bathroom said man was clearly showering, Gibbs felt emboldened and recklessly gave into all feelings of attraction and lust.

“Well,” Said he, “You do have similar eyes. Although yours are much prettier, if I do say so myself.”

“Very good,” Henrietta encouraged, closing the gap between them by placing her stomach flat against his. “But I fear I expect more creativity of you, Sir. For, you see, I am very often complemented on my eyes.”

Having clandestinely purchased an edition of Pride and Prejudice the previous evening, and promptly devoured the book in less than an hour given its slim composition, Gibbs felt more than just a little prepared to respond in kind to Henrietta’s endless Regency-styled flirtations.
“I was afraid of that.” Gibbs said, mockingly somber. “But, very well, allow me to praise your hair.”

“Please, Sir, I beg you – be more specific.”

Recklessly emboldened by her intoxicating nearness, the likes of which had put a slight tremble in his knees, Gibbs swallowed down a fit of sudden nervousness and gave reply.

“I imagine it would be very nice to run my hands through it.”

“You imagine correctly, Sir, but let us not stop there.”

“My,” Gibbs exclaimed, “You are a very vain creature.”

Grinning quite cheekily at the heatless rebuke, Henrietta nodded her agreement but otherwise made no moves to defend herself.

“It is so.” She happily agreed. “But by allowing you to feed my vanity, I nourish your own, for all men like to imagine themselves gallant.”

“Very well,” Gibbs allowed, unable to argue against such logic, “You shall have one more compliment.”

“Yes?” Purred she, eyes all aglow with mischief and excitement.

Feeling for himself much of the selfsame excitement, the likes of which he had not felt since meeting Shannon for the first time, Gibbs had to work to moderate his breathing to that of an acceptable level.

“Your lips.” Gibbs declared, the decision easily made.

For both smooth and plump, said facial feature was inarguably one of the best facial features his newest of friends possessed.

“What of them, Sir?” Inquired Henrietta. “I fear you are making me very cross with all this coyness.”

“I imagine them to be very soft.” He confessed, the words a whisper.

“It is a most egregious scandal that you haven’t been able to decipher so for yourself. A heinous crime, really. You must rectify at once.”

Having been prepared to do just that since the first time he had spoken with her, Gibbs felt his heart soar with anticipation upon receiving such passionate permission to kiss her.

“Far be it from me to disobey the desires of my hostess.”

“No.” Henrietta agreed. “You do not possess such cruelty.”

Gifted with the alluring eyes of a seductive Siren, Gibbs found he could not help but obey her innocent orders – especially not once she had gotten up on the tips of toes to assist him in such an endeavor, her lithe body stretching alluring up against his own as she did so.

“Mama,” Tony scowled, choosing at that moment to return from his shower, “What are you doing!?”

“I fear you are making me very cross with all this coyness.”

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“Mama,” Tony scowled, choosing at that moment to return from his shower, “What are you doing!?”
“I was brushing off a spider from his shoulder.” Henrietta calmly responded, looking markedly put-out to have had her impromptu kiss interrupted. “Don’t look so alarmed.”

Amazed at the speed and manner in which Henrietta quickly recovered her composure upon being discovered in such a wanton position, as he himself was still blushing profusely, Gibbs seating himself in a kitchen chair and feigned sudden interest in the purple tablecloth.

“What was a spider doing on his shoulder?” Tony demanded, in his best interrogator voice.

Not at all cowed by such sudden ferocity, but rather seeming to take a great delight in such, Henrietta smiled disarmingly and turned back to her stove.

“I’m afraid you would have to ask the spider himself.” She quipped. “I’m not at all privy as the preferences of his perches.”

Feeling all the discomfort that came with finding himself in the midst of a familial dispute, and all the agonies that accompanies wanted to defend both of the arguing parties, Gibbs hesitantly remained neutral and prayed that the spat would soon be over.

“Gibbs is able to defend himself against his spiders.”

“Yes,” Henrietta calmly agreed, “But it does not necessarily follow that he does not grow weary of such a tiresome task.”

Watching with no small amount of concern as his favorite agent’s face began to grow red with anger and frustration, Gibbs forwent his sense of neutrality and hastily interrupted the conversation before his pseudo-son had a chance to say something he would later regret.

“Anthony,” He growled, making full use of his name to denote his seriousness, “Go and set the table.”
Chapter 24

Although it was not at all in his nature to interfere in the lifestyle choices of those who surrounded him, himself subscribing to a more ‘live and let live’ lifestyle than most, Ducky was not at all disinclined to meddle when he felt the situation grave enough to interfere. And whilst such a proclivity did not often endear itself unto its recipient, his beloved Jimmy finding no real amusement in his pseudo-father’s persistent interventions on behalf of a mischievous Victoria, he felt confident enough in his ability to decipher the feelings of others to feel that his well-intended intrusions were far more often appreciated than they were despaired of. And so, with those self-assurances firmly in mind, Ducky stalked off in pursuit of his oldest friend – leaving a very suspicious Jimmy behind in the morgue to tend to the very bloated corpse they had received just that morning.

“Ah, Jethro.” Ducky grinned, coming up alongside said man in the bullpen. “I was hoping to find you here.”

Giving his oldest friend a very wary look, one that conveyed perfectly that he was not all oblivious as to the nature of such an impromptu visit and, in fact, highly suspected his motives for such, Jethro exhaled loudly through his nose and only reluctantly set aside the notepad he had been scribbling notes in.

“You found me.” The former Marine intoned, quite sardonically.

“So I did.” Ducky agreed, taking the marked lack of hostility from his friend as permission to continue. “I was hoping that you might like to share lunch with me in my office.”

Resembling an errant schoolboy who had just been informed he was needed down in the Headmaster’s office, Jethro frowned deeply but nonetheless seemed resolved to take his punishment like a man.

“That place is a deathtrap.” The surlier man grumbled. “We’ll have lunch in my office.”

Not at all offended by the accurate description of the office he seldom used, as several guests to such a room had been required to have a tetanus booster after leaving its confines, Ducky readily agreed to the new terms with a small smile.

“A fair enough compromise, I suppose.”

“I’ll wait here while you go and grab your lunch.” The taller man obliged, reclaiming from his desk the notepad he had earlier abandoned.

Although it gave him some small semblance of guilt to interrupt his friend from his work, as he himself loathed to be separated from his duties when he was on a roll, Ducky found he could not but help doing just that.

“I’ve already taken my meal with Jimmy, Jethro.”

Rather than make any impertinent inquires as to why his friend felt entitled to two lunchbreaks, as he might have should one of his agents try to pull the same shenanigans, Jethro sighed aloud once more and looked at him through eyes squinted in suspicion.

“I’m about to have a very awkward lunch, aren’t I?” He grumbled, taking great care not to be overheard by any of his curious agents.
“It need not be so.” Ducky suggested, unable to keep a small trace of doubt from his voice.

Earning from that remark a rather pointed look, and quite unable to pretend he had not noticed the existence of such, Ducky frowned for himself and all but grumbled out his answer in a fashion that ought to have his friend proud had said individual not been so determined to be contrary.

“Very well,” He allowed, expertly adjusting his glasses, “I suppose there will be some form of awkwardness.”

“Then we had best get it over with.” Jethro toned, decidedly somber.

“That is often the best way for dealing with one’s problems.” Ducky advised.

Receiving no real answer in response to his sage wisdom, other than another sardonic look leveled his way, Jethro rose slowly to his feet and reluctantly returned his much-abused notepad to the desk he had just taken leave of. But rather than tease his gruffer companion about the way he was currently facing the ordeal of leaving his work behind, Ducky kept all quips about the similarities of a father leaving their child to go to war to himself, knowing that such a joking comparison would not all be well-received by his sterner counterpart. He was forced to be content, instead, with a silent and self-delivered appraisal of his own wit and humor – the likes of which he would later share his beloved Jimmy and Hamish over supper.

“Well,” Said Jethro, yanking open the door to his office, “What have you come to chastise me about today?”

Greatly offended by such an erroneous assumption, as not all his impromptu visits to Jethro involved a chastisement, Ducky gave his closest friend a small scowl and promptly seated himself in the best chair of the room, all but forcing his reluctant lunchmate to take the much harder and far less pleasant seat usually reserved for whatever agent had angered him enough to warrant a private ass-reaming.

“Have no fear, friend.” Ducky obliged, his offence quickly forgotten. “I bring no chastisements today. At least not where regards your person.”

“You’ve come to tattle?” Jethro asked, reasonably incredulous at the very thought.

For whilst Ducky did enjoy the reputation for playing the unofficial part of resident therapist, it was but seldom, indeed, that he took the information garnered in one such session and related it unto his colleague. Such rare incidences of such a betrayal being, of course, only brought about on the occasion that the nature of such a confession necessitated immediate intervention by their employer.

“Not quite.” Ducky clarified.

“Ducky,” Jethro sighed, “Just tell me who the culprit is.”

As it was not at all in his character to be blunt, Ducky did not answer the question directly - though such a result was so clearly what his dearest friend had been hoping for.

“Have you, perchance, noticed Tony’s sudden…sullenness?”

Greatly adverse to facing any conversation that dealt with feelings in a brave and direct fashion, Jethro grimaced and looked as if he would rather eat his own fingers than talk about the behavior of his favorite agent.
“I thought you didn’t come to tattle.”

“I didn’t.” Ducky calmly assured. “I wished only to discuss the matter with you in private.”

Receiving one raised eyebrow in way or response, the action itself somehow being full of condescension and sarcasm despite the forced expression of neutrality on the Marine’s face, Ducky felt a slight twinge of annoyance and briefly gave into such a negative feeling.

“I know you believe me to be a relentless meddler, Jethro.” Ducky allowed. “But you do have to admit, Jethro, that you tend to be quite thick when it comes to dealing with emotions.”

Rather than take offense at such a negative review of his person, as seldom anyone was bold enough to address his failings, Jethro smiled in amusement and nodded.

“I can’t argue with you there.”

“No, you cannot.” Ducky agreed, partially annoyed with the manner in which his friend casually responded to his chastisement. “Which is why you value your friendship with me so highly. I tell you all the things you don’t wish to hear.”

Receiving no real argument on that score, as Jethro himself had often confessed to possessing such views throughout their friendship, Ducky silently reveled in the victory of silencing his stubborn friend – only to be immediately humbled moments later by the irreverent remark delivered unto his person by the same man he had earlier rebuked.

“And here I was,” Jethro smirked, “Thinking that our friendship was based on my delight of your endless stories about the Scottish moors and fields.”

“My stories are a delight, Jethro.” Ducky insisted. “Jimmy would vouch for such.”

“Jimmy would support chopping off one’s own arm if you were the one to suggest it.”

Not at all enjoying the casual disparaging of his child’s character, no matter how teasingly the subject matter was approached, Ducky frowned and gave his friend a warning look.

“I would thank you not to disparage my Jimmy as a man incapable of forming his own opinions.”

“I did no such thing.” Jethro defended. “I only said – “

“We did not come here to discuss my child.” Ducky interrupted. “We came here to discuss yours.”

Seeming to deflate just as soon as the subject was returned to Tony, Jethro grumbled something about crafty Scotsmen under his breath and looked longingly toward the closed office door.

“So Tony is a little…testy – so is Kate.”

Despite harboring the belief that they would, in fact, have to soon discuss the more recent changes in Kate’s behavior and attitude, as such concerned him grievously, Ducky refused to allow the subject to be changed and further pressed his point.

“We have not come to discuss Kate.” Ducky patiently reminded.

“Well,” Jethro groused, crossing his arms, “Unless you have some insider knowledge as to
why Tony’s behaving like a clingy child, I think this lunch is going to be rather useless.”

Taking no real measures to defend Tony from the accusations of clinginess, as he himself had witnessed the agent being glued to Jethro’s heels, Ducky leaned back his chair and delivered unto his friend a most deliciously smug smile.

“How silly you are, Jethro, to think that I don’t have any particular insights into such behavior.”

Suitably embarrassed that he had allowed himself to believe so little in the perceptions of his dearest friend, as really there had been no cause for such given his impeccable track-record, Jethro sighed and rubbed at his temples.

“Well?”

“Anthony is jealous.” Ducky said simply.

“Jealous.” Jethro repeated, perfectly monotone.

Having no doubt whatsoever as to the veracity of his statements, as jealous was easily one of the simpler emotions to detect and analyze, it being so primal and simplistic in nature, Ducky nodded his head and refused to be made unsure by the looks of doubt he was currently receiving.

“Of what?” Jethro demanded. “If Tony really is so ‘jealous’ of me flirting with his mother, why has he been clinging to me of all people!?”

Understanding the Marine’s great annoyance as he spoke of the clinginess of his favorite agent, as Tony had earlier vexed him very greatly by becoming markedly whiny when he had selected Tim to accompany on him a short mission, Ducky allowed the little outburst to go unsold – knowing that by doing so, he was surely prevented a similar outburst from falling unto the agent who had so grievously irritated him earlier that day.

“Because Jethro,” Ducky lectured, “Tony is not jealous of the attention his mother is receiving his father. He is jealous of the attention his father is receiving from his mother. I do believe the poor lad thinks you’ll abandon him should something go wrong in the relationship.”

“That –“

While Jethro had initially bristled at such an unwelcome overview, as it admittedly painted him in not so great a light, he just as quickly deflated and slumped his shoulders.

“– Makes perfect sense.” He sighed, looking suddenly very weary.

“You ought never have doubted me.” Ducky suggested, more playful than smug.

“No, I shouldn’t have.” Jethro sighed, taking him by surprise. “But why does that boy have to so damn difficult?”

Himself in possession of a difficult child, the troubles and behavior of which were just as vexing and frustrating as those of Tony’s despite the different natures and compositions of their traumas, Ducky swiftly took compassion on his friend.

“Difficult childhoods often lead to troubled adulthoods.” He explained. “That Tony is as well-adjusted as he his now, is a blessing indeed.”
In fact, were Jimmy to be so well-adjusted, Ducky would be exceedingly happy indeed.

“I’ll take the kid out to Dairy Queen after work.” Jethro sighed. “It’ll be easier to talk some sense into him if he has a Blizzard in hand.”

Knowing the Marine to have already taken Tony out for ice-cream earlier that week, after a rather traumatic flu-shot had resulted in no small amount of tears from said agent, Ducky smirked and tutted.

“You spoil that boy.” He admonished, without any heat.

Not one to allow the questioning of his parent to go unchecked, Jethro raised a warning brow and quickly gave voice to a retort.

“You spoil Jimmy and Victoria.” He accused.

Unable to outright deny such an accusation, as Jethro could very likely point out many such incidences of him indulging both son and granddaughter, Ducky shrugged his shoulders and feigned nonchalance.

“We did not come here to discuss my parenting.” He quipped.

“No,” Jethro grinned, getting to his feet, “That subject never seems to come up.”
Despite having initially approached the idea of a car-ride with his boss quite enthusiastically, to the point where he had been practically bouncing in his seat throughout the remainder of the day, Gibbs found that Tony’s joy was somehow absurdly diminished as soon as they climbed into his truck – all the energy seemingly sucked right out of him by the time they pulled away from the parking lot and unto the relatively-busy street. But before Gibbs could so much as inquire into the matter himself, and subsequently put the distressed boy at ease, Tony took the duty upon himself and reluctantly made known his concern via a mumbled question.

“I’m not in trouble, are I?” The younger agent, a growing horror dawning on his face.

Inwardly stiffening at such an inculpating inquiry, as the guilt within his favorite agent’s eyes was really quite concerning given his proclivity toward elaborate pranks, Gibbs raised a warning brow at his child and made an investigation of his own.

“No, but your guilty demeanor does concern me.” Gibbs cautioned. “Why would you be in trouble, Anthony?”

Putting on a very exemplary poker face, one that was mitigated only by the manner in which he smiled more to the left rather than the right, Tony answered Gibbs with an alarming amount of conviction and innocence.

“Because we only go out for a ‘talk’ when I’m in trouble or hurt.” Tony replied, expertly trying to evade the question.

“You’re not in trouble, Kid.” Gibbs allowed, waiting until his son had relaxed to make an addition. “At least not until I find out why you look so guilty.”

Knowing Gibbs to be one of the only people capable of making good on such a promise, Tony quickly deflated and tried for one last evasion, the end result of such being more of a whine rather than a clever deflection.

“I didn’t do anything.”

Nailing his child with a rather firm look, in order to convey that he didn’t much appreciate being lied to, Gibbs turned left and waited in silence for Tony to crack.

“I didn’t do anything that you can prove – at least not at the moment.” He amended, caving in almost immediately.

“We’ll see about – “

“If I’m not in trouble, why are we going for a drive?” Tony badgered, interrupting him in his eagerness to avoid the more dangerous line of questioning.

Evoking every shred of patience he had in order not to roll his eyes at the childish question, Gibbs shook his head and silently cursed Senior for ever having made his kid so insecure and unsure of himself.

“We’re not going for a drive,” Gibbs grumbled, “We’re going to Dairy Queen.”

“So I’m not in trouble!” Tony said brightly, visibly relaxing.
“No,” Gibbs sighed, “Not yet.”

Either ignoring the danger the latter part of his sentence conveyed, or simply choosing not to acknowledge it, Tony grinned widely and began to reverberated anew with sudden energy.

“But why are we going to Dairy Queen?” He questioned. “I didn’t get hurt today.”

“I just wanted to talk to you.” Gibbs assured, taking care to keep his voice neutral.

“But you said I wasn’t in trouble!” Tony cried, looking ready to jump from the moving truck.

“Goddammit!” Gibbs barked. “I just said you weren’t in trouble!”

Jumping at the sudden increase in volume, and promptly banging his head on the roof of the truck, Tony shied away from Gibbs and rubbed at his newest injury with a markedly wounded expression on his face, provoking within Gibbs no small amount of guilt and shame for having so quickly lost his temper. For having grown up under the dubious care and discipline of Senior, if once could even call it that, it only stood to reason that Tony was overly-weary about any situation that might involve discipline or chastisement.

“I just wanted to talk, Kid.” Gibbs sighed, his tone much softer. “I promise.”

“I’m really not in trouble?” Tony asked, still rubbing at his head.

“No.” Gibbs agreed, taking several deep breaths. “But, again, your guilt is very concerning.”

“Whatever it is, just know that McGee started it first.”

Shuddering at those very familiar words, as they were almost always precipitated in McGee being harmed or humiliated in some significant degree, Gibbs sighed warily and shook his head, hoping he might find a way to mitigate or hide the damage before an overstressed Abby could discover the crime for herself.

“I’ve already told you,” Gibbs lectured, “That you weren’t allowed to have superglue anymore.”

Because whilst he had been able to overlook the incident of Kate’s cellphone somehow being glued to the ceiling of the bullpen, as well as the explosive drama that had encompassed Blackadder finding all her possessions impossibly secured to her desk with industrial-strength adhesive, he had been forced to put his foot down after the Director himself had overheard the alarmingly angry tirade McGee had give Tony after the latter had somehow found a way to superglue the former’s hands together.

“I didn’t use superglue.” Tony unhelpfully contributed.

“What about power tools?” Gibbs questioned, feeling a headache coming on.

Because while Gibbs had made several allowances when it had come to the misuse of superglue, he had made no such indulges with the power tools after Tony had somehow covertly managed to remove from Kate’s desk and chair all the bolts and screws keeping it together. For while said prank had been admittedly funny upon initially reaction, all the humor of such a joke had been lost upon watching Kate crack her chin open on her descent to the floor.

“Nope.” Tony assured, almost irreverently.
“Well,” Gibbs sighed, pulling into the parking lot, “That’s good, I suppose.”

Wise enough not to question his receipt of such an unexpected reprieve, Tony smiled innocent and made to bolt from the truck, only to be promptly thwarted and confounded when the doors of said vehicle remained tightly locked.

“Zip your coat up.” Gibbs ordered.

“But the door is only a few feet away – “

“I didn’t ask how far away the door was.” Gibbs growled. “I told you to zip up your coat.”

Knowing from prior experience that any arguments on the subject would be entirely fruitless, and more than likely result in his coat being forcefully zipped up all the way to his neck rather than the more-acceptable position near the collarbones, Tony hastily complied and looked pointedly at the locked doors.

“It looks dead inside.” Tony remarked, cracking his door open the moment it was unlocked.

Glancing out the windshield to see that the parking was, indeed, quite devoid of any cars apart from a rusting Volkswagen and a pink Lexus, Gibbs nodded his agreement and removed the keys from the ignition.

“Most people don’t like eating ice-cream when it’s only nine degrees outside.”

“Those people are ridiculous.” Tony asserted, gently shutting his door before hurrying off toward warmth and comfort.

Watching his favorite agent amble off toward the deserted establishment with all the restraint of a small child, meaning none, Gibbs rolled his eyes and set off after him.

“Yes, those people are ridiculous.” Gibbs mumbled, his mild rebuke going unheard as Tony left him in the dust.

He was just about ready to call after the energetic youth, and charge him to slow down, when serendipity stalled his son’s footsteps for him. For clumsily tended to, and negligently left coated in a thin layer of ice, the sidewalk near the door soon assaulted Tony with its slickness and promptly sent him down on his knees. And though Gibbs knew his child to remarkably resilient when it came to recovering from injuries both grand and minor, he still found that he could not help but be concerned regardless of the perceived lack of severity such a slip might engender. For he had learned, over time, that the smallest of injuries could often be quite severe if left unchecked.

“Jesus Christ, Kid, you’re going to give me a heart attack.” Gibbs grumbled, helping the boy to his feet. “You okay?”

Blinking a suspicious sheen of moisture from his eyes, Tony brushed off his jeans as best he could and nodded.

“I’m all good, Boss.” He assured, not at all as convincing as he could be. “Think I just skinned my knees a little bit.”

“You must be made out of rubber.” Gibbs groused, with no small amount of jealously.

For if he had been the one to fall like that, with all the force of such a clumsy landing going to his knees, Gibbs was almost positive he would’ve been out of commission for weeks.
“Yup.” Tony agreed, nodding happily as he yanked open the door.
Standing at the counter next to an over-excited Tony, likes of whom was currently bouncing on the heels of his feet like a toddler in need of the restroom, Gibbs shook his head in amusement but was otherwise grateful that there was no real audience to lay witness to such an unseemly display.

“I’m starting to think you don’t need anymore sugar.” Gibbs cautioned, raising a warning brow his way.

Earning for his censure no more than a scandalized expression, the likes of which was genuine and not at all theatric, Gibbs rolled his eyes and lightly slapped his agent on the back of the head, the disciplinary act being more symbolic than anything else.

“Settle down.” Gibbs groused. “You’re not six, for God’s sake.”

“I am at heart.” Tony countered, perfectly serious.

Both unwilling and unable to offer up any real argument to such an accurate claim, as both Tony and Abby possessed rather childish characteristics, Gibbs sighed and only narrowly resisted the urge to suggest that his favorite agent was perhaps closer to three or four.

“Yeah, no one was doubting that.” Gibbs mumbled, allowing himself a small smile.

A mirthful expression which, while genuine in nature, quickly dissipated the longer they waited at the counter for service. For utterly devoid of any other customers, save for a disheveled man Gibbs was almost certain was homeless, there was no excuse at all for such shoddy service. And while, initially, he was prepared to let such laxness in customer-care go without any significant reprisal, his resolve to do so went out the door the moment he caught sight of the young cashier on duty hiding behind a soft-serve dispenser – smiling dreamily at her cellphone and texting away as if her life depended on it. Which, while infuriating enough, was only made more so by the manner in which the blonde casually glanced up from her phone, looked him in the eye, and promptly returned to her texting.

“Excuse me – “

“Dad, don’t.” Tony pleaded, speaking under his breath. “She’ll spit in our ice cream.”

Seeing as how the marked lack of any clear obstacles would prevent such an action, as they could physically watch her make their orders if they chose to, Gibbs snorted at the very thought and rolled his eyes.

“This is ridiculous.” He griped.

“Maybe it’s important.” Tony suggested, clearly not keen to make a scene.

Promptly disabused of that notion moments that, as they awkwardly watched their cashier take a picture of her chest and promptly send it off to whichever lucky person had ensnared her attentions, they both grimaced in distaste and looked away.

“We can wait.” Tony sighed, sounding very put upon by such an unsavory prospect.

Willing to oblige his more sympathetic agent in this, given that he earlier lost his temper with him for no real reason, Gibbs grumbled something unflattering about teenagers beneath his breathe
but otherwise staid his anger. At least, he did, up until another three minutes had gone by without any significant results.

“Do you mind?!” Gibbs barked, startling the girl into dropping her phone. “We’ve been standing here for ten minutes!”

Glaring hostilely at him as she stooped to retrieve her now-cracked phone, the surly blonde in question stomped to the counter in a peevish fashion, showing more resolve and bravery, as well as stupidity, than any of his agents ever had.

“Gibbs,” Tony whispered, interrupting their standoff, “We can go somewhere else.”

Having already agreed to the terms of the challenge, by issuing forth his harshest glare to his adversary, Gibbs promptly ignored the suggestion and stood his ground. For if his child wanted a goddamn Blizzard, he was going to get a goddamn Blizzard.

“Go make us a small Cotton Candy Blizzard and an Oreo Blizzard.”

Seeming to recognize the extent of his willpower, and recognizing it as something worthy of respect given her own apparent proclivity toward mulishness, the cashier promptly nodded and turned her back to fulfil their orders.

“Go and pick a seat.” Gibbs directed Tony, hoping his boy would have the foresight to avoid sitting near the homeless man.

Scurrying off to obey the simple order, as he had clearly not been comfortable at all during the terse stare-down of only moments before, Tony analyzed the small lobby before finally selecting a seat far away from the draft-producing doors.

“These are on the house if your promise not to call corporate.”

“Deal.” Gibbs grunted, claiming the desserts without proper thanks.

Handing over to his boy the admittedly childish Blizzard, Gibbs slipped in beside the frowning agent and immediately inquired as to what was wrong – for only moments before the sullen expression had not been there.

“She forgot the sprinkles.” Tony complained, sticking a plastic spoon into his dessert and looking as resigned to his fate as someone on death row.

Seizing the improperly made dessert before his agent could raise any real complaint as to what he was about to do, Gibbs stomped over to the counter and immediately interrupted the girl’s texting to demand she fix the Blizzard. Thankfully, for the both of them, she seemed to realize that quick compliance would only result in their mutual happiness. And so, thusly decided, she promptly upended two large cups of sprinkles into the still-firm ice cream.

“Keep going.” Gibbs directed.

Shrugging her shoulders, and all but flouting company policy, the incessant-texter in question promptly upended the remainder of the container into the dessert cup – the end result being, of course, that Tony’s Blizzard was now more sprinkles than ice-cream. Something that would outright disgust Gibbs if he were the one being compelled to eat it but otherwise delighted the sweet-toothed Tony.

“Thanks, Dad!” Tony said brightly, immediately digging into his dessert before Gibbs even
had time to properly seat himself.

Temporarily allowing his boy the pleasure of uninterrupted eating, Gibbs nibbled slowly at his own, silently wondering how best to broach the subject of jealousy as he did so. For having been earlier peeved with Ducky for said man’s casual questioning of his parenting, he had not thought to stop and ask for any advice on the subject currently at hand.

“You really like those Cotton Candy Blizzards, don’t you?” Gibbs inquired, opting for a bit of subtly rather than outright candor. “There you’re favorite, aren’t they?”

Mouth far too full with food to either politely or adequately respond to the question, Tony simply settled for nodding, his eye-contact making it quite clear that he had actually been listening and not just agreeing with whatever his boss was currently saying.

“But,” Gibbs lead, “I bet you like a few others just as much.”

“Not really.” Tony shrugged, stubbornly failing to catch the presence of a metaphor.

A trifle bit annoyed with such a stunning lack of any clear progress, as Tony was usually so very good about detecting the existence of hidden meanings, Gibbs ran a sweaty hand through his hair and tried again to broach the subject of jealousy with metaphors.

“But you could learn to.” Gibbs suggested, already feeling greatly uncomfortable.

Eyes going wide at such a statement, Tony turned and glared at the cashier before turning back to look at Gibbs.

“Are they discontinuing Cotton Candy Blizzards?!”

“No.” Gibbs sighed, suddenly exhausted. “They’re not.”

Immediately relaxing upon hearing such good news, Tony returned to the process of eating his dessert with great gusto, the abject discomfort his employer going all but unnoticed until, minutes later, Gibbs gave into his frustration and sighed aloud.

“Got something on your mind, Boss?” Tony inquired, looking earnestly into his face.

“No, I just wanted to talk to you is all.” Gibbs reminded.

Looking as somber as he was wont to do when faced with the prospect of visiting the dentist, or elsewise a doctor, Tony steeled his shoulders and nervously began to use his plastic spoon to play with his ice-cream.

“What did you want to talk about?” Tony sighed, looking decidedly trapped despite sitting on the outside.

“Well,” Gibbs began, searching for words, “You’ve been sort of… clingy today.”

Appearing to be highly offended at such an accusation, which was simply absurd given the way in which he had been fine with allegations of childishness, Tony scowled and crossed his arms against his chest.

“Was not.”

“You were.” Gibbs stated, perfectly calm. “And I thought, maybe, it might have something to do with me and your mother.”
Getting nothing other than an alarmed look for all the effort that little speech had taken him, Gibbs frowned slightly and heartily began to regret having not first spoken to Ducky about the matter.

“Tony,” Gibbs began anew, “If you’re…If you’re not comfortable with…whatever…is going on between your mother and me, I’ll put a stop to it.”

Because even if by doing so he would be greatly bereaved, having already developed quite an affection for the bubbly woman in less than a week, Gibbs just wouldn’t be able to set his son aside for a woman. He was simply far too honorable and upstanding for such churlish behavior.

“I don’t want you to.” Tony sighed, throwing down his spoon unto the table. “Not if it makes you both happy.”

Giving his son a warning look at such a tantrum, regardless of how small it had been, Gibbs grabbed the spoon and shoved it back into the Blizzard before moving forward, his severe countenance enough to motivate Tony into using a napkin to clean the mess of ice-cream he had left behind from the spoon-tossing.

“That what’s your deal, Kiddo?” Gibbs inquired, making full use of his Dad-voice.

Sitting in a semi-petulant silence for a markedly long spell, Tony fiddled with the buttons on his designer shirt and nibbled ferociously at his bottom lip before finally garnering up the courage and motivation to speak.

“What if something goes wrong and you two don’t work out?”

Seeing as Gibbs had quite the history of mucking up his relationships with women, the number of ex-wives in his possession a testament to such, he felt no real outrage or indignation at the question. He felt, instead, a marked sense of shame and regret – the likes of which was only further compounded by the accompanying fact that all his breakups and divorces had resulted in a very difficult time for Tony as well, simply by virtue of him being a prominent person in his life. But, quite unable to express such intricacies in an adequate or coherent fashion, Gibbs simply sighed and said the first thing that came to mind.

“That’s just the way it is sometimes.”

Immediately regretting his lack of delicacy as he watched Tony’s expression turn forlorn, Gibbs inwardly cursed himself and tried again.

“I just meant,” He began, running a hand through his hair again, “That if something were to happen, that nothing would change between us.”

“Of course it would!” Tony snapped, more overwhelmed than angry. “I’d have to chose sides.”

Understanding all too well that the things said in arguments weren’t at all good indicators as to how a person truly felt, Gibbs brushed aside his outrage at the inaccurate denouncement of his character and carried on, taking great care to keep his tone even so that the conversation might stay on track.

“Tony, neither one of us would ask you to do that.” He assured. “How could you even think that?”

Looking quite sulky, Tony glared down at the table and mumbled his response, the words
very nearly as inaudible as they were unintelligible.

“But it would.” Tony persisted. “Mom has to love me – you don’t.”

Downright incredulous at such a ridiculous statement, as nothing could be further from the truth, Gibbs bit down a bemused laugh and firmly grabbed his son’s chin, gently directing the distraught young man’s face until he was forced, by necessity, into looking him into the eye whether he willed it or no.

“You cause me so much grief every day of my life, Tony, and I haven’t stopped wanting to be your father yet.” And, before his boy had time to take that in the wrong manner, Gibbs quickly moved forward. “And I won’t. Not for any reason. I made a choice to make you mine, and I don’t regret it for a moment. Just because you’re not blood, doesn’t make that any less real. You got it?”

Receiving no response for the longest time, aside from a suspicious blinking of watery eyes, Gibbs rapidly began to grow concerned he had gone too far in asserting his love for the boy. But, before he could so much as apologize, or seek to rectify the situation, Tony absolved him of all doubts by launching himself at him and wrapping him in oppressive hug. And Gibbs, never one to miss the mark, more than happily embraced him back, pleased to see that his parental instincts had not been so far off after all.
Chapter 27

Absentmindedly knitting away at the purple sweater she was currently crafting for Abby, as she most stubbornly refused to give the young woman anything so somber and dreary as black for a Christmas gift, Henrietta hummed softly to herself and wondered if, perhaps, she ought to be working on the quilts she was making each bride for their wedding instead. Because whilst Abby’s was all but finished, needing nothing other than to be touched up with some more precise stitches, Kate’s still required an entire border to be made complete. And, seeing as how both weddings were fast approaching, with one on Saturday and the next on Sunday, Henrietta really didn’t have a whole lot of time to be putting around with Christmas gifts. And so, thus decided, she promptly set aside the plum-colored yarn and stalked off to her bedroom, fully intent on finishing up both quilts before Thursday at the very latest. She was just starting to attach a pretty mint-green border unto Kate’s, having earlier been informed by her son that such color was her favorite, when she heard the door open – the distinct sounds of her child’s heavy footsteps sounding soon after.

“Anthony,” She frowned, stepping into the living room to see her son collapse on the couch, “Where have you been? It’s nearly midnight!”

Lifting his head off the couch to stare at her with a bleary expression, Tony yawned loudly and rubbed at his bloodshot eyes – evoking in his poor mother no small amount of concern and worry where regarded the state of his health.

“I had to swing over to Abby’s to help her with the centerpieces.” Tony yawned, lifting his head from the couch to make room for her.

“Her wedding is on Saturday.” Henrietta frowned, quickly seating herself in the space allotted. “Why is she only now finishing them?”

“She probably forgot is all.” Tony offered, plopping his head down into her lap.

Sincerely hoping that the young woman in question had not forgotten anything else, or at least not anything that would require the attentions and labors of her already overworked child, Henrietta frowned in commiseration and absentmindedly began to run her fingers through Tony’s sweat-dampened hair, the simple action earning her both a sleepy smile and subconscious hum in return.

“Did you eat, Monkey?” She inquired, fully prepared to whip him up a quick sandwich or salad.

Giving her a brief shake of the head, and promptly tangling her fingers in his hair by doing so, Tony all but mumbled out his answer as he struggled to stay awake.

“Sarah fed us lasagna.”

Liking more and more of this Sarah the more that she heard about her, for the similarities between their persons were of a startling amount, Henrietta silently sent the college freshman her thanks and resolved later to expression them in person at the wedding. Although whether or not that beatitude would involve a plateful of baked goods remained to be seen, such a factor being, as it was, largely contingent on whether or not she was able to promptly finish up the work on her wedding gifts.

“Good.” She smiled, carefully extracting her fingers from the curls. “How was work?”
While in any other circumstance she would have felt all the awkwardness such an insipid question brought, for Tony had informed her the previous day that he planned to catch up on paperwork, Henrietta found herself unashamed as she made the innocent inquiry – sheer boredom on her part being a more than a sufficient motivator to relieve her of such silly qualms.

“Good.” Tony answered, suddenly perking up. “Gibbs took me out for ice cream.”

Heart helplessly fluttering at the mentioning of said man’s name, Henrietta took a deep breath and tried not to show anything but neutrality on her face, not wishing to make it known to her child just how smitten she had become with his employer in only the space of a few days. Because, if she was not mistaken, she was almost certain she would have to put an end to the whole affair – her son’s apparent jealousy simply far too advanced and noticeable for her motherly instincts to ignore.

“And how did that go?” She questioned, making quick work of a loose thread on the shoulder of Tony’s shirt.

“We had a talk.” Tony reluctantly confessed, steadfastly refusing to meet her eyes.

Inwardly praying that her stubborn son hadn’t been foolish enough to cop an attitude with Jethro whilst at work, for there were some behaviors an employer simply couldn’t ignore, Henrietta resumed her hair stroking and began to wonder if, perhaps, a scolding was in order. But, rather than launch immediately into her discipline of choice, and thus run the risk of having another row with her beloved son, she kept mum and graciously allowed her child a chance to explain himself.

“What kind of talk?” She hummed, gently untangling a knot from his hair.

“The kind where he talks some sense into me.” Tony sighed, a small frown on his lips as he stubbornly stared down at the carpet.

Only narrowly resisting the urge to inquire into whether or not such talks were a frequent occurrence, for the annoyed frown on her son’s face seemed to convey that such was very much the case, Henrietta frowned a bit herself and helplessly began to wonder just how much Jethro had done for her boy whilst she was away.

“I see.” She responded, idly tracing the outline of his ear with a finger. “What sense were you lacking at the moment?”

Turning over on his back to better look into her face, and in turn her eyes, Tony sighed dramatically before mumbling out his response.

“I was being a bit of a brat about you and Dad- Gibbs.”

Unable to ignore that this was inarguably the dozenth time she had caught her son nearly referring to his boss as his father, and inexpressibly touched by such a realization, Henrietta required several moments before she deemed it safe enough to speak again.

“Kind of?” She teased, playfully poking his nose.

Swatting lazily at her offending finger like a lazy cat, Tony huffed indignantly and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Oh, I was being a brat.”

“Care to enlighten me as to why?” Henrietta prodded, snatching one of his large hands to squeeze in her own.
Coloring as brightly as he had the time she had caught him ‘playing house’ with Teddy Martin in the third grad, with the former being the wife and the latter playing the husband, Tony squirmed uncomfortably and lowered his gaze to her chin.

“I was worried something might go wrong between you two,” He confessed, “And that I’d have to pick sides when it was over.”

“Oh, Tony –“

“I know.” The distraught man groaned, hiding his face with his hands. “It was stupid of me.”

Never one to allow those around her to refer to themselves as anything derogatory, especially stupid, Henrietta shook her head in mild rebuke and gently extracted her child’s fingers away from his reddened face.

“Not stupid.” She insisted, holding the fingers hostage in her hands. “Maybe silly, but not stupid.”

“I just didn’t want things to have to get awkward, is all.” Tony mumbled, beginning to fiddle with the sleeve of her sweater. “I love you both.”

Resolving later to look more into the nature of Tony and Jethro’s relationship, as it was becoming increasingly clear that it was far more than that of an employer-employee nature, Henrietta smiled gently and softly kissed her son’s forehead.

“Neither one of us would do that to you.” She avowed.

And, when promptly confronted with an awkward silence in response to her sage declaration, Henrietta smiled wickedly and tickled the sullen man beneath the chin.

“And, besides.” She added, in a conspiratorial whisper. “I don’t have plans on letting him go.”

Grimacing theatrically as he slapped her evasive fingers away, Tony sat up and made a point of gagging dramatically.

“Yuck, Mama!”

“What?” Henrietta defended, pleased to see the tension flee. “That man is delicious.”

Quickly scooting away from her in much the same manner a child sought to evade a wooden spoon, Tony shook his head and prepared to flee at any moment.

“Stop.” He whined, holding his hands over his ears. “I don’t want to hear this.”

“Why not?” Henrietta teased, clutching a pillow to her chest. “He’s almost as hot as John Wayne!”

“What is it with you and your cowboy fetish?!” Tony groaned, shaking his head in disbelief.

Not at all enjoying the irreverent manner in which her innocent fetish was so easily dismissed, as she herself did not harass her offspring for their shared sexual enjoyment of Regency-Ear speech, or for his most ardent appreciation of being dominated in bed, Henrietta huffed
indignantly and sought to set her ignorant boy straight.

“I don’t have a cowboy fetish.” She huffed. “I have a John Wayne fetish.”

“Gross.” Tony exclaimed, wrinkling up his nose.

“Don’t think I don’t know about your own fetishes, Anthony.” Henrietta warned. “I saw those books in your room.”

Herself having read several of those self-same books, and enjoyed a selection of such, Henrietta’s remark was more playful than it was scolding or derogatory in nature.

“What were you doing in my room!?” Tony demanded, not at all as amused as his mother currently was.

“I was doing laundry.” Henrietta defended, perfectly earnest.

Unable to chastise her for doing something as innocent as laundry, and all the more infuriated as a result of such, Tony glowered at the carpet and looked more than just a little mutinous.

“What else did you find?”

“More than I cared to.” Henrietta confessed, coloring a bit herself.

Because while the books had been mildly innocent enough, at least where her sensibilities were involved, the variety of toys she had spotted had caused her more than just a little mortification, they being of a variety and type that she had never before seen or even imagined to exist in her wildest dreams.

“You shouldn’t have gone under my bed.” Tony fussed.

“I honestly wish that I had.” Henrietta retorted.

For while a few of the toys had, admittedly, caught her attention and curiosity, the existence of male sex toys having been up until that moment unheard of in her life, the grand majority of those items had outright terrified her.

“Don’t give me that look.” Tony huffed. “We had a deal that neither one of us looks under the other’s bed.”

Having crafted that deal long ago, when Tony was no more than a baby-faced first grader discovering his first dildo beneath the confines of his mother’s bed, Henrietta was forced to concede that her son’s indignation was, indeed, well-founded. That was not to say, however, that she was accept the blame so easily.

“I was checking for laundry!”

“Well, I don’t keep laundry down there!” Tony scowled.

“No.” Henrietta blushed. “You don’t.”

Receiving only a glare in response to such cleverness, Henrietta immediately added:

“I won’t tell anyone – I swear. But –” She added, “You are still using protection, right?”

“Mom!”
“What!? Just because you can’t get your partner pregnant doesn’t mean you can’t catch something!” Henrietta cautioned. “And trust me, you do not want to catch the clap!”

Having been given such a wonderful gift by Senior only six months into their fledgling relationship, the sure culprit of such being the foreign maid she had no say in hiring, Henrietta spoke ardently as she attested to the foulness of such a disease.

“Jesus Christ – “Tony groaned, “I’m going to bed.”

“I’m just looking out for you.” Henrietta insisted.

“Good night, Mom.”
Chapter 28

Much more inclined toward random fits of mischievousness than her stuffier and priggish agemates, the grand majority of whom had seemed to lose their spark and liveliness with age, Henrietta curled up atop the soft couch with a wicked grin and clutched her son’s cellphone to her chest, both nervous and giddy all at once as she tried to work up the nerve to send off her first text message. Because whilst the idea of conversing with Jethro was, admittedly, a very attractive notion after years of loneliness, the very thought that she might embarrass herself with a mortifying typo was enough to grieve her to no end. For, having grown up in prestigious boarding schools amongst similarly wealthy and spoiled girls, Henrietta had played witness to more than just a few embarrassing incidences of unconfident young women acting the fool in order to garner the attentions of a handsome boy. Worse yet, she had committed an even greater crime herself by knowingly playing a similar part – the end result of such an action being, of course, her subsequent shotgun marriage to the man who would cheat on her several times before having the questionable decency to divorce her for a younger woman. But, rather than choose to dwell on such unpleasantness for any longer than was strictly necessary, as by doing so she would only be rewarding Senior for his degeneracy, Henrietta shook her head clear of all unpleasantness and eagerly began to craft her first text.

“Jethro,” She began, needing several backspaces just to make the name correct, “I just spoke with Tony. Thank you.”

Promptly left to consider the prudence of such an ill-conceived plan when a full ten minutes went by without any answer, for in her haste she had foolishly forgotten to consider that the working man was very likely asleep at such an hour, Henrietta frowned and once more considered getting a part-time job – if not to have some money of her own, then at least to break apart the endless monotony of her days. But before she could so much as even consider what careers were viable for her, having not worked a single day in her life, Tony’s phone pinged softly in the darkness and alerted her to the fact that Jethro had finally replied.

“No purple.”

Charitably opting not to tease him for such an apparent typo, as it had taken her several minutes just to type out his damn name on the touchscreen, Henrietta smiled softly in the darkness and slowly began to go about the painstaking process of typing out her response.

“Don’t be so demure, Jethro.” She scolded. “You’ll take my appreciation and be glad for it.”

Inwardly a bit miffed that there was no clear way to convey that she was being sarcastic rather than playful, as she most certainly did not wish to come across as a harpy, Henrietta scowled and resolved to later ask her son if there was some sort of way to convey emotions in her texts.

“Feeling a bit bossy, are we?” Jethro questioned.

Inwardly thrilled to discover that her newest friend seemed to lack no small amount of courage when it came to flirting via text, Henrietta beamed openly into the screen of her borrowed phone and eagerly began to respond.

“Assertive.” She corrected.

“Commanding.” Jethro promptly retorted.
“Domineering.” Henrietta rebuttled, blushing a bit as she realized the sexual connotations behind such a word.

Because as much as she was all for uninhibited sexual expression, to a certain degree, she knew also that Jethro was a bit more reserved in such dealings than most.

“Is that something you’re into?” Jethro finally responded, after a long three minutes.

Flushing warmly at such a flirtatious response, and immensely grateful that her son was now in bed and unable to play witness to her sudden arousal, Henrietta bit down on her bottom lip and struggled to send out a reply given the newfound shakiness of her fingers.

“Yes – but only if I’m the one dominating.”

“I’m almost sorry I asked.” Jethro replied.

“I’m not.” Henrietta assured, shamelessly picturing the blush that must be on his cheeks.

Because whilst she was not a woman who enjoyed embarrassing others, Henrietta couldn’t honestly say that she didn’t enjoy getting a rise out of people with both her frankness and flirtations.

“I see where your sons lack of shame comes from.” Jethro texted.

“He also had my limbo.” Henrietta teased, only to frown as she realized her error. “My licorice. No! My libido!”

“Can we maybe not talk about my son’s libido?” Jethro questioned, only to immediately follow it up with: “Tony’s limes, I mean.”

Unable to ignore the outright prevalence of the many instances in which either Jethro or Tony casually referred to the other as father or son, Henrietta drew her brows together and subsequently decided to make an inquiry into the matter.

“There it is again.” She wrote, the words more of an observation rather than an accusation.

“What?” Jethro asked, endearingly clueless.

“Tony’s almost called you Dad severance times today. And you keep referring to him as your son.” She explained, the short sentences taking several minutes to type out.

But although her observation had been made with an appreciative air, for indeed she was exceedingly grateful for the care Jethro had provided her son, Henrietta was promptly faced with an oppressive silence that lasted the length of eight minutes before her conversational partner found it fit to reply.

“Does that bother you?”

And though the question was asked via text, Henrietta could have sworn she heard all the nervousness conveyed within such words.

“No!” She promptly assured, nearly dropping the phone in her haste. “It makes me hoppy.”

“Good.” Jethro responded. “I don’t want to overfates and boards.”

Despite having promised to leave all incidences of typos alone, as she herself provided a great many of such errors, Henrietta was forced to concede that a little inquiry was needed on the
latest typos if she had any hope of understanding what her friend was trying to say.

“What?”

“Overstep and bounds.” Jethro clarified, taking a full three minutes to respond.

Immensely grateful that Jethro had not taken her need for clarification to heart, Henrietta relaxed once more and swiftly sent off a response.

“You’re not.” She wrote. “Tony is clearly okay with it – and that’s what matters.”

Because even if she couldn’t help but feel a small amount of jealousy at having not been able to be there herself for her son, Henrietta was more than able to overlook such feelings when she saw the genuine love and affection both men shared with each other.

“It’s nice of you take my feelings into consideration.” Jethro teased.

“Sorry, but my Monkey will always come first.” Henrietta replied. “You can be second though.”

For even though she had only known the man for a few days, if that, Henrietta knew enough about reading people’s characters to know that she wished to keep Jethro with her life in whatever capacity she could.

“I’ve never been in that position before.” Jethro confessed, although whether he was flirting or annoyed she could not rightfully say.

“Don’t worry.” Henrietta teased. “I plan on introducing you to tons of new positions.”

Because even if Jethro didn’t seem like the sort to be adventurous in bed, Henrietta was almost confident she could instill a bit of creativity into their sex-life once their relationship became official.

“You know.” Jethro began, “It’s not nice to tease a man like that when you’re so far away.”

Charitably ignoring the fact that were only fifteen minutes apart from each other at most, as such a tidbit was not at all conducive of their flirting, Henrietta smiled wickedly and was greatly affronted when she realized there was no clear way to share such a naughty expression with her beau.

“We’ll have to rectify that soon.” She declared. “Hopefully before the wedding.”

“Yes, soon.” Jethro hastily replied. “But speaking of weddings…can I get away with wearing black to Abby’s wedding?”

Although she could not claim to be a great adherent to the rules dictating the laws of fashion, herself preferring to dress simply in whatever she had lying around, Henrietta knew enough about weddings to know that the bride must never be upstaged.

“What? No!” Henrietta scolded. “You can’t wear the same color as the bride!”

Because as petty as it was, even she had yet to forgive the cousin who had worn a white fucking sundress and tiara to her wedding.

“Her dress has some purple…” Jethro argued, referring to the dark plum color buried beneath all the black lace.
“Jethro – No.” Henrietta insisted, refusing to back down on the matter.

“Well, can I wear black shoes with a brown suit?”

Unable to grant her assent to such a half-formed idea with any amount of happiness, as Tony had gone on several rants about the matter after one of his dates showed up in the same combo, Henrietta sighed and pondered just what it was that made some men so inept at picking out outfits.

“Did you hit your head at work today?” She replied. “You can’t wear black shoes with a brown suit, Jethro. What else do you have?”

Gratefully taking no real umbrage at the casual reference of him perhaps being concussed, Jethro promptly responded in a rank, yet offended, manner.

“I have work-clothes.”

Rather than scold him for possessing only two suits, one of which was the ungodly color of brown, Henrietta smiled softly and resolved to use such information for the good of their fledgling relationship.

“We’re going shopping tomorrow.” Henrietta decided, wishing to leave no room for dissent in her declaration.

“I work.”

Only mildly annoyed at the casual reference to an everyday part of life she had nothing to do with, for she knew Jethro had not been throwing her lack of work-history in her face to upset her, Henrietta thought quickly and rapidly came up with a new plan.

“We’ll go over lunch. You can leave Tony in charge.”

“Lunch sounds good.” Jethro promptly agreed. “Leaving Tony in charge doesn’t.”

And even though Henrietta knew perfectly well that Jethro was only teasing, for he would never disparage the young man in question, she couldn’t help but offer up at least a small retort when it came to the defense of her son.

“He hasn’t burned the place down yet.”

“Yet.” Jethro parroted, the sarcasm of such a word somehow making its way through the phone.

“Don’t make me come over there.” Henrietta warned, once more wishing she knew how to drive.

Because as forward and wanton as such a behavior would be, the only thing keeping her from paying a midnight call to her new beau was her lack of a license.

“But that was my whole game-plan.”

Biting down hard on her bottom lip to keep from moaning aloud as a flood of warmth assailed the private space betwixt her legs, Henrietta found it necessary to fan her face with a small pillow before she was recovered enough to reply.

“You naughty boy!” She scolded, still helplessly and painfully aroused.
“It’s the bourgeoise.” Jethro defended, before promptly correcting himself. “The bourbon.”

Promptly setting all communism jokes aside, in favor of dealing with the most recent revelation, Henrietta frowned and swiftly sent out her response.

“It’s past midnight.” She lectured. “Why are you drinking?”

Because as much as it wasn’t her business, at least not yet, the idea that Jethro found it necessary to be drinking so late at night worried her to no end.

“My knee, is all.” Jethro unhelpfully explained.

“Could you elaborate?” Henrietta requested, thoroughly confused.

“Old injury.” Jethro evaded, seemingly and needlessly embarrassed.

But rather than opt to soothe away all traces of said mortification, Henrietta remained firm, entirely unwilling to indulge the man his bad behaviors.

“Then ice it – alcohol will only make it worse.” She lectured.

“Nah.” Came the infuriating response.

More than just a little familiar with dealing with stubborn patients, given that she had Tony for a son, Henrietta rose to the challenge without losing her temper.

“I’m going to beat you.” She threatened.

“I think that would only make it worse.” Jethro sassed.

Unable to argue against such sound logic, even though that was what she so greatly wished to do, Henrietta pouted for a bit before promptly changing tactics.

“Would a kiss make it better?”


Once more feeling the familiar flood on warmth betwixt her legs, Henrietta colored brightly and took several moments to recover before texting back.

“I’ll tell you what,” She bargained, “You can have that kiss tomorrow.”

“I’ll count the hours.” Jethro assured, surely just as assured as she.

“But,” Henrietta grinned, feeling quite wicked, “I’m not telling you where.”

It was, after all, more conducive for their relationship if she allowed his imagination to do all the work. For, by doing so, when she would be able to more quickly deduce just what sorts of things Jethro liked when it came to acts of affection.

“Should I be worried?” Jethro inquired, frustratingly opting not to share where he would have liked to been kissed.

“I’ll leave you to discover that for yourself.” Henrietta evaded, wishing to allow both their imaginations some creative liberty.
“I take it that it’s time for bed?” Jethro asked, more assuredly upset at the very notion.

Upset herself at such an inevitable proposition, as it was only getting in the way of their flirtations, Henrietta made her confirmation of such a fact with no small degree of sorrow.

“Alas, it is so.” Henrietta wrote. “But fear not, for I shall think of you tonight.”

At it was no lie either, for Henrietta fully resolved to bring out a few toys of her own once she was safely ensconced in her own bedroom.

“Hope you have gourd dreams.” Jethro responded, every bit the gentleman as he tried to conceal his disappointment.

“I do, too.” Henrietta agreed. “But I won’t be sleeping while I think of you.”

“Good God, Woman!” Jethro responded, his arousal all but palpable from the screen.

And, not at all content to let the matter rest there, Henrietta gave into all feelings of debauchery and giggled as she sent off her reply.

“If you do the same, we can compare notes tomorrow.”

“I might need a study aid.” Jethro hinted. “I was never any good at tests.”

Although she was not at all adverse to sharing such pictures with her newest of friends, Henrietta expertly evaded fulfilling the terms of the request, her lack of understanding as to how to take and send off such pictures being the only inhibited factor of such a decision.

“You’ll have to buy me lunch first.”

“The demands never stop with you.” Jethro pouted.

“Go to sleep, Jethro.” Henrietta responded, a small smile on her face.

“Yes, Ma’am.”
Although he would have much preferred to have time to go home and change out of his sweaty work-clothes before meeting Henrietta for their impromptu lunch-date, Gibbs found that little bit of disappointment to be of a minor degree as he surreptitiously took his leave of the bullpen and hastily navigated his aging truck throughout the city’s busy streets and into the crowded parking lot of Tony’s apartment building. But, not wish to appear an overeager mess by any means, for he was entirely unwilling to do anything that might jeopardize their fledgling relationship, Gibbs took several minutes in the parking lot to steel his nerves before finally making his way inside and up the stairs to the appropriate door.

“Jethro!” Henrietta beamed, opening the door not two seconds after he had knocked.

“Henrietta.” Gibbs greeted, suddenly not at all as confident as he had been the previous night.

Because whilst the general anonymity of texting had managed to make him feel quite bold, whatever resolve and confidence Gibbs had managed to build up on the way over had all but vanished the very moment he saw Henrietta standing in the doorway, her full lips an alluring red and her skinny body clad in a distractingly form-fitting sweater-dress the exact same shade of green as her eyes.

“I wish you would just start calling me Hen already.” The short woman rebuked, a small smile playing up the corner of her lips as she issued forth such a heatless scolding.

“I didn’t want to be too forward.” Gibbs excused, shrugging his shoulders as he stepped inside the apartment to help her into her coat.

Promptly rewarded with an amused giggle at such a ridiculous answer, for his excuse was indeed ridiculous in nature, Jethro cursed himself for his lack of grace and inwardly avowed to correct the matter as best he could.

“After all those texts you sent me last night, you’re afraid of being forward?” Henrietta scoffed, a light and pleasing laughter coating her words.

“Well, I didn’t know if that was going to be a onetime thing or not.” Gibbs defended, feeling quite stupid.

Rather than taunt him any further for such a perceived lack of faith where regarded the nature and future of their relationship, Henrietta simply giggled and eyed him with a very flirtatious expression that might have been mistaken for severity were it not for the ample amounts of mischief shining merrily within her eyes.

“Oh no, Sir.” Henrietta boldly. “That was only a precursor for what’s to come.” She additionally assured, expertly wrapping a black scarf about her neck.

“Oh?” Gibbs asked, suddenly going very weak in the knees.

A bit alarmed at such a sudden flood of nerves, for he had not felt anything close to such a feeling since his first meeting with Shannon, Gibbs gripped at a kitchen chair with one of his strong arms and inwardly prayed that his tendency towards sweating whilst anxious would not, for once, make itself known.

“Oh, yes.” Henrietta promptly assured, the twinkle in her eyes only magnifying in intensity
the longer they conversed. “And, speaking of that particular conversation, I do believe I still owe you a kiss.”

Although he was not at all a man inclined to coerce a kiss out of a reluctant woman, Gibbs found the suggestion nearly unignorable as his befuddled mind hastily supplied him with the thoughts that Henrietta seemed more than just a little willing to bestow upon him such an undeserved kiss.

“That was part of the bargain.” Gibbs agreed, throat suddenly dry. “Although I am a bit nervous about just where you think that kiss should – “

Gibbs did not, much to his absolute delight, have any time at all to finish off his sentence. For, seconds later, before he could so much as blink, Henrietta was upon him, her skinny arms thrown about his neck as she leaped up unto the very tips of her toes and kissed him straight on the lips with a passion that effectively stole the breath right out of his body. And Gibbs, not at all about to turn down such a beautiful woman’s enthusiastic advances (it being far too long since he had experienced any similar attentions of the sort) responded promptly in turn – all but smooshing the petite woman up against the refrigerator as he allowed his passions to get the best of him and propel him into sticking his tongue into her mouth.

But, rather than shy away from such a feverous display of passion as many shyer women might have done, Henrietta seemed to relish in it, the way in which she moved her slender fingers to wrap more firmly about his neck an adequate testament where regarded her consent on the matter. And, understandably aroused by such evident passion, as his last two wives had been nowhere near as enthusiastic in their dealings with him, Gibbs even went so far as to snake an adventurous hand up the skirt of her woolen dress, his fingers coming up to indulgently rest on her plump backside as he pulled her ever closer to his body. Similarly just as emboldened by such unabashed forwardness, or else simply unwilling to ever play the part of demure damsel, Henrietta moaned softly into his mouth and dug her fingernails in the flesh of his neck, her lithe body going somewhat limp as she attacked his lips with all the passion a woman of her size could possibly possess.

“Jethro,” Henrietta murmured, her eyes half-closed as she edged her fingers toward the zipper of his jeans, “Oh, Jethro.”

