Angels and Heroes

by kikkimax

Summary

A case from Tony's past comes back to haunt NCIS.

Notes

Love me some hurt Tony. Beware if you're squeamish.
Chapter 1

As far as Kate was concerned DiNozzo was nothing if not a big kid at heart. Tony loved attention in any way, shape, or form and everyone knew it. So the small, brightly wrapped box sitting ignored on the corner of his desk next to the plain brown package it had come in was slowly driving her insane.

“Tony?”

“Yeah?” came the reticent reply from somewhere on the other side of his monitor.

“What are you doing?”

A faint sigh sounded before Tony finally looked up and logged off the network. “Just checkin’ something.”

“Care to share?” Kate prodded, ready to get to the bottom of the mysterious and apparently unwanted present.

“Not really. It’s personal.”

“Personal?” Gibbs asked with his usual impeccable timing, seemingly appearing out of nowhere as he made his way to his desk and sat down. “Surely not on my time.”

“Dammit,” Tony muttered sotto voce as he gave Kate the evil eye. “Not really personal-personal, Boss. Sort of work-related personal,” he explained sheepishly.

“Well that’s clear as mud,” Kate taunted, enjoying watching her frequent tormentor squirm for a change.

“Elaborate,” Gibbs ordered, folding his hands in front of him and turning his cool blue eyes to DiNozzo in rapt attention.

Tony released another deeper sigh and reached for the parcel, holding up the shiny gift for inspection. Gibbs narrowed his gaze and stared at it intensely for a moment then wordlessly nodded his understanding, apparently satisfied by the non-explanation as he pulled out a file and turned his attention to it.

Still in the dark, Kate bit back her annoyed and somewhat perplexed envy of their silent man-communication. “I see you haven’t opened it yet,” she pressed for more information, looking from Tony to Gibbs. “Is it ticking or something?”

“No,” Tony huffed with a mirthless laugh, placing it back in the bigger box and tossing the whole thing into the trashcan next to his desk.

“Tony!” Kate objected, crossing over to retrieve the smaller package. “You’re not even going to see what it is?”

“I know what it is. It’s a Christmas ornament.”

“Oh.” Kate stood holding the present, going so far as to raise it to her ear and shake it gently. “It’s not broken,” she offered tentatively. “Why would someone send you an ornament in June?”

“Leave it alone, Kate,” Gibbs warned. He spared her an irritated glance when she didn’t promptly
return the gift to the garbage.

“Do you want to open it?” Tony finally asked in mild exasperation.

“No if you don’t want me to,” Kate lied as she plucked at the red ribbon hopefully.

“I don’t care,” Tony mumbled, making of show of pulling out a case file of his own. “You can have it.”

Kate gleefully took the box back to her desk where she untied the ribbon then cut the tape with a letter opener, unfolding the elegant gold paper carefully.

“DiNozzo?” Gibbs queried, sounding a little worried.

“It’s okay,” Tony assured without looking up. “It’s safe. My last step monster has four of them.”

Kate froze. “Safe? Why wouldn't it be safe?”

“It’s an offering from the groupie of a serial killer who Tony put away back when he was a green-behind-the-ears beat cop,” Gibbs supplied with the tiniest touch of pride in his voice.

“Something Mommy Dearest didn’t know,” Tony explained. “I told her I was in an ornament club.”

“You were a uniformed officer?” Kate questioned, hesitant to open the box now that she knew its significance.

“No, Kate,” Tony deadpanned, “They handed me a gold shield the minute I graduated from the police academy. What do you think?”

“I never really thought about it at all, I guess,” Kate admitted, trying to picture a younger, less cocky DiNozzo in blues. She smiled at the image.

“You gonna play with it all day or open it?” Gibbs asked impatiently.

“No,” Kate responded in an apologetic tone aimed at Tony. “I didn’t realize. I’ll throw it away.”

“Go ahead and open it. It only means something if I let it, right?” Tony soothed himself as much as Kate. “Just, ah… do me a favor and don’t keep it on your desk, okay?”

“Sure.” Staring down at the now completely exposed white box, Kate hesitated once again.

“Open the damn thing,” Gibbs growled at her.

When she jumped Tony was quick to grin at her and she knew it would be okay. She untucked the top flap and pulled back the thick layer of bubble wrap to find a delicate, hand-spun glass angel.

“Oh, Tony, it’s beautiful.” She held it up by a tiny golden chain, watching the light dance over its intricate surface. “The perp is sitting on death row, I take it.”

“Actually, no,” Tony responded uneasily. “He never even made it to trial. He offed himself in the county lockup the night we busted him.”

“So who sends the ornaments?” Kate questioned carefully as she set the angel out of Tony’s line of sight, paying more attention to his guarded body language.
“I’ve never been able to find out. They’ve all had phony return addresses and postmarks from all over. But this one and the one last year were both mailed in DC.”

“This makes ten, right?” Gibbs asked.

“Actually, this is number eleven. I get one a year on the next victim’s birthday in the order they were killed. I hate to admit it but it took me five years to figure it out. Which is why I gave the first four to Dad’s last ex-wife, it took that long to piece together the pattern,” Tony confessed a little awkwardly. “I thought last year would have been the last one because there were only ten victims.”

“That might be significant,” Gibbs warned. “I’d like to go over the original case file.”

Tony hesitated, actually looking like he might object for a few seconds before nodding his compliance and typing something on his keyboard. “There,” he said. “I kept a copy on my hard drive.”

“Why an ornament?” Kate persisted, trying to understand.

“Tony busted the guy on Christmas Eve,” Gibbs clarified as his computer dinged and he brought up the file. “Single-handedly, I might add.”

“I never said that.” Tony frowned as Gibbs smirked back at him.

“It’s a big gold star on your record, DiNozzo. Or don’t you think I checked you out before I hired you?”

“That is pretty impressive,” Kate exclaimed, “A rookie taking down a serial killer alone.”

“I didn’t do it alone; there were dozens of people on the task force. And I wasn’t exactly a rookie,” Tony grumbled petulantly. “I’d already been on the force for… months. Like eight.”

Gibbs harrumphed. “Rookie.”

“So why haven’t I ever heard about this? It’s not like you to gloss over your accomplishments.”

“It’s no big deal,” Tony muttered, uncharacteristically humble. “I got lucky.”

“Oh, come on, Tony,” Kate wheedled. “Don’t be so modest, it doesn’t suit you. I want to hear how you brought down the big bad murderer all by yourself.”

“Drop it, Kate,” Gibbs said evenly as he read the information on his screen.

Tony swallowed once then spoke so softly Kate almost missed it. “I was his type.”

“His type,” Kate repeated, suddenly getting the picture.

“Yeah… tall, slender, dark hair… young.”

“Male prostitutes,” Kate guessed as she crossed the aisle and settled on the edge of Tony’s desk.

“Most were runaways, but a few were pros,” Tony agreed grimly. “The department pulled in practically every young cop for the undercover detail after the press got wind of the murders. Before that it hadn’t really been a high priority case.”

Kate gave an involuntary shudder. “Out of all the decoys the killer picked you.”
“We’d been running the op for a little over three weeks with no luck even though most of the local talent was in short supply. Those kids were scared for good reason. The smart ones relocated,” Tony explained bleakly, running a hand over his face, obviously disturbed by the memories. “We were gonna shut down the next day for Christmas.”

“Tony, you don’t have to…”

“It was cold that day. Like, really cold,” Tony continued, keeping his voice low. “As soon as I saw him on the street, I thought he might be the guy even though he never approached me. Finally, he showed up at the fast food place where I went to get coffee and warm up every few hours. He didn’t do anything except watch me, but somehow… I just knew.”

“You’ve got good instincts,” Kate encouraged quietly.

“After a while he walked over and very discretely showed me a pair of fur-lined handcuffs and a hundred-dollar bill,” Tony managed a small laugh. “Then he showed me the number on a key to a room in a fleabag hotel down the road. Most of the bodies had been discovered in cheap motel rooms so it fit the killer’s MO. I finished my coffee and followed him out. My team was on the ball so I don’t think I was ever in any real danger.”

“Then what happened?”

DiNozzo let out a long slow breath. “It’s kind of anti-climatic actually. When he let me into the room, he locked the door and asked me when my birthday was. I made something up and he marked it in his date book. I asked if he was planning to kill me and he admitted he was. When he pulled a knife, I pulled my gun. By the time my backup kicked in the door a minute later I already had him in cuffs and was reading him his rights.”

“God, Tony,” Kate whispered. “Weren’t you afraid?”

“Not at the time,” Tony shrugged unassumingly. “It happened too fast. I got the shakes later, but I played it off as adrenaline.”

“Let me guess, he vowed revenge.”

“Nope. Just the opposite,” Tony replied, getting to his feet. “He called me his angel, his… hero. He said I’d freed him from his demons. I’m gonna hit the head,” he added as he wandered away from his desk.

“Sorry, Gibbs,” Kate offered guiltily. “I didn’t mean to open any old wounds.”

“You didn’t know. Hell, I didn’t know the specifics,” Gibbs allowed as he snapped on a latex glove and rounded his desk. He plucked the empty box out of the trash and held it out to Kate. “See if Abby can pull any prints off this. In fact, take all of it.”

“Why?”

“There were only ten victims. I don’t know if Tony remembers or not,” Gibbs replied pointing to his own computer, “But the birthday he gave the killer was June 15th.”

“That’s day after tomorrow,” Kate responded worriedly as she put on her own gloves and gathered the wrapping paper. “You think whoever is sending the angels might try to finish what the killer started.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Gibbs retorted.
Tony wasn’t exactly in the mood to discuss his love life with Margo Camp, the network administrator and resident busybody. When he heard her voice coming from the breakroom, he hung back from the door holding his empty cup as he considered his options. Endure an interrogation here with the benefit of caffeine or retreat back to his desk to ward off pitying looks from Kate without. He really needed some coffee he decided unenthusiastically.

Taking a chance, he leaned forward to peek into the small room, nearly bumping heads with the guy from the mailroom as he looked out, obviously slipping under Margo’s man-finding-radar. They exchanged brief, conspiratory nods in passing and Tony tried again. Just as he thought Margo held the fresh pot of coffee hostage while sharing the latest office gossip with Bradley Honeycutt, another of NCIS’s more attractive young agents. She spotted Tony instantly and waved him in.

Caught, Tony tried to force a polite smile as he entered, already working on an excuse to get in and out quickly.

Brad’s eyes were glazed over but he nodded at the appropriate times and Tony realized he was looking for a reason to bolt. Not willing to be the next victim, DiNozzo ignored the pleading look and carefully backed towards the coffee machine, tuning out the conversation completely. With a sigh he poured himself the dregs of the decaf instead of waiting for the good stuff. By the time he poured the scant remains of the Hazelnut creamer into his bitter brew Brad was making his escape.

“Oh, honey,” Margo exclaimed, turning her sights on Tony. “Don’t drink that.” She swiped his cup and dumped the contents into the sink then filled it with fresh, real coffee. “There’s a new carton of creamer in the fridge,” Margo instructed as she topped off her own beverage then finally set the pot back on the burner. “Be a doll and get it, would you?”

Obediently, Tony opened the mini-fridge without actually bending over as he suspected Margo wanted him to do. Keeping one eye on the older woman he quickly located another pint carton, surprised to find it already open. He poured some in his cup and then a larger amount into Margo’s when she held it out to him.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Margo crooned as she took a big drink. “So have you gotten yourself a girlfriend yet?” she fished. “I know a charming young woman who would love to go out with you. She’s my daughter’s neighbor’s second cousin. Okay, I haven’t actually met her myself but they say she has a wonderful personality. Do you like kids? I think she has four.”

“DiNozzo, Gibbs wants you,” Brad said, sticking his head back in the doorway.

“Sorry, Margo, I gotta go,” Tony apologized as he took his cup and fled. “Thanks, man, I owe you one,” he muttered to Brad once they cleared the room.

“You sure do, you bastard,” Brad confirmed, well aware Tony hadn’t even tried to help him. “But Gibbs really is looking for you.”

“Oh. Shit. Thanks anyway,” Tony replied as he hotfooted it back to his desk. “What’s up, Boss?” he asked a minute later, sitting his untouched coffee down to put his jacket on.

“Grab your gear. We’ve got a body down at the docks,” Gibbs informed him. “Where the hell is Kate? Kate!”

Tony slid his weapon into his holster then took advantage of the brief wait to pick up his cup and take a sip. He made a face at the taste and set it aside as Kate came sprinting down the stairs.
“Where’ve you been,” Gibbs questioned her. “We’ve got to go.”

“You sent me to the lab, remember?” Kate retorted as she hurried to get her gun.

Gibbs moved to the elevator and Tony grinned at a frenzied Kate as he followed.

“Wait for me,” Kate called after them, grabbing her bag and barely squeezing in as the doors closed.

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Leaning back in the seat Tony closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths as they came to a stop. Either he’d picked up a stomach bug somewhere along the way or Gibbs’ driving was getting even worse. It had to be Gibbs’ driving, he decided since he’d felt fine when they’d left the office. Before he could get his door completely open Gibbs was already out of the truck and headed towards the gathered police cars and emergency vehicles.

“Are you planning on getting out sometime today, Tony?” Kate asked as she grew impatient and crawled out the driver’s side instead of waiting for him.

“Right behind you,” Tony sighed as he finally opened his door, taking another second to clear his head before standing up.

“That’s an interesting shade of green,” Kate commented, shouldering her bag as she came around the front of the truck to follow Gibbs.

“Where?” Tony asked nonplussed as he glanced up and down the gray strip of asphalt wedged between two rows of long, flat warehouses parallel to the water. “There’s not a tree in sight.”

Kate stopped and turned to really look at him. “I was talking about your face. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tony lied. “Let’s get over there before he starts to yell.” They ducked under the yellow tape and headed directly to the scene.

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“I’m fine,” Tony lied. “Let’s get over there before he starts to yell.” They ducked under the yellow tape and headed directly to the scene. Tony’s gear seemed especially heavy and his feet didn’t want to move in a straight line but he put his physical discomfort aside and tried to concentrate on the job. “What have we got?”

“It’s a dump job,” Gibbs replied from where he squatted next to the body of a dead sailor wearing a duty uniform. “There’s not nearly enough blood for him to have been shot here. And look at the way the body is arranged. Nobody hits the ground that neatly after taking a large caliber slug to the head.”

“We thought he was sleeping,” a cop standing behind Gibbs provided uneasily. “We didn’t even see the blood until we got out of the car.”

“You found him.”

“Yes sir, we were making our normal rounds. This place is usually dead unless a ship is coming in. No pun intended.”

“It might not be that busy but it isn’t exactly covert either, he’s in the middle of the road,” Gibbs mused as he carefully checked out the wallet on the ground. “It wasn’t a robbery. There’s sixty bucks and two credit cards right here.”

“Why would someone dump a body in such a conspicuous place?” Kate asked, looking around.
“Because they wanted it to be found,” Tony surmised as he pulled the camera out of his kit.

Gibbs frowned in Tony’s direction as he rose to his feet and turned a suspicious eye to the artificial canyon around them. His gaze came to rest on the small crane that almost completely blocked the end of the road. Further away he spotted a man loaded down with equipment working his way to the top of a cell tower. He made a mental note to send someone to question him since he had a bird’s eye view of the entire vicinity, although he was still climbing and probably hadn’t been there long enough to see anything useful.

“How far away is Ducky?” Gibbs asked as he brought his attention back to the immediate area.

“I’ll check,” Kate replied as she pulled out her phone and hit speed dial. She walked away a few feet so she could hear.

“What’s in these building?” Gibbs questioned the small crowd of dock workers.

“Overflow from the main warehouse,” a man in coveralls stepped forward to answer. “Not much at the moment; empty pallets mostly. We were dockside but came over when we heard the ambulance.”

“Did you touch the body?” Gibbs asked the EMTs.

“Nah,” the older guy said with a shrug. “We could see he was dead. I mean the whole back of his head is gone.”

“Ducky’s still at least twenty-five minutes out,” Kate reported, rejoining the group. “Something came up at NCIS as he was leaving the building.”

“Swell,” Gibbs grumbled as he turned to address the group around him. “Okay, listen up. Everybody stay put until we can interview you. And keep your eyes open, people.”

Kate exchanged a glance with Tony. “Gibbs?”

“This set-up is hinky.”

“What are you thinking, Boss?” Tony asked as he lowered his bag and tried not to look as dizzy as he felt.

“I’m thinking this is a hell of a location for an ambush. Kate, laser and sketch, DiNozzo, sit down before you fall down. Give me the camera, I’ll take the photos.”

“What? Why?” Tony started to protest when the crack of rifle fire split the air.

The first bullet took out one of the lights on top of the police cruiser sending pieces of colored plastic flying through the air. Bodies dove in every direction in a confused panic, no one quite certain which direction the shot had come from.

“The cell tower!” Gibbs shouted as he ducked behind the squad car and pulled his weapon. At his warning people scrambled for better cover on the opposite sides of the haphazardly parked vehicles as the second, third and forth shots echoed around them.

“Tony!” Kate shouted as she spotted her coworker down on the ground out in the open. The splash of crimson on his face was easier to see but less worrisome than the wet spot spreading across his dark jacket. The camera lay busted beside him.
She moved to break cover but Gibbs grabbed her by the arm and yanked her back. “Stay down,” he ordered tersely. “DiNozzo?”

Still under fire, Tony grunted and rolled onto his stomach then crawled as fast as he could to the relative safety offered by the ambulance, leaving a bloody trail behind him. He laboriously propped himself up against the rear wheel then pulled out his gun. Breathing heavily, he closed his eyes.

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs called urgently, staying low as he tried to edge closer. Another carefully aimed shot kept him in place. “Tony, drop your weapon and put pressure on that wound. Now!”

“Pressure,” Tony repeated breathlessly. He lay his gun down beside him and clutched at the hole in his shoulder. The soggy cloth immediately gave way to little rivers of red that trickled between his fingers.

“That’s good. Good job, Tony. Don’t let go,” Gibbs praised. “Has anybody called in for backup?” he shouted to no one in particular.

“Help is on the way,” one of the policemen assured loudly. “I’ve advised dispatch we have an officer down and we’re being fired on from the cell tower north of our location. The SWAT team and an army of cops should be here soon.”

“I hope it’s soon enough,” Gibbs muttered, well aware they were sitting ducks until a sharp shooter could take out the perp.

“Tony?” Kate asked, dropping down to peer under the car when she heard the sound of retching coming from the direction of the ambulance. She got an excellent view of bile as it hit the asphalt.

Tony coughed and wiped his mouth with his bloody sleeve. “Hell of a time to be car sick,” he muttered. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not okay,” Kate argued across the distance separating them.

“It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Cut the macho bullshit, DiNozzo,” Kate scolded under her breath. “Yesterday you were acting like you were going to die from a splinter.”

“He’ll be okay,” Gibbs said, sounding more like he was giving an order than offering reassurance. When he dared to take another peek, a shot ricocheted off the bumper right in front of him. “Dammit! He’s got me pinned. Maybe someone else can get to DiNozzo if I distract him.”

“I’ll go,” a voice said from the next vehicle over. Gibbs looked up at the rather muscular paramedic and narrowed his eyes as he assessed him. “I was a special forces medic, sir. I’m trained to work under fire.”

Gibbs nodded his approval. “Go around the other way, as far away from me as you can get.”

“Yes sir.” The man quickly moved to the far end of the other car then shook out his hands and positioned himself like a runner on the starting blocks. “I’m ready.”

“On three,” Gibbs instructed as he readied himself for the fake out. “One… two… three!” He bolted forward a step then immediately pulled back. The sniper didn’t let him down, knocking out a headlight and showering Gibbs with glass.

In the meantime, the medic sprinted for the ambulance. He yanked open the side door to hastily
grab a tackle box then dropped down next to Tony. “How ya doing?” he greeted, barely winded as he gently pushed Tony’s head back to get a better look at him and take a pulse.

Tony sluggishly glanced up at him through his lashes but managed a grin. “I’ve been better, actually.”

“I take it from all the shouting you must be Tony?”

“Good guess.”

The man slipped a pair of trauma shears out of his pocket and made quick work of Tony’s suit coat. “Well Tony, you’re a little shocky but I think you’re going to be fine. You can call me Doc.”

“Doc, of course,” Tony slurred, not bothering to complain about the expensive jacket. It already had a couple of holes in it anyway, not to mention the growing stain.

“Let’s have a look,” Doc said as he cut away Tony’s bloody shirt. “Wow, it’s through and through your upper arm.”

“Ha, Kate,” Tony muttered, gritting his teeth as Doc applied a pressure bandage. “I told ya it was just a flesh wound.”