Fully prepared to simply throw the aroused woman over his shoulder and carry her into the guestroom, all qualms about fucking his pseudo-son’s mother in his own apartment long since forgotten, Gibbs nibbled a bit at her bottom lip before reluctantly pulling a few inches away, finding such a space quite necessary if he was going to be able to properly inquire into whether or not Henrietta would like to take things into the bedroom.

“Do you want to – “

“Yes.” Henrietta rapidly agreed, once more assaulting his hopelessly chapped lips with her own softer pair.

That one word being all the verbal consent he required to continue, Gibbs steeled himself for a bit of light labor as he kissed her back and prepared himself to carry her into the nearby bedroom. Because even if said woman was remarkably tiny in stature, the vexing fact still remained that his knee was still giving him quite a bit trouble given the recent cold snap. But, rather than convey such an embarrassing fact to Henrietta, and thus run the risk of embarrassing himself by making her feel compelled to go easy on him between the sheets, Gibbs kept mum and snaked his hands about her slender waist, fully prepared to sweep her up in one smooth move to further mitigate the risk of him pulling something that ought not to be pulled. But, before he could so much as interlock his fingers, much less give her fair warning as to what was about to happen, the distinct sounds of the front door
being opened still him right in his tracks.

“Tony!” A reedy and feeble voice called out, “I need to borrow some sugar! Fluffy knocked over my only bag and – Oh my!”

Promptly and unceremoniously pushed away from Henrietta with haste that was almost a little bit insulting, Gibbs stumbled and very nearly fell over before catching himself on the stove.

“Ms. Hudson!” Henrietta blushed, her greeting more of a squeak as she frantically tugged the skirt of her dress back into place.

Straightening up his posture with as much dignity as he could manage given the situation, Gibbs turned to greet the impromptu invader with his harshest glare, his feelings of homicidal rage for once, in his mind, fully justified given the facts in question. It was only when he realized the culprit to be a feeble nonagenarian, hump-backed and confined to a walker, did he remember his manners and lessen the harshness of his expression.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.” The elderly woman excused, her wrinkled cheeks taking on a vivid glow. “I didn’t know that Tony’s mother would be having any friends over.”

“Well,” Henrietta stammered, looking very much like a guilty schoolgirl, “I – “

Sensing that the uncharacteristically flustered woman was in need of a little assistance, it not a ton, Gibbs quickly launched into action and yanked open the appropriate cabinet with a force strong enough to loosen the screws affixing it to the wall.

“Here.” He bluntly offered, unceremoniously setting a nearly full bag of sugar into the basket of her walker. “There you are.”

“Oh,” The elderly woman frowned, “But I only needed a cup!”

Only narrowly resisting the urge to snap at the older being for being so damn nitpicky, as the timeframe for resuming his sexual activities with Henrietta greatly diminished the longer they tarried in the kitchen, Gibbs looked to his recent makeup partner for assistance, not trusting himself to remain cordial should he be compelled to speak right at that moment.

“No worries, Ms. Hudson!” Henrietta quickly recovered. “We’ve got another full bag!”

Giving them a markedly firm glare, one that had even Gibbs withering beneath its weight and intensity, Ms. Hudson quirked a brow at Henrietta and sniffed out her answer.

“Tony does know that you have a friend over, yes?”

“Of course.” Gibbs fibbed, feeling no small amount of guilt when it came to lying the elderly.

“Well, we’ll just see about that.” Ms. Hudson avowed, promptly taking her leave of the place and effectively leaving Gibbs with all the feelings of guilt a teenager might experience upon sneaking their girlfriend into their room.

Magnanimously waiting until he was certain the woman was outside of hearing distance, Gibbs scowled and turned to find Henrietta with much the same expression.

“That woman is something else.” Gibbs grumbled, the swelling in his pants having long since evaporated.
“I don’t know how Tony tolerates her meddling.” Henrietta agreed, quickly stepping into her boots. “She’s a bigger cock-block than a nosy toddler.”

And unable to argue against such a fact, as he knew there was no way they could now finish what they had earlier started after such an awkward interruption, Gibbs sighed and reluctantly accompanied her out the door and into the confines of his still warm truck.
Chapter 30

Still riding high on the relative success of having so swiftly found a suitable suit for the upcoming wedding weekend he would be forced to preen for, said three-piece garment being quite comfortable despite its more modern design, Gibbs was, for once, all smiles as he navigated his trucks throughout the crowded streets of the city.

“You’re going to look so handsome in your blue suit.” Henrietta purred, sipping gingerly at the boiling hot chocolate he had purchased her after their shared lunch in the food court.

More than just a little uncomfortable with all the attention being paid unto him by his bubbly riding companion, Gibbs shifted a little in his seat and eagerly began trying to refocus some that attention unto someone else.

“I hope I don’t upstage McGee.” He sardonically intoned, hoping to turn the focus unto the fast-approaching wedding.

“With how delicious you’re going to look, it’s a very real fear.” Henrietta teased, effortlessly sliding across the leather seats to rest her head on his shoulder.

Wishing most ardently that he could, for once, allow his staunch adherence to vehicle safety to waver, as Gibbs wanted nothing more than to be able to wrap an affectionate arm about her slender shoulders, he inwardly cursed himself for his unconventional hang-ups but nonetheless settled for smiling softly into her beaming face.

“Would you hush up?” He inquired, allowing the small smile on his face to remain.

“What?” Henrietta grinned, hugging his arm all the tighter. “I’m being serious.”

But while the sentiment was most certainly endearing, as he had not been flirted with in such a manner for the longest of times, Gibbs was also more modest than the average man his age – resulting in his subsequent desire to be rid of the topic before he found himself in any real danger of blushing and sweating a ridiculous amount.

“Well,” Gibbs shrugged, “It’s hard to take you seriously when you have a whipped-cream mustache on your face.”

“Oh!” Henrietta squeaked, an amused twinkle overtaking her eyes. “We can’t have that, now can we?”

And, before Gibbs could even think to stop her from doing so, Henrietta scouted away from him and reached a slender hand up to the passenger-side visor, her expression one of perfect innocence as she lowered it and sent the photograph safely concealed within flittering to the muddy floor below.

“What’s this?” Henrietta questioned, quickly stooping to retrieve the picture before it could face any damage.

Clamping down hard on his tongue to keep from barking at her to return the mall-kiosk strip of photos back to its original place of honor, as he could suffer absolutely nothing to happen to his favorite pictures of his deceased family, Gibbs gripped fiercely at the steering wheel and desperately hoped that Henrietta would somehow know to be careful with such an important keepsake.
“Who are they?” Henrietta wondered aloud, looking at the four pictures.

Already knowing what those pictures showed without needing to turn and look at them, as he had spent several hours staring at them throughout the years as he struggled with the occasional suicidal ideation, Gibbs stubbornly avoided the photographs of Kelly and Shannon making faces at the camera and concentrated his gaze on the road instead – figuring such an action to be the safest way of assuring he did not get worked up in front of Henrietta.

“That’s Shannon.” Gibbs managed, throat growing tight. “And Kelly.”

Reverently moving a careful finger over the faces of the two girls he had loved most in the world, Henrietta smiled gently and carefully returned the aged memento to its proper place.

“They’re very pretty girls.” She observed. “The little one kind of looks like you.”

Unable to keep from smiling at such a modest observation, as Henrietta had been one of the very few people to notice that Kelly had his chin and cheekbones, Gibbs swallowed down the lump in his throat and forced himself to answer.

“Yeah.” He agreed. “Kelly is – was my daughter.”

“Was?” Henrietta frowned, her voice impossibly small.

Not knowing any better way to segue into a conversation as difficult as the one they were about to have, Gibbs sighed aloud and hoped he wouldn’t live to regret sharing such a trauma with Henrietta.

“Kelly died in a car crash with her mother.” He explained, gut twisting painfully. “She was eight.”

“Oh, Jethro.” Henrietta exclaimed, voice full of compassion as she hugged his arm tightly. “I’m so sorry.”

“I was in Afghanistan.” He elaborated, unable to stop himself. “During the height of all violence. Three of my men died, but I got to go home to bury my wife and daughter.”

Feeling the arm hugging his own arm tighten, but otherwise refusing to meet her gaze and see the pity espoused there, Gibbs blinked several times but found the sudden moisture trapped within remained.

“I didn’t… Tony never told me.” Henrietta babbled, seemingly making an attempt to apologize for that which wasn’t her fault.

“I don’t like to talk about it.” Gibbs croaked.

“Well,” Henrietta squirmed, “Thank you for sharing, then.”

“Thank you for listening.”
Chapter 31

Despite knowing perfectly well that a man as stoic and reserved as Jethro would have preferred nothing more than for her to hurry on inside and leave him alone to deal with his sudden onset of grief in private, Henrietta also knew that a person so distraught needed comfort rather than isolation. After all, she herself, had experienced a great deal of suicidal ideation upon finding herself utterly alone to deal with the untimely suicide of her Irish Twin. And while she didn’t think that Jethro would just go and try to off himself should she leave him alone, what with his character leading her to believe he would never do that to Tony, Henrietta couldn’t be completely sure of such which was more than enough motivation to convince her to stay.

“Jethro,” Henrietta breathed, refusing to exit the truck even though it had been an awkward three minutes since he’d put it into park, “I’m sorry.”

Looking as if he would very much like to flee from the suddenly oppressive atmosphere of the truck, despite having arguably nowhere to go were he to do so, Jethro sat stiffly and colored with all the needless embarrassment of a self-conscious man caught experiencing one of the more stereotypical female emotions.

“I shouldn’t have…” Jethro began, looking highly uncomfortable as he cut himself off. “I shouldn’t have made things so awkward.”

Promptly wrapping his arm in a markedly tight hug, more so to provide comfort than to prevent escape, Henrietta saddled closer to him and indulgently rested her head on his broad shoulder, knowing, as she somehow did, that Jethro was far too distraught and mortified at the moment to be wanting any eye-contact to be made.

“You didn’t make things awkward.” She compassionately assured, gently squeezing her cheek to his upper arm. “You were sharing something...special with me. And I appreciate that, I really do.”

Because as familiar as she was with playing the part of the proverbial mother-hen, having often been compelled to do so in both her youth and young adulthood, it never failed to warm her heart when she came to face with yet another individual who considered her trustworthy enough to bear witness to their pains and traumas. For, if nothing else, such unreserved trust and affection only served to further solidify for her that she was, indeed, a good person at heart.

“This time of year is always hard.” Jethro breathed, wearily closing his eyes. “I married Shannon in September and Kelly...Kelly was born in November.”

Compassionately intertwining her butter-soft fingers through his own rougher digits, Henrietta frowned in sympathy and helplessly began to wonder why it was that there was so much evil in a world meant to be created by a supposedly loving God.

“The Holiday’s must be hard for you.” She observed, already knowing it was so.

Because even if Penelope had meant her untimely end several decades ago, well before the nephew of her favorite sister had even been conceived, the sounds of Christmas carols being sung without abandon by young children never failed to produce in her some small measure of regret and longing. For, even after all these years, it sometimes felt like just yesterday that she and Pen were sneaking out of the manor to go and spy on the Protestant Christmas programs their parents so despised.
“It almost feels like a betrayal sometimes.” Jethro confessed, subconsciously squishing her fingers in his agony. “Like I shouldn’t…Like I shouldn’t be spending time with Tony around the Holidays. But,” And there he paused for a moment to compose himself, his handsome features taking on a markedly anguished air, “I know that Kelly and Shannon wouldn’t want me to alone anyways. And they know I would never…They know I would never try to replace them.”

“You’d never be able to.” Henrietta agreed, giving his calloused fingers a squeeze.

“Did…Did you lose someone, too?” Jethro inquired, finally turning his face to look at her.

Willing away the moisture that came to her eyes as she thought back upon her beloved younger sister, Henrietta swallowed harshly and found it necessary to take several sips of her hot chocolate before she was able to confidently speak.

“I had a younger sister.” She began, practically forcing the words out. “We were practically twins…We did everything together, and I mean everything.”

They had even looked eerily similar to boot, what with their only major discrepancy in facial features being the fact that Pen had somehow inherited an odd sprinkling of freckles upon her nose whilst Henrietta had not.

“What happened?”

“She hanged herself.” Henrietta whispered, stomach clenching painfully. “We were fifteen.”

Grimacing openly at such a blunt confession, as was only reasonable for someone who had not heard the story before, Jethro gave her fingers a tight squeeze but otherwise seemed unsure of what to do or say next.

“It was Christmas Eve and she went off to take a nap.” Henrietta elaborated, suddenly unable to stop herself. “But when she didn’t come downstairs in time for supper, I went to go and find her.” Pausing there to a long and shuddering breath, she then pressed onward with all the strength she possessed. “I found her in a linen closet, Jethro. With an extension cord wrapped around her neck. She was purple.”

Her pretty green eyes had been bulged out of their sockets, too, but as of that moment Henrietta just didn’t have it within her to share that most traumatizing of recollections.

“I’d give anything to be able to get that image out of my head.” Henrietta whispered, shaking her head.

“I can’t even imagine.” Jethro frowned, wrapping a strong arm about her shoulders.

Reveling in such an affectionate embrace, as they both so clearly needed each other at the moment, Henrietta swiped at the back of her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater and looked blearily up at him.

“Call into work, Jethro.” She implored. “Let’s spend the rest of the day being sad.”

“You want to be sad on purpose?” He inquired, clearly nonplussed.

“Yes.” Henrietta smiled. “It’s good for you.”
Chapter 32

Having been suddenly thrust into acting the part of Leading Agent when Gibbs oddly decided to take the rest of the day off, Tony was all but exhausted as he shuffled into his apartment that late afternoon with a bottle of beer in one hand and a limp slice of pizza in the other.

“Mama, I’m home.” He called out, immediately kicking off his muddy shoes.

Receiving only a muffled greeting in return, which was quite unusual given their shared tendency towards exuberant greetings, Tony frowned in concern and rapidly made his way through the kitchen into the living room, fully prepared to find his clumsy mother half-asleep atop the couch with a pillow dangerously pressed up against her mouth.

But while that did, indeed, turn out to be one of his more reasonable assumptions, Tony was quite put out to discover that it was not a pillow causing her responses to go mumbled, but rather the presence of Gibbs’s strong arm near her mouth as she used said appendage as a makeshift pillow.

“Anthony Angelo!” His mother gently chided, making no real move to remove herself from Gibbs’s lap. “Why on Earth are you eating!? I have a chicken in the oven!”

Hastily shoving his sorry excuse of a meal into his salivating mouth, before it could be confiscated by either mother or employer, Tony chewed meagerly a few times before mumbling out his answer with a mouth full of food.

“This is lunch.” He whined, clutching his empty stomach for emphasis.

“Oh!” His indulgent mother huffed, worry clear in her bright green eyes. “You’re going to choke! You had best chew that pizza really well, young man!”

Already struggling to do just that, as said slice of pizza had been particularly large in nature, Tony grimaced as he labored to swallow the food down and promptly collapsed into his favorite recliner once such a chore was completed.

“Why are you only now just getting lunch, Tony?” Gibbs inquired, a suspicious gleam in his eyes. “Abby didn’t talk you into writing up Tim’s reports for him, did she?”

Already having received quite a lengthy lecture after being caught doing so the first time, and particularly nasty headslap the second time, Tony vigorously shook his head in denial.

“Kate got sick so I had to send her home.” He explained. “We got a little behind, afterwards.”

“Was McGee not helping?” Gibbs interrogated, grimacing garishly as the woman using him as a pillow crawled off his lap and elbowed his gut.

Already anticipating the angry tirade McGee was going to receive if he didn’t intervene in a judicious and timely manner, Tony sat up a little straighter and sullenly began to reflect upon the fact that acting as a leading agent was, indeed, a good excuse for all the rage Gibbs experienced on a daily basis.

“McGee had to go home and change after lunch.” Tony clarified.

“And why is that?” Gibbs demanded.
“Well,” Tony frowned, gagging on the inside, “Kate got sick on him.”

And while Kate’s subsequent embarrassed tears had been more than enough to convince him that he was right in sending her home early, as a good leader needed to be compassionate as well, Tim’s horrified expression as he stood covered in projectile vomit had also been enough to earn the mortified man an extended lunchbreak. Which, of course, had left only him to work until McGee had decided to return an hour later.

“That poor girl.” Tony’s mother sighed. “I hope she feels better tomorrow.”

“Yeah, me too.” Tony agreed, yawning heavily. “It wouldn’t really be fun for anyone if Tim got puked on during his vows.”

“Knowing how nervous McGee is, Abby might be the one getting vomited on.” Gibbs remarked, only half-joking.

Sincerely hoping that such wouldn’t be the case, as Tony knew enough about Tim to know that said man would drop dead on the spot if he embarrassed himself in such a manner.

“Would you two stop jinxing the weddings?” His mother fussed, stretching across the sofa to rap on a wooden end table.

Looking more than just a little amused at such an overt display of superstitious, as well as more than just a little amorous as the stretching motion of said woman caused a few inches of her sweater to rise and reveal a portion of her stomach, Gibbs smirked and quirked a brow at his hostess.

“You can’t jinx a wedding.” He argued. “If two people are meant to get married, then they’ll get married.”

Still greatly weirded out by Gibbs’s earlier observation of his mother’s curves, as well as greatly concerned that such an action would be repeated at some point during the night, Tony frowned inwardly and quickly set about to pulling focus unto himself.

“That’s awfully romantic coming from you, Boss.” Tony joked, reasonably assured that his mother’s presence prevented all forms of violence against his person. “You must be going soft.”

“Must be the Eastside Story getting to me.” Gibbs shrugged, gesturing lazily at the television.

Immediately outraged at the very idea that his mother could do something so awful as to watch a musical without him, her only son, Tony theatrically clutched at his chest and glared weakly at his mother.

“Westside Story, Boss.” Tony corrected, still pouting at his mother. “And I cannot believe you watched it without me!”

“Calm down, Monkey.” His mother soothed. “We only watched ‘You Only Live Twice’ and ‘Casablanca’ without you.”

Deciding not to argue that such a declaration most certainly did not help her case, as those were all classics that should have been enjoyed with him, Tony focused on the argument at hand and gestured himself at the flat screen.

“I can see you stated Westside Story without me.” Tony countered, highly offended.

“Oh, relax.” His mother frowned. “The dancing hasn’t even started yet.”
Given but little satisfaction with that answer, as there was still several minutes of exemplary footage before then, Tony frowned and resolved to pout for the rest of the evening for such an egregious breach of trust.

“Wait,” Gibbs groaned, pointedly ignoring his pouting, “This is a musical?”

“No.” Tony’s mother hastily evaded. “It’s a…tragedy.”

“Delivered via song.” Tony quipped, actively conspiring against his mother.

Receiving a warning glance from both parents, as well as a raised brow from Gibbs, Tony clamped down on his tongue and began to wonder if his earlier assumptions about being safe from all headslaps was, indeed, an accurate one.

“We agreed on no musical, Hen.” Gibbs sighed, giving the guilty party a weary look.

“Oh, come on.” The blushing culprit implored, cupping his face in her hands. “I let you pick out the James Bond movie – and I didn’t even complain when you failed to pick the best Bond.”

“I think that’s subject to debate.” Gibbs erroneously defended.

Pausing a moment in her coaxing only to share a long-suffering look with Tony, as only they seemed to understand that Sean Connery was the best Bond, Henrietta shook her head and turned back to Gibbs with a fervent look in her eyes.

“You’re wrong.” She casually dismissed. “And besides, a little music with our good will be good. Haven’t you ever heard of dinner theater.”

“I went to one of those once.” Gibbs argued. “I hated it.”

Mild anger at his mother now promptly forgotten as the chance to razz his Boss came into play, Tony grinned mischievously and brought out the big guns.

“That’s because you went with Stephanie.” Tony supplied.

“You got me there.” Gibbs obliged, stubbornly refusing to take the bait.

Either oblivious to the glare her child was now receiving from her beau, or at the very least ignoring it, his mother beamed openly and kissed him on the cheek.

“So you’ll watch it with us?”

“Well, I’m kind of outnumbered, aren’t I?” Gibbs sighed, his frown not at all as severe as it might have been.

“Yes.” His mother giggled, kissing his other cheek. “But don’t you worry, you’ll soon learn to have an appreciation for cinematic masterpieces.”

Inwardly thrilled at the very thought, as Tony had spent years planting the seeds of appreciation in his boss’s brain, Tony grinned and cast his employer a very smug look.

“I’d rather appreciate supper at the moment.” Gibbs quipped, vexingly ignoring Tony.

“The food will be ready in ten minutes, Jethro. Try to hold out until then.”

Figuring that there would be no better time then the presence to quickly get himself clean, as
the work of the day had involved climbing into several dumpsters, Tony climbed to his feet and tried not to think of all the things his mother and boss might do while he was getting clean.

“I’m going to hop in the shower.” Tony announced, already stalking off.

Progress suddenly impeded by the presence of a tiny hand grabbing him by the scruff of his collar, Tony sighed and turned to give him mother an indignant look.

“You’ll do no such thing, Anthony.” She pronounced, firm yet somehow gentle as always.

“Why?” Tony demanded, expertly wriggling free of her grasp.

“Because you’re incapable of having a quick shower.” Gibbs intervened. “You’d be in there for at least twenty minutes.”

Unable to argue against such unassailable facts, but nonetheless still eager for a shower, Tony huffed and turned his pleas unto the more sympathetic inhabitant of the room.

“But I’m all gross, Mom.”

“Whining isn’t anyway to get what you want.” She retorted, remaining staunch in her stubborn decision not to hold off supper for another half hour.

“But – “

“Quit arguing with your mother.” Gibbs warned, looking dangerously close to leaving the couch.

Knowing that any further arguments would be futile, as his mother could be just as stubborn as Gibbs when it came to mealtimes, Tony sighed and slunk ungracefully to the floor in a form of protest.

“This house is a prison.” He complained.

“It’s about to be a crime scene if you don’t get your ass up off that floor.” Gibbs warned, rising to his feet.

Nowhere near foolish enough to press his luck, Tony rose quickly to his own feet and looked to his mother for assistance.

“Jethro!” She squawked, using all five feet of her body to shield her son. “Don’t say those things!”

And while Tony knew that such a mild rebuke would not lead to any sort or argument, as his mother was markedly quick to forgive those she loved, it was with a small semblance of victory that he slunk away toward the general safety of the kitchen – his tongue poked at Gibbs in initial victory up until the point that he received a heated look that promised later retribution.
Comfortably settled atop his pseudo-son’s leather sofa with Henrietta cozily snuggled up to his left side, her large mass of perfumed curls ticking his chin every time she shifted or laughed at a scene from ‘The Odd Couple,’ Gibbs surprisingly found himself able to relax for the first time in weeks. For, without all the constant visual reminders of just how ill Kate appeared to be at the moment (his number one fear being she was afflicted with a cancer of some sort), and devoid of all the reminders of his loneliness that his own home provided, the sheer mass of stress and anxiety he usually carried had seemed to lessen to a more manageable level sometime during their shared supper of chicken and potatoes. In fact, in so magnanimous a mood was he, that Gibbs even went so far as to allow the perpetually childlike Tony to use his right left leg as a pillow, said man’s absurd decision to seat himself on the floor during the movie one of the main factors behind such an unreserved disregard of personal space. Although, if Gibbs were being completely honest with himself, he would be forced to admit that Tony’s desire to snuggle up on him, too, was the primary motivator of such an endearing act. And, were he currently not dealing with a violently angry throbbing in his sore knee, the cold weather having only seemed to exacerbate such an old wound, Gibbs might have even enjoyed the familial bit of contact just as much as Tony seemed to be enjoying it at the moment.

“Tony,” Henrietta questioned, her interest in the film waning as it reached it natural climax, “Is your suit ready to go for tomorrow?”

Shifting slightly against Gibbs’s leg in a manner that seemed to suggest he had been fully asleep when the question had been asked, Tony yawned loudly and reluctantly straightened up his posture before giving answer.

“Yes, Mama.”

Seemingly oblivious to her only child’s exhaustion as concerns about the upcoming wedding-weekend began to dominate her mind, as was simply the wont for motherly women, Henrietta paused but for a moment to stretch before immediately continuing her interrogation.

“And you’re sure you’re meeting them for pictures at nine?”

Despite knowing that it was perfectly reasonable for Henrietta to harbor certain doubts when it came to the timeline of the McGee wedding, as already they had received several texts about the affair being moved back an hour and then pushed forward an hour, Gibbs couldn’t help but smile at the relentless mother-henning, such an act unfailingly serving to remind him of his own mother’s unique brand of coddling.

“Mmhmm.” Tony mumbled, his reply as soft as a whisper.

“And you remembered to pick up Tim’s shoes for him, yes?”

Receiving no answer at all in reply to her simple question, Henrietta frowned mildly in rebuke and gently nudged the back of her son’s head with the tip of her toes.

“Tony?” She coaxed. “Tim’s shoes?”

“Yes.” Tony grumbled, rubbing at his eyes. “At nine, Mama. We went tomorrow already.”

Sharing a smirk with Henrietta at such a nonsensical answer, as Tony’s sleep-talking was always a great source of entertainment for any who happened to hear it, Gibbs shifted a bit to
redistribute the younger man’s weight to his thigh, rather than his knee, and tried not to grimace when such a manipulation only made things worse.

“Hen.” Gibbs whispered, trying not to groan as his knee throbbed. “He’s asleep.”

“Am not.” Tony argued, eyes still firmly shut.

Mildly amused that his favorite agent’s stubbornness somehow managed to persist even in slumber, as it was a trait he shared with the younger man, Gibbs smirked and snaked a hand down from the sofa to tousle the dark curls resting just above his aching knee.

“Go to bed, Kiddo.” Gibbs coaxed. “You have an early day tomorrow.”

Because even if the nuptials themselves didn’t start until five in the afternoon, Tony and Kate were still apparently needed at the McGee residence by seven in the morning to help finish up some last-minute details Abby had put off until the last minute.

“I’m not tired yet.” Tony fibbed, sleepily nuzzling his face against Gibbs’s knee.

Biting down hard on his tongue to keep from cursing as a malicious pain overtook his entire leg, as well as to keep himself from headslapping his agent out of reflex, Gibbs took several deep breaths and labored to keep his voice steady as he replied.

“You’re falling asleep on my leg, Kiddo.”

“Fine.” Tony grumbled, reluctantly sitting up to rub at his eyes. “But will you at least look over my Best Man speech?”

“Of course.” Gibbs agreed, gently repositioning himself. “Now go to bed.”
Despite having been most heartily assured by Abby that the reception was due to start at five in the afternoon, even though the earlier-issued invitations had stipulated it would begin at four, Henrietta found herself shivering violently next to Jethro for a good solid hour before the wedding party finally trapezed in – their exhausted faces veritably blue from the harsh chill in the air and their movements less than graceful as they tried, and failed, to navigate their half-frozen limbs down the dimly-lit aisle. And whilst such a sight was certainly disgraceful enough, as really there was no cause for a bride to allow her wedding party to become frost-bitten, the pitiful sight of a half-frozen Victoria shivering down the aisle with her basketful of flowers most certainly was. And, if the vengeful expression showing on both Jimmy and Ducky’s usually passive faces were anything to go by, she wasn’t the only one unamused by such antics.

“Tony is going to get the flu after today.” Jethro groused, staring in concern upon the very frozen Best Man. “They should have taken pictures somewhere inside. I don’t know what the hell Abby was thinking.”

“Jethro,” Henrietta whispered, feeling her cheeks flush with color, “The Scuito’s will overhear you.”

Because even though neither one of them were even marginally related to the Bride and Groom, they had somehow secured for themselves the honor of being seated in a front pew with both the Scuito’s and McGee’s. And while such an indulgence was certainly touching, as Henrietta hadn’t even known either of the couple for longer than a few days, it went without saying that such an unasked for privilege came with a certain amount of awkwardness as, periodically, Gloria Scuito would stare at her from out of the corner of her eyes and frown.

“Don’t worry,” Elizabeth McGee whispered to her right, “They’re deaf.”

Coloring profusely at the polite reminder of the Scuito’s deafness, as really she ought not to have been so forgetful about something so rememberable, Henrietta smiled her appreciation at Elizabeth and leaned against Jethro for warmth, inwardly very relieved that neither Scuito had been able to pay witness to her temporary lapse in recollection.

“He’s going to get sick.” Jethro grumped further, chivalrously trying to warm her by rubbing her bare arm. “He needs to get himself warmed up.”

“You don’t get sick by being out in the cold, Jethro.” Henrietta breathed. “That’s an old wives’ tale.”

“Then why do you look so worried?” Jethro demanded, anxiety for Tony clearly on overdrive as he watched Ducky wrap Victoria up in the jacket of his suit.

No doubt wishing he could do exactly the same for the man he viewed as a son, Henrietta stayed her annoyance at being spoken to so gruffly and worked to assuage the fears of her good friend.

“I’m not concerned,” Henrietta shivered, “I’m annoyed.”

“Me too.” Breathed Elizabeth, face creased in concern. “One expects a certain degree of comfort at a wedding, after all.”

Whilst normally Henrietta would have found herself more than just a little shocked upon
hearing such sudden harshness from the seemingly serene woman seated to her right, she found she could be nothing other than sympathetic once she deduced the cause for such ire: such a negative feeling being borne, of course, from the beleaguered housewife’s unending concern for the cancer-ridden husband who sat beside her in abject, as well as undeniable, discomfort.

“The reception will be better.” Henrietta comforted, laying a friendly hand on the blonde woman’s shoulder.

Looking alive for the first time since seating himself in the uncushioned pew, John McGee turned his head and smiled at.

“Music does always make things better.” He agreed, nodding his head as vigorously as he was able to in his weakened state.

“Still,” Elizabeth persisted, “It isn’t right for them to make their guests sit in the cold. We offered to pay for heating.”

Understanding from several sources that the McGee’s were well-off, if not proverbially loaded, Henrietta found herself just as troubled and confused as to why neither half of the marrying couple had decided to accept such an offer.

“A bride tends to get frazzled planning her wedding.” Henrietta suggested, feeling the need to defend Abby before Jethro did.

“Well,” Elizabeth sighed, quickly deflating, “I suppose you’re right.”

And, having thusly deflated the feelings of irritation those surrounding her espoused, Henrietta smiled victoriously and returned her attentions unto the ceremony – sincerely hoping that the unification of a couple so clearly in love would serve to help her forget the hardness of the pews and the chill in the air.

To her great relief, the legal coupling of Abby and Tim did, in fact, turn out to do just that. For having only her disastrous wedding with Senior for reference, the remainder of the ceremony, whilst absurdly long, was a very welcome display as to how such an important life event ought to be carried out. In fact, so great was her rapture at seeing such a joyous coupling, that Henrietta promptly burst into unseemly tears the very moment Tim did, the abject amount of love shining in his eyes serving, most adequately, to remind her that there was, indeed, still such a thing as true love.

“Hen,” Jethro admonished, “You’re going to get me started.”

“It might do you some good.” Henrietta managed, bottom lip quivering. “Crying is good for the soul.”

“Now who’s spouting of old wives’ tales?” Jethro grumbled, suspiciously unable to meet her eyes.

Kept from asserting the fact that crying was, indeed, good for one’s health by Elizabeth and John’s prompt outbreak into happy tears as their only son was declared officially wed to a woman whose company they both enjoyed, Henrietta quickly forgot her negligible annoyance with Jethro and good-naturedly passed out tissues to both crying McGee’s and a watery-eyed Gloria.

“Save some of those for poor Sarah.” Jethro advised, watching the young college freshmen in pity as she sobbed her eyes out in front of a crowd of 300.

“I think Tony will need some, too.” Elizabeth conjectured, smiling in good humor upon the
sight of a clearly crying Tony.

“Oh hell,” Henrietta sniffled, “I’ll need to run to the store for more before the night is over.”
Having felt compelled, by factors outside his control, to lead a small congregation of wedding guests out into the relative safety and warmth of his truck to enjoy a few discreetly ordered pepperoni pizzas, Gibbs repositioned Henrietta on his lap inwardly prayed most ardently that Abby would not discover his great crime of inspiring a guest uprising. Because as much as he loved the bubbly young girl like an uncle would adore a favorite niece, the fact still remained that the venue she had selected had been dangerously dark and the food offered painfully meagre in comparison to the blood-sugar rising candy buffet.

“I feel dreadful about behaving so abominably,” Ducky fussed, “But Jimmy’s blood sugars are through the roof.”

Concerned himself for the general welfare of the Autopsy Gremlin, as he really was quite pale and sweaty after eating only a meal of pasta of candy, Gibbs frowned and raised an inquiring brow at his oldest of friends, fully prepared to ferry off the clearly ill diabetic to the nearest hospital at the drop of a hat.

“Now, Jethro.” Ducky began, clearly having read his mind. “There’s no need to spring into such dramatics. Jimmy will be just fine once the insulin kicks in.”

“Mommy told you to eat afore you left.” Victoria fussed, looking very concerned for the well-being of her sweaty daddy.

Unable to keep from smirking at the sassiness of said three-year-old, despite the arguable seriousness of the situation, Gibbs subtly hid his face in Henrietta’s hair and took a moment to recover himself before reemerging.

“I don’t know that eating beforehand would have helped matters, Toria.” Her grandfather calmly assured, plucking the toddler from her father’s lap and depositing her in his own. “Diabetes is a far more complex disease than that.”

Despite being markedly brilliant for her age, the extent of such cleverness having impressed a private school into granting her permission to start kindergarten the very moment she turned four, Victoria frowned at her grandfather’s more technical explanation and immediately sought out a more child-friendly answer.

“But Daddy’s going to be okay, right?”

“Yes, my Little Hornet.” Ducky obliged, using his thumb to swipe away some sauce from her chin. “Daddy will be just fine in a moment or two.”

Seemingly satisfied with such an answer, especially so after Jimmy repeated the same such assurances, Victoria nodded primly and promptly stole the last piece of cheesy bread right out of Gibbs hands. And, before anyone could even entertain the idea of trying to scold her for such an egregious lack of manners, the toddler grinned mischievously and shoved the half-eaten food into her mouth.

“You’re lucky you’re cute, Kid.” Gibbs grumbled, sorely put out at the loss of one of his favorite foods.

“No,” Victoria frowned, mouth still full of food, “That’s phonetics.”
“I think you mean ‘genetics,’ Honey.” John McGee gently corrected, sharing a chuckle with his wife.

Having no great love of being corrected by anyone other than her beloved Grandfather, but otherwise far too polite and well-raised to protest such treatment with a fit, Victoria huffed loudly and made a great show of turning herself around on Ducky’s lap so that she was facing out of the window rather into their faces. But, not wishing to encourage the young girl into believing any such form of protest would work to her advantage, or at least not all the time, the collective adults in the car shared a small smile at the antic but otherwise gave no verbal response that might have redeemed such a petulant action.

“But speaking of genetics,” Elizabeth frowned, “How is it that you have diabetes, Jimmy? You’re not fat at all.”

Clearly still feeling far too ill to want to do anything other than lean against his father’s shoulder, Jimmy tilted up his head and looked expectantly at his supervisor.

“Type 1 diabetes is not caused by diet, Mrs. McGee.” Ducky began. “It happens when one’s own body, for some unknown reason, choses to attack and destroy it’s insulin-producing cells.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth blushed, hiding her shame behind a greasy napkin. “Excuse me.”

“No need.” Jimmy mumbled, gradually starting to look less pale. “It’s a common misconception.”

Appearing quite relieved to have not caused any real offense, Elizabeth relaxed her prim posture for the first time that evening and moved to rest her head on her husband’s shoulder.

“You two fit together so well.” Henrietta observed with a smile. “How long have you been married?”

Exchanging looks of sheer unadulterated love, both McGee’s grinned like idiots and answered the question together as one.

“Thirty-two years.”

“And hopefully another thirty-two as well.” John added, giving his wife’s fingers a tight squeeze.

“We will be.” Elizabeth asserted, almost frantically. “We will be.”

Glancing down at the floorboards of his truck as he remembrances of his own mother’s bout with cancer flooded his brain, the result of which produced a fierce sorrow within his person, Gibbs squirmed uncomfortably and waited impatiently for either Ducky or Henrietta to change the subject – a skill both of them were highly proficient in.

“You must have gotten married young.” Henrietta asserted, not failing to detect the anguish within Elizabeth’s person.

“You could certainly say that.” John agreed, beaming openly into his wife’s troubled face. “But I knew she was the one the moment I saw her – so what would have been the point in waiting?”

Having felt very much the same way about Shannon, but forced to wait a year to wed upon her parent’s insistent, Gibbs nibbled at a close slice of pizza and hoped the taste would help him
forget the loss of his wife.

“How did you two meet?” Henrietta inquired further.

Feeling relieved as a touched expression softened the harried look on Elizabeth’s face, as he had greatly feared he would soon be dealing with tears of an uncomfortable nature, Gibbs swallowed down the lump in his throat and awaited the answer.

“I had just started my Senior year of high school,” Elizabeth recollected with a smile, “And I was eating lunch out on the grass of our campus when he walked by.”

“I had never seen anyone so pretty in all my life.” John continued, his mirth taking away some of the harshness of his illness-ravished face. “And I tripped over myself trying to sneak a better look.”

“He busted his nose right open, poor thing.” Elizabeth giggled. “But all I could think of was how handsome he looked up grinning at me, even with all that blood dripping down his face.”

“And I knew I was going to marry her the moment she smiled back.” John added. “I knew it in soul.”

“We saw each other for three weeks straight after that.” Elizabeth informed. “And on our 22nd date, he proposed.”

Having waited only a year to propose Shannon, as stipulated by her parents, Gibbs found he couldn’t help but relate to having feelings of love so strong they simply couldn’t be abated. He had felt that way for Shannon, after all. And, if he was being completely honest with himself, he was starting to feel that way for the bubbly woman seated in his lap.

“I was being shipped off to Vietnam, you see. And I couldn’t leave without making her mine. My father might have thought I was an idiot, but well, I’ve never regretted it a moment in my life.” And, turning to his wife, he added. “The only reason I survived that Godforsaken war was so that I could get back to you.”

“Oh, John.” Elizabeth cried, bottom lip quavering. “You’ve got me in tears all over again.”

As the inhabitants of the truck quieted to allow the couple a moment to themselves, Elizabeth swiped the moisture from her cheeks and John wrapped an arm about her shoulders.

“And your parents just let you marry so young?” Jimmy questioned.

“Seventeen isn’t so young – at least not back then it wasn’t.” Elizabeth defended. “And John was nearly twenty – that’s more than old enough to provide.”

“And Elizabeth was certainly kind and pretty enough.” John added. “Far too kind and pretty for me.”

“Oh, hush up, you big goon.” Elizabeth giggled. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“You love every moment of it, don’t lie.” John teased, pulling her closer to kiss her lips.

Relishing every bit in the act of affection, Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck and giggled as he ran his fingers through her long, blonde hair. And seeming to forget that there were several other people in the truck with them, this went on for quite awhile until Jimmy sneezed and brought them back into reality.
“Excuse me.” John blushed.

“How long have you two been married?” Elizabeth inquired with a glance at them, hoping to divert attention away from themselves.

“I can you’re still in the Honeymoon stage.” John asserted.

Coloring brightly as Ducky and Henrietta burst into amused giggles at the question, Gibbs squirmed and valiantly tried to answer the question in a manner that would bring the least offence.

“I – We’re – “

“What Jethro is trying to say, is that we’re not married.” Henrietta giggled, green eyes shining with mirth.

“Well, surely you’re engaged then.” Elizabeth asserted, trying to subtly sneak a peek at her ring finger.

Clearly sensing what the woman was trying to do, Henrietta lifted her hand and wriggled her notably ringless fingers in her direction.

“We’re not even dating.” Henrietta giggled. “Jethro hasn’t asked me yet.”

Receiving a rather sharp look from John at his perceived lack of responsibility, Jethro scowled and started to regret leading the small congregation into his truck for pizza.

“What the hell are you waiting for?”

“The timing.” Jethro spluttered, not at all enjoying the concept of being put on the spot.

“People always think there’s going to be more time.” John lectured. “Sometimes there just isn’t.”

Already knowing such a fact more than anyone else, for he had always hoped to have more time with Shannon and Kelly, Gibbs frowned but otherwise kept his temper, understanding that John was only wishing to help and not be condescending.

“I know.”

“Well then,” John quipped, “We ought to give you two a little privacy then.”

And with that, John opened the door nearest to him and let into the truck a blast of frigid air.

“Wait – you don’t have to go.” Jethro insisted, thrown off-guard by the sudden change in dynamics.

“The groom’s parents can’t hide forever.” Elizabeth dismissed, allowing her feeble husband to help her from the truck.

“And I had best say my goodbyes before ferrying Jimmy and Victoria home.” Ducky conspired, already gently repositioning the toddler in his grasp.

And with that, Gibbs was promptly left alone with only Victoria for company.

“Well,” Henrietta began, shifting a little awkwardly, “This…This is the opposite of a
cockblock. It’s like a…a facilitation of cock.”

Coloring brightly at the casual vulgarity, as it almost immediately brought a certain swelling to a part of his body that he would otherwise not like to be swelled when he couldn’t do anything about it, Gibbs coughed a few times and wondered whether he ought to thank or curse John McGee for abandoning him to such a fate.

“Don’t look so excited.” Henrietta teased, laying her hand dangerously close to his swollen member. “I said facilitation…not fellatio. Although, depending on how this night goes, that might be added to the agenda.”

Experiencing all the awkwardness of having a boner and no clear way to conceal it, Gibbs shifted even more and inwardly prayed that Henrietta wouldn’t be able to feel herself being poked on the thigh.

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that.” Henrietta frowned, clearly worried after mistaking his nerves for reluctance.

And, panicking and not knowing what else could be done, as Jethro knew his words would only fail him, Jethro reacted impulsively and kissed her full on the mouth – the taste of the pixie sticks she had earlier imbibed coating his tongue as she responded passionately and stuck her tongue in his mouth.

“Is this your way of asking me out, Jethro.” Henrietta panted, breaking away after several long minutes.

“Well,” Jethro grinned, sneaking a hand up her thigh, “I’ve never been good with words.

“With a kiss like that,” Henrietta purred, “You don’t need to be.”

And, having thus finished with her generous accolades, Henrietta then initiated the next kiss, promptly stealing the breath right out of his body as she wantonly slipped her fingers into the confines of his dress pants.

“Does this mean you’ll be my girlfriend?” Jethro grinned, allowing her to unbutton his pants.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Henrietta smiled, giving him a quick smooch.

Taking that as all the permission he needed to snake a hand up the skirt of her dress, Gibbs sat up straighter and edged his fingers up toward the hidden treasure, his heart throbbing at full speed as he made contact with hair and promptly realized she was wearing no underwear. But, before he could so much as do anything with the discovery, much less moan as Henrietta’s fingers touched his own organ, there was an annoyed rapping sounding at his windows.

“My niece is looking for you.” Abby’s annoyed uncle barked, shivering in his suit. “It’s time to cut the cake.”
Chapter 36

Sitting atop a stool in her son’s bathroom as Jethro gingerly worked to remove a few rouge hairpins from her hair, such a disaster being the result of her foolishly thinking that her large mass of hair could be tamed with a little work, Henrietta allowed her weary eyes to close and tried not to flinch too much whenever her boyfriend tugged to hard and parted a small section of hair from her head.

“You should have just kept your hair down.” Jethro gently rebuked, carefully placing her expensive silver pins in a small pile well away from the sink drain. “It’s prettier that way.”

“And less painful, too.” Henrietta quipped, heartily regretting her earlier decision to put her hair up into a French Twist.

Because all the pain of having clumsy and calloused fingers pulling out little snippets of hair aside, the effort in which she had put into styling her incorrigible hair had been utterly absurd in comparison to the negligible amount of effort Abby had put into making certain her guests were comfortable, if not well-fed, at her reception. Because garish amounts of candy and an obscenely gorgeous venue aside, more than just a few guests had left early after they found they could tolerate neither their hunger nor the chill any longer. And, were she not reasonably sure of her judgment of Jimmy and Ducky’s good-spirited nature, Henrietta would have not been surprised at all to find that they had reclaimed their gifts once the cake had been cut and etiquette allowed for them to finally take their leave and hurry home to get Victoria into a warm bath.

“I’m trying to be gentle.” Jethro frowned, a small semblance of guilt creeping into his eyes. “But I’m not used to dealing with curls.”

“You’re quite all right, Jethro.” Henrietta promptly assured. “I’m just a bit grumpy is all.”

For even with their impromptu little pizza-party halfway through the wedding, during which time she had been able to enjoy a full two slices of pepperoni pizza, Henrietta still found herself quite hungry and irritable as a result. And while such a minor inconvenience was usually dealt with maturely by most adults and youths, such was not the case for her or anyone else sharing even a portion of her DNA.

“Can’t say I blame you.” Jethro grumbled, working to free from her hair the last of her pins. “That reception was a joke.”

Sharing much the same sentiments, as lack of food and heat had not been the only genuine grievance aired that night by the McGee’s endless amount of guests, Henrietta nodded her assent and quickly regretted the action when a large hank of hair was unceremoniously pulled as a result.

“Poor Sarah.” Henrietta fussed, keeping perfectly still. “She must have tripped at least a dozen times in all that darkness.”

“Yeah.” Jethro concurred, carefully manipulating a loop of hair free from its bondage. “I don’t know if purple lights were the best choice for an evening reception.”

But, not at all one to harshly disparage the young woman he so clearly thought of as a niece, Jethro then promptly added: “McGee should have talked her out of it.”

Understanding as only fellow women did that a reception was in full control of the bride, barring only a select few cases, Henrietta raised a perfectly groomed brow at such a ridiculous
assertion but otherwise made no real efforts to disabuse her new boyfriend of such a notion - knowing, as she did, that any further condemnation of Abby’s negligence, no matter how mild such a rebuke might be, would only prompt him to rise to the young woman’s defense in a manner that might lead to an unnecessary quarrel betwixt themselves.

“Abby looked very beautiful.” Henrietta evaded, resorting to flattery to change the subject without detection.

Finally wriggling free the last of her pins from the tangle ensnaring it, Jethro grinned victoriously and placed it with all the others.

“She wasn’t the only one who looked beautiful tonight.” Jethro murmured in her ear, wrapping his strong arms about her tiny frame.

Indulgently leaning back against him, and immediately lamenting the fact that their jarring height disparity allowed for her head to reach only sternum, Henrietta placed her softer hands atop his more calloused ones and smiled wickedly.

“You know, Jethro, I do believe we have some unfinished business to attend to in your truck.”

Immediately feeling the full effect of her words as something notably hard poked her in the back, Henrietta leaned even further back into his inviting embrace and spread her legs a bit, sincerely hoping that Jethro would understand the meaning hidden behind such an action and that a little satisfaction, on either one of their parts, could be reached that evening. Because, were she to be forced to spend yet another day without either giving or receiving relief from the sexual tension betwixt them, Henrietta was all but sure she would have to break out one of her more intimidating toys to deal with those feelings.

“Hen,” Jethro breathed, the name resembling more of an anguished groan than anything else, “Must you tease me?”

“I wasn’t.” Henrietta promptly assured, spreading further her legs. “I am being perfectly serious.” And, to further drive her point across, she freed one arm confining his embrace to her waist and moved it to touch the sign of his arousal. “I don’t know how much more this tension I can take, Jethro, and I suggest we do something about it.”

This time moaning aloud at such a cheeky declaration, as no doubt he was also on the very edge of sex-deprived insanity, Jethro closed his eyes in rapture but promptly stiffened upon hearing a sneeze outside the door and lost the swelling in his pants.

“We’ll do something about it soon,” Jethro assured, sounding very strained, “But not now. Not with Tony – “

Cut off from what he was about to say by the very arrival of the person who had so vexingly interrupted their imminent bathroom jaunt, Jethro sighed bereavedly but otherwise concealed his irritation in an admirable fashion as his favorite agent waltzed into the bathroom with a plate full of French Fries.

“I thought you might still be hungry, Mama.” Tony offered, stepping further into the room.

And, thus declared, Tony promptly seated himself atop the closed lid of the toilet and began to nibble at the still steaming-hot fries he had cooked, his nonchalance in which he did so suggested much heartily that he had either failed to noticed to his mother’s spread legs upon arrival or, instead,
had witnessed such an awkward display but was nonetheless so gifted an actor he was able to show no outward signs of such. And while Henrietta was indeed as liberal with sex as one person could be, she found she could not help but pray it had been the former rather than the latter which had prompted such unaffected casualness in her son.

“Give me one of those fries.” Henrietta sighed, figuring that if she could not be satisfied by Jethro than food was, of course, the second best thing.
Chapter 37

Despite having been given no forthright admission by Kate that she desired for anyone to take over the roles and duties of the biological parents who were currently choosing to protest her wedding by refusing to play a part in it, Gibbs found that his sole female agent seemed to relish in the motherly attentions Henrietta was currently bestowing upon her person. For not only did she finally crack a smile when the older woman shared with the story of how Senior got so drunk at the reception he shat his pants on the way to their Honeymoon, so too did Kate gradually come to relax the more Henrietta fussed and fretted over such last-minute details like the proper arrangement of a cathedral veil and the suitability of a corseted back being tied so tight that a bride couldn’t possibly hope to breath properly in her gown. And even though he, himself, received no smiles or words of appreciation for the roles he played in keeping away undesired guests from the dressing room and acting the part of an errand boy throughout that early morning, Gibbs knew Kate well enough to know that she appreciated his assistance all the same.

“Oh, Katie! My God, do you look gorgeous!” Henrietta repeated for the fifth time that morning as she meticulously readjusted the veil resting atop Kate’s head. “Like something right out a magazine!”

Although Gibbs could honestly claim to have never once in his life looked at a bridal magazine, even with his current ownership of three disastrous marriages, he knew enough about aesthetics to appreciate the fact that Kate did, indeed, look as if she had just been prepared for some high-priced magazine shoot. For not only did said young woman possess the golden ratio of proportions all women sought to achieve, her hourglass figure enviable indeed, so too did the nervous future-bride espouse a certain facial beauty reminiscent of several former Hollywood starlets.

“So pretty!” Abby echoed, face all aglow with genuine joy for her friend. “I’m almost jealous!”

“You’d think she was someone famous!” Siobhan Walsh agreed, her Irish accent thicker and less decipherable than that of her elder brother’s. “It’s no wonder Seamus picked you!”

Apparently in full agreement with her eldest sister, judging by the wide grin on her cherubim face, the youngest of the Walsh sisters rapturously nodded her agreement and muttered a compliment of her own in Irish – the toddler being far too young yet to have even begun to learn English in school. But, not at all stymied by such an occurrence, as Kate had been quite diligent in learning to speak and understand her intended’s native language, the indulgent bride smiled sweetly and responded to Sheridan in a similarly sweet fashion.

“Ten minutes to go!” Sarah McGee promptly announced, hastily trying to waggle Solomon Walsh back into the tie the baby had inexplicably managed to remove. “If anyone has to go potty, go now.”

Allowed a place of honor in Kate’s bridal party simply due to the fact that anyone who met the sweet-natured girl inevitably fell in love with her person, Sarah had selflessly taken it upon herself to repay the kindness by acting the part of unofficial child-minder so that the remainder of the bridesmaids would not have to trouble themselves with chasing after three energetic flower girls and a heartily confused ringbearer. A role the young women played quite well, as even the headstrong Victoria seemed more inclined to obey then usual.

“Now little lassie,” Began Shannon, looking quite firmly at Victoria, “Remember, you got to help the little ones if they get confused.”
Not at all amused at being addressed in so irreverent a manner, and seemingly just as baffled by the indecipherable thickness of the woman’s accent, Victoria frowned deeply and immediately looked to Gibbs for assistance.

“She’s reminding you to help Sophie and Sheridan if they get confused.” He promptly translated.

“But all they have to do is throw flower petals.” Victoria quipped, keeping a firm hold on Sophie’s hand so that Sarah could replace the floral crown she had ripped off.

“Not everyone has been in half-a-dozen weddings this year.” Gibbs gently reminded.

But, if he was hoping that such sage wisdom would put a temporary end to the toddler’s proclivity to debate any sort of matter, Gibbs was sorely mistaken.

“That’s not my fault.” Victoria defended, releasing Sophie once the crown was replaced and secured with pins. “Tell Kate or Abby to have a baby.”

Opting not to share his opinion that such an action would only result in him being faced with a trip to HR, and perhaps a subsequent shunning from both scandalized women, Gibbs sighed and rubbed at his temples, thinking how best to change the subject before Victoria’s desire for a sister made itself known by the little girl sharing the intimate details of her parent’s newly-enlivened sex life.

“I think the stork is far too busy with Siobhan to be bothering with anyone else.” Sheila hastily intervened, gesturing merrily at her sister’s slightly swollen abdomen.

“Babies don’t come from the stork.” Victoria argued, not at all amused to be so patronized. “They come from an ooderous.”

Gasping loudly at such an unrestrained declaration, even though it was inarguably true, Sarah McGee colored brightly and looked ready to faint.

“Good Heavens,” The young woman scolded, “Wherever do you hear such vulgar things!?”

Clearly not understanding what the word vulgar meant, but otherwise deciphering that it was not a pleasant thing judging from the look on her babysitter’s face, Victoria scowled and rose admirably to the defense of Ducky.

“From my Grampa.” She sassed. “And he knows everything.”

“Oh,” Sheila guffawed, clutching at her heart, “This one is a little hellion, isn’t she?”

Promptly pushing away Sarah’s hands from her ears, Victoria stomped her little foot and stuck her nose in the air.

“I’m not a hellion.” She argued, crossing her arms against her chest. “I’m a Capricorn.”

Instinctively sensing a peace-shattering tantrum approaching, and subsequently wishing to avoid such a delay, Henrietta promptly fled Kate’s side and hurried over to the enraged toddler with a pacifying smile on her face.

“Toria.” Henrietta hummed, making use of her nickname. “Let me put a little glitter in her hair.”
Immediately thrilled at the concept of coming into contact with glitter, something she was no longer allowed to do after a disastrous evening at home had resulted in all her father’s clothing being coated in an angry sprinkle of bright pink glitter, Victoria all but forget her wroth with the adults in the room and moved herself to sit at Henrietta’s feet. And, sensing that something very important was about to happen with the eldest of their little trio, both Sophie and Sheridan exchanged conspiratorial looks before making a beeline to Henrietta as well.

“Kate,” Sheila questioned, upon seeing that all the children were suitably distracted and not like to cause any chaos, “I’m walking with Tony, yes?”

Looking away from her conversation with Abby to answer the question, Kate immediately frowned upon seeing Sheila’s amorous expression.

“Yes, but why?” Kate answered, feeling all the awkwardness of witnessing her future sister-in-law paying homage to a gay man’s preferences.

“Well,” Sheila asked, pulling from her purse four different bottles, “What sort of perfume does he like?”

Coloring slightly at the concept of outing her friend, as usually Tony was present and willing to do so himself in such situations, Kate fidgeted with the bouquet in her hand and looked to Gibbs for assistance.

“He prefers cologne.” Gibbs hinted, quirking a brow.

“Oh!” The three eldest Walsh sisters squealed, looking absurdly delighted at the news.

“We’ll set him up with Declan, then!” Shannon decided, grinning widely from ear to ear.

Kept from interjecting into the conversation that Tony already had his eyes set on somebody else, if not by the speed in which the women conversed then by the volume, Gibbs sighed wearily and wondered what it was about gay men that made women behave so absurdly. Because, as far as he knew, women were never so keen to set their straight male friends up with their friends and family.

“Yes,” Siobhan exclaimed theatrically, “Do Declan a world of good, that would.”

“Let him forget all about that British bastard, it would.” Sheila agreed.

Long since given up trying to conceal from the children all the swearing going on around them, as she had only two hands and four small children to mind, Sarah sighed in defeat and began to refocus her attentions unto keeping her charges from eating anything that stain their good clothes. A Herculean task, thought Gibbs, as Abby had been negligent enough to bring in a large pack of chocolate candies to snack on whilst getting dressed.

“Grampa says the British are dirty colonizers.” Victoria pipped, assisting Sarah in her endeavors by slapping Sophie’s hands away from the candy.

“Your grandfather is a wise man, Lassie.” Sheila agreed, stooping down to place Kate’s heels on her feet. “It’s best you mind him.”

Kept from asserting that she most certainly did listen to everything her favorite person in the world said by a harried knocking sounding on the door, and the subsequent announcement that there was only five minutes to go until the procession started, Victoria swelled suddenly with energy and renewed her efforts into assisting Sarah with making certain the younger children were presentable
and relaxed before making their big debut.

“Five minutes.” Kate repeated, rising swiftly to her feet before promptly reseating herself atop the stool. “Five minutes.”

“Kate,” Abby frowned, flying immediately to her side, “Are you going to be alright?”

Markedly pale and beginning to tremble, the suddenly-nervous bride swallowed loudly but otherwise nodded vigorously in her attempts to convince herself, as well as the room, that all was well.

“Need a bit of whiskey?” Shannon questioned, pulling from betwixt her breasts a small flask of the aforementioned beverage.

“No.” Kate promptly dismissed, fingers flying immediately to her belly. “Thank you.”

“She don’t need to be barfing her way down the aisle, you eejit.” Sheila rebuked, stealing from her sister’s hand the silver flask and throwing it in her own purse. “Haven’t you got the sense you were born with?”

Turning a bit green at the mention of vomit, and looking dangerously close to bursting into nervous tears, Kate began to nervously pick at her bridal bouquet as the sister’s squabbled and balked when Abby tried to pry her trembling fingers away from the pink roses.

“Kate,” Abby hummed, finally able to save the flowers, “Take a deep breath.”

Doing exactly as bid by her maid-of-honor, Kate sucked in a greedy breath and held it for several moments before finally releasing it, the end result of such thankfully being that the nervous young bride suddenly looked far less green and sweaty. But before Abby could so much as suggest she taken yet another deep breath, much less return the negligibly damaged bouquet to her friend’s hand, their was a rap on a door and a very stern order that the procession begin – leaving the very conflicted Abby to reluctantly take her leave of Kate after planting a sloppy kiss on her flushed cheek.

“My father isn’t coming, is he?” Kate asked, watching sadly as Siobhan took off after Abby moments later.

Having been sulking quietly in a corner as the rest of the bridal party worked to pamper and reassure Kate before her inevitable jaunt down the aisle, such a protest being the sure result of her having not been designated maid of honor, Rachel finally turned from her self-imposed exile and addressed her younger sister with a patronizing scowl.

“Dad doesn’t agree with the wedding, Kate. Of course, he isn’t going to walk you down the aisle.” And having thus delivered that mean-spirited blow, Rachel then added. “I don’t know why you thought he would.”

Coming from a family that greatly resembled the Brady Brunch without all the children, Sarah gasped at such a cruel remark and looked as if Rachel had just uttered the proverbial and detested ‘F-word’ in front of the children.

“Because he’s her father.” Sarah automatically defended, outrage on Kate’s behalf causing the young girl to forget her meekness. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Spared what would surely be a very scathing response from Rachel as yet another Walsh brother rapped on the door and declared it time to march, Sarah lost of the tension in body and
immediately set about to soothing a now decidedly-frazzled Kate.

“I’ll go get Daddy.” Sarah quickly offered, already moving to step out of her heels. “He’ll be happy to walk you – “

Desperately using a tissue to keep any amount of mascara from escaping her lashes and running down her cheeks, Kate blinked rapidly several times and immediately dismissed Sarah’s suggestion with one firm, yet calm, word.

“No.”

Not at all familiar with being so stymied when it came to helping others, as Sarah was a sweetheart through and through, the young woman vibrated anxiously before landing on yet another well-intended idea.

“Well, what about Timmy?” She offered, still unable to break from the habit of referring to her brother with so childish a nickname.

“Tim is already in the wedding party.” Kate reminded, looking close to breaking down.

“But Tony is the best man.” Sarah refuted. “Nobody will notice if Timmy is gone.”

Thinking for himself that it was a very good idea, as Tim had only been added to the wedding party last minute on the virtue of him being the only one willing to march with a woman so unpleasant as Rachel, Gibbs made to voice his approval of the idea only to be jabbed unceremoniously in the ribs by a harried Henrietta.

“It’ll throw the numbers off.” Kate dismissed, keeping in mind her future husband’s strict adherence to superstition. “Just go – you’ll throw the procession off. Please.”

“Fine,” Sarah frowned, “But I’m going to spill wine on your father tonight.”

And with that solemn avowal for future vengeance thus declared, Sarah stalked out of the dressing room with a great deal of reluctance, clearly not at all keen on leaving behind anybody so clearly distraught but not wishing, either, to exacerbate the problem by further irritating the bride by throwing off the carefully timed procession.

“Alright, Girlies.” Henrietta spoke, breaking the tense silence of the room. “This is your time to shine.”

Nearly reverberating with all the energy a social butterfly could contain, Victoria squealed loudly and impatiently dragged a more hesitant Sheridan and Sophie out of the room, their mild protests going all but ignored as the older girl ordered them to smile and walk pretty.

“Okay, Solomon.” Kate announced, rising unsteadily on her feet to tend to the confused baby. “Go follow the girlies and give this box to Seamus.”

And then, seeming to remember her folly, Kate immediately repeated the same directions in Irish.

“Mus!” Solomon cried, looking very thrilled at the concept of coming into contact with the elder brother he had not seen since said man had taken his leave of Ireland. “Mus!”

“Yes!” Kate nodded enthusiastically, hesitantly gifting him the ring box. “To Mus!”
Seeming not to be the only woman in the room to sense the folly of entrusting an expensive emerald ring into the hands of a baby who had only just learned to walk, Henrietta took charge and made the swift decision to act as a guide for the infant.

“I’ll make sure Solomon makes it down the aisle.” Henrietta promised, gently taking the little boy’s hand to steer him from the room.

And with that decision thusly made, Gibbs found himself in the slightly uncomfortable position of being left alone with a sensitive bride who had just been unceremoniously shafted by her father. But, rather than allow such awkward feelings to prompt him to flee the room, Gibbs remained steady for the sake of his agent and decided, then and there, to do what needed to be done. Because even if he didn’t love Kate like he loved Tony, he still cared for her as deeply as he cared for any of his other agents. And as a result, he was damned if he was going to let a couple of malignant narcissists put a damper on her special day.

“C’mon, Kate.” Gibbs coaxed, holding out a hand to the distraught bride.

“What are you doing, Boss?” Kate inquired, frowning in confusion. “You need to go and find your seat before – “

“Kate,” Gibbs patiently interrupted, “I’m not leaving one of my agents behind.”

Tearing up anew as she took in the magnitude of such words, as coming from a person as reserved and stoic as Gibbs they were exceedingly rare and precious, indeed, Kate allowed a few rogue tears to slip down her cheeks before hastily swiping them away and rising to accept his arm.

“Thank you, Boss.” She whispered, clearly far too overwhelmed to say anything more.

“I take care of my own, Kate.” Gibbs responded, his own throat suspiciously tight. “Just remember that.”
Chapter 38

Having been forced, by sheer necessity and nothing else, to seat herself alone nearby the unwelcoming persons of Margaret and Joseph Todd after Jethro had inexplicably failed to show up and join her before the procession began, Henrietta squirmed uncomfortably atop the cushionless pews and wondered just how noticeable her antics would be if she gave into the temptation to duck across the aisle and join the friendlier Walsh side of the congregation. Because if she had to endure yet another insufferable minute of the chronically unhappy Margaret mumbling to her husband about how unseemly the rose-pink bridesmaid dresses were, or play any further witness to the wrinkled woman’s endless diatribes about all the reasons it was not appropriate for her youngest daughter to wear white during her nuptials, Henrietta was all but certain she wouldn’t be able to refrain from slapping the miserable woman – something she very much did not wish to do on the grounds that such an act would only pull focus away from the real star of the hour.

Luckily for Margaret’s sake, as well as for the well-being of her sycophantic husband, Jethro discreetly slipped into their pew seconds later, his stubbly cheeks still slightly colored by all the adrenaline his earlier act of heroism had inflected upon his more reserved personality. And, feeling quite sympathetic for her easily embarrassed boyfriend, as well as quite amorous toward his person after such a touching display of affection for his agent, Henrietta leaned heavily against him in a show of solidarity and promptly kissed his cheek.

"Jethro, that was so sweet of you." She whispered, making no move to remove the red smear of lipstick from his cheeks.

Magnanimously opting to ignore the palpable amounts of rage radiating directly off of Joseph Todd’s pallid body, as well as the visceral stank-eye Margaret was sending his way, if not for their sakes then for Kate, Jethro stared pointedly ahead at the ceremony and smiled modestly as he wrapped a strong around about her bare shoulders.

"It was nothing." Jethro mouthed back, careful not to let his strong voice echo. "I’d do anything for my agents."

Not at all doubting the veracity of such an earnest statement, as she had witnessed several instances of her boyfriend behaving quite selflessly when it came to assisting and comforting all his underlings in their personal lives, Henrietta frowned in mild rebuked but nonetheless kept her voice steady as she set about chastising her partner for such undeserved modesty.

"It was not nothing." Henrietta scolded, cheekily ignoring the sound of someone shushing her from several pews back. "It was beautiful. And," Added she, practically breathing into his rapidly reddening ear, "I intend to show you just how much that turned me on later tonight."

Groaning loudly at such an unexpected verbal assault, and promptly drawing several pairs of angry and scandalized eyes unto himself, Jethro turned as bright and red as her lipstick and hastily, as well as irreverently, plopped a thick Bible unto his lap.

"Henrietta!" He reproached, still quite red. "We’re in church."

"Not for long." Replied she, more out of the desire for friendly banter than anything else.

"This is a Catholic ceremony." Jethro mildly retorted, cleverly forestalling any further argument by stubbornly turning his eyes forward.
All-too-promptly reminded that they would both be rigorously confined to their hard pew for at least another hour, if not more, Henrietta frowned openly her displeasure for all religious services and cursed whatever fools thought it conducive to attentive congregants to make their seating arrangements so uncomfortable and splintery. For, if it were up to her, she would make all but certain to provide adequate comfort to her guests before issuing forth the decree that her proverbial flock must gather in a dusty-room every Sunday for the rest of their lives. But, as it was, she was neither in charge of a congregation nor inclined at all to garner one, as her boisterous and loving spirit prevented such a stifling occupation from ever being at the forefront of her desires or aspirations. And so, with that slightly irreverent thought thusly dismissed from her mind, Henrietta turned her focus back to the ceremony on hand and smiled anew at the sight, her worth with the elder Todd’s and discomfort with the splinters in her ass all but forgotten as she took in the sight of two people very much in raptures about the idea of soon being married to one another.

“I require and charge thee both, as you stand in the presence of God before whom the secrets of all hearts are disclosed, that having duly considered the holy covenant you are about to make, you do now declare before this company your pledge of faith, each to the other.” Intoned the jovial and elderly Father O’Malley. “Be well assured that if these solemn vows are kept inviolate, as God’s Word demands, and if steadfastly you endeavor to do the will of you heavenly Father, God will bless your marriage, will grant you fulfillment in it, and will establish your home in peace.”

Pausing there a moment to allow the Americans in the congregation to decipher his accent-garbled speech, Father O’Malley smiled serenely out into audience before launching into his well-rehearsed diatribe once again.

“Seamus Barney Walsh,” Continued he, “Wilt though have Caitlyn Elizabeth Todd to be thy wedded wife, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her and keep her, in sickness and in health; forsaking all others? Keep thee only unto her so long as ye both shall live?”

Having help up reasonably well until that part of the ceremony, the only outright signs of her nerves being a bit of paleness, Kate promptly dissolved into a fit of overwhelmingly grateful tears when her soon-to-be husband passionately scooped up her trebling hands and kissed them before making known his answer.

“I will.”

Eagerly accepting a tissue from the ever-prepared Jethro as she watched such a loving display in fits of rapture and adoration, Henrietta dabbed hastily at her eyes before the mascara could streak her cheek and bit down hard on her tongue to garner a bit of control over herself.

“Caitlyn Elizabeth Todd, wilt though have Seamus Barney Walsh to be thy wedded husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love him, comfort him, honor him and keep him, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep thee only unto him so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will.” Kate avowed, bottom lip all aquiver.

Allowing the emotional bride a few moments to dab at her eyes with the handkerchief Abby had readily supplied from within the confines of her bouquet, Father O’Malley mumbled something beneath his breath to the anxious bride and was promptly rewarded for all his efforts with a small, yet face-brightening, smile.

“Caitlyn and Seamus will now exchange their vows.” Father O’Malley declared, once the silken handkerchief had been returned to its proper owner.
Having earlier resembled a man on the brink of pissing himself, wedding-jitters no doubt being the harbinger of such relentless fidgeting, Seamus threw the whole congregation off-guard by suddenly coming alive and returning to his usual spirited result as he accepted such a request with renewed passion – his desire to be wed to the self-proclaimed love his life clearly having worked great wonders in causing him to forget, at last, his concern that something might go wrong during the ceremony.

“I, Seamus, take you Katie, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Suitably recovered enough to respond with a respectable amount of coherence, even despite the copious amount of tears still welled up within her eyes, Kate blinked rapidly several times but otherwise made her way through the following vows without incidence.

“I, Caitlyn, take you Seamus, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Seemingly satisfied with the amount of sincerity both halves of the couple emitted, Father O’Malley beamed openly upon his young charges for several long moments before finally deciding to move the ceremony along.

“I will now bless the rings.” The smiling priest announced, happily accepting the rings from a very giddy Tony.

“The wedding ring,” Began the freckled clergy, “Is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, signifying to all, the uniting of this man and woman in holy matrimony, through the grace of Jesus Christ, our Lord.” And, pausing there a moment only to sip at a bit of water, he quite happily continued onward with his sermon. “Bless, O Lord, the giving of these rings, and they who wear them that they may abide in thy peace, and continue in they favor; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Watching in near rapture as Seamus solemnly accepted the newly blessed jewelry with steady fingers, Henrietta squeezed Jethro’s fingers in her own and silently thanked whatever Gods there might be in existence that the ceremony had, for all intents and purposes, gone exactly as it ought to have.

“In token and pledge our loyalty, friendship, and love, with this ring I thee wed, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

And though Henrietta was fully enraptured in the ongoing display of love being shown before her very eyes, she found her concentration being slightly challenged as it promptly became necessary for her to nudge her non-Catholic boyfriend in the ribs to remind him that a chorusing ‘Amen’ was required after such a scene.

“In token and pledge of our loyalty,” Began Kate, fingers trembling but voice firm, “Friendship and love, with this ring I thee wed, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Once more finding it necessary to remind Jethro of his manners with a nudge to the ribs, as they had already offended a great many number of guests by their earlier whispering, Henrietta frowned in mild rebuke but otherwise soon forgave her negligent boyfriend on the grounds that he had been born and raised a Baptist.
“Let us now more unto intercessory prayers.” Father O’Malley declared, his face all aglow with the pride that must surely accompany a successful ceremony. “If anyone gathered here today wishes to make known their desire for intercession on behalf of the newly wed couple, then let speak now, before the eyes of the Lord.”

Greatly relieved that the ceremony seemed to be coming to an end, as an insatiable amount of hunger had long ago began to assail her alongside the soreness in her arse, Henrietta straightened out the skirt of her dress in preparation to take her leave of the church, wishing to be one of the first ones out so that she might not become trapped in the endless throng of congregants who might, given past experience, absurdly chose to clog up the aisles so that they might mingle and chat without any regards to those who had no real desire to do so. But before she could so much as gesture to Jethro that he should also prepare himself, as she had no major qualms about leaving him behind to face the crowd should he tarry, Margaret through the entire ceremony off kilter as she stood up dramatically and shamelessly interrupted a sweet intercessory prayer from an elderly member of Walsh side of the congregation.

“I have a protest!” The indignant woman squawked, wrinkled face all aflame with delusional fervor. “A big one, too!”

Having found herself promptly flabbergasted by such an unseemly display of envy and wrath, Henrietta found that her reaction came far too late to prevent the initial outburst from the elder Todd. But, not wishing to allow such a lapse in her self-imposed duty as substitute mother to go on continued, Henrietta soon acted swiftly and made to yank the impetuous woman back down into the pew by her skirt, only to find the material of such a dress far to silky and slippery to allow for any notable success in such a maneuver.

“A prayer of intercession is not a protest.” Father O’Malley rebuked, his former jovial expression taking on a very stormy edge. “Do not mistake the one for the other.”

Seeming to have no sense of shame whatsoever, or decency, Margaret stuck her nose up into the air and that snub and proceeded to continue making a fool of herself.

“Well,” She huffed, “I have an objection, then!”

Staying what was sure to have been Seamus’s angry outburst at the woman with a steady hand upon his shoulder, as well as comforting a mortified Kate with a grasping of her hand, Father O’Malley glowered powerfully at the tantruming woman and refused to give her any real leeway in which she might cause anymore mischief than she already had.

“Kate and Seamus are already married in the eyes of our Lord.” He declared. “There will be no objections.”

“But this is ridiculous!” Margaret snapped. “Kate isn’t even a proper virg – “

It was only that particular point in time, wherein Mrs. Todd seemed determined to out her daughter as unchaste before the priest who had married just married her, that Victoria decided she had heard all she was willing to hear about one of the few women she idolized and adored. And so, thus decided, the headstrong toddler jumped to stand boldly atop her pew, and hollered loud for all to hear: “WE LOVE KATE! WE LOVE KATE! WE LOVE KATE!”

And, not at all one to feel any sort of embarrassment, Tony heartily joined into the chanting with all the gusto of one protesting a great injustice, his green eyes all aglow with righteous indignation as he carried on the battle-cry and prompted the vast majority of the willing congregation to join in on such a righteous crusade.
And, so it was, that the whole church echoed loudly with the rigorous defense of the slighted bride, the very windows and floors themselves reverberating with all the energy and passion in which such an honorable act provoked.

If Joseph and Margaret Todd just so happened to be tripped on their shameful retreat from the church, well, Henrietta was all but certain she hadn’t witnessed Director Vance’s boot being the culprit of such a crime. Nor, she reflected, did the mirthful expression on Father O’Malley’s face have *anything* to do with such timely retribution.
Despite the evening’s reception being far from over, not in the slightest, Henrietta still found herself loyally seated by her boyfriend’s side at a small little table tucked away into one of the more private enclaves of the beautiful ballroom, her earlier and temporary irritation at having received only three requests to dance from Jethro, by that point, all but forgotten as said man had, eventually, confessed that his bad knees had been troubling greatly since that morning. But, rather than ruin what was rapidly turning out to be a perfect wedding by taking for themselves an early leave, something neither one of them was inclined to do, Jethro subsequently dismissed all suggestions that they head home and valiantly sucked up his discomfort as tolerably well as he was able to and settled, instead, for passing the remainder of the evening with a few shared beers with his girlfriend and whoever else happened to stop by and chat with them. Which, given the proclivity toward kindness the Walsh family seemed imbued with, was a staggering amount of random individuals – each of those fine people coming along to them in a randomly-timed procession that seemed to become drunker and far less graceful the longer the evening stretched on.

“I haven’t had this much fun in a while, Jethro.” Henrietta dreamily sighed, head firmly rested against her boyfriend’s broad shoulders. “I love weddings.”

Because even if her own nuptials had been a disastrous affair, and nothing short of a tragedy, it still warmed her heart to pay witness to other couples finding happiness and bliss in weddings of their own.

“It’s been a fun day.” Jethro wearily agreed, his usual lack of eloquence exacerbated by the throbbing in his knee. “And you look absolutely beautiful in that dress.”

Flushing brightly at such an unreserved compliment, as it always touched her deeply to be praised by those who wished for her happiness as a result rather than her body, Henrietta beamed openly into the face of her boyfriend and shivered in pleasure when he slowly moved his head to kiss her full on the lips. An act of love, which unprompted and unexpected, was most heartily retuned with equal amounts of passion as she expertly maneuvered herself from her own chair and unto the lap her boyfriend so that might better kiss him without having to stretch so obscenely and also run the risk of jostling his irritated knee.

“I do hate to interrupt you two lovebirds,” Hamish quipped, taking her recently vacated seat with no small amount of regret, “But Kate is about to the throw the bouquet soon and I need your assistance.”

Reluctantly parting her lips from Jethro in what seemed to be a mercilessly reoccurring pattern of interrupted passions, Henrietta frowned a bit petulantly for a moment but otherwise remained decently civil after spinning about on her boyfriend’s lap to face the newest arrival to their exclusive table. Unfortunately for Hamish, however, Jethro was nowhere near as inclined to be so forgiving given the soreness of his knee and his growing impatience after having endured nearly a full week of seemingly nonstop cockblocking.

“And you want us to keep the women away so you can catch it?” Jethro growled, a notable edge to his voice.

Thankfully taking no real umbrage at the unsavory tone in which was addressed, as said man was far too serene and jovial an individual to give into such a childish and vain temptation, Hamish smiled indulgently at his boyfriend’s best friend and pulled from the pocket of his dress shirt a shining silver ring.
“Not quite.” Hamish grinned, holding up the silver oval so that they might all have a better view of its beauty and quality.

Despite being perfectly aware of the fact that the topic which they were now discussing was most certainly one meant to be kept under the strictest of confidences, at least for the next several moments or so, Henrietta found to her subsequent and vast embarrassment that she just couldn’t contain her excitement at the sight of the jewelry and, as a result, squealed loudly with all the gusto and lack of restraint of a toddler. And, though she had not meant to cause any significant trouble by expressing her unrestrained joy in response to such a reveal, it was to her great chagrin that she promptly realized her energetic squawking had provoked several people, including Ducky, to look over at their table with an undisguised air of nosiness and, for the latter, an air of great suspicion. Which was, admittedly, quite a dangerous outcome when a great deal of secrecy was called for in order to secure the success of such an imminent engagement. In fact, had it not been for Jethro and his characteristic quick-thinking, the whole affair might have soon met its demise at the hands of a clearly and very curious Medical Examiner. Luckily for Hamish, as well as for the soon-to-be-surprised Ducky, their Marine friend had convincingly managed to feign a choking fit that was, of course, subsequently rectified by a few hearty slaps on the back from Hamish.

“Sorry.” Henrietta cringed, hastily shooing away one of Seamus’s eager-to-assist surgeon colleagues.

“It’s quite alright, Love.” Hamish heartily assured, gradually regaining his calm composure once the danger of an untimely discovery had passed. “But here’s what I need you two to do for me; when Kate gets ready to toss the bouquet, I need you to make sure that Ducky is near her.”

“What for?” Jethro demanded, a tad harsher than necessary. “You’re not planning to propose at Kate’s reception, are you?”

Uncomfortable with such a thought herself, although nowhere near as indignant as her boyfriend, Henrietta pursed her lips and pondered how best to politely inform the overexcited Hamish that he was very much in danger of committing one of the most grievous faux-paus in all of existence. But before she could so much as land upon a satisfactory solution, that being once in which no one would wind of offended, much less give voice to it, Hamish was all grins again as he clutched the expensive ring in his palm and faced Jethro with an air of calm determination.

“Yes, I am proposing to Ducky tonight.” Hamish readily assured. “And I have the bride’s full permission as well. Kate, you see, is actually in on this plan. She’s going to have the flowers off to Ducky and the last moment.”

Extremely thrilled with the creativity of such a plot, as she had never before seen such an unique proposal before, Henrietta had to chomp down hard on her bottom lip to keep from squealing anew.

“How romantic!” She exclaimed instead, careful to keep her voice low.

“So, you’ll help!?” Hamish inquired, beginning to sound slightly nervous as he tucked the ring safely back into his pocket.

Kept from loudly exclaiming her promise to assist in every fashion possible by Jethro’s decision to finally contribute to the conversation, Henrietta settled for bouncing on her toes as she waited for the details of the plan to come into fruition.

“Promise me that I won’t have to war a suit to your wedding and we have a deal.” Jethro bargained, sticking out his hand.
“Deal.” Hamish readily agreed, accepting the proffered arm with gusto.

“Great,” Jethro grunted, politely relinquishing the hand. “Now go and wipe that sauce off your face. Hen and I have work to do.”

Far too excited at the prospect of gaining for himself a fiancé to be offended at the irreverent manner in which he was informed their was food on his face, or to be irritated at the blasé manner in which he was dismissed, Hamish nodded vigorously in assent to the plan and very nearly tripped over his own feet in his hurry to obey. And, seeing as how no real harm seemed to have been garnered in that exchanging of words, Henrietta found herself more than just a little willing to forgo scolding Jethro for his marked lack of manners.

“Well, Captain.” Henrietta grinned, tilting her head back to smile mischievously into his face. “What’s the plan?”

“Simple.” Jethro grinned, as smug as hypocrite in church. “You’ll go and tell Ducky that Rachel is planning to rip apart the bouquet if she catches it.”

Understanding that Jethro was far too sore to have any real inclination to hobble across the dancefloor on such a mission himself, as well as inwardly thrilled at the concept of playing so pivotal a role in the proposal, Henrietta graciously accepted her role and kissed her brilliant boyfriend on the cheek before scurrying off to find the Scottish individual. Which, given the sheer size of the ballroom and the volume of guests, might have been a Herculean task had not it not been for her earlier sighting of said man near the refreshment table.

“Ducky!” She sang, hastily stepping nearer to him before anyone else could usurp his attentions. “There you are!”

Taken mildly aback by her exuberance, but otherwise promptly dismissing the behavior as he took a hearty swig of whiskey from his glass, Ducky smiled indulgently and answered back as politely as always.

“Henrietta, how has your evening been? Were you able to try any of the – “

Feeling terribly for what she was about to do, as interrupting really was one of her most hated behaviors, Henrietta forced herself to keep a polite smile on her face even as she cut off the older man mid-sentence.

“I need you help, Ducky!”

Startled greatly by the energy behind such a declaration, as well as more than just a little tipsy after several hours spent sipping at whisky, Ducky jumped a bit and very nearly spilled his beverage unto the hardwood floors.

“Is everything alright, Henrietta?” The Scottish man fussed. “I noticed Jethro was choking earlier but I thought him quite recovered by the time I looked away.”

“Forget Jethro!” Henrietta hastily suggested, feeling all the danger of being slow to achieve results. “He’s not important right now.”

Highly scandalized at such casual disregard being paid to his closest of friends, yet far too polite and serene to rise to the defense of Jethro with any cruel words or scathing indictments, Ducky pursed his lips a bit but otherwise gave no real answer apart from a very unsubtle raising of his eyebrow.
“Jethro is fine.” Henrietta readily asserted. “I need your help.”

Relaxing almost immediately upon hearing the news that his best friend’s new girlfriend wasn’t at all as callous as her earlier statements might have made her seem, Ducky smiled warmly at her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“What can I do for you, Henrietta?”

“Well,” She began, “Kate is about to throw her bouquet.”

“And you’re hoping to catch it?” Ducky frowned, honestly nonplussed.

Seeing as she, herself, felt far too old to be engaging in such an activity, Henrietta let the subtle and unspoken reference to age go without challenge and launched immediately into the crux of the matter.

“Not quite.” She corrected. “Rachel is. And she’s planning to tear it to pieces in protest, too.”

Looking quite aghast at the thought that someone could behave so abominably, especially so a woman Rachel’s age, Ducky huffed quite indignantly and leveled a powerful glare across the room to where said woman was currently, and loudly, arguing with one of Seamus’s sisters about the suitability of their bridesmaids dresses.

“Kate and I need you to make sure that Rachel doesn’t get the bouquet.” Henrietta elaborated further, effectively pulling his attention back unto herself. “It’ll ruin the wedding if she does.”

“That would certainly be a very unfortunate display.” Ducky agreed. “But wouldn’t it be more appropriate for another woman, such as yourself, to play the part of – “

“I need to be near Kate.” Henrietta interrupted. “For…emotional support.”

Far too tipsy to question such a flimsy argument, or perhaps more preoccupied with the task of trying to decipher just why she was behaving so oddly, Ducky took a hearty swig of his whiskey before frustratingly continuing his line of questioning.

“But what about Abigail?” He asked. “Surely as Maid-of-Honor she should be willing to assist the bride in this.”

Only narrowly resisting the urge to bark out an order that he simply obey the request to stand near Kate, as really it was quite a simple task, Henrietta counted rapidly to twenty before responded and wondered, idly, if perhaps a bit of her boyfriend’s personality was beginning to rub off on her.

“Abby went off with Tim an hour ago.” She answered truthfully. “And God only knows what they’re doing.”

Sharing an uncomfortable shudder with her as such an unwelcome explanation produced within their brains several unseemly images, Ducky sighed in defeat yet still refused to move his feet and relocated as earlier requested.

“But what about Anthony – surely someone his age would be more appropriate for such a task.”

“Rachel will get suspicious if it’s Tony.” Henrietta supplied. “But she won’t suspect anything of you.”
That such a statement was made so confidently via her belief in the fact that Ducky looked as harmless as a Kitten on the worst of days, Henrietta kept to herself, figuring such a little snippet more amusing than it was useful for the task at hand.

“Well,” Ducky finally caved, “I do suppose that I would feel rather guilty were I to sit idle and allow Kate’s reception to be placed into jeopardy.”

“Good!” Henrietta cried, letting out a bated breath. “I didn’t think that you would allow something like that to – “

Unfortunately for their conversation, as well as the eardrums of anyone within five feet of her son, their discussion was cut off before its natural finish by the sudden, and loud, deliverance of a warning issued forth by a store-bought megaphone wielded by her child.

“IT’S TIME FOR THE BOUQUET TOSS!” Tony hollered, causing several guests to cover their ears. “I NEED ALL THE SINGLE LADIES TO GET THEIR FINE ASSES OUT ON THE DANCE FLOOR!”

Promptly removed from his self-assigned duty of MC by Sarah’s hastily confiscation of his purple megaphone, an act which was heartily applauded by several people, Tony put on a dramatically bereaved expression and made to playfully assault Sarah with a glowstick before being promptly overshadowed, and subsequently interrupted, by Kate’s victorious march into the midst of the dance floor.

“God speed, Duck.” Henrietta teased, shoving him ungraciously into the throng of excited and semi-drunk women now thronging the bride.

And, that task thusly completed, Henrietta scurried back to the table she shared with Jethro without abandon, understanding perfectly well that she had only moments to do so before the flowers would inevitably begin their descent into Ducky’s unsuspecting hands.

“I was starting to think you’d run out of time.” Jethro teased, slowly rising to his feet with only minor assistance on her part.

“Well, your friend can be just as stubborn you sometimes.” She pouted. “Now hush up, and help me unto the table.”

Taking no real offense at the brusque manner in which he was addressed, no doubt understanding the necessity of bluntness at certain times, Jethro grinned indulgently and chivalrously held out his hand that she might better climb up unto the table without falling and breaking her head wide open. And, that task adequately completed, as she had slipped only once on a hidden napkin, Jethro climbed up unto his chair for his own better view and grinned at her his appreciation for such a clever decision.

“Short people have to be clever if they want to see anything important.”

“Clearly.” Jethro humored, blue eyes sparkling with some unshared joke.

But, rather than give him the satisfaction of demanding an answer, Henrietta grinned mischievously and made a great show of paying rapturous attention to the affair taking place below them.

“Twenty bucks says Ducky cries.” Jethro teased.

“Thirty bucks says Hamish cries first.” Henrietta countered.
That irreverent bargain thusly made, both Henrietta and Jethro watched in delight as Kate, clearly emboldened by a successful wedding, began to spin madly about in the midst of those gathered around her, the blindfold clumsily tied about her head by Tony not at all impeded her movement as she made a great show of leaning toward one hopeful woman to the next before, finally and dramatically, yanking off the purple covering from her eyes and lurching toward a heartily confused Ducky with all the eloquence a very dizzy person could manage – which was to say none at all, as Vance had to catch Kate before she hit the floorboards and settle her properly back on her feet before she was able to sufficiently make her way back over to Ducky and deposit the still-fragrant blooms into his unexpecting hands.

“What’s this now?” Ducky frowned, turning to his left and looking quite ready to surrender the flowers over to a grinning, and also suddenly knowledgeable, Sarah.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to return those flowers, Dad.” Jimmy suggested from somewhere behind his father. “Turn around.”

And, doing just that, Ducky spun around clearly expecting to come face-to-face with his child only to find Hamish had taken his place at the last moment and gotten down unto his knees to boot.

“Marry me.” Hamish requested, tears dribbling down his cheeks. “I can’t go another day without making you mine.”

Ignorant to the pain he was causing his best friend by remaining stubbornly dry-eyed, the overwhelmed Medical Examiner shook his head rapidly, for once, at a complete loss of words.

“I don’t know what to say.” He finally managed, the words more a whisper than anything else.

“Say yes!” Victoria cried, from her advantage perch atop her father’s shoulder.

Earning several laughs from the wedding guests as such unbridled exuberance, including a hearty chuckle from her grandfather, Ducky swallowed down a lump in his throat and grinned widely from ear to ear.

“Yes.” He consisted. “Yes.”

Receiving a very effusive kiss in response as Hamish seamlessly rose to his feet, Ducky turned bright red as the ballroom erupted into the loud claps and whistles – the thunderous sounds of which were only doubly magnified by the size and make of the room they were in.

“Congrats, Ducky.” Kate beamed, accepting a bearhug from said man.

“Thank you, Kate.” Hamish expressed, giving the bride a hug of her own.

“Don’t make me regret this.” Kate warned, perfectly sincere as she returned his embrace.

“Believe me,” Hamish reverently intoned, “I won’t.”

And, having thus received the sage promise that her efforts would not go to waste, Kate lead the room in yet another rousing round of applause, the likes of which seemed highly unlikely to end in an expeditious manner until Seamus took action and hollered, sans megaphone, a phrase rousing enough to capture even the newly affianced couples attention.

“IRISH CARBOMBS FOR EVERYONE!”
“EVERYONE OLDER THAN TWENTY!” Kate quickly amended, before catching the scandalized expression on Sarah’s face. “NINTEEN!”

And although the vast majority of guests in attendance at the Walsh/Todd wedding that evening would not be able to sufficiently recall the events of the reception following that announcement, Henrietta remembered thinking at some point during that night that the shenanigans that followed such a declaration were almost certainly beneath the dignity of all those in attendance. Especially so that of Angus Walsh and Sarah McGee, the former of which had been promptly and sounded defeated by the latter in a kegstand competition initiated by the veritable giant of a man when his competitor’s brother was nowhere to be found. And, if Hen vaguely had the idea that she might have been a third party in such a competition as Siobhan and Sheila held her up, the lack of sufficient photographic evidence the next afternoon upon waking granted her enough relief to entirely forget the matter as she vomited profusely into her son’s bathtub and listened to Jethro abusing the toilet in a similar fashion.
Gradually coming his senses as the sound of a door being opened registered within the fog of his brain, along with the scent of something decidedly greasy and salty, Gibbs groaned softly yet somehow found the strength to haul himself up off the tiled floor long enough to adequately position himself against the vomit-coated toilet before promptly closing his eyes again as his head began to reverberate painfully with all the noise accosting him from somewhere out in the building. But rather than get off his hungover arse to investigate, a feat of which he was not reasonably sure he could accomplish without great embarrassment and peril to himself, Gibbs simply settled for silently cursing the culprit and prayed to whatever Gods there might be that his agonies might soon be ended. Because if he had to contend with the sourness in his gut, as well as the throbbing in both his head and knee, much longer, he was going to bash his brains out on the side of the sink and leave the unnamed noisy asshole to clean up the mess. “Mama,” The unknown culprit called out, “Boss?”

Vaguely registering that it was Tony calling out to him and not, as he had thought, some malicious burglar intend on making him suffer any more than he was already did, Gibbs hastily retracted his earlier avowal to bash his brains open and valiantly forced himself to mumble out a reply that might have intelligible had he been able to speak up properly.

“I’m coming in.” Tony forewarned, rapping gently on the door.

Despite having been adequately forewarned that he was soon to be accosted by the presence of his characteristically boisterous son, Gibbs found he very nearly cursed out the innocent young man when his entrance carried with him an ungodly and blinding light from the hallway.

“Are you and Mama awake?” Tony whispered, gingerly stepping into the foul-smelling room.

Only narrowly resisting the urge to bark at his son for asking such an insipid question, as it was quite obvious he was awake given the fact that he had been talking to him, Gibbs made a noncommittal groan before deciding to crack open his eyes long enough to notice that his girlfriend was currently only semi-conscious within the confines of the vomit befouled bathtub.

“I feel like garbage.” She groaned, still refusing to open her eyes.

“Yeah,” Tony grinned, “Maybe you shouldn’t have done that kegstand.”

Frowning in consternation as he tried, and failed, to recall the memory of Henrietta doing a kegstand, or anyone for that matter, Gibbs rubbed at his eyes and began to wonder if, perhaps, Tony was simply poking fun at his clearly disoriented mother.

“Oh, God.” She groaned. “Did I really do that?”

“Yeah.” Tony heartily assured. “You came in second place, though.”

“That’s just jolly.” Henrietta sardonically moaned. “Is Sarah still alive?”

Vaguely recalling a foggy snippet of memory that seemed to suggest he had, at one point, been the one holding up the young girl with the assistance of a Walsh cousin, at least until Tim had stomped back into the reception and put a prompt to end such behavior by threatening to report his sister to their parents if she repeated such an unseemly challenge, Gibbs shook his head to clear it and immediately regretted the action as his stomach churned in protest.
“Sarah is fine.” Tony casually dismissed. “She texted me just this morning and asked if Tim and Abby had made it to the airport on time.”

Experiencing no small amount of jealousy upon being so reminded of the fact that his advanced age prevented him from bouncing back after a night out as quickly as those Sarah and Tony’s age could, Gibbs grumbled beneath his breath something unsavory about that particular youth’s proclivity to be ungrateful for all the gifts youth bestowed upon him.

“Did they make it to the airport?” Gibbs interrogated, always concerned for the health and well-being of his agents.

“Tim got them there just on time.” Tony confirmed, seating himself atop the sink as such was clearly the best place to avoid vomit.

Understanding from an overexcited Abby, and the from a much calmer Tim, that their flight was set to take off at three in the morning, Gibbs frowned and sat up a bit straighter as he tried, and failed, to rub the soreness from his eyes.

“What time is it?” Gibbs demanded, already dreading the answer.

“Five in the afternoon, Boss.” Tony blithely informed, nibbling irreverently on the McDonald’s French Fries he had brought into the bathroom with him.

Stomach roiling at the smell of such greasy food, Gibbs felt the bile rush up into his throat and quickly swallowed down the acidic mess before he could even further embarrass himself in front of his child.

“Jesus Christ.” He groaned, clumsily wiping the sweat from his face.

“I know.” Henrietta concurred, having yet to open her eyes. “We’re getting too old to be drinking like this.”

Far too ill to experience any significant outrage or offense at such an insinuation, as really his girlfriend had been perfectly correct, Gibbs licked his chapped lips and grimaced as the taste of vodka assaulted his tongue.

“Why do I taste vodka?” He demanded of Tony. “I don’t drink Vodka.”

He was, after all, a strictly bourbon and beer kind of man.

“You do when Ducky and Hamish are getting toasted by the bride and groom.” Tony grinned. “Moscow Mules, to be exact.”

“Ugh.” Henrietta moaned, pressing her palms against her eyes. “I think I might be dead.”

Sorely disappointed that he was far too disoriented to get up and comfort his girlfriend, as well as slightly embarrassed that his age had caused him such a vengeful hangover, Gibbs frowned deeply and finally came to realize that his grandfather had, perhaps, had a good point about drinking and eating all things in moderation. Because if the alcohol was not currently wreaking havoc on his body, which it was, the end result of three large pieces of Napoleons would have certainly done the trick just as well.

“How mad is Vance?” Gibbs questioned, his dry throat causing the words to crack.

“He’s been passed out at his desk all day.” Tony comforted. “I honestly don’t even think he
has *any* idea of who came into today.

Inwardly relieved that he had avoided an aggravating telling-off, so long as nobody let his minor indiscretion slip out to Vance, Gibbs smiled victoriously and smugly thought of all the ways he might use the Director’s lack of sobriety against him should the man foolishly take it into his head that he ought to punish either him or Tony.

“Katie wasn’t too put out, was she?” Henrietta fussed, clearly worrying that their antics, whatever those might have been, had either irritated or offended the bride.

“Are you kidding?” Tony smiled. “Kate’s been on cloud nine *all* day. I mean, she didn’t even get angry when a perp peed on her leg.”

“A man peed on her?” Henrietta frowned, face scrunched up in disgust.

“No – a woman did.” Tony corrected. “And anyway, it doesn’t matter, because she was still as happy as a clam by the time she left.”

Satisfied with such an answer, at least for the moment, Gibbs allowed himself a brief resting of his eyes and gradually found himself founding asleep before the sugary voice of his girlfriend interrupted his slumber and pulled him back into reality.

“Shouldn’t Katie be going off on a Honeymoon?”

Already feeling decidedly guilty about only being able to allow Abby and Tim their request for time off, as Kate had been the first to be engaged, Gibbs sighed and inwardly steeled himself for the minor scolding he was sure to receive from the motherly and protective Henrietta.

“Vance would never allow me to have two field agents gone at the same time.” He explained. “And besides that, Kate used up all her vacation and sick time visiting Seamus’s family in Ireland.”

“Vance is an asshole.” Henrietta pouted. “Kate was engaged first.”

“I know.” Gibbs agreed, head still throbbing. “But I promised Kate some extra time when Tim and Abby get back.”

Smiling indulgently at him from over the rim of a vomit-coated bathtub, at then promptly regretting the action as it had motivated her into opening her eyes, Henrietta cried out as the light stabbed her sore pupils and threw a washrag over her face.

“Speaking of returns,” She began, “How did we even get home last night?”

Thinking it a rather good question, as he could not even recall ordering a cab, Gibbs looked expectantly at his son and prayed that his answer would not be an embarrassing one.

“Jimmy took all of us here.”

“Jimmy?” Gibbs parroted, heartily confused.

“Yeah.” Tony confirmed, nibbling on a fry. “I was just as surprised as you, too.”

“Wait – whose *all of us*?” Henrietta spoke up, a notable panic in her voice.

Just as concerned about who the other parties in the apartment might be, as he greatly feared that he might have somehow talked Tim and Sarah’s parents into accompanying him back to the
apartment for a final nightcap, or even worse, had perhaps compelled Declan Walsh into accepting an invitation to woo Tony, Gibbs swallowed down a moan and wondered just how hard it would be to convince all parties involved to pretend that nothing had happened.

“Ducky and Hamish are both passed out on the couch.” Tony clarified. “And I don’t mean to sound like a bitch, but I’m not cleaning out the garbage disposal because I didn’t puke in it.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake.” Henrietta cursed, promptly riled up at the thought of such filth assaulting her usually pristine kitchen.

“Don’t be too upset, Mama.” Tony jested. “Your boyfriend was the one to throw up in Jimmy’s car.”

Far too mortified at the realization that he had vomited in Jimmy’s prized antique, the likes of which would be very difficult to clean given its cloth interior, Gibbs prayed for a timely death even as his girlfriend was fast at work trying to reach a solution.

“Text Jimmy and tell him to throw some baking soda on the vomit. I’ll be over shortly to clean it up.”

“He’s already taken care of it, Mom.”

Silently avowing to send the aggrieved party a generous check for the cleaning costs, as well as for the effort of towing home what was surely five very inebriated individuals, Gibbs slowly climbed to his feet and staggered over to the dirty bathtub, taking several moments to steady himself before reaching into the vomit-filled mess to assist his girlfriend with her own ascent.

“Don’t look at me.” Henrietta frowned, blushing profusely. “I need a bath.”

Coated profusely in her own vomit, and hopefully nobody else’s, Henrietta did, indeed, look like quite a mess. But rather than agree with her and issue forth such a dangerous statement, Gibbs shook his head in chivalrous denial and carefully helped her step out of the mess she had slept in.

“I’m never drinking again.” She bemoaned, clumsily trying to swipe the vomit from her dress.

“Neither am I.” Gibbs agreed, knee throbbing violently.
Waking far more slowly than was his usual wont, the events of Sunday evening no doubt still being a great contributing factor to such, Gibbs stretched indulgently beneath the blankets covering him and yawned ungracefully before gradually working up the courage to open his eyes and face the start of a brand new day. A chore which, while tedious, was made infinitely better by its subsequent reminder of the fact that he had been put to bed with his girlfriend in their shared child’s guestroom. Because while they might have been far too ill to try anything other than sleeping and half-hearted cuddling for the duration of Monday, it was still an absolute delight for him to rise and immediately see the face of a beautiful woman lying right next to him. For serene-faced and smiling lightly from the experience of some much-enjoyed dream, Henrietta did, in fact, look like the face of beauty as she laid atop their shared mattress and snored softly beneath the covers. And, suddenly overcome with a great surplus of adoration for the woman he had only known for less than a week, Gibbs gave into his lustful temptation and leaned across the small space separating them to kiss her full on the lips – the spontaneous action which, while gentle so as not to wake her, was quite full of unsatisfied passion and longing.

“Well,” Henrietta murmured, coming slowly to life, “That’s certainly one of the better ways to wake up.”

Feeling slightly guilty for rousing her from what was obviously a very pleasant sleep, the magnitude of which was only slightly diminished upon his subsequent realization that his bedmate’s eyes looked even greener and prettier in the light of the dawn, Gibbs frowned apologetically and brought his forehead to rest against her own.

“You can’t be that beautiful and expect not to be kissed.” He defended, taking the liberty of kissing her nose.

Grinning widely at the compliment, the act of which coaxed very alluring dimples unto her creamy cheeks, Henrietta closed the gap betwixt their bodies by shimmying hers ungracefully across the mattress and brazenly pressed herself against him, effectively causing every last nerve upon his body, some of which he had not even known existed, to flare into life and set his loins to burning. Which, considering the incessant pain assaulting his knee for the last several days, was quite a blessing, as he sincerely doubted anything but his girlfriend’s presence would have mitigated the agony in any significant degree.

“You’re not so bad yourself.” Henrietta purred, raising her hands to cup his face before kissing him on the nose.

“No bad?” Gibbs harrumphed, a smile still on his face. “Is that all I get?”

“A thousand apologies, my good Sir.” Henrietta apologized, putting on a very effected posh accent. “Whatever might I do to gain your pardon?”

Taking the licentious liberty of placing one of his rough hands on the swell of her bottom, something he had most ardently been longing to do since the day he had first made her acquaintance, Gibbs grinned in a markedly naughty fashion and wantonly requested that his girlfriend surprise him with an apology of her own choosing. A playful challenge, which, delightful to her lively spirits, seemed to enliven Henrietta well enough to cause her to forget the disagreeable earliness of the hour. For face all aglow with the joy only some secret mischief could wrought, and beautiful eyes all ashine with untampered exuberance and excitement, the veritable dwarf of a woman manipulated her limber body, in the space of seconds, so that she now straddled his lap in a most enticing manner.
“We have at least two hours before my son wakes,” Henrietta breathed, glancing away only to denote the time on her bedside clock, “And I intend to use those two hours to show you just how much I appreciate your appearance.”

Quickly forgetting his resolve not to make love to said women whilst inside the house of their shared son, as the desirous look she was currently exuding served commendably well to cause him to forget those morals of his which stipulated it would be obscene and disrespectful to plow his son’s mother when the former was right next door to them, Gibbs rapidly gave into one of the many temptations plaguing him all the week and shamelessly snaked an adventurous hand up her purple nightgown without any clear regard to the propriety of doing so when the snores of her son could still be heard coming down the hallway.

“You’re touching a scar.” Henrietta breathed, shivering violently as he stopped his fingers just below the most tantalizing part of her body. “See what else you can find.”

Suitably encouraged with the deliverance of such a bold assignment, as well as heartily enticed by the warmth and softness of her impossibly smooth skin, Gibbs licked his suddenly dry lips and slowly began to inch his fingers upward, the pleasure of staking his claim in lands hereinto unclaimed very nearly at the point of fulfilment before, mere moments into his exploration, disaster struck.

For, in her endearing haste to assist him in such a noble pursuit, Henrietta made the most egregious error of leaning back to allow better access to her loins and, as a result, put an almost vicious amount of pressure on the knee which had been terrorizing him for the past several days; the agony of which, whilst unimaginable in comparison to all those other injuries which he had sustained throughout his long career as both Marine and Team-Lead, had been endurable for no other reason then that Henrietta had been almost constantly by his side since the initial flareup had first assaulted him. But, much to his great chagrin, Gibbs soon found that once the innocent mistake of misapplied weight had been allowed to exacerbat the persistent problem he could not longer neither ignore, or conceal, its existence. For so suddenly assailed with a searing and blinding was he, that Gibbs was rendered utterly unable to keep a strangled, yet distinct, growl from escaping his lips.

“What is it?!” Henrietta cried, straightening her posture and immediately making the pain in his knee worse. “Did I cut you with my ring?!”

Such a piece of jewelry being, in fact, more akin to a razor given the size and sharpness of its amethyst stone, the question was from ridiculous but still, given the present circumstances, no less grating as he could not, in his pain, keep from thinking with some bitterness that a mere scratch from a paltry bit of jewelry could never compare to the anguish he was now suffering at the hands of poorly-distributed weight.

“It’s nothing.” Gibbs lied poorly, sweat begging to pool on his face. “I must still be a bit hungover, is all.”

Receiving only a shrewd look in response to such an intelligence-insulting perjury, Gibbs cringed a little and resolutely prepared himself for a thorough scolding that was sure to come from the lips of a woman who hated nothing more than to be lied to or deceived. But, much to his great (and temporary) relief, Henrietta soon proved determined to disabuse him of such a rational assumption – herself either being far too delighted to her adversary wrong, or else far too encumbered with concern to resort to her usual method of gleaning answers from taciturn men.

“Pull down your pants.” She directed, no trace of desire showing upon her suddenly stern face.
Immediately aggrieved by the staunch injustice of such a situation, as really there was absolutely nothing in the world that he wouldn’t have gladly given to be able to comply to such a demand, Gibbs frowned deeply and helplessly wondered if he might not be able to power through the pain he was currently experiencing long enough to convince his girlfriend that all was well.

“Jethro.” Henrietta impatiently chided, gingerly extracting herself from off his lap. “Take off your pants.”

Shivering inwardly at the very thought of assaulting his sore joint in such a needless display of obedience, as even breathing in the wrong way sent a fresh flare of pain shooting up into all parts of his body, Gibbs stubbornly shook his head and tried to appear as firm as he could in the given situation.

“Don’t you think you’re being a forward?” He quipped, hoping a bit of humor would diffuse the sudden seriousness of such an undesired conversation.

“Jethro.”

Sensing from the sternness of her tone that there would be no real reprieve until he had, at last, obeyed her request that he divest himself of his pants, Gibbs frowned but nonetheless summoned every last ounce of reserve he possessed and moved somberly to heed the order by first undoing the buttons of the dress pants he had negligently been put to bed in. And while that miniscule action was, within itself, quiet negligible when it came to the amount of exertion needed to accomplish it, all further progress was immediately stopped the moment Gibbs arched his back in preparation of tugging the constricting fabric down his legs. Because that little bit of movement alone, whilst otherwise effortless on any other day, was more than enough exertion to cause him to see stars and subsequently compel him to collapse back against his pillows with an ungodly and unseemly expulsion of breath.

“Jethro!” Henrietta cried, face suddenly all aflood with concern.

“I’m fine.” He grunted, suddenly slick with sweat as he labored to breath. “Just give me a minute.”

Reluctantly granting him the dubious privilege of doing just that, Henrietta sat upright mere inches from his side but otherwise kept her hands to herself though it clearly pained her greatly to play the part of disinterested bystander.

“Jethro,” She suddenly pipped, unwilling to allow for more than a minute to pass without intervening, “I know you’re in a lot of pain, but I really do need to look at your knee. Can I cut you out of those pants?”

Seeing as there was no other way in which he hoped to have the too-tight garment removed from his body, Gibbs quickly surrendered his pride and nodded his assent to the idea, far too overcome with debilitating pain to wish to exert any more effort by speaking.

“I’ll try and be gentle.” Henrietta avowed, quickly fetching from her bedside table a pair of very sharp fabric-scissors. “Stay still.”

Understanding the silver instrument to quiet sharp indeed, as Henrietta had once boasted about them cutting through leather like said fabric was butter, Gibbs instantly went motionless and tried not to breathe too aggressively as the scissors path brushed precipitously near his manhood on their way to finish cutting him out of his trousers.
“There we are.” Henrietta purred, reverently setting aside her favorite scissors. “I’m going to pull the fabric away now.”

And so she did, without any sort of pause in which he might have mustered strength and fortitude for what was to come. Because whilst the cutting away of his fabric had been more than nerve-wracking enough for the both of them, the actual process of tugging away the somewhat expensive fabric proved to be quite hellish as every pull of the material and maneuver of his body sent a fresh wave of pain coursing through his body. So bad was the resulting aching, in fact, that Gibbs soon found he had no other choice but to clamp down hard on his bottom lip to keep from crying out and waking half the apartment complex.

“Oh my God.” Henrietta exclaimed, barely able to keep her spontaneous exclamation at a respectfully quiet decibel. “Look at your knee.”

Despite wishing to do nothing more than keep his head firmly attached to the pillows he had collapsed against, Gibbs took a bracing breath and reluctantly lifted himself away from the comfortable mound cushions, his morbid sense of curiosity, for the moment, outweighing all tenents of the self-preservation that dictated he ought to move any more then was strictly necessary.

“Sweet Jesus.” Gibbs moaned, taking in the ghastly sight with no pleasure whatsoever.

For whereas the previous morning his right knee had only been slightly swollen and perhaps a bit pink, the long night that had followed seemed to have been more then sufficient in exacerbating the mild symptom up unto the point that his damaged knee now resembled, in both size and color, an apple.

“I think you might have gout, Jethro.” Henrietta expressed, grimacing sympathetically at the very swollen joint.

Himself having come to conclusion that the damage had initially been done at the McGee wedding, during which event he had both tripped and been tripped over several times, Gibbs shook his head in respectful dismissal of such a silly notion and verbally made known his dissent with as much humor as he could muster.

“This isn’t the Middle Ages.”
“Jethro,” Henrietta frowned, more concerned then annoyed, “Gout isn’t some long extinct disease like the plague. It’s a very common affliction.”

Having once heard the disease referred to by his grandfather as something only stuffy and fat wealthy people were diagnosed with, Gibbs continued further in his denial and clung tightly to the idea that his old injury had simply flared back into life after one of Abby’s girthier uncles had drunkenly fallen into his lap near the end of his niece’s reception.

“How do you know so much about something like gout?” Gibbs groused, the pain in his knee gradually becoming slightly less horrid the longer he kept it still.

“Because my grandfather suffered from it.” Henrietta explained, gently swiping away some of the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of her nightshirt. “And his big toes would swell up the exact same way your knee did.”

Gradually coming to see reason now that his pain was slowly ebbing from excruciating levels down into a more horrific level, Gibbs frowned inwardly at the diagnosis but otherwise gave no real efforts to further refute the reasonably sound assumption.
“So what do I do?” He questioned, feeling entirely helpless. “Ice my knee?”

“God no.” Henrietta promptly dismissed. “We’re getting you to the doctor so you can get some anti-inflammatories.”

Fully prepared to assert that such a visit was unnecessary or, at the very least, would have to wait until after the end of the work day, Gibbs opened his mouth to give voice to the protest only be promptly silenced with one firm look from his girlfriend.

“You can’t work with your knee the size of an apple.” Henrietta promptly, yet gently, dismissed. “And untreated gout can lead to kidney stones. Which, according to my grandfather, hurt far worse then getting shot in the groin by the Nazis.”
Understandably and thoroughly exhausted after a grueling morning spent being poked and prodded at by an elderly doctor with some of the worst bedside manners Henrietta had ever had the displeasure to play witness to, as well as utterly and thoroughly incensed after his following hour-long phone conversation with Vance wherein the latter had quite rudely demanded to know why his lead agent was willingly calling off from work for the first time in nearly a decade, Jethro’s loud and animalistic groan as he collapsed ungracefully unto his own mattress was more than just a little understandable and acceptable to Henrietta.

“Why alcohol?” Her boyfriend groused, flinching slightly as she gingerly placed a carefully wrapped bag of ice on his knee. “Why can’t gout be caused by something like kale?”

Despite knowing perfectly well that it was the sugars in alcohol that were the real culprit, rather than just beverage itself, Henrietta inwardly chuckled at such a simplified deduction but otherwise kept her unhelpful information to herself, understanding perfectly well that her boyfriend simply needed to vent and would not care, at all, for such an unnecessary correction.

“For the same reason women were cursed with menstrual cycles.” Henrietta opined, hoping to inject a little levity into the situation. “The Gods are cruel.”

Frowning deeply at such a half-hearted comment, eyes flickering immediately to the obviously child-crafted ceramic mug that resided on his bedside table, Jethro sighed softly and wearily closed his eyes – provoking within Henrietta no small amount of well-deserved guilt for having spoken so irreverently about the concept of faith in front of someone whose religious beliefs she wasn’t quite so sure of.

“Yeah.” The injured Marine sighed. “They are.”

Feeling all the awkwardness of the situation she had unwittingly placed them in, as well as feeling keenly the meaning behind such a mildly voiced agreement, Henrietta shifted uncomfortably in the bedroom of her boyfriend and soon began to wish that she had a task or chore that needed completed. For having already seen her injured beau safely into bed, as well as fed and appropriately medicated with the prescribed anti-inflammatory and extra-strength painkiller, there really was no acceptable reason for her to be hovering in such a space other than the fact that she worried for Jethro and wished to see him comforted by any means possible.

“Would you like some tea?” She inquired.

Scrunching up his nose in a very endearing manner that served to remind her of Tony’s own expressions of disgust, Gibbs immediately shook his head to denote his pleasure with such an unsavory idea.

“What about some coffee?” She offered, not wishing to see her boyfriend go parched.

“No.” Gibbs yawned, the effects of the painkiller finally kicking in. “I think I’m going to try and sleep for a bit.”

Thinking such a decision to be a very fine one indeed, as in slumber one could more easily forget their pain, Henrietta smiled encouragingly and strode forward to carefully drape the blankets over his couchant form.

“Would you like me to wake up before I leave?” She asked, figuring that would grant the
drowsy man three or four hours of uninterrupted sleep, as Tony would not be able to pick her up until he was done with work.

“Please.” Jethro breathed, eyelids already becoming quite droopy.

“Your wish is my command.” She declared, carefully leaning over his frame to kiss him on the chin. “I’ll be in living room with my book – yell for me if you need me.”

And, having thusly informed her patient of where she would be for the next several hours, Henrietta turned on her heel and made to quit the room – wishing to leave her boyfriend in relative privacy as she knew him well enough by then to understand that he loathed to appear so weak in front of others.

“Wait.” Jethro murmured sleepily, effectively calling her back into the room. “What are you reading?”

“Northanger Abbey.” She happily clarified, quite eager to begin the recently-purchased novel as the double-wedding weekend had kept her from it for far too long.

“Is it any good?” Jethro asked, seeming to wish to keep her in the room.

“I have no idea.” She giggled. “I haven’t had time to start it.”

“Then stay,” Jethro implored, gesturing at the empty side of the bed, “Stay and read it aloud.”
Despite having felt all the effects of her throat going dry hours ago, the unpleasant result of such having scarcely been helped with the aid of a few surreptitious sips of water stolen from her boyfriend’s own glass, Henrietta found herself carrying on with the narration of the novel she had started long ago, feeling every bit the need to reach its conclusion as all the effort she had already put into the ingratiating chore had left her only with a few paragraphs to be read before she finished Northanger Abbey in full. Furthermore, reasoned Henrietta, she knew her discomfort and vocal distress to be of but negligible levels when compared to that of her new suitor’s anguish and torment and, as such, felt it her girlfriendly duty to provide what comfort she could to the comatose man. And, if it just so happened that the most effective form of soothing the slumbering man’s subconscious twitchings and mutterings came at the price of her vocal cords, well, so be it. Jethro had done far more for her the night they had been drunk and far too ill to do anything more than vomit and bemoan their self-inflicted fate. For chivalrous and gentlemanly to a fault, even despite his inebriated state, he had somehow managed to see her safely into the relative comfort of the tub before collapsing himself against the toilet. A heroic feat which, while brief, had surely taken far more effort and resolve than a tiny bit of reading.

“The influence of the viscount and viscountess in their brother’s behalf was assisted by that right understanding of Mr. Morland’s circumstances which, as soon as the general would allow him to be informed, they were qualified to give. It taught him that he had been scarcely more misled by Thorpe’s first boast of the family wealth than by his subsequent malicious overthrow of it; that in no sense of the word were they necessitous or poor, and that Catherine would have three thousand pounds.” Pausing there for yet another pilfered sip of water, the likes of which she needed to get through the next several sentences, Henrietta drank freely of the lukewarm beverage and cleared her throat a few times before continuing. “This was so material an amendment of his late expectations that it greatly contributed to smooth the descent of his pride; and by no means without its effect was the private intelligence, which he was at some pains to procure, that the Fullerton estate, being entirely at the disposal of its present proprietor, was consequently open to every greedy speculation.”

Impeded from continuing any further in her reading by Jethro’s sudden and ungraceful jolt back into consciousness, a prospect she found in equal parts to be both invigorating and vexing, Henrietta politely lowered her book to her lap and waited (admittedly impatiently) for her newly-roused boyfriend to acknowledge her with a greeting or request.