“Whew. You’re a very lucky man,” Doc replied, trying to keep his head down as the sniper continued to make pot shots into the knot of vehicles all around them, sending debris flying. “There must be an angel on your shoulder today.”

Tony looked at him oddly but before he could comment he felt another wave of nausea. He pushed Doc away as he brought up more bile.

“Oh man,” Doc commiserated as he handed Tony another bandage to wipe his mouth. “That’s a weird reaction to getting shot.”

“I was queasy when we got here,” Tony told him, trying not to gag on the taste in his mouth. “It seems to be getting worse.”

“Stomach flu?”

“I don’t think so. It came on too fast.”

In the distance they could hear the wail of multiple sirens and the random firing abruptly ceased. “Here comes help,” Doc soothed as he finished up the bandage and rubbed Tony’s back as he puked again. “We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“How is he?” Gibbs asked as he suddenly dropped down in front of them with Kate half a step behind.

“Are you trying to get shot?” Tony gasped out between ragged breaths.

The nearby squeal of tires as the police car speed away almost drowned out Gibbs answer. “The shooter is on the run. He probably panicked when he spotted the entire local police department headed this way.”

“They’ll get him at the bottom of the tower if he doesn’t break his neck on the way down,” Kate added as she brushed Tony’s matted hair back from his forehead. “How are you doing?”

As if in answer Tony’s eyes rolled back and he began to seize.
Chapter 2

Gibbs handed the sniper over to the NCIS agents who met them at the door and then thanked the police officers who had helped him transport the man back to headquarters. He considered changing before starting the interrogation but the blood on his clothes was from one of his own and that raised the ante considerably. The stains would serve to remind the perp just how high the stakes were. First, he had to see Ducky who had never shown up at the scene but had sent for the county coroner instead.

“What the hell is going on, Duck?” Gibbs asked as he entered the morgue and stopped short.

“Ethylene glycol,” Ducky announced without looking up from taking pictures of the still-dressed corpse on his table; the body of Margo Camp.

“Antifreeze?”

“Hmm? Oh yes, it is a main ingredient in a lot of the older types of antifreeze. It’s also in hydraulic brake fluid, photographic developing solutions, industrial solvents for lacquers and paints, and even cosmetics in small amounts. How is Tony?”

“The round tore up some muscle and cracked the bone in his arm on the way through,” Gibbs sighed, running a hand through gray hair that he swore was getting grayer as the day wore on. “They were more concerned with the seizures and persistent vomiting when I left. Kate’s going to call if anything changes.”

“Yes, I’ve just spoken to the attending physician to advise appropriate treatment. They should be administering the antidote as we speak. I believe we got it in time.”

“Ethylene glycol,” Gibbs said in a deadly calm voice as he caught on.

“No doubt you wondered why I begged off the shooting. We had problems closer to home.”

“Margo?”

“She was the first,” Ducky sighed solemnly. “Her coworkers said she appeared to be intoxicated shortly before she began to vomit. By the time the ambulance arrived she had gone into a state of protracted seizures. She died en route to the hospital. In the meantime, four more people became ill. Five counting Tony. Frankly, I thought we had an epidemic on our hands or perhaps some type of bio-terrorist attack.”

“Well that explains the ambulances out front. How’d you figure it out?”

“People were staggering, disoriented, and vomiting. Just as I decided to quarantine the building Abby got the first tox-screen back,” Ducky explained, setting the camera aside. “Looking at the symptoms I should have realized sooner. It took us a little longer to find the source.”

“Which was?”

“Nearly one third of the contents of the hazelnut creamer in the first-floor coffee room was undiluted solvent.”

“And nobody noticed?”
Ducky shook his head. “In its pure form ethylene glycol is clear, colorless, odorless… and very sweet. In fact, most poisonings from it are accidental ingestions by children and animals who like the taste. It takes less than a teaspoon of antifreeze to do in a normal sized housecat, you know.”

“A teaspoon? How much creamer do these people use?” Gibbs asked, appalled by the idea of anything but black coffee.

“Aw, but this was full strength. It would require a lesser dose to be lethal. Although I do suspect Ms. Camp was not a firm believer in moderation.”

Gibbs stared at Margo’s pale, bloated face. “Could this have been an accident?”

“Very doubtful,” Ducky exclaimed sadly. “It’s more likely we have a snake in our midst.”

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“Lucky? How do you figure that?” Tony grimaced as he shifted his weight on the bed to find a more comfortable position. “I was shot and poisoned all in the same day.”

“And you survived both,” Kate pointed out, tucking another pillow behind his injured shoulder then fussing with the blanket.

“I guess. Poor Margo,” Tony sighed. He wiggled a little more causing the extra pillow to fall then waved Kate away with an irritated grunt when she tried to replace it.

Holding her hands up, Kate backed off. “You want to try a little water now?” she asked as she held up the Styrofoam pitcher. “Just wet your mouth,” she encouraged when he pulled a face and looked away.

“Maybe later,” Tony hedged as he closed his eyes, not willing to risk another bout of vomiting. His abdominal muscles ached almost as bad as his arm. “The pain meds are making me drowsy. I think I’ll take a little nap.”

“Well, it’s not like you’ll dehydrate,” Kate gave in, glancing at the assorted bags of fluids hanging above the bed. “How many IVs do you have now anyway?”

“Just two needles,” Tony mumbled. “That stuff’s all piggybacked together. Kate?”

“Yeah Tony?”

Tony opened his eyes and looked at her suspiciously. “Doesn’t Gibbs need you back at the office?”

“He’s got McGee,” Kate shrugged, obviously hiding something. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, I just wondered why you’re still hanging around when there’s work to do. I mean it’s not like I need a bodyguard or anything. They got the guy who shot me.”

“Yep, sure did. I understand Gibbs has been interrogating him for the last three hours. I almost feel sorry for the guy. Almost.”

“But you’re still here because he’s not the one who poisoned me and everyone else.”

“There’s no way the sniper got into NCIS,” Kate confirmed reluctantly. “He didn’t show up on any of the security cameras and he’s a big boy, hard to miss. Considering the lengths the person with the poison would have had to go through to bypass security, it was most likely an inside job.”
“And Gibbs thinks this whole thing has to do with the eleventh angel,” Tony surmised.

“It’s a hell of a coincidence, wouldn’t you say? Two attempts on your life hours after receiving it?”

“Kate?”

“Yeah Tony?”

“If I start to puke again will you put me out of my misery?” Tony asked groggily as his eyelids fluttered shut. “Shoot me right between the eyes this time.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Kate assured as she settled in a chair next to the bed to watch over him. “Go to sleep.”

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“I done told you, I don’t know nobody named DiNozzo,” Junior Silva swore savagely as the sweat poured down his face.

“Then tell me why, out of all the people you had in your sights this morning he’s the only one you actually managed to shoot?” Gibbs asked as he leaned back in his chair, away from the stale odor of booze and perspiration.

“I don’t know. I ain’t that great a shot when I’m drunk,” Junior insisted. “Maybe he was the only one who wasn’t fast enough to get outta my way.”

“Not that great a shot? You kept me pinned pretty easily.”

“Hey, I was trying to hit you.”

“Is that a confession?”

“No! I just… I want my lawyer.”

“He’s on the way,” Gibbs advised coolly. “I understand he got caught up in traffic.”

The big man wiped his damp brow. “I have the right to remain silent.”

Gibbs smiled and took a long drink of coffee. “Sure you do. Just listen while I do the math.”

Junior shrugged, going for nonchalant but coming off as scared to death.

“Let’s see, there were at least a dozen people under fire, so that’s attempted murder times twelve. Say you get ten to fifteen years per person to run consecutively. You’re looking at a minimum of a hundred and twenty years. And that’s before we even consider Seaman Perez’s murder.”

“No, no, I didn’t kill him,” Junior jumped up in a panic. “I found him. He was already dead, I just moved him to a better location.”

“Oh, you found him.”

“That’s right.”

“Where?”

“Outside my back door when I got home from a club last night.”
“And what time was that?”

“I don’t know, around three I guess. He was just layin’ there like a gift or something. I thought it was a sign.”

“A sign?” Gibbs asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“So you’ve been planning this little shooting arcade for a while.”

“No. I just been thinking about it, working out the details,” Junior admitted, panting as he began to pace. “Like a fantasy.”

Gibbs sat perfectly still as he registered the information. “Have you ever told anyone about this fantasy?” he asked at last.

Junior started to shake. “I don’t know. I do stupid stuff when I drink. I don’t remember.”

“Was there a lot of blood outside your back door?”

“Hardly any,” Junior said softly, as tears welled up in his eyes. “At first I thought he was asleep. But he didn’t move when I rolled him and I realized he was dead.”

Gibbs glanced up at the two-way mirror as he got up. “Get the truck,” he ordered, knowing McGee was on the other side.

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“You rang, Ducky?” Abby asked, hiding her worry as she strolled into the morgue.

She’d found her favorite medical examiner uncharacteristically tight-lipped over the phone when he’d ask her to come down. It had already been a bad day for both of them considering their colleagues had been attacked in their own house but Ducky was as resilient as anyone, more so than most and his decidedly un-sunny disposition at the moment was disconcerting.

The tables were empty but Ducky appeared grim as he looked up from the photo he held in his hand. “I’ve just received a preliminary report from a good friend of mine at the DC coroner’s office. I need a second opinion before I call Gibbs.”

Abby pursed her lips in confusion as she accepted the picture. When she glanced at it her knees went weak and she reached for the counter for support. “Oh God,” she gasped, inadvertently dropping the photograph.

“Oh dear, that’s what I thought. It’s alright,” Ducky soothed as he helped her to a nearby stool. He retrieved the offending material from the floor and tried to hand it back to her. “Please, look again.”

Shaking her head Abby tearfully turned away. “I can’t.”

“It’s not Tony.”

“What?” Abby grabbed the paper and stared at the dead face accented sharply where the long dark lashes swept down to rest against pale skin. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” Ducky assured. “I even called the hospital and spoke to Kate. She assures me our boy has been sleeping soundly all afternoon. This unfortunate individual is Seaman Alfredo
Perez.”

Abby set the picture aside and shakily fingered one of the spikes on her dog collar as she thought out the implications. “Why didn’t anyone mention the resemblance?”

Ducky frowned. “If I were to guess I’d say residual gray matter and blood splatter from the gun shot wound obscured the likeness at the scene. And I might add; sniper fire is rather distracting.”

“Ya think?” Abby snorted.

“Indeed, I do,” Ducky assured seriously. “On first glance I thought perhaps I was imagining things, maybe letting my worry for Tony slip into my work.”

“No, that guy is a dead ringer… uh, you know what I mean,” Abby rambled on, irritated by her unintentional pun. “He looks just like Tony.”

“Overall, his facial features are similar,” Ducky agreed. “However, Seaman Perez was shorter, slighter, ten years younger, and his eyes were brown.”

“Not to mention the military haircut.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t get the connection.”

“There’s more,” Ducky sighed. “Our young sailor was sexually assaulted prior to being shot then redressed postmortem. It was a bit of a political pickle, but the body is on the way here now.”

“Gibbs wouldn’t have it any other way,” Abby nodded supportively.

***

“It was a double dump?” McGee asked as he examined the scene in Junior Silva’s small, trashy backyard.

Gibbs pinned him with a stare. “A double dump?”

“Well, there’s some blood, but not nearly enough for Perez to have been shot here, either,” McGee offered uneasily. “Somebody dumped him here then Silva found him and moved him to the docks.”

“Or someone left him here specifically for Junior to find.”

“You think he told someone about his fantasy to shoot a bunch of police officers and that person pushed him into it by providing the bait.”

Gibbs eyed him again then answered his ringing phone. “Gibbs.” He glanced at McGee as he listened intently. “I want you to get that body… oh, right. Good job, Duck. Yeah, we’ll finish up here then head back… Yeah, we still don’t have the initial crime scene. It looks like a double dump. Sketch and photos, McGee,” he ordered brusquely as he hung up.

McGee couldn’t help but grin at his boss’ use of his newly coined colloquialism but with one more look from Gibbs he quickly wiped it off and got to work.
Tony groaned as he opened his eyes. His body protested every little movement but he was so thirsty. The room was semi-dark and he could just make out a cup and pitcher off to his right. Confused by a drug induced fog he knew something bad must have happened but it was just too much trouble to pull his jumbled thoughts together at the moment. All he really wanted was that damn cup that seemed so far out of reach.

As if reading his thoughts a hand came into view to bring the desired object toward him, placing the straw against his lower lip. Gratefully he drew up the cool liquid into his mouth but just as he was really getting started it was pulled away.

“Just sips,” a familiar voice urged quietly. “I don’t ever want to have to watch you puke again.”

“Gibbs?” Tony uttered feebly, squinting up at his boss as a light came on directly over him bringing everything around the bed into a surreal halo.

“Well it ain’t Florence Nightingale.”

“No, that would be Kate,” Tony replied as he became more coherent and tried to sit up. “I thought she was going to nurse me to death.” He winced and resigned himself to lying flat when Gibbs took mercy on him and used the bed control to raise the head slightly. “Thanks. What time is it?” he asked with a heartfelt yawn.

“It’s late. You’ve been asleep for a long time. That morphine pump works wonders to shut you up.”

“Where are we on the poisoning?” Tony inquired as he arranged his IV lines so he wouldn’t pull them.

Gibbs sighed and rubbed his eyes. “You want the facts or what my gut tells me?”

“Your gut,” Tony answered immediately, accepting the cup as Gibbs passed it over to him. His mouth still felt like it was stuffed with cotton but his stomach remembered the nausea so he wisely did as Gibbs had suggested and stuck to sips.

“There’s a connection between the shooting and the antifreeze in the creamer.”

“No,” Tony protested. “Kate said the sniper was some psychotic redneck who wanted to off a cop.”

“And he damned near did, didn’t he? If he hadn’t been so hungover, he probably would have shot more than one. It’s a wonder he didn’t kill himself climbing the cell tower.”

Tony chuckled softly at the thought. “They say God watches out for fools and drunks.”

“Yeah,” Gibbs agreed with an amused snort. “And Junior qualifies on all counts.”

“Well there you go.”

“Tony, I think you were the objective in both attacks,” Gibbs went on somberly. “You received an extra angel two days prior to your reported ‘birthday’. Then your favorite creamer was contaminated in the office where you work taking down four of your coworkers along with you, one of them fatally.”
“So, the guy doesn’t care how many innocent people get hurt,” Tony said with a guilty start.

“And the body of a sailor in uniform made sure NCIS would be lured into the ambush. Even though Junior swears he wasn’t specifically gunning for you, the poison slowed you down enough to make you an easy target.”

“Couldn’t this all be a just great big a cosmic coincidence?”

“DiNozzo.”

“That’s right,” Tony backpedaled. “You don’t believe in coincidences.”

“You are the factor that links these events together. And it all goes back to a serial killer you caught twelve years ago.”

“So that’s where we start,” Tony said determinedly, handing the cup back as he settled against the mattress. “What do you want to know?”

“I’ve read the case file and some of the newspaper stories up to Godwin’s suicide. Tell me what happened next.”

Tony shook his head as he tried to clear his mind of everything but the past. “The next month was a media circus and it only got worse after someone leaked Godwin’s date book-cum-diary to a tabloid. They printed it word for word right down to dental appointments and scheduled oil changes for his car.”

“That explains how the perp knew when to send each angel.”

“Yeah. Part of it was the private life of an ordinary Joe and the rest read like a how-to manual for up and coming killers. He wrote a description of each rape and murder on the date it occurred in chilling detail.”

“Who leaked the date book?”

“They finally pinned it on Jason Thompson.”

“The lead detective on the case?” Gibbs asked in surprise.

“I thought he was smarter than that but when he showed up at work in a brand-new corvette the next week Internal Affairs nailed him to the wall.”

“That’s pretty circumstantial; do you think he really did it?”

“He was a twenty-year veteran on the force. I think it was hard for him to be upstaged by a rookie,” Tony explained. “But he wasn’t even there for the bust. The case didn’t seem to be going anywhere so he’d taken a couple days off for Christmas when it went down. He didn’t even get his ugly mug on camera.”

“He took a vacation during a case?” Gibbs asked in disgust. “He deserved what he got.”

Tony grinned. “Not everyone has your obsessive work ethic, Boss. But yeah, he was a jerk about the whole thing. He took early retirement rather than walk a beat.”

“And that’s when you made detective.”

The grin quickly faded. “It was the mayor’s idea. I was his new golden boy. Needless to say, it
didn’t go over too well in the ranks when I got promoted into Godwin’s position. It was hell.”

“I can imagine,” Gibbs commiserated. “But obviously you handled the job.”

“They all said I was a spoiled brat rich kid who would quit when the going got tough. Maybe they were right because when I got an offer from Peoria less than two years later I jumped ship and never looked back.”

“But you did some damn fine work while you were there, and under pretty abysmal conditions,” Gibbs argued. “In fact, I spoke to Captain Leo Santo before I hired you.”

“You did,” Tony asked in disbelief. “Just how far back do you go with your background checks?”

Gibbs allowed an evil grin. “I know how you got an A on your Spanish final your senior year at Ohio State.”

Tony coughed uneasily wondering what other embarrassing tidbits Gibbs might have turned up. “The teacher was hot,” he muttered under his breath.

“Do you want to know what Leo said about you?”

“God, no. He rode me like a two-dollar whore. He hated me.”

“He said you had the best natural instincts of any cop he’d ever worked with,” Gibbs told him anyway as he casually stretched his legs out. “He also said you were a spoiled brat rich kid but you hung in there and he always knew you’d be a hell of a detective once you got some experience under your belt.”

If Tony was surprised, he didn’t show it. “All I ever wanted to be was a cop,” he said seriously before catching himself. “Or a fireman, or a cowboy,” he covered, “But mostly a cop. I guess you also know my father didn’t approve.”

“I know. Let’s get back to the case,” Gibbs said, letting Tony off that particularly painful hook.

“Where were we?” Tony asked, suppressing another yawn.

“Thompson got busted for being an idiot.”

“Oh yeah, Thompson was out, I was in. The anniversary of Godwin’s death came and went without much notice except for a little recap in the local paper at the bottom of page 4D. I can show it to you if you want.”

“You kept the clipping?”

“Well it had my picture on it,” Tony grinned sheepishly.

“Of course.”

“Uh, I got the first angel in February the next year. I didn’t even associate it with the Godwin case. By the time I got the second one, I was already in Peoria. It got me curious, though, but like I said, I didn’t even detect a pattern until the fifth year,” Tony sighed and closed his eyes.

The moment stretched a little too long and Gibbs reluctantly gave him a shake. “Come on, Tony. Concentrate. Who might have sent you the ornaments?”

“It was a long time ago,” Tony protested groggily. “I’ve slept since then.”
“You’ve slept since we started this conversation. That’s beside the point.”

“You know, I considered Thompson and his buddies at the precinct at first but little glass angels weren’t really their style. They were more of a ‘lure you into a dark alley and beat the crap out of you’ group of guys.”

Gibbs clenched his jaw, finally making sense of something else he’d read in DiNozzo’s file. “You should have pressed charges.”

“That wasn’t an option at the time. I could take the name calling; rent boy and faggot and whatever else their sick little minds could come up with. I could even take a couple of beatings. I couldn’t take them thinking I was a rat.”

“Aw, Tony,” Gibbs grumbled. “You didn’t have to prove anything to those assholes.”

“I know that now. What can I say? I was young and dumb.”

“Some things haven’t changed,” Gibbs quipped.

“You know I’m only trying to toughen McGee up when I give him a hard time? I would never harass him the way I was harassed.”

“I know. I think deep down he knows it, too.”

“Someday he’s gonna tell me to shove it,” Tony said, looking ahead proudly. “That’s when I’ll stop worrying about him.”

“You never stop worrying about your problem children,” Gibbs assured with a smirk. “What about Godwin’s family?”

“Oh yeah,” Tony perked up. “The wife used to send me letters.”

“Threats?”

“No, no, more like… love letters. Apparently Charlie was shit for a husband and I did her a huge favor by catching him. It couldn’t have been her though. She died of AIDS a few years later but the angels kept coming.”

“Let me guess, Charlie brought HIV home to her?”

“Yeah, the sorry bastard. He never even got sick.”

“I need to see those letters.”

Tony snorted. “They’re long gone, Boss. I threw them out as soon as I got them. I didn’t even read the last four or five. They were just so sad.”

“You destroyed evidence in an ongoing investigation?”

“There wasn’t an investigation at the time,” Tony pointed out. He grunted as he reached for his watch on the bedside table.

“Well there is now,” Gibbs argued, knowing he was being unreasonable.

“I’ve never noticed how scary you are at two a.m. before,” Tony declared as he gaped at him. “You’re looking a little rough. Shouldn’t you get someone else to baby sit me while you get some
“Kate and McGee need to sleep, too,” Gibbs replied. “Considering the circumstances, there’s no
one else I trust at the moment since Abby and Ducky don’t carry guns.”

“Oh,” Tony murmured, feeling ridiculously sentimental at the idea of his team protecting him,
which he immediately attributed to the drugs.

“Just a few more minutes then I’ll let you go back to sleep,” Gibbs promised. “Other family
members?”

Tony let out a breath as he tried to think. “There was a brother, a lifer in Sing Sing, but they had a
falling out when they were young and hadn’t talked in years. And Godwin had two kids, a boy and
a girl but they were like nine and twelve at the time of the murders.”

“Who raised them after mom died?”

“Oh, maternal grandmother in Utah,” Tony managed as his eyes slipped shut once again. “I think
she’s passed now, too.”

“We should probably locate the kids just to rule them out,” Gibbs said thoughtfully to himself as
Tony drifted back to dreamland. He decided to wait until later to tell him just how much he
resembled a dead man.

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Gibbs wasn’t especially surprised to find Abby already in the lab at five a.m., but a closer
inspection revealed she hadn’t just arrived. She was still there, she just hid the signs of an all-
nighter a lot better than he did as she be-bopped to her tunes and worked over the uniform on her
table. “Abs,” he greeted as he turned down the music that was a tad too loud for his weary senses.

“Morning, Bossman,” Abby returned cheerfully as she pulled off her gloves. “How’s Tony?”

“He was sleeping like a baby when I left,” Gibbs shrugged. “What have you got?”

“Well…” Abby drawled as she motioned him over to her side. “For starters, this isn’t Seaman
Perez’s uniform.”

“What? Abby, I want you to focus on Perez…”

“Gibbs,” Abby interrupted. “This is the uniform he had on when he was discovered, it’s just not
his. At least it’s not one he was issued by the Navy.”

Gibbs cut his eyes back to the clothing as he snapped on some latex and lifted the shirt. “Okay, so
there’s no name tag or rate insignia,” he agreed.

“Right. And there never has been, either. Sewing thread would have left tiny holes in the fabric on
the chest and the shoulder.”

“And on the back of the dungarees,” Gibbs finished for her.

“Yeah, I always thought that was cute the way Seamen wear their little names on their butts.
Anyway, I’m thinking this came from a surplus store. It’s never been washed, at least it doesn’t
have any typical laundry products on it, and probably never worn at all prior to Perez’s swan song.
It still has creases where it was folded. And here’s the kicker… this isn’t even Perez’s size. I
checked his records; these are two sizes bigger than what he normally wears.”

“The express purpose of the uniform was to draw in NCIS.”

“Or Tony. Oh, and I found two hairs on the front of the shirt. Both belong to Junior Silva.”

“Hey,” Kate called as she walked through the sliding doors. “I thought I’d find you here.”

“Oh?” Gibbs asked, raising an eyebrow as he accepted the tall coffee she handed him. “Am I that predictable?”

“Process of elimination. Ducky’s still asleep on the cot in his office.”

“That’s my next stop.”

“Did you get some sleep?” Abby asked Kate.

“Some,” Kate assured. “I’ve been thinking about our killer. I think we’ve got a copy cat on our hands.”

“The MOs don’t match,” Gibbs argued as he lifted the lid and sniffed the coffee before taking a sip. “Godwin used a knife, this guy killed with a 357.”

“He’s progressing. To his mind the only reason the first guy was caught was because Tony had a gun.”

“Never take a knife to a gun fight,” Abby quipped. “Duh.”

“Maybe that’s why he tried to take out DiNozzo,” Gibbs mused. “He thinks Tony might catch him, too.”

“I don’t get it,” Abby said, shaking her head. “Does he want to draw him in or take him out?”

“I don’t think the killer knows either,” Kate explained. “His actions are intricately planned out but erratic in their purpose. This guy’s conflicted.”

“Well he’s had twelve years to think about it, I’d say he’s unstable as well.”

Kate nodded grimly. “What about the package?”

“God! The outer wrapper had at least eight different prints and that’s not counting Tony’s and Kenny’s.”

“Kenny?”

“Kenny Black, you know, the kid who works in the mailroom? Anyway, I got sidetracked with the Perez stuff but since postal workers are federal employees it should be a snap to rule out most of the extra prints. I haven’t dusted the insides of the package yet.”

“Well get on that as soon as you finish with this,” Gibbs instructed. “There should only be three sets of prints on the gift paper.”

“Three?”

“Yeah, I opened it. My prints will be there,” Kate supplied.
“Yours, Tony’s, and the killer’s,” Abby counted out on her fingers. “I’m on it.”
A soft hand on his forehead woke Tony and he gently grasped it to pull it down to his lips as he stirred from a pleasant, recurring dream of Rosanna Esposito slowly stepping out of her frilly, pink prom dress. He could feel the light streaming through the window on his face as he opened his eyes… and screeched. But in a totally macho, manly way he told himself as he thrust the hand away.

“McGee!” he yelped, now utterly and completely awake.

“Yuck,” Tim complained as he jumped back and wiped off the back of his hand.

“What the hell were you doing?” Tony asked defensively to shift the focus to the younger agent and away from the fact that he’d been on the verge of nibbling on his fingers.

“I was trying to see if you had a fever,” McGee stammered, slowly turning three shades of red.

“I’m not sick,” Tony growled, “I got shot.”

“And poisoned. I know. But nosocomial infections are rampant these days.”

“Nosy… what?”

“Nosocomial, it comes from the Greek nosos-- disease and komeion-- to care for.”

Tony glowered at him in disbelief.

“It’s an infection you acquire while you’re in the hospital, usually from poor hand washing techniques by the staff. Uh, staff members, not Staph like the bacterium.”

“What does a staff infection do?” Tony asked uneasily as he thumbed the control and raised the head of his bed until he was almost sitting. He gritted his teeth until the pain caused by the movement subsided.

“Staph or staff?”

“Staff? The nosy one.”

“Nosocomial? Oh, uh, fever mostly.”

“Oh. Okay. What about the other?”

“Pustules, abscesses, boils, impetigo. Of course, a Staph infection can also be nosocomial…”

“Stop,” Tony commanded, suppressing a shudder. “You’ve been hanging around Ducky again, I can tell.”

“Actually,” McGee explained as he took a seat next to the bed. “I went through a period when I was younger when I wanted to be a doctor.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, feigning interest as he arranged his more or less useless arm across his lap.

“I even did a volunteer stint at my local hospital when I was in high school.”
“You were a candy striper?” Tony questioned with a grin, now fully involved in the conversation.

“No,” McGee denied haughtily. “I was a student volunteer.”

“Yeah, they call those candy stripers,” Tony insisted. “You were a candy striper.”

McGee let out an annoyed sigh. “Sort of,” he admitted.

“Candy striper.”

“Yes, Tony! I was a candy striper. Are you happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Tony confirmed as he really smiled for the first time in two days. “Since you’re so experienced you can help me up.”

“You’re on bed rest,” McGee balked. “That means you have to stay in bed,” he threw in meanly.

“Come on, McGee. I need to pee. Hey, that rhymed.”

“You are peeing.”

“What?”

“You’ve got a urinary catheter in,” Tim said, not without a little pity. “It irritates the urethra and that makes it feel like you need to pee.”

Tony grimaced as he lifted the covers and took a tentative look. “Is nothing sacred?” he moaned, wondering how he’d gone so long without noticing the rubber implement sticking out of his manhood. “Damn morphine,” he swore dejectedly as he pulled down his gown and lowered the sheet.

“They’re uh, they’re monitoring your output. One of the problems caused by ethylene glycol poisoning is kidney failure.”

“You learned that as a candy striper?” Tony questioned dubiously.

“No, I asked Ducky about your prognosis and he told me all about the symptoms.”

“You actually listen when Ducky goes off on a tangent?”

“You don’t?”

“Your hands are really soft,” Tony abruptly changed the subject before he could say anything under the influence of the drugs that might get him in hot water with the M.E.

“Thank you,” McGee answered cautiously as he gauged Tony’s sincerity. “I started using Udder Butter a while back.”

“Udder Butter?”

“It was originally produced for chapped teats but dairy farmers found it to be a very good hand cream.”

“Hold up for a minute,” Tony protested impishly. “I’m still on chapped teats.”

“Cows, Tony.”
“Yeah, yeah, dairy farmers, I got that. Let me see your hands.”

McGee studied him distrustfully before slowly offering both hands. Tony frowned as he examined one then the other, taking the time to really feel the difference as he compared the skin texture to his own.

“Udder Butter, you say. Where’d you get it?”

“They have it at any good drugstore,” McGee provided helpfully as Tony continued to stroke his palm experimentally.

The door opened and they dropped their hands like they’d been stung. McGee rapidly moved away from the bed and Tony cleared his throat as he rearranged the cover nervously.

“Good morning, Mister DiNozzo,” the young nurse greeted with a smile. “Let’s get you cleaned up before breakfast.”

“Bed bath?” Tony inquired, both eyebrows going up hopefully.

“Of course,” the nurse replied, glancing at McGee. “Your friend can help you if you would rather?”

“No!” Tony and McGee yelled at the same time.

“No, really, he was just leaving,” Tony said, shooing McGee to the door with his eyes and a jerk of his head.

“Sorry, Tony. Gibbs left very specific instructions.”

“And you always do what Gibbs says, don’t you?” Tony grumbled.

“So do you,” McGee pointed out obstinately.

“Five minutes,” Tony bargained, smiling at the nurse. “Make it ten. Gibbs will never know.”

“Gibbs knows everything,” McGee objected, moving to the door anyway as he had no desire to watch Tony being bathed. “Five minutes, and I’ll be right outside.”

“Ten!” Tony called after him as he slipped out the door. “We work together,” he told the nurse as she drew up a basin of warm water.

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“This is Seaman Apprentice Robert Andrews, Seaman Perez’s roommate,” Kate introduced as Gibbs entered the interrogation room. “Robert, this is my boss, Special Agent Gibbs.”

“Sir,” Andrews replied formally, jumping to attention.

“At ease,” Gibbs ordered the baby-faced redhead as he looked him over. “And don’t ‘sir’ me, I work for a living. Are you even old enough to be in the Navy?”

“I’m nineteen, sir…” Andrews protested meekly. “I mean, uh, Special Agent Gibbs,” he corrected when an icy glare was directed at him.

Gibbs glanced at Kate for conformation of his age then sat at the table when she nodded. “You were the last person to see Perez alive. That we know of.”
“Yes ssss… uh, Yes.”

“When was that?”

“Day before yesterday,” Andrews provided, still standing at parade rest, the understood ‘sir’ almost audible.

“Are you nervous, son?” Gibbs asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“Y…yes.”

“Gibbs,” Kate interrupted with a longsuffering sigh. “Can I see you outside?” Gibbs shifted his frown to Kate but she stood her ground. “Please.”

“Fine,” he grumbled as he got up and followed her to the exit. “What’s so damned important?” he asked irritably as soon as they were in the hall.

“Why don’t you let me handle this one?”

“What?”

“Look, Gibbs, I know how upset you are,” Kate appeased. “But you’re intimidating the poor kid to the point he can’t even talk

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. He was fine before you came into the room. And he is alibied. He had guard duty from four p.m. until midnight on the night Perez was killed. Three other people have already verified he never left his post.”

“And Ducky puts the time of death between nine and eleven,” Gibbs recalled.

“That’s right.”

Gibbs released a pent-up breath. “Five of our people…”

“I know, Gibbs, I know,” Kate interrupted again. “I want the bastard, too. Look, you’re tired. You were up all night with Tony. You want to beat the crap out of somebody.”

“I’m not quite sure how you meant that,” Gibbs pondered thoughtfully. “Do I want to beat the crap out of somebody because I’m tired or because I was up all night with DiNozzo?”

Kate paused to think about what she’d said. “I’m sure there’s a correlation there either way,” she decided. “I just don’t think you’re the best person to interview this particular witness at this particular time.”

“Fine,” Gibbs finally gave in. “Have at him. I’ll be watching.”

“Thank you.”

“But don’t baby him,” Gibbs called after her as she slipped back into the interrogation room. “He’s still a sailor whether he shaves yet or not.”

Kate rolled her eyes but didn’t comment as she closed the door behind her. “Robert, please sit down.”
“Yes ma’am,” the nervous young man replied as he pulled out a chair and complied. “Can I call you ma’am, Ma’am?”

“Sure,” Kate soothed, taking the seat opposite him. “Or you can call me Kate if you’d like.”

“Yes ma’am,” Robert nodded then glanced over his shoulder at the door.

“Agent Gibbs had some other business,” Kate lied, knowing the man wouldn’t relax if he were aware Gibbs was still watching.

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

Kate couldn’t help but smile at the overwhelming relief in his voice. “Okay, why don’t you tell me about the last time you saw Alfredo.”

“Al,” Robert corrected. “He went by Al. Uh, he was still in our room when I left for guard duty. He was watching ESPN.”

“Did he have any plans for the evening?”

Robert let out a deep breath. “He didn’t say but I assumed he might have gone out looking for a little action.”

“You mean he was looking for sex,” Kate prodded.

“Yes.”

“Where would he go? A bar or club?”

“No ma’am,” Robert said bashfully, his cheeks slowly turning the color of his hair. “He liked a sure thing and he didn’t mind paying for it.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “He solicited prostitutes.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Male or female?”

Robert gasped. “F…female,” he stammered, shocked by the other suggestion. “Al wasn’t gay, ma’am.”

“You sound awfully sure about that.”

“He was my bunkmate, I would know if he was gay. Besides, the United States Navy doesn’t allow fags.”

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“What world does this guy live in?” Gibbs agreed. “But if he’s right about Perez’s penchant for picking up hookers it reinforces the copycat theory.”

“So, Perez goes to an area worked by pros and ends up getting picked up himself?”
Gibbs shrugged. “He could have had a gun pulled on him or otherwise been coerced.”

“Maybe somebody saw something.”

“Maybe, but how many working girls do you know who would willing come forward with something like this? We’ll canvas the hot spots anyway.”

“We may not have to,” Abby said. “I got a print. It’s the kid from the mailroom.”

Gibbs shook his head. “That doesn’t really prove anything. He could have been with Tony when he opened the outside package. It’s not unreasonable to think he might have touched it.”

“Uh uh. The print is not on the paper, it’s on the angel. And Tony didn’t open the gift, Kate did. So, unless Kenny’s been opening people’s packages…”

“Even that’s not completely out of reason.”

“Yeah, but the print is… uh, small.”

“Small?”

“It’s definitely Kenny’s print, it’s a ten-point match. But it’s from when he was a lot younger.”

“Where is Kenny now?” Gibbs asked stonily.

“He called in sick,” Abby sighed. “No one’s seen him since yesterday.”
Chapter 5

McGee checked his watch again. It had already been twelve minutes but the last time he’d peeked in the nurse had politely asked him to get lost. He wondered if he was really hovering or if DiNozzo had prompted her. Admittedly, Tony didn’t seem as happy about the actual bed bath as he had been at the idea of one. Just as he was working up the nerve to open the door the elevator at the end of the hall dinged.

Tim gulped apprehensively and held his breath as he prayed Gibbs wouldn’t be the one to step out when the door opened. “Kenny,” he sighed in short-lived relief that waned as soon as he got a good look at the young man.

The kid’s usual fly-away blonde hair was matted to his head with sweat and his ruddy complexion appeared pasty and pale. The long coat he wore was out of place but Kenny seemed to be shivering in spite of it as he stumbled out of the elevator. He breathing was labored as he used the wall to support himself and make his way down the hall towards Tony’s room.

“Kenny?”

“Agent McGee,” Kenny greeted somewhere between a wheeze and a slur. “How is Agent DiNozzo?”

“He’s uh, he’s getting better,” McGee said warily. “On the other hand, you don’t look so hot.”

Kenny stopped a few feet away and smacked his lips as he leaned his forehead against the wall. “Not again,” he whispered as he clutched his abdomen with his left hand. He moaned pitifully and began to pant slightly.

“Are you going to be sick?” McGee asked with concern as he approached, receiving another moan in response. As he got closer, he smelled urine and realized Kenny’s pants were soiled. “Kenny, did you drink hazelnut creamer in your coffee yesterday?”

“Felt bad,” Kenny managed.

“You felt bad after you drank it,” McGee surmised. “We’ve got to get you down to the emergency room.” He tried to slip an arm around Kenny’s waist but the other man balked and pushed him away, almost falling in the process.

“I felt bad about poisoning all those people,” Kenny spat out between ragged breaths as he began to cry.

“Oh Kenny,” McGee said as he pulled out his cell phone. “Why?”

As the tears began to flow Kenny wiped his nose with his sleeve. “Tony was always nice to me,” he sniffled. “He always took the time to speak to me, you know?”

“Sure,” McGee appeased as he hit speed dial.

“A joke or… or a story.”

“I know. That’s DiNozzo, always talking.”

“Sir! You can’t use that in here,” the nurse scolded as she came out of Tony’s room. “It interferes
“Oh, that’s right,” McGee swore as he hung up. “Sorry. Look, this man has been poisoned. We need to get him to the ER right away.”

The nurse took one look at Kenny and ran for the nurses’ station. “I’ll call for a stretcher.”

Kenny used the distraction to lunge for the door behind McGee, clumsily trying to pull a large handgun from his pocket as he did. Tim grabbed his arm and easily put him down. Once he hit the ground Kenny rolled to his side and began to dry heave.

McGee quickly pulled out a handkerchief and used it to secure the weapon, stuffing it into the back of his pants under his suit coat.

“Shoot him,” Kenny begged McGee as the nurse got back and knelt at his side using one hand to push his hair out of his eyes and the other to check his pulse.

“Why, Kenny? Why do you want to kill Tony?”

“I dream of angels,” Kenny whispered, suddenly quiet and still, “but I live with demons.”

“What does that mean?” McGee questioned anxiously as he watched the dull eyes lose focus.

“Kenny?”

“I lost his pulse,” the nurse uttered frantically. “Code one hundred!” she shouted over her shoulder.

McGee got to his feet and stumbled out of the way as hospital staff came running. He stared for another second before pushing open the door and retreating inside to check on Tony.

“What’s going on?” DiNozzo asked worriedly from the chair at the side of the bed.

“Should you be up?” McGee countered as he hastily made his way to the bedside phone.

“It’s okay,” Tony assured sounding more alert than before. “She took out the torture device. She also took away my morphine pump but I gotta tell you it was a fair trade. What’s all the commotion out there?”

“It’s Kenny Black,” McGee said as he dialed NCIS. “He came to kill you.”

“You mean the kid from the mailroom?” Tony asked in confusion. “No way. Kenny likes me… in a hero-worship kind of way.”

McGee cut his eyes back to Tony as he punched in the extension and wasn’t surprised when it was picked up on the first ring. “Gibbs, I think I’ve got the murder weapon.”

***

“Kenny’s dead,” McGee announced as he entered the bullpen late in the afternoon.

Abby looked up from where she sat on the edge of Tony’s desk while she waited for Kate to get off the phone. “I don’t suppose you’re talking about South Park,” she said sadly.

“What’s South Park?” Gibbs asked as McGee shook his head.

“You know, ‘You killed Kenny, you bastard’,” Abby elaborated in a high voice while she made ‘quote’ marks in the air.
Gibbs raised an eyebrow and looked even more confused.

“Ah, it’s an animated TV show, Boss. The character Kenny somehow manages to get killed in almost every episode.”

“And children find that funny?” Gibbs questioned in disgust.

“It’s not actually a kiddy show, Gibbs,” Abby rolled her eyes. “But somehow I don’t think you would enjoy it either. How’s Tony?” she asked as she turned back to McGee.

“Physically he’s fine. The doctor said they’re going to let him go home in a couple of days. I don’t know about emotionally though, he wanted to be alone for awhile. Let’s just say he was surprised to find out Kenny Black was actually Kenneth Godwin.”

“I wonder how that fact slipped by the personnel office,” Gibbs retorted. “How the hell did he even get a security clearance in the first place with a serial killer for a father?”

“I did a little checking up on that. To push the mail cart he only needed a confidential clearance,” McGee explained. “While it’s true he had a limited amount of access to some sealed classified stuff he wasn’t supposed to be opening it. Did you find anything when you searched his apartment?”

“You mean aside from the fact he lived in the same duplex as Junior Silva?”

McGee cringed at how close they’d been. “Yeah, aside from that. Did he kill Perez inside and then just dump the body out back? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Nope, not a drop of blood anywhere,” Gibbs replied as Abby got up and located the remote to the big monitor. “We still don’t have our original crime scene.”