“Hen.” The well-drugged man slurred. “What time is it?”

Needing to crane her neck to catch a glimpse of the grandfather clock nestled outside the bedroom at the end of the hall, as she had misplaced her favorite watch sometime during the seemingly endless events of the recent wedding-weekend, Henrietta leaned precariously backward from her perch atop the firm mattress for an even better view and was promptly started by the sudden sensation of a pair of very protective hands being wrapped about her ankles to keep her, no doubt, rooted to the bed should she slip up and fall.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” Jethro rebuked, refusing to surrender his grip on her ankles until she was properly reseated once more.

“Of course not.” Henrietta teased with a grin. “There are far easier ways to incapacitate a man.”

Smiling for the time in several hours at such a flirtatious quip, the sight of which delighted
Henrietta to no end, Jethro shifted slightly atop the mattress to refresh his sleep-frozen bones and sighed in relief upon the realization that such a movement had not, in any way, caused the pain in his knee to return with a medicine-denying vengeance.

“I hope one day to be enlightened on such a subject.” Jethro returned, cheekily stretching out a hand to lay his fingers atop her thigh. “But, for now, I’d be happy just hearing the end of that story you were reading to me.”

Despite being greatly relieved upon receiving such a thinly-veiled suggestion she continue her reading, as there was but only a paragraph left to them before they could learn the fates of their endearingly sweet protagonist, Henrietta found she could not fulfill the terms of such an innocent request without being provoked into feeling a great amount of great at the prospect of ruining the ending of a novel for the boyfriend who had, at best, only heard the first three of four pages with clarity before succumbing to sleep. For so long inclined to think of all classics as treasures, whether cinematic or literary, the very idea of forbidding a person of all the joys that only the entirety of a novel could provide was, indeed, quite the scandalous and unforgivable sin her mind.

“How can you want me to finish the book!?” She cried, thoroughly flustered at such a foreign concept. “You don’t even know how Elanor and Henry came to be together! It would be like starting a movie after the second climax!”

No doubt having been barraged and harangued by the selfsame arguments from the likes of their shared son, as he looked utterly unalarmed at her sudden fit of passion, Jethro politely tried to conceal his bemused smile and gently moved his fingers away from her thigh so that he might put the digits to better use by wrapping them around hers in a steadying and refocusing grip.

“I’ll never have any peace until I know how the story ends.” The stubborn man firmly persisted, a ghost of a smile resting on his face all the while. “If that means not knowing any of the details, so be it. That sort of nonsense can be sorted out later.”

“Nonsense!” Henrietta squawked, highly indignant on behalf of one of her favorite authors. “How can you call the plot of a story nonsense?! That’s like saying the meat of a sandwich is unimportant!”

Seeming to take some perverted delight in riling her up, or perhaps seeking some sort of mild revenge for the teasing he had endured all week, Jethro sat up against his pillows and swallowed down a mischievous smile before replying.

“Hen,” He began, all good-humor now that his pain had gone, “Why should I subject myself to all the unpleasant parts of a novel when I can just as easily read the pleasant parts and glean what happened from there? That’s like eating the pickles you don’t like off a sandwich when you can just as well pick them off.”

Temporary stymied at such a sound argument, as really it had been quite well-crafted, Henrietta huffed loudly several times before coming up with a respectable retort of her own.

“Ignoring the crux of a story in favor of its beginning and end, is like ignoring the vegetables on your plate in favor of the desserts and alcohol.” She quipped. “While you might gain the most pleasure from the latter, it is the former that keeps you healthy and alive.”

“You make a good point.” Jethro calmly agreed. “But books, my dear, are not food.”

“Books are food for soul.” She countered, refusing to give any ground in such a personal argument.
Taking his turn to be suitably stymied by the strength of a good argument with all the dignity and calmness of character a Marine ought to possess, Jethro frowned in concentration as he sought a retort but made no real move to resort to some of the more underhanded methods of debate to achieve a score in their argument.

“You have me there.” Jethro gradually conceded. “But all the same, I really would like to hear the end of that book.”

“Seeing as you’re so injured,” Henrietta caved, “I’ll humor just this once. But rest assured, my good man, that I will not be so lenient the next time you decide to fall asleep on my monologuing.”

Seeming to come alive at the sudden emergence of such regency-era speech, as that particular battle of wits was one in which they seemed to be equally matched, Jethro put on a theatrically somber expression and addressed her with the utmost, yet dramatic, sincerity.

“The next time you monologue,” Declared Jethro, “I shall be at full attentions, for there is nothing so lovelier than the sound of your voice.”

Flattered beyond comprehension that Jethro had complimented her, once more, on something other than her inarguable beauty, as well as deeply touched that he had taken the effort of learning a new form of speech just to delight her, Henrietta bent her head and gently kissed him on the forehead before making her more playful reply.

“I would think the feel of my skin upon yours would be a far better treat.” Henrietta priggishly declared, failing to keep the giggle out of her declaration. “But as you’ve already made known your preference for my voice, you shall have to content yourself with the finishing of the story.”

“I assure you, madam, that I would be just as equally pleased with the one as I would the other.”

Greatly aggrieved by the fact that she was not able to throw herself upon his recumbent person by means of expressing her gratitude and appraisal of such a compliment, as by doing so she would only insure that his knee set to bothering him again, Henrietta plucked up her book in order to distract her from the temptations of lust and began, in earnest, to narrate the stories unclimactic end.

“On the strength of this, the general, soon after Elanor’s marriage, permitted his son to return to Northanger, and thence made him the bearer of his consent, very courteously worded in a page full of empty professions to Mr. Morland.” Mischievously pausing there long enough to prompt Jethro into pinching her arm, Henrietta giggled irreverently and pinched him on the shoulder in retaliation before continuing onward. “The event of which it authorized soon followed: Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang, and everyone smiled; and, as this took place within a twelvemonth from the first day of their meeting, it will not appear, after all the dreadful delays occasioned by the general’s cruelty, that they were essentially hurt by it. For to begin perfect happiness a the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced that the general’s unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled, by whomever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.”

And with that narrative thusly concluded, Henrietta set aside the aging volume with great gentleness and eagerly looked to her boyfriend to gauge his response, only to be promptly thrown off-guard by that which she saw. For rather than the satisfied expression she had expected, or the
unamused look she had feared might be a possibility, Jethro wore a very impish expression that served commendably to remind her of a young Tony moments before disaster struck in the form of some great mischief.

“You do understand,” Began he, “That the ending of that book was a very clear invitation for a debate.”

Feeling all the adrenaline being faced with yet another literary debate provided, Henrietta beamed widely and thought to herself that she was very lucky, indeed, to have so soon found a man like Jethro upon her return from isolation.

“Of course.” She grinned. “That was the very reason I selected this book.”
Chapter 44

Having stubbornly and resolutely decided to fix a decent supper comprised of chicken hotdish and buttered rolls for her boyfriend, despite said man’s repeated attempts at a chivalrous refusal of such efforts, Henrietta putzed about the retired Marine’s kitchen and expertly dished out for the guests of such a meal portions both equal in size and appearance. For despite the great and uncorruptible love she bore for her only child, as well as the great affection she was rapidly beginning to feel for her newest of suitors, Katie was in attendance at such an impromptu meal and, as a result, prevented all instances of nepotism or girlfriendly prejudice from taking place. Because as much as Henrietta most ardently enjoyed spoiling the men in her life, her son especially, her womanly loyalty and motherly instincts provoked within her a desire to be more fair with her affections when in the presence of such a fragile young woman. For having already endured quite a vicious snubbing from her own mother not too long ago, the wound of being set aside for negligible reasons was likely still very fresh and in danger of being reopened should feelings of being unfairly compared to her colleague and boss start to set in.

“What’s Seamus doing anyways?” Jethro inquired of the young woman, a mere ten minutes into the meal. “I can’t imagine you two would want to be apart so soon after your wedding.”

Nearly choking on a small bit of buttered roll at such a poorly-concealed illusion to the unquenchable lust of newlyweds, Henrietta hastily swallowed down a great portion of milk to loosen the bread stuck in her throat and stealthily pinched her boyfriend’s thigh beneath the table.

“Seamus had a brain surgery scheduled for this morning.” Kate explained, a notable blush coloring her otherwise pale cheeks. “He won’t be back until later tonight.”

Idly thinking that such an unpleasant occurrence was, perhaps, to blame for Kate’s initial sullenness upon making her appearance for supper, as no newlywed wished to spend any amount of time away from their spouse, Henrietta frowned inwardly and later resolved to press the subject of providing a more appropriate honeymoon for the jilted lovers to either Jethro or Vance. Because whilst Katie might very well have used up all her vacation and sick time in visiting Ireland to acquaint herself with her new family, a noble and respectable pursuit, Henrietta found it very hard to believe, or accept, that there wasn’t even two or three days that could be spared for the benefit of the newly-minted Walsh’s.

“Unfortunate.” Jethro grunted, eloquent as always. “What were you and Tony up to?”

Although Henrietta was almost certain that the inquiry was more of a polite question rather than an interrogation, as the latter was most definitely not appropriate at a supper table, she was soon thoroughly disabused of such a notion by the way in which Katie quailed and Tony pouted.

“We weren’t up to anything!” Tony protested, markedly petulant.

Watching in mild disapproval as her boyfriend leveled her son with a very firm and stern expression, the magnitude of which could have easily cowed even Hitler into submission, Henrietta nibbled on a bit of hotdish to keep from intervening and avowed, at the least, to allow the conversation to go on as uninhibited as possible, for no lover or son ever appropriately appreciated the acts a woman in their life took to protect them when said acts were carried out in front of an audience.

“You and Kate hate each other.” Jethro callously dismissed. “If you’re spending time together, it has to be because you two are up to something. So spit it out.” Demanded the former
Marine without abandon. “The longer you keep a secret from me, the madder I’ll be when I discover it. And, rest assured, that I will discover it.”

Heartily regretted her decision not to intervene from the very start, as the blanching of poor Katie’s face was really quite heart-wrenching indeed, Henrietta again pinched her boyfriend’s thigh and levelled him promptly with a glare that could have cowed even Lucifer himself.

“Jethro,” She rebuked with a frown, “Stop being so militant. You’re not at work anymore and Katie and Tony are free to do as they please.”

Despite finding the very concept of quarreling with her boyfriend highly distasteful indeed, as her livelier spirits sought to avoid arguments rather than seek them, Henrietta remained firm in her chastisement and refused to be swayed by the unpleasant feelings such an action provoked within her. For knowing the friendship between her son and surrogate-daughter to be of a very close nature, as well as understanding the secret behind their afternoon errand to be relatively harmless, she simply could not sit idle and allow the innocent duo to be so castigated.

“Tony was just taking me to the doctor.” Kate hastily supplied, clearly and understandably not at all keen to play witness to an argument. “Abby normally would have but…she’s in Romania.”

Although Henrietta was not at all amused at the fashion in which such a hasty confession was coerced from the younger woman, she was markedly relieved that such an admission was incontrovertibly truthful, as anything other then sheer honesty would have very likely aggravated her beau into spearheading yet another, harsher, interrogation. An unpleasant occurrence she had most heartily hoped to avoid, for should Jethro lean that Tony (in the absence of Seamus) had been commandeered into accompanying Kate to an obstetrician, the resulting questions would only lead to the very uncomfortable discovery of the secret that his sole female agent wished to be keep under the strictest of confidences.

“You’ve been sick a lot, lately.” Jethro observed, nailing his still very uncomfortable agent with a piercing gaze. “Should I be worried?”

Instantaneously turning a very vivid shade of crimson, the intensity of which seemed to startle even the normally aloof Jethro to a certain degree, Kate subconsciously pressed a protective hand against the nonexistent swell of her belly and, by doing so, subsequently brought about the demise of her closely-guarded secret. For while the former Marine was nowhere near as privy as to the nature of most womanly habits, he had been the husband to an expectant woman at one time, and as such, was unmistakably able to detect the significance of a cradled belly without assistance.

“Are congratulations in order?” Jethro wryly amended, oblivious to his great error as he quirked a silver eyebrow at the expectant woman.

Helplessly unable to do anything to rectify the situation as poor Katie’s face drained of color and crumpled, as the Great Secret was out with no real way to recapture and contain it, Henrietta fussed restlessly in her chair, utterly and entirely unsure of what was to be done until, moments into the sudden silence, Kate burst into tears and buried her face in her hands.

“Oh, Jethro.” Henrietta sighed, leaping immediately to her feet to hug the distraught woman from behind. “You’re never supposed to ask a woman that question.”

Looking heartily confused at the events of the last several seconds, almost pitifully so, Jethro looked to Tony for aid only to be met with a very uncomfortable expression that somehow denoted the fact that he was not the one to be coming to for questions.
“I didn’t mean – I don’t understand what all the fuss is about.” Jethro stammered, clearly very uncomfortable when faced with the sight of womanly tears. “Hell, aren’t you excited, Kate?”

Dramatically tearing her hands away from her flushed face to reveal a rather heartbreaking countenance of despair and anguish, Katie let loose from her lips a rather guttural cry before finally finding it within her to respond to her employers question with some semblance of dignity and coherence.

“No!” She cried, eyes all aflame with a teary madness.

“No?” Jethro parroted, brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean? It’s a baby, Todd, not jury duty.”

Cringing in tandem with her son at such an unwittingly callous remark, Henrietta hugged Katie all the tighter as the young woman began to sob afresh and wished, all the while, that she had the power at her disposal to fix all her hurts.

“It’s not Seamus’s!” Katie exploded, more anguished then enraged.

“Not Seamus’s?” Jethro repeated. “What do you mean…You wouldn’t…I know you wouldn’t step out….”

“Boss,” Kate cried, “It’s Ari Haswari’s.”
Despite having very clearly been the only innocent victim of such a heedless interrogation, one wherein her prenuptial chastity had been callously called into question, Kate had soon found, to her rising horror, that she was promptly thrust into the receiving end of no small amount of panic and consternation as she helplessly watched her normally stoic employer color violently and clutch at his chest. For whilst Gibbs was purportedly as strong and healthy as the most exemplary breed of oxen, whatever variety that might be, the way in which the former Marine had looked ready to drop from sheer rage alone had worried her to no end. Because as stern and aloof as her boss usually was when it came to dealing with his agents, sans Tony, Kate really had come to think of the gruff man as some sort of uncle-figure throughout the years. And, as such, she was darned if she was going to be anything less than devastated should the coffee addict keel over in front of her – even if said man had earlier insulted her by insinuating she was getting up to some nefarious hijinks with his son.

“Jethro!” Henrietta squawked, looking very much the panicked housewife. “Would you say something!!”

Having up until that point remained stubbornly seated in his chair whilst everyone else had flocked over to comfort her after the rather dramatic revealing of her ghastly assault, Gibbs took several deeps and rose rather stonily to his feet, his left eye twitching all the while in a manner that easily suggested he was about to go rouge in a manner not at all condoned by those that employed him. And, sure enough, as soon as the fuming older man had recovered he did just that by making to seize the rifle he had placed on the kitchen counter after showing Tony the correct way to adjust a scope, his fingers just barely inches from the stock before his son intervened and yanked the weapon out of his reach.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” Tony demanded, hastily thrusting the rifle into his mother’s hands as, understandably, that was the best way to keep it out of the reach of his boss.

“What do you think I’m doing?” Gibbs growled, face still markedly red and purple.

Entirely overwhelmed by this point in the evening, as already her afternoon had been fraught with the occurrence of having to go to an ultrasound sans Seamus, Kate felt her own face flood with her own personal telltale sign of anger and couldn’t help but bring her own voice into the argument with a bit more volume than was strictly necessary.

“What!?” Kate snapped, throwing up her hands in consternation. “Are you going to shoot a corpse, Gibbs!?”

Understandably startled by the deliverance of such an uncharacteristic outburst from what was easily one of his most obedient agents, Gibbs stiffened in response to the unexpected verbal assault and hastily opened his mouth to respond in kind, only to remember himself at the last moment and reluctantly swallow down whatever response he had been more than prepared to give.

“Haswari is dead, Gibbs.” Kate added, her tone much softer. “There isn’t anything you can do anymore.”

And, with that morbid and depressing thought now hanging in the air, Kate began to cry afresh, only this time instead of heaving sobs that shook her entire frame, it was a more dignified type of sorrow – the type that came with both time and the knowledge that tears would never be able to rectify the problem that had precipitated them.
“Oh, Katie.” Henrietta murmured, pulling her tightly into a motherly embrace.

“He’s dead.” Kate babbled, feeling no relief. “He’s dead.”

Because even if she knew said monster was currently buried in some untended grave that had barely had any time to regrow its grass, the very thought that there might still be some part of him that could live on in her unborn child frightened her more than she liked to admit. For having grown up in a home where love was very much a thing that had to be earned if you were a girl, she most certainly did not want the same fate for her own progeny. For, at the end of the day, it was most certainly not the baby’s fault that its conception had been brought about by the most grisly of means.

“Poor thing.” Henrietta murmured, petting her hair. “You’ve had such a long day, haven’t you?”

Only able to nod in response to the question, as she didn’t quite trust her voice not to break at the moment, Kate swiped at her eyes with a napkin Tony hastily supplied and tried to avoid all contact with the boss she had just impatiently snapped at, not quite knowing for sure how said man would react to such a perceived slight. Because as distress as Kate clearly was at the moment, Gibbs had never been one to tolerate being spoken to in so disrespectful a manner.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Gibbs demanded, the question spoken softly yet no less aggressively.

“Jethro!” Henrietta hissed, pausing in her stroking to glare at her boyfriend. “Enough.”

The mild scolding seeming to be more than enough to quiet the former Marine, at least for the time being, Henrietta promptly resumed the petting of her hair even as Tony began to politely ply her with more tissues to tend to the mascara now streaked down her cheeks.

“You should have told me.” Gibbs asserted, after several long moments had elapsed with nobody saying anything.

Having already heard the same sentiments from her father, and then been promptly plied with a large of money to bribe her into aborting the child she now carried, Kate bristled and the question and couldn’t keep the venom from her voice as she answered.

“What good would it have done?” She demanded, clinging tightly to the woman stroking her hair. “The damage was already done. There was nothing you could have done.”
Chapter 46

Having taken charge of the situation well before it could get anymore out of hand than it already was, Henrietta had made the executive decision to task her son with accompanying Katie home and keeping her company until Seamus arrived and had also, likewise, ordered her boyfriend into the living room to calm down whilst she cleaned up the remains of the disastrous supper she had earlier labored in love to create. Because as much as she hated the idea of separating herself from two people who could clearly use her loving attention, which was ardently so, Henrietta knew perfectly well that Katie would be in more than good enough company with Tony to care for her and understood, as well, that Jethro needed a little time to collect himself before being faced with the uncomfortable conversation that must needs follow such a tumultuous evening.

“I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t have spoke to her like that.” Jethro sighed, sneaking into the kitchen as she was putting the last of the dishes into the dishwasher. “I lost my temper.”

Already having been informed of her boyfriend’s slight anger-management problem by her son ages ago via mild illusions in his many letters to her during their long separation, Henrietta frowned and promptly realized, with no small amount of concern, that said issue wasn’t at all as mild as Tony had made it seem during their literary correspondence. For if his tendency to yell when enraged was not an adequate indicator of the depth of such a problem, the way in which he had almost casually reached for his rifle most certainly was. But, rather than focus their impending conversation on that particularly troubling subject, Henrietta tucked the issue away for later discussion and refocused on the matter at hand – thinking it to be of far greater import at the moment seeing as the aftermath of such an explosive confession was still likely fresh in the temperamental Marine’s mind.

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Henrietta agreed, firmly yet evenly. “Katie already feels guilty enough about…this. She doesn’t need to be yelled atop of everything else.”

Sinking wearily down into the same chair he had been seated in during supper, Jethro sighed aloud his disconcertment and ran a hand through his graying hair.

“I don’t know what she should feel guilty for.” Jethro grumbled, subconsciously bringing a hand up to his head to smooth the hair he had just ruffled.

Taking a bit longer the necessary to start up the dishwasher, simply so she could get a better handle on all the mother instincts within her that screamed she should be with the distraught Kate right now, Henrietta swallowed down the sympathetic lump in her throat and swiped at her eyes before moving away from the kitchen appliance to take the chair directly beside her flustered boyfriend.

“Her parents have been blaming her a lot for this.” Henrietta explained, hastily capturing his rougher hands in her own so that he might not flee the table in search of his rifle again. “They think she shouldn’t have put herself in a position where…where something like this could have happened to her.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Jethro barked, face coloring all over again. “Something like…like that happens to all sorts of people! Her being an agent had nothing to do with it!”

Flinching a bit at the raised voice, as she had not been the unlucky recipient of such a treatment since making the decision to shun both Senior and her parents, Henrietta frowned her rebuke but otherwise allowed the behavior to slide for the sake of the conversation at hand.
“You investigate all sorts of crime, Jethro.” Henrietta gently reminded. “You have to know that women get more than their fair share of victim-blaming.”

Taking on a very anguished expression as the wisdom of such words gradually began to resonate within his mind, Jethro growled loudly his frustrations and promptly buried his face in his calloused hands in an effort to avoid throwing the object nearest him at the wall. Which, given his close proximity to the ceramic saltshaker, Henrietta was most heartily grateful for.

“I shouldn’t have sent her off alone.” Jethro bitterly expressed. “I should have made…I should have made someone go with her.”

“Oh, Jethro.” Henrietta frowned, hastily wrapping her arms about his body. “This isn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known what would happen – no one could.”

Shaking his head in denial at the very thought, as well as to express the great deal of guilt he was now wrongly experiencing on behalf of Katie’s assault, Jethro wearily closed his eyes and expelled a great deal of oxygen from his nose.

“Is that why Kate is so angry with me?” He inquired, voice impossible small.

Immediately tightening her grip about his person in response to such a question, Henrietta vigorously shook her head before seizing Jethro’s stubbly chin with a gentle hand and directing his gaze to her face.

“Katie doesn’t blame you, not at all.” She adamantly declared.

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” Jethro sighed, gently extracting his chin from her hand.

Ardently protesting against the very idea that she might ever lie to her boyfriend simply to make him feel better, Henrietta shook her head and again forced her boyfriend to look her in the eyes by seizing his chin.

“Katie doesn’t blame you.” She repeated, more forceful then before. “Trust me.”

Looking as if her assertions were but of a small consolation in place of actually hearing the same words from the mouth of the agent he feared was angry with him, Jethro tore his gaze away from her eyes and stared down at the table with a notable expression of guilt still showing upon his face.

“I still don’t understand why she wouldn’t have told me.” Jethro groused. “It’s not like she could have kept this a secret for long. I mean, she has to start showing sooner or later.”

Unable to argue against such sound logic, as indeed all the outward signs of pregnancy would soon begin to show themselves, Henrietta sighed herself and took several moments to recollect her thoughts before responding to such a blunt statement – her search for some sort of tactful way to broach an unpleasant subject very important to her as she wished to avoid a quarrel that evening.

“I think she was scared, Jethro.” She finally opined.

“Of what?” Her boyfriend questioned, furrowing his brow.

Stiffening a bit at the question, as she so sorely didn’t wish to answer it truthfully, Henrietta nibbled at her lip for a long moment and frantically searched all the recesses of her mind for a
suitable answer to the inquiry. Because whilst a certain amount of bluntness might be a desired trait in some people, it most certainly was not within her to be callous should the situation not strictly call for such behavior.

“You think she was scared of me.” Jethro spoke, interrupting her silent contemplations with both a frown and statement.

Frowning deeply upon being so suddenly confronted with the truth, Henrietta grabbed up one of her boyfriend’s hands with her own and squeezed the calloused fingers before answering, hoping to, at the very least, give the Marine some sort of comfort before egregiously hurting his feelings.

“Yes.” She sighed. “I’m sorry, but yes.”

Flinching a bit at the verbal assault, as if the words themselves had somehow actually been a physical blow, Jethro grimaced and used his free hand to hand to muss his hair once more.

“I don’t understand why.” He confessed, honestly and frustratingly nonplussed.

“Jethro,” Henrietta frowned, “You just pulled a gun out an hour ago.”

Not even having the decency to look mildly guilty at such a sound remonstration, Jethro took on a bewildered expression and threw up his hands into the air.

“It’s not like I was pointing it at her!”

“No – but you’re still rather frightening when you’re angry!” Henrietta retorted. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

It was no real exaggeration she made either, for when properly enraged Jethro really did bare a remarkable resemblance to a drunken Senior moments before striking.

“But I’m her boss.” Jethro argued, missing the point entirely. “Kate doesn’t need to be afraid of me.”

Reluctantly coming to the conclusion that a bit of bluntness was going to be needed to get through to her boyfriend, as said man was proving to be remarkably stupid when it came to dealing with emotions and feelings, Henrietta sighed inwardly but nonetheless launched into her reply without reserve.

“Jethro,” She frowned, “I don’t…I don’t think that Katie is the only agent afraid of you.”

“What are you talking about?” He grumbled. “None of my agents are afraid of me.”

“They are, Jethro.” Henrietta gently refuted. “And I’m not just saying this to hurt your feelings, either. But, for Christ’s Sake, Jethro, Jimmy can’t even be around you without having a full-fledged panic attack and Tim isn’t much better. Hell, even Tony is afraid of you sometimes.”

Looking as if Henrietta had just suggested he go off and pleasure himself with a poison-coated cactus, Jethro scoffed vocally at her assertion and shook his head to further emphasis his disagreement.

“They aren’t afraid of me.” He argued. “They just know not to make me angry.”

“Jethro,” Henrietta rebuked, “Do you hear yourself right now?”
Taking a moment to reflect upon his choice of words, and then cringing guiltily as the weight of them registered within his stubborn mind, Jethro angrily smoothed his hair with a clumsy hand and glowered at the table.

“Well, I can’t help it if they’re afraid of me.” He grumbled. “They have no reason to be!”

Having been made privy by her son to the many instances in which Jethro had delivered a stinging headslap to one of his agents, an assault always accompanied by an inexcusable verbal tirade, Henrietta gave her boyfriend a disbelieving look and immediately sought to challenge him on such a ridiculous notion.

“Are you sure of that?”

Clearly not at all familiar with the concept of being questioned, Jethro frowned deeply and all but shouted his response.

“Yes!”

Only narrowly holding back her desire to quip to that there was no real need for yelling given their close proximity, Henrietta calmly placed a placating hand on her boyfriend’s good knee and trudged along with the conversation in a more pliant manner, figuring that if any progress was to be made at all that evening, it would have to be at the expense of her pride.

“Can you really not think of any reason why your agents might be scared to come to you with things like this?”

Descending into a sullen silence as he began to contemplate the matter, Jethro picked at his fingernails in clear agitation and looked ready to draw blood from his fingers until she stilled him with a simple hand placed to his shoulder.

“I suppose you think I shouldn’t yell at them…or hit them.”

“This isn’t about what I think, Jethro.” Henrietta corrected. “But…no. I don’t think yelling or hitting is especially conducive to good leadership. Fear will only keep people obedient until the fear wears off. Respect however…”

“My agents do respect me.” Jethro hastily argued. “I know that, at least.”

Not at all disbelieving of such a fact, as she herself had borne witness to the myriad ways in which Jethro’s agents showed their respect to his person, Henrietta nodded her agreement but couldn’t keep from further pressing the matter at hand.

“I think they might fear you more.”

“A little fear isn’t out of place every now and then.” Jethro asserted, sounding less and less sure of himself as their conversation waged on.

“Jethro,” Henrietta began, “Authoritatism and authoritarianism are two very different things. One gets you a healthy amount of respect and the other fearful obedience.”

And, thought she with no small amount of bitterness, nobody could better know the difference than her. For if a life spent with narcissistic and domineering parents had not taught her what true authoritarianism was, a hellish eight years of marriage to Senior certainly had.

“I need to run a tight ship. It’s imperative to the job.”
“Jethro, this isn’t the Marines. You don’t need to break your agents down in the pursuit of building them up. And they’ll never fully trust you if they fear you. How could they?’’

Begrudgingly accepting the advice with a small frown, Jethro shook his head and looked at a loss for words.

“What would you have me do instead?”

“Mentor them. Guide them.” Henrietta suggested. “I’m not saying you have treat them as well as you treat Tony, but you could at least give them the same respect you give Abby. They’re good agents, Jethro. And they want to please you. They don’t need to be afraid of you in order to work hard.”

“If I did that, they’d all go soft.” Jethro asserted, thought not with any real enthusiasm.

Sensing that she was, at last, making decent headway in the pursuit of driving home her point, Henrietta smiled to herself and presenting one last challenge to her boyfriend.

“Has Abby gotten soft?”

Unable to answer that question without promptly admitted defeat, Jethro frowned petulantly and took on a very betrayed expression.

“Look,” Henrietta smiled, “I’m not saying you have to go all Mr. Rogers on them. All I’m suggesting you do is leave the Drill Sergeant at home. You might just be surprised at the results.”

“Maybe.” Jethro reluctantly admitted. “But enough about me. What are you going to do about Kate?”

“We’re going to take care of her.” Henrietta readily supplied. “No man left behind, right?”

“Oorah.” Jethro replied, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“Oorah.” She agreed, kissing his nose.
Whilst nervousness was not often an affliction she could openly claim any real ownership to, Henrietta soon found, to her rising consternation, that the longer she tarried in her boyfriend’s bathroom on the pretense of fixing her bra strap the more anxious and unsettled she became. For having just spent a good two hours engrossed with listening to Jethro read to her from the aged copy of Pride and Prejudice she always kept in her purse, Henrietta had immediately decided afterwards that tonight would be the night they consummated their fledgling relationship. And, as such, it had been most highly necessary that she abscond to the bathroom for a bit so that she might somehow make quick work of the forest residing on her legs. Because as sex-positive as she was, which was quite so, nothing mortified her so much as thought of presenting herself to a man with three months of hair coating her legs. Her vagina, perhaps, but only because Jethro had reached the peak of adulthood in the 70’s and would expect such a visage.

And so, it was with those thoughts in mind that Henrietta began to attack her legs with the flimsy disposal razor she always carried with her in the most discreet pocket of her purse, cursing its unique fallibility as it missed several strands of hair even as she silently thanked her lucky stars that it did, at the very least, mitigate the hairiness to a slightly more appealing nature. Because with a few dabs of shaving cream pilfered from her boyfriend, as well as a great deal of unseemly acrobatics, her legs were devoid enough of hair to adequately fool her boyfriend in the relative darkness his bedroom would provide.

That task promptly taken care of, at least as well as she could have reasonable hoped for, Henrietta then promptly buried the evidence of her lack of womanliness in the garbage and prayed that Jethro wouldn’t discover the befouled disposal razor buried beneath the copious and suspicious amounts of toilet paper she had piled atop it. Because as proud as she was to be a woman, which was markedly so, there were just some things that ought to be left to the mystery of men – tampons and leg hair being just two of those scandalous things.

Thankfully for the both of them, she had steadily worked at enough of a speed to finish before Jethro’s suspicions became aroused and prompted him to investigate. For whilst the leg hair, and all accompanying evidence of it had been hidden, Henrietta still had a bit of work to do before came hunting for her out of concern. For still dressed in the same green sweater and black skirt she had arrived in, she worried her image might convey to her clueless boyfriend that she wished to do far more innocent acts with him then what she actually intended. And so, with that concern in mind, Henrietta made quick of a solution by hastily doffing her outerwear and brassier and leaving only her undergarments and socks on. For with that sort of scandalous outfit, thought she, there could be no mistaking her intentions.

“Jethro!” She called, skillfully reapplying her lipstick without the aid of a mirror. “Come here! I have something I need to show you!”

Knowing that the ever-curious Marine would hastily move to obey her harmless request, Henrietta refrained from feigning an emergency to hasten his footfalls and settled, instead, for seating herself on the rim of the tub in patient anticipation, her legs cocked just a bit to aid her in balance as well as to provide an enticing view for her boyfriend immediately upon entry.

“Hen?” Jethro promptly inquired, knocking politely at the door. “Are you alright? You’ve been in there for a while…”

Blushing at the casual insinuation that she might have developed a sour stomach after an evening spent doing nothing but listen to her boyfriend read, Henrietta stole a glance of her visage in
the mirror to remind herself of how well she looked, and then promptly answered her boyfriend’s inquiries with as alluring a voice as possible.

“Jethro.” She sang, keeping her voice light and sweet. “I’m waiting.”

“Jesus Christ, woman.” Jethro moaned, directly outside the door. “Are you trying to tempt me?”

“Yes.” Henrietta confessed, with no sense of shame at all. “So get your ass in here.”

Hearing the unmistakable sounds of an aroused groan from the other side of the door, Henrietta grinned victoriously and arched her back a bit so that her bared breasts would be on full display upon entry. For if the moist organ betwixt her legs somehow failed to properly capture the Marine’s attentions, the modestly-sized lumps of fat on her chest most certainly would.

“Here I come.” Jethro warned, rapping at the door just once before pushing it open.

Much to her absolute delight, the arching of her back proved to have been a most prudent measure, for only seconds into his impatient entrance Jethro’s piercing blue eyes flickered to her uncovered chest and remained that way for several seconds.

“Don’t just stare.” Henrietta mildly rebuked. “Kiss me.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Jethro managed, the words hardly comprehensible due to the amount of lust coating them.

And, ever true to his word, Jethro stalked across the bathroom in four long strides and swooped down to kiss her without any further appeals needed to motivate him, his strong hands wrapping protectively around her body to keep her from falling backward into the tub even as he vigorously attacked her perfumed neck with his impossibly hungry and chapped lips.

“Jethro!” She gasped, bare flesh rippling with the goosebumps only pleasure could ignite.

Feeling against the sensitive skin of her neck the corners of his lips being turned up in a wicked smile, Henrietta shivered afresh and all but gasped like an innocent eighth-grader when Jethro parted those chapped lips and began to nibble hungrily at her neck.

“Jethro.” She panted, entirely overwhelmed as he ravished the most sensitive part of her body. “Oh my God, I can’t breathe.”

It was only once she had issued forth such an admittedly passionate declaration that things began to advance sufficiently enough to ensure her of the fact that consummation would, in fact, be happening that evening. For with a rather salacious gleam livening up his piercing blue eyes, Jethro moved his mouth from her neck and pressed it firmly against her own, his hands impatient as they gently pulled her to her feet and wrapped themselves about her slender body without abandon – one hand in tangled up in the curls of her hair and the other quite cheekily pressed against her ample backside in a manner most possessive and alluring. And, wishing most heartily to return such a favor, Henrietta moaned loudly to denote her pleasure and gave into the sudden temptation to chomp down on his bottom lip, the urge to mark him as belonging to her far too powerful to ignore in favor of considering the fact that her boyfriend might not enjoy such a painful reciprocation.

“Hen.” Jethro gasped, flinching violently at the assault. “Do that again.”

More than just a little relieved upon learning that her boyfriend did not hold her impulsive biting against her, but rather seemed to enjoy the concept quite a bit, Henrietta grinned openly and
pressed her lithe body up against him as she kissed and nibbled at his lips with renewed fervor. And, all but rendered senseless by such a newly discovered kink, Jethro responded passionately to the act of affection by wrapping his arms about her tiny waist and pulling her ever closer to his person – prompting her, in kind, to stretch up her arms and dig the slender digits of her hands into his already tousled hair.

It was only then, that Jethro seemed to realize he must have her. For suddenly looking very sure of himself as he broke their embrace, the panting Marine impatiently seized her beneath the armpits and lifted her effortlessly into the air, the very act, whilst exhilarating, prompting her wrap her legs about his waist for security and support in a manner he had very clearly been hoping for. For suddenly envigored by the sensation of having the warmness of her legs so very near to his throbbing manhood, Jethro gave a beastlike moan and all but kicked the bathroom door down in his pursuit to sooner get her into the bedroom they had spent all evening reading in.

Such was his haste, that the two of them fell through his half-opened bedroom door in a kissing contortion of tangled limbs and conjoined lips, very nearly landing in an ungraceful heap upon the floor until Jethro hastily righted their balance and promptly tossed her unto the soft mattress without warning. And then, almost immediately afterward, much to Henrietta’s absolute delight, Jethro leaped over the ornate footboard of the bed like a predator in frenzied pursuit of its prey and landed, on his good knee, just inches away from her feet.

“Jethro.” She panted, shuddering in rapture as he seized her ankles and pulled her nearer.

“Hush.” Jethro murmured, edging his fingers up her thighs. “Let me take care of you.”

Having never before been on the receiving end of pleasure, unless one counted the joy that could be artificially garnered from a sex toy, Henrietta nearly shrieked in pleasure as Jethro used his tongue to attack the sensitive part of her body that rested betwixt her legs. For having very often been forced to rely upon the use of her own fingers, or toys, to deduce any real enjoyment from her most womanly of organs, the experience of a better skilled person navigating the area was almost too much to handle.

“Do you like that?” Jethro inquired, resurfacing after a long ten minutes had elapse.

Unable to issue forth a verbal reply to such an intoxicating question, Henrietta uncurled her toes and gave a stifled cry of pleasure, earning for herself a very lascivious grin from the boyfriend who had just rendered her breathless not moments ago.

“Get that smile off your face and take off your pants.” Henrietta ordered, still slightly breathless. “I can only hold out so long.”
Chapter 48

Having woken that morning in quite a good mood, an prebreakfast romp with his insatiable girlfriend having been the cause of such uncharacteristic amiability, Gibbs found himself more than capable of heeding his girlfriend’s sage advice from the evening before and did not so much as slap any of his agents once throughout that monotonous morning. A more than impressive feat, thought he, as Tony had been pushing his luck all damn day by making repeated demands to know why his lips had come to be so unmistakably bruised. Because whilst he was initially certain that the question had been innocent and well-intended at the start, the longer Tony persisted in trying to force an answer from him made Gibbs start to question the younger man’s intentions.

“I’m going for lunch!” Gibbs growled, after Tony had asked the selfsame impertinent question for the eleventh time. “Todd – with me.”

Startling greatly from behind her computer monitor, as up until then Gibbs had largely ignored her, Kate blanched a bit and absurdly took on an expression of one about to meet their untimely demise at the scaffold.

“I brought my own lunch from home.” She meekly argued, holding up for a display a large bag of salt-and-vinegar chips.

Scowling openly at the poor substitute for a meal, as those chips seemed to be the only thing to capture Kate’s appetite of late, Gibbs silently avowed to later suggest to the expectant woman that she go back to her obstetrician as soon as possible for some anti-nausea medication. Because whilst Shannon had been blessed with a relatively uneventful pregnancy, save for a little troublesome swelling of her skinny ankles, Gibbs knew more than enough about basic nutrition to know that a developing baby couldn’t just subsist on cheap chips and Ginger Ale.

“So bring it along.” Gibbs directed, already shrugging into his coat.

Seeming very much resigned to the fate of sharing her lunch-hour with the gruff employer who had so recently been prepared to desecrate a corpse, Kate rose stonily to her feet and very slowly shrugged into her own coat.

“Sometime today, Todd.” Gibbs grumbled.

Reluctantly hastening the speed in which she prepared for their impromptu lunch date, Kate frowned deeply but nonetheless hastily snatched the fresh bag of chips from her desk before hesitatingly making her way over to his side.

“Where are we going?” She inquired, following slowly after as he led her toward the elevator.

“For a walk.” Gibbs declared, as eloquent as always.

Seeming to understand that she would receive no real answer to her question with repeated inquiries, as she had spent all morning watching Tony fail at the same pursuit, Kate sighed softly to herself but otherwise raised no real protests as Gibbs led the both of them throughout the building and unto the roof.

“It’s not too cold out here for you, is it?” Gibbs inquired.

“No.” Kate quickly assured, gently lowering herself to the floor. “It’s just fine.”
Seeing as how the weather of the last two days had been unseasonably warm, in what was surely some last hurrah before an early winter set in, Gibbs didn’t feel the need to press the issue as he lowered himself to sit beside his expectant agent.

“Here.” Gibbs grumbled, opening the bag of chips for her. “Eat up.”

Needing no real motivation to indulge her most persistent of cravings, Kate snaked a slender hand into the bag of crisps and pulled out a large handful before unceremoniously tossing the entire quantity into her tiny mouth in a manner very reminiscent of Tony attacking a pizza. But rather than reprimand her for such garish behavior, as he might have done his Senior Agent, Gibbs shook his head in mild consternation and silently thanked his lucky starts that his sole female agent had developed a hankering for plain butter like Shannon had. Because no matter how many times he had tried to get over the absurd squeamishness that watching his wife down two bars of softened butter provided, he just hadn’t been able to with any real success.

“Look,” Gibbs began, having waited until her mouth was full to speak, “I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did last night. I was out of line.”

Because even if he did have a more than adequate excuse for being so enraged, the way in which he had acted in response to that flood of feeling had been more than just a little inappropriate. For gun or not, all the yelling in front of a distraught pregnant woman had certainly been uncalled for at best.

“Gibbs…don’t.” Kate implored, hastily having swallowed down her chips. “I already spent half-an-hour crying this morning at the gas pumps.”

Vaguely wondering if the failure of the machine to provide a receipt was the culprit for such behavior, as such had been the frequent cause of tears for Shannon, Gibbs frowned and considerately passed over to his teary-eyed agent a clean tissue fished free from the pocket of his jacket.

“Nobody is saying you have to cry.” Gibbs bluntly dismissed. “I’m apologizing, not berating you.”

Valiantly trying to hold back her tears in an effort to retain some sort of dignity, Kate blinked rapidly and held the tissue against her waterier left eye in pursuit of preparing for an onslaught of tears that might befoul her cheek with mascara.

“You don’t ever apologize.” Kate sniffed. “What gives?”

“I don’t apologize when I’m not sorry.” Gibbs corrected.

Leveling him with a very sardonic expression, one that clearly conveyed she knew him to be lying, Kate quirked an eyebrow at him and promptly dismantled his argument with just a few words.

“I’ve never heard that side of the argument before.”

“Would you shut up and let me do this properly?” Gibbs groused, not at all as angrily as he might have.

Not flinching as she might have done had Gibbs actually been angry, Kate awkwardly rifled through her bag of chips in pursuit of the perfect specimen and avoided all eye contact with him.

“You already apologized.” She gently admonished.

Feeling every bit just as awkward as the expectant mother, Gibbs sighed and ran a hand
through his hair before managing to finally find any words suitable enough to convey the passion of his apology.

“You know I only got so angry because he hurt you, right?” Gibbs questioned. “I would never blame you for what happened.”

Blushing slightly at the uncomfortable reference to her earlier sexual assault, Kate fidgeted with the napkin in her hand and blinked rapidly several times.

“I know that, Gibbs.” Kate asserted, perfectly genuine.

“Then why didn’t you come to me?” He questioned, still very hurt by the deception.

Because even if he could understand the need for secrecy in the first stages of pregnancy, as many women believed it was bad luck to announce before the second trimester, it still wounded him deeply to think that one of his agents had been afraid to come to him after being so brutally assaulted.

“Because,” Kate began, bottom lip wavering, “Because I’m not your problem to worry about.”

Having heard the selfsame proclamation from Tony several times before their father-son relationship had been firmly solidified, Gibbs flinched at Kate’s casual insinuation that she was not worth the effort of being cared for and inwardly resolved to later kick the collective asses of both her parents.

“Kate, that’s not true.” Gibbs calmly refuted. “All of you kids are my problem.” And, wishing to add a little levity to the situation, he then added. “Some of you might be bigger problems then others…but…still…I care about all of my agents.”

Looking very much like Gibbs had just suggested the sun set in the North, rather than the west, Kate frowned and began fiddling with her napkin all over again.

“I guess I just thought that only Abby and Tony were the only ones allowed to bother you with nonsense like this.”

“This isn’t nonsense, Kate.” Gibbs gently chastised. “And if something like…this…is happening to one of my agents, you can be damn sure I want to hear about it. I Know it might not seem like it…but I do care about all my agents. I’m just not the type to be so touchy-feely about it.”

It was no lie he spoke either, for apart from his wife and daughter, Gibbs had never shown anyone that much avert affection.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to you.” Kate apologized, brown eyes flooding with tears.

“Don’t be sorry about that.” Gibbs implored, feeling no small amount of shame for having ever made her feel guilty. “You did what you felt you had to do.”

Because even though he himself had never been assaulted in such a vile manner, Gibbs knew enough about human character to understand that people to tended to withdraw into themselves when faced with an influx of negative feelings.

“It’s just…it’s just that I’ve been trying to get a handle on how I feel before I tell everyone else.”

Having kept the deaths of Shannon and Kelly to himself for an absurd amount of time, to the
point where he wasn’t even sure if Kate and Tim knew about their existence, Gibbs could more than just sympathize with the assaulted soon-to-be mother – he could empathize with her.

“You’ve…You’ve told Seamus though, right?”

“Yes!” Kate hastily asserted. “And he’s excited – very excited. It’s just…I worry is all.”

Immensely relieved to learn that the young woman beside him hadn’t been foolish or selfish enough to believe that she could conceal this pregnancy from her husband, as well as greatly bereaved that she had been put in that position in the first place, Gibbs slumped against the chimney stack and wearily closed his eyes.

“About what people might say?” Gibbs inquired. “Because they don’t have to know. You don’t have to tell anyone anything you don’t want them to know.”

“It’s not that.” Kate frowned, a few rogue tears slipping down her cheek. “It’s that I’m worried…I’m worried that the baby might look like Ari Haswari. And…And I don’t know how to deal with that.”

Cringing violently at such a confession, as it produced within his mind some very gruesome thoughts, Gibbs forced himself to temper his rage toward the dead man by taking several deep breaths and afterward seized the expectant woman’s hand in a sudden fit of compassion.

“Kate, no matter what that kid looks like, it’ll still be yours.” Gibbs vehemently asserted.

“I know.” Kate cried, beginning to cry afresh. “I just worry that it’ll make it hard to love the baby.”

“Kate,” Gibbs frowned, “You already love that baby. I can tell by the way you clutch your stomach whenever your around suspects in interrogation.”

For even though Gibbs would have liked for nothing more than to keep his pregnant agent firmly behind her desk until after delivery, both Vance and Kate stubbornly refused to entertain the notion of being taken off active duty until at least the second trimester.

“But that’s now,” Kate sniffed, “I’m talking about after the baby is born.”

“Kate,” Gibbs sighed, squeezing her hand, “The moment that child is placed in your arms, you’re going to be flooded with the strongest feelings of love you have ever felt.”

Because even if it had been decades since the birth of his daughter, Gibbs still looked back fondly upon the memories of seeing his sweet and perfect Kelly for the first time – her skin all splotchy and pink and her hair a perfect mound of slightly reddish-brown hair that had immediately struck him as nearly the same hue as her grandmother’s. And not only did he recall her visage, so pretty and perfect, so too did he reflect fondly upon the memories of the way she had wailed and wailed until placed in his arms in a fit of desperation by the lead nurse, of the way she had quieted up in his embrace and parted her eyelids to reveal the same striking brown eyes as her mother, of the way he had been able to count all four freckles on her nose before being compelled to pass her over to an eager Shannon, the way his heart had contracted when the nurse said she had his chin, the way his heart had swelled with a joy he would never be able to fully explain.

“Are you sure?” Kate asked.

“I’m positive.” Gibbs assured, giving her fingers one last squeeze.
Despite having promised her child not to go overboard with her preparations for the Thanksgiving Holiday that was fast approaching, an event in which all her boyfriend’s agents had been invited to, Henrietta shamelessly found herself at the grocery store nearest to her son’s apartment for the third time that week, her ever growing list of side-dishes and appetizers having most recently expanded that morning upon her discovery of a rather enticing hord 'oeuvre in the pages of her magazine that she had never before tried. And while it did not necessarily follow that she couldn’t make use of such a recipe at some later point in her life, preferably once the Holiday season began to wind down, the foods distinctly peppermint composition made it so that such a lengthy delay would render it rather out of place on her supper table. A fate which, while certainly mild when compared to others, was all but inconceivable to she who had spent several decades perfecting the craft of arranging an appealing supper arrangement.

“Excuse me,” Henrietta pipped, touching a passing saleswoman on the elbow, “But could you tell me where the peppermint extract is?”

Looking initially frazzled upon registering the fact that someone had touched her, no doubt the sure result of having been groped several times throughout the Holiday Season, the gorgeous young woman stiffened and jerked her elbow away before curtly responding, in a very gruff tone, that the desired item was in the next aisle near the cleaning supplies.

“Thank you!” Henrietta grinned, refusing to take offense at the gruff manner in which she was addressed.

Understandably receiving no response in reply to her words of gratitude, as only moments later a rouge elderly lady appeared demanding sugarless oranges, Henrietta hastily made her retreat into the next aisle and silently prayed to whatever forces there might be that the unfortunate cashier might be allowed to leave such an absurd confrontation relatively unharmed. Because even though the young woman had addressed in so aggressive and unprovoked a manner, Henrietta knew more than enough about human psychology to understand that such hostility had simply been misdirected at her and was, as a result, not at all indicative of her worth as a person.

And so, with those comforting thoughts in mind, Henrietta carefully navigated her way down the aisle swarmed with a myriad of women, careful to avoid the meanest looking ones of the bunch as well as the unleashed chihuahua that was currently making a rather smelly mess on the portion of floor nearest to the mops. Thankfully for the sake of her sanity, as well as for the wellbeing of her favorite winter boots, the desired peppermint oil was quite far away from such an unsavory present, it being tucked safely away in a slightly dusty recess residing atop the highest shelf.

‘Well,’ Thought Henrietta with a slight frown, ‘Isn’t that just jolly?’

But rather than chose to dwell on her misfortunes for very long, as by doing so she would achieve utterly nothing in return, Henrietta took for herself a bracing breath and gingerly placed her booted foot until the bottommost shelf to tests its sturdiness, only to be immediately ingratiated for her efforts by the realization that the foundation of the shelving was not, as she suspected, cheap plywood. And so, thusly and subsequently assured of the rationality of her impromptu plan to achieve ownership of the coveted peppermint extract, Henrietta placed her remained foot beside the other and slowly, yet steadily, began her indecorous ascent toward glory. In fact, so uneventful was her spontaneous decision to take up climbing, that Henrietta soon found had the small bottle of oil in her hand in mere moments, the slender fingers of her left hand gently wrapped about its glass neck in triumph.
It was only when she made to begin her descent, such an act requiring some minor
distribution of her weight, that disaster struck. For despite having tolerated reasonably well her
meagre weight upon their initial greeting and contact, the capricious wooden slat holding her up
seemed suddenly to decide that her presence was all but unbearable and, as a result, began to creak
and bend in an ominous manner that seemed to suggest she would so be toppling to the floor in an
ungraceful heap.

“Hold still now, Miss.” A concerned voice called from behind her. “One false move and
you’ll bring the whole shelf down.”

Having not had any real desire to move any more than was strictly necessary, as a fall of
eight feet really was quite a dangerous ordeal for one barely five feet tall, Henrietta nodded to show
she understood the severity of the situation and immediately let out a scared let breath when said act
agonized the shelving to retaliate with a loud croak.

“Now hold still.” The unfamiliar voice behind her implored. “I’m going to grab you from
behind and see if I can’t lift you down.”

Nodding timidly her consent to the hastily-formed plot, as really she saw no other options,
Henrietta held her breath in anticipation and tried not to fidget too greatly as her unnamed hero
placed a pair of gentle (yet very calloused) hands on her waist and lifted her from the protesting
shelving with nary a warning nor grunt of complaint.

“There we are.” Her helpful assistant hummed, hastily retracting his hands from her waist just
as soon as she was settled firmly upon the ground. “Nothing to it.”

Pulling the skirt of her woolen dress back into its proper resting place below her knees,
Henrietta forcefully willed the blush from her flaming cheeks and subsequently spun around to give
her thanks to the man who had so gently, and skillfully, rescued her from certain carpentry related
disaster.

“Thank you, Sir.” She expressed, beaming openly into the face of a man with a markedly
kind and friendly countenance.

“Come now, there isn’t any need for such formalities.” The aging man promptly dismissed,
flippantly waving his wrinkled hand. “I was only doing what any man ought to have done.”

Glancing about quite pointedly at all the men who had failed to step in and assist her,
Henrietta smiled wryly at her savior and kissed his stubbly cheek.

“You’ll take my appreciation and be glad for it.” She playfully scolded, gently shooing away
the rouge dog with the toe of her boot as he came to investigate her ankles.

“Well,” Blushed her savior, his vivid and oddly familiar blue eyes all aglow, “Far it be it from
me to argue with a lady.”
Chapter 50

Although Gibbs would never admit, out loud, to the fact that he was slowly beginning to feel the effect of his age, not just where regarded his knee but his energy levels as well, he did occasionally allow himself the indulgence of an afternoon nap whenever the opportunity, and the lack of witnesses, provided itself. Which, given his time-consuming career and tendency toward workaholism, admittedly wasn’t as frequent as he might have liked it to be. But, rather than dwell overly long on the facts of life that he could not change, Gibbs yawned loudly as he sat up from his impromptu nap and thoroughly resolved never again to waste such a precious opportunity by being foolish enough to fall asleep on his sofa. For while the couch was, indeed, fairly soft, it stood to reason that a man who was no longer middle-aged needed a bit more support than such a furnishing could offer. Because newly refreshed or no, his impromptu nap atop the couch had left him with an aggravating kink in his neck as well. An annoyance, while admittedly minor, he thankfully didn’t have to dwell on very long – as moments later his front door opened with a flourish and admitted into his home a very beautiful woman.

“Honey, I’m home!” She bellowed, putting on a God-awful Ricky Ricardo impression.

Gazing in abject adoration upon his girlfriend’s grinning face, as she really did look quite the ravishing sight with her wind-blown hair and wind-pinkened cheeks, Jethro chivalrously hid all evidence of his wet-dream beneath a craftsman magazine and replied, with enthusiasm, to his girlfriend’s silly flirtations.

“Henrietta!” Gibbs appropriately retorted, making much better use of the infamous Cuban’s accent. “You’ve got some ‘splaining to do.”

Groaning theatrically in response to such a declaration, in a very Lucy-like fashion, Henrietta feigned a guilty expression and bashfully took a step forward.

“And what is that I have to explain, Sir?” She inquired, taking yet another step forward.

“Well, for starters,” Grinned Gibbs, “I need you to explain how it is that you can look so beautiful after being outside in that blizzard.”

Flushing alluringly at such a high accolade, the blood in her body rushing to her cheeks to make them all but rosy, Henrietta promptly dressed her purse to the floorboards and hurried across the room to plant a hearty kiss on his lips – leaving behind with such an action an intense feeling of longing within his soul as well as her trademark lipstick on his mouth.

“A fellow could get used being kissed like that.” Gibbs murmured, gently tugging the amorous woman unto his lap.

“You could get used to this.” Henrietta corrected, shoving her fingers in his hair. “And only you.”

Thoroughly bolstered by the very idea that his girlfriend would consider no one but he worthy of such an act of affection, Gibbs grinned proudly and entwined his own fingers through the impeccably-groomed curls belonging to she who sat in his lap and set ablaze his passions without even trying.

“That’s more than fine by me.” Gibbs murmured, audaciously moving a hand to grope one of her ample butt cheeks and pull her nearer. “How was your trip to the store?”
Carefully repositioning herself to better achieve individual comfort, as well as to avoid assaulting his knee with any undo pressure, Henrietta wriggled purposely about in an enticing manner and grinned naughtily as the evidence of his arousal became apparent through the fabric of her skirt.

“I’ll not bore you with the detail.” Henrietta deflected, wrapping her slender arms about his neck. “But I will tell you that I was victorious and, as a result, quite horny.”

Only growing exponentially more aroused at such a flirtatious remark, Gibbs groaned throatily and tightened his grip on her ass, hoping to use the hungry touch as a distraction from the fact that he was almost at full-mast where regarded the very important organ that resided betwixt his legs.

“I felt that Jethro.” Henrietta giggled, clearly not referring to his hand.

“You can’t just say things like that and expect me not to get aroused.” Gibbs retorted, by that point in time fully hot and bothered.

Appearing just as aroused as he was currently was, the lust and longing residing within her beautiful eyes of an alarming amount, Henrietta pressed herself even closer to his body and craned her neck to whisper in his ear.

“Oh, of course not.” She breathed, sending a shiver down his spine. “That would be cruel.”

“Then why did you say it?” Gibbs questioned, a hopeful tone lacing the words.

“Because,” Henrietta purred, “I need you to be aroused for what’s to come.”

Gracelessly letting out a breath he hadn’t known himself to be holding, Gibbs issued forth a very bestial sound from the back of his throat and only narrowly resisted the urge to throw her over his shoulder like a caveman so that their sure visit to his bedroom would go as quickly as possible.

“Tell me what’s to come.” Jethro begged, the confines of his jeans already uncomfortably tight.

Snaking down a hand to touch the button of his jeans, in a manner that very nearly had him panting like a dog in heat, Henrietta brought her head forward until their foreheads were touching and grinned cheekily.

“You, hopefully.” She quipped, unzipping his pants with one hand. “Because I do believe I owe you after what you did with your mouth last night.”

Reflecting fondly upon the remembrance of taking said woman in the bed of his truck, after an impromptu midnight date to get slushies, Gibbs grinned widely and brought his nose to rest against hers.

“I didn’t do that because I wanted anything in return.”

And it was not courtesy which provoked him into speaking either for, truth be told, Gibbs had received just as much pleasure from pleasing his girlfriend as he would have had she chosen to reciprocate in a similar manner that evening.

“Be that as it may, you were very generous and I intend to repay that favor.”

“Jethro, you were the first man to ever give me an orgasm.” Henrietta flirtatiously and shamelessly reminded. “That you only further graced me with... well... whatever that was last night shows me that you deserve a similar treat.”

Having not received such a sexual act since his second wife, both the third and fourth of such a group being staunch opponents of such a performance, Gibbs bolted upright and nearly tackled his girlfriend unto the floor in pursuit of achieving satisfaction. But before he could so much as move to stand, much less carry her gently into the kitchen for a proper table-fucking, Henrietta beat him to the punch and slipped off his lap to kneel in front of him, her fingers flying to depants him with a skill that was amazing if not slightly alarming.

“You know you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, right?” Gibbs questioned, not wanting to make his girlfriend feel pressured in any way.

“Jethro.” Henrietta rebuked, glaring up at him from betwixt his legs. “Shut up and enjoy the ride.”

Unable to properly conceal his arousal once his boxers were promptly yanked down without ceremony, as there was no longer any fabric to keep his organ restrained, Gibbs blushed a bit but managed to keep from further embarrassing himself by speaking.

“Oh, you like that, don’t you?” Henrietta taunted. “Someone taking charge gets you real fired up, doesn’t it?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.” Gibbs managed, beginning to quiver with anticipation as she slowly traced her fingers up his legs.

Glaring theatrically up at him from her perch on the floor, Henrietta thwacked him on the side of his thigh and used her sternest voice to chastise him.

“Don’t get lippy with me.”

As expected, the domineering behavior soon proved very effective in achieving that which they both wished for. For as soon as his girlfriend’s hand had made contact with his thigh, his arousal reached peak and very nearly threatened to proclaim itself all over her face. But, thankfully for the both of them, Henrietta inexplicably seemed to know what to do to prevent such a calamity and, as such, promptly placed her mouth on a part of his body that most religions declared it ought not touch.

“Henrietta.” Gibbs groaned, digging his fingers into her hair.

Far too busy with more important tasks to verbally respond, Henrietta gave him a fleeting thumbs up before renewing her efforts and promptly blew his mind as she began to apply tongue in a place he had never before been graced with tongue.

“Henrietta.” Gibbs panted, leaning back against the couch for support. “That’s enough. I’m going to – “

Promptly cut off from his chivalrous warnings of impending completion, as Henrietta had only renewed the speed at which she sucked as soon as he had begun to protest, Gibbs clamped down hard on his tongue and tried, most ardently, to keep the inevitable from happening as his girlfriend made use of her fingers in a way that left him nearly breathless.

“Hen, really.” He panted, fingers tightening in her hair. “You need to move. I can’t hold out much longer.”
Giving him a quick thumbs down that perfectly conveyed she was just fine with such a natural result, Henrietta readjusted her posture for better reach and steadily continued with to work her magic for the space of time it took for him to near completion. Which, while grand in itself, would have been made all but perfect had the unexpected opening of his kitchen door not resulted in his seed being spilled in her hair instead of her mouth. For while she had earlier conveyed that such a receptacle was the preordained dumping grounds for such a fluid, it was only perfectly natural that she had jerked away from him at the last moment in fear that their son might unexpectedly be tramping in on them.

“Leeroy!” A very familiar and very unwelcome voice called out. “I dropped by to catch up. I brought some pie and thought we could – OH MY GOD!”

Far too traumatized upon the initial realization that his father was about to walk in on him getting head to forewarn said man not to come into the living room, Gibbs’s mortification was promptly made complete when his father stumbled into the living room just in time to see Henrietta swiping seed from her hair with a fast-food wrapper and his son’s inculpating dick still on full display.

“Dad!” Gibbs squawked, equal parts embarrassed and livid.

Seeming to recover just as soon as the silence had been broken by his cry of indignation, Henrietta quickly jumped to her feet and snatched a purple afghan off the recliner before tossing it over his still very-exposed lap. An act which, despite being very unsubtle, provided Gibbs a great amount of relief as it allowed him enough plausible privacy to tuck away his manhood without any further embarrassment.

“I’m…I’m so sorry, Son.”

“Not as sorry as I am.” Gibbs snapped, clumsily doing up his zipper before tossing off the blanket.

Blushing profusely as he passed over to Henrietta one of the handkerchiefs he always carried around, as anyone with a decent set of eyes could see that she had missed a spot in her hair, Jackson Gibbs lowered his gaze to the floorboards and looked as traumatized as he had been the first, and last, time he had walked into his twelve-year-old son’s room without knocking.

“You…You ought to lock your doors if you’re planning on…that.”

Wondering vaguely if this impromptu visit was, perhaps, a delayed sort of revenge after several years spent trying to keep a young Jethro out of his marital bed, Gibbs frowned petulantly and hastily tossed a throw pillow atop the small bit of mess that had made it unto the floor.

“Well,” His father asked, still highly uncomfortable, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your girlfriend?”

Sighing aloud his frustrations upon receiving such an insipid request after such a thorough cock-blocking, Gibbs scowled but nonetheless complied, not wishing to hurt his father’s feelings over something that hadn’t maliciously been done.

“Dad, this is Henrietta. We’ve been seeing each other since October.”

Looking politely upon the face of the woman he had just caught giving oral to his son, Gibbs’s father held out a friendly hand for a shake and outright beamed as Henrietta accepted the invitation with gusto.
“Say,” The older man began, a quizzical smile on his face, “Aren’t you the young lady I met at the store?”

“As a matter of fact,” Henrietta smiled, “I am.”

Thoroughly confused as to how such a meeting could have taken place, as his father had no reason to be grocery shopping so far from home, Gibbs frowned and opened his mouth to make an inquiry only to be cut off by his oblivious father.

“It sure is nice to meet you again.” The perpetually smiling man assured. “Although, I do wish it could have been under…other circumstances.”

“That’s fair enough.” Henrietta giggled, no shame at all on her face.

By now heartily annoyed at the easy fashion in which his father could converse with near strangers, as he inherited all the social anxiety belonging to his mother, Gibbs frowned and couldn’t help but give voice to his irritation.

“Why didn’t you call, Dad?”

“I did call.” His father heartily assured, looking confused. “You don’t have your phone on mute again, do you?”

Coloring mildly as he came to the reluctant conclusion that such was very likely the case, as he hadn’t heard a sound from it since morning, Gibbs scowled at the sound defeat and tried not to become too annoyed when his father smiled in response to the nonverbal answer.

“Why’d you stop by, Dad?” Gibbs bluntly interrogated, earning for himself a jab in the ribs from a disproving Henrietta.

“I just thought I’d stop by with some of that venison jerky you like so much. The Meyer twins bagged a prize-stag each this year and they didn’t want all the extra meat going to waste in their freezer.” Jackson explained, perfectly genuine in his kindness. “I got us a pumpkin pie to go with it, too, but…Well, if you’re busy with your lady friend here, I can just as well go and bother Tony for a spell.”

“That…wouldn’t go be a very good idea at the moment.” Henrietta gingerly asserted, slightly embarrassed. “My son currently has a…guest over.”

“Oh.” Gibbs’s father pipped, blushing himself. “Wait – your boy?!”

Unable to look anything but proud as someone realized the relationship that existed betwixt her and Tony, Henrietta nodded eagerly and touched a hand to her chest.

“That’s right.” She heartily agreed. “Tony is my baby.”

“And you’re…friends with my son?” The older man questions, clearly not failing to grasp the complexity of such a situation.

“Yes,” Henrietta agreed enthusiastically, “But I’m not just friends with your son. I think we both know that.”

Initially taken aback by Henrietta’s candor, and then subsequently amused by the same characteristic, Jackson Gibbs chuckled uproariously at such a cheeky response and clamped his son on the shoulder.
“Well, I’ll be damned, son.” The older Gibbs grinned. “I actually like this one.”

“I like you, too.” Henrietta agreed, green eyes all aglow with their usual good humor.

Utterly baffled at the way in which some people could make friends wherever they went, Gibbs shook his head and couldn’t help but voice his confusion.

“You two just met.” He reminded the duo.

“Not really.” Henrietta gently refuted. “You saved my life this morning at the grocery store.”

Having up until that point been thoroughly oblivious to the fact that his girlfriend had been in any sort of danger, Gibbs frowned and gave the woman an exasperated look.

“How?”

“I believe that’s a story best shared over pie and venison.” His father interjected.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Gotta throw in some more Grampa Jackson while I can!

Delighted as always to play the part of hostess, as aside from mothering there was really no other skill she was quite so proficient in, Henrietta beamed widely at the Gibbs men as she pried their plates high with spaghetti and garlic bread and refreshed their coffee as well. Because as delicious as the venison had proved to be, which was quite so, it was not at all a sufficient meal whereas she was concerned. Nor, she had decided, was pumpkin pie at all an appropriate snack before a meal had reached its completion. Which was why, upon her most earnest of insistences, said dessert was currently tucked away in one of the darkest cabinets her boyfriend possessed – its inferior store-bought quality far less offensive to her person in just such a space.

“Well,” Declared Jackson, scooping up his fork, “If this smells as good as it looks, I’m afraid my belt buckle is going to be in all sorts of trouble.”

Beaming openly into the older face of the man in response to such a compliment, as there was nothing aside from praise of her mothering that could touch her so deeply, Henrietta graced his wrinkled cheek with a quick peck and added yet another helping of the pasta to his plate.

“You’re too kind.” She modestly demurred, feeling her cheeks glow with pride all the same. “I’m sure your wife cooked just as well I can.”

Having been given to understand that Jethro’s mother had passed away at an early age due to some sort of untreatable cancer, the details of which she had been far too polite and sympathetic to try and extract, Henrietta tread carefully as she referred to her for the first time and was pleased, greatly, when such a thoughtful act provoked amused grins on the faces of both her diners.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.” Jackson chuckled. “Anne once set the stove on fire trying to make spaghetti when Leroy was just a little boy.”

Deeply troubled just by thinking of an innocent kitchen meeting so unceremonious a death, Henrietta gasped softly and immediately tried, and failed, to conceal the noise with a clumsy sip of her wine.

“It wasn’t so bad, Hen.” Jethro smirked. “The fire marshal let me sit in his lap and drive the firetruck around the block.”

Smiling openly as she imagined the sight of a young Jethro piloting a firetruck, as it was absurdly reminiscent of the way in which Tony had been given a private tour of the zoo, Henrietta eagerly pulled her chair into table and eagerly awaited the presence of similar informative conversation.

“I’m sure that must have made your year.” Henrietta observed, pointedly passing her boyfriend a napkin as a bit of sauce from his fork dripped unto his shirt.

Accepting the napkin with a distracted air, as the food piled before him was currently proving
to be a very effective distraction, Jethro used one hand to dab away the homemade sauce even as he shoved another forkful into his mouth with the other. An action, while endearing with its rather childlike quality, promptly proved to be his downfall as, with mouth so uncomfortably filled with food, he was unable to keep his father from sharing an embarrassing tidbit about his childhood.

“No, not really.” Jackson demurred, a rather mischievous smile splayed across his friendly features. “*That* honor would belong to the week after that.”

“What could possibly trump a ride in a firetruck?” Henrietta queried, eager to know the answer.

Patiently enduring Jethro’s glare with all the magnanimity only a parent could possess, Jackson smiled serenely and decorated his spaghetti with more parmesan cheese before making his response, either skillfully building up anticipation or playfully harassing his son in front of his girlfriend as might any parent do.

“He stole my shotgun while Anne was napping and snuck down to the river to meet with the big boys.” Jackson narrated, time clearly having rendered the story far more amusing than aggravating with time. “And well, them fifth-graders just weren’t keen on having a first-grader on their turf – not until they saw the gun at least. They got excited then, and tried to take the gun right off him. But Leroy, well, Leroy was a force to be reckoned with even when he was small.”

“Please tell me you didn’t shoot those boys.” Henrietta begged, glancing hopefully at her boyfriend as he ardently tried to wolf down a large amount of spaghetti.

“Thankfully no, though I’m sure he wanted to.” Jackson quipped, smiling broadly into the face of his blushing son. “What he did – and it was clever, I’ll give him that – Is shoot the wasps nest hanging right over their heads before running to jump in the river with a he’d brought along.”

Having no choice but to concede that such a plan was indeed clever, despite its cartoonish composition, Henrietta praised her boyfriend appropriately before asking a question that returned a blush to his cheeks.

“Why *did* you attack those boys like that, though?”

“Well,” Jackson grinned, enthusiastically tackling the question, “It turned out them boys had been bullying the black kids on the playground. And Leroy, well, Leroy never took too kindly to bullies if he could help it.” Pausing there for a sip wine to refresh his throat, the older man then added, as an afterthought: “It was a good thing he had a good reason though, because Anne would have throttled him even more than she already did for stealing the gun in the first place had that *not* been the case.”

Looking quite bashful at the remembrance, as no doubt the experience of facing his mother’s wrath was something that had troubled him deeply, Jethro scowled and poked at his spaghetti in a petulant fashion before mumbling a response to his father.

“Mom thrashed you pretty good for that one, too.” He sassed.

“Yeah.” Jackson agreed, wide grin on his face. “But she *was* right. I really ought to have known hiding my gun behind the bookcase wasn’t good enough. Not with you around anyways.”

Becoming more and more amused as she kept learning of all the ways in which her boyfriend had been similar to her son whilst growing up, as well as delighted when given adequate information to contrast their likenesses as well, Henrietta sat up in her chair and made another innocent inquiry.
“Was it hard to keep things hidden from Jethro?”

“God Almighty, was it ever!” Jackson exclaimed, laughter in his voice. “Why, Anne and I, we had to keep from Christmas shopping until Christmas Eve to keep him from finding any presents and discovering Santa wasn’t real.”

Having had to resort to hiding Christmas gifts in a locked safe when Tony was small, after had to suffer through the ordeal of rewrapping the literally hundreds of gifts her son had received for his first Christmas after said boy had snuck from his crib to tear at the shiny paper, Henrietta shared in Jackson’s chuckles and privately resolved to continue her relationship with the kindly man.

“I can’t imagine how big a hassle that must have been.” She expressed.

“You could say that again.” Jackson agreed. “But fortunately, the whole midnight shopping runs only lasted until he was seven.”

Thoroughly confused by such a statement, as not even Senior had ruined the magic of Santa for Tony until said boy had turned nine, Henrietta frowned and wondered how it might be that a man so friendly as Jackson had informed his son of the truth behind the presents so early on in his life.

“Don’t look at Dad like that.” Jethro implored, by now very pink. “I was the one who put an end to Santa.”

“Quite literally, too.” Jackson interjected, before Henrietta could pose any further questions. “Turns out the clever boy had boobytrapped the living room while we were sleeping and managed to catch Santa in the weighted nets I used to fish.”

“Was Santa alright?” Henrietta giggled, imagining the scene in her head.

“Well, his uncle LJ might have been sore for a few days afterwards, but even he thought it was funny once the concussion went away.”

Frowning slightly at the mention of the man who Jethro had admitted to idolizing in his youth, as said man’s traumatic death from lynching was likely still fresh in the mind of the person who had witnessed it while hiding in a cupboard, her boyfriend stabbed his plate and made to speak before the opening of the kitchen door interrupted them.

“For the love of God,” Jackson frowned, looking somber for the first time since she had made his acquaintance, “If that’s Stephanie, I’m going to have to hide in the oven.”

Wondering vaguely what said woman could have done to the man to make him so fear her, as Jackson was surely just as stalwart and brave as his son, Henrietta resolved to later make inquiries before turning in her chair to greet whoever had walked through the door without knocking.

“Grampa!”

“Lamb!”

Heartily surprised, as well as ingratiated, as she watched both prospective father-in-law and son embrace each other as fondly as a child hugged their favorite grandparent, the former enthusiastically enough to lift the other off the floor despite his advanced age and the latter beaming as widely as a child just plied heavily with candy, Henrietta rose to her feet and waited patiently for the two to disengage before posing any questions.

“You two have already met?” She innocently inquired.
“It’s only natural that they did.” Jethro answered, fiercely defensive.

Understanding that such a hostility had only come about at her boyfriend’s mistaken belief that she was somehow offended by the familiarity evident between Jackson and Tony, rather than deeply touched the former had provided the latter with the indulgent grandparent neither she nor Senior had been able to provide him, Henrietta let the harshness go unchallenged and happily began to fix her son up a plate even as he spoke a mile-a-minute at his confused, yet indulgent, grandfather.

“Monkey,” She expressed, gently tapping his shoulder to gain his attentions, “Let your poor grandfather sit down and finish his meal.”

Glancing down at the table and seeming thoroughly surprised to espy the presence of food on the table despite it being the appropriate hour in which food should be present, Tony frowned sheepishly at the table and gingerly took a seat.

“Don’t look so somber, Lamb.” Jackson obliged, patting his shoulder. “They’ll be plenty of time for chatting after supper is finished.”

Looking very much annoyed at the concept of having to wait for supper to finish in order to steal away his grandfather for an hour or two, Tony sighed despondently but otherwise accepted his fate with all the grace of a scolded toddler as he ignored the food on his plate.

“Eat up, now.” Jackson coaxed, pressing a fork into the boy’s reluctant fingers. “No sense in letting food go to waste.”

“I already ate.” Tony politely dismissed, placing the fork back down on the table. “Thank you.”

Immediately suspicious of her son’s claim, as it was not at all like him to turn down the offer of good food no matter how full he currently was, Henrietta narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him even as Jethro raised a brow in his direction.

“What did you have, Tony?” Jethro inquired.

“Abby and I shared a big bag of cotton candy a few hours ago.” Her son answered honestly, squirming a bit under his employer’s gaze.

Frowning openly at the admission, as it had been her life’s work to convince her son to stop eating so poorly, Henrietta stuck her son’s fork back into his plate and looked at him expectantly – only to receive a defiant glare in return.

“Your mother said eat.” Jethro intervened, having not failed to catch the expression.

“But I’m full.” Tony groused, touching his stomach for emphasis.

Knowing her boyfriend to be far more temperamental when challenged than most, including herself, Henrietta quickly intervened and spoke up before an ensuing power-struggle could take place.

“You need to eat a little something, Tony.” She reasoned. “You can’t just go to bed with your stomach full of sugar.”

“We had churros, too.” Her son provided, mistakenly believing it would help his argument.

Slightly annoyed with Abby’s uncanny ability to coax those around her into making the same
decisions she did, whether for bad or good, Henrietta resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the reference
to the forensic-scientist and instead focused her attentions on making sure her son ate something
remotely healthy before heading off to bed.

“I’ll assume you’re far too full for pie then, too.” She announced. “Which is a pity, because I
made homemade whipped cream.”

Looking as scandalized as he had the night Henrietta had sent him to bed without supper for
degrading one of their maids in a very Senior-like fashion, Tony frowned heavily and looked to his
grandfather for assistance only to discover that Jackson’s eyes were suddenly very focused on the
fine details of his plain white plate.

“I never said that.” He grumbled.

“Well,” Henrietta reasoned, “If you’re hungry enough for pie, you’re hungry enough for a
few bites of spaghetti.”

“It doesn’t work that way.” Tony asserted, uncharacteristically grumpy.

By that point having endured as much of his agent’s sassing as he possibly could, which was
admittedly not a lot, Jethro glared harshly at their son and all but barked out his next order.

“Your mother told you to eat!”

Flinching a bit at the sudden increase in volume, but otherwise foolishly choosing to hold his
ground, Tony crossed his arms against his chest and shook his head.

“No, she didn’t.”

At that point feeling her own face flush with irritation, as she knew perfectly well that her
child had deliberately taken the command as literally as possible in order to provoke a response,
Henrietta frowned and immediately scolded her son, all the while feeling all the shame of a mother
whose child chose to act up in front of an audience.

“Anthony Angelo!” She rebuked. “Don’t be a smartass.”

“Would you rather I be the alternative?”

Finally taking as much umbrage with the attitude as the rest of those seated around the table,
Jackson inhaled sharply and promptly thwacked Tony on the thigh with a very calloused hand.

“Don’t you sass your mother like that in front of me.” He chided. “I’ll wash your mouth out
with soap.”

Green eyes going immediately wide at the threat, in a manner that seemed to suggest he had
received at least one mouth-soaping before, Tony clamped down on his bottom lip to prevent another
retort from escaping without his permission but stubbornly refused to even look at his plate.

“Anthony,” Henrietta sighed, “Three bites.”

“That’s three bites too many.”

Having no time at all to revel in the ‘cleverness’ of his retort, as Jethro had promptly lost his
temper and jumped to his feet in response, Tony shrank back in his chair like a chastised schoolboy
cowering before the sight of a ruler and looked to his grandfather for reprieve, this time receiving
such a blessing rather than the forced apathy he was met with before.

“Well,” The older man sighed, rising to his feet, “If you can’t behave yourself at the table, you had best not sit at it with the adults.”

“But – “

Hastily cut off from whatever he was about to say by the sudden presence of five very firm fingers on his ear, the pressure of which quickly turned the appendance pink, Tony yelped softly but otherwise raised no further complaints as his grandfather lead him from the kitchen into the living room to administer whatever punishment he deemed suitable in response to the crime.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into that boy!” Henrietta exclaimed, thoroughly confused.

“I’ll get to the bottom of it.” Jethro soothed, kissing her cheek. “But, for now, we had best keep out of the living room.”

Despite believing Jackson to be an obscenely kind nature, Henrietta recoiled at such a somber remark and nearly rushed into the living room to save her son before Jethro caught her and pulled him into her lap.

“You can’t baby the boy forever.” He lectured, looking slightly disappointed that such was the case. “And besides, Dad will go a lot easier on him, then I would.”

Reluctantly coming to conclusion that both snippets of wisdom were well-founded, despite their displeasing nature, Henrietta sighed and rested her head on her boyfriend’s shoulder as she waited for him to finish his meal and give her the excuse to go and see to her son’s comfort.

“Alright, then.” Jethro sighed, taking his last bite after an agonizing eleven minutes of dining. “Let’s go and see to Tony.”

Leaping off his lap with an agility that surprised even her, as not even fifteen years of ballet could perfectly mitigate the effects of aging, Henrietta sprinted to the door leading into the living room and sucked in a deep breath before peeking out from behind the frame.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” She exclaimed in a whisper to the boyfriend who had crept up behind her. “He’s fucking feeding him even more candy.”

“Yeah.” Jethro grinned. “That’s why I didn’t want you going into the living room.”

Giving the former Marine an expression that conveyed perfectly well she did not appreciate such subterfuge, as Tony really ought to have been punished for such a sassiness with a thorough lecturing, Henrietta swatted his shoulder with the pad of her hand and crossed her arms.

“And you accuse me of babying him.” She huffed. “When you knew your Dad wasn’t going to punish him at all.”

Grinning gingerly at her as he rubbed away the soreness in his shoulder, Jethro kissed her on the temple and grabbed up her arms in his before answering.

“I have to be hard on him at work, I don’t like doing it at home.” He excused. “And besides, it’s not like he’s getting any pie.”

“He’s being fed chocolates by your father!”
“Well,” Jethro grinned, “It’s dark chocolate. It’s good for you.”
Chapter 52

Having once utterly adored being the company of his perpetually bubbly granddaughter, even with all the awkwardness of brightly painted toes and coerced tea parties, Jackson had come to discover, over the many long years, that the relationship he shared with his pseudo-grandson was not at all far off in similarity to that which he shared with Kelly. For while both of his grandchildren had wildly differing interests, a shared enthusiasm for football being one of the only few things they shared, both such children were highly spirited and friendly in nature and, as such, had almost immediately endeared themselves to his person. Because whilst he loved Leroy most fiercely, in a manner only a parent could understand, it stood to reason that their mutually-recognized clash in personalities had somewhat prevented them from getting along for a greater portion of their lives – a reality which, much to his great displeasure, had almost always outright forbid the cuddles and coddling Jackson so loved to bestow upon those most important to him. Which was precisely why, after rescuing his grandson from a most inevitable headslap, he had ushered said man into the general living room and plied him soundly with chocolates until he could, at last, eat no more of the semi-bitter sweets. If such an act was also possessive of some sort of ulterior motive, well, that was just a secondary motivation compared to seeing his grandson both reprieved and comforted.

“There now,” Jackson crooned, ruffling the hair of the man who sat on the floor, “Now that your stomach is full you can tell you me what’s been bothering you.”

Looking as highly betrayed as one might imagine a benevolent ruler to be upon the discovery that he had just been poisoned by his most loyal of advisors, Tony licked a few smudged of melted chocolate from his face and stubbornly refused to meet his gaze – the manner in which he did so eerily reminiscent of the way in which Kelly would avoid her Daddy’s gaze when teased about any member of her group of many boyfriends.

“It’s nothing, Grampa.” Tony sighed, picking at a lose thread on his jeans.

Despite having proven himself to be a marvelous liar throughout the long years, such occasions thankfully exceedingly rare and usually only the result of his wishing to spare the feelings of someone he cared about, Tony’s casual dismissal of the idea that there was something bothering him might have very well been believable had not Jackson eventually come to realization that Tony smiled with a completely different side of this mouth when he fibbed rather than when he was genuinely jovial.

“C’mon, now,” Jackson coaxed, scratching the younger man’s head. “I know something is bugging you. You would’ve never spoken to your folks that way, otherwise.”

Slumping rather gracelessly against his legs as he reluctantly surrendered before the battle of wills could commence, Tony sighed loudly but nonetheless confessed the cause of his earlier irritation without any further delay.

“Abby and I had an…argument is all.”

Sensing that his grandson wasn’t being entirely honest in his reply, Jackson frowned slightly and gently tried to coax a more truthful answer out of the disgruntled young man seated at his feet.

“You and Abby squabble all the time over silly nonsense.” Jackson pointed out. “Why is it only bothering you now?”

Nibbling at his bottom lip in a fashion that clearly conveyed he was very reluctant to sell out
his self-proclaimed best friend, even in a manner so trivial as unburdening himself to his grandfather, Tony fussed at a non-existent wrinkle on his sweater for quite awhile before mumbling out his response.

“She’s just…too much some times.”

Understanding perfectly well such sentiments, as said young woman had once gotten on his nerves by repeatedly badgering him to go out with some great-aunt of hers, Jackson frowned his sympathies and again ruffled his grandson’s hair.

“I know she means well.” Tony babbled. “But…”

“But good intentions don’t necessarily make for good results, do they?” Jackson questioned, a long life having taught him such wisdom.

For even though, as a parent, he had tried to love Leroy through the illness and subsequent death of his mother at the tender age of eight, he could now see that the way he had gone about it had been entirely wrong for someone of said boy’s more withdrawn temperament. It was to his great regret, as well as chagrin, that it had taken him decades to realize that his son had needed time alone to process his grief instead of being barraged constantly by well-meaning adults in his life as to how he was fairing.

“I know.” Tony sighed, no doubt reflecting upon his own unwelcome and intrusive remembrances. “But I just thought that Abby would know better about harassing someone about their choices. Especially after getting so much crap about her…taboo interests.”

Despite having already known said young woman to live a more adventurous lifestyle beneath the sheets, herself having already shared such an unwelcome factoid with him, Jackson still couldn’t help but shudder as his mind conjured up all sorts of unimaginably scenarios in his head.

“She hadn’t been giving you any guff about being gay, has she?” Jackson demanded, feeling his blood run warm at the very thought.

Because even though he had grown up in a time where such an orientation was kept firmly behind doors, or took place only in more cosmopolitan areas, the fact still remained that Jackson was very much just as live-and-let-live as was his own child.

“No – Well…not really.” Tony faltered. “It’s just that…We got into a spat about me not wanting to go to some trashy gay bar downtown and…Well, she accused me of not being gay enough.”

Although Jackson had been given to understand that there were varying types of homosexuals, a cursory bit of research on the subject having adequately taught him the basics of such a lifestyle, he found he was utterly perplexed about the concept of their being some sort of limit needed to achieve in order to be considered gay by others. Because whilst he certainly hadn’t gone into any of the more detailed websites during his self-imposed education, for fear he would stumble upon porn, it stood to reason that the existence of a gayness-limit would have been one of the first things he stumbled across.

“So, because you don’t like going to trashy bars, you’re not gay enough?” Jackson demanded, outraged on behalf of his grandson.

“I guess.” Tony grumbled, frown ever deepening.

Already having gone through quite enough drama when his grandson had initially struggled
to come out of the closet, as well as when said man had been slowly learning to cope with being homosexual, Jackson promptly set about preventing a relapse by offering up Tony some sage advice.

“Now you listen here, Lamb.” He directed, waiting until a set of very troubled green eyes looked into his own bluer variety. “You’re just as you’re made to be. A duck is no less a duck because it prefers flying over swimming. And, well, if Abby can’t see that, then she’s not nobody you need to be trifling with, anyhow. Life’s too short to keep in touch with those who don’t make you happy.”

“But Abby is my friend.” Tony protested, looking highly troubled.

“If that’s the case,” Jackson realized, “She’ll come to her senses and apologize.”
Despite being as perfectly sex-positive as one person could be barring, of course, the existence of Woodstock Hippies, Henrietta did possess certain qualms when it came to making love with the men in her life. The primary caveat of such being, of course, her outright reluctance and refusal to have sex with a man when said person’s father had been invited to stay the night and take up residence in the guest room directly next to his son’s. Because sound-observing softness of the mattress aside, there was simply no way she’d be able to keep quiet enough for her prospective father-in-law not to at least get the gist of what they might have been doing together in the darkness of their often-shared bedroom.

But rather than allow such prudish hang-ups to trouble her anymore than she could bare, Henrietta had filled up a large glass of wine and promptly taken solace in the comforts of her son’s bathtub, the porcelain receptacle was more than adequate enough to soothe her disappointment even if it did lack bubble-producing jets. And so, properly placated, at least for the moment, Henrietta did as any good girlfriend would do and immediately set upon to see to her boyfriend’s comfort. Which, naturally, involved the use of her unexpecting son’s cellphone.

“Jethro,” She texted, careful to avoid dropping the phone in the water, “Did I tell you what I leaked to do on a cellphone?”

Waiting patiently for a reply, given that she was not faster at texting than her boyfriend, Henrietta stretched her short feet out in the perfumed water and wonders just how long she could remain in the locked room before her son eventually requested use of his bathroom. Because, as it was, she had already been in there for a full 90 minutes of uninterrupted bliss – which, given her son’s endearingly needy personality was quite the feat in and of itself.

“No, tell me.” Jethro requested, after a full three minutes had elapsed.

Grinning quite widely, even though such an effect was quite unnecessary given her lack of an audience, Henrietta turned her son’s phone unto camera mode and shamelessly captured a photograph of her suds-covered breasts before cheekily sending it off to her boyfriend.

“You can’t tease me when you’re so far away. It’s cerulean.”

“What’s cruel is you not reciprocating.” Henrietta promptly retorted.

“Give me a momentum.” Jethro requested, his answer troubling vague.

Because as much as she had wanted to sleep with Jethro that night, which was quite so, she didn’t much fancy the idea of having sex next to her son’s bedroom anymore than she did the idea of doing so next to Jackson’s. Which meant that if Jethro was currently on his way over to Tony’s, which he might very well be given the wording of his text, she would almost surely have to send him away disappointed. But before she could so much as lift up her phone and begin to send a text to her boyfriend that prohibited such a romantic jaunt, the expensive gadget resting on the rim of the tub buzzed loudly and effectively alerted her to the fact that Jethro was still at home as he would never drive distracted. And so, subsequently made curious as to what he might have replied with after so long a pause, Henrietta lifted the phone above her face and very nearly dropped it in the rose-scented water when she took in the photo of the very familiar organ resting betwixt her boyfriend’s legs.

“I see I’ve gotten your full attainment.”
“You have.” Jethro assured. “But now I have no way to take care of that.”

Thinking it markedly silly for Jethro to insinuate he didn’t pleasure himself just as much she pleasured herself, as really what person was able to keep from exploring their bodies for their entire lives, Henrietta rolled her eyes to the ceiling before charitably sending off a picture of her nether regions to her hot-and-bothered boyfriend.

“God, I wish I knew how to take a photo-shot.”

“You’ll have to settle for drawing me like once of your French Grills instead.”

“What makes you think that I haven’t?”

Frowning in confusion, as up until then she hadn’t even had any idea that Jethro knew enough about Titanic to recognize such a famous quote, much less was possessive of any artistic talents, Henrietta promptly made her inquiries into the matter as politely as she could.

“What are you tapping about?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow.”

“When!?”

“When I pick you up for breakfast.” Jethro wrote, adding a purple heart icon behind the words.
Despite having gradually grown accustomed to early mornings throughout his lengthy career in the Marines, Jethro was still capable of understanding other people’s great reluctance to rise out of bed before the sun had even thought of rising – himself having once hated the very notion as a small child forced to awaken from pleasant dreams and march off to school without even the benefit of a warm car to soothe away his grumpiness. And, as such, he was perfectly and patiently prepared to deal with the slight crankiness of his girlfriend as she crept into his truck with a scowl on her face at the apparently ungodly hour of half-past-five.

“Good morning, Kitten.” Jethro teased, leaning across the tiny distance separating them to kiss her cheek.

Moodily swiping away the adoring kiss with the back of her hand, in a callous manner that hurt his feelings more than he would ever care to admit, Henrietta scowled and impatiently cranked the heat up to an uncomfortable level.

“Oh, so now you’re a Kitten, Lamb, Grizzly-Bear?” The half-asleep woman huffed, “What is it with animal names and your family?”

Slightly offended at the irreverent dismissal of the family tradition his deceased mother had started well before he had been born, as he had always found it highly amusing that his father was referred to as a wise old owl whilst he was christened a grizzly-bear nearly from birth, Jethro frowned in tandem with his girlfriend but chivalrously refrained from pointing out how rude she was being so as to maintain the possibility for as good a breakfast-date as could be managed given the circumstances.

“You’re mischievous, graceful, and beautiful.” Jethro deflected, seizing the curmudgeon’s freezing hand. “It’s only natural I declare you a Kitten.”

Flushing most wondrously at such an earnest appraisal, in a manner that promptly provoked her beautiful green eyes to glow as brightly as any priceless emerald in the world, Henrietta grinned sappily and immediately edged the negligible gap between them before resting her tired head on his shoulder.

“So long as you promise to be my noble lion,” Henrietta purred, “I’ll be your kitten.”

Beaming down into the face of his girlfriend with an unaffected happiness he hadn’t experienced since he had first started dating Shannon, Jethro pulled her ever closer with one strong arm and indulgently kissed her butter-soft lips without warning, the spontaneity of such an amorous move perfectly effective in drawing out a pleased sigh from the throat of his girlfriend. But, rather than respond in the usual fashion and nudge her tongue into his mouth, Henrietta only gave his bottom lip a brief nibble before pulling away.

“Look, Jethro.” She began, suddenly serious. “I love car sex just as much as the next woman – but not on an empty stomach.”

Quickly sensing that nothing more of consequence was going to happen until Henrietta had at least a half-dozen strips of bacon in her system, as she was frustratingly more like her son in that regard than he might have liked, Jethro reluctantly pulled out of the crowded parking lot and unto the empty street with a very somber air.
“Cheer up, Jethro.” Henrietta encouraged, snuggling close to him. “A good breakfast always makes me horny.”

“Well,” Jethro promptly retorted, “A happy girlfriend, always makes me happy.”

Grinning widely at such an admittedly romantic notion, Henrietta fluttered her long lashes up at him in a display of thetic affection and further nestled into his side, the warmth of her body, tiny though it was, more then effective at coaxing away the chill clinging to his flesh.

“Where are you taking me, Jethro?” The good-natured woman inquired, looking out the windshield in wonder as he began to pilot them away from the crowded parking lot.

“I don’t know.” He admitted, surprised at the notion himself. “I thought we could try someplace new.”

For as simple as his culinary tastes were, his preferences very often running away from those things which people bolder then himself ran toward, Jethro had late last night stumbled upon the realization that he did not wish to replicate his past dating experiences with Henrietta in the hope that some contrived formula would bring about the success of domestic bliss. Because not only was his current girlfriend far too good for the uninspired courting he had inflicted upon his previous girlfriend’s and last three wives, so too did Jethro feel, for the first time since Shannon, that he was not simply wasting his time in performing the expected dating rituals in the somewhat selfish pursuit of passionless sex. For the first time in decades, he had suddenly realized, he wanted to be cared for rather than simply tolerated for the lifestyle he could provide or lusted after by the young women he equally fetishized. In short, his sleepy contemplations had revealed him to him that was, at last, ready to give himself over to another woman in the same manner he had surrendered his entirety to Shannon. But whether or not that epiphany had been more effective in frightening him or thrilling him, Jethro could not readily determine, for he had promptly downed a quarter of his beside bourbon and willed himself to sleep, too afraid of the thoughts that might have followed should he give himself the permission to dwell on those thoughts any longer.

“I’ve only been back in America for a month, Jethro.” Henrietta gently reminded him, inadvertently calling into focus the fledgling nature of their relationship. “I have no idea where we could go.” And, added she with a mischievous smile, “All I know is that I don’t want to go to Le Lieu.”

Forcing himself to smirk at such an aggravating comment, so that his passenger might not realize just how much she had wounded his feelings by irreverently referencing that disaster of a supper, Jethro expertly piloted his truck unto the highway and found himself surprised at how well he was able to keep his temper whilst in proximity to the raven-haired beauty currently seated to his left. Because, sure as shit, had Stephanie been the one to razz him such a manner, he would have promptly gone off on her before promptly returning them home in a very hostile silence. A tenuous calm which, unfortunately, never lasted upon their foray into his house. For it seemed, almost by habit, that something either hard or sharp would make contact with his face or chest once Stephanie was suitably assured there was no chance of any witness meddling in their affairs and calling the authorities.

“Jethro,” Henrietta frowned, clearly not fooled by his forced nonchalance, “I don’t honestly care where we go. Just so long as they feed us adequately. Because I think we both left Le Lieu hungry and angry that night.”

Unable to argue with so profound a truth, as Jethro had most assuredly been ready to flay Antoine alive until Ducky had physically dragged him from the establishment, Jethro grimaced openly and idly wondered if he would ever again be able to sample French cuisine without thinking
of the first, and only, angry argument of their relationship.

“With as much as they charge at that place, you would think they would feed you more than a few slivers of food.” Jethro agreed, focusing on the mutual hunger they had shared that night rather than the anger.

“You would think,” Henrietta agreed, “But they didn’t. So pick a place where they will.”

Sensing that he would soon be dealing with one hell of an angry tyrant if he didn’t soon procure a decent amount of palatable food, as Henrietta had shown time and time again that she was very much like her son in most regards, Jethro gave into a small sense of panic and hastily blurted out the first restaurant that came to mind.

“McDonalds.”

Blinking in surprise at the sudden utterance, as it had come out much louder than he intended, Henrietta looked up at him quite queerly before a sudden smile erupted across her face.

“You know what? I haven’t had any fast food since leaving America. Let’s do it.”

Relieved that his sudden lack of grace had not proved overtly harmful, as his ego could only endure so many embarrassments in a single relationship, Jethro released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and happily steered his truck into the parking lot of said restaurant just as soon as the golden arches came into view.

“I’m just warning you ahead of time,” Henrietta cautioned, graciously allowing him to assist her out of the vehicle, “That if they got rid of their McGriddle, I’m going to shank someone with a plastic straw.”

“Remind me to never let you get hungry again.” Jethro requested, perfectly serious as they hurried through the doors leading into the fast-food establishment.

“If I’m not fed in exactly ten minutes, you won’t need a verbal reminder.” Henrietta somberly quipped, stomach growling loudly in testament to her impending-starvation.

Thinking it wise not to provoke the ravenous wolf into attacking with any thoughtless words or careless deeds, Jethro promptly lead them over the counter as quickly as the slippery floors would allow and generously gave her leave to order whatever her heart should desire.

“I would like a large number five, please.” She informed the clearly stoned teenager managing the till. “With an extra hashbrown.”

By now perfectly acclimated to his girlfriend’s fierce appetite, though no less confounded as to how she managed to stay so skinny in spite of it, Jethro requested the same order sans the extra hashbrown and chivalrously filled up both their Styrofoam cups with coffee as Henrietta stalked off to claim the booth furthest from the bathrooms and entryways.

“Is the table to your liking, Madam?” Jethro queried in a mock French accent, slipping gently in beside her once he had collected their beverages.

“Aside from the bag of coke I found on the floor, yes.” She grinned, pulling him closer to her side.

Highly relieved that it hadn’t been a used hypodermic she had stumbled across, as no doubt her perpetually clumsy self would have been stuck with it almost immediately, Jethro wrapped an
affectionate arm over her shoulder and kissed her chin before tilting his head to whisper in her ear.

“I believe I owe you a painting.”

“I thought we agreed upon a drawing.” Henrietta teased, eyes all aglow. “But a painting will have to suffice for now.”

Despite taking a certain degree of umbrage with her casual insinuation that a drawing was far more difficult to produce than a painting, as far more work went into the latter than the former, Jethro brushed off his slight irritation and wordlessly slipped from his pocket a folded piece of parchment that contained the rudimentary watercolor he had crafted of her face.

“If I open this,” Henrietta began, accepting the rectangle with glee, “I won’t be scandalizing anyone, will I?”

“No.” Jethro assured with a smile. “I hadn’t received adequate enough source material until yesterday to create anything even remotely scandalous. You’ll have to settle for this instead.”

“Very well.” Henrietta somberly intoned. “You have forced my hand.”

And, with that thusly declared, Jethro watched anxiously as his girlfriend slowly unfolded the delicate paper with careful fingers. Because as decent as he was at capturing the likeness of a person or thing, which was fairly so, he still didn’t feel quite so confident as to believe either Abby, Tony, or his father whenever either one of them claimed his artwork was of a phenomenal quality.

“Oh, Jethro.” Henrietta cried, voice full of earnest excitement and tenderness. “This is…This is amazing.”

Feeling himself blush a bit as an elderly woman peered over their booth to admire the artwork Henrietta clutched with her graceful fingers, Jethro fiddled awkwardly with the cardboard sleeve wrapped about his coffee and heartily regretted having revealed such a minor talent in so public a place.

“I smudged the paint around your chin a bit.” He confessed, not liking all the attention being paid his way. “But only because I sneezed.”

“Jethro,” Henrietta sternly stated, “If this is the work of even a fraction of your talent, Van Gough should be jealous.”
Chapter 55

Understanding from his own time spent as a child that no woman enjoyed the presence of extra hands in their kitchen when there was a meal to be prepared, as he had been soundly switched numerous times in his youth for trying to pilfer a few samples of his supper before it had been plated, Jackson was not at all surprised to be awakened from an afternoon couch nap on Wednesday to the sounds of Henrietta soundly and sufficient chewing out both son and grandson for the egregious crime of trying to procure an afternoon snack of popcorn to heighten their enjoyment of whatever pretentious film Tony had clearly talked his father into watching.

“– Only two fucking hours until supper, and you both come barging into the goddamn kitchen like a bunch of starving thrice-damned refugees!”

“We only wanted to make some popcorn, Hen.” Leroy foolishly reasoned, neither Anne nor Shannon having ever taught him that most woman held their kitchen sacred on certain occasions.

“And I only want to finish these fucking appetizers!” Henrietta retorted. “Because if you think I’m going to wake up at the ass-crack of dawn tomorrow to do it, you’re mistaken!”

Sensing that there would be no real return to his indulgent nap now that the ire of his son’s girlfriend had been fully realized, the pressure of the upcoming holiday having no doubt begun wreaking havoc on the usually jovial woman’s person, Jackson sighed softly and reluctantly sat himself up in the recliner before seizing the remote control and turning the television from the pretentious garbage displayed upon the small screen unto a much more universally enjoyed football game.

“Don’t worry, Dad.” Tony comforted, as he and his father wisely retreated from the kitchen. “She’s only like that around Thanksgiving.”

“If you knew that, why the hell didn’t you stop me from bothering her?” Leroy grumbled.

“Because I thought she would let you get away with it.” Tony sighed. “I guess not, though.”

Hearing Leroy expel from his nose a loud puff of air, in a fashion that clearly conveyed he was about to deliver one hell of a slap to the back of his child’s head, Jackson quickly intervened for the sake of his grandchild and leveled a foreboding expression at his son before the strict disciplinarian could so much as lift his hand away from his side.

“Don’t you even think about it Leroy Jethro.” He forewarned. “You’ve used Tony in a similar fashion before, too.”

Soundly defeated by such a sound argument, as well as utterly unwilling to disrespect his father by going against his wishes in front of an audience, Leroy sighed once more and very grumpily made his way over to the empty sofa – followed only moments later by his very repentant son.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” Tony inquired, seating himself upon the sofa and immediately placing his head in his father’s lap.

Mildly rolling his eyes at such a childish inquiry, Leroy shook his head and ran a few fingers through his child’s hair before answering.

“No, Tony. I’m not mad.”
“Well,” Jackson yawned, shoulders popping as he stretched, “If that’s the case, let’s say we break out a boardgame to pass the time. Whose in for some Scrabble?”

Having passed many a rainy Saturday with Leroy playing just such a game, as said boy’s quieter temperament had heartily embraced the more reserved-approaches such a strategic game required, Jackson thought it ought to do an admirable job in keeping both the younger men quiet and distracted enough to avoid and further wrath from the woman currently ensconced in their kitchen.

“You and Dad are both way smarter than me.” Tony frowned. “No thanks.”

Feeling the familiar flareup of anger he experienced whenever the results of Senior’s poor parenting made itself evident via the self-depreciating habits his grandson every now and then exhibited, Jackson took a deep breath and counted to ten before responding.

“That’s not true.” He gently refuted. “You have a whole wealth of knowledge that your father and I could never lay claim to.”

“Only movie and sports stuff.” Tony refuted. “How useful is that?”

“Engines and tires are two very different things, Tony, but both are needed to keep a car running. The world works in the same way, too, I would argue.”

And, ever eloquent, Leroy added: “Dad’s right.”

Only narrowly resisting the urge to smirk in amusement upon the realization that some people possessed characteristics that would never change, as Leroy and Tony would only misinterpret his amusement as mockery or irreverence, Jackson sipped at the beer he had been wise enough to secure before the cooking had begun and suggested a simple solution.

“How about Candyland?” He requested. “It’s quick enough that we’ll be finished before supper.”

Judging that his efforts in providing distraction had been effective, as both heads of the younger men had perked up in response to the suggestion, Jackson relaxed in his recliner and was fully prepared to send his grandson off to collect the game before the next challenge presented itself.

“– I call blue.”

“– I call blue.”

Marveling at just how similar both the younger men truly were, as they were oftentimes so alike in character that even he sometimes forgot that the duo were not technically related by anything as legally-bounding as blood, Jackson shook his head and ran a hand through his hair before gradually relaxing as his son took charge of the situation.

“We’ll play for it.” Leroy compromised, holding up a fisted hand.

“You’re on.” Tony grinned, holding up his own fisted hand.

Already sensing what his son was about to do, as he himself had done the same for Leroy multiple times, Jackson bit down on his lip to keep from smiling and ruining the charade as he watched his only child purposely hesitate a second longer than necessary before said man magnanimously presented paper in response to his son’s scissors.

“Looks like you get blue, after all, Kiddo.” Leroy smiled, ever gracious in defeat.
“Not be too put out, Dad.” Tony encouraged, ever kind. “We’ll trade after the first game.”
Given that nothing so delighted her as to entertain a smart bevy of differing personalities, aside from spending some quality with her son, Henrietta found herself in a very chipper mood Thursday afternoon, even though the breathtaking results of her hard work had required that she begin her day at the ungodly hour of six in the morning. For even if such a labor of love had left her most thoroughly exhausted by noon, as well as heartily disheveled, those complaints seemed but negligible and mild in comparison the joy she felt when she glanced around her boyfriend’s crowded dining-room and found it full of laughter and pleased faces. Because even though she had grown quite used to being in attendance to such elaborate affairs, whether by hosting or accompanying either her parents of Senior, those such ‘festivities’ had been most severely lacking in anything even remotely resembling genuineness or joviality.

“Martha Stuart has been dethroned.” Jackson declared, as gradually both food and wine began to disappear from the table. “May the cooking channel have mercy on her soul.”

Breaking short his animated conversation with Abby to scrutinize his father with a slightly-concerned countenance after such an exuberant display, as Jackson’s speech had been quite slurred and unnecessarily loud, Jethro almost immediately came to the correct conclusion that his father had imbibed too much liquor and subsequently distracted him with a question about the correct way to bait a fishing hook so that Tony could remove the older man’s wine glass without any protest.

“He’s right, though.” Kate readily assured, shoveling a fourth slice of pumpkin pie into her mouth. “I’ve never tasted anything half so good.”

“That pie would probably taste even better if you hadn’t drowned it in all that chocolate syrup.” Tim good-naturedly advised, looking in horror upon the visage gracing her plate.

By that point in time a good four months pregnant, and well out of her hellish first trimester, Kate took the friendly rebuke as intended and responded in kind without bursting into any of the hormonal tears that might have put a damper on the festivities.

“You used to put a gallon of butter on your popcorn before starting your diet.” Kate calmly retorted, her face all aglow with mirth and hormones. “You don’t get to criticize my choices – not around the Holidays, at least.”

“Fair enough.” Tim easily acquiesced, holding his hands up in surrender as he nibbled at his one, and only, slice of apple pie.

Finding it absurdly frustrating that the technology-enthusiast had only been able to sample but a fourth of her cooking and baking, his strict diet prohibiting mostly anything that brought a person pleasure, Henrietta only narrowly resisted to urge to reassure him that there was plenty of pie for him to have a second slice and, as such, there was really no need for him to be going at the dessert on his plate like a mouse attacking meagre rations. But, knowing that such a thinly-veiled suggestion would only prompt said young man into reluctantly accepting another slice of pie, something he was clearly loathe to do given the great progress he had already made in shedding thirty pounds, Henrietta instead smiled sweetly at the more reserved individual and wordlessly refilled his glass of water without having to be asked.

“You’ll still want to be careful, though.” Abby cautioned, good-naturedly but sanctimonious all the same. “You only just got done with that acne flareup.”
Coloring slightly in the cheeks at the flippant reminder of the hormonal acne she had experienced somewhat near the second month of pregnancy, a case so severe she had required medication to clear it up, Kate scowled and looked ready to retaliate before, at the last moment, deciding to simply focus on her tea instead.

“Tim,” Jackson hummed, sensing an impending squabble, “Tony tells me you and your missus just got back from Romania. What was that like?”

Nowhere near as close to enjoying attention as much as his wife or best friend did, Tim squirmed awkwardly as all eyes turned toward him but did manage, after a quick few sips of wine, to spit out some sort of trivial information about the hotel they had stayed in.

“But was Romania like?” Tony pestered, a glint of very familiar mischief in his eyes.

Mouth too full of her own portion of pie to intervene and stop her son from being so delightfully naughty at the table, Henrietta looked furtively at Jethro in pursuit of assistance only to find the stern man hiding his amused smirk behind a napkin – clearly, and shamelessly, in cahoots with their child where regarded the razzing of the easily-flustered Tim.

“We didn’t…” Tim managed, blushing profusely. “We didn’t really…Get a chance to explore all that much.”

Innocently missing the sexual connotations encapsulated within such an ambiguous phrase, Victoria sat proudly up in her Grandfather’s lap and gave voice to the first thing that came to her little mind: “That hotel must have been very interesting.”

Needlessly mortified by his daughter’s innocent remark, as he was far more reserved in nature then even Tim, Jimmy colored as the table giggled in an unadulterated fashion and immediately called his daughter’s attention unto a plate of fudge before said toddler could make any indignant inquiries into what was so amusing to those seated around her.

“It was a very interesting hotel.” Tim murmured, looking reverently at his wife.

Quickly pinching Jethro on the thigh to keep him from raising any unneeded protests upon hearing his second-favorite underling referred to as a hotel, Henrietta made a general inquiry to those seated around the table if they desired more whipped cream for their dessert and hastened off to procure more of the concoction just as soon as Victoria assured her that she would very much like a bowlful of it for her pudding. A move, which highly indulgent, she was more than happy to comply with, as she loved young children to no end and, at the moment, currently had no grandchildren of her own to spoil in so careless a manner.

“And how about you, Kate?” Jackson innocently inquired, right as Henrietta returned to her seat. “How are you and Seamus enjoying this special time?”

Stiffening in her chair as the loaded question almost immediately threw the entire room into a stunned silence, save for a distracted Ducky who was currently trying to keep his granddaughter from coating her hair in chocolate mousse, Henrietta shook her head imperceptibly and Jackson and quit desperately began to try and concoct some sort of damage-controlling plot in her panicked mind – not wishing for Kate to be denied a proper pregnancy announcement at the hands of an endearingly well-meaning old man.

“Dad – “ Jethro began, his tone scolding yet respectful, “They haven’t – “

“Oh come, now, Leroy,” Jackson reproached with a smile. “There isn’t any sense in keeping
the good news from a harmless old man. I know a pregnant woman when I see one."

Looking very much like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights, Kate sat glued to her chair in horror even as her husband tried, and failed, to tug her from the chair in what was, no doubt, a compassionate and silent bid for an early retreat.

“Kate can’t be pregnant!” Abby protested, finally breaking the silence.

“And what does that mean!?” Kate snapped, effectively snapping out of her stupor as she rounded on her friend.

Fleetingly touching her stomach in a manner that seemed to have gone utterly unnoticed by everyone in the room but her, Abby cringed slightly and fiddled with her wedding ring before, at last, giving a very feeble response.

“Well,” She faltered, “You and Seamus only just got married.”

“Three months is plenty of time to make a baby.” Kate countered, placing a protective hand over the tiny swell of her stomach.

“Believe me,” Abby frowned, “I know.”

Rapidly coming to the conclusion that Abby, herself, was now in the beginning stages of a pregnancy, as the signs and behaviors pointed towards such, Henrietta stiffened in her seats and wondered how best to keep the unreserved woman from upstaging Kate yet again. Because whilst there was a certain amount of culpable deniability it came time to dissecting the reasoning behind having her wedding so close to her friend’s own nuptials, the desire to be wed on her favorite holiday slightly understandable, there could be almost no forgiveness between the two woman if the younger chose to announce what could only be a few-weeks-old pregnancy before the older could announce her own further along pregnancy.

“Now wait just a moment,” Ducky intervened, “What has everyone in such a fervor?”

“Kate’s pregnant, Dad.” Jimmy supplied, gently swatting Victoria’s chocolate-coated fingers away from his chin.

Giving great credit to his character by not reacting in as over-the-top a fashion as mostly everyone else had, Ducky smiled awkwardly in the terse silence toward Kate before subsequently thwacking Jimmy’s knuckles with a fork in retaliation for his treatment of Victoria.

“Aww, Geez.” Jackson frowned, fiddling with his spoon. “I shouldn’t have said anything, should I have?”

Giving his father a very sardonic look, an act which promptly earned him another pinch to the thigh, Jethro sighed and shook his head.

“Probably not, Dad.”

“So are you pregnant or not!?” Victoria demanded.

“Victoria!” Ducky gasped, perhaps scolding his granddaughter for the first time in his life.

But, rather than respond to the toddler in a similar vein, Kate thoroughly surprised Henrietta by breaking into an enormous grin.
“Yes, Toria, I’m having a baby.”

“We’re having a baby.” Seamus corrected, earning for himself a smile of adoration.
Chapter 57

Despite having started out the evening in a spectacular fashion, both he and Abby having arrived at their employer’s house to find it already full of people and laughter, Tim soon found, much to his consternation, that his evening was not at all going in a similar fashion. For not only had he received a phone-call from his grandmother before dessert expressing her disappointment in having not yet received the thank-you card Abby had sworn to have mailed out weeks ago, so too was he now faced with the unpleasant task of navigating his first marital argument whilst in a very crowded house full of nosy individuals.

“My Grandma wasn’t trying to make you feel bad, Abby.” Tim sighed, speaking below his breath in the general safety of the kitchen. “She just wanted to know if her card got lost in the mail.”

“It’s only been a few weeks, Timmy.” Abby pouted. “I don’t understand why everyone is being so impatient about a piece of paper.”

Understanding perfectly well that not all families held the same beliefs about the importance of such traditions like thank-you notes, as he had possessed a variety of different friends growing up, Tim frowned as he plated himself a fat piece of pumpkin pie and pondered how best to convey to his slightly-stubborn wife just why he was so irritated at her failure to send out something so simple as the cards he, himself, had offered to do.

“I know it doesn’t seem that important, but it is to my family.” Tim explained, feeling like a parrot fixated on just one phrase. “And if you didn’t want to write the notes yourself, you should have just told me so that I could.” Nervously tapping his foot a bit, he then added: “And I wish you hadn’t lied to be about it either.”

Having at least the decency to look guilty at his mild rebuke calling out her dishonesty, his usually confident wife colored a bit beneath all her makeup and looked guiltily down at the floor for a long spell.

“I shouldn’t have lied to you.” She agreed, seizing his hands with her own. “It’s just…I didn’t feel the need to prioritize the cards after hearing all the complaints from the wedding.”

Up until that point having believed himself to be the only one receiving the complaints from his disgruntled relatives, as he had so strongly wished to protect his sensitive wife from any sort of censure, Tim blinked upon hearing the news that his relations had gotten bold enough to be so rude as to approach the negligent bride themselves.

“Who – “

“Sarah.” Abby blurted, cutting him short with a one-worded blow. “She called the house last night wanting to talk to you, but you were out so I thought we could chat instead. Only, she didn’t really seem to want to talk to me at all, for some reason, and kept trying to get out of the conversation by saying she had to get to class. But, it’s Thanksgiving week, Timmy, and I knew there was no class the day before.”

By that point in time more than just a littler familiar with deciphering Abby’s emotional rambles, practice having helped him to nearly perfect the art, Tim nodded along at the appropriate intervals and frowned when his mind gradually began to put together the general theme of her spiel.

“I’ll talk to Sarah.” Tim placated, squeezing his wife’s pale fingers in his own. “And see
what’s going on.”

“There’s no need.” Abby frowned, blinking away tears in her eyes. “I already know what’s going on because she told me.”

Grimacing at such a declaration, as it had taken generous amounts of pleading on his part to keep Sarah from confronting Abby about her treatment of guests at their wedding, Tim looked desperately out into the living room and prayed someone would come along to interrupt them for more wine. Because if there was one thing he was most afraid of in life, it was having to chose sides between his beloved sister and beloved wife.

“What…What did Sarah say?”

“I asked her why she seemed to be avoiding me now that were sisters-in-law,” Abby began, bottom lip wobbling, “And she told me it was because I didn’t respect you or your family.”

Despite having childishly given into the same such thoughts at the beginning of their engagement, when it had seemed Abby was utterly unwilling to compromise in any portion of their nuptials or reception, Tim had kept resolutely silent on such a matter until those thoughts had vanished and, as such, now wondered how Sarah could have ever picked up on such misgivings. Because whilst they were closer then most siblings, given the caregiver role he had experienced due to their significant age gap, they had not reached the point where the could read each other’s minds.

“I don’t know why she would say that, Abbs.” Tim sighed. “Maybe she just had a bad day is all.”

Glaring at him as harshly as one so sweet could manage, Abby yanked her hands away from his without ceremony and raised her voice at him.

“She was very rude to me, Tim!”

Having been taught by both his mother and father that there was seldom any good reason to yell at a person, as they believed increased volume did not necessarily mean that your arguments were any stronger or sounder, Tim flinched a bit at the tone but otherwise let the outburst go unrebuked, not wanting to go so far as to tone-police his wife when she was so understandably upset.

“What did she say to you?” Tim questioned, taking care to keep his voice even.

“She said that I should haven taking more things into consideration when planning the wedding!” Abby cried, looking deeply wounded. “As if I didn’t spend three weeks putting it all together!”

Finding himself in the very uncomfortable position of agreeing with his younger sister, even when such an act meant he was in direct opposition to his newlywed wife, Tim fiddled the stem of his wineglass and wondered just how it was that Abby could be so clueless in some things yet so brilliant in others.

“I just…I don’t think our wedding was what people expected is all.”