“They did find this in the back of the closet,” Abby said as she punched up a picture of a well worn, flat cardboard container. “There’s still an angel in it but it’s smashed into a million little pieces. It only holds six so we have to assume he discarded the first box after six years. But doesn’t sending the angels seem like an awfully grown up thing for a little kid to do?”

“Well he didn’t start it, he was only nine at the time of the murders,” Kate put in as she hung up the phone. “I just talked to his sister and got the whole story.”

Gibbs smirked. “Kate, we never get the whole story.”

“Do you want to hear it or not?”


“Oh, I can do short. Godwin’s widow became somewhat enamored of the picture in the paper of the young man who caught her cheating, murdering husband and tried to strike up a correspondence with him.”


“Tony sent her a one-time note of condolence and it was enough to encourage her. But after almost a year of sending him letters she finally realized it wasn’t going to get her anywhere so she moved the kids back to Utah to live with her mother. After they settled in she was afraid Tony would forget how important he was to her so she started the angel ritual as a way to keep in touch with him. Kenny and his sister promised to continue sending them after her death four years later. She
treasured the note from Tony so much they buried her with it.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” Abby interrupted again with a lump in her throat. “Tragic, but sweet.”

“Well Grandma Black didn’t think so. In fact, she was so against the whole thing she once threw one of the boxes against the wall breaking two of the angels.”

Abby jumped up and clicked the remote again. “Thus the super glue,” she proclaimed as a picture of the angel came up. “Please note the hairline fracture along the left wing. The glass had recently been cleaned with alcohol but it couldn’t remove the adolescent’s fingerprint embedded in the glue from years before.”

“Good work, Abs.”

“Hey, that was a gimme.”

“Lisa, that’s the sister, said she left the rite up to Kenny after she went away to college,” Kate went on to explain. “She said he was a little obsessed by it anyway.”

“Why the secrecy?” Gibbs asked.

“They didn’t want Grandma to find out. According to Lisa she was a tyrant who made their lives a living hell. After their mother died and she had sole custody she had their last names legally changed to Black. Both kids left home as soon as they finished high school. Lisa says she’s sorry she lost touch with her brother, but he always seemed out of reach anyway.”

“Where is Lisa now? Is there any chance she’s involved in Perez’s murder?”

“No chance. She lives in Kyoto Japan with her businessman husband and hasn’t been to the states in several years.”

“There are too many lose ends,” McGee said to himself.

“What was that McGee?”

“Ah, what was the significance of the uniform? And why did Kenny try to lure us out to the docks in the first place if he already thought Tony was taken care of? And why after all these years did he decide Tony needed to die anyway?”

“He was out of angels?” Abby suggested.

“Gibbs was right,” Kate sighed reluctantly. “With Kenny dead we never will know the whole story. Are you about ready?” she asked Abby as she gathered her things.

“Hey, I’ve been waiting on you.”

“Where are you guys off to?” McGee asked hopefully as they waved and started to the elevator.

“We’re going to drop in on Tony before visiting hours are over,” Abby grinned. “Wanna come with?”

“Pass,” McGee laughed. “I think Tony and I have reached our tolerance levels of each other for one day.”

“Kate, work up a profile on Kenny for me,” Gibbs called after them. “And write up the specifics on the sister.”
“It’ll be on your desk first thing Monday morning,” Kate promised as they got into the elevator.

“So,” Gibbs asked as he turned back to McGee. “How long were you out of the room?”
Chapter 6

Sunday turned out overcast and breezy with a threat of rain, perfect weather for the afternoon agenda Tony thought morosely as he stepped away from the hospital window. He allowed Kate to help him slip his good arm into the jacket of his ‘funeral’ suit. Since his injured arm rested in a sling with the upper portion bound tightly to his torso by a wide elastic and Velcro contraption, the other sleeve hung empty by his side.

“Hold still,” Kate scolded as she pulled out a safety pin and attempted to stick it into the elegant fabric.

“Ow,” Tony complained with a wince as he shrugged away from her. “That’s silk, ya know. That pin’ll leave holes.”

“Well you don’t want the sleeve flapping in the wind do you?”

“No. Why do I have to wear this stupid bondage gear to the service anyway? I can put it back on when I get home.”

“That was the deal, DiNozzo,” Kate sighed in exasperation, finally losing patience with his constant fidgeting and increasingly sour disposition. “The only reason they’re letting you go is because you promised to keep the sling and swathe in place. I guarantee they’re not gonna let you walk out of here without it.”

“Just tuck the sleeve into the pocket,” Abby suggested as a compromise from her perch on the bed where she’d watched Kate practically dress their uncharacteristically somber friend in the clothes they’d brought him from home. “It’s a cool look. It gives you a certain one-armed-man/James Bond mystic.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, straightening his shoulders as he studied his reflection in the bathroom mirror through the open door. Abby and Kate took the opportunity to roll their eyes and exchange knowing grins.

“Oh yeah,” Abby assured with a playful leer. “I’d do ya.”

“I wouldn’t,” Kate put in with a wicked grin as she turned him back around and tucked the sleeve in before adjusting his tie. “But that’s only because I know you. You do look nice.”

“Thank you, Abby,” Tony said, pointedly ignoring Kate’s mockery.

Satisfied with her work Kate looked around as she moved towards the door. “Well you’re all packed. I’ll see about putting a rush on your discharge papers.”

“Try to sneak me out without the wheelchair,” Tony instructed as he stepped into the bathroom to examine his tie up close in the mirror, unhappy with the knot but unable to do anything about it with only one hand.

“Yeah, right,” Kate scoffed, opening the door. “Good luck with that… oh, hello,” she interrupted herself as she nearly ran into the raised fist preparing to knock.

“Hi,” the dark-haired man greeted with an embarrassed smile as he lowered his hand. “I remember you. Kate, right?”
“That’s right,” Kate confirmed flirtatiously as she smoothed her skirt then held her hand out to him. “You’re the guy who saved Tony.”

“I wouldn’t that say I saved him,” the paramedic stammered self-consciously as he shook her hand. “I’m uh, Mike. Michael Redding actually but everyone calls me…”

“Doc!” Tony called out with a genuine smile as he came out of the bathroom and ushered his visitor further into the room.

“Hey, Tony, I’ve been meaning to come by and see how you were doing. I guess the dress code got really strict around here,” Doc teased as he squeezed Tony’s left elbow and checked out the formal suit.

“They’re springing me a little early so I can go to the funeral of a colleague,” Tony explained, his smile fading as he fingered his tie again.

“Oh yeah, I heard about that when they told me you’d been poisoned. You guys live dangerously I guess.”

“Hello,” Abby butted in as she got off the bed and joined them, her simple black dress blending in a little more than usual with Kate and Tony’s dark clothing. She sidled up next to Doc and gave him a hug. “I’m Abby. Thanks for taking care of Tony for us. Under fire no less.”

“Just doin’ my job, ma’am,” Doc grinned shyly.

“Ma’am,” Abby giggled as she lowered her arm to rest around his back. “He called me ma’am. That’s so cute.”

“Yeah,” Kate agreed with an adoring grin at the handsome newcomer until Tony reached up to loosen his tie. “Leave it alone,” she warned as she swatted his hand away. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. It’s crap. And I thought you were going to get my discharge papers,” Tony prompted irritably. “We’re gonna be late.”

“Why you ungrateful…” Kate stopped mid-rant and spared a smile for Doc. “I’ll just be a minute,” she assured sweetly, cutting her eyes at Tony one last time before slipping out the door.

Tony stared after her for a minute before excusing himself to the bathroom to remove the tie in peace in front of the mirror.

“Are you Tony’s girlfriend?” Doc inquired, politely extricating himself from Abby’s lingering clutches.

“God no,” Abby exclaimed as she reluctantly released him. “Tony’s not real big on monogamy. Come to think of it, neither am I. We work together.”

“Oh,” Doc replied thoughtfully. “So. He seems a little uptight. Is everything okay?”

“I think he’s feeling a little survivor’s guilt,” Abby guessed ruefully. “Especially today.”

“He can still hear you,” Tony grumbled from the bathroom.

“Let me,” Doc told Abby quietly as he followed Tony into the small lavatory. “Need a hand?” he asked, meeting Tony’s inquisitive gaze in the mirror.

With a sigh of frustration Tony dropped his hand to rest on the sink and nodded. “Yeah,” he
admitted. “I do. Kate’s not that great with ties and Abby’s earlier attempt… frankly, it looked a lot like a noose.”

Doc laughed as he reached over Tony’s shoulders and took the ends of the silky material in hand and used the reflection to guide his fingers. “Around the tree once, twice, and into the rabbit hole,” he muttered to himself before gently tightening the new knot into a perfect square. “There. I’m surprised your boss didn’t show up to help.”

“Gibbs? Nah, Gibbs doesn’t do funerals,” Tony explained offhandedly as he smoothed down the tie and awkwardly buttoned his jacket. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Hey listen, I gotta go but I’d really like to buy you a beer sometime, one hero to another.”

Tony bit back a harrumph as he turned around to face Doc in the cramped room. “I’m nobody’s hero,” he said thickly.

“That’s not the way I heard it,” Doc insisted as he pulled out a card and stuck it into Tony’s breast pocket. “Besides, you owe me one, right? Call me.”

“I will,” Tony agreed with a sincere nod. “Thanks again.”

As he lowered himself into the chair he managed a cocky smile. “What? Again?” he joked. “Don’t these women ever get enough?”

***

Tony knew he was awake but the eccentric surroundings combined with the Percocet he’d taken just prior to the funeral gave the atmosphere a surreal air. Thankfully Kate and Abby had finally stopped hovering over him, although he could easily pick out their voices along with a few others he recognized amongst the din of conversations in the more crowded dining room and kitchen behind him. He smiled slightly as he caught the end of one of Ducky’s well-known tales. Truthfully, the last place Tony ever thought he’d find himself was in Margo Camp’s sitting room. Still wearing his sunglasses, which he’d kept on in spite of the fine drizzle of rain throughout the graveside service, he glanced around at the overdone, flamboyant, and yet somehow classy digs. Margo’s décor proved to be a lot like the woman herself Tony decided as he sat the untouched paper plate of food Kate had insisted on fixing for him on the edge of the coffee table. He felt somewhat queasy and really just wanted to lie down somewhere.

An elderly woman snoozed on the other end of the overstuffed sofa in the relatively quiet corner and an obviously pampered Pomeranian occupied the middle cushion. Tony watched in fascination as the dog stretched its snout far enough to sniff Tony’s discarded food without actually bothering to get up.

“She liked you,” a woman with a slimmer, younger version of Margo’s facial features and the same bottled-red hair said, appearing unexpectedly at Tony’s elbow.

“Sorry?” Tony asked, taken aback as he realized Margo’s daughter was speaking to him. He blinked and tried to focus his wandering attention from the malleable dog to her.
“I just wanted to thank you for coming today, Agent DiNozzo. My mother spoke of you often and fondly. She would have been so honored to have you here.”

Grateful for the sunglasses as his eyes began to sting again Tony swallowed compulsively then cleared his throat. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” he managed to say softly. “Margo was something else.”

“Yep, God certainly broke the mold after he made Mom,” the doppelganger laughed tearfully. She took Tony’s good hand in hers and leaned in to buss his cheek with the same pushy, overly-familiar manner that was so patently Margo.

“I wouldn’t quite say that,” Tony smiled gently, squeezing her hand and thinking how dominant Margo’s genes must have been to produce such an exact copy of herself.

“Dee Dee, no,” the daughter admonished the dog as it finally snatched a cocktail weenie from the abandoned plate and took off for parts unknown. “Excuse me, if I don’t catch her I’ll never get that barbeque sauce out of the white carpet.”

“Sorry,” Tony called after her culpably as he retrieved his plate a bit too late and held it safely in his lap. He thought of getting up to deposit the now ruined remains in the trash but decided to wait for Kate’s next pass through to check on him.

“Not hungry?” McGee asked a minute later when he joined Tony on the couch.

“Hey, McGee,” Tony greeted tiredly. “Not really. You want it?”

McGee shrugged and accepted the plate before picking out a piece of cheese to nibble on. As he chewed, he frowned slightly and studied Tony’s face.

“What?” Tony asked with a guilty glance at the food.

“You’ve got something on your cheek,” McGee replied as he leaned forward and dabbed at the smear of red next to Tony’s mouth with a napkin. “Lipstick?”

Tony reached up and rubbed the area with his fingertips. “Yeah, well, you know how it is.”

“Sure,” McGee agreed dubiously as he cast his eyes towards the snuffling snores coming from the only other occupant of the couch. “You want to get out of here?”

“What?” Tony asked again dopily.

“I mean you’ve got the perfect excuse,” McGee pointed out, following the cheese with a melon ball on a toothpick, “You just got out of the hospital, nobody expects you to hang around. If you want to go, I’d be glad to take you home.”

A slow, mischievous smile blossomed on Tony’s face. “Giving you the perfect out as well, of course. There’s hope for you yet, Probie,” he approved.

“I learned from the best,” McGee declared earnestly.

“That you did. Let’s blow this pop stand.”

McGee frowned and put his fingers to his lips, pulling out a long, red dog hair. “Yuck,” he declared in disgust.

“Tony? You okay?” Kate asked as she quickly came back into the room when Tony stood up,
obviously having been watching him.

“Not feeling so hot,” Tony told her honestly as he considered sitting back down but held on to McGee to steady himself instead until the lightheadedness passed.

“I’m going to take him home,” McGee told Kate as he tried to hand off the unwanted plate of spoiled goodies to her.

“Oh Tim, that’s so nice of you,” Kate cooed as she levered Tony’s free arm up over her shoulders, easily avoiding taking possession of ‘the plate’, “But his stuff is already in my car. I’ll take him.”

“That’s not necessary,” McGee protested. “You should stay. We can move the stuff, right Tony? Tony?”

“It’s okay, I’ve got you,” Kate assured as she maneuvered DiNozzo around the couch and toward the front door. “Give Abby a ride home, would you Tim? She should be ready to go in another hour or so,” she called back to McGee.

Tony lolled his head back enough as he waited for Kate to open the door for McGee to catch the wink over the top of his shades. “Enjoy the buffet,” Tony said with a grin.

McGee sighed as he looked at the overfilled plate, wondering how to get rid of it without appearing wasteful. He sat down and put the food on the coffee table as he examined it for anything else unsavory. As he resigned himself to eating it there was movement next to him.

“Oh. Weenies,” the little old lady proclaimed, flashing him a hopeful, denture-free smile.
Chapter 7

Kate drove with her usual care but couldn’t help sending frequent sidelong glances toward her uncommunicative passenger. As another mile passed without any wry comments or snide remarks she began to think she’d read Tony wrong at the wake. Maybe he hadn’t just been looking to duck out of the stilted social commitment; maybe he wasn’t as hale and hearty as he’d led everyone to believe. “Do you need another pain pill?” she finally asked solicitously.

“Huh? Oh. No, I’m fine. Besides, they make me feel funny.”

“ Funny strange? Or funny ha ha?” Kate teased. The lame joke elicited a short-lived smirk which made her feel tons better.

“Exactly, ” Tony replied with a touch of his usual playfulness before lapsing back into silence as he turned away from her to watch the passing scenery.

“Did you see Margo’s master bath?” Kate persisted, trying to prolong the dialog, thinking something superficial just might be the ticket. “I swear everything in there was fuzzy or hot pink.”

“Didn’t they teach you in Catholic school not to speak ill of the dead?”

“I wasn’t speaking ill of the dead, ” Kate protested with a defensive huff, not quite sure if the rebuke was meant seriously or not. “I was speaking ill of the dead’s bathroom. There’s a huge difference.”

Tony pursed his lips briefly but didn’t quite smile. “If you say so,” he muttered, sounding unconvinced. He relaxed into the seat and closed his eyes effectively sending the message the conversation was over.

Annoyed at being put off yet again, Kate decided to stop walking on egg shells and take the bull by the horns. Mixed metaphors aside, she released a determined sigh and broached the subject DiNozzo had been evading for days. “None of this is your fault.”

Several seconds passed before Tony sat up and looked at her. “I know.”

“You know?” Kate asked, completely surprised by the softly spoken reply.

“Yeah,” Tony admitted gruffly. “Intellectually I know that I didn’t really do anything wrong.”

“But emotionally…”

It was Tony’s turn to sigh. “Margo’s dead. Kenny’s dead. Two of my co-workers are still in the hospital and one of them will probably be on dialysis for the rest of his life.”

“You were poisoned, too, Tony. It all happened so fast. There wasn’t anything you could have done to protect the others.”

“Twelve years is fast?” Tony argued, waving her reassurances away impatiently with his hand. “All that time I never saw this coming.”

“Exactly,” Kate echoed Tony’s earlier proclamation in a perfect imitation as she pulled into a parking spot in front of his apartment. “Nothing terrible happened in all that time. You had no reason to expect anything unpleasant to happen. Hindsight is 20/20; foresight isn’t unless you
happen to be psychic.”

Tony turned to her and managed a fairly convincing smile. “Thanks for the ride,” he said, shutting the argument down once and for all.

“I’m not just kicking you out at the curb,” Kate advised him as she put the car in park but left the engine running. “You’re going to need some help.”

“Aw, Kate, I’d invite you up but the place is a mess.”

“I’ve already seen it once today. I came with Abby to get your suit, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Tony mused as he glanced up at the building.

“And I have to say I was pleasantly surprised. It wasn’t nearly the bachelor pad I was expecting.”

“You liked my genuine imitation tiger-skin bedspread. What’d you think of the mirror over the bathtub? Tell me the truth. Is the disco ball in the kitchen too much?”

Kate laughed and shook her head at the colorful exaggerations. “You’ve got a nice place, Tony. Come on, I’ll help you change.”

“Not that I wouldn’t love to get naked with you again,” Tony hedged as he opened his door. “It’s just not necessary. Some of my neighbors have already set up a schedule to look after me.”

“Oh really,” Kate inquired dubiously, getting out and grabbing Tony’s carryall from the backseat. “Let me guess, female neighbors?”

“Well, yeah. What can I say? They like having a ‘cop’ around. And the lady next door used to be a nurse’s aid so she can help me with dressing changes and the sling-from-hell.”

Tony suppressed a grimace as he levered himself out of the car, timing the move while Kate was coming around the car so she wouldn’t see the effort it took. “I’ll be fine,” he told her as he straightened his jacket then pulled his bag out of her grip.

“If you need anything…”

“I’ll call,” Tony promised as he started up the walk, stopping half way to look back. “You could always go back to the wake. I know Abby’s still there, she loves those things. McGee will be lucky to get her out of there by midnight.”

“Abby is kind of strange sometimes,” Kate agreed.

“Sometimes? You’re not much of a profiler,” Tony teased as he went up the steps and into the building.

Kate didn’t smile but she didn’t throw anything at Tony’s back before he disappeared inside either.

***

Tony frowned when he found his front door unlocked. He let himself in and set his carryall down next to the couch before moving to the kitchen, pausing only long enough to sniff the delicious aroma wafting in the air.

“Mrs. Bornemeier, what have I told you about locking the door?” he scolded gently as he slipped in behind the full-bodied woman to try to get a peek at what was in the oven.
“Anthony! You’re home,” his neighbor greeted, turning to pull him to her ample bosom for a maternal hug.

“Yeah, what if I’d been a rapist and murderer?”

“Then I would have beaten you to death with this leg of lamb. Or Mister Bornemeier would run off with a sweet young thing until the insurance money ran out.”

“Either way I’d never get the blood out of the carpet. So please,” Tony said, making his oft repeated plea. “For my peace of mind, lock the door when you’re alone. The city is a dangerous place.”

“Such a worry wart,” Mrs. Bornemeier scoffed as she kissed his forehead then turned him toward the bedroom. “Now let’s get you out of this nice suit and into something more comfortable.”

“Oh you romantic, you,” Tony joked, earning a fond swat to the rear end.

“Don’t get fresh with me, young man. I’ll snap you in half.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tony smiled tiredly as he allowed himself to be propelled along.

***

Abby entered the bullpen with an air of exuberated exhaustion about her. Tired but still on a caffeine high after a particularly rough all-nighter, she smiled as she spotted three-fourths of her favorite team working diligently at their desks. “So Kate, how’s our injured boy?” she inquired as she plopped unceremoniously into Tony’s vacant chair.

“I don’t know,” Kate admitted a little guiltily. “I haven’t seen him since I took him home after the funeral.”

“But that was two days ago,” Abby protested. “I would have looked in on him myself but I got slammed first thing yesterday morning and only caught up just now.”

“I wanted to go over last night but he made it pretty clear he didn’t want me hanging around.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Either he didn’t want to talk and thought I might push him…”

“Now why would DiNozzo think that?” Gibbs interrupted sarcastically as he continued to type.

“Or,” Kate went on, shooting an annoyed glance at the top of her boss’ head, “He didn’t want me interacting with his little harem. Maybe he thought I’d scare them off.”

“Harem?” Gibbs actually laughed as he finally looked up.

“Yeah, apparently the ladies in his building have joined together to nurse him through his convalescence.”

“And he called them his ‘harem’?”

“Well, no. That’s just what came to mind,” Kate confessed sheepishly. “I just assumed he has a bevy of Barbie dolls waiting on him hand and foot. You don’t think he was lying about having someone to take care of him to throw me off, do you?”
“God. He’s probably been all alone, in pain, eating ravioli out of the can,” Abby jumped in fretfully. “If he’s even able to open a can one handed at all,” she added, pantomiming the difficult task comically, but sincerely.

“Unless he’s got an electric can opener,” McGee suggested from his desk.

“We should all go over there at lunch and take him something to eat,” Kate decided, checking her watch.

“He’s so helpless he’s probably still in his dress shirt from the funeral. Poor guy,” Abby cooed as she absently put her feet up on his desk.

“Relax,” Gibbs huffed with an amused shake of his head. “Tony’s fine. He’s clean, well-fed, and spoiled rotten.”

“You went to see him,” Kate accused, narrowing her eyes as she left the ‘and didn’t tell us’ unspoken.

“I dropped in last night for a few minutes and I can assure you, he doesn’t need anything. There’s a cat fight brewing every time he even looks like he might want something.”

“He really does have a harem,” McGee muttered almost enviously as he logged on to the network and made a few keystrokes. “This can’t be right,” he replied to himself as he read the information on the screen. “This says Tony’s building is a rent-controlled, sixty-five and older community.”

“We should still go see him at lunch,” Abby insisted, giving Kate her best puppy dog eyes.

“I guess we should,” Kate agreed before turning abruptly to McGee. “Wait a minute. Did you say over sixty-five?”

“For retirees, it’s even got a seal of approval from AARP.”

“So his Barbie dolls are…”

“Grandmothers,” McGee replied. “I would expect so, yes.”

Kate harrumphed in surprise. “I don’t get it. Why would a swinger like Tony choose to live among a bunch of…”

“I just know you’re not going to say ‘old people’,” Gibbs growled.

“Of course not, I was going to say grownups.”

“Uh huh,” Gibbs uttered, unconvinced.

“I was just thinking from Tony’s point of view. And I really don’t get it.”

“Did I mention rent-controlled?” McGee asked acerbically. “But I’m sure it’s a sub-lease, probably on the up and up. I mean, I’m sure it is. Tony wouldn’t do anything underhanded or…” he paused at the three incredulous looks aimed at him. “Oh, right. Probably best not to dig too deep,” he replied as he quickly logged off.

Abby rolled her eyes and turned back to Kate. “Tony’s not stupid. Who would you rather live with? A group of beautiful but self-centered young women who take, take, take? Or… “ Abby paused dramatically, “A group of mature, giving women who just want to baby you because you are young and beautiful.”
“And self-centered,” Kate added. “You’re good.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t shit where you eat,” Gibbs theorized succinctly.

“Or that,” Abby agreed with an energetic nod of her head.

McGee looked confused. “Huh?”

“If he lives in the middle of a bunch of women his own age…”

“Or younger,” Gibbs put in.

“Or younger,” Kate agreed with a wince, “He runs the risks of one of his dating fatalities and he still has to live there. This way, after an ugly break up he gets to keep his happy home. Consider his neighbors’ ages insurance.”

“Or maybe he just lives there because the place is rent-controlled,” McGee persisted stubbornly.

“I guess you can’t get better care than from a bunch of grannies,” Kate sighed. “If I know DiNozzo, he’s eating it up.”

“Yeah. We’ll never get him back,” Abby stated with finality.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Gibbs said with a knowing smirk. “Give him another day. He’ll be begging to come back to work just to get away from them.”

***

“Just about ready,” Kate said when Abby showed up at her desk again several hours later. She saved her work then logged off the computer and began to straighten her things. “You look refreshed.”

“Yeah, I caught ten winks in my lab.”

“Just ten?” Gibbs asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Young bodies and minds don’t need as much downtime, Gibbs,” Abby teased. “But you probably don’t remember back that far.”

Gibbs sent her the low beam version of his usual glare which only earned him a delighted grin in return. “Gibbs,” he grunted into the phone, snagging it on the first ring.

Kate holstered her weapon and ushered Abby towards the elevator.

“Tell Tony I said hi,” McGee called after them.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with?” Abby inquired, verging on a whine as the elevator dinged and the doors opened to an empty car.

“Kate!” Gibbs shouted. “Belay that.” He grabbed his gun and tossed McGee the keys to the truck. “It looks like Kenny had another victim.”
“Oh my God, that smell.” Kate reached into her pack for the Vapo-rub and smeared a dab under her nose before offering the jar to McGee. Without Tony around to comment, Tim dipped a finger in as well. Already knowing what Gibbs’ answer would be she put it away and hurried to catch up.

“This look familiar?” Gibbs asked as he glanced back down the narrow alley formed by the long rows of storage units before carefully scanning the rooftops across the road for any possible threats.

“That does,” Kate sighed as she nodded towards the slight form in the oversized Navy dungarees on the floor of the open unit.

Ducky looked up and sadly shook his head. “Rigor has come and gone. From the decomposition I’d say the poor lad has been dead approximately two weeks.”

“And in all that time nobody noticed that rank odor?” Gibbs asked in disbelief.

“There’s a dump just the other side,” an obviously shook-up man replied from his seat on the bumper of a nearby ambulance. “Everybody assumed it was a dead animal. In fact we complained a couple of times but they never found anything.”

For the moment Gibbs accepted the explanation as he wandered over while Kate and McGee went to work. “I take it you found the body?”

The man took a few more deep breaths from the oxygen mask then pulled it away from his face. “Yeah. Lucky me.”

“And you are?”

“Lester Brown. I work here.”

“Who rented this space?”

“That’s just it. Nobody did. This one was supposed to be empty. When I leased it out this morning the lady came back all mad. She said it was already taken and if she couldn’t get a unit on the side away from the trash dump she didn’t want it anyway. I came down and cut off the lock off after she left.”

“You’re telling me that for two weeks no one noticed the extra lock.”

“Look, we got three hundred and fifteen storage units, any number of which are rented and vacated every day. Since customers use their own locks new ones pop up all the time. You think we got ’em memorized by sight which one is rented and which one ain’t?” Lester asked a little hysterically.

“Easy,” Gibbs soothed, giving the man a second before pushing on. “I see the gate has an automatic opener for after hours. How does that work?”

“The customer gets the code when they sign the lease. Then they can come and go as they please.”

“How often does the code change?”

Lester looked confused. “It doesn’t.”
“So anyone who has ever rented a unit from you can get in here anytime they want,” Gibbs sighed.

“Why would anyone want to do that?”

“I don’t know,” Gibbs replied curtly. “To dump a body?”

With a contrite nod Lester put his oxygen mask back on and lowered his head.

“There’s a surveillance camera on each aisle, Boss, but they don’t appear to be connected to anything,” McGee reported as he rounded the side of the ambulance. “They might be wireless though, I’ll have to check.”

“Dummies?” Gibbs asked Lester in disgust. At the confirming nod, Gibbs led McGee back to the scene. “Don’t bother. The security around here leaves something to be desired. How’s Ducky doing?”

“I’m done for now,” Ducky answered for himself as he rose to his feet. “We’ll load up when Kate finishes her photos.”

Gibbs scowled at the swollen, discolored face of the victim. “You said lad.”

“Yes,” Ducky confirmed. “No more than fifteen or sixteen I’d say. And he certainly fits the physical profile of the earlier victims.”

“Cause of death?”

Ducky rolled his eyes but didn’t object. “Well his throat was cut, but it looks to be superficial, possibly symbolic. I’ll know more when I get him on my table.”

“You always do, Duck, you always do. Take an educated guess. For me.”

“I’d say the bullet to the brain did him in.”

“Was he shot here?” Gibbs asked looking around at the relatively clean floor, already knowing the answer.

“Not a chance.”

“I’m done,” Kate told Ducky as she stood back to let Palmer lay out the body bag.

“Kate, you did an extensive workup on Kenny Black. What do you think?” Gibbs asked as she joined him and McGee just outside the door.

“Well we’ve got the uniform again, this time on someone who was obviously not in the Navy. I’d say without a doubt Kenny’s intent was to draw Tony into the investigation. Especially since the murder happened to coincide with Tony’s supposed birthday.”

“You think he wanted a battle of wits with the guy who caught his father?” McGee asked.

Kate shrugged. “Probably.”

“Yeah, but this guy had already been dead at least a week before Tony got the angel,” Gibbs mused.

“When no one found the body it screwed up his timing,” Kate suggested. “He must have thought in this warm weather someone surely would have reported the smell after a week, give or take a few
days. Since no one did, he had to kill again to put his plan in motion.”

“Perez.”

“Yeah. Killing a real seaman pretty much guaranteed NCIS would be involved. Killing one that looked like Tony, mimicking the original murders would be sure to get his attention. He just had to leave the next one in a more conspicuous place without getting caught.”

McGee scratched his head. “You’re assuming Kenny knew Silva would put Perez’s body somewhere public so we would find it at the right time.”

“Seems like an awful big risk,” Gibbs muttered, shaking his head. “If Silva hadn’t taken the body, someone would have found Perez right there at Kenny’s backdoor step.”

“It’s entirely possible he wanted to get caught,” Kate pointed out. “I mean, the kid really did like Tony for some unknown reason. Maybe deep down he didn’t want to kill him.”

They stepped aside and let Palmer wheel the boy to the coroner’s van. Ducky adjusted his hat and followed.

“Okay, give it the works,” Gibbs instructed his team as he waved a hand at the now empty space. “I want a print, a hair… something that tells us for a fact that Kenny was here. We’re not closing this until we’re sure.”

***

“Try some of my soup, Tony. No, no, mine’s much better, Tony. Oh dear, Tony, let’s get you out of that wet shirt. Like we don’t all know the old bat spilt it on purpose,” Mrs. Bornemeier muttered to herself as she furiously wiped down the kitchen counter.

“Soup,” she huffed indignantly. “They all brought soup. We’re not talking about a cold here, ladies. The boy was shot. He needs something with some substance. Protein, that’s the ticket. Why I thought those biddies would stick to a schedule is beyond me. All that fussing wore Anthony out. I should have put a stop to it long before I did.”

A sudden sound just outside the back door broke Mrs. Bornemeier out of her heated monologue and she froze in place as she raised her head to listen. “Rena, you’re a fool,” she scolded herself when she heard nothing more than her own rapid breathing. She tossed the rag in the sink and made another pass at the assorted cakes, pies, and homemade candies on the table to make sure everything was covered before going home. When she flipped off the light, she heard the sound again. Like someone testing the door knob to see if it was locked.

Her breath caught in her throat as she eased across the dark kitchen to slowly tug the curtain back and peek outside. The sun hadn’t been down long but the big security light seemed to be out, as was the bulb on Anthony’s porch. Odd for the man who insisted everyone else keep their entries well lit and their deadbolts in place. The large shade trees patterned the back stoop in shadows that danced in the light breeze but nothing seemed amiss.

Still a bit uneasy, she considered waking Anthony or calling her husband over but quickly put the kibosh on both ideas. She would not upset either of them with her overactive imagination. Anthony was injured and Bernie hadn’t been up to the role of ‘protector’ in years, which was the reason she kept a Louisville Slugger under her side of the bed. Besides, it was almost time for ‘Law and Order’ and she’d never get Bernie away from the boob-tube until it was over even if he’d seen the episode a dozen times already.
Minutes passed without another sound and finally Mrs. Bornemeier was convinced she’d only been hearing things anyway. Her reaction to the non-incident left her feeling silly and she couldn’t help but blame Anthony for it since he insisted on putting those paranoid thoughts in her head every time she forgot to lock the door. “Get a grip, old woman,” she told herself firmly and let it go.

She untied her apron and folded it, leaving it next to the sink. Tomorrow, she decided, she was going to fix Anthony some lasagna and pour all that damned soup down the drain. Checking on the sleeping man one last time, she made her way to the front door, pausing when she heard female voices in the hall.

“… can still smell it. I think it permanently singed my nose hairs.”

“Oh yeah, the smell of death always lingers.”

Mrs. Bornemeier frowned at the suspicious conversation and quickly yanked the door open. “Can I help you?” she demanded irritably.

Two young women jumped back and the one with the brown hair reached to her side reflexively. Mrs. Bornemeier let her eyes follow the girl’s hand, not surprised to see a holstered gun.

“Uh, sorry. I guess we have the wrong apartment,” the armed one stammered a bit. “Don’t worry about the weapon, we’re federal agents.”

“I’m not,” the girl with the jet-black hair and clothing said. “Well, technically, I sort of am, they just don’t let me carry a gun.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” Mrs. Bornemeier replied as she eyed the Goth ensemble. “Anthony’s already asleep.”

“Oh, we do have the right apartment,” the first girl chirped with a strained smile, tapping the number on the door nervously. “We would have come earlier…"

“Much earlier…”

“But we got tied up at work.”

Remembering her ridiculously unfounded fear Mrs. Bornemeier suddenly welcomed the unexpected company. She stepped aside and gestured the women in. “Would you like some cake? I haven’t seen so much junk food in one place since Harold Harper died.”

“Who’s Harold Harper?”

“Old man lived down the hall. I have to admit, he had a gorgeous funeral. He left Anthony his thimble collection. I don’t know why he doesn’t display it but he’d probably show it to you sometime if you asked.”

Apparently dumbfounded by the one-eighty of her attitude, the girls looked at each other and remained in the hall. “If Tony’s already asleep we don’t want to disturb him,” one of them apologized as they started to back away.

“Nonsense, he’s taken a pain pill. An atomic bomb wouldn’t wake him up right now,” Mrs. Bornemeier insisted. “Come on in, I’ll make coffee.” Pleased as the girls followed her through the living room and into the kitchen, albeit reluctantly, she filled the Mr. Coffee and turned to study them as they settled at the overflowing table. It was nice to finally put faces with the names of some of the people Anthony spoke of so often.
“Holy cow,” the dark-haired girl remarked, lifting a piece of tinfoil here and there to inspect the contents. “Carb heaven.”

“You must be Abby,” Mrs. Bornemeier smiled as she pulled three small plates from the cabinet and set them on the table along with paper napkins, a knife, and three forks. “Anthony’s told me all about you.”

“He has?” Abby asked in surprise. “What’d he say?” she added lowering her voice, primed and ready to be offended.

“Oh honey, lots of things. Mostly he thinks you’re the smartest woman he’s ever met.”

“Really? Aw, that’s so sweet.” Abby’s scowl melted into a grin. She took a plate and began uncovering whatever fell within easy reach before opting for one large bite of everything. “Do you have any soda?”

“Abby!” the other girl rebuked.

“I don’t think so,” Mrs. Bornemeier responded, opening the refrigerator to check. “How about some chocolate milk?”

“Tony drinks chocolate milk?”

“All the time.”

“That sounds good,” Abby agreed as she took an appreciative bite from her heaping plate. “Who are you?”

“I’m Rena. Rena Bornemeier, I live next door.” Mrs. Bornemeier poured a tall glass of milk and set it down on the table before checking on the coffee. “Aren’t you going to eat something, dear?”

“Oh, no, I’m watching my weight,” the too thin woman declared, clearly unnerved by the disapproving once over and haughty sniff from the older woman. “I’m Kate, by the way. I work with Tony.”

“I gathered that. I don’t think Anthony’s ever mentioned you,” Mrs. Bornemeier lied with an evil glint in her eye, knowing full well who the young woman was.

“Never?” Kate asked, seeming a little hurt.

“Not once,” Mrs. Bornemeier replied as she peeled back the cover on a Tupperware bowl and pulled out a chocolaty square which she slowly sank her teeth into. “Mmmm.”

“Is that fudge?”

“Peanut butter fudge.”

“Oh. You know. I did skip lunch. One piece of fudge won’t kill me,” Kate reasoned as she reached into the plastic bowl and helped herself to a nice thick chunk. “Abby,” she gushed after tasting it. “Did you try this? It’s to die for.”

“You think that’s good,” Abby mumbled around a mouthful of cherry pie, “You should try the red velvet cake.”

“Okay,” Kate quickly agreed and cut herself a slice.
Mrs. Bornemeier smiled as she poured two cups of coffee and settled at the table. “Sugar?” she asked Kate sweetly.

“Do you have any Equal?”

“Are you kidding?” Mrs. Bornemeier asked as she stared at the fairly sizable piece of cake Kate was tearing into.

“Black is fine,” Kate muttered demurely, accepting the cup.

“Tony is so spoiled,” Abby swore as she wiped her mouth and looked around for her next taste treat.

“He’s a good man,” Mrs. Bornemeier replied with gentle smile. “When we heard he’d been shot…” she took a shuddering breath before continuing. “Well, we do what we can.”

Kate paused with her fork over her plate. “Can I ask you a personal question, Rena?”

“If I had any sense I’d say no,” Mrs. Bornemeier responded skeptically. “But go ahead. If it’s none of your business, I’ll say so.”

“I’m really not trying to pry,” Kate assured. “I’m just concerned that Tony might be taking advantage of you. Of all of you,” she added, indicating the obvious signs of adoration and devotion on the table.

“Neighbors can’t help neighbors in their time of need?”

“Well,” Kate chortled uncertainly. “I get the feeling this is nothing new. Maybe not on such a grand scale, but…”

“We do try to look after Anthony,” Mrs. Bornemeier interrupted, distinctly unhappy with Kate’s view of things. “I know as a group we keep his fridge full of leftovers. Otherwise I shuddered to think what the man would eat. But he takes care of us, too, in his own way.”

Kate smirked and took another bite. “Somehow I find that hard to believe.”

“Look Agent Todd,” Mrs. Bornemeier said flatly, dropping all pretenses of not being aware of Kate and Tony’s love/hate working relationship. “Last year when my husband had a heart attack Anthony sat with me at the hospital holding my hand and plying me with bad coffee and worse jokes until my daughter could arrive from North Carolina. It took her all night to get there. Then he kissed my cheek and told me everything was going to be okay before trundling off to work to get yelled at for being late.”

“Wow.”

“He’s that way with all of us. From stubborn pickle jars to broken hips, everyone in the building calls Anthony first.”

“I didn’t realize,” Kate said softly. “Who would have thought it? Tony’s a saint.”

“Far from it,” Mrs. Bornemeier disagreed, still a little angry.

“Far, far, far…” Abby expounded. “So why do you always call him Anthony? That seems a little formal.”

“Because he won’t call me Rena.”
“Why not?”

Mrs. Bornemeier suddenly laughed and shook her head at the memory. “I was kind of tough on him when he first moved in. In fact, I tried to get him kicked out but he’d already won over too many of the widows with that handsome face and lethal smile of his. He never lets me forget.”

Kate snorted. “Now that sounds like Tony.”

They made small talk and exchanged some more ‘Tony’ stories as they finished up dessert and had another round of coffee and chocolate milk. Finally, Kate gathered the dirty dishes and moved to the sink to fill it with hot, soapy water, earning back some of the points she’d lost with Mrs. Bornemeier for daring to question Tony’s motives. Abby began to re-cover the food on the table.

“The man who hurt Anthony,” Mrs. Bornemeier asked Kate, inadvertently sending a nervous glance in the direction of the back door. “You caught him, right?”

“Why? Has something happened?” Kate questioned as she picked up on the apprehensive tone.

“No. It’s nothing. I’ll just sleep better knowing Anthony is safe.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Kate assured, turning back to the dishes with a relieved sigh. “The man who shot Tony is in custody awaiting trial. He’ll be in prison for a long, long time.”

“And the one who poisoned him is dead,” Abby put in.

“Poisoned?” Mrs. Bornemeier gasped. “We didn’t know he’d been poisoned.”

“Oops.”

“I read in the paper about the poisoning deaths at the NCIS offices, the woman and the young man. I knew some more people were sent to the hospital but I had no idea Anthony was involved in that, too. He never said.”

“He probably didn’t want to cause you any unnecessarily concern,” Kate guessed. “Don’t be mad at him.”

Mrs. Bornemeier wordlessly brushed past her and moved down the short hall to Tony’s bedroom door. She pushed it open and stood there watching him sleep, covering her mouth with her hand when the girls came up behind her.

“See? He’s fine,” Kate whispered as she patted Mrs. Bornemeier’s back.

Abby slipped an arm around the older woman from the other side and leaned her head against her shoulder. “He looks so cute when he’s snoozing.”

“You think so?” Kate asked, turning her head slightly to get another angle. Sprawled on his back with the hated sling and swathe over a white tee shirt, Tony hung on to a pillow with his other arm and half buried his face in it. One bare foot stuck out of the rumpled sheets. “I guess he does have a certain… innocence about him when he’s asleep. But I thought he always slept in the nude.”