In truth, it hadn’t been what he had expected either, as not only had Abby stubbornly refused to wear the wedding veil that had been in their family for six generations, so too had she outright refused to allow any of his family’s more Baptist-influences into the ceremony – effectively placing more importance upon her religion than that belonging to his family.
“No one made them stay, Tim. If they found our wedding so awful, they could have left.”

“It’s a long trip from Maryland, Abby.” Tim rebuked, not much liking her irreverent attitude where regarded his family.

Looking very much like a queen who had just been informed she should eat a steaming heap of dung by the lowest of her subjects, Abby made a very displeased noise and angrily grabbed a slice of dessert for herself.

“You’re supposed to be on my side.” She groused. “That’s what you agreed to when you married me.”

Angrily thinking that he had made no such agreement in any portion of their vows, yet unwilling to risk a row by stating such, Tim swallowed down his pride and tried, once more, to soothe away his wife’s frustrations.

“I am on your side, Abby.”

“Not with this you, aren’t!” Abby cried. “And not about what I wanted to do tonight, either.”

Gradually losing his resolve to remain strong against temptation that holiday season, Tim gave into his frustration and subsequently allowed such a decision to motivate him into plating himself a third slice of pie.

“You’re two weeks pregnant!” Tim snapped. “We can let Kate have this one!”
Gradually having come upon the realization he was a bit more tipsy then he had intended to get that evening, or at least not so early into the after-dinner festivities, Jackson reluctantly took his leave of the living room where an animated discussion was currently taking place as to what after-dinner game was to be played and stalked off into the kitchen in pursuit of some hopefully sobering coffee. Because as old as he was, which was quite so, even he didn’t much fancy the notion of dropping off to sleep before the hour had even struck ten. For not only would such an involuntary decision be the height of rudeness, given that alcohol had been the thing to precipitate it, so too did he not wish to miss out any quality-time with Leroy and Tony.

“Jackson!”

Having entered the kitchen with no expectation of finding anyone within, as Jackson had not witnessed anyone leaving the living room once dinner had reached its completion, he gave an unseemly gasp and very nearly dropped the dirty dishes in his hands before, at last, recovering himself upon seeing it was only Tim and not some sort of intruder as he had fleetingly expected.

“Tim.” Jackson smiled, carefully placing the dishes in the sink. “What’re you doing all alone in here? Shouldn’t you be with Abby?”

Rather than receive an amorous smile in response to the mentioning of his wife, as anyone might have expected a newlywed husband to respond, Tim thoroughly surprised Jackson by smiling weakly in a manner that suggested there had been some sort of quarrel between themselves.

“Is everything okay?” Jackson politely inquired.

Because as much as he understood that he had no business sticking his nose into the affairs of his son’s agents, as Leroy preferred to take care of those matters himself, Jackson somehow felt that it was his duty to step up and intervene in such matters when his son wasn’t around to do so himself.

“Everything is fine.” Tim feebly lied, looking very haggard as he wiped the counters clean with a rag. “I just thought I would clean up a bit before heading out.”

Glancing about the kitchen with a pointed look, as it was quite clear the troubled man had been cleaning for quite awhile given the marked lack of dirty dishes, Jackson sank into one of his son’s kitchen chairs and gestured for Tim to do the same, his gaze, while firm, only sharpening when said man seemed unlikely to heed his nonverbal suggestion without sufficient motivation.

“C’mon now.” Jackson coaxed. “You can talk to me.”

“I know that.” Tim readily agreed. “You’re like…Everyone’s favorite Grampa.”

Immensely flattered at such a high accolade, as Leroy and Tony both liked to bastardize such a characteristic by dubbing him the Second-Coming of Mr. Rogers, Jackson beamed at the technological whiz before remembering his self-imposed mission and responding accordingly.

“If that’s the case, Tim.” Jackson began. “You had best tell your Grampa what’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bothering me.” Tim lied again, absentmindedly nibbling on the tray of cookies left on the table.
Recalling the way in which Anne had put on a full seventeen pounds of weight after first receiving her diagnosis of cancer, just one of the ways in which the stress of such a disheartening verdict had affected her, Jackson leveled the younger man with a slightly reproachful look and calmly called him out for his deceit.

“If nothing was wrong,” He began, “You wouldn’t be hidden away in the kitchen.”

Looking as effectively trapped as a toddler Leroy once had when questioned by his mother why there was chocolate on his face if he had not stolen the cake from her plate, Tim squirmed uncomfortably and looked desperately at the kitchen door in a manner that suggested he might bolt if he became too overwhelmed with conversation at hand.

“Look, Jackson, I’d really love to stay and chat with you but Abby is waiting for me in the car.” The troubled man weakly excused. “She has a headache and I thought we’d call it an early night.”

“I see.” Jackson hummed, considerately moving the tray of cookies out of the reach of the emotional-eater’s hands. “That headache wouldn’t have anything to do with the argument you two just had, would it?”

Although Jackson honestly hadn’t had any real idea that there had been any sort of disagreement taking place in the kitchen whilst he was in the comfort of the living room amongst friends and family, the way in which Tim’s face colored guiltily all but assured him of such a fact.

“I’m sorry you overheard that.” The younger man needlessly apologized. “But I really need to go and tend to Abby.”

Effectively stopping the man with a stern expression as he made to leave his chair, Jackson sat up a little straighter and began his lecture without preamble.

“Let her cool down for a spell.” He advised. “She knows how to turn the heat on.”

Himself having utilized the same tactics with a stubborn Jethro whenever said boy refused to leave his truck on the spurious claims grocery shopping was far too boring without his mother being the one to bring him along, Jackson felt no guilt at all in advising the same methods seeing as how no real harm had come to his boy by utilizing such methods.

“Abby’s already angry with me – “

“Then a little time to cool off is exactly what she needs.” Jackson declared. “There isn’t any sense in trying to have a discussion when one of you is still upset.”

Either unable to offer up a suitable counterargument to such sage wisdom, or simply unwilling to argue with an elder, Tim fidgeted slightly in his chair before plucking up a linen napkin to fiddle with it.

“It was a ridiculous argument to begin with.” The younger man began, shaking his head in disgust. “I mean, the thank-you cards weren’t that important.”

Having earlier overheard Henrietta and Ducky expressing their mild disdain for the way in which they seemed to have been mutually overlooked by the McGee’s after conferring with one another and discovering neither head received a literary token of appreciation, Jackson found he didn’t need to ask any questions to clarify as to what Tim was reeling to.

“If they weren’t that important, they wouldn’t have started an argument.”
And it was not from any feelings of sanctimony that he spoke either. For, early on in his own marriage, he had swiftly learned that what seemed a trifling matter to him (a broken teacup for example) held far more significance for Anne (the only keepsake she had from her own mother) then he had initially realized.

“It’s just…She shouldn’t have lied about sending them.” Tim finally expressed, more annoyed then legitimately angry. “If she had just been honest about not sending them, I could have had them finished weeks ago.”

“So, you’re mad that she lied to you.” He parroted, waiting to see if he would receive anymore information.

“Yes!” Tim frowned, a slight flush of anger coloring his face. “I mean, I know it’s not important to her, but my family still enjoys those old-fashioned traditions.”

Resisting the urge to smile as Tim’s heated exclamation had led him to the crux of the matter in a fashion that was both prudent and swift, Jackson leaned back in his chair and kicked his feet up unto its empty counterpart before responding.

“It seems to me that you’re angrier about the disrespect to your family then you are the cards themselves.”

“Of course I am.” Tim frowned, feeling quite sorry for himself. “I mean, my family went out of the way to welcome her into their lives. And she…She can’t even send off a measly postcard to a lonely old woman who lives in a nursing home.” And, not quite done with his rant at that point, he added: “I’m going to have to spend all night writing the cards myself and posting them – that way they’ll arrive before the Christmas ones are due.”

Himself having never held with the idea of having to send off a card for every occasion, especially when the two biggest holidays were only four weeks apart at best, Jackson bit his tongue to keep from disparaging the practice and focused, instead, at the more pressing matter at hand.

“Can I be blunt with you, Tim?”

“If you’re anything like your son, I don’t have a choice, do I?” The younger man grimaced, clearly concerned for what was to come.

Not at all appreciating the casual way in which his son’s honestly was so disparaged, but otherwise understanding the intended result to be one of humor rather than sincerity, Jackson let the matter go unchastised as he launched into one of his ‘Mr. Rogers’ lectures.

“You married a young woman, Tim.” Jackson began without ceremony. “And while it’s a fine and dandy choice for a young man to take a young bride, the fact still remains that you’re a good ten years older than your wife. Now, that wouldn’t be such a problem if you were both a decade or two older, but as it is, your both at vastly different points in your life whereas maturity is concerned. Abby’s at that age where she’s more girl then woman, and you, well, you’re clearly ready to settle down and start a family. And that,” Jackson declared, “Is where the problem lays. You ought to have waited a few more years before putting a ring on her finger, Tim, so that you could start your marriage together as equals.”

Shrinking at such unabashed honestly, as no doubt Jackson had been the only one in his company decent enough to tell him the truth, Tim cupped his head in his hands as if his thoughts were to heavy a burden to bear without such an aid and looked despondently down at the table.
“I wanted to wait.” The young man confessed in a whisper. “But…Abby was impatient and I was worried my Dad wouldn’t make it long enough to see August – let alone October.”

Understanding perfectly well such a sentiment, as it had broken his heart to watch Leroy wed Shannon without Anne there beside him to share in his happiness, Jackson nodded respectfully but didn’t retract any of his previous statements.

“I wish we would have waited,” Tim confessed, “But, there’s nothing that can be done now. I made a vow to love and care for her, and I intend to keep it, no matter the obstacles.”

Finding himself to respect said young man all the more with such a declaration, as it was a rare feat these days to find any man so serious about his duties as a husband, Jackson clapped the field agent on his shoulder in a fatherly fashion and nodded his approval before promptly continuing on in much the same vein he gone about earlier.

“That’s a mighty fine resolve you got there, Tim.” Jackson appraised. “Just be careful it doesn’t turn to resentment. That will ruin a marriage faster than you can blink.”

“And how do I prevent resentment?”

Thinking that it might already be too late if he was already asking such a question, but far too wise to make known such a thought, Jackson smiled softly and ardently hoped he was leading the young man on the right path.

“Spend some time in different rooms tonight.” He advised. “And then, once morning comes, sit down and come to some sort of consensus as to what the terms of your marriage ought to entail.”
Chapter 59

Despite there being a full two weeks before Christmas was set to take place, Henrietta nonetheless found herself willing her sleepiness away as she lovingly labored to knead the rather stubborn mound of gingerbread dough laid out before her, her desires to provide for Tony, as well anyone else who might be partaking in the hallowed tradition, more than enough building material for the gingerbread houses she and Tony had been making together since the latter was barely enough to hold a pipping bag much less decorate with any sense of accuracy.

“Hen,” Jethro called out, startling her from her labors as he walked into the apartment without knocking, “What smells so good in here?”

“Come and find out.” She teased. “But watch your step, I just waxed the floors.”

Thankfully heeding her advice in a cautious manner that their son seemed not to possess, Jethro slowed his steps as he entered the kitchen and all but tiptoed across the tiles to kiss her full on the cheek.

“Where’s our child?” She innocently inquired, reciprocating the affection by pecking him on the lips.

“He went bowling with Tim and Jimmy.” Jethro explained. “But he left his keys on his desk before leaving and I figured he might need them eventually.”

Gratefully accepting the small collection of keys from her thoughtful boyfriend, Henrietta smiled indulgently at him turned to place the important tools in their proper place in an empty bowl beside the refrigerator.

“That boy would forget his own dick if it weren’t attached.”

Involuntary grimacing at such a callous imagery, for like most men he held that particular organ in high regards, Jethro let loose a hissing sound from between his teeth before gradually recovering himself well enough to respond in a coherent fashion.

“I think you meant to say head.” He patiently corrected, reaching out an impulsive hand toward the freshest batch of gingerbread.

Quickly swatting away the errant fingers before the could so much as touch the fragrant building material, Henrietta smiled cheekily before any offense could register within her boyfriend’s mind and playfully stroked his chin.

“They’re the same thing, aren’t they?”

“You naughty girl.” Jethro scolded, wrapping her in a fierce bearhug. “Whatever am I to do with you?”

Melting most enthusiastically into the embrace, Henrietta tilted her head back to better meet his alluring eyes and grinned most wickedly.

“I suppose you could take me over your knees once my gingerbread is out of the oven.”

Feeling all the excitement her boyfriend experienced at such a naughty thought when something big promptly poked her in the hip, Henrietta giggled openly and patiently awaited the
“You already have enough gingerbread to make a mansion.” Jethro reasoned. “How much do you need.”

“Have you forgotten what type of person our child is?” Henrietta countered, a wry smile on her face as she referred to Tony’s childishness.

“Good point.” Jethro agreed, wearing a smile of his own. “But for God’s sake, woman, where did you find time to wax the floors and make all of this? You don’t even wake before noon on most days.”

Immensely pleased that Jethro had not even seemed the mildest bit affected upon hearing her refer to Tony as their child, to the extent that her pleasure outweighed her mild annoyance at having her sleeping habits so shamelessly called out, Henrietta harmlessly swatted her boyfriend’s shoulder in retaliation and was promptly kissed on the brow in return.

“I’ll have you know I’ve been waking up at ten lately.” Henrietta defended, grinning madly as her other brow was assailed with a kiss. “And besides,” She pouted, “I’ve been bored lately.”

Because with both son and boyfriend spending a good nine to ten hours at work each day, with nothing but a television to soothe her restless personality, Henrietta had found it harder and harder each morning to send her child off with the same cheery smile he had grown accustomed to from childhood.

“Why don’t you try finding a day job?” Jethro suggested, frowning sympathetically.

“Why not a night job?” Henrietta teased, unable to contain herself.

“Oh no.” Jethro calmly argued, squeezing her tighter. “The nights are for us.”

Thinking to herself that she would never grow used to the way in which Jethro actually seemed to want to spend time with her, as Senior had made it most blatantly clear that her existence in his life was more of a nuisance than reward, Henrietta returned the hug with equal fervor and silently vowed to herself to never let this man go.

“A job is a very good suggestion, Jethro.” Henrietta allowed, once the moment had passed. “But I’ve never worked a day in my life. Who would hire me?”

And it was not from any sense of self-gratifying pity that she spoke either. For, having lived quite a privileged life under both Senior and her parents, she had grown more accustomed to giving out requests rather than demanding them. And as such, had it not been for the alimony her scoundrel of an ex had been ordered to pay her, Henrietta was all but sure she would have immediately starved or frozen death immediately after the unexpected divorce had left her without either son or home.

“Didn’t you go to college?” Jethro questioned. “Surely you’ve got some type of degree.”

“I got a missus degree.” Henrietta frowned, slightly embarrassed at her stupidity. “In performing arts.”

Involuntarily grimacing at the confession, and immediately trying to rectify it with some sort of humor, Jethro smirked and gave voice to his admirable attempt at lightening the mood.

“I wouldn’t think you would need to learn anything about being dramatic.”
“Sounds like someone doesn’t want any gingerbread.” Henrietta sassed, tapping him on the chin with a finger.

Gently seizing the offending finger with his own larger hand, Jethro smiled apologetically and robbed any further rebukes from her body with one well-placed kiss on the crook of her neck.

“You’re forgiven, Sir.” She breathed, knees still weak.

“A thousand thanks.” He crooned, holding her up. “But save any rewards for after I tell you the good news.”

Delighted at the very real prospect Jethro was referring to the purchasing of more of that hated lube they had both so enjoyed, Henrietta shamelessly took the bait and made the expected inquiries.

“And what news is that?”

“Well,” Jethro began, suddenly nervous, “The Director is looking for some sort of secretary.” And, suddenly squirmy, he added: “I guess he’s getting sick and tired of paying us overtime whenever we stay behind to finish our reports.”

Only narrowly resisting the urge to quip that she was sick and tired, as well, of her boys being away from her for up to twelve hours at times, Henrietta frowned and briefly contemplated the idea in her head.

“Do you think I could manage?” She fuzzed, overwhelmed at the thought of being put into charge of something so serious.

“Of course I do.” Jethro chivalrously agreed. “You’re ridiculously organized.”

Unable to argue against such a fact, as even her feminine products were arranged in a very specific order, Henrietta smiled at the accolade and decided, then and there, that she ought to at least give the job a try.

“Very well.” She declared. “You may suggest to Vance that I would like the job.”

“Then it’s as good as yours.” Jethro assured, kissing her chin. “Are you up to the challenge of being put to work?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” Henrietta quipped.

Thoroughly confused by such a response, as Jethro sometimes wasn’t quite so clever when it came to flirting, the Marine furrowed his brow and looked helplessly down into her face.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Henrietta purred, reaching up on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear, “My gingerbread will be done any minute now and we’ll have at least four hours to ourselves before Tony gets home. Let’s break in my new sheets.”

“And then what?” Jethro asked, slightly breathless.

“Well, I suppose we can have some supper if there’s enough time.”
Chapter 60

“You do understand that when I break both my legs and an arm, you’re going to have to take care of me day and night, yes?” Jethro pressed, reluctantly allowing his girlfriend to tie a pair of skates unto his feet. “Because I’m going to break my legs – “

“And an arm.” Tony finished, already standing on the ice in his perfectly laced-up skates.

Made absurdly angry at such a graceful visage, as said younger man could hardly go a full day without walking into something sharp or tripping over nothing, Jethro scowled and briefly considered throwing his shoe at the reprobate’s head before, at the last minute, coming to senses and the subsequent conclusion that such an act would not at all go over well with his protective girlfriend.

“You’ll be fine, Jethro.” Henrietta patiently assured, tying off the laces of his skates with an impressive knot. “It’s just like rollerblading.”

Helplessly blanching at such a dismissive comparison, as the first and last time he had tried to participate in such an activity he had crashed into a thorn bush and subsequently been forced to spend the remainder of his second-grade summer vacation with both his wrists locked into casts, Jethro sincerely contemplated cutting the bladed death-traps off his feet and abandoning the rink altogether. But, with just one look from an over-eager Tony, the unchivalrous plot was quickly abandoned in favor of making his son’s night. Because as much as Jethro had ardently protested that he had no real wish to impose upon the tradition the boy had begun with his mother decades ago, both Tony and Henrietta had been most ardently enthusiastic in their declarations that they wanted him to participate.

“Rollerblading was never really my thing.” Jethro confessed, feeling slightly sweaty despite the general coolness of the facility. “I preferred walking.”

Because, at the end of the day, one didn’t need to worry about splitting someone’s head open with a blade if they tripped and fell whilst walking. Nor, he further conferred, did they have to contend with the possibilities of embarrassing themselves by being outskated by the small group of Brownie-Scouts currently slipping and sliding across the ice without effort.

“We can get you an ice-walker.” Henrietta offered, effortlessly rising to her feet in a manner that had him questioning all he knew about physics. “Would you like to try that?”

Glancing in distaste upon the small collection of toddlers currently using such aids to keep their balance as their more-adept parents and elder siblings pushed them across the smoothed ice in an aggravatingly effortlessly fashion, Jethro shook his head in vehement refusal and resolved not to embarrass himself in such a fashion.

“I’m thinking I’m just going to have to go with the sink-or-swim method.”

“Don’t worry, Jethro.” Henrietta assured, holding out a hand. “I won’t let you drown.”

And, with that sentiment thus declared, Jethro found he had no other choice but to accept the proffered hand and hope for the best as he rose shakily to his feet in a fashion more befitting of Bambi then a seasoned Marine.

“Are you going to skate, Dad?” Tony beamed, effortlessly sliding across the ice to his side.

Very reluctantly straightening his posture once both feet were as firmly on the ice as they
were ever going to be, Jethro nodded tersely and chivalrously tried not to put any more pressure on Henrietta than was strictly necessary to keep him upright. A feat which, while noble, almost immediately had him slipping backward until he rapidly readjusted his grip on his girlfriend in a decidedly ungentlemanly fashion.

“T’m going to try.” Jethro offered, fighting to keep his ankles from buckling. “Now get over here and give me a hand before I drag your mother down to the ice.”

Hastily hurrying to comply, as he very clearly didn’t wish for either of his parents to get hurt, Tony glided a few inches forward and calmly and effortlessly seized his free arm so that his mother could be released from his father’s grip.

“Try a few steps now.” Henrietta encouraged, seizing up the fingers of his other hand.

“Okay.” Jethro reluctantly agreed. “But when my ankles snap in half, I don’t want to hear any complaints from the two of you.”

Despite being fully aware of the fact that his nerves were provoking him into being needlessly gruff, and hating himself for it all the while, neither wife nor son moved to chastise him as they patiently guided him further away from the safety of the bench and deeper into the less-occupied center of the rink.

“You’re not going to fall.” Henrietta soothed, squeezing his fingers. “We’ve got you.”

And, just like that, all of the tension and pressure of not wanting to seem foolish in front of both girlfriend and son melted away with that calm reassurance. For, having dared allow himself to look away from his own feet into the bewilderingly beautiful eyes of his girlfriend at such a proclamation, he somehow knew, just knew, that it would take far more than a stumble for him to lose face in the eyes of Henrietta. And, as for Tony, well, it would take a thousand betrayals for his loyal St. Bernard to think ill of him.
Chapter 61

More out of breath and exhausted then he would ever care to admit out loud, as skating really did take quite a bit of effort, Jethro had found the prospect of enduring a horse-drawn sleigh ride far less cliché and unpalatable then he had before the skating had begun. Because as much as he had nobly and chivalrously protested to Henrietta that his ankles were just fine, and his nose not at all sore from running right into the glass planes encircling the ice, the facts still remained that his entire legs were sore and his nose quite persistent with its reminders that it had been assaulted for the first time in years. Not that any of those factors were currently inhibiting his enjoyment of the sleigh-ride to the point that he was unable to appreciate the intimacy it was currently providing him and his girlfriend. No, his mild soreness was all but negligible compared to that.

“I wish you would have let me find an ice-pack for your nose.” Henrietta fussed, whispering so as not to wake their sleeping fellow passenger.

“A little swelling never hurt anybody.” Jethro dismissed, kindly leaving out the part where he had made his own inquiries about first-aid supplies to the manager only to be informed the rink possessed none. “And that’s what I get for using my face to break a fall.”

Because while, admittedly, he had tried to use his hands to keep from plowing into the glass planes, he had been shamefully too slow to the draw to save his face, and ego, from being bruised.

“I still say that the little bastard in the yellow coat pushed you.” Henrietta huffed, idly ruffling the hair of the head currently using his lap as a pillow.

Although he was also of the opinion that said hellspawn had shoved him without provocation, Jethro startled to hear the notoriously good-hearted Henrietta gave voice to the same grievance.

“Did you really just refer to a Girl Scout as hellspawn?” Jethro scoffed, amazed but amused all at once.

“Don’t you go thinking all Girl Scouts are innocent.” Henrietta cautioned. “Because I was one, too.”

Carefully rearranging the blanket that had slipped from their kids shoulder after their sleigh had stumbled of a rock, Jethro smiled and gave into his temptation to tease his girlfriend.

“How long did it take you to get kicked out?”


“How long?” He pestered, already sensing his victory.

Huffing with an indignity that didn’t quite reach her beautiful eyes, Henrietta folded her arms across her tiny chest and rolled her eyes.

“Three years.” She fibbed, her blush giving her away.

“Hen.” Jethro reasoned. “You can’t lie to me.”

“Oh, fine.” She pouted. “Three weeks. Clara Wang and Sarah Marshal told me I was going to hell for not being a Baptist, and I told them they were going to hell for being so ugly.”
Smiling as it became abundantly clear to him just where Tony’s sense of innate sassiness came from, Jethro chuckled beneath his breath and pressed further into the matter in the hopes garnering more details.

“They kicked you out for that?”

Because although he knew that Tony had been kicked out of the scouts for kissing another boy on the mouth during a camping trip, something the other boy hadn’t been enthused about, the thought that a mean retort could get a girl kicked out of her own trip was bewildering for him.

“Sarah Marshal’s mother was the troop leader.” Henrietta clarified. “Also, I may have shoved poison ivy in their pillow cases.”

Good God,” Jethro grinned, “You’re just devious.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Henrietta grinned, sending a thrill down his spine as she gingerly kissed his nose.

“How could I forget it?” Jethro questioned. “That’s one of the reasons I love you.”

Watching in horror as her ensnaring eyes turned as big as saucers at such a carless slip of his tongue, as not even he had anticipated the words that had left his lips, Jethro inwardly cursed himself for his moment of weakness and briefly wondered if a swan-dive off the side of the sleigh would kill him or only add to his misery.

“Oh, Jethro.” Henrietta smiled, cupping his face in her gloved hands. “I love you, too.”

“Do you mean it?” Jethro asked stupidly, pressing his forehead against her own.

“Yes.” She breathed, green eyes all aglow. “Yes.”

And that was all the encouragement he needed to kiss her, to press his besmirchingly chapped lips against her impossibly soft pink petals and fold his fingers into her immaculately-groomed hair even as she stood to lean further into the embrace and entwine her hands around his neck. It was only when Jethro forgot the existence of the young man currently sleeping in his lap, did their embrace come to an end. For, in his great haste to convey his love with acts rather than words, he had made to sit up straighter and all but jolted his boy awake with the action.

“Whas goin on?” Tony mumbled sleepily, firmly repositioning his head in his lap.

“Your father loves me.” Henrietta explained. “Go back to sleep.”

“That’s nice.” Tony breathed dreamily, promptly dropping off to sleep as ordered.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Keep the reviews coming, please! They motivate me!
Also, any prompts will be well-received!

Given that both of them had been needed to shepherd a half-asleep Tony up the stairs and into his bedroom, a room Jethro hadn’t referred to as the guest-room in ages, both he and Henrietta had found themselves collapsing on the sofa without any real desire to further tire themselves out with any additional physical activity. Although Jethro did feel he was being more than just a little gratuitous in his stroking of her plump bottom as she rested peacefully in his lap against his chest and absentmindedly fiddled with the buttons on his shirt.

“This has been one of the best nights I’ve ever had.” Henrietta murmured against his chest. “Thank you.”

“I feel the same way.” Jethro ardently assured, moving his fingers away from her bottom to play with the curls adorning her head. “It was almost like I was teenager again.”

Granted, of course, there had been no curfews of cockblocking neighbors to tell him off for stealing the virginity of Madeline Prescott in the back of his father’s truck, but still, all the thrill and emotion of that clandestine first date had been present during the sleigh-ride all the same. In fact, were he not so afraid of the very thought, he might have entertained the notion he had experienced the very same sensations and emotions as the day he had plucked up the nerve to take a seat beside Shannon on that bench all those years ago.

“For me, it was like falling in love for the first time.” Henrietta gushed. “Which, I guess, it actually kind of was.”

Once more feeling that familiar flare of anger towards Senior, a man who had managed to aggravate him to no end despite them having had but little interaction over the years, Jethro stiffened a bit before gradually relaxing Henrietta stroked his collarbone.

“Have you really never been in love before?” Jethro questioned, finding such a prospect immensely sad.

Face clouding over with emotion as she contemplated the question, in a manner he feared greatly suggested the promise of tears, Henrietta withdrew her face from his hand and nibbled at her bottom lip for a spell before answering.

“I thought I was once – with Senior.” She confessed, looking highly ashamed. “But it wasn’t long at all before I realized he was using me for my money and connections. And, by the time I did figure it out, I was two weeks pregnant with Tony.”

“There are worse mistakes to be made.” Jethro soothed. “And at least we got Tony out of the deal.”

“Yes,” Henrietta grinned, “Letting Senior take me in the back of his ugly yellow thunderbird
was certainly my best mistake.”

Cringing a bit as his mind helplessly conjured up images of Senior doing just that to his current girlfriend, Jethro grimaced in disgust and was immensely grateful his repeated trysts in the back of his father’s truck had never resulted in a shotgun marriage. Because as hot as Madeline Prescott had been back in the day, which was quite so, the untimely impregnation of the sheriff’s daughter would have surely gotten him murdered.

“Don’t feel too bad.” He implored. “I was the stupidest teenager alive.”

“You?” Henrietta scoffed, sitting up a bit to convey her disbelief.

Blushing a bit as he thought of all the midnight hospital-runs, as well as all the arrests and subsequent bribes from his father to get the Sheriff to release him without charges, he grimaced a bit but nodded all the same.

“I’m sure my Dad would be more than happy to share a few stories with you come Christmas.”

“You do understand that I intend to encourage him in this, yes?” Henrietta teased, green eyes full of delightful mischief.

“I wouldn’t expect any less from you.” Jethro calmly assured, lovingly kissing her brow.

Closing her pretty eyes in delight at the kiss, as she loved being showed affection just as much as her son, Henrietta sighed contentedly and stroked his stubbly chin with two perfectly soft fingers.

“Speaking of Christmas,” She hummed, “How do you want to spend it? Or, better yet, where?”

“I was thinking we ought to just spend it here.” Jethro began, hoping he wouldn’t bring any offense unto her person. “I mean, we actually have a tree here and enough room for everyone to be comfortable.”

“That sounds perfect.” Henrietta hummed, looking relieved. “But tell me, how did you manage to get that tree in here with only Tony for help? It’s enormous.”

“The same way I get my boats out of the basement.” He teased, refusing to elaborate.

Having by that point in time come to the realization that Jethro was never going to share such a secret with anyone other than Tony, Henrietta rolled her eyes but otherwise raised no real protest against his secrecy before launching into another line of dialogue.

“Speaking of Tony,” She whispered, glancing suspiciously at the stairs, “Santa has already gotten him a large book of classic movie posters and a new suit.”

“Anything else?” Jethro pressed, not wishing for his kid to receive two of the same things.

“I knitted him a few sweaters and sewed up a new quilt for his bed.” She shrugged. “And then I just got a few more odds-and-ends for him…nothing big.”

Greatly relieved that she had made no mention of anything he had already purchased for their child, the most significant of which being a theatre-styled popcorn maker and ticked to whatever Tony-award winning piece of crap had been popular at the time of his purchasing, Jethro relaxed
against the cushions and felt Henrietta immediately do the same against his body.

“I have to hide his gifts in a pail of sawdust.” Jethro breathed.

“I put his in my sex-toy drawer.” Henrietta shamelessly confessed. “It’s the only place he won’t look…Even though I’m sure he knows that’s where I keep them.”

Not at all surprised by such information, as Tony had a very vexing knack for locating all those things which he ought not find, Jethro focused on the latter part of her statement.

“You have an entire drawer full of toys?”

“Of course, I do.” Henrietta purred. “And I intend to introduce you to them one-by-one.”

“If the rest of them are anything like that purple thing, I have no objections.”
Chapter 63

Having awoken that morning to find himself tucked thoroughly into bed in the perfect fashion only Gibbs could manage, Tony crept out of bed without bothering to change out of the pajamas he *definitely* hadn’t dressed himself in and stalked of sleepily in pursuit of the kitchen he was sure both his parents would be sipping coffee in. And, sure enough, when finally he made his sluggish appearance in such a room, both Gibbs and his mother were seated at the table to greet him with warm smiles. Which, while only *slightly* so, was much more gratifying than the alluring sight of freshly-made blueberry pancakes on the table.

“See,” Gibbs crowed, glancing away from his newspaper to smirk at his girlfriend, “*I told* you he would be down in ten minutes.”

“Lucky guess.” Tony’s mother calmly dismissed, lovingly refilling her boyfriend’s coffee cup. “That’s all.”

Watching in mild interest as he watched his parents tease each other with an ease that belied the short duration of their relationship, Tony absentmindedly fixed himself a plateful of pancakes and very nearly forgot the all-important syrup before taking a seat near Gibbs.

“It wasn’t luck.” His father calmly asserted, preemptively passing Tony a rather large stack of napkins. “I heard him coughing a moment ago, and I knew he would be down for food right away.”

Having by that point in time grown used to the way in which his father seemed to know *everything*, as well as learned to live with the fact that the older man’s hearing was as effective at preventing mischief as was his direct supervision, Tony enthusiastically shoved a fork into his fluffy pancakes and tucked into his breakfast with all the gusto of a starving man as he allowed his Mama to face the absurdities of her boyfriend unhindered.

“My God,” Henrietta huffed, without any real displeasure, “Your hearing *must* be as good as your eyesight.”

“It’s hard to tell.” Gibbs confessed, a tender smile on his face. “Because I can enjoy hearing your laughter just as easily as I can enjoy viewing your beauty.”

Thinking it would be quite the pity if he allowed himself to gag on the delicious breakfast his Mama had surely spent a significant time laboring over, as well as greatly fearing he would receive one hell of a headslap if he gave into such a temptation, Tony steadfastly turned the majority of his focus unto his pancakes and desperately tried not to think too long upon all those things which his mother could have done to make her usually stern boyfriend so openly affectionate. Because, even with as sex-positive as they both were, there were some lines that just hadn’t ought to be crossed between mother and son. *Or* father and son, for that matter.

“Jethro,” His mother giggled, very difficult to tune out, “*Not* at the breakfast table.”

“Would you prefer I ‘compliment’ you in a different room?” Gibbs shamelessly antagonized, wantonly snaking out a strong hand to pull her into his lap.

Had Tony been faced with the unpleasant situation of leaving behind a delicious plate of food should he chose to flee the house in pursuit of a less awkward breakfast, he would have gladly thrown down his fork and ran from his father’s house the *very moment* he heard Gibbs *fucking giggle* in response to being poked in the ribs by his mother.
“Dad,” Tony managed, deciding to press his luck, “Can I eat breakfast in front of the tv?”

Far too distracted with the prospect of keeping a very wiggly girlfriend in his lap to remind his child that eating in front of the television was strictly reserved only for when he was too ill to sit upright at the table, Gibbs nodded his agreement to the notion and made to vocalize it even as his mother sought to deny him the opportunity on what was surely the very spurious grounds that he was a messy eater.

“ – Go for it.”

“ – Absolutely not.”

At a loss as to just who he should be listening to, as he greatly reviled the thought of going against either parent, Tony looked helplessly at the more sympathetic portion of the duo and was promptly rewarded when a pair of very vivid blue eyes rolled toward the ceiling in a fashion that conveyed he was about to get exactly what he wanted. Which was really quite the impressive feat when Tony stopped to contemplate the fact that he hadn’t even needed to make use of his puppy-dog eyes to accomplish such a feat.

“Jethro,” Henrietta mildly reproved, “That boy had to use a bib until he was four.”

“It’s just a couch, Hen.” Gibbs reasoned. “And leather cleans real easy.”

Looking highly affronted at such an erroneous assertion, as his mother really was quite fastidious when it came to the keeping of her house, Henrietta affixed her boyfriend with a look that promised future rebuke before turning to face Tony with a very stern expression.

“If I find so much as one crumb on that couch, Anthony Angelo, you’ll rue the day.”

Thinking it not at all wise to assert that such was a very unreasonable term, even though the sofa had no doubt accumulated all sorts of crumbs that had nothing to do with him over the long years, Tony hastily made his retreat into the living room right as his mother began questioning her boyfriend in earnest as to whether or not it was he who had been giving her son permission to eat in his bed.
Given that he did, in fact, possess a remarkable talent for working wood into all sorts of shape, Jethro really ought not to have been so surprised to find his skills extended to that of gingerbread-related architecture. For as concerned as he had initially been that his large and calloused fingers would be far too clumsy to even assist his wife and son in the crafting of an admittedly large mansion, it had been his sense of structural-design that had kept the more enthusiastic duo from bringing their hard work to an untimely end via his patient suggestions that all principles of weight-distribution leaned toward the prohibition of a third-story, let alone a chimney above the study. A scientific observation which, while slightly disheartening, had promptly earned him several expressions of appreciation when the finishing touches of colored frosting were placed on the completed home without any significant damage being done to its structural integrity.

“You were right, Jethro.” Henrietta appraised, kissing his brow. “A third-story would have made the whole thing collapse.”

Because, even with all their caution in heeding the natural laws of gravity, their stately gingerbread house did have a noticeable, yet slight, sagging of its bottom ceiling.

“Do you think it’ll hold up, Dad?” Tony pestered, having not failed to notice the mild curvature.

“It’ll be fine.” Jethro calmly reassured, ruffling his boy’s hair. “I added six support beams, didn’t I?”

Never one to doubt him in anything, Tony took his words as seriously as the Disciples took the Gospel and subsequently turned away from his critical examination of the delicious house he had helped to craft and boldly picked up a bag of half-empty purple frosting before upending the entire contents of the thing into his mouth in a very unseemly fashion.

“Anthony!” Henrietta scolded, seizing the bag away from her son. “You’ll make yourself sick!”

Already having received what he wanted in the form of sugar-filled frosting, Tony allowed the seizure of his snack to go unprotested until his mother approached him with a wet rag and, somewhat maliciously, scrubbed away the frosting from his lips.

“Hen,” Jethro rebuked, picking up a bag of pink, “You missed a spot.”

“Where?” Henrietta fussed, clearly not amused at having her cleaning skills called into question.

“Right,” Jethro began, releasing a smudge of frosting on their son’s nose, “There.”

Giggling childishly even as his mother drew in an indignant breath at such a blatant disregard to her desires for a clean home and child, Tony snatched a bag of yellow and shamelessly drew a gaudy handlebar mustache unto Jethro’s face.

“You little shit.” Jethro heatlessly admonished, effortlessly subduing his son in a headlock. “Let’s see how you like a green goatee.”

Hastily retreating from the kitchen in a fashion that suggested she greatly feared having to wash frosting from her thick mane of curls, her expression firm but her eyes full of amusement,
Henrietta charitably left them to their rough-housing without and censure and nary a warning to keep things as clean as possible.

“Dad,” Tony wheezed, “You’re starting to hurt me.”

Forgetting, for a moment, just how skillful an actor his son was in his panic that he might very well have actually hurt the poor kid, Jethro loosened his hold on the boy without question and was promptly rewarded, and betrayed, for his stupidity by his prisoner’s subsequent escape and attempted tackle by launching unto his back.

“You can’t tackle a Marine, Tony.” Jethro lectured, not for the first time. “You ought to know that by now.”

And, that little bit of wisdom thusly imparted, Jethro kept the nimble boy from wriggling free by firmly locking his legs into piggy-back position and promptly carried the little miscreant out into the living room whereupon he unceremoniously dumped him into his mother’s lap.

“Oh,” Henrietta squawked, not at all irritated as she ought to have been, “What am I going to do with you boys?”

“Love us.” Tony cheekily suggested, sitting up in her lap to kiss her cheek.

“Fully and unconditionally.” Jethro agreed, pecking her other cheek.

Grinning widely as she swiped the different colored frostings from her cheek with a tissue from the nearby box, Henrietta rolled her eyes with good-humored exasperated, and pulled Jethro down to sit at her side.

“I’m glad you two get along so well.” She beamed, drawing them into a false sense of security. “It’ll make cleaning the kitchen even easier for you.”
Chapter 65

Cuddled up in her boyfriend’s lap in the recliner, as both Jackson and Tony had fallen asleep on the couch together in a very heartwarming fashion, Henrietta kissed Jethro adoring on the chin before carefully readjusting the blanket they shared back over their snuggled frame.

“Those two are adorable together.” She gushed, pressing further into her man.

“Except when they’re working in cahoots together.” Jethro amended.

Thinking that her boyfriend was no doubt referring to the way in which Jackson had worked to distract them both with some absurd story about the origins of Coca-Cola, a narrative which had seemed endless at the time, so that Tony could have enough time to conceal the fact that they had accidentally spilled wine on her cloth purse, Henrietta furrowed her brow and nodded in agreement.

“It’s a good thing I had already started making myself another one.” She quipped, feeling not at all put out with the loss of a bag that was older than her son. “I’d hate to have to buy one.”

“I’m so glad you’re not high-maintenance.” Jethro praised, stroking her hair. “I get enough of that from Tony.”

Unable to defend her son against accusations that he possessed high standards for himself, as Tony could be quite the diva when it came to fashion, Henrietta simply smiled demurely and opted for a bit of humor.

“I still don’t how that boy went so long without realization he was gay.”

“Me either.” Jethro conferred. “And trying to convince him was like what I’d imagine trying to convince Charles Ray he wasn’t blind would be like.”

Chortling at such a creative description, and nearly choking on her wine as a result, Henrietta muffled her giggled with a fist held to her mouth and pondered, briefly, if Jethro was perhaps as good a writer as he was a painter.

“I can’t even imagine the hissy-fit he threw when he finally accepted it.” Henrietta shuddered. “Good thing you were the one to deal with it.”

“Yeah,” Jethro groused, “I probably handled being called every name under the sun better than you would have.”

Up until that point having been mostly clueless as to what exactly went down during the dramatically dubbed ‘Final Showdown,’ Henrietta was more than just a little disheartened to hear that such a tantrum had resulted in such unseemly behavior.

“Oh, Jethro,” Henrietta frowned, “He didn’t.”

“He is sure as hell did.” Jethro asserted, a fond smile on his face. “I even heard words and phrases I hadn’t heard since leaving Service.”

“Why are you smiling?” Henrietta questioned, slightly exasperated. “I would have devastated!”

Because, even after all these years, she could still recall the way in which she had cried for
hours in the bathroom after a four-year-old Tony informed her he preferred the company of his chief nanny over her.

“Which is precisely why it was a good thing that I was the one to deal with it.” Jethro nonchalantly shrugged. “Besides, it was all for the good in the end.”

“You’re telling me that your feelings weren’t hurt by that?”

“I never said that.” Jethro refuted, frowning slightly. “I said that I dealt with it better than you would have.”

Thinking that she would have, at the very least, burst into unseemly tears if referred to in so vulgar a manner by her only child, Henrietta was forced to concede, without argument, to her boyfriend in such a matter.

“And how did you deal with it?” Henrietta questioned, feeling as if she already knew the answer.

“Copious amounts of bourbon.” Jethro grimaced. “And a call to Dad.”

Sneaking a quick glance at said elderly man, who was currently snoring loud enough to rattle the glass in the windows of the neighbor’s houses, Henrietta smiled softly and again thanked her lucky stars that the Gibbs men had stepped in for Tony when she had been so frustratingly unable to do so herself.

“Your father is a wise man, Jethro.” Henrietta observed. “And so are you.”

“I’m getting there.” The former Marine agreed, kissing her temple. “Slowly but surely.”

“You’ll get there in no time.” Henrietta expressed. “You have a good role-model.”

“One of the best.” Jethro agreed. “To this day I still have no idea what the hell he told Tony that night, but whatever it was must have worked, because the next day the kid was on my doorstep apologizing up a storm.”

Immensely glad that both men had helped Tony to get his head on straight, as Henrietta had read plenty of horrible stories about people going off the deep end when they finally realized they couldn’t stay closeted any longer, Henrietta kissed her boyfriend’s chin before turning a very soft expression unto the slumber elder Gibbs.

“I think Jackson might just be the next incarnation of Mr. Rogers.” She whispered.

“I agree.” Jethro breathed in her ear. “But don’t tell him that. It drives him crazy.”
Chapter 66

Having gradually grown accustomed to working as a secretary for the NCIS after only a week, Henrietta typed adequately away at her keyboard and tried not to blush too hard whenever the sounds of Tim fixing Tony’s phone became too loud and pronounced for her to ignore. Because as much as her son had assured her that he wasn’t at all angry with her for inadvertently dropping his phone into the bathtub after Jethro had sent her a particular scandalous shot involving the rather shameless use of his Marine outfit, it was still quite awkward for her to be faced with the realization the entire team was now aware of her blunder as their resident technological genius fiddled away with the contraption with an ease that was almost as astonishing as it was insulting.

“I don’t know why you didn’t bother with insurance, Tony.” Tim lectured, effortlessly beginning to reattach the glass screen to its proper place. “You’re notoriously clumsy.”

“I’ll remind you that I wasn’t the one who dropped it, McHusband.” Tony rebutted.

“Still,” Tim countered, “A bit of insurance would have gotten you a free upgrade.”

Pausing in his report-writing to level his subordinate with a very ill-humored expression, which for Tony was more of a half-smile than a scowl, the phoneless young man made a great show of glancing at his watch before responding.

“It’s nearly time to head home, McSassy.” Her boy lectured. “Did you really want to stay behind and rewrite your report?”

Although Henrietta had already filed away said man’s report, finding within the pages no errors punishable by forced-rewriting, she had no doubts whatsoever that both Jethro and her boy employed such an aggravating chastisement from time to time for no other reason than that the victim had annoyed them in a most egregious fashion.

“Oh, calm down, would you?” Tim placated, typing away at her son’s phone. “I’m fixing your phone, aren’t I?”

“Which is a very sweet thing to do.” Henrietta contributed, giving her son a pointed look.

Facing being scolded by his mother with all the grace a shameless man could possess, which was quite a lot, Tony smiled sweetly in her direction before addressing Tim in far less flamboyant a fashion.

“Thanks, McGee. I owe you a beer.” Tony obliged. “Hell, I’ll even buy you two if you restore some of my photos.”

“You don’t owe me a thing.” Tim calmly dismissed. “And I can have all your photos restored in a heartbeat.”

“Oh, Timmy.” Tony crooned, using a cloying sweet affect in his voice. “I’m starting to see why Abby decided to marry you.”

“And I’m starting to see why you’re still single.” Tim playfully razzed.

Pleased to see the two men getting along so well, as she was almost certain there was some sort of quarrel on between her son and said girl, Henrietta turned back to her mindless typing perfectly assured of the fact that her blunder in dropping her child’s phone into the tub had been
rectified without any significant and long-lasting harm afflicted to anyone.

“I think I’m finished, Tony.” Tim suddenly spoke up. “Just let me check if the photos – “

Glancing away from her computer screen after the technological genius went suddenly silent, as her motherly instincts could not allow her to ignore such a troubling action, Henrietta glanced in the young man’s direction and found his face suddenly very pale even as his cheeks burned a vicious scarlet.

“Tim!” Kate cried, very alarmed herself as she hurried over to the man. “What – OH MY GOD!”

Having spared a glance down at the screen in a silent inquiry as to figure out what was wrong, as she really did take on the role of an older sister for both the men she worked with, Kate immediately turned as red as a tomato before glancing, fleeting, in Henrietta’s direction and turning scarlet.

“Tim!” Tony scowled. “You didn’t go into my Male Model album, did you?!”

“No.” Kate managed, hastily hiding the phone behind her back. “He didn’t do that.”

Gradually coming to the horrifying realization that poor Tim had somehow managed to come across the…not-so-innocent pictures she and Jethro had been sending back and forth, in the clearly mistaken belief that those photos simply disappeared once sent, Henrietta jumped to her feet in the pursuit of trying to seize the phone before her child could look only to have the much quicker, and much closer Tony, effortlessly snatch the phone from Kate’s weaker grip and promptly traumatize himself.

“I…I’m going to…” Tony stammered, hastily dropping the phone. “I’m…I don’t even know what to…Jesus.”

Judging from his reaction that it had been one of Jethro’s photos he had stumbled across, as Tony wouldn’t have been nearly as traumatized seeing his mother’s naked form by matters of principal alone, Henrietta felt herself blush vividly and desperately wondered whether or not the government had discovered a way to erase memories whilst she was away in Spain.

“I already ordered your mother another phone.” Tim spoke, finally recovering as he typed away at his own phone. “It’ll be at your place by tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” Tony expressed, glaring weakly at his poor mother. “I think I owe you an entire dinner now…You too, Kate.”

“Yeah…And we’re getting dessert, too.” The pregnant woman stipulated.

“That’s fair.” Tony agreed, before turning to Tim. “Nuke my photos before we leave, though. All of them. Every single one.”

A bit put out at the idea of losing the picture that involved a shameless use of military uniform, but otherwise not so oblivious as to make requests for its salvation, Henrietta hid her burning face behind her screen and prayed that Jethro would never be faced with the awkwardness of knowing his entire team had seen some of the better parts of his person.

“What the hell is going on in here?” The former Marine growled, effectively crushing her wishes as he walked into the bullpen with a fresh coffee both himself and her. “It’s not quitting time.”
“Boss,” Tony addressed, speaking for the scandalized team, “You have no idea how picture storage works on cellphones, do you?”

“What does that have to do with – “

“We saw the pictures, Boss.” Tony interrupted. “And we need to go out and forget about it.”

Blushing as vividly as his child at that point, Jethro looked near the point of a heart-attack as he fished his wallet out of his pocket and passed their child a stack of bills.

“Suppers on me, tonight.”
Despite having only been sent over to Ducky’s to drop off the wallet he had forgotten in Jethro’s truck during their lunch break, Henrietta had promptly found herself invited into the home by the perpetually well-mannered Scot and offered a quick nightcap or two before her boyfriend came by to pick her up. Which, given her proclivity toward friendliness, she had readily and eagerly accepted on the grounds that it would be a most egregious flouting of manners to decline.

“This moonshine is delicious.” Henrietta expressed, firmly ensconced in the general warmth and comfort of said man’s study. “Although, I do have to say, I think whatever your drinking seems to smell far better.”

“Ah, yes.” Ducky agreed, taking an indulgent sip of his own brew. “That’s because its infused with cannabis.”

Not at all surprised that a man such as Ducky partook in the occasional use of marijuana and marijuana-related substances, given the age in which he had been during the height of the seventies, Henrietta did not so much as blink an eye at the casual mentioning of illicit drug-use.

“And you aren’t going to share?” She tutted, playful smile on face.

Returning her own friendly expression with one of his own, Ducky politely stole her glass of moonshine and set it aside on his desk before offering her a sip of the cannabis-infused tea from his own cup.

“I knew you wouldn’t react poorly.” Ducky appraised, indulgently allowing her to take a long sip of the brew. “You’re far more liberal than your boyfriend.”

“I’ve been working on loosening him up a bit.” Henrietta confessed. “Although I’m not at all sure he’d be okay with something this.”

Because even though she was all but certain that he wouldn’t forbid her from participating in so relatively harmless an activity, Henrietta was also equally certain that the return from such affairs would be met with a polite smile rather than a genuine one.

“In that case,” Ducky advised, pulling from his pocket a small bag of weed, “We had better hurry and finish a bowl before Jethro arrives.”

“Ducky Mallard,” Henrietta mockingly scolded, “Whatever would your mother say?”

Frowning deeply in a manner that greatly suggested whatever his mother had to say on the top of drug use would not be complementary, by any meaning of the word, the graying medical examiner shrugged his shoulders and made a valiant attempt at seeming nonchalant.

“Let us not dwell on such unpleasantness.” The older man calmly suggested. “We have far better activities to occupy ourselves with, after all.”

“Of course.” Henrietta obliged, wordlessly following her host out of the kitchen.

Their arrival to the living room being greeted by a decidedly uninterested Jimmy, who looked away from his book but only a moment to nod a greeting in their direction, Henrietta felt herself relax all the more in preparation of smoking a bowl, as she new the younger man to be one the least likely people to blow the proverbial whistle on their clandestine activity.
“Jimmy, my dear boy, I’m taking Henrietta up to the study for a bit of relaxation. Be a good lad, would you, and order a pizza in half an hour.”

“If you’re getting high, you’ll want a few pops as well I’d imagine.” Jimmy casually suggested, sounding as if he were no more than referring to his father sharing a few beers with a friend. “And cheesy bread.”

“Yes, yes.” Ducky agreed, waving a dismissive hand. “You know the drill by now.”

And, with that brief dismissal, Ducky wordlessly led Henrietta through his house and up into the study with nary a word, neither one of them finding words quite necessary given the slightly baffling strength of their fledgling friendship.

“You’re not adverse to making use of a bong, are you?” Ducky inquired, firmly shutting the door to his study behind them.

So surprised to hear that someone such as Ducky made use of a bong for smoking purposes, rather than a more sophisticated hookah, Henrietta blinked several times and almost made an inquiry into whether or not she was being played for a fool by the older man. But, before she could so much as formulate in her head the most polite way to ask such a question, Ducky only increased her surprise by pulling out from under his desk a large purple bong adorned with several differently colored dragons.

“That thing looks like something a Girl Scout would use.” Henrietta quipped, reverently touching a very yellow dragon.

“Good God,” Ducky softly exclaimed, preparing the instrument, “What kind of organizations do people in America allow their children to participate in?”

“You don’t want to know.” Henrietta assured.
Having received a very blunt text from Jimmy of all people right when he was just about to be wondrously bent over the couch in Gavin’s apartment, telling him that Gibbs of all people had gotten high enough to the point where he was having a severe anxiety attack about the possibilities of the snow outside never melting because of the population being too high, Tony’s evening out was effectively ruined before he had even arrived at Ducky’s home to find a very resigned Jimmy keeping vigil over the duo of cockblocking morons currently losing their collective shit over the fact that the staunchly anti-drug friend they had finally convinced to get high was now losing his metaphorical shit as he lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling muttering in a language Tony thought might be Russian.

“What the hell happened?” He demanded, intensely peeved that Jimmy seemed so calm in the face of hysteria. “Gibbs has only been here an hour.”

Not so much as batting an eye at the harsh tone in which he was addressed, having no doubt endured far worse during his childhood, Jimmy simply shrugged his shoulders in a defeated fashion and gave a very unsatisfactory answer.

“They got high.” The skinny boy summarized.

“What?” Tony scoffed. “This is just a daily occurrence for you?”

“More like weekly.” Jimmy freely offered. “Although this is the first time my dad has ever invited anyone to smoke with him.”

Despite wanting nothing more than to disbelieve that such behavior was a common occurrence in the life of someone so…old-fashioned as Ducky, Tony could not argue against Jimmy’s statement without appearing quite the fool. For not only was the evidence that a great deal of pot-smoking had taken place that evening directly before him, so too was the fact that Jimmy almost never lied a prohibitive measure from him being in doubt.

“Why the fuck are you so calm?!” Tony demanded, thoroughly exasperated. “Our parents are stoned out of their goddamn minds!”

“The only one we need to be worried about right now is your dad.” Jimmy patiently advised. “He clearly can’t handle his THC the same way your mom and my dad can.”

“That’s because he doesn’t smoke!” Tony snapped. “So, again, what the fuck happened?”

Becoming increasingly annoyed the longer Jimmy persisted in acting as if it was a perfectly natural thing for both his bosses to be as high as kites, as really the sight of a near catatonic Gibbs should have frightened anyone, Tony had to resist the urge to accent his demand for answers with any of the angry hand-gestures that might provoke a bit of childhood-related fear from the autopsy assistant.

“I’m assuming your dad got a contact high.” Jimmy proposed. “And, after that point, succumbed to a little bit of peer pressure.”

“What are we going to do, Jimmy?” Tony demanded, losing patience. “We can’t leave them like this.”

“The only thing we can do is ply them with food and water and wait for this to pass.” The other sober man decided, sounding resigned to his fate. “We’ll also need to keep them from doing anything
stupid, as well.”

Glancing wearily at the trio in question, two of whom seemed ready to fall asleep on the floor at any moment, Tony grimaced but thought it would not be quite so difficult a task to keep the three safe provided that it was only one of them who needed any major assistance. Said victim being, of course, the currently tripping Gibbs.

“What do we do?” Tony inquired, greatly concerned as his father was still chattering away in Russian.

“I’m going to put on some Pink Floyd for Ducky and your mom.” Jimmy decided, already moving to the phonograph. “I don’t really know what to do for your dad, though.”

“Great.” Tony sighed, slowly creeping his way over to his couchant boss.

Kneeling slowly once arrived, so as not to startle the already very alarmed Gibbs, Tony gently touched the hallucinating man on the shoulder and made a gentle inquiry.

“You feeling okay?”

Blinking slowly at the words, in what was comically a very delayed reaction, Gibbs groaned loudly and took a very long time to meet his eyes.

“How can you hear what I’m saying?” The older man whispered, very startled.

“Because you’re talking.” Tony calmly responded. “Do you want a blanket or something while you’re down there?”

Taking even longer to register that question, much less answer it, Gibbs licked at his chapped lips several times before giving a small, nervous nod.

“Could you get it for me though? I can’t get up.”

Acquiescing to such a simple request without complaint, Tony wordlessly snagged an afghan from the back of a chair before carefully laying the garment over his shivering bosses form.

“Why can’t you get up, Jethro?” Henrietta fussed, suddenly attentive.

“Gravity.” Gibbs breathed, eyes as wide as plates. “Too heavy.”

“Tony,” Jimmy quipped, looking away from his book, “You need to have a talk with your dad about drug-use. He clearly can’t handle it.”
Chapter 69

Given that February had heralded its arrival with an unseasonably warm day, if one could call twenty degrees ‘warm,’ Jethro had prevailed upon her, after several hours, to take a quick walk around the block before supper. For while Henrietta had wanted to nothing more than to stay indoors wrapped up in the very warm blanket she had received for Christmas, she had, eventually, been forced to concede that she still owed her boyfriend a favor after having convinced him to get stoned that one evening at Ducky’s.

“That’s Ms. McClure’s home.” Jethro narrated, jerking a thumb at a very cookie-cutter looking house. “She’s the old bat that tried to force everyone into a Home Owner’s Association.”

“I don’t know why some people are so insistent on having one of those.” Hen expressed, shivering slightly despite the force of the sun. “Why should someone’s neighbors get to dictate what color they paint their house or what kind of flowers they can have in their garden?”

And it was not merely loyalty which provoked her to speak thus, either, for having grown up and spent the majority of her adulthood raised in affluence, the insidious nature of Home Owner’s Associations was not at all a foreign concept to her.

“Exactly.” Gibbs agreed, steering her around a puddle. “If Ms. McClure had it her way, every goddamn house would look the same.”

“She sounds like a very pleasant woman.” Henrietta jeered. “Maybe I should bring her over some banana bread and introduce myself.”

“Knowing her,” Jethro began, “She would slam the door in your face after claiming bananas were the Devil’s Fruit.”

Resolving then and there to avoid all contact with such an unpleasant woman, as religious fanatics were quite literally the worst types of people in existence, Henrietta pressed closer to her boyfriend to gleam some of his warmth and listened, enthused, as said man continued to rattle off information about his small neighborhood.

“The Donahue’s live in that green house, right there.” Jethro dictated, gesturing at a very large domicile. “There nice enough, but they’ve got eight children that are always selling something or the other for schools and scouts.”

“They must be Catholic.” Henrietta vouched, thinking of own Grandfather’s exceedingly large brood of brothers and sisters.

“Whatever they are, they raised those kids well.” Jethro asserted. “It’s the Avery twins you have to watch out for.”

Never having the opportunity to experience what it was like to have so many varying neighbors, as life in a gated community didn’t allow for very many displays of defiance or destruction, Henrietta found herself intrigued at the very idea that there could be so very many personalities surrounding a place.

“How bad are they?” Henrietta inquired, hoping that the occasional mischief was the extent of their naughtiness.

“Well, the boy is harmless enough when his sister is gone.” Jethro allowed. “It’s when the
girl gets back that things start going missing and cars start getting keyed.”