Both Abby and Mrs. Bornemeier turned to look at her.

“Uh… Guantanamo? There was a big lizard and, uh, a chair… eventually. Never mind.”

“Oh. Right.” Abby pouted as she remembered what Gibbs had dubbed ‘the iguana affair’. “That thing probably chaffs without anything under it,” she said a second later, lifting her chin to indicate
the elastic brace.

“I would think so,” Mrs. Bornemeier agreed with a nod.

“So… under the sheet? Is he…” Abby trailed off as she eyed the blue linens in the dim light.

Mrs. Bornemeier shrugged mischievously.

“Abby, no!” Kate objected as her friend quietly approached the bed.

Abby shushed her with a finger to her lips as she lifted the corner of the sheet and took a gander.

“Oh.”

“Nomoresoup,” Tony muttered in his sleep as he rolled onto his uninjured side.

“That’s right, hon, we’re all out of soup,” Abby told him softly, lowering the cover before kissing his forehead and moving back out to the hall.

“Well?” Kate asked expectantly.

“Thank you so much for having us,” Abby said to Mrs. Bornemeier, ignoring Kate’s inquiry.

“Any time, dear. Anthony’s place is your place.”

“Abby?”

“If you wanna know, Kate, you’re just gonna have to go look yourself,” Abby grinned wickedly.

Kate harrumphed and stormed past her into the livingroom.

“Boxers,” Abby sighed in mock disappointment.

“You know it, sister,” Mrs. Bornemeier said with a wink. They turned off the lights and followed Kate out, locking the front door behind them.
“Hey, Tony,” Kate greeted, surprised but pleased to see her co-worker casually enter the bullpen and amble over to his desk. “We dropped by to see you last night but you’d already gone to bed.”

“I heard,” Tony said with an impish grin. Dressed in nice slacks and a button down shirt he looked like it might be any other afternoon at work except for the sling.

“Does Rena know you’re out?”

“Who do you think orchestrated my escape?” Tony joked as he slipped the handle of the picnic basket he carried off his arm and set it on his desk to go through. “She didn’t want to come in but she sent snacks. Call Abby.”

Kate punched in the lab extension and waited a second for an answer. “Tony’s here,” she sing-songed into the phone. “Abby? Huh. She hung up on me so I assume she’s on her way.”

“Let’s see, this one is earmarked especially for you,” Tony said as he read the note on top of what looked like a tin-foiled brick. He crumpled the piece of paper and shoved it into his pocket then met a curious Kate halfway as she got up to take it.

“It’s fudge, isn’t it?” Kate asked, hefting the weight then sniffing it. “That woman is pure evil.”

“Oh, that she is,” Tony chuckled as he continued to empty the basket out onto his desk.

McGee came around the corner and stopped in mild bemusement. “Tony.”

“Yo, Probie. You like apple pie?” Tony asked as he picked up a Saran wrapped paper plate. “No, you’re probably more of a cherry man.”

“What?”

“Here. Take ’em both. Don’t worry, I guarantee there’s no dog hair,” Tony assured as he handed them over.

“Thanks.”

“Now cat hair… eh, I can’t make any promises.”

Not particularly comforted, McGee frowned as he studied one piece of pie and then the other before taking them back to his desk.

“Tony!” Abby squealed, exiting the elevator before the doors were even open all the way. She flew across the room causing Tony to flinch as he braced for the impact. Luckily she slammed on the brakes as she reached him and carefully put her arms around his neck for a nice civilized hug.

“Hi, Abs.”

“Did Mrs. Bornemeier tell you we came by?”

“She sure did. In fact, she told me everything.”

Abby paused for a beat to exchange a nervous glance with Kate. “Everything? As in everything?”
“Everything.”

Abby grimaced guilty and Kate ducked her head to put all her energy into opening the brick. The foil suddenly tore and most of the fudge ended up in her lap. She swore under her breath and grabbed a Kleenex to stack the runaway candy on, nibbling on the broken pieces as she went.

“What’s ‘everything’?” McGee asked innocently.

“Never mind,” Tony and Abby answered at the same time while sharing a conspiratory look that swore each other to secrecy.

“What’d you bring?” Abby abruptly changed the subject. She put a hand on Tony’s back as she perused the assortment of sugar and fat scattered around his desk.

“Got any more of that fudge?” Gibbs asked as he pushed in between them to see for himself.

“Hey, Boss, I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Obviously. Is my calendar broken? I could have sworn you weren’t supposed to be back in the office until next week.”

“Just visiting,” Tony said, holding up his hand. “Thought I’d check my e-mail, pick up my car…”

“Have you been cleared to drive?” McGee interrupted.

“Yes, I’m clear to drive,” Tony answered irritably. “I’m not taking any pain meds except at night now. Otherwise I’d sleep all the time.” He rounded his desk and pulled out the chair.

“Where are we on the case?”

“Nice try, DiNozzo,” Gibbs cut him off. “Don’t bother to sit down. The director doesn’t want you to have any further involvement in this one.”

“Can I at least get an update?” Tony asked, letting out an exasperated breath.

The brief standoff was broken as Abby grabbed a couple random desserts. “Kenny had another vic before Perez but he wasn’t found until yesterday,” she supplied quickly then bolted for the stairs.

“See ya, Tony. Love you. Mean it!”

“Abby,” Gibbs barked, but the rebuke only sped her getaway.

“Another sailor?” Tony asked as he turned back to Gibbs in shock.

“No, Ducky thinks the kid was probably a runaway, but we haven’t been able to ID him yet,” Kate reported as she pretended not to notice Gibbs’ glare. “He was also sexually assaulted then dressed in a surplus uniform postmortem.”

“The MO was a combination of the old murders and Perez,” McGee picked up the thread then bit his lip as he sent a worried glance in Gibbs’ direction.

“Go on,” Gibbs assented grumpily.

“Ducky compared the wounds of the second guy and found them to be a close match with Godwin’s first kill, except for the execution-style gunshot wound to the head. Ballistics matched the bullet to the gun I took off Kenny at the hospital.”

“Kenny was reenacting his father’s crimes,” Tony muttered softly. “I wouldn’t have thought he’d
“Maybe adding the gun to the scenario gave him that extra little bit of confidence,” Kate guessed.

“Yeah, but confident enough to overpower the vic then rape and kill him? Not to mention a military man trained in hand to hand combat.”

“Finger prints on the lock and outside the door of the storage unit where the kid was found put Kenny at the scene,” Kate pointed out. “Of course there were dozens of other prints as well but it is a public place.”

“I don’t know.” Tony shook his head uneasily. “It just seems too tidy. I smell a setup.”

“What else would you do?” Gibbs asked Tony solemnly.

“I’d interview Silva again. Evidently he was privy to a side of Kenny we weren’t. Maybe he was in on it.”

Gibbs nodded his approval. “Set that up,” he instructed Kate.

“Yeah, good,” Tony agreed. “Let’s do it.”

“Not you, DiNozzo. The only place you’re going is home.”

“But Gibbs…”

“Ah!” Gibbs held up a finger and gave Tony a stern look that broached no further argument.

“Fine,” Tony huffed petulantly as he started to load the remaining food back into the basket. “Let me know if I can be of any help.”

“Don’t worry, we will.”

Tony slid the handle onto his arm and turned to leave. “What about Kenny’s memorial service?” he stopped to inquire.

“There’s not going to be one, at least not here,” McGee provided regretfully. “When the final paper work on the autopsy is complete the body is supposed to be shipped back to Utah. The sister made arrangements for him to be buried beside his mother.”

With a sigh and a nod of understanding, Tony made his way to the elevator. “Kate has all the fudge,” he called over his shoulder.

Kate stifled a wary yelp by cramming another bite into her mouth when Gibbs turned on her like a cat stalking prey.

***

Gibbs hadn’t specifically told him not to go to the morgue Tony reasoned as he got off the elevator in the basement. He’d only told him to go home. Not straight home. And Ducky did have a bit of a sweet tooth. He pushed open the door and spotted the coroner’s assistant hovering over a body on the far side of the room.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Tony called out as he deposited the basket on the first table. He froze when he realized just who Palmer was working on. “I thought the autopsy would already be finished,” he said a little shakily.
“Hello Agent DiNozzo,” Palmer greeted with a shy smile. “It is. But the funeral home is sending someone to pick him up soon so Doctor Mallard asked me to clean the… uh, clean Kenny up a little.”

“Isn’t that their job?” Tony asked past the lump in his throat.

“Yeah, but… one of our own,” Palmer said quietly, glancing up as his boss entered the room.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed in the same tone. He moved closer and frowned as he saw the myriad of scars on the pale skin. “He was into cutting?”

“Doubtful,” Ducky replied, appearing at Tony’s elbow. “Although I did think of self-mutilation first, some of the scars are in places he simply would not be able to reach unless he was an extremely flexible contortionist. Some are a bit older, but none terribly deep.”

“Painful but not deadly.”

“And then there are these.” The older man indicated the closest wrist.

“Ligature marks.”

“Mmm,” Ducky hummed in agreement.

“Does Gibbs know about this?”

“Yes, but since young Kenneth never reported any abuse nor was ever found dead in a storage facility, we have to assume this was consensual. Whatever the case, the mistreatment was long term, over at least six months but probably not more than a year. Perhaps that’s what finally pushed him into violence.”

Tony let out a long, slow breath then began to back towards the door. “Good to see you Ducky. Jimmy.”

“Are you all right?” Ducky called after him worriedly. “I haven’t seen you since the funeral.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“What about your wicker thing?” Palmer asked helpfully.

“There’s some stuff in it for you guys,” Tony hedged, finally making it to the door. “Just hang on to the basket for me, will you? It’s not mine.”

“No problem,” Palmer assured but Tony had already fled. “I didn’t think Agent DiNozzo was the squeamish type,” he commented mildly as he got back to work.

“I believe his reaction was of a more personal nature,” Ducky sighed as he made his way to the basket to take a peek inside. “Oh my! Come into my office when you’re finished with Kenny,” he invited delightedly then absconded with the goods.

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After pushing the button to take him back up to the ground floor, Tony leaned against the wall of the elevator and briefly closed his eyes. “I need a beer,” he muttered out loud.

He checked his watch and saw it was almost five o’clock. Still, Kate and McGee and especially Gibbs would not be going home any time soon he was sure. And Abby’s idea of a friendly drink
frightened him a little. Not one to imbibe alone, inspiration hit him and he fished out his wallet to find the card he had put there. “Michael Redding,” he read.

When the doors opened he nodded to several people he knew by sight and headed to the exit. Once outside he flipped open his cell and dialed the number. While he waited for it to connect he pulled out the crumpled piece of paper in his front pocket. He grinned at Mrs. Bornemeier’s bold script: ‘For the skinny, nosy one’. The phone rang three times and just as Tony was about to give up someone answered.

“Doc?” Tony asked, shoving the note back into his pocket. “Hey, it’s Tony DiNozzo. How about that drink?”
Feeling like he was on display, Tony fidgeted with the nearest bowl of peanuts when Doc excused himself to go to the restroom. He realized he hadn’t just been imagining the wicked glee in Doc’s voice when he’d said he knew the perfect place to go for a drink. And it really was a nice bar; clean, cozy, quiet. But Tony couldn’t help noticing all the patrons appeared to be men, and some of them paid a little more attention to him than he was strictly comfortable with. Luckily the only woman in the place also took a liking to him and hovered incessantly.

He wasn’t actually hungry but the difficulty he was having removing the roasted peanuts from their shells made Tony want them just that much more. Even though he knew darn well he’d be force fed something as soon as he got home, he intensified his efforts, stopping just short of using his teeth. In a final burst of frustration he smacked one especially stubborn legume with the side of his fist which sent it skittering across the tabletop and into the floor.

“Poor baby,” the waitress cooed as she watched. She leaned over him to grab a handful from the bowl and unhurriedly released seeds from husks with long, blood-red fingernails. All the while her abundant cleavage hung provocatively in Tony’s face.

“Thanks, uh, Lola,” Tony said with an appreciative smile, pulling back just far enough to read her nametag. “Considering the clientele here, I guess you don’t get hit on much while you work,” he added flirtatiously.

“Oh honey, it’s hell on tips. Some days it’s not even worth the trouble to wear a push-up bra,” Lola proclaimed in a voice just a tad too deep.

Tony blinked and took a swig of his room-temperature beer, making a face as he swallowed. He glanced past Lola to see Doc come out of the restroom. Another man stopped him next to the payphones and they had a brief, apparently friendly conversation.

“Another cold one, sweetie?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Tony muttered, handing over the bottle he’d been nursing for almost an hour, “And another for my friend.”

“Friend. Right,” Lola commented as she gathered Doc’s empty and sashayed away.

In the meantime, Doc finished up his tête-à-tête and made his way back to the table.

“Did you get his number?” Tony asked as he popped a couple of the shelled peanuts into his mouth.

“Did you get hers?”

“No. She was just cracking my nuts.”

“Sorry I missed that,” Doc deadpanned, helping himself to some of Tony’s hard-won peanuts. “And yeah, I got his number, but only after I assured him he didn’t stand a chance with you.”

“What?” Tony laughed.

“Broke his heart when I told him you were straight. I’m not quite sure he believed me, what with you hanging out in a gay bar and all.”
“Yeah, about that… Why did you bring me here anyway?”

Doc shrugged and looked around for his beer. “I don’t know, you’re kind of like a puppy; cute enough to draw ’em in, but no real competition when it comes down to it.”

“It was a test wasn’t it? To see if I’d balk.”

“I guess,” Doc admitted. “Look NCIS may be primarily civilian but they tend to be pretty damned indoctrinated into the military way of thinking.”

“You were in the Army yourself,” Tony pointed out.

“No shit. That was eight long years of denying who I was. It was hell. I don’t hide anymore.”

“Good for you. But you could have just told me.”

“What fun would that have been?” Doc grinned cheekily as Lola arrived with the next round.

Tony paid this time and included a generous tip. Lola lingered for a minute, chatting them up and playing with Tony’s hair before the bartender insisted she ‘get her ass back to work’.

“Did I pass?” Tony asked when Lola was gone, raising his beer and tilting it toward Doc in question.

“Well Lola likes you,” Doc answered wryly. He tapped his bottle against Tony’s. “Bottom’s up.”

“Lola likes everybody,” Tony groused as he took a sip.

“You actually gonna drink this one?” Doc teased.

“No,” Tony sighed as he set the bottle back down. “I mean I thought I was in the mood for a drink when I called you. But now that we’re here I realize alcohol’s not gonna make me feel any better. The company’s nice though. At least you haven’t brought up dentures, support stockings, or hemorrhoid cream. Yet.”

“Oookay,” Doc drawled, choking a bit on his beer. “I’ll remember to mark those topics off my ‘casual party conversations’ list. Well, except for the hemorrhoid cream.”

Tony snorted. “I think I’m gonna go. Sorry I got you out for nothing.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Doc soothed. “I’ve been out. Besides, it’s not for nothing.” He nodded his head towards the bar and Tony turned to see the man Doc had been talking to outside the restroom now leaning against the rail and watching them intently.

“Gotcha,” Tony replied as he stood up and shook Doc’s hand. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“I never am,” Doc assured with a wink before wandering over to the bar.

Tony waved at Lola then hit the exit before she could wind her way back over to him. He stopped just outside the door and took a deep breath. It was still fairly muggy even though the sun would be setting soon. The residual heat seemed to sap what energy he had left and he suddenly felt old. He had a twinge of guilt over the comments he’d made to Doc about his neighbors and decided to go home and see what the soup du jour was going to be. Having faked only a few swallows of beer he knew he was fine to drive and made his way to his car, deciding dinner and bed were what his flagging spirits needed most.
Mrs. Bornemeier turned on the light above the stove and bent to check the lasagna. Satisfied the cheese was bubbling nicely she straightened just as a hand came to rest on her elbow. She clutched her chest and stifled a shriek of fright.

“Easy old woman, don’t go having a stroke on me.”

“Anthony DiNozzo!” she swore, grabbing a wooden spoon and spinning to whack him with it repeatedly. “What do I have to do to get you to stop sneaking up on me?”

Tony chuckled good-naturedly but took the precaution to shield his injured arm from the wildly aimed but far from painful blows. “Try locking the door,” he suggested wryly.

“I was only going to be in here for a minute,” Mrs. Bornemeier huffed as she dropped her weapon and indignantly smoothed her hair. Once she could breathe normally she dug in the drawer next to the stove and chose a bright orange set from Tony’s vast and eclectic collection of knitted potholders. “Besides, your porch light is out. So there.”

“No it’s not,” Tony argued, taking the apparent non sequitur in stride as he moved to the back door to test the light in question. “I just changed that bulb like three weeks ago.”

“Bought the cheap ones, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Tony sighed as he gave up his futile switch flicking. “It’s not like I comparison shop. Where’s the rest of the coven? I expected a houseful when I got home.”

Mrs. Bornemeier treated him to an annoyed harrumph and a sidelong glare before getting his dinner out of the oven. “I sent them home. Now that they know you’re not dying they need to back off a little.”

“Oh, they do?”

“Would you like me to take my lasagna and leave?” Mrs. Bornemeier threatened lightly even as she turned on the broiler and slid the garlic bread in to toast.

“No!” Tony yelped, quickly adding “Please stay,” along with a generous portion of straight white teeth and fluttering eyelashes.

“That doesn’t work on me.”

“No, of course not,” Tony agreed amicably even if they both knew it was a bold face lie. “Maybe the next sniper will be a better shot and get me out of your hair for good.”

“Anthony! Don’t say that!” Mrs. Bornemeier suddenly got teary eyed and sniffed back a sob. “We almost lost you this time.”

“Hey,” Tony soothed as he pulled a chair away from the table and eased her into it. “Don’t worry, DiNozzos are tough. Well, okay, not exactly tough, just real damn stubborn when it comes to stuff like dying.”

“You don’t understand. There were noises at the door last night and… someone said they’ve seen a man lurking around the building,” the old woman blurted out.

“Who told you that?” Tony asked as the cop part of his brain kicked into overdrive.
Mrs. Bornemeier winced and glanced at her hands in embarrassment before answering. “Flora.”

Tony relaxed and let out a deep breath as he leaned against the counter. “Oh, Flora. So how is Elvis?”

“It wasn’t Elvis this time,” Mrs. Bornemeier insisted. “She said it was a tall young man with black hair. She’s seen him twice now, once inside the building.”

“We should probably consider the source. Flora’s not exactly hittin’ on all six on a good day and those are getting few and far between. Has anyone else seen or heard anything?”

“Mr. Robertson told Irene that he might have heard something last night, but he admits the battery in his hearing aide is a little weak right now. And me. Here in your kitchen last night.”

“Was that before or after Abby and Kate came by?”

“Before. But I wasn’t going to send two defenseless girls out there in the dark.”

“Oh, no,” Tony disagreed with a smirk. “Abby is many things, but defenseless is not one of them. And Kate is… well, Kate is Kate. She’s mean and she has a gun. You should have told them or woken me up.”

“Well at the time I’d already convinced myself it was nothing. But then today…”

“Today you sat around with the girls and scared each other.”

“Don’t be condescending, Anthony.”

“Sorry. Look, I’ll check into it,” Tony promised while hiding the true dept of his concern. “Are you staying for dinner?” he purposely changed the subject.

“I suppose,” Mrs. Bornemeier gave in easily, knowing Bernie wouldn’t miss her until Jeopardy was over anyway. She remembered the garlic bread and jumped up to try to save it. “Oops, let it go a little long.”

“It’s fine,” Tony assured as he caught a glimpse of the blackened bread. “I like my toast well done.”

Mrs. Bornemeier gave him a resigned look and tossed all of it into the trash. While she fixed three plates of lasagna, including one to take home to Bernie, Tony managed to dislodge the cork from an already open bottle of good red wine with his teeth and pour them each a glass. He ignored the raised eyebrow as he took a taste and sat down.

“Did you have a good time at the office?” Mrs. Bornemeier asked as she put the plates on the table and settled in opposite him.

Realizing how hungry he was, Tony dug in with gusto. “It was all right. Gibbs didn’t let me stay long since I haven’t been medically cleared for desk duty yet. But everyone appreciated the food and I’ll pick up your basket from the morgue on Monday.”

“You were gone for hours,” Mrs. Bornemeier observed offhandedly, not bothering to ask how or why her picnic basket had ended up in the morgue. “Out tomcatting around already?”

“And you think Kate is nosy?” Tony queried around a mouthful of food. “I had a drink with a friend.”
“Would that be a girl friend?”

“Actually, no. But we did go to a gay bar, so technically I suppose it could be considered a date,” Tony said with a smug grin.

“Stop trying to shock me, Anthony. I’m on to you.”

“Oh really.”

“Yes. And I always did think you were a little light in the loafers.”

“Hey,” Tony grumbled as Mrs. Bornemeier licked her finger and marked her victory in the air. “Tell me, do you ever wake up in the middle of the night with Mr. Bornemeier’s elbow wedged across your throat? Cause I know living with you for forty years had to be tough on him.”

“Bernie would never kill me,” Mrs. Bornemeier insisted haughtily. “He loves my lasagna even more than you do.”

“Not possible,” Tony disputed as he got up for seconds. “My compliments to the chef.”

“Try chewing this time,” Mrs. Bornemeier advised as she took a sip of wine. “I told the hens not to come clucking in the morning. I thought you might like to lie around in your underwear and watch TV for a few days before you have to go back to work.”

Tony paused with the serving spoon halfway to his plate. “You didn’t have to do that. I really appreciate everything everyone has done for me.”

“I know,” Mrs. Bornemeier sighed. “But you need a little time for yourself now. Just say thank you and shut up.”

“Thank you,” Tony said gratefully. Mrs. Bornemeier hid her grin behind her glass as she waited for it. “And shut up.”

After dinner Tony took a shower while Mrs. Bornemeier cleaned the kitchen. He let her re-bandage the wound, help him into a fresh tee-shirt, then wrap him snugly back into his sling and swathe. She put him to bed with a promise to drop by the next afternoon.

“Give me a buzz if you need anything.”

“I will,” Tony called after her as she closed the door.

As soon as she was gone Tony slipped on some sweats and tennis shoes. He tucked his gun between the sling and his body then made a point to visit Flora, the very sweet, frequently confused little woman who lived across the hall. But Flora didn’t recall seeing anyone out of the ordinary in the building, the king of rock and roll or otherwise. She did however send Tony home with two new potholders that didn’t quite match. Since Mr. Robertson was an early to bed kind of guy, Tony decided not to bother him until the next day and took a stroll around the building instead.

Knowing Mrs. Bornemeier wasn’t the type to image things Tony stood outside in the dark for a while just to listen and watch. Convinced everything was fine at the moment, he went home and manhandled a kitchen chair out to the porch so he could replace the burned-out bulb. But surprisingly, when he jiggled it, it came on. Tony screwed it back in then hauled the chair back inside.
Since he’d had two glasses of wine with dinner he put off taking a Percocet even though he had probably overdone things his first day out and about. Hugging a pillow to his chest, he sat up in bed to watch an old Cary Grant movie, reciting every line of dialogue along with the actors. As long as he kept his mind occupied he could disregard the dull ache in his shoulder.

By the time the movie was over he was beat but he knew he’d never be able to go to sleep the way his arm was now throbbing. He yawned expansively on his way to the bathroom and took two pills before commencing his nightly bedtime ritual. By the time he got back to the bed the alcohol enhanced drug had already worked its way into his system and he quickly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Chapter 11

Some unknown… thing teased Tony to the edge of consciousness, a noise perhaps, or maybe just an intuitive sense of movement in the room. Still firmly entrenched in a semi-drugged haze, he grunted as he rolled over to look at the clock. A digital three was visible but a small, shadowy rectangle partially obscured the numbers representing the minutes past the hour.

“What the hell,” Tony muttered as he rubbed his eyes then took another look. Obviously he’d left something on the nightstand. He reached for it in the dark and found it to be a business card. If he squinted, he could just make out Doc’s name as he tilted it in the glow of the clock. Oddly, there were black stains all over it on both sides.

As he turned on the bedside lamp Tony scrunched his eyes shut. When he opened them a second later he was simultaneously aware of two things: the smudges were in fact bright red, and his own gun was pointed at his face from less than a foot away. He followed the line of the gloved hand up the arm to the intruder’s face. “You,” he said as he recognized Doc’s impromptu date.

The stranger smiled. “I didn’t think you noticed me. I’m pleased.”

“Don’t be. I’m trained to remember faces,” Tony replied, somehow managing to keep his tone carefully neutral in spite of the slight, drunken slur, “Even unremarkable ones.”

The smile dissolved into a disenchanted frown either at the apparent lack of fear or the putdown. Probably both, Tony thought. “What did you do to Doc?” he pressed as he eased into a more upright position.

“Nothing of consequence. Yet. We’re waiting for you to join us.”

“He’s alive?”

“For now. Let’s go.”

“Can I get dressed?” Tony asked, stalling for time as he tried to make his addled brain function. In his current condition he knew he wouldn’t be able to overpower the other man. And if he let him get away there was no telling what might happen to Doc, if in fact the guy really had him at all.

Those’ll do,” the man refused, gesturing to the sweat pants Tony had fallen asleep in.

“What about shoes? I’ve got really tender feet.”

The man sighed. “Make it quick.”

Tony covertly placed the bloody calling card on the floor under the edge of the bed as he leaned forward to slip on his sneakers. “What’s your name?” he asked as he straightened up.

The crazed smile was back. “You can call me Charlie. You do remember Charlie, don’t you, Officer DiNozzo?”

“I’m not a beat cop anymore. And you sure as hell aren’t Charlie Godwin,” Tony said as a sickening clarity came over him.

“I might as well be. Take two of these, it’s gonna be a long night.” The uninvited guest handed Tony his prescription bottle and pointed to the glass of water Tony didn’t remember leaving on the
nightstand.

“This is a bad idea,” Tony objected as he tried to formulate a plan.

Charlie raised the weapon and pressed the muzzle against Tony’s bandaged arm. “Take the damn pills or you’ll wish you had.”

The pharmacists had switched the script to a bottle without a child-proof cap after Tony had explained his situation so he was able to use his thumb to flick the top off. “Just two?” he asked as he opened it. “Not much of an overdose.”

“I don’t want you dead, Tony.” Charlie assured as he stroked Tony’s cheek suggestively with a leather covered finger. “I just want you pliable.”

“Pliable,” Tony echoed dubiously. He poured the large pink pills into a pile on the bed and sorted out two of them. “Comatose is more like it. I’m already legally impaired.”

“The longer this takes, the more likely somebody here at the Shady Rest Inn is gonna get hurt,” Charlie threatened. Tony glared at him then downed the drugs with a healthy swig of water. “Show me,” Charlie insisted, grabbing Tony by the jaw to force his mouth open.

Obediently, Tony stuck out his tongue and moved it side to side to prove he had swallowed the pills. When Charlie released him he let himself fall back hard enough to knock the bottle to the floor and scatter the contents amongst the sheets, ensuring they couldn’t be used against him again without sparing the time to gather them up.

“Get up,” Charlie growled as he grabbed Tony roughly by the sling and yanked him to his feet and towards the bedroom door.

Tony gasped and gritted his teeth as he stumbled across the room. He stopped to steady himself on the dresser and tried to palm his cell in the process. But Charlie saw the move and slapped the phone out of his hand sending it crashing to the floor.

“One more trick, DiNozzo, and I’ll kill you right here and take out as many of the old folks as I can on my way out.”

The threat seemed real enough and Tony only nodded. He led the way through the livingroom and cautiously opened the door a crack. “Shit,” he swore under his breath.

Charlie pressed hard against his back to peek out. He put one hand on the doorframe and lifted the gun with the other when he saw the open door across the hall.

“No!” Tony whispered urgently. “Let’s just go out the back.”

“I don’t think you’ll make it that far.”

“Then let me talk to her, she’ll believe whatever I tell her. Just don’t hurt her.”

“One wrong word…”

“I know.” Tony waited breathlessly for Charlie to decide.

“Okay. But be cool.”

“Hey, cool is my middle name,” Tony assured. He breathed a sigh of relief both for himself and for his neighbor when the weight against his back moved away. “Flora,” he called out cheerfully as he
opened the door. “What are you doing up? It’s the middle of the night.”

“Tony,” the diminutive, white haired woman greeted happily when she saw him. “It’s trash day.”

“Not yet, sweetie,” Tony told her gently. “Two more days. I’ll come get your bags when I take mine out.”

“Where are you going?”

“Uh, we’ve got a case. You remember Special Agent Gibbs, don’t you?” Tony said, thumbing over his shoulder towards Charlie. He tried not to grimace as the gun in his back pushed in a little deeper.

“Of course,” Flora smiled as she adjusted her glasses. “Nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Charlie muttered, keeping his head down distrustfully.

“Flora, I want you to go back to bed,” Tony said in harsher voice than he had ever used on the woman. He was starting to feel the pull of the Percocet and wanted to get away from the building before someone else heard them talking and came out to investigate.

Flora looked a little hurt but nodded her head and backed towards her door. “I made you some potholders,” she offered tentatively.

“That’s terrific, Flora. I’ll pick them up tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” Flora gave in with a tiny smile and a wave. “Bye-bye.”

“Sweet dreams, honey,” Tony said softly as she shut her door. He closed his eyes for a second and swallowed before looking at Charlie. “Let’s get out of here,” he told him brusquely and started down the hall, holding onto the wall for balance.

Charlie huffed and followed. He caught Tony by the scruff of the neck in an obscene simulation of a friendly gesture as they made their way out of the building. The street was empty and when they got to the car Charlie made Tony get in on the driver’s side then side over so they never lost physical contact. Tony rolled his head to the side to watch as they pulled away from his home. He sighed wearily but had the unshakable feeling he had done the right thing.

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Junior Silva shuffled down the hall encumbered by the chains that linked his hands and feet to his waist. The excruciatingly sober days behind bars had started to blur together and only the frequent meetings with his court appointed attorney broke up the monotony, even if she was nothing special to look at. But she usually didn’t show up so early in the morning and he was almost certain he wasn’t supposed to see her again until Thursday. Still, whenever a guard said ‘move’, he moved. A lesson he’d learned the hard way.

The door to one of the visitor rooms was open and as he turned the corner he caught a glimpse of gray hair. “Aw crap.”

“Hello Junior.”

“I don’t have to talk you,” Junior balked, starting to back away even as he took a moment to appreciate the brunette sitting next to the hardass NCIS agent.
“No, you don’t,” Gibbs agreed as he calmly sipped a cup of coffee. “But the more you help me the more you help yourself.”

“I ain’t interested in no deal,” Junior scoffed, still checking out the hot babe. “My lawyer thinks she can get me off on a count’a I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” the woman stated matter-of-factly. She pulled out a folder and tossed it toward him. “These are the findings from the psychiatrist who examined you. He says you knew what you were doing when you planted that body and climbed the cell tower with a high-powered rifle.”

Junior ignored the folder and tried to put on a brave face. “What’s that mean?”

Gibbs smiled. “It means you’re going away for a long, long time no matter what your lawyer told you.”

“Did that Dino fella die or something?” Junior asked apprehensively.

“Anything regarding DiNozzo is none of your business,” Gibbs told him coldly. “We’re here to talk about Kenny Black.”

“Oh.” Junior awkwardly seated himself at the table. “Yeah, I suppose I can tell you what I know about the kid if you’re willing to deal.”

“You were neighbors for a little over three months,” Gibbs started without making any promises.

“Yeah. So?”

“Did you spend any time with him?”

“Hell no. That boy was queerer than a three-dollar bill.”

“Why do you say that?”

Junior harrumphed and tried to rub his head but his hand wouldn’t reach. “Cause he had a boyfriend. Thin walls, ya know? You shoulda heard the two of ‘em goin’ at it over there. Kenny couldn’t take it. He was always screaming and crying and carrying on.”

Gibbs shared a concerned look with the chick.

“Was it consensual?” she questioned, apparently shocked by the claim.

“How the hell do I know? Didn’t sound like it.”

“You sat by and listened while that poor kid was being tortured?”

“I never did nothing ’cause it was none of my business. I wasn’t getting off on it or nothing.”

“Yeah right, you cold hearted bastard…”

“Kate,” Gibbs interrupted, laying a hand on her wrist to quiet her. “Could you describe the boyfriend to a sketch artist?” he asked as he turned back to Junior.

“Yeah,” Junior agreed. “For a price.”

“That’s up to the District Attorney. I’ll either tell her you were helpful or not. What’s it gonna be?”
“Do you believe Silva’s story?” Kate asked, speaking for the first time since they got in the car and headed back towards the shipyard.

“Do I believe Kenny Black had a psycho lover that might or might not be fixated on DiNozzo?” Gibbs inquired acerbically. “Is that what you’re asking?”

“I guess.”

“Yeah, I believe him.”

“So do I,” Kate sighed as she dialed her cell. “Dammit,” she muttered after a short silence. “I got his voicemail.”

“Try his landline,” Gibbs instructed evenly.

“Answering machine,” Kate grumbled after another fruitless attempt. “You know we could just…,” she paused and grabbed the dash as Gibbs cut across two lanes of traffic and pulled a highspeed U-turn. “Swing by his place,” she finished breathlessly.

“Good idea.”

“He’s still on sick leave,” Kate pointed out as Gibbs picked up speed. “He might have just turned his phones off.”

“He knows better.”

“He could be in the shower.”

“He could be,” Gibbs agreed, not slowing the car a bit.

“I mean we just saw him yesterday,” Kate went on in an obvious attempt to assure herself that everything was okay. “If Kenny did have a partner in the murders he might have skipped town once things got too hot.”

“Oh he might be biding his time to finish up where Godwin left off. This thing has always been about Tony.”

“Not exactly. It’s been about going head to head with the man who caught Godwin. It’s also been twelve years. If anything, this guy is patient.”

“Maybe. But now he’s tasted blood. I think it’s a whole new ballgame.”

Kate shook her head emphatically. “He won’t want to face off with Tony until he knows he’s a hundred percent.”

“Bullshit. He’ll strike while he thinks he can win.”

Reluctantly, Kate bowed her head in defeat then opened her phone again. “I’m calling to put a rush on the sketch artist.”

“You do that,” Gibbs approved grimly.
Chapter 12

“Tony, please wake up. Come on, man, you still owe me. Just wake up and we’ll call it even. Just say something, okay? Wiggle your fingers if you can hear me…”

When the haggard, raw voice finally reached him Tony heard it without recognition or understanding. But the smell of urine and old blood that hung heavy in the air choked him enough to force a response. Unable to suppress a groan as he opened his eyes he found himself slumped against a large piece of furniture though he had no recollection of how he’d gotten there.

“Wha…?” he mumbled as he tried to focus his sight but saw nothing more than blurred titles from the spines of the too-close books. The background noise got a little louder and a lot more persistent.

His wrists were cuffed together through a metal loop directly above his head and as he groggily rose to his knees he realized why his shoulder hurt like hell. He hissed through his teeth as he attempted to find his footing, ending up stumbling face first into the heavy bookshelf, rocking it perilously. When he finally obtained a mostly upright position it took him another few moments of deep breathing for the nausea and dizziness to pass. Through sheer force of will he did not pass out as he clung tenaciously to the now waist high loop and merely grunted at the pins and needles sensation of the blood rushing back into his hands.

“Damn it, Tony, look at me!”

The shout got through to him and Tony managed to twist enough to see behind him to a bed with a startling amount of bare skin stretched out on it. “Huh?”

“Tony.”

“Doc?”

“Thank God!” Doc sighed expansively as he rested his forehead on the plastic covered mattress for a second before looking up through wet lashes. “Are you okay? For awhile there I thought you were dead,” he said hoarsely.

“Are you naked?” Tony asked as he swayed drunkenly on his feet to turn the opposite way to try to get a better view.

Doc laughed, sounding amused and in shock at the same time. “Yep, I’m naked and spread eagle on my belly. Gee, I wonder what this guy has in mind for me.”

“Oh Doc, I’m so sorry,” Tony slurred, still trying to focus as he looked for obvious injuries. There appeared to be dry blood on the back of Doc’s head but the smooth expanse of skin seemed untouched.

“Stop looking at my ass.”

“Sorry,” Tony said again, jerking his gaze back to Doc’s face. “You must work out,” he added absently.

“Squats,” Doc confirmed in the same offhand tone.

“This is my fault,” Tony swore guilty.
“What? That I have lousy taste in men?” Doc queried. “The funny thing is, after one drink I realized the guy was a creep and decided to go home.”

“So what happened?” Tony leaned against the bookshelf and closed his eyes.

“Tony?”

“I’m listening. I just need to rest for a minute.”

“Sure. I got as far as the parking lot but he followed me out and hit me in the back of the head with a tire iron, I think. Then he must have stuffed me into a car or something because I woke up here. He brought you in later and chained you up over there. I’ve been trying to rouse you ever since.”

“How long was I out?”

“I’m not sure. The sun’s been up for a while. Maybe six hours?”

Tony opened his eyes and tried to shake off the drug enough to think. “Did he hurt you?”

“Did I mention my head?”

“No,” Tony persisted uncomfortably. “I mean did he… you know, hurt you?”

“You mean did he rape me. Not yet.”

“We gotta get out of here.” Tony panted through the pain as he struggled to yank his hands free.


“Sorry,” Tony apologized yet again as he tried to calm down, bending to press the heels of his hands against his eyes for a minute. “It’s just… I’ve had this nightmare before. Only in the dream I’m the one who’s naked and tied to a bed.”

“You know what’s going on, don’t you?” Doc asked softly.

“He calls himself Charlie and he’s emulating a serial killer I arrested some years back.”

Doc was quiet for a long time while Tony finished his unsuccessful search for anything that might help them escape. “I guess that explains the reading material.”


“And my personal favorite,” Doc chimed in, “Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream’.”

“Oh yeah, he’s got all the biggies here, too,” Tony noted as he moved on to another shelf. “Let’s see, there’s the Night Stalker and the Boston Strangler, Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, Henry Lee Lucas, and of course, Jack the Ripper.”

“Can’t leave out Jack,” Doc said with an indelicate snort.

“Hmm,” Tony murmured as he looked over the titles on the top shelves.
“What?”

“Uh oh, it looks like he’s paid special attention to John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Patrick Kearney, the California trashbag murderer.”

“And the significance of that would be…?”

“They exclusively targeted boys and gay men.”

Doc sighed. “Thanks, Tony. That doesn’t really make me feel any better.”

“We gotta get out of here,” Tony repeated as he tested the strength of the loop that kept him in place. Unfortunately, at the moment, it was a lot stronger than he was. “Dammit,” he muttered angrily on further inspection.

“What?”

“These are my handcuffs.”

“Kinky,” Doc mused with a wry grin. “You seem to know a lot about serial killers.”

Dizzy, Tony sank to his haunches wincing at the pull on his injured shoulder that until Charlie came along hadn’t been more than an inch from his side since he’d been shot. “Let’s just say I used to have an unhealthy interest in them,” he replied as he leaned his head against ‘The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers’.

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“He could be in the shower,” Kate offered again as she glanced up and down the hallway when Tony failed to appear at the door.

Gibbs knocked again, loud enough to send an echo bouncing off the walls this time. “If I were DiNozzo, I might mention this obsession you seem to have lately about him being naked and wet.”

Kate’s squawk of protest was interrupted by the door across the hall opening a crack then rapidly slamming shut. The agents turned to stare at it just as Mrs. Bornemeier peeked out of her own apartment to check out the noise.

“Rena,” Kate called to her.

“Agent Todd,” the older woman greeted as she came out into the hall wiping her hands on a dish towel. She smiled warmly when she spotted Gibbs. “Jethro, it’s so good to see you again. Is something wrong?” she asked at his curt answering nod.

“No, it’s just that Tony’s not answering his door,” Kate explained without giving away too much of her worry.

“I believe he planned to sleep in.”

Gibbs frowned as he checked his watch. “It’s after ten.”

“That’s not all that unreasonable,” Kate retorted, “Especially if he took a pain pill.”

“And he did have some wine with dinner last night,” Mrs. Bornemeier agreed.

“Do you have a key?” Gibbs asked, fully expecting her to hand one over even as she stalled in
indecision.

“Of course,” Mrs. Bornemeier quickly relented as she dug into her apron pocket and pulled out a single key on a smiley face ring.

“Thank you,” Kate said as Gibbs put the key in the lock and opened the door.

“Tony!” Gibbs shouted as he moved quickly to the bedroom. Kate paused in the livingroom as Mrs. Bornemeier went ahead into the kitchen. “Well he’s not in the shower,” Gibbs called out sardonically just as Mrs. Bornemeier screamed.

Gibbs appeared next to Kate instantly and as one they entered the kitchen with weapons drawn. “Don’t touch anything,” Gibbs warned as he put his gun away and pulled Mrs. Bornemeier gently away from the scattered glass.

“Oh God,” Kate gasped when she saw the broken pane on the back door.

“You said they caught the man who hurt Anthony,” Mrs. Bornemeier all but accused.

“We did… we will. We’ll find him,” Kate insisted as she secured her weapon then took over with Mrs. Bornemeier.

“Get her out of here and call the police to set up a perimeter,” Gibbs ordered. He hit speed dial then stuck the phone between his ear and shoulder as he tugged on a pair of latex gloves. “McGee, bring the truck to DiNozzo’s building. He was right. Kenny wasn’t working alone.”

***

McGee arrived twenty minutes later and with kit in hand threaded his way carefully through the anxious, gray-haired crowd in the hall. A uniformed officer checked his ID and let him into the taped off apartment. He’d never been to Tony’s place before but Gibbs’ directions had been succinct and accurate as expected. “What have we got, Boss?” he asked when Gibbs met him at the door.

“The perp entered through the kitchen sometime during the night after breaking the bulb on the back porch then smashing the window on the door,” Gibbs briefed him tersely. “Apparently DiNozzo was gorked on pain pills because there’s no sign of a struggle except for a broken cell phone and said pills scattered all over hell and back. Kate is canvassing the neighbors so I’ll take photos and you can dust for prints.”

As he pulled the camera out and handed it over McGee had to ask, “And Tony is…?”

“Gone.”

Nodding mutely, McGee put his concern aside and went to work. In the bedroom he knelt on one knee to dust the nightstand when he accidentally kicked something with his foot and sent it rolling under the bed. He turned and got down on his elbows to retrieve the prescription bottle, surprised to find the hardwood floor under the bed immaculate, not a lost sock or dust bunny in sight, when something else caught his eye.

“Boss! I think you should see this.”

As McGee climbed to his feet with the soiled business card in his hand an empty baggie appeared in his face. He dropped the card inside and it was snatched away.
“Who the hell is Michael Redding?” Gibbs asked as he studied the evidence.

“I have no idea.”

“Doc,” Kate said from the doorway. “Is that blood?” she asked as she moved closer.

“What?” Gibbs snapped at her.

“You know, the paramedic who treated Tony at the shooting gallery.”

“You mean when we were the targets?” McGee asked.

“Yes. I spoke with him at the hospital that day and then he came around again the day of the funeral.”

“He showed an undo interest in DiNozzo?” Gibbs questioned.

Kate shrugged helplessly. “I didn’t think so at the time, but maybe.”

“Find him,” Gibbs ordered, handing the bagged card over to her. “Start with this.”

“How did the canvas go?” McGee asked as Kate pulled out her cell and began to dial the number on the card.

“No one heard or saw anything out of the ordinary last night. Wait a sec it’s ringing.” Kate paused then shook her head after several seconds. “Voicemail. I’ll call back in a minute and leave a message. Anyway, the night before last Mrs. Bornemeier thought she heard someone trying the lock on Tony’s back door. She said the light was out then but not broken.”

Gibbs nodded. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, the lady across the hall told people yesterday that she’d seen someone in the building but she doesn’t remember anything today.”

“Flora?”

“Yes, Flora Johnson. They say she’s, uh, pleasantly confused most of the time. In fact, she thought I was her granddaughter for part of our conversation.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Gibbs stated as he left.

Kate looked at McGee but neither spoke. She dialed the number again and he glanced at the scattered pills before getting back to the nightstand.

***

Gibbs ducked under the tape at Tony’s front door and nodded to the cop as he crossed the hall. Before he could knock the door opened and Mrs. Bornemeier ushered him into the cluttered but neat apartment. The group of women Tony had jokingly called the unholy cabal as they fussed over him only three nights prior gathered in the livingroom.

“I need to talk to Flora,” Gibbs explained quietly.

“Flora,” Mrs. Bornemeier called as she led Gibbs to where Flora sat in a well-worn rocking chair. “You remember Jethro, don’t you?”
Flora looked up with dark eyes as she smoothed a wayward lock of contrasting white hair away from her face. She smiled sweetly. “No.”

Gibbs settled on one knee in front of her and took her hand. “Sure you do, Flora. We met at Tony’s a few nights ago. You fed me some of that incredible fudge you made. We talked about Rosa Parks for a while. You said you knew her when you were a young girl in Alabama.”

“Oh yes,” Flora cooed as recognition registered on her face. She fluttered her other hand to Gibbs’ face. “I remember.”

“Good girl,” Gibbs approved as he covered her hand with his own. “Do you remember seeing anyone else recently who doesn’t belong here?”

“Elvis visits quite often.”

“Elvis?”

“Elvis Aaron Presley.”

Mrs. Bornemeier put a hand over her mouth as she turned away in frustration. The other ladies murmured among themselves.

“Anybody else?” Gibbs asked with a gentle smile, ignoring the anxious whispers behind him.

“No.”

“Okay. Let’s try something else. When was the last time you saw Tony?”

Flora pulled her hands away and dropped them to her lap, suddenly looking tearful. “Tony is angry with me. He yelled at me.”

“No, Flora,” Mrs. Bornemeier said as she sighed and came back over. “Tony adores you. He would never raise his voice to you.”

“He did!” Flora insisted.

“When did Tony yell at you,” Gibbs pressed.

“This morning. He told me to go back to bed.”

“She’s confused,” Mrs. Bornemeier told Gibbs. “I don’t believe Tony would ever hurt her feelings like that.”

“He might if he thought she was in danger,” Gibbs argued before turning back to Flora a little more urgently. “Do you know what time it was this morning when you saw Tony?”

“No. The sun hadn’t come up yet. I thought it was trash day but it wasn’t. I get mixed up.”

“Are you mixed up now?”

“I don’t think so. Am I?”

“No, you’re not,” Gibbs stated firmly. “Now tell me exactly what happened this morning. And everyone else, please keep your comments to yourselves.”

Mrs. Bornemeier harrumphed and went to sit on the couch between two other women who took her
hands and held them fretfully as they listened.

“I couldn’t sleep. I bundled the newspapers and carried them to the door but I went ahead and opened it before I went to get the rest of the garbage. Tony came out and told me it wasn’t trash day and to go back to bed.”

“Was he alone?”

“No, there was another man with him,” Flora paused at the group gasp from the other side of the room.

“Go on,” Gibbs urged, using a hand to shush the peanut gallery.

“He said he had to go to work but he wasn’t dressed nice like usual. And he swayed a little. I thought he should go back to bed.”

“Did you get a good look at the other man?”

“He was young. And he had dark hair like Elvis.”

Gibbs took a deep breath and let it out. “Did you get a name?”

“Yes,” Flora smiled proudly. “His name was Special Agent Gibbs.”
Chapter 13

After being tied up for what he guestimated to be somewhere between twelve and fourteen hours Doc was no longer able to control his full bladder. For the first time in thirty-odd years, with the dual sensation of regret and relief, he wet the bed. He cast his gaze upward to the beach towel that covered the window above him and silently added another reason to curse the drink he’d had with the man who turned out to be his kidnapper. Some of the urine spread warmly along the line of his body making him sticky and even more uncomfortable but most of it trickled down a heavy crease in the sheet of thick, black plastic that covered the lopsided mattress and ran into the floor.

Thankfully, or not since he knew he and Tony were both slowly dehydrating, he probably wouldn’t need to pee again any time soon. His humiliation was boundless but since the small, dank room already smelled like a toilet Tony either didn’t noticed his ‘accident’ or was simply too much of a nice guy to mention it. Or maybe he was just asleep. Doc glanced over to check on him and saw that Tony’s eyes were closed and his head down as he crouched against the bookshelf. Dried rivulets of blood from his wrists to his elbows testified to the intensity of his earlier struggles to get free. No wonder he was exhausted.

Doc’s own wrists and ankles were rubbed raw from the rope but he seemed to have a little more give between his extremities and the bed frame now. He remembered to wiggle his fingers and toes to ensure adequate circulation then steeled himself with a couple deep breaths before sliding his body as far as he could to the right, taking the damp sheeting with him. By painstakingly peeling his lower body away from the wet plastic and shifting back to the left he was able to find a drier spot. He completed the move with his chest and shoulders and then repeated the entire process twice more. Though his skin was still clammy, he felt much better until he turned the other way and found that repositioning the plastic had exposed the mattress. He cried out in shock and horror.


“It’s blood,” Doc gasped wretchedly as bile threatened to bubble out of his throat and add to the macabre sight. “The mattress is soaked with blood.”

“That explains the smell.”

“Oh God, I can’t… I gotta get out of here.” Doc momentarily bucked against his restraints but stopped when the ropes began to bite into him.

“Take it easy,” Tony urged. “Come on, Doc, calm down.”

Breathing heavily, Doc listened as Tony struggled to his feet but couldn’t force his eyes away from the enormous stain so close to his face.

“You’re okay,” Tony continued to soothe, composed if a little breathless himself. “I need you to look at it. How fresh is it?”


“Look there’s no easy way to say this; most serial killers have cooling off periods between murders. If he killed someone recently we may have some time.”

“He killed somebody right here in the spot where I’m laying and you want me to what? Examine it for evidence? That’s cold, man.”
“I know and I’m sorry,” Tony said gently. “But we can’t do anything for the poor bastard except catch this creep and right now our necks are on the same chopping block. You have to look.”

“You’re right,” Doc accepted with a heavy sigh. “I know you’re right. I can do this.”

“You can.”

“I’m a paramedic for Pete’s sake. I’ve seen combat. Blood does not freak me out,” Doc scolded himself as he gathered his wits. He lifted his arm and hesitantly studied the discolored mattress under it with as much clinical detachment as he could muster. “Yeah, it’s, uh, it’s mostly dry but there’s a lot of it. There’s, oh God, it looks like there’s some kind of tissue, it could be gray matter. And there are definitely some bone fragments.”

“So… gunshot wound to the head?” Tony asked edgily.

“Yeah, that’d be a good bet,” Doc agreed as his breathing started to speed up again. “But it ain’t fresh.”

“Look at me,” Tony ordered firmly. “Just turn around and look at me.”

“That’s what’s gonna happen to us,” Doc stated as he shakily complied and turned his head back towards Tony. “He’s going to kill us right here, too.”

“Aw, Doc, don’t.”

“Tony, please. Not knowing is the worst part. Tell me everything you know, don’t pull any punches.”

Tony swallowed and looked away. “I don’t know what he’s gonna do.”

“Tony…”

“I really don’t,” Tony insisted. “I’d already been shot by the time they autopsied the first victim and they didn’t give me too many details about the second.”

“You said he mutilated them.”

“Yeah, but that was mostly supposition on my part. McGee said the wounds of the second vic were similar to the real Charlie’s handiwork. Well, except for the cap in the head.”

“I don’t understand. The real Charlie?”

Tony blew out a breath. “This guy’s a copy cat… a wannabe.”

“A wannabe?” Doc scoffed incredulously. “Who the hell wants to be a serial killer?”

“I can’t explain it,” Tony said with a wince as he bumped his arm against the wooden shelf. “Why do men on death row have groupies? And others confess to heinous crimes they didn’t commit? Some people just have this crazy desire for notoriety. If we knew why we could write one of these damn psycho-babble books and retire rich.”

Doc snorted at the suggestion as he made a conscious effort to calm down. “The, uh, the real Charlie, is he the reason you developed your unhealthy interest in serial killers?”

With a barely perceptible clench of his jaw Tony nodded minutely. “I was the bait they caught him with. If anything had gone wrong, I would have been his eleventh victim.”
“Oh. I guess that explains your nightmares.”

“Those came later. I mean I knew I wasn’t really a victim; I was only pretending. But later it struck me that to him… to Charlie…” Tony paused resignedly. “Let’s just say I try not to think about it too much.”

Doc went through the motion of moistening his lips but his mouth was too dry to do any good. “Well no one is pretending this time and copy cat or not, we’ll still be just as dead when he gets through with us.”

“We’re not dead yet,” Tony argued, once again trying to work his hands free from the cuffs. “And if it makes you feel any better, I suspect he let at least one victim live.”

“You suspect.”

“Yeah.”

They were silent for a long time. When Doc spoke again he was proud of his steady voice. “He’s been gone a long time.”

“He’s probably at work,” Tony guessed.

“Work? You mean like an ordinary guy? Driving a taxi or making sandwiches in some deli somewhere?” Doc laughed at the absurdity of the situation. “And all the while he’s got prisoners at home ready to be whacked. The anticipation must be killing him.”

“Hey, even psychos have to earn a living.” Tony managed a brief, reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, my team is good. They’ll find us. You know, once they actually figure out we’re missing. They’ll be breaking down that door any minute.”

“If you say so,” Doc muttered, doubtful but wanting more than anything to believe.

“Yes, any second now. Gibbs won’t give up until he gets this guy.”

Doc wished he could see the door but he knew Tony was watching it for both of them.

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Gibbs had been reluctant to leave Tony’s apartment but they’d done all they could at the scene and being there had started to become a distraction, surrounded by their missing teammate’s belongings. The essence of Tony, as Kate had so aptly described it. And the wringing of hands amongst the neighbors had begun to wear on them as well.

“Lay it out for me,” Gibbs instructed brusquely when he returned to his desk from reporting to the director.

“Tony’s car is parked at his building in its assigned spot,” McGee started. “It’s locked and un-tampered with. His watch and wallet were on the dresser in his bedroom and cash and credit cards appear to be intact. We couldn’t locate his service weapon so we have to assume the perp took it. Ducky assures me that with the number of Percocet left on the bed that even if Tony took only one pill a night since it was filled there aren’t enough missing for a lethal overdose.”

Abby sank down next to McGee on the edge of his desk. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Kate,” Gibbs prodded grimly. “What’d you find out about this ‘Doc’ person?”
“Michael Scott Redding,” Kate prefaced as she clicked the remote and brought up a picture of Doc in his class A’s complete with a broad chest full of ribbons and medals. “He was a Sergeant 1st Class with an exemplary record as a Special Forces medic. After being wounded in Afghanistan while treating another soldier he was awarded the Combat Medical Badge and of course a Purple Heart.

“He left the Army six years ago and has worked locally as a paramedic for the last three. According to his boss he is ‘the best of the best’. But he didn’t show up for work today, which is apparently unheard of. His coworkers seem genuinely worried and no one, including me, has been able to reach him at home or on his cell.”

McGee nodded and took over. “Redding is still widely known by his military nickname ‘Doc’. He has no criminal record and lives alone in a small house that he owns. We’ve got an APB out on his 2000 Acura. His finances are in order with a modest nest egg of stocks and bonds consistent with his salary. He’s been estranged from his family in Chicago for years. According to his friend the timing coincides with the fact that shortly after he left the military Doc came out and has lived an openly gay lifestyle ever since.”

Abby made a disappointed sound and Kate shared a commiserative look with her as she passed over the remote.

“Abby?”

“Okay, I can say one hundred percent that we do not have Doc’s prints at Tony’s place except for the ones on his business card,” Abby began as she flipped through a series of fingerprints on the large screen. “I was able to match all of these to either Tony or a small handful of his neighbors. But I did find a teeny-weeny piece of leather on a sliver of glass from the broken window that suggests the perp wore gloves.”

“Redding will have DNA in the military database to match to the blood on the business card,” Gibbs noted.

“No need,” Abby replied as she brought up an extremely magnified picture of a microscope slide. “It’s bovine.”

“Cow blood? Maybe our perp works at a slaughter house,” McGee suggested.

“More like a butcher shop,” Abby corrected with a shake of her head. “Notice how some but not all of the cells have burst open. I’d say it was stored in very cold place but not quite frozen through. I’m thinking a meat locker.”

“Our butcher is a butcher,” Kate mused. “That shifts the suspicion off Doc.”

“So does this,” Abby agreed as she clicked again and brought up the pencil drawing from the sketch artist. She bent to tap on McGee’s keyboard and quickly had Doc’s picture up along side it.

“Could be him,” McGee offered as he compared the two.

“I don’t think so,” Kate disagreed tentatively.

“It doesn’t look anything like him,” Abby insisted, completely unconvinced. “And believe me; I got a good look at the man.”

McGee’s lower lip protruded slightly but he didn’t comment.
Gibbs squinted at the images. “Aside from the dark hair, I don’t see any real resemblance. But if this isn’t Redding, where is he?”

“He could have been taken, too,” Kate pointed out. “He does have the physical characteristics of the other victims; he’s handsome, slim, dark headed…”

“Except he’s a little older than the others,” McGee interrupted.

“More like Tony,” Abby murmured unhappily.

“Or maybe Silva is just a crappy witness,” Gibbs retorted. “We know he only cooperated to save his own ass. McGee, get a copy of that sketch to Mrs. Johnson anyway. Take the picture of Redding, too.”

“I’m on it, Boss,” McGee retrieved his gun and picked up his pack while Abby hurriedly printed out a copy of the sketch and the photo of Doc for him.

“I’m not so sure Flora is such a reliable witness either, Gibbs,” Kate said as she watched McGee leave. “She thought Tony was with you.”

“No, Flora only knows me as Jethro. She said Tony left with ‘Special Agent Gibbs’ because that’s what Tony told her,” Gibbs responded with conviction. “He knew we would know better and not waste time chasing bad leads.”

“You’re probably right,” Kate sighed as she reached for her ringing phone. “Agent Todd. Yes,” she scribbled something down then held up a hand to Gibbs. “Thank you, we’re on our way. They found Doc’s car in the parking lot of a bar not far from Tony’s apartment,” she informed him as she hung up.

“Let’s go.”

As they grabbed their gear and rushed out, Abby grumbled in frustration. “I hate always being left behind.”
“Up or down? I think I can manage more power coming down, I just don’t know if I can turn my hand the right way.”

“Tony, no,” Doc advised tersely. “It won’t work. You’ll just end up hurting yourself.”

“In light of the situation, I’d say it’s worth the risk,” Tony argued as he continued to angle his hand one way and then another to try and find the best way to whack it against the bookshelf for maximum damage. “What’s a broken thumb between friends?”

“Look, you’d have to shatter the joint to make it bend enough to slip out of the cuff and if you fail it’s gonna swell up so bad you won’t get another shot. Besides, you’ll never get your arm far enough away to get a decent swing.”

“You may be right,” Tony reluctantly agreed, stretching his hand out the full six inches the chain allowed him. “Damn.”

“We’ll think of something else,” Doc consoled.

“Like what?”

“Well I’m not without certain charms, you know. I’ll seduce him.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Are you nuts?” Tony whirled around to glare at his cellmate.

“Well it’s not like I haven’t done it before,” Doc said coyly with a suggestive wiggle of his rear end. “And given the choice of letting my virtue slide a little versus you breaking your own bones, I’ll be happy to take one for the Gipper.”

Tony’s jaw dropped as he stared for a moment in disbelief. “What part of serial killer don’t you get?” he finally stammered. “It’s about the violence, not the sex. He has to hurt somebody to get it up. I’ll give you three guesses who he’s going to hurt if you offer up your ass.”

“Thanks for clearing that up,” Doc snapped irritably. “But can I just point out that you’re the one who said he’s a copy cat.”

“So?”

“So obviously he doesn’t have the same motivation as the guy he’s copying. We may be looking at a case of hero worship gone amuck rather than a true psychotic need to maim and kill.”

“You may be on to something,” Tony admitted. “Still, it’s not like he can’t take what he wants…” he paused and listened. “Hey, do you hear that?”

“Is that a car?” Doc asked hopefully. “Do you think your friends found us?”

“Please, please, please,” Tony crooned as the sound of the engine came closer.

“Oh man,” Doc squirmed in anticipation of being set free as the vehicle pulled in and the motor was shut off. “It is them, right?” he stopped to ask as one car door slammed.

“Sure,” Tony offered worriedly as they waited for the rest of the team to get out of the car. They heard the distant whine of a truck on the highway but nothing else. “Or not. Shit.”
“Tony,” Doc called out as he clenched his fists and fought off the impending panic attack.

“Just remember what we talked about,” Tony coached, near panic himself. “Be cool and do what he tells you. Don’t try to piss him off.”

“Okay.”

“And let me do the talking. Serial killers like to brag. They enjoy taunting authority figures so I should be able to sidetrack him for some boasting at least for a little while.”

“Tony?”

“Yeah?” Tony asked distractedly as he strained to hear a door open and close. Boots sounded on the wooden floor inside the house but didn’t come immediately to the back room where they were sequestered away.

“If you get out of here…”

“We’re both gonna get out of here,” Tony cut him off.

“But if you do and I don’t, I want you to do something for me,” Doc persisted urgently. “Tony? Promise?”

Tony agonized over what to say. “Anything,” he managed at last.

“My mom and pop tried to make things up to me a couple years ago for something they’d said that I thought was unforgivable at the time. I cut them out of my life. Tell them I’m sorry. Tell them I love them.”

“I will.”


They exchanged nervous glances when the footsteps stopped. “Are you scared?” Doc whispered after a few moments.

“No,” Tony fibbed obstinately. “You?”

“Nah,” Doc denied, keeping up his end of the delusion. When the footsteps resumed