Not liking the ominous tone behind the casual reference to the girl not being home often, as it was eerily reminiscent of the way in which the ‘willful’ friends in her life were sent away to reformatory schools when they crossed one line too many, Henrietta shivered and made an important inquiry.

“Where does the girl go when she isn’t at home?”

“One of her boyfriend’s houses, I’m assuming.” Jethro shrugged.

Knowing perfectly well all of the dangers a young teenager could get into whilst fooling around with boys unprotected, as had been notably pregnant at her own wedding, Henrietta inwardly resolved to speak to the girl just as soon as the opportunity presented itself and warn her of all the difficulties she could find herself in because, quite clearly, her own parents were doing their job anywhere near effectively.

“Now that house, right there, it belongs to Patience Clearwater.” Jethro continued. “She’s a real nice lady and she babysits for half the block.”

“She’s the one whose lawn you take care of, right?” Henrietta asked, waving at said old woman as she smiled at them from her window.

“Yeah,” Jethro agreed, “She’s doesn’t have any children and is too old to do it herself.”

Jumping up on the tips of her toes to kiss her chivalrous boyfriend right on his stubbly cheek, Henrietta smiled adoringly up at her boyfriend as they continued their impromptu walk.

“Jackson raised you right.” She crooned, exceedingly pleased to be able to claim him as her own. “So did your Mama.”

“They did their best.” Jethro grunted, never once to take praise easily.

Shaking her head in mild amusement at her boyfriend’s modesty, as it was quite the concept after dealing with mostly confident people throughout her life, Henrietta smiled softly and all but forgot the chill of the slight breeze as Jethro spontaneously maneuvered his body so that he could more easily grasp her fingers and clutch them in a tight hold.

“We’re just a like a couple of teenagers.” Henrietta gushed, pleased with the action.

“Only with better skin and – “

Interrupted from whatever he about to say by the sounds of a piercing cry, the origins of which seemed to be stemming from the hedges of a currently vacant home, both Jethro and Henrietta jumped out of their skin before recovering themselves well enough to take action.

“It sounds like a baby!” Henrietta cried, rushing over to the greenery with her boyfriend.

“Stay back.” Jethro calmly ordered, gently sticking an inquisitive arm into the thick hedges.

“This thing is full of thorns.”

“Don’t scratch the baby.” Henrietta cautioned, quite needlessly.

For not only did Jethro approach the bush with the utmost caution, appearing as if he was about to dissemble a bomb rather than navigate his hands around a shrub, so too did the former
Marine move about in a very gentle matter so as not to manhandle whatever poor child might be trapped within the leafy confines. In fact, so meticulous and gentle was he, that Henrietta didn’t even feel the need to do anything other than observe up until her boyfriend poked his head into the thorns and quickly withdrew it with disgust in his eyes.

“Holy fuck!” Jethro exclaimed, nearly falling unto his ass. “It’s not a baby, it’s a fucking rat!”

Shuddering in tandem with her boyfriend, as rats carried on their person all sorts of ghastly diseases, Henrietta quickly took several steps back and prayed the beast would stay where it was until, moments later, she heard the shrill cry again.

“What kind of rat makes that sound?” She questioned, wondering if perhaps it was a cat stuck in the branches instead.

“A fucking big one.” Jethro assured, grabbing her arm to pull her away.

Holding her ground as best she could, which was not at all easy given the slushy sidewalk and her small frame, Henrietta swatted at the fingers on her arm and eventually managed to extract herself from her boyfriend’s concerned grip.

“Jethro,” She began, “Are you sure it was a rat?”

“It sure as hell looked like one.” Jethro grumbled, beginning to sound unsure. “But it was dark in there.”

“Jethro,” Henrietta frowned, “What if it’s a kitty?”

Unable to assert with any confidence that it was not, in fact, a kitten trapped inside the thorny prison, especially now that they had established the thing definitely wasn’t a rat, Jethro slumped his shoulders in defeat and approached the bush once more, his air very somber and resigned as he stuck his head into the greenery for a second time.

“When I get rabies – “Jethro began, pawing through the branches.

“You can’t get rabies.” Henrietta calmly dismissed. “You just had a rabies booster.”

Mumbling something about elephant-like memory-retaining beneath his breath, in a manner more playful then genuinely aggrieved, Jethro thrust himself a little further into the shrubs and let out a muffled cry of surprise as something growled weakly in response.

“Jethro, get out of there!” Henrietta implored, now fearing it might be a racoon or badger inside. “You’re going to get bit!”

“Calm down.” Jethro gently chided. “Whatever this thing is, it’s too weak to do any harm.”

Curiosity now taking the place of fear, or at least greatly surpassing it, Henrietta tried to peer into the shrubbery only to be met with darkness.

“And what is it?” She pestered, moving aside as Jethro worked to extract himself.

“I…I don’t know.” Jethro admitted, finally reemerging with a soggy carpet in his hands.

“What the fuck is that thing?” Henrietta cried, taking several steps backward.

Because not only did the foul-smelling…thing in her boyfriend’s arm fail to resemble anything even close to an existing animal in her mind, so too was it making sounds of the variety and
make Henrietta had never before even heard.

“I think… I think it’s a dog?” Jethro suggested, moving some fur away from the beast’s face to reveal an infected blue eye. “Maybe?”

“I think it’s a new plague waiting to happen.” Henrietta suggested, refusing to touch it. “Let’s drop that thing off at a vet and decontaminate you.”
Chapter 70

Although Henrietta would have been more than just a little happy to leave the putrid beast behind in the very capable hands of the nearby veterinarian clinic, as she already greatly feared her boyfriend would be afflicted with some horrendous malady after having handled it so long, she soon found herself held hostage in the small facility as Jethro harassed the poor vet over whether or not the poor unfortunate beast deserved to be put down.

“Let me get this straight,” Jethro growled, “Because this dog is ugly, it deserved to be euthanized?”

Despite being similar in stature to Henrietta, both height and weight-wise, the young veterinarian looked as unintimidated of a clearly-annoyed Jethro as did a principal of a tantruming first-grader.

“The aesthetics of the animal have nothing to do with my recommendation, Sir.” Dr. Hao calmly asserted.

“You just said that you wouldn’t put any real effort into saving it because it’s ‘unadoptable.’” Jethro argued, clearly vexed.

“Sir,” Dr. Hao sighed, voice tinged with annoyance, “Without any promise that the dog will be adopted by someone who can offset the cost of all the work it needs, I cannot recommend anything other than putting him to sleep. And,” Added she, quite firm, “Before you accuse me of being heartless, just know I spend six hours working on a cat I already knew wasn’t going to make it.”

Sensing that there was going to be no real consensus until somebody ended up with their feelings hurt, likely Jethro, Henrietta quickly stepped in and laid a soothing hand on her boyfriend’s shoulder.

“Jethro.” She hummed, rubbing his arm. “The dog has clearly been through a lot. Maybe… Maybe it’s a kindness to put it to sleep.”

“But it still has a chance of living.” Jethro argued. “And it should be given that chance. I mean, lots of kids in foster care probably don’t get adopted out. That doesn’t mean we just get rid of them.”

Suddenly coming to the heart-warming realization that Jethro was, perhaps, taking the dismissal of the life of the dog as personally as he took Senior’s continual disinterest in Tony’s life, Henrietta blinked a few sappy tears away from her eye and reluctantly came to the conclusion that she might very well soon have an exceedingly ugly dog in her life.

“What if we paid for the dog’s treatment?” She suggested.

“That would all be very well.” Dr. Hao assured, smile on face. “But…if he goes to a shelter afterwards, they might put him down if he goes awhile without being adopted.”

“I think you already know that we’re keeping the damn thing.” Jethro grumbled, reaching out a hand to scratch the beast currently resting in the vet’s arms.

Not at all enthused about having so dirt-producing pet as a dog, but otherwise far too in love with Jethro to suggest that the dog would best be adopted out, Henrietta shrugged her shoulders and
wondered just how long such a thing could be expected to live.

“What type of dog is this, by the way?” Jethro inquired, some of his manners now returned.

“Well,” Dr. Hao grimaced, “It’s clearly a mutt. Probably...a Bichon Frise and Terrier mix?”

Distractedly thinking of all the precautions she would have to take in order to make sure the hybrid didn’t destroy the house, namely the floorboards and furniture, Henrietta almost missed out the very adorable sight of Jethro affectionally stroking his new pet.

“What does he need done?” Jethro interrogated the vet, grinning as the dog licked his fingers.

“His left eye for sure needs to go.” Dr. Hao frowned. “And the other one might need to go, as well. Then he’ll need to have his broken tail tended, too, along with the tears in his ears. Then, of course, he’ll no doubt need to be dewormed and treated for whatever other diseases he likely picked up.”

Nodding along calmly to the assessment as if the vet were simply suggested the dog only needed his nails and fur trimmed, Jethro impatiently consented to all required work and promised to take over care of the animal just as soon as he could.

“When do you think this Gremlin can leave?” Jethro inquired, looking perfectly prepared to take the dog as it already was.

“I’d say Sunday probably.” Dr. Hao expressed. “We’ll want to keep him and observe him for a few days after his surgery to make certain everything is working right with him.”

“Great.” Jethro grunted, patting the dog’s ears. “Call me with updates.”
Having gradually come to accept the existence of Gremlin into her life, as said dog really was quite handy when it came time to fetch newspapers inside from the cold, Henrietta had slowly and surely begun to relax her standards about household cleanliness up until the point the unfortunately ugly dog had even been granted access to the bed she shared with Jethro.

“Alright you little footwarmer,” Henrietta yawned, sitting up in bed, “Go fetch me my slippers.”

Remaining ear perking up in response to the command, and crooked tail wagging in delight as she wished him good morning by kissing his nose, the one-eyed wonder immediately hurried off to do as bid and dashed across the bedroom to the closet to retrieve her fuzzy pink slippers.

“And to think,” Jethro chided, casually slipping into the room, “That you wanted to let that vet put him down.”

“I wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea.” Henrietta protested, gladly accepting a hot cup of coffee from her boyfriend. “And besides, you could fetch my slippers just as well as he can.”

Not at all protesting the idea that he was in any way subservient to her, in a manner thankfully very unlike Senior, Jethro sank down unto the mattress beside her and kissed her temple as he joined her for a bit of breakfast in bed at eleven.

“Yeah, but he can lick you far better than I can.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Henrietta teased, stroking her partner’s chin. “The dogs licks have never made me see stars.”

Placing an amorous hand on her thigh, Jethro grinned lasciviously and leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“I know it’s only noon,” He breathed, stroking her hair, “But we could go looking for stars right now, if you wished.”

“Actually, we can’t.” Henrietta declined, gently extracting herself. “We’re meeting our child for lunch today.”

Not at all deterred by such a reminder, Jethro crooked a suggestive eyebrow in her direction and leaned across the mattress to kiss her neck once more.

“That gives us a full forty-five minutes.” He calmly rebutted. “Just imagine the things I could do to you in that time.”

“Jethro,” Henrietta giggled, “I can either have an orgasm or fix my hair.”

Because as greatly as she would have liked to have an early morning romp with her boyfriend, the vexing fact still remained that she needed at least a half hour to tame her unruly mane of curls.

“So – “

“I’m choosing hair, this time.” Henrietta interjected. “But if you behave yourself at the diner,
we’ll see what happens in the truck on the way back.”

Blue eyes all aglow with the joy only a promised romp in his truck could provide, as there was just something about vehicular sex that aroused him to no end, Jethro hastily retreated from her beside and collected Gremlin off the floor before taking his leave of their bedroom, knowing the longer he tarried in such a space, the longer it would take her to fix her hair and get ready.

“I have my boys trained well.” She murmured to nobody, gently running her fingers through her hair to check for snarls.
Entirely unfamiliar with the concept of either of his parents being anything but early to their intended destinations, Tony sat quite uncomfortably in the booth he had selected at Freida’s Café and restlessly fretted over what might have become of his mother and father. Because while he could admit that it was quite ridiculous to worry that they had met their deaths after only five minutes had gone past the agreed upon time, it was far less so after a full ten minutes had elapsed. For not in the duration of his entire life, or career, had either of them been so unfathomably tardy without excuse. In fact, he was just about to pull out his cellphone to call his mother and make inquiries as to where she and her boyfriend might be, when the guilty duo arrived – their faces flushed with the cold and their hair tousled by the wind.

“Where have you two been?” Tony pouted, stomach rumbling loudly. “I thought you were dead.”

“Sorry, Kiddo.” Gibbs sincerely apologized, helping his girlfriend out of her oversized coat. “We got distracted is all. We’ll call you ahead of time if it happens again.”

Wisely deciding not to inquire into what had made his parents so distracted, as he greatly suspected it had something to do with ‘private relations’ on some discreet side-street, Tony hastily and genuinely supplied his forgiveness before making a great show of perusing the menu once the older duo was seated across from him.

“Tony,” Gibbs heatlessly scolded, “We already know damn well that you’re going to get the same thing you do every time.”

Although his father was, indeed, correct about his dining choices involving a copious amount of French Toast and soft bacon, Tony protested his innocence in the manner with a look of indignation and theatrically turned the page of his slightly-sticky menu.

“Jethro,” Mama calmly rebuked, “That’s just his way of telling us to hurry up and order.”

“Which only makes me want to take my sweet time.” Gibbs replied, giving Tony a slight look of chastisement.

Alarmed at the very notion that would Gibbs would punish him in such a fashion, as he had disciplined him in similar fashions before, Tony meekly dropped his menu to the table before turning to his Mama for assistance.

“You had better not.” Mama advised, stomach growling loudly in protest to the unthinkable suggestion. “You wouldn’t like us when we’re hungry.”

“You two are always hungry.” Dad frowned, quickly flipping the menu. “It’s baffling how neither one of you are fat.”

“I’m tall.” Tony shrugged, fiddling with a jelly packet. “And Mama is…manic.”

Not even bothering to defend herself from such an accusation, as even she had to acknowledge the fact that she was in constant motion doing something or the other, Mama shrugged dismissively and wordlessly seized the makeshift toy from his hands before it could explode all over the table.

“Do you need me to get you a coloring sheet?” Gibbs wryly inquired.
“Normally I would say yes,” Tony grinned, “But all they have is robots.”

“What is it with you and your hatred towards robots?” Dad questioned, shaking his head in mild amusement.

Frowning slightly at the question, as it was not at all an inquiry that provoked an innocent or happy answer, Tony prepared to mumble the same trite nonsense about fears not always needing to have some cause when Mama spoke up.

“One of Senior’s dumbass friends got drunk one Halloween when Tony was six and knocked him down the stairs be accident.”

“And I take it that dumbass was dressed as a robot?”

“He was.” Mama scowled. “But by the time I was done with him, he looked more like a flattened sheet of tin.”

Smiling slightly in remembrance of the way in which his Mama had taken the broom from her witch’s costume and thoroughly beaten the drunkard to within an inch of his life with it, as she had seemed every bit the superhero during that beatdown, Tony turned to his father to gauge said man’s amusement levels only to be startled by the frown on his face.

“I just keep having to add more and more people to my list of asses that need kicked.” He grumbled.

“You don’t really have such a list, do you?” Mama asked, smiling brightly at the waitress to catch her attentions.

“Of course he does, Mama.” Tony answered. “It’s written on fancy parchment paper.”

Before his surprised Mama could make any inquiries into whether or not such a list really did exist, and thus give her son the opportunity to assure her that it did, their elderly waitress arrived with notepad in hand and asked them all for their orders.

“First, we need coffee.” Mama implored. “Lot’s of it. And then I’ll take the largest stack of waffles you have to offer. With bacon, of course.”

Giving Mama a very incredulous look at such an order, as she clearly believed nobody of her size could ever hope to finish so much food, the waitress frowned gingerly and made her next suggestion with a great deal of caution.

“That’s eight pancakes – “

“Oh,” Mama smiled, “Better make that extra bacon then, too.”

Too well-mannered to do anything other than blink at such a blatant disregard to all laws of physics, the grey-haired waitress turned politely to Dad and asked him what he might like to order.

“Bacon, toast, and eggs.” Dad informed. “And better make that extra bacon, too.” He added, glancing lovingly at his girlfriend. “Hen likes to nibble.”

Smiling fondly at the sweet display of affection, as what good-hearted person could fail to garner joy from someone else’s happiness, the waitress turned to Tony last and made her inquired as to what he would like even as she already began to scribble down his usual order in her absurdly neat cursive.

Having already returned her pen to her apron before Tony even finished speaking, their waitress nodded good-humoredly before turning to address his parents.

“It’s so sweet that your son still makes time for you.” She expressed. “God knows my own children can’t be bothered.”
Chapter 73

Having finally forgiven Ducky for the role he had played in getting him obscenely stoned just a few weeks ago, an experience he had heartily come to regret after hallucinating that he had been crushed by gravity, Jethro found no reason whatsoever that he ought not accompany his girlfriend to said man’s house for a nightcap or two. For not only was it a Friday, such a day being perfect for a little bit of mild drinking, so too had his gout been reasonably controlled with a little bit of medication and diet-change.

“Ah, Jethro.” Hamish beamed, being the one to answer the front door. “It’s so nice to see you again. It’s been quite a while, has it not?”

Thinking it would be the very height of inappropriateness to convey to the friendly European that his reasons for shunning the home he shared with fiancé had largely to do with the fact that the latter had skillfully talked him into taking a few drags from a marijuana-pipe, Jethro grimaced apologetically and was promptly rewarded for his reserve when Henrietta’s elbow failed to make a connection with his ribs.

“So, well, it’s hard to want to go out in this cold.” He offered, gently extracting the last of the deceased, elder, Victoria’s Pomeranians from his leg.

“Francis!” Hamish rebuked, promptly picking up the aged beast. “We don’t hump our guest’s legs.”

Immediately poking a gentle finger into Henrietta’s ribs, in what was a delightful change of positions, Jethro effectively prevented the oftentimes irreverent woman from making some scandalous inquiry into whether or not the guests themselves were allowed to do any humping.

“I’m sorry about this beast.” Hamish needlessly apologized, gently settling the dog upon a very plush pet-bed. “Ducky’s mother really was quite indulgent when it came to training her herd.”

“Francis is no bother to us.” Henrietta promptly assured, giving the beast wide berth as their host led them through the house up into the study. “Especially not now that we have Gremlin.”

Thankfully abstaining from any commentary on the way in which he ‘supposedly’ babied and spoiled said beast, as she was usually very apt to do to anyone who would listen, Henrietta confidently claimed the softest of the chairs in the room without any reserve in a happy manner that suggested she had become quite familiar with being granted such an honored privilege. And, sure enough, Hamish did not so much as blink an eyelash as he directed Jethro to the second most comfortable seat in the office before taking, for himself, a less distinguished perch in a far less elegant piece of furnishing he had not doubt had to fight his fiancé tooth-and-nail to position in the study.

“Ducky still won’t let anyone besides Victoria and Jimmy sit in his chair, will he?” Jethro smirked, glancing pointedly at the very plush chair that sat behind the desk.

“No.” Hamish frowned. “He won’t. But, God help me, I love that man enough to forgive him for it.”

“You’re a very forgiving man, Hamish.” Henrietta quipped. “I mean, the chair is one thing. But I don’t know how inclined toward forgiveness I would be, if someone kept putting scratches and dings on my car.”

Up until that point having managed to keep Ducky’s involvement in the damage to such an
expensive vehicle secret, as he had charitably taking up the blame for such assaults upon himself, Jethro winced as he awaited Hamish’s reaction and jabbed Henrietta in the ribs.

“Oh, don’t be to cross with your girlfriend.” Hamish implored, a wide and cheeky grin on his face. “I knew the whole time that Ducky was the one damaging the Corvette.”

“And you still let me take the blame for it?” Jethro demanded, not at all amused.

“It was a necessary evil, I’m afraid.” The European deflected. “It was either play along with the charade or hurt my Ducky’s feelings. And I couldn’t very well do the latter.”

Despite wanting to further protest that Hamish ought to have, at the very least, clued him in on such a romantic deception, as he had greatly believed the European to be righteously upset with him for all the damages, Jethro kept mum in the pursuit of keeping the peace and graciously accepted a glass of port from his host – all the while inwardly plotting some sort of harmless revenge in return for all the grief had been given over the year as a result of those scratches and dings.

“You really ought to stop letting him drive that thing.” Jethro advised, seeing no sense in allowing a perpetually-clumsy driver to continue wreaking havoc.

“Ducky puts up with my spontaneity,” Hamish declared, “And I put up with the occasional rise in my car insurance.”

Seeing as how said man could easily afford even the most egregious rise in insurance, as he had evidently inherited an ungodly amount of money from a favorite uncle, Jethro diplomatically let the matter rest and turned away from his host to address his perpetually cold girlfriend with a question as to whether or not she might like to borrow his sweater for the evening. But, before he could so much as swallow the beverage currently occupying his mouth, Henrietta smiled quite wickedly in his direction before responding to Hamish in a very familiar and mischievous fashion.

“I completely understand.” The traitor commiserated. “I put up with Jethro’s early rising and he begrudgingly accepts my snoring in return.”

Quickly swallowing down his beverage in three graceless gulps, Jethro opened his mouth to make the assertion that her snoring was endearing in its own fashion, and as a result not anywhere near a proper trade-off as a result, only to be untimely cut off by the sudden appearance of Ducky strolling through the study door – reeking of a very familiar herb and a full ten minutes later than previously agreed upon.

“You’ll have to forgive my tardiness.” The older man obliged, in what had quickly become an overused catchphrase. “Montel had a few other customers to serve before he got to me, I’m afr – Jethro! How good it is that you’ve decided to accept my invitation. I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

Already knowing perfectly well that the suddenly nervous Medical Examiner had a bagful of weed in one of his pockets, if not more, Jethro crooked a brow in the guilty man’s direction and garnered no small amount of pleasure when the simple gesture provoked a nervous grimace into appearing on said man’s face.

“I already know you smoke.” Jethro reminded. “You don’t need to hide it from me.”

“Well,” Ducky blushed, pulling out a fat bag of marijuana from his pocket, “If you’re certain…”

“It’s fine.” Jethro allowed, not wanting to be a spoil-sport. “Just crack the door open a bit, I don’t want another contact-high.”
Hastily obliging his friend such a simple request, Ducky cracked the door to his study open a good few inches and loudly called down the hallway for Jimmy to order some fast-food in amount twenty minutes of so.

“I could have done that.” Jethro scolded, watching in mild fascination as Hamish effortlessly began rolling up a few joints. “There was no sense in bothering your child.”

“Jimmy already knows our specific instructions.” Ducky dismissed. “And he quite likes being made to feel useful.”

Only narrowly biting back the urge to suggest that requesting one’s child actively participate in the facilitating of their father’s drug-use was, perhaps, not at all a good testament to a person’s parenting skills, Jethro grabbed that mornings newspaper from the off the desk and inwardly resolved to pass the time with as much grace and patience as he could muster.

“Ladies first.” Hamish announced, passing to Henrietta the fat joint right as Jethro began perusing the comics.

“What a gentleman.” Henrietta theatrically crooned, putting the illegal object to her lips before allowing Ducky to light it for her.

“Oh yes.” The Medical Examiner gushed, a pink blush on his cheeks. “I do believe I’ve landed myself quite the catch.”

Immediately becoming distracted from his favorite comic strip before he could discover just what Garfield had done to John’s shoes, as both Hamish and Ducky had quickly dissolved into a duo of gushing lovebirds in their attempts not to be romantically outdone by each other, Jethro grimaced slightly and wondered just how well it would go over with his friends if he chose to quit the room in favor of watching a bit of television downstairs with Jimmy. Because as easy as it would be to ignore the two lovers as they currently flirted away at one another, once he found an article suitable enough in quality to distract him, the pungent smell gradually coming to fill the slightly claustrophobic room really was becoming quite difficult to ignore. For every time he inhaled the overpowering fumes would rush immediately up his nose, and every time he exhaled through his slightly parted lips the heady taste accompanying such smoke would rapidly coat his tongue with a speed that was both baffling and unsettling. And while, admittedly, he found himself absurdly relaxed about such an occurrence, in a fashion he wouldn’t normally experience when face-to-face with drug use, Jethro felt it would be better not to become too comfortable in the room for fear he might receive a contact-high if he remained overly-long.

“I think…I think I should leave the room for a while.” Jethro managed, his own words sounding strangely muffled to his own ears.

Blinking in rising horror as the heads of his three friends turned in an absurdly slow fashion, seeming to deny the very laws of physics itself, Jethro inhaled sharply and nearly gagged as more of the acrid smoke filling the room coated his tongue.

“Perhaps that is a good idea.” Ducky agreed, his voice very muffled. “I’d hate for you to get another contact high.”

Almost unable to hear his own thoughts above the rapid beating of his heart, Jethro nodded his consent to the idea before rapidly swiping away the sudden sweat on his brow.

“Jethro,” Henrietta fusses, “Are you alright?”
Seeing as how his girlfriend seemed to be vibrating with some otherworldly energy he could not possibly define, Jethro backed quickly away from her and shook his head, the action almost immediately prompting him to groan as the wooden floorboards seemed to tremble beneath him.

“Anxious.” He managed, the word more a groan than anything. “Just anxious.”

“Here,” Hamish coaxed, putting the joint to his help, “Take a puff. It’ll help.”

Feeling as if he would rather prefer castration over another hellish drug-trip, for at least with the former he would be in control of his faculties, Jethro groaned and tried to push the friendly hand away even though his own limb felt unfathomably heavy.

“It’s quite alright, Jethro.” Ducky soothed. “This strain is far milder then the one we sampled all those weeks ago.”

“Go on, Jethro.” Henrietta coaxed, caressing his cheek. “It’ll help you feel better.”
Although Jimmy had gradually grown used to all the antics his father could get up to whilst said man was stoned out of his goddamn mind, as well as gained a fond familiarity for the way in which Hamish handled being baked, he was completely and thoroughly thrown for a loop when he stumbled into his father’s office with a stack of pizzas and found the straight-laced Jethro Gibbs proverbially tripping balls. For not only had Jimmy assumed he would’ve have learned his lesson the first time, so too had he dared to hope that his father would be considerate enough not to even offer the illicit drug to such a person ever again.

“Dad,” Jimmy scolded, irreverently placing the pizza on the desk, “We talked about this. You promised not to get him high again – not off your own supply, at least.”

Taking several moments to register what had even been said to him, Ducky blinked slowly and reluctantly set aside his can of pop before giving an answer.

“Oh, Jimmy.” The older man sighed. “When did you get so tall?”

“Duck,” Hamish grinned, “He’s just standing up.”

Quickly coming to the conclusion that his soon-to-be stepfather was the most clearheaded of the stoned quartet, which was not saying a lot, Jimmy turned helplessly to face the European in a show of good manners before posing to him a very important question.

“How long has he been like this?” Jimmy inquired, jerking a finger at Gibbs.

“I didn’t know that there was a time.” Hamish frowned, clearly just as apologetic as he was unhelpful. “I didn’t bring the clock in.”

Knowing it would do absolutely no good to chide the innocent man for his failure to remember that he always wore a Rolex on his wrist, Jimmy shook his head in mild annoyance before reluctantly making his way over to his hallucinating boss.

“Gibbs,” Jimmy whispered, kneeling before his couchant boss, “You okay?”

“I think I can’t.” Gibbs groaned, very sweaty.

Having long ago developed an impressive knack for deciphering all sorts of drunken or stoned gibberish, his horrific childhood having cultivated such a scandalous talent, Jimmy needed no further questions to determine that his boss was not, in fact, alright at all.

“What can I do for you?” Jimmy requested, gently touching the trembling man’s shoulder.

“Lights are bright…Can you take them away?”

Despite the fact that the lights in the room were already turned off, save for a small lamp positioned in the darkest of the corners, Jimmy eagerly accepted the request with a nod and hastily removed his sweater. And then, without nary a word of warning, he unceremoniously dropped the green garment over the eyes of his employer, hoping that such a rudimentary trick would service him just as well as it had in the past.

“Thank.” Gibbs expressed, seeming to melt into the floorboards in relief.
“Welcome.” Jimmy replied with good humor. “Anything else I can do?”

Taking a very long moment to answer, prompting Jimmy to fear he had passed out, Gibbs stretched his feet out slowly from their awkward position and whispered so softly he went almost unheard.

“You’re a good boy. Ducky is lucky to have you.”

Taking great stock in such high accolades, as Ducky had once made his bawl like a baby the first time he had bestowed them upon him, Jimmy blinked sudden moisture from his eyes and, once again, felt no small amount of joy that Tony was able to secure for himself a father almost as good as his own.

“Thanks, Boss.” Jimmy smiled, throat still tight.
Chapter 75

Although his brief relationship with Gavin had not worked out in the end, the two of them being far too different in personalities to feel anything other than respectful lust for one another, Tony’s feelings of regret and sadness about their inevitable breakup had been quickly extinguished by the sudden appearance of a new man in his life. Said individual being, of course, a very handsome literature professor he had bumped into one night at one of the more upscale gay bars in the local area.

“I’m glad you talked me into going out.” Theodore expressed, a small smile brightening his comely face. “I was going to go crazy if I had to correct one more midterm tonight.”

Feeling much the same way, as the two of them had been woefully unable to see one another due to their mutual increase in workloads, Tony smiled brightly and reached a hand across the table to grasp the impossibly soft fingers belonging to his new boyfriend.

“Then it’s a good thing I was able to get us a reservation.” Tony agreed, waiting quite patiently for his indecisive partner to select his desired meal.

Because as quickly as said man had decided upon which beverage to drink (a fine glass of pink champagne) said professor was woefully unable to decide between a dish involving steak or one involving fish. And while that would have ordinarily driven Tony crazy, given his fierce appetite, for the first time in his life he sat idly and allowed his dining partner to go unharrassed as he studied the menu.

“How did you manage to secure reservations?” Teddy inquired, flipping a page to peruse the chicken courses.

“My dad’s best friend’s boyfriend is the uncle of the owner’s father.” Tony explained, finishing slightly out of breath.

Despite being a valedictorian-graduate from Harvard, Theodore frowned in confusion at the lengthy explanation and quirked a perfectly-groomed eyebrow in his direction.

“What?”

“I’m not sure either.” Tony confessed. “Just rest assured that it was some sort of nepotism that allowed us this date.”

Because, if Tony wasn’t mistaken, it was Hamish’s familial connection to the owner of said upscale establishment that allowed for them to be dining in a place that usually took several years to grant access to new customers.

“Well,” Teddy smiled, raising his glass, “Let us give a toast to nepotism, then.”

“To nepotism,” Tony obliged, connecting his wine glass with that of Teddy’s glass, “May it continue to serve us well.”

Exchanging admittedly dopey expressions with one another as they softly clinked their glasses, they inadvertently drew several curious, yet excited, glances from half-a-dozen fellow diners who had clearly mistakenly believed them to be celebrating an engagement or anniversary. But, rather than disabuse them of such an innocent notion, Tony politely played his part in the charade by smiling softly at the well-wishes before turning back to his earlier discussion with his partner.
“That kind of reaction would have never happened ten years ago.” Theodore asserted, still all smiles.

“Ten years ago, we might have been assaulted.” Tony agreed, just as pleased with their fellow diner’s reactions.

Settling then into a comfortable silence, Tony sipping idly away at his white wine whilst Teddy now perused the vegetarian section of the menu, the curious onlookers gradually turned their gazes away and effectively left them to their own devices once more – all but lulling them into a false sense of security as, moments later, a rouge hand placed itself on Tony’s shoulder and nearly prompted him into spilling his wine.

“Junior!” A very familiar, and unwelcome, voice bellowed.

Reluctantly twisting around in his seat to face the sperm-donor he had not spoken to for several months, Tony smiled stiffly and only slightly lost his calm composure when he took in the sight of the young, college-aged-girl clinging to Senior’s arm.

“…Dad.” Tony greeted, reluctantly rising to accept his handshake.

Either failing to realize the lack of enthusiasm with which his son greeted their impromptu meeting, or otherwise stubbornly choosing to ignore it, Senior beamed obliviously into his face and slapped his shoulder once more.

“How the hell are you, Son?” The older man inquired. “It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you.”

Only narrowly resisting the urge to make inquiries into who’s fault that was, Tony stubbornly maintained his emotionless smile and issued forth to his father a less vehement version of the question.

“You’ve been busy, Dad, remember?”

Just as smarmy and glib as always, Senior did not so much a blink at the thinly-veiled accusation. Rather, instead, he pulled his companion closer with a possessive flair and proudly made an announcement of his own.

“Let me introduce you to your new step-mother.” Their unwelcome guest intreated, pulling his barely-legal wife closer to his person. “Tony, this is Britta. We met in the Bahamas last spring.”

Seeming to be the only one of the duo to realize just how awkward such an introduction was, as Tony had not even been invited the wedding, much less been made aware of its existence up until that point, Britta shuffled a bit uncomfortably before gradually recovering her manners.

“Hello, Tony.” She chirped, very bubbly as she stuck out a pale hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Feeling great compassion for the young woman, as she clearly had no idea of what sort of mess she was getting into, Tony accepted the handshake with as much genuine friendliness as he could muster and smiled gently down into the face of his new step-mother.

“It’s very nice to you, Britta.” Tony agreed. “And congrats on the nuptials, as well.”

“I sure wish you could have been there.” Britta warbled, exuding warmth.
“My invitation must have gotten lost in the mail.” Tony wryly proposed. “But don’t worry, Britta, I don’t feel slighted at all. Weddings tend to lose their charm after the ninth or tenth one.”

Responding to such a verbal blow with a sharp intake of breath, as well as with a very wounded expression, Britta seemed to shrink in size as she awkwardly looked to her husband for assistance.

“Who’s this now, Junior. One of your teammates?” Senior deflected, gesturing vaguely at Theodore before turning back to his wife. “Tony’s a Senior Field Agent for the NCIS, you know.”

Already bracing himself for the hostility and awkwardness he knew was about to ensue, Tony dug his fingernails into his palms and spoke with as much clarity and calmness as he could muster at the moment.

“This is Theodore.” Tony grudgingly introduced. “He’s a literature professor.”

“And where’d you bump into this guy?” Senior questioned, exchanging a very awkward handshake with said man. “He doesn’t much seem like the sort to play any kind of sports.”

Despite knowing perfectly well that his father was referring to Theodore’s tall and slender physique, and not his somewhat evident homosexuality, Tony bristled angrily at the question and cursed for Senior for ever having felt the need to make an appearance at so fine an establishment.

“I was a Green Beret…Sir.” Teddy clarified, giving his antagonizer a very grim expression.

Seemingly cowed at such a visage, or perhaps just not in the mood to get his ass kicked in front of a new wife, Senior smiled saccharinely up into the face of his new acquaintance and condescendingly clapped him on the shoulder.

“So, you two met at some NCIS banquet.” Senior decided. “Are you a field-agent now, too?”

Before Theodore could remind the malignant narcissist that his child had already informed him of his current career in teaching, and before Senior could casually stroll away as he was clearly intending to do, Tony gathered up all the courage he possessed and shook his head.

“No.” He firmly dismissed. “I met Theodore at Posh.”

Earning for himself a startled gasp from Britta, and a very chilly smile from his father, Tony felt his stomach churn with an anxiety that had him greatly concerned he would throw up. But rather then back down, and retract the statement with shame, Tony held his ground in a manner that would have made his real father proud and unflinchingly met Senior’s eyes.

“Tony,” Senior chided, addressing him as one would a child, “Posh is a gay bar.”

Feeling righteous indignation at the way he was being condescended, as well as greatly injured by the way in which Senior felt the need to whisper the word gay, Tony felt his face flare with color as a wave of anger overtook him.

“It’s also where I met Teddy.”

“Tony,” Senior bristled, “If this is another one of your practical jokes – “

Cut off from finishing what was sure to be another one of his endless rants by the sudden appearance of his wife’s elbow in his gut, Senior flinched at the contact and glared weakly at the
meek defender standing by his side.

“Senior,” Britta scolded, her voice a whisper, “Don’t be insensitive.”

“How am I being insensitive?” Senior groused. “This is just a little joke of his…DiNozzos aren’t gay.”

Adding that stipulation to the endlessly long list of things he had been told DiNozzos either weren’t or didn’t do, Tony swallowed down the rage rising in his throat and retorted with as much calmness and patience as he could manage.

“Well, this one is.”

Glaring at Tony in a manner that had once been able to frighten him into compliance, Senior moved a step closer and placed an unwelcomed hand on his shoulder, the pressure he applied to such a grip both forceful and painful.

“You’re not a queer, Anthony.” Senior declared. “I didn’t raise you that way.”

Impatiently removing the hand from his shoulder with a simply step backward, and slapping the rouge appendage away as it tried to reattach itself to his throbbing shoulder, Tony glared sharply at Senior and finally gave into the anger.

“You didn’t raise me at all!” Tony hissed, full of venom. “And right now, this queer needs you to leave.”

“Anthon – “

Having already endured more than he could reasonably be expected to bear as witness to such a scene, Theodore rose swiftly to his feet and effortlessly distracted Senior from his tirade with all the fierceness and danger a Green Beret could muster.

“You were asked to leave.” The handsome brunette reminded. “So go.”

Giving Theodore a very wary once-over, and quickly reaching the correct conclusion that said man could rip him in two without effort, Senior wisely took a step back from the table before addressing Tony once more.

“We’ll discuss this…rebellion of yours, later, Anthony.” The older man forewarned. “I’m not having a queer in the family. You were raised better than that.” And, that said, he turned to his wife and grabbed her arm. “Come along, Britta – “

Promptly stopped in his tracks as Britta jerked her arm free, Senior scowled fiercely and leveled the young girl with a glower.

“I think…I feel a little dizzy, Senior.” Britta clearly fibbed. “I…I’m going to take a cab home. I’ll call you when I get there.”

“You’re going back to your mother’s, aren’t you?” Senior growled, with no small amount of petulance.

Not even bothering to deny the assertion, as even an idiot could tell it was so, Britta smiled weakly before awkwardly stretching up on her toes to kiss his chin.

“I’ll call you.” She avowed, swiftly taking her leave.
Wisely sensing that some shit was about to go down, Teddy chivalrously moved to stand in front of Tony before Senior had even turned back to grace them with a stormy expression.


“It’s not my fault, she left.” Tony snapped. “But I’m glad she did. Britta deserved a better husband than you.”

Effectively prohibited from hitting his son by the presence of a very frightening man blocking such access, Senior settled for a verbal assault rather than a physical one.

“Why do you have to do these kinds of things to piss me off!?” He roared, gesticulating at Theodore in an irreverent manner. “Did you not get enough attention as a kid!?”

Keeping to himself the thought that Senior only ever paid attention to him when his presence could be used to lure in potential kid-loving girlfriend’s, as that would only further ignite the flames, Tony took a deep breath and addressed his father in a far calmer matter than he deserved.

“You’re causing a scene.”

“Don’t you start that shit with me.” Senior growled. “You’re the one having dinner with a gay man!”

“Dad – “

“I mean honestly, what the fuck is wrong with you?” Senior ranted. “My God, as if your career choices weren’t already bad enough you go and…You go and become a faggot!” And then, addressing Theodore, he snarled: “This is his mother’s fault you know. He’d have never turned out this way if – “

Up until that point having remained calm in the face of such a tirade, as responding in a similar vein would have only made him look equally ridiculous, Tony was taken rather off-guard by the uncalled-for reference to his mother and, as such, reacted with as much rage as a slighted son could be expected to respond with.

“You leave my mother out of this!” Tony snapped. “She’s a goddamn saint!”

“As if!” Senior spat, his eyes dark and cold. “If you turned out like…this, then she clearly didn’t do a very good job raising you.”

Choosing at that moment to intervene in what was once a familial dispute, Theodore roughly seized Senior by the arm and dragged him a few steps away from Tony.

“You leaving. Now.”

“Who the hell do you think you – “

“I was a Green Beret.” Teddy reminded, squeezing the arm in his grasp. “I know how to make people disappear.”

Visibly frightened by such an ominous statement, but otherwise unwilling to give up his pride, Senior yanked angrily away from the hand holding him and appeared to gloat when he was, with the assistance of his capture, successful.

“We will talk about this later, Junior.” Senior hissed, already turning away. “There are camps
that can fix this sort of thing. You’ll see.”

Flinching at such a threat, as Senior had already once sent him to a conversion therapy camp the summer he turned fifteen, Tony sank bonelessly back into his chair and hid his face behind his menu, wishing to hide any tears that spilled from his eyes from the small crowd of pitying onlookers.


“I…I think I need to go home.” Tony interrupted, voice very thick. “I’m sorry.”

Rather than respond angrily to such a request, or pout, Theodore gave his shoulders a comforting squeeze and waved the waitress over so that that he could pay for their drinks.

“Let me drive you home, alright?”
Chapter 76

Having not been able to enjoy any quality alone-time with girlfriend in weeks, given that their mutual workload had suddenly increased without warning, Jethro had intended to make the most his rare evening off by snuggling with his girlfriend on the sofa and copping a feel whenever the presence of commercials allowed for such an honor. Which was precisely what he had been doing, with a great lack of shame, when the front door burst open and revealed to them a very distraught Tony.

“Why doesn’t he want me?” Tony sniffled, still red in the face as he laid on the sofa with his head buried in his father’s lap.

Having never once been forced to confront such a negative question in his life, as both of his parents had been exceedingly attentive and loving to him during his formative years, Jethro was woefully unable to confront such an anguished query and, as such, settled for remaining quiet as he stroked his boy’s hair in a fashion that usually worked wonders to soothe him.

“Oh, Tony.” Henrietta crooned, rubbing the legs which rested in her lap. “Some people are just... Some people are just very unhappy with their lives. And they can’t stand it when other people are happy, so... so they do all they can to make sure everyone is as miserable as they are. What Senior did has nothing to do with you. He’s just a very angry man.”

Although Jethro felt that such an explanation was, indeed, accurate and sincere, their child clearly didn’t believe such wisdom to be infallible judging by the way he shook his head and responded with no small amount of despair in his voice.

“Senior wouldn’t be so angry with me if I were normal.” Tony erroneously asserted.

“Tony.” Henrietta frowned, looking near tears herself. “Senior is a cold and calculating man. Nothing you could do would change that, Monkey. And you are normal, don’t ever forget that.”

By that point having already resolved to flay Senior alive, with the dullest pair of scissors he could procure, Jethro was able to swallow down his righteous anger for the time being and tend to the matter at hand without any troublesome feelings of rage distracting him.

“And a good parent should love you regardless.” Jethro stipulated, feeling slightly bereaved that a person should even need to be reminded of such a universal fact.

Sniffling loudly in response to such a sage decree, Tony swiped angrily at his eyes and took several shuddering breaths before being able to speak with any sense of clarity.

“I don’t know why Senior has to be so... so hateful.”

Frowning slightly as unwelcome reminders of the way his Uncle L.J had been treated by some of the people in Stillwater simply for being black flooded into his mind, Jethro sighed inwardly and ruffled his boy’s hair a bit more enthusiastically then necessary.

“Some people are just born that way, Tony.” He advised. “I’m just sorry you had to have one of them in your life.”

“Senior never loved me, did he?” Tony asked, voice impossibly small.

Despite wanting to do nothing more than preserve his child’s sense of worth by egregiously lying and stating that Senior must love him to a certain degree, by virtue of having given him life, Jethro
knew he could do no such thing with any amount of conviction. Because not only did he possess for himself a strong anti-lying stance, so too had Ducky shared with him the angry results he had garnered from trying to spare Jimmy’s feelings by lying. No, Jethro thought, *There was nothing he could do but tell the truth.*

“I don’t think a person like that is capable of love, Kiddo.” Jethro confessed. “But that doesn’t say about you as a person.”

In truth, it said *everything* about Senior as a person. If, in any sense of the word, a goblin such as he could be referred to as human.

“He was a real dick, Dad.” Tony sniffled, shamelessly wiping his eyes on Jethro’s already soaked sleeve. “He hurt my shoulder.”

“– WHAT!?”

“- WHAT!?”

Flinching slightly at the dual outbursts from his parents, as he had no doubt had his fill of raised voices for the evening, Tony turned suddenly somber and tried, in vain, to keep his mother from yanking down the collar of his shirt. Which, in hindsight, would have been a very prudent move had he been successful. For, upon seeing a very red mark upon his boy’s shoulder, one that was sure to bruise by morning, Jethro only strengthened his resolve to kill the man who had done it.

“That sonofabitch!” Henrietta growled, green eyes all aflame with wrath. “I’m going to fucking kill that - “

Wisely sensing that all the sudden hostility in the air wasn’t at all conducive to soothing an already very distraught Tony, Jethro caught Henrietta’s gaze and firmly shook his head once.

“Do you want some hot chocolate, Monkey?” Henrietta inquired of her son, reluctantly but surely deflating. “It’ll make you feel better.”

Shaking his head in a manner that surprised both his parents, as it was not like their child at all to refuse any sort of food or beverage, Tony yawned pointedly and reluctantly sat up.

“I think I just want to go to bed.”

“C’mon, then.” Jethro encouraged, climbing to his feet before helping his boy to do the same. “I’ll take you up while Mom makes some hot chocolate – just in case.”

Because as much as Jethro knew that Tony would be out like a rock just as soon as he was in bed, so to did he understand that Henrietta needed a little time by herself to effectively calm down. Or, at the very least, school her expression into one that wouldn’t outright terrify their child.

“Alright, Tony. Into bed you go.” Jethro encouraged, leading the way into the guestroom.

Hastily complying, as he had no doubt sobbed himself free of all his usual energy, Tony wriggled himself beneath the thick blankets and bonelessly allowed to be tucked in without complaint.

“You know I love you, Kiddo. Right?” Jethro asked, smoothing down the hair he had so ruthlessly ruffled moments before.

Meeting his father’s unflinching gaze with a resolute countenance of his own, Tony nodded twice and smiled.
“I know.”

“Good.” Jethro sighed, seating himself on the side of the bed. “I mean, I know it’s not the same as having your real father – “

“Dad,” Tony interrupted with a frown, “You are my real father. But…A kid will always want all his parents to love him – even if they’re terrible.”

Even though he could live to a hundred and never fully understand such a concept, having been lucky enough to have a relatively good childhood, Jethro nodded to show he was listening and relaxed when that action alone seemed to be enough for his child.

“I’m sorry your night was so awful.” Jethro expressed. “I wish I knew how to make everything better.”

“It’s enough that you’re here.” Tony comforted. “Can I have a hug?”

Unable to deny such a simple request even at the best of times, as who was he to deny a touch-served person a simple embrace, Jethro nodded and prepared to do just that before recalling the state in which his son currently resided.

“You’re all wrapped up, Kiddo.” Jethro reminded, earning himself a frown. “You’ll have to settle for one of these instead.”

And, with that said, Jethro planted a quick peck on his boy’s forehead.

Beaming brightly at such a rare display of affection, as it really was quite rare that Jethro went so far as to kiss him, Tony greatly resembled an overexcited toddler who had just been granted a rare treat indeed.

“And Gibbs-pancakes in the morning, too?” The younger man asked, pressing his luck.

“You’re already spoiled rotten, as it is.” Jethro sighed. “But, yes. I’ll make my special pancakes in the morning.”

“With – “

“With the syrup Grampa made – even though it’s not Christmas.”

Grinning much like a cat who had just caught a prize-mouse, Tony relaxed into his mattress and closed his eyes.

“You’re the greatest, Dad.”

“Don’t let Mom hear you saying that.” Jethro advised, rubbing his boy’s shoulder to facilitate sleep.

“Hear what?” Henrietta asked, strolling into the bedroom with a large glass of hot chocolate.

Quickly exchanging a conspiratorial look with Tony, Jethro grinned mischievously and feigned innocence.

“Nothing.” They said, together.

“What am I going to do with you two boys?” Henrietta smirked, kissing both their cheeks with great affection.
“Love us.” Tony opined, grinning widely.

Giving their son yet another kiss on the forehead, nearly in the same spot he had placed his own kiss, Henrietta smiled sweetly and ran a hand through her son’s curls.

“That was a given, Monkey.” She assured. “But try to get some sleep, okay? You’ve had a long night.”

Nodding in agreement to such an agreeable suggestion, Tony obediently closed his eyes and was, in half-a-minute, promptly asleep and dead to the world around him.

“I’m going to kill that beast.” Henrietta whispered, grabbing Jethro’s hand to lead him from the room.

“We’re going to kill that beast.” Jethro agreed, already hatching several plots.
Chapter 77

Despite having been fully prepared to hunt down Senior and geld him just as soon as her child had been put to bed and coaxed into a peaceful sleep, Jethro had stubbornly and effectively stayed her wroth long enough to convince her that a midnight excursion to acquire justice was not at well-advised. Her boyfriend had quite cleverly suggested, instead, that they wait until morning to fulfil their need for a bit of vigilantism. But what that might entail, they had yet to reach a consensus on.

“We can’t cut the breaks in his car, Hen.” Jethro calmly argued, refusing yet another of her plots. “We can have it towed.”

“Oh, what’s the difference?” Henrietta pouted, crossing her arms.

“One is murder.” Jethro reminded, giving her a heatless frown.

Only narrowly resisting the urge to roll her eyes at such semantics, as nobody could say for sure that Senior would die were his breaks to be cut, Henrietta huffed loudly before taking a large gulp of soothing coffee.

“It would technically be manslaughter.”

“Hen.” Jethro weakly admonished, fighting a smile. “I don’t want us to go to prison.”

Thinking that prison would be of but little consequence should Senior be suitably punished by a vehicular-mangling, but otherwise understanding that Jethro would never be in agreement with her on that accord, Henrietta sighed once more but finally made a concession in their bargaining.

“Oh, fine.” She surrendered. “Call up your buddy and have him tow that bastard’s car.”

Clearly sensing his girlfriend’s displeasure, without needing to be outright informed of such, Jethro frowned guiltily and laid a soothing hand on her thigh.

“If it makes you feel better, I can have them rough the car up, too.” He bargained, cheekily edging his fingers up her thigh.

Not at all in the mood for lovemaking at the moment, as anger was the one emotion that could effectively overpower her sex-drive, Henrietta gently edged the rouge fingers down to her knees and smiled apologetically at her boyfriend.

“If they hide a piece of cheese in the car – somewhere he’ll never find it.” She advised, hellbent on justice.

“I’ll have them break the radio, too.” Jethro added, taking the refusal of his advances with great dignity.

Thinking that she ought to perhaps reward such good manners with a little midnight romp or two, but otherwise still far too worked up to encourage any ravenous displays of affection that might lead to increased expectations, Henrietta settled for lying her hand atop the rougher one resting upon her knee – the action promising, but not quite obligating.

“I don’t suppose we could have him evicted?” Henrietta queried, feeling as if she already knew the answer.
“I don’t know anybody who could pull that off.” Jethro verbally confirmed. “I could have some bored parolees ring his doorbell at all hours of the night.”

Thinking it quite marvelous, indeed, that their justified mischief would be providing a respectable hobby for underprivileged individuals, Henrietta smiled in satisfaction and thanked her lucky stars that she had managed to secure so great a boyfriend as Jethro.

“Could you have them egg his house, as well?”

Because as much as Tony had asserted that Britta was a very kind young woman indeed, it troubled her but little to assail the home she lived in provided it proved a great irritant to the nuisance who owned it.

“That would be illegal, Hen.” Jethro repeated, for what must have been the eleventh time.

“And?” She questioned, quirking a brow.

“And, of course, I’ll do it.” Jethro grinned. “I’ll have a few cops trail him, too, just to make him nervous.”

Thinking that a very satisfying amendment, indeed, Henrietta awarded her boyfriend with a very saucy kiss to his lips and cast him a look that promised much more in the near future.

“We’ve made a great start, Jethro.”

Still a bit flustered from the earlier kiss, as he had clearly come to the erroneously conclusion that he would not be getting any affection that night, Jethro blinked slowly a few times before responding.

“Do I even want to know what’s going on in your mind, right now?”

“No.” Henrietta grinned. “It would only inculpate you.”
Chapter 78

Despite having informed Senior DiNozzo that the next time he was foolish enough to be found in presence he would be forced to leave it with his nose broken in several places, said reprobate seemed to have absolutely no qualms whatsoever in barging into Jethro’s home without even the negligible curtesy of knocking or ringing the doorbell. Fortunately for Senior, as well as the fate of his floorboards and walls, the guns had already been locked up for the evening after a thorough cleansing – elsewise such a noisy invasion would have very well been met with any even noisier rebuke.

“Gibbs!” Senior ranted, yelling loud enough to wake the dead. “Gibbs, where are you!?"

Having been seated in the kitchen to share with Henrietta the last few cups of coffee, before their beloved coffee-brewer was retired for the evening, sat up firmly in his chair before making a calm reply.

“We’re in here, you asshole.” He informed, keeping his voice low. “Now stop your screeching.”

Because as much as Jethro could tolerate a bit of screeching, his previous wives having acclimated him to such a sound, he most certainly did not wish for Tony to be awoken and promptly thrust into the midst of yet another fiery tirade from his biological father. For as confident as such a young man proclaimed to be, which was quite often, all the facts pointed to Tony being quite a sensitive individual when it came to matters of family and friends.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, Gibbs,” Senior ranted, not quite so loud as he was before, “But if you think you can convince my son that being a fag – “

Having finally stumbled his way into the kitchen in the midst of his rant, after a great deal of graceless stumbling around the bottom floor, Senior had glared quite sharply in his direction before breaking his speech off midsentence upon noting the presence of his ex-wife.

“You!” Senior snapped, looking quite feral. “What are you doing here!?"

Appearing to be more annoyed with her ex-husband’s presence than she was afraid, Henrietta calmly set her cup of coffee down on the table and cast the unwelcomed intruder a very withering expression.

“I was enjoying a bit of coffee with my boyfriend.” She waspishly explained, looking fully prepared to throw the boiling beverage into the blackguard’s face.

Looking as if he actually had been assaulted in such a matter, Senior inhaled sharply and looked, with rising horror, between the two of them. The shock of which quickly wore off, in mere seconds, as indignant rage quickly rose to take the place of it. For no man, no matter how much he detested a pervious wife, could stand to see that which was once his belonging now to someone else.

“What is this?” Senior hissed, advancing upon Henrietta with an angry air.

Sensing that their angry intruder had suddenly lost his senses, as by approaching Henrietta in such a manner he was clearly courting death, Jethro rose to his feet with more calmness then he felt and moved to stand between the two of them.

“When did she get back?!” Senior demanded, wisely deciding not to try and duck around
Jethro. “She’s supposed to be in hiding!”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you with my freedom, but I left Spain months ago.” Hen snarked, glaring at her ex-husband from behind the protective wall of her boyfriend.

Feeling absurdly proud that some of his sarcasm had managed to rub off on his girlfriend, as he felt it a fair return for the way in which her patience had managed to rub off on him, Jethro smiled and forgot, for a moment, that they had only been seeing each other for a few months at most.

“Well, isn’t this cute.” Senior disparaged, eyes all aglow with rage as they flicked between the two of them. “You’ve managed to claim another one of my castoffs for your – “

As greatly insulted as any man could be when faced with the prospect of having just had both his girlfriend and son insulted in such a manner, Jethro reacted without much restraint and all but growled as he drew back his fist and landed it squarely on Senior’s nose.

“Jethro!” Henrietta cried, springing to her feet as Senior collapsed. “I just mopped that floor!” And, glancing down at her passed out ex-husband, she added: “And I wanted to be the one to do that.”

Sensing that his girlfriend wasn’t at all that put out with not being the one to assault the nefarious Senior, Jethro responded with a bit of humor and promptly earned himself both a kiss and a jab in the ribs.

“I couldn’t wait for you to climb up on a chair to do it.”
Although Jethro had all but bullied the Director into mandating all vaccinations since the day before Tony had gotten out of the hospital after his hellish bout with the plague, malignant objectors be damned, he was promptly throw off-guard one morning, as well as enraged, when he discovered, quite by accident, that one of the senior custodians had been given a reprieve from such an unnegotiable requirement on spurious claims that his religion forbid such a medical intervention. Which, had said man actually been proven to observe any sort of religious custom, much less stopped participating in his usual gambling and fornications, would have been just fine by Jethro so long as he had been prudent enough to keep away from the immunocompromised Tony.

What was not fine however, by any sense of the word, was the way in which said custodian had somehow felt it necessary to come into the bullpen last week, hacking and wheezing, to clean up a bit of the coffee the Director had inadvertently spilled after being knocked into by an unusually clumsy Tim. Because not only did Jethro have Tony to worry about getting ill, so too was he greatly concerned about the well-being of Kate’s unborn, and therefore unprotected, child.

But before he had been able to protest said man’s presence, much less clamor for his removal, on the grounds he would land either Tony of Kate in the hospital, Ducky had jabbed him quite sharply in ribs with an unspoken warning – clearly hoping to keep his closest friend from getting a religious-discrimination complaint taken out against his person. A particular bit of advice, whilst initially hard to accept at the time, Jethro had hastily accepted as he had only just gotten the Director off his back after his well-provoked manhandling of a female suspect had became known to him.

But Jethro had quickly come to regret having such faith in his usually dependable friend, for eleven days later, early in the morning, Tony arrived late to work with bleary-eyed and a very pronounced and gnarly cough. Which, in itself, was already awful enough. But, compounded further in seriousness by the way in which said man tugged woefully at his ears in a manner that suggested a dual infection, and worse yet took no efforts to conceal his illness, whatever ailment assailed Tony proved itself to be quite formidable indeed.

“My God, Tony,” Tim quipped, nearly dripping his coffee as said man stumbled blindly past him. “You look like garbage.”

Glaring at Tim with a ferociousness that Jethro hadn’t thought possible for such an amiable young man to muster, much less display, Tony opened him mouth to retort with some cutting jibe only to be immediately thwarted from doing so properly by the loud, wheezing coughs that escaped his lungs without warning.

“Tony,” Kate rebuked, rising to press a sisterly hand against his forehead, “Why didn’t you just call in? You’re clearly too sick to be working.”

And, having thus delivered her concern-prompted scolding, Kate frowned and almost immediately removed her hand from her colleague’s forehead in a manner that seemed to suggest Tony’s skin had actually been hot enough to cause her fingers discomfort.

“Jesus,” Kate gasped, suddenly very somber, “You’re burning up.”

And at that worried condemnation, Jethro was promptly on his feet and at the side of his boy in mere moments – his great reluctance to embarrass his son in front of his subordinates all but forgotten as concern took over.
“C’mon.” Jethro ordered, firmly seizing the ill man’s arm and immediately finding it very sweaty. “We’re going to see Ducky.”

For once meek and compliant in the face of medical intervention, in a manner Jethro had not at all thought possible, Tony nodded weakly and subsequently surprised all the inhabitants of the bullpen with such easy consent.

“Let Hen know where we went.” Jethro ordered Tim and Kate, already steering Tony toward the elevator.

Because as much as Jethro knew his girlfriend would soon be back, surely in the space of minutes given that she had only ducked out to fetch coffee for them all, he didn’t much think it would be wise to await her arrival when Tony seemed ablaze with fever. A decision, which unfortunate in nature, soon proved to be quite the wise one as mere moments after entering the elevator Tony nearly toppled over as it jerked itself downward without grace – necessitating Jethro to tighten his grip upon the young man’s arm.

“I’m dizzy, Dad.” Tony groaned, making use of the title he only used outside of work.

“I can see that.” Jethro frowned, willing the notoriously fickle elevator to move a little bit faster. “You can lie down in a moment.”

Thankfully for the both of them, the elevator chose to be compliant that morning and deliver its users to their intended destination without much, if any, fuss. An unusual act of charity, whilst unfortunately rare in nature, effectively enabled them both to stumble into the morgue with a noted lack of grace more befitting Henrietta than an ex-marine. A fact not unnoticed by a passing Jimmy, who quickly rushed to their side to assist in their pursuit of an adequate autopsy table for the near-comatose man being half-dragged across the floor.

“Go fetch, Ducky.” Jethro ordered, quite unnecessarily as said assistance had already retreated to do just that.

“I feel like I’m dead.” Tony groaned, holding one arm over his eyes to block out the meager, but offending, light of the morgue.

Feeling encouraged by the absence of any witnesses, as well as compelled by the abject misery of his child, Jethro took pity on the miserable man lying before him and gently stroked the damp curls away from his face, moving slowly so as not to startle the sweating patient should he suddenly become delirious with his fever.

“I’m going to kill that custodian.” Jethro avowed, hastily shrugging off his sweater so that Tony might use the garment as an eye-mask.

Eagerly accepting the sweater with all the greediness of a toddler just offered a fat slice of cake, Tony clumsily laid the soft fabric over his eyes (neccessitating his father’s interference so that it was not rendered useless) and impatiently began to tug at his ears with his newly-freed hands.

“You can’t.” Tony pouted, voice all gravely. “Francis knows how to get the best fireworks.”

Flinching angrily at the unwelcome reminder that such a reckless custodian had been almost primarily responsible for the way in which Tony had nearly blown off his thumbs last summer, as said employee had undoubtedly been the one to supply the illegal fireworks that had burned the flesh off his kid’s hands, Jethro scowled and was immediately made grateful that the frightening expression was hidden from Tony’s view by the expertly-folded sweater.
“We already talked about this.” Jethro lectured, hoping the playful banter would keep his kid somewhat lucid. “No more illegal fireworks.”

Looking slightly teary-eyed in response to such a harsh edict, as there was no one who loved pyrotechnics so much as his boy, Tony almost immediately had Jethro making an amendment to his earlier decree.

“At least not in front of Mom.” Jethro whispered conspiratorially.

He was, after all, almost nearly as enraptured with a good display of Chinese and Mexican explosives, provided, of course, that the igniter of such objects was not his perpetually clumsy child. A reasonable concession which, while upspoken, seemed to delight Tony to no end given by the way in which he smiled brightly.

“You’re the bes – “

Kept from finishing his compliment by an untimely betrayal of his body, more specifically another garish coughing fit, Tony shook violently on the table and played, quite effectively, the part of a dying man who was clearly just about ready to hack up a lung before finally giving up the ghost. But before Jethro could dissolve into a fit of anxiety, much less yell loudly across the morgue for Ducky to hurry his ass over there, said Medical Examiner’s voice was soon heard from somewhere off behind him.

“My Lord,” Ducky irreverently exclaimed, “Who has let a smoker into my morgue?”

Unable to bare such a marked lack of seriousness when his child was clearly so very ill, Jethro whipped angrily around on his heel to confront his closest of friends only to discover that such an action was highly unnecessary. For upon sighting the couchant youth sprawled out upon his favorite autopsy table, all vestiges of flippancy quickly faded away.

“Oh, dear.” Ducky somberly exclaimed, quickly approaching the table. “I do hope this unhappy scene had nothing to do with Francis Montague’s sudden bout of measles. I did warn that senseless man not to heed to the advice of celebrities over doctors on the merits of vaccinations.”

“WHAT?!” Jethro growled, fully prepared to wring said custodian’s neck.

Although Ducky did not so much as flinch as his dearest friend’s increase in volume, as he had no doubt grown acclimated to such verbal explosions of the lengthy years of their friendship, Jimmy did jump out of his skin at the outburst and immediately look to his father for assistance – thoroughly disheartening Jethro as he had, most ardently, been working on not frightening said young man out of his goddamn mind.

“Jimmy,” Ducky effortlessly intervened, “Be a good lad and fetch me my doctors’ bag. Quickly, please.”

Hastily scurrying off to do just that, as said assistant was always of a mind to be obliging to his father, Jimmy effectively left them alone in the space of seconds.

“Jethro,” Ducky said sternly, “Would you be so kind as to make certain I don’t get punched in the face when I remove his shirt?”

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“Jethro,” Ducky said sternly, “Would you be so kind as to make certain I don’t get punched in the face when I remove his shirt?”

Although Jethro so greatly wanted to defend his child by claiming such precautions were degrading, as well as unnecessary, it was quite evident, judging by the expression on his friend’s face, that Ducky had not at all forgotten last years disastrous flu-shot administration wherein he had been punched quite soundly in the face by a very panicked Tony.
“You act if he were some kind of dog.” Jethro groused, seizing hold of his child’s sweaty hands.

Earning for himself a low groan from his reluctant patient, as Tony was clearly not at all pleased with the notion of not being able to tug at his sore ears, Jethro grimaced and sincerely wished that he could trade places with his unwell son.

“I would oblige you to remember the last time Tony was delirious with fever.” The slightly older man requested. “Because I most certainly have not. Nor,” he added, “Has my thumb.”

Despite being fully of the opinion that Ducky was fully at fault for that incident, as he had been warned repeatedly not to try and force a pill down Tony’s throat, Jethro kept mum in favor of preserving the peace and settled, instead, for humoring his friend.

“I can see how that would leave a lasting impression.” Jethro grumbled.

“The scar serves a wonderful reminder.” Ducky muttered sardonically, expertly making quick work of removing Tony’s button-down.

Which, given the fact that Tony was unusually docile, was a feat no less impressive given the fact that said man was utterly powerless to assist in the removal of such a tightly-fitting garment.

“Those fucking anti-vaxxers.” Ducky hissed, scowling as what his earlier actions had revealed. “Their stupidity alone is a crime in and of itself, but my god, there is no reason to afflict that defect upon everyone else.”

Feeling just as enraged as his friend, if not more, Jethro felt his face flame with heat even as an icy dread settled itself into the rest of his body. Because there, lying before him on the autopsy table, was a grisly visual that spoke greatly of the stupidity of those who decided to selfishly disregard the benefit of vaccinations. For not only was Tony’s chest made slick with an ungodly amount of sweat, so too was the skin of such mercilessly covered in an entire horde of unsightly red spots.

“Measles.” Jethro reluctantly diagnosed, vaguely recalling the host of pock-marks on the faces of several of his aunts and uncles. “That…That isn’t so serious.”

Even though Jethro was absolutely certain that Ducky knew he was being more hopeful than serious, said Medical Examiner frowned deeply and immediately set about to disabuse him of such a notion.

“I assure you, Jethro, measles is a very serious ailment.” His closest friend needlessly lectured. “Especially for poor Anthony. We’ll be very lucky, indeed, if the poor lad doesn’t develop a bit of pneumonia to go alone with – “

“His lungs aren’t strong enough to handle that!” Jethro protested, rather absurdly as there was absolutely nothing either one of them could do to prevent it.

“And that precisely the type of disregard that makes anti-vaxxers so selfish.” Ducky sermonized, wordlessly accepting his beg from a newly-returned Jimmy. “Thank you, my dear lad.”

Pausing but a moment in his work to award his child a smile for a job well done, as well as a quick pat to the head, Ducky then stuck a well-practiced hand into his medical bag and pulled out an oral thermometer on the first try.

“Now, let us have none of the usual biting.” Ducky encouraged his charge, gently tapping the patient’s lips with gentle fingers to coax them into parting. “There now.” He grinned, delighted when the teeth failed to close over any his fingers. “What a good lad, indeed. Why can we not behave this way every visit?”
Receiving no reply from his patient at such a chiding, save for a low moan, Jethro took it upon himself to defend his ill child with a low glare directed at the culprit responsible for causing him to moan in protest.

“You cannot reasonably argue, Jethro, that getting bit or punched every time the lad requires a temperature taken, or medicine administered, is not a tedious ordeal.”

“That doesn’t mean it needs voiced.” Jethro fussed, watching in consternation as the mercury in the thermometer slowly rose.

Heatlessly brushing off Jethro’s rebuke with a flippant wave of the hand, a behavior on he could get away with, Ducky gently extracted the thermometer from his charge’s mouth and held it close to his eyes for examination before frowning deeply.

“Nevermind that now.” Ducky dismissed, suddenly very somber. “I do believe a trip to the hospital is a far more prudent topic.”

Willfully beguiling himself into believing a little bit of fever-reducing medication and coddling would be all that was needed to make his son well again, as that had seemed to be the case for his uncles and aunts, Jethro blanched at the thought of a needed hospital-intervention and looked helplessly to his friend for a reprieve that never came.

“Are you sure that – “

“Jethro,” Ducky uncharacteristically interrupted, the concern in his eyes belying the steadying of his voice, “Anthony has a current temperature of 103.9. And, knowing the lad as well as we do, it is not unreasonable to assume he has been this ill for quite a while.”

Helplessly unable to argue against the notion that a temperature that high was not at all concerning, Jethro opened his mouth to make inquiries into whether or not an ambulance was required when he was unceremoniously cut off by Henrietta’s shrill voice carrying over to them from near the elevator.

“Jethro! Jethro!” Cried Henrietta. “What the hell happened?! I was only gone for twelve minutes!”

Thinking it wise not to startle Tony awake, as he could be quite the hellion when delirious with fever, Jethro calmly pulled his girlfriend a few steps away from the table and held her still so that he might whisper into her ear without much difficulty.

“One of us needs to take Tony to the hospital.” He explained, sounding calmer then he felt. “He’s got one hell of a fever and Ducky thinks it might be measles.”

“I…But how?” Henrietta cried, her panic rising. “He’s vaccinated. I made sure of that!”

Thinking it very wise of Henrietta to have taken the responsibility of getting Tony inoculated upon herself, as Senior would have hardly been likely to do so, Jethro felt like quite the asshole when he dismantled her anguished argument with some logic of his own.

“The plague did a number on his immune system.” Jethro reminded her.

“Then why wasn’t he revaccinated!?!” Henrietta snapped, flying into full Mama-Bear mode.

Opting not to take such a poorly-veiled accusation to heart, as he both knew and understood that parental panic had been the cause for such an outburst, Jethro took a deep breath before responding and was relieved when such an act worked to keep him from snapping back in retaliation.
“He was.” Jethro assured. “But it clearly wasn’t enough.”

“This is all that stupid Montague’s fault!” Henrietta cried, tears welling up in her eyes.

Despite also wanting to give into feelings panic, Jethro kept his resolve strong for the sake of his boy and immediately took charge of the situation as best as he could under such trying conditions.

“We’ll need with Montague later.” Jethro promised. “But right now, one of us needs to get Tony to the hospital.”

Because as much as he would have liked for both of them to be able to go, he knew perfectly well that the Director would never agree to such terms.

“I…I’ll take him.” Henrietta decided. “I’ll flag down a taxi and – “

“I’ll drive you.” Jimmy nervously, but helpfully offered. “I can help get him inside, too.”

Thinking that the wisest of recourses, as Henrietta was both without a license and the strength to manhandle a nearly-comatose Tony, Jethro nodded and reluctantly agreed to stay behind.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Jethro assured, kissing his wife’s cheek. “Call if something serious happens.”
Although Jethro knew, without a doubt, that Tony loved his mother as much as any child could, perhaps even more so, Jethro soon found that it was he who could not leave their son’s bedside without said young man launching into a full-fledged and half-delirious fit. A series of childish behavior which, in themselves, would have been more than innocent enough given the boy’s illness had it not been for the way in which said clinginess to his father clearly provoked a helpless amount of jealousy from Henrietta. Who, try as she might, was not at all capable at concealing such negative feelings with any amount of success. For every time their fevered child called out for his attentions, or elsewise reached out for him with very sweaty hands, a very wounded expression flickered across Henrietta’s face even as her green eyes flooded with tears. And nothing Jethro could say, or do, could make such a vast discrepancy in parental preference less hurtful or pronounced.

And, so it was, that the both of them were embroiled in what was very clearly an uncomfortable silence when Dr. Pitt strolled into the room with his usual serene smile plastered on his face.

“I’ve got to say, Gibbs, this is the longest time Tony’s gone without being in the hospital. Perhaps it was only natural he break that streak with something such as this.”

While Jethro was more than just a little familiar with the said doctor’s irreverent sense of humor, Henrietta most certainly was not and immediately made her ire known to the amiable man by glaring at him as he finally looked up from his clipboard.

“You must be Tony’s mother.” Dr. Pitt correctly surmised, having not failed to notice the glower of a protective parent.

“I am.” Henrietta said stiffly, moving even closer to her ill son.

Clearly wishing to put his favorite patient’s mother at ease, with the selfsame joviality that had once provoked he fiercest of crushes in Tony, Dr. Pitt smiled charmingly and politely set aside the clipboard that had so monopolized his attention earlier.

“It’s very nice to finally meet the woman responsible for bringing such a medical-disaster into the world. Tony has become a favorite of mine, you see, and all the nurses love and adore him.”

Although it was a sweet sentiment to share, indeed, Henrietta visibly bristled at such casualness and looked fully prepared to strangle the doctor with the IV tubing currently providing hydration to her son.

“It’s hard to imagine how that might be, doctor, when he doesn’t favor them back.”

“Is it?” Dr. Pitt cheerily challenged. “I’ve always thought Tony to be particularly gifted at making friends wherever he went.”

Clearly taken back a bit to discover that her son’s physician had not at all been insinuating that her child had ongoing flirtations with a great many of the nurses, but rather lasting friendships instead, Henrietta blushed guiltily but made no further effort to make known her regret.

“How is Tony.” Jethro asked, breaking the sudden tension. “Is it serious?”

“How ever not with this boy?” Dr. Pitt quipped, almost immediately regretting her form of humor as Henrietta growled at him. “It’s definitely measles,” He amended, much more professional, “There was never any doubt of that. And the dual ear-infections and conjunctivitis weren’t at all that much of a surprise either, unfortunately. I suppose we ought to just be grateful he hasn’t developed
pneumonia yet, or any other more serious complication.”

“Yet?!” Henrietta cried, reacting quite violently to such an odious word.

Having already faced the extent of Jethro’s great wrath years ago, when Tony had been diagnosed with the plague and actively dying, Dr. Pitt did not so much as blink at the sensation of being snarled at by a woman both a 1/3 of his size and weight. Which, had Henrietta actually been inclined to do some damage, would have been a very unfortunate underestimation, indeed.

“I’m sorry to be so blunt, but measles does lend itself to complications…as does the plague.” Dr. Pitt explained, nervously examining his patient’s vitals.

“Why does everyone keep bringing up the plague!” Henrietta cried, clearly at her wit’s end after having spent several hours alone in the hospital with her very sick son. “I’m tired of hearing about it!”

If the earlier looks of wounded pride and despair had failed to assure him of such a fact, Jethro was made all but certain by such an obscene outburst that Henrietta still felt absurdly guilty about having not been at Tony’s side whilst he had the plague. A situation he was most painfully unable to bear, for there was no logic at all behind it - only motherly grief and misapplied blame.

“The good news,” Said Dr. Pitt, speaking through the sudden awkwardness, “Is that Tony can go home just as soon as his fever goes down to a less dangerous level and remains that way for a half-a-day.”

“And what is his fever at now?” Jethro fussed, obscenely worried about the possibility of brain-damage.

Because as much as he would still love Tony were he to be rendered disabled in such a manner, the complications that such a diagnosis would encompass were almost unbearable to think of.

“It’s been wavering at about 102.8 for a couple of hours now.” Dr. Pitt informed, glancing down at the chart resting at the foot of Tony’s hospital bed. “The acetaminophen and fluids have clearly done their job. He might even be able to go home tomorrow if his fever doesn’t spike.”

“And in the meantime?!” Henrietta interrogated, clearly as distraught as any mother would be should their child be faced with the prospect of spending the night in a hospital.

Far more charitable then most men would be after being snarled at so impatiently by a woman who seemed keen to undermine his intelligence at every turn, Dr. Pitt smiled compassionately and laid a gentle hand upon Henrietta’s shoulder.

“And in the meantime, he’ll receive plenty of fluids and have his lungs monitored.”

Despite looking greatly relieved to hear such news, Henrietta shrugged the fingers off her shoulder without any sense of decorum and quickly turned her focus back to mopping the sweat from her incapacitated son’s face.

“Thank you.” Jethro expressed, finding it odd to be the one with manners.

“Oh, what are you thanking him for?” Henrietta snarled, voice hitching as she dabbed futilely at the sweat dampening her son’s face. “He should have known the new vaccinations didn’t take!”
Growing rapidly uncomfortable with the way his girlfriend was behaving in front of the man who had saved Tony’s life, but otherwise unable to convey such without being faced with the prospect of a relationship-ending fight, Jethro looked helplessly at Dr. Pitt and mouthed him a silent apology.

“Ma’am,” Dr. Pitt began, voice full of compassion, “I cannot reasonably be held culpable for not knowing how a nigh-extinct disease would effect your son’s body. But, rest assured, had I been able to predict such results, I would have acted accordingly.”

Seeming to be suitably chastised at such a mild rebuke, Henrietta had the decency to look ashamed of herself before promptly bursting into a heart-wrenching series of sobs.

“I’ll…I’ll leave you two alone.” Dr. Pitt charitably offered, making for himself a quick exit of the room.

And that was all the encouragement needed for Jethro to fly to her side and wrap his large arms around her.

“Hen – “

“Montague should have never been allowed not to vaccinate.”

Clinging to her all the tighter as she shook with sobs, Jethro stroked her hair and hoped, all the while, that all the hullabaloo would not wake their child.


Because God help him, if Tony succumbed to such a sudden illness, there was not a force on Earth that would be able to save Francis Montague from the horrors he would inflict upon him.

“What if our baby gets pneumonia?!”

“He survived the plague, he can survive a bit of – “

“Can he?!”

Utterly unable to even entertain such an idea, Jethro flinched sharply and remained silent even as Henrietta fell apart in his arms. Much to his consternation, as well as shame, Jethro found he could only stroke her hair and whisper absurd promises that all would be well into her ear even as he, himself, struggled not to fall apart.

“I don’t…I don’t…I don’t know how you did this the first time.” Henrietta wailed, clinging tightly to him. “Sitting with him when he looks so…so miserable. I can hardly stand it!”

Sneaking a quick glance at his boy as he held her head close to his chest, Jethro frowned and found himself unable to disagree. For pale-faced and coated in vicious red-spots, IV hooked up to one arm, Tony really did look like the very picture of misery. Jethro’s only consolation, he thought, was the fact that there was not even 1/3 as many tubes and machines hooked up to his son this time.

“It was hard.” Jethro admitted. “But he’ll get this through, Hen. He’ll be fine.”

Almost on cue, Tony groaned feebly and reached a sweaty arm out toward them.

“Dad.” He fussed, arm flailing about in search of the body usually stationed by his side.

Looking as if she had been slapped, Henrietta pulled sharply away from him and tried,
failed, to hide her jealously as she looked at him.

“He’s calling for you.” She needlessly explained, the words an accusation.

“Hen – “

“Go to him.” Henrietta insisted, brows furrowed. “He had you for the plague and now he
wants you for the measles, too.”

Becoming more than just a little fed-up with such verbal attacks, Jethro scowled and was
fully prepared to tell-off his girlfriend for assuming she was the only one so distraught at the sight of
Tony lying in his sickbed. But, glancing at the tears on his cheeks, and the way her bottom lip
wobbled dangerously, Jethro stalled at the last moment and gave a far weaker defense.

“That’s not fair, Hen.” He reproached.

“I should have been there the first time.” Henrietta wailed, streaking her cheeks with even
more mascara. “I should – “

“Hen.” Jethro said firmly. “That wasn’t your fault. This isn’t your fault.”

Unable to answer him with any sense of dignity, much less coherence, Henrietta dissolved
into yet another puddle of tears and thoroughly began to soak the front of his shirt even as Jethro
tried, in vain, to press a wad of tissues into her hand. Thankfully for him, as well as the sanity of his
girlfriend, Nurse Emma just so happened to be walking down the hallway containing their room
when Henrietta’s sobs turned truly desperate and threatened to awake their child.

“Ms. Paddington,” The compassionate nurse frowned, fearlessly stepping in, “Why don’t I
take you for a walk down to the giftshop? I know Tony would love to wake up and find some card
or stuffed animal waiting to greet him.”

Although Jethro was all but certain Henrietta would refuse to be moved from the room, as
there was not a force on Earth that could compel him to leave, Jethro blinked in surprise when his
girlfriend nodded weakly her consent to the idea.

“He likes the ones that sing.” She sniffled, finally accepting the tissues from his hand.

“We have plenty of those.” Nurse Emma assured, closing the distance between them to
gently extract her from Jethro’s arms. “We even have a few that smell like chocolate.”

“He’ll like those.” Henrietta agreed, eagerly accepting the outstretched arm of the nurse.
“But,” She faltered, glancing at Tony, “I can’t – “

“Hen,” Jethro assured, “I’ll stay with him.”

Seeming to take his offer as an unspoken permission to leave the room for a spell, Henrietta
smiled at him through watery eyes and bonelessly allowed the sweet nurse to guide her from the
room without either fuss or protest.

“Dad.” Tony groaned, sounding more pitiful then ever as the women left the room.

“I’m here, Kiddo.” Jethro assured, quickly returning to his post at the bedside.

Greatly relaxing at such an assurance, Tony sank even further into the pillows provided to
him and weakly reached out to grasp his hand.
“Don’t…feel good.”

“I know.” Jethro commiserated. “But in a few days, you’ll be home and as good as new.”

Receiving only a low groan in response to such happy news, Jethro frowned slightly and immediately changed tactics to try and cheer up his boy.

“Did you know Nurse Emma and Dr. Pitt are finally engaged?”

Although there was a distinct flair of jealousy that flickered across Tony’s face at such news, it was greatly eclipsed by the bright smile that overtook his features.

“We’re invited, too.” Jethro assured. “Now, imagine how nice a wedding thrown by a doctor will be.”

Because if the wedding put on by the surgeon Seamus was anything to go off of, the nuptials of Emma and Brad were going to be a very fine affair, indeed.

“Kate?” Tony asked, suddenly somber.

“Kate’s fine.” Jethro quickly assured, dabbing at his boy’s sweaty brow with a tissue.

Because even if said woman hadn’t felt the need to go get checked out, Jethro was all but certain Ducky would have dragged her to the clinic himself.

“Surgery?” Tony mumbled.

Cringing inwardly as it became to clear to him that Tony thought Kate was still in surgery after getting shot by Haswari, Jethro pushed out all unpleasant remembrances of such an event, and rapidly worked to soothe his boy before a full-fledged panic could set in.

“Kate is fine.” Jethro assured, opting not to argue with the delirious. “Seamus took her home, and she’s resting.”

And with that, Tony used up the last vestiges of energy he possess, and drifted promptly off the sleep.
Despite knowing perfectly that well that Mama only wished to see him comfortable, as well as healthy again, Tony found that he could not help but yearn for his father’s more specialized form of coddling. Because whilst his mother had excelled in cossetting him when he was much younger, it was Dad who had taken over such duties in the later years of his life; And, as a result of such a symbiotic relationship, had subsequently learned all the ways in which Tony preferred to be cared for at such a stage. For while he did still enjoy a frigid class of ginger-ale during any illness that confined him to bed, as well as copious amounts of popsicles to keep hydrated, Mama was completely oblivious to the way in which he now preferred his beverage in a water-bottle as well as shifted his loyalties from cherry-flavored delicacies to the more subdued banana-flavor. A temporary lapse in parental instinct, while forgivable, that was no less aggravating when compounded further by the insufferable way in which his mother insisted upon being the one to snuggled him and administer him his medication. Because not only did she erroneously try to coax a pill-form down his throat by means of applesauce-related concealment, whereas Dad would have simply channeled a liquid-form into him via eye-dropper, so too did his mother fail to rub his back in the manner he had become accustomed to when ill. And while ordinarily he would have been able to suffer in silence, for want of sparing his mother’s feelings and preventing a jealousy-related spat between his parents, he was nowhere near the same genial and easy-going person he was when in good health. And, as a result, he found himself far more irritable and incorrigible in her presence then usual.

An unpleasant phenomenon, which had only increased daily since he had left hospital, quickly came to a head three days later when his Mama had tried, for the seventh time, to press the wrong-flavored popsicle on him. For having awoken several times last evening with a strong need to vomit, something he had reluctantly done all over himself and the bedding, Tony had awoken that morning in quite an incorrigible mood and with a slight fever to boot. And though his following actions had later proved to shame him greatly, once his fever had ebbed down far enough for him to think clearly, Tony had angrily snatched the delectable from his mother’s hand and launched it across the room before angrily demanding she leave him alone and send Dad in.

“Tony,” Dad quietly rebuked, strolling into the living room mere moments after his girlfriend had fled it in tears, “What did you do?”

Feeling very much like a scolded toddler just caught coloring on the walls, Tony flinched guiltily and prepared himself for a headslap that never came. Which, had not had a touch of fever, would have not been all that surprising, after all. For no matter how much Dad liked to profess himself to be the biggest bastard in all of existence, he was oftentimes just as indulgent and affectionate as his girlfriend – even more so, on certain occasions.

“I know you don’t feel good, Kiddo.” Dad assured, gesturing for Tony to lift his head so he could seat himself on the couch. “But you have to cut her some slack. She’s going the best she can, isn’t she?”

Feebly placing his head in his father’s lap once the older man was comfortably seated, Tony rubbed weakly at his still-sore eyes to keep fever-induced tears and bay and sighed loudly, on the very dangerous edge of a meltdown until his father, seeming to know what was up, took charge and quickly began to soothe away his ire with a firm backrub.

“I already told her I don’t like grape.” Tony croaked, feeling every bit of ridiculousness such a childish state provoked.

“You haven’t said a word since midnight.” Dad chuckled, hardly any reproach in his voice. “So you
must have been imagining that conversation.”

Feeling every bit the asshole at such unwelcome news, as not even delirium was an excuse good enough to absolve him of his guilt, Tony groaned in frustration and clutched angrily at the pillow currently cushioning his head – far too ill, and frustrated as a result, to go hunt down his aggrieved mother and apologize.

“You’ll have some medicine and then a nice nap.” Dad directed, firm yet kind. “Then, when you wake up, you can apologize to your mother.”

Although Tony was never one to gladly accept the administration of medication, no matter what form it was taken in, he nodded weakly and bonelessly allowed his father to coax a small dose of the foul-tasting liquid down his throat with the aid of an eye-dropper.

“Yuck.” Tony groaned, immediately accepting a sip of Ginger-Ale from his father.

“Just a few more rounds to go.” Dad reassured, pocketing the medication so that Tony could not later empty the bottle and fill it with cherry soda.
Although none of her friends and colleagues had been unkind enough to mention it, or too stupid, Kate knew (without a doubt) that she had grown as large as a small house since her unceremonious launch into her third trimester. Because not only did the maternity clothes she had purchases not fit anymore, despite the claims they would last her up into her postpartum days, so too was doing anything other than sitting a tedious chore for her. A feat which had not gone unnoticed by any of her fellow teammates, let alone Gibbs. For not only did the latter refuse to let her do anything more than paperwork, a negligible amount at that, so too did her fellow agents hastily set out to retrieve for her anything she casually voiced a preference for – an amusing phenomenon, whilst oftentimes slightly annoying, she had once used to her advantage in order to compel Tim to go out in a late-winter blizzard to fetch for her a can of black olives.

“Kate, have some more Napoleon.” Henrietta fussed, placing a rather large slice of the delicacy on her desk. “You haven’t eaten all day.”

Unable to argue with the motherly woman, as she had not even had the appetite to have breakfast, Kate nibbled gingerly at the sweet she so favored but soon gave up – her stomach not allowing her more than a bite of two before protesting she must stop.

“I’m not all that hungry today.” She confessed.

“That means the baby will come soon!” Henrietta squealed, all aglow with delight. “I couldn’t eat anything the two days before Tony was born.”

Despite wanting nothing more than to have the largeness of her stomach depleted, as it really was quite an uncomfortable burden to bare, Kate frowned at the eager assumption and politely shook her head in the negatory.

“The baby is due April 6th.” Kate mildly argued, touching her stomach.

“Which is only five days away.” Henrietta reminded, glancing pointedly at the calendar she kept on her desk. “And, let me assure you, babies never arrive when they’re supposed to.”

Seeing as how she had opted to work right up until the point of labor, as Kate wished to preserve all her maternity leave for staying with the baby, she again shook her head in denial and protectively clutched the swell of her belly.

“Let’s hope the baby cooks a little longer.” She obliged, not at all keen on the idea of delivering her baby when Seamus was still stuck in surgery.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed.” Henrietta assured, shrugging into a coat. “I’m going to get some coffee, do you two want anything?”

Unable to even entertain the idea of having coffee, as her heartburn had been nigh on unbearable the last several days, Kate shook her head and turned back to her paperwork in a vain attempt to ignore the aching of her back.

“Will you bring me back a latte, Mama?” Tony inquired. “And a blueberry scone?”

“Of course, Monkey.” Henrietta obliged, kissing his temple. “I’ll be back soon, keep at eye on Katie.”
Had it been anyone else to suggest that she needed an eye kept on her, Kate would have been very angry indeed. But, given that it had been Henrietta to offer such sage advice, she allowed it to go unchallenged on the grounds that it was simply one woman looking out for another woman the best that she could.

“Tony,” Kate groaned, a mere twenty minutes later, “Help me stand up for a bit.”

Hastily moving to her side to do just that, Tony tugged gently on Kate’s arms and had her on her feet in the space of seconds.

“You okay, Kate?” Tony inquired, looking quite nervous to be alone with a very pregnant woman. “I can call my mother back.”

Thinking it would be very unwise, indeed, to prevent Henrietta from securing for herself a coffee so early in the morning, Kate immediately digressed.

“It’s just these Braxton-Hicks contractions.” Kate calmly assured, rubbing at her back. “I just need to walk around for a bit, is all.”

“I can walk you around the bullpen.” Tony offered, quite the gentleman. “But you know I can’t take you any further.”

Having been the one designated to stay behind and play the part of researcher whilst the rest of the team set out to hunt down several dangerous terrorists, as he really was still recuperating from the measles, Tony had glued himself to a computer and his phone in order to make himself as helpful as he could to McGee and Gibbs as they worked the field.

“It’s fine, Tony.” Kate assured, breathing heavily as she took a step forward. “I think I’ll just step outside for a bit.”

“No can do, Katie.” Tony grinned, ever pleased to confound her. “The surrounding neighborhood is on lockdown.”

“Great.” Kate pouted, obscenely angry at her confinement.

Because as close as she and Tony had become over the past several months, and as much as it pained her to move with so large a load attached to her person, she really had wanted to step outside to breathe in a little fresh air.

“I’m going to go and see Ducky.” She decided, already waddling toward the elevator.

“Sorry to keep disappointing you, Kate, but Ducky and Jimmy are off collecting all the bodies our terrorists are leaving behind.”

“For fucks sake.” Kate snapped, stomping back to her chair. “I hope Gibbs skins them alive.”
Chapter 83

Having finally been given a moment to relax, once all six terrorists had been terminated with the aid of very judicious shots from both Tim and himself, Jethro kicked his feet up unto the dash of his truck and requested his youngest field agent drive them back to headquarters – stopping first, of course, to pick up the particularly beautiful dwarf who had been stranded in a coffee shop mere moments after the lockdown had begun.

“We’re going to have so much paperwork.” Tim groaned, still coated in a copious amount of blood. “So much paperwork.”

“I’d worry more about how angry Abs is going to be when she sees you stained another shirt.” Jethro teased, hoping to inject a little levity into an otherwise very serious situation.

Because even if neither one of them had been injured during their hunting of the terrorists, Tim had come very close to getting his brains blown out by one of the bolder accomplices. A fact, whilst grisly in nature, both of them had decided not to share with their favorite pregnant forensic-specialist.

“I should just start wearing red.” Tim grumbled, clearly not fancying another dressing down from his hormonal wife.

“Happy wife, happy life.” Jethro conceded, smiling slightly as Tim steered himself into the parking lot of Bongos.

Obediently nodding his agreement to such a cliché phrase, Tim parked the running vehicle in front of the small establishment and waited patiently, for the space of seconds, for Henrietta to arrive and throw herself into the vehicle.

“I see you missed me.” Jethro flirted, pulling her closer.

“Not now, Jethro!” Henrietta snapped. “We need to get back to the bullpen! Kate’s in labor!”

Jerking slightly as Tim wordlessly floored the vehicle out of the parking lot, without so much as a warning, Jethro shook his head in consternation and looked helplessly at his girlfriend.

“Hen,” He said, much more calmly then he felt, “We won’t be able to get near headquarters. Those streets are still blocked off.”
Chapter 84

Thoroughly exhausted by the time that all was said and done, as helping one of his closest friends to vaginally deliver a baby had taken quite a lot out of both of them, Tony slumped gracelessly against the wall of the bullpen and inwardly prayed that Seamus would not be too angry with him for having been compelled, by an insistent Ducky, to touch his wife’s lady parts in order to facilitate the birth of the promised Walsh child.

“When…Is the lockdown over soon?” Kate panted, looking quite pale but no worse for the wear half-an-hour after delivery.

Understandably having no real idea as to the answer of such a question, as up until that point he had been thoroughly preoccupied with coaxing a baby free from its uterus, Tony shrugged helplessly and only hoped his friend wouldn’t be too upset with his sudden unhelpfulness.

“Have no fear, Caitlyn.” Ducky’s reassuring voice came from the loudspeaker. “I’ve just spoken with Jethro a moment ago and he assures us all the lockdown will be over in a few minutes or so.” And, all comforting thus finished, the Medical Examiner quickly moved unto the less happy business by asking: “Now, do tell me, how is the wee lad doing at the moment?”

Glancing down at the very pink bundle currently wrapped up in Tim’s spring jacket, and grimacing slightly at the way in which said boy ravenously fed off the breast provided to him, Tony opened his mouth to assure Ducky that all was well with the child, as far as he could tell, only to be cut off by the mother of said being.

“He’s eating like a pig.” Kate confirmed, lovingly clutching the pink boy to her body.

“And you’re sure it’s a boy?” Ducky pressed, suddenly not so somber.

“Dad!” Jimmy’s voice sounded, full of reproach.

Already knowing himself to have lost a good thirty dollars after clipping the cord himself with a pair of fabric scissors from his mother’s purse, as the baby Kate clutched most certainly was a boy, Tony scowled in defeat and conveyed the good news over the phone.

“Yes, Ducky, it’s a boy. We all owe you thirty dollars.”

“Good, good.” The Medical Examiner softly purred, clearly delighted. “But let us move unto more important matters. Anthony, I need you to take a peek at Kate and see if she’s still bleed – “

Having already seen more of Kate then he had ever wished to, as well as touched parts of her that he had never in his life wanted to touch, Tony shook his head in frantic denial and voiced loudly his protests for all to hear.

“I am NOT looking down there again! It’s a mess!”

“For God’s sake, Anthony!” His mother scolded. “It’s a vagina, not a corpse!”

Seeing as how Kate had bled most profusely from the organ betwixt her legs, as well as expelled other unpleasant fluids from the same hole, Tony found himself thinking that a visit to the morgue would be a far better prospect than ever being in a delivery room again. Because at least amongst the dead, he would know what to expect.
“I am not looking again! I’ve done my part!”

“ANTHONY!” His father barked. “FOR FUCKS SAKE – “

Clearly not at all keen to be listening to yelling so soon after her untimely delivery, and just as reluctant for the details of her vagina to be made known again, Kate blanched and spoke loudly so that she might be heard on the other end of the line.

“You know, I think I’ll just wait for the ambulance.” She decided. “I think everyone has already heard more about my body then they care to.”

“I said was sorry for mistaking the baby’s hair for your own…lady hair.” Tony frowned. “But it’s the same color…and there was a lot of it.”

Because, truth be told, the damn child almost had enough to hair to sport a ponytail.

“I told you heartburn meant your baby would have a lot of hair.” Henrietta pipped. “It was the same thing with Tony.”

“Yes, but what color are the eyes?” Ducky hounded. “I’m making quite the racket with my predictions, here.”

Already having resigned himself to the fact that he’d be losing a great deal of money to the resident Medical Examiner, as he had been foolish enough to predict grey for the color, Tony scowled and was only comforted by the fact that he was not the only one to have guessed so poorly.

“They’re brown.” Tony announced, softening as he glanced at the babe. “And he for sure takes after his mother.”

Because even with the little view Tony had managed to procure when passing the babe to its mother, it had been abundantly clear that said infant had not only the same colored hair and eyes but the same nose as well.

“Thank the Lord for that.” Kate reverently intoned.

“Seamus is certainly going to be happy.” Dad agreed.

“He had better be.” Kate growled. “Because I’m not doing this again. No sane woman would.”

Heartily of the same opinion, Tony nodded vigorously and wondered just how it might be that some women willingly chose to have four or five before they even hit their forties. Because, for him, it seemed to defy all sense of logic that a person would willingly subject themselves the trauma of birth more than one time.

“Was it really all that bad?” Abby fussed, herself three months along.

“Terrible.” Kate promised. “It’s enough to turn me off Catholicism.”

Although Tony so greatly wanted to quip that such a visage would have turned him off women if he wasn’t already gay, he tactfully kept mum out of fear of the very real possibility that Kate might launch a projectile at his head as a result.

“Can we maybe not terrorize my wife?” Tim requested.

“I’m the one who just delivered a baby in the bullpen, Tim. I think I’m entitled to a little
complaining!”

Sensing that there would be none of the usual magnanimity from Kate, at least not until her vagina had been given time to heal, Tony charitably stepped in to soothe the fears of the pregnant forensic specialist.

“It’ll be fine, Abs.” He assured. “Just camp out in front of the hospital when its close to your due date.”

“But I wanted a homebirth.” Abby sighed.

• “NO, you don’t!”
• NO, you don’t!”

Thinking that the dual outburst from both Kate and his mother would scare off even the most veteran of mother’s, Tony flinched in silent sympathy with Abby and ardently prayed that her labor would go a lot smoother then that of her friends.

“Yeah, I don’t think I do.” Abby agreed, audibly shuddering.

“You don’t.” Tony agreed, hoping for some humor. “Because as it is, we’re going to need to get HAZMAT up here to take care of the mess.”

For not only was there a great deal of blood to contend with, so too was there a placenta and all its accompanying fluids and discharges to deal with as well.

“There wasn’t a great deal of blood, was there?” Ducky fussed. “Is she still bleeding?”

“I am not – “

“Tony!” Dad said firmly, sounding very weary. “I cannot believe I’m asking this of one of my agents, but I really do need you to look at Kate’s…parts.”

Already resigning himself to the fact that he would hear no end of arguments until he at last complied with such an egregious demand, Tony groaned loudly and reluctantly, very reluctantly, sneak ed a peek at that which lay between Kate’s bloodied legs.

“You’re all paying for my therapy after this.” He warned, fighting not to gag as his fellow agent parted her legs to grant him a better view. “And – holy shit – yup. There’s a lot of blood.”

“More of less than an average menstrual cycle would provide?” Ducky interrogated.

“How the hell would you expect me to know that!?”

For close friendship with Abby and Kate aside, the topic of periods had thankfully never come up whenever he was around.

“For God’s sake, “Ducky sighed, “Just take a picture and send – “

“Absolutely fucking not.” Kate hissed. “Tony – get me a mirror.”

Thinking it very wise of her, indeed, not to send forth such a picture, as they all of them had learned the dangers of sexting not that long ago, Tony hurriedly fished a mirror out of his mother’s purse and gingerly positioned so that Kate might use the vantage point to better describe her own parts to Ducky.
“It’s…I think I see a little tear, maybe.”

“It’s hard to see through all the hair.” Tony quipped, shuddering in revulsion as images of the blood-coated and coarse hairs flickered across his mind.

“It’s not like I could get a wax when I was as big as a walrus, Tony!” Kate snapped, lobbing the mirror at his head and missing by centimeters.

“ENOUGH you two!” Ducky scolded. “Kate, how big is the tear?”

Blushing a brilliant shade of red in response to such a question, the new mother grimaced deeply before reluctantly answering.

“A few inches…maybe less.”

“Hmmm. Well, its not preferable. But you ought to be fine until the ambulance arrives.” Ducky declared. “Now, are you certain the little one is pink – and not grey or blue?”

“He’s as pink as bubblegum.” Tony assured.

“Very well,” Ducky decided, “Keep the both of them warm, Anthony.”

Having already wrapped his own jacket around Kate once the labor was finished, as she had shivered quite violently as the result of the sweat from her body cooling quite rapidly, Tony felt no great hurry to rush off and search for invisible blankets.

“Don’t worry, Duck. I wrapped the baby up in Tim’s new sweater.”

“Tony!” Tim cried. “Why didn’t you just use my old jacket?!”

Whilst Tony would have used said garment had previous circumstances been any different, he had felt more than justified at the time in using the newborn babe to get back at the literary-enthusiast. Because, aggravatingly enough, said man and his wife had decided that it would be funny to make a great game of cockblocking Tony and Teddy by playing ding-dong-ditch on their door.

“You know what you did, Tim.”

“Well, we’re going to do it again if that sweater stains, Tony!” Abby warned. “I’m sick of washing blood and gunk from Tim’s shirts!”

“And I’m sick of this conversation.” Kate quipped, promptly hanging up the cellphone.

Very pleased himself with such an action, as it had been quite stressful indeed having a whole audience listen in on him as he dealt with Kate, Tony relaxed even further and slowly scooted himself closer to his friend so that he might have a better look at her baby.

“Hold Anthony for a moment,” Kate obliged, “I want to wash the blood off my legs before the ambulance gets here.”

“Are…Are you sure?” Tony queried, excited and nervous and the prospect all at once.

“I’m sure.” Kate said dryly. “If you didn’t drop him when you pulled him out, you won’t drop him now.”

Sensing all the wisdom of such an assertion, Tony gingerly reached out two careful hands and collected the small bundle from his friend’s hands, marveling at the feelings such an action
provoked within him.

“What’re you going to name this guy?” Tony questioned, carefully avoiding looking at Kate as she attacked her bloodied legs with a wetnap.

“Did you not here me earlier?” Kate mildly rebuked. “We’re naming him Anthony.”

Almost immediately overwhelmed by such news, Tony was subsequently made grateful for his earlier decision to remain seated while holding the baby.

“You…You’re naming the baby after me?”

“Seamus and I already talked about it months ago.” Kate assured. “Plus, you did just have your hands all up in my business. If anyone deserves the honor, it’s you.”
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

It's been a good run, everyone! Thanks for all the kind reviews!

Two Years Later

If three years ago someone would have told Jethro that he would be married once again, happily this time, he would have laughed in their faces and reminded them of the vow he had made never to get married again after the fourth wife had left him high and dry. If somebody had told him even a year ago that he would be in a healthy enough place to even want such a thing, much less facilitate it by proposing, he would have labeled them a lunatic and happily cast them out of his life forever. And, had somebody told him even six months ago that he would find the prospect of throwing a little barbeque in his backyard to celebrate such a coupling, he would have gladly made inquiries into what they had been smoking. But, as it was, he had been given no real need, nor motivation, to behave in any such manner as said fictional antagonist had never come into existence. Nor, thought he with a smile, had any vestiges of such fictional doubt.

“It’s such a shame it didn’t rain today.” Henrietta calmly commented, seated quite comfortably in his lap as they watched the revelers enjoy the small celebration their child had put on for them.

“You wanted rain?” Jethro humored, utterly and shamefully unable to tear his gaze away from the large emerald ring resting on her finger.

Because, having sorted through the remainder of his mother’s jewelry with Tony to pick out the trinket she might like best, the beautiful piece of antique jewelry was fare more special to the both of them for reasons other than its value.

“Rain on a wedding day brings good luck.” Henrietta calmly defended, clearly just as enraptured with the same bit of jewelry resting on her finger.

“I don’t think we need anything like luck.” Jethro gently refuted, pulling her closer to his body. “We got this far without it, didn’t we?”

“You know what,” Henrietta purred, stroking his chin, “I think you’re right.”

Wise enough to know that it wouldn’t be a good idea to verbally rejoice at being told he was right, at least not with his wife still present, Jethro kept quiet on such a matter and simply smiled indulgently out at the pleasant scene that laid before them.

Because even though all the guests assembled were technically at the reception of their very subdued courthouse nuptials, wherein only Tony and Ducky had been permitted in to act as witnesses, all their well-wishers were as care-free and jovial as if they were at a picnic – which was exactly what both Jethro and Henrietta had been hoping see. For not only did it delight them both to see the whole team assembled, as over the years they had become like surrogate nieces and nephews, so too did it give them great pleasure to take in the wild antics of the small horde of children that accompanied their parents to such an event. Because if the way in which an admittedly brilliant
Victoria had managed to trick both her grandfathers into hunting down a lost earring that simply didn’t exist, all whilst her exhausted father watched on with thinly-veiled amusement, didn’t serve to entertain them as well as any DJ or Band would have, the way in which the profoundly loquacious Anthony babbled freely to the attentive and captivated audience of the McGee twins, Lucy and Sarah, certainly was a sight to behold – for not only did the sole male in the whole horde of toddlers and babies possess a great deal of facial features, having clearly been an attentive student of his namesake in such a matter, so too did the little boy gesticulate with his chubby hands in a fashion eerily similar to his mother. And it those visages alone were not enough to please both he and his wife, which they were, the infinite pleasures of having been able to hold the infants Lizzy McGee and Molly Wash were most certainly enough to give them a great sense of contentment for the rest of the evening. For as charming as it was to interact with the younger children, especially the veritable child-prodigy that was Victoria, there was absolutely nothing in the world like holding, and smelling, young babies.

“We might need a bigger backyard, though.” Jethro rejoined, already casually entertaining the idea of moving his fence out a few feet.

Because even if Henrietta’s fruitful garden didn’t take up an entire quarter of the area, which it most certainly did, the large wooden playground he had installed sometime last year for the benefit of the children they were constantly babysitting had definitely taken over at least another quarter or so – leaving only less then half the yard free and open if one chose to disregard the firepit he had put in decades ago.

“And more baby-gates.” Henrietta agreed, watching in defeated horror as the toddler Lucy inexplicably chose to bowl headfirst into the fence.

Flinching in silent commiseration with the wounded toddler as the girl began to kick up quite a fuss, as no doubt the reckless child had been fully unprepared to discover that bonking one’s head on a fence was just as unpleasant as doing so on a on lamppost, Jethro grimaced sympathetically at a haggard Tim as he ferreted the child away from her more docile twin in pursuit of the magic slice of cake that would make it all better.

“Yeah,” Jethro agreed, “We’re never going to be able to get rid of those.”

“Nope.” Henrietta calmly declared, smiling sweetly as Victoria immediately took over the duties of entertaining Sarah until her twin was returned. “Because I’m pretty sure Abby is pregnant…again.”

Having, himself, come to the same conclusion a few days ago after stumbling upon Abby scarfing down a whole can of pineapple in the elevator at work, the typical sign that she was expecting another child, Jethro nodded in agreement and couldn’t help but hope the two McGee’s would stop after that one. Because as happy as they seemed to be with their growing brood, which was quite so, the fact still remained that a set of parents could only have so many kids before the gradually exhausted themselves with the numbers. But, rather than dwell on such unpleasant thoughts on the day of his wedding, Jethro brushed them away impatiently and focused on news he found far more exciting and pleasing.

“We’ll have to invest in a another carseat, too.” Jethro added. “Anastasia will be here before we know it.”

And whilst the adjustable carseat he kept in his truck would be more than acceptable had the child Tony and Teddy decided to adopt been at least as young as Anthony, the fact that Anastasia was solid three-years of age prohibited her from using either the carseat the younger children used or the booster that was employed by Victoria.
“Let’s hope.” Henrietta gushed, green eyes all aflood with joy as she considered the fact that their first grandchild would soon be with them. “I can’t wait to hold her!”

Feeling much the same way, as the photographs they had been shown just a few weeks ago had made the prospect of being grandparents seem all the more real, Jethro grinned alongside his wife and ardently prayed that the toddler in question could be fetched sooner rather than later now that the final signatures had been provided and approved.

“Well,” Came a familiar voice from somewhere behind them, “I do hate to break up such a cozy scene, but I have something for you.”

Even though the both of them had ardently requested that no gifts be purchased on their behalf, several times, their wishes had gone most unabashedly ignored by all gathered and, as a result, rendered them utterly unable to refuse the same privilege from the Director as he casually strolled into view and offered them an envelope.

“What is this?” Jethro asked, gingerly accepting the small parcel with no small amount of awkwardness.

“It’s a gift.” Vance needlessly informed, rolling his dark eyes. “But Lord knows why I got you anything when I’m still angry at you for deciding to retire.”

Understanding that the Director was not at all still genuinely upset with him, or at least not so much that he couldn’t speak without yelling anymore, Jethro let any defenses he might have offered fall to the side as he passed over to his wife the envelope to open.

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“Really.” Henrietta smiled, delicately tugging the paper container open, “You didn’t have to get us anything at – “

Although Tony had already surprised them both with a much-expected wedding prank, i.e. the glittering of their car vents, Jethro could not help but worry that Vance was trying to one up their son with a prank of his own when his wife gasped loudly at the contents in the envelope.

“This…This is a three-week stay in Mali.” Henrietta finally managed, thrusting the paper into his hands. “Oh, Vance, you shouldn’t have!”

“I’m away of what I gifted you,” The Director smiled, “And as to whether or not I shouldn’t have, I digress.”

Feeling just as overwhelmed with the generosity of the gift as was his wife, as already they had been treated to a one-week stay in a nearby bed-and-breakfast by Tony and Teddy for purposes of providing them a honeymoon, Jethro shook his head and opened his mouth to protest the acceptance of such a gift only to be cut off by his former employer.

“Don’t start with me, Gibbs.” The darker man firmly insisted. “You’ve earned that time. And we all know damn well that you won’t get any alone time unless you go.”

Thoroughly unable to argue with such a sound point, as his home really had become a daycare of late, Jethro politely set aside the envelope with great care and awkwardly shook the hand of the man he had often quarreled with.

“Thank you.” He managed, without sounding too uncomfortable.

“It’s…It’s going to be weird without you.” Vance sighed, the hint of a smile turning up the corner of his lips. “It’s going to be even weirder with Tony taking your place.”
Sharing a knowing grin with the man who had once been his adversary, as he didn’t dare outright agree with him with Henrietta so near, Jethro tossed a cold beer to his most unexpected well-wisher and raised his own in a false toast.

“It’ll be weird to get used to, I’m sure.” Jethro agreed, once the impromptu toast was over. “But one of us had to step down if I was going to marry Hen…and, well, I’ve had my time.”

“You’ve certainly earned your retirement.” Vance agreed. “You’ve worked enough to last five men an entire lifetime.”

Thinking that his newest of friends was, perhaps, right in that regard, Jethro nodded his agreement and took a long swig of beer, still slightly uneasy at the idea of handing over the reigns to his son when it had been so unexpected a transition.

“Go easy on him.” Jethro obliged, able to be bold now that he didn’t have a job to worry about. “You know what will happen if you don’t.”

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“Understood.” Vance replied, casting him a mock salute before promptly taking his leave as Mike Franks strolled over.

Already having received no small amount of barbing from his former employer about his admittedly abysmal track record at keeping wives, at one point having been forced to endure comparisons between himself and King Henry the Eighth, Jethro braced himself for another onslaught and was pleasantly surprised when he was not immediately greeted with good-natured barbs as Franks stole the beer from his hand and greeted Hen with a kiss to her cheek.

“This one is a keeper, Kid.” Franks announced, grinning as Hen returned his kiss with one of her own. “You be sure to keep this one or you’ll be hearing from me.”

“Yes, Boss.” Jethro replied, having absolutely no mind whatsoever to disobey.

Nodding his approval at such obedience, Franks shuffled a bit awkwardly before turning to address the beaming bride.

“You,” He ordered, more gently than Jethro had thought him capable of, “You be good to him, too. I know he can be a bit stupid at times, but he does mean well.”

“Oh, I’ll be very good to him, Sir.” Henrietta assured. “Especially tonight?”

Only reprieved from the very uncomfortable situation of his former boss seeing his arousal made evident at such a cheeky statement, as said man had dissolved into a laughing fit at such unbridled sass, Jethro carefully repositioned his wife on his lap and was immediately rewarded for his efforts when Franks failed to notice anything amiss once he had gained his breath.

“You two can come down to Mexico whenever you like.” The older man assured. “But not until you’re out of the honeymoon phase. I don’t much care for the notion of stumbling in on young lovers now that I’m an old man.”

Knowing that making a ridiculous assertion that his boss was not old would only get him a slap to the head, or perhaps two, Jethro kept mum and graciously accepted the invitation.

“Well, now that we have that settled, I’ll leave you two alone for a spell.” He declared, kissing Hen’s cheek once more. “I promised little Ms. Victoria I would show how to put a few bullies in a chokehold before I left.”
“Franks—“ Henrietta immediately objected, launching to her feet to still his progress.

“Oh, relax would you.” Franks grinned, patting her shoulder. “The girl’s father already said it was fine so long as I don’t teach her anything lethal.”

“That girl is already dangerous enough.” Henrietta protested, still unsettled at the idea of a small child being taught such maneuvers.

“I know,” Frank beamed, “It’s great, isn’t it?”

And, with that, the older man was off, sparing not so much as a look back as he stalked off toward the impatiently-waiting little girl seated in Hamish’s lap.

“Good Lord, Jethro.” Henrietta fusses, reluctantly sinking back into his lap. “That child is going to take over the world in ten years.”

“Let’s stay on her good side, then.” Jethro suggested, perfectly serious.

“We had better.” Henrietta agreed, gradually relaxing in his hold. “Gulags don’t seem as if they’d appeal to me.”

Good-naturedly rolling his eyes at such dramatic humor, even though he did believe they’re was a small possibly Victoria could prove herself to be a mad-scientist rather than a congenial president, Jethro kissed his wife on the brow to reclaim the spot from his former boss and then kissed her lips for good measure.

“As much as I’d love to stay here all day,” Jethro purred, “I think I’m going to pull Tony aside for a few moments to give him our gift.”

“You mean your gift.” Henrietta sassed, rising to her feet. “But go on, I’ll give you boys a few moments.”

“You sure?” Jethro asked, not wishing to leave his bride alone at their reception.

“Positive.” She assured, stretching up to kiss his chin. “Now go. I have a set of twins that need pampering.”

And, before he could so much as protest further, Henrietta was off towards the swings to push a pair of very energetic girls so that their possibly pregnant mother might take a break for a spell.

“Saucy girl.” Jethro thought, watching her retreat with great appreciation before stalking over to the firepit where Tony and Teddy were currently canoodling.

“Sorry to interrupt,” He frowned, genuinely apologetic, “But I need to borrow my kid for a moment.”

Although he looked greatly reluctant to sacrifice any of the time he might spend with his husband, Teddy was too kind-hearted a man to put up a fuss in response to such a very reasonable request.

“Far be it from me to deny a groom anything on his wedding day.” The former Green Beret declared, relinquishing his husband after a quick kiss to said man’s lips. “Just be sure to return him in as good a condition as you found him in.”
Promising to do just that, provided said man behaved himself, Jethro lured Tony in the house and into the basement on the false pretext of showing him the wooden horse he had finished carving for Anthony’s approaching birthday.

“It looks really nice, Dad.” Tony appraised, giving the toy all the praise and approval it deserved. “Anthony will get a real kick out of it.”

“Sure hope so.” Jethro agreed, suddenly very nervous as he held out a manila envelope behind his kid’s back. “But that’s not really why I called you down here.”

Understandably confused at such a vague statement, Tony turned on his heels and was promptly thrown off-guard by the presence of the envelope.

“What…What’s this?” The younger man asked, gingerly accepting the paper container.

“Well,” Jethro began, stomach all in knots, “I know…I know it’s not usual for a groom to give gifts at his reception but…well…I just thought…seeing as how I made your mother mine in the eyes of the law…I thought…well…Jesus, just open the damn thing already.”

Hastily doing as bid, whether out of fear or curiosity who could say, Tony carefully opened the lip of the envelope with unusually clumsy fingers and slowly, ever so slowly, pulled out the adoption papers Jethro had carefully tucked within.

“Dad – “ Tony croaked, rapidly overcome as he realized the significance of the papers.

“It’s…This just makes what we already have official.” Jethro babbled. “All you have to do is sign them – if that’s what you want.”

Receiving a look that seemed to convey he had just said something particularly stupid, Jethro frowned apologetically and watched anxiously as his kid searched the pocket of his jeans for a pen.

“Here.” Jethro offered, impatiently slapping a pen of his own into the disorganized boy’s hand.

Swallowing what was surely a very large lump in his throat, Tony blinked rapidly several times before quickly signing the document with his usual flourish, the only departure from his usual signature being, of course, the presence of several ink-smearing teardrops Jethro charitably chose to pretend not to see – at least not until his son flew into his arms unleashed an unholy flood of tears unto the back of his shirt.

“Stop your bawling.” Jethro growled, his own eyes unusually irritated by the dust usually found within the basement. “You’re going to get me started and we both know I don’t do that.”

“I can feel you crying, you know.” Tony asserted, refusing to play dumb.

“Shut your mouth.” Jethro heatlessly ordered, struggling to contain his emotions to just a few tears.

An effort, which valiant in nature, ultimately proved to be in vain. For a few moments later, just as the both of them were beginning to get a hold of themselves, Henrietta snuck into the basement and asserted herself into the situation with all her usual tact and love.

“Can I get in on this?”

Wordlessly inviting her into their little moment by opening one of his arms to her, as Tony
seemed unable to do anything but cry for moment, Jethro smiled softly as she wriggled into the hug and nearly melted when she began to tear up with all the speed of a sympathy crier.

“Oh, I know you three don’t think you can keep me out of this hug.” Jackson announced, at their side in moments as he crept down into the basement in much the same manner as his daughter-in-law had.

“Wouldn’t think of it.” Jethro assured, wordlessly allowing him into the impromptu huddle.

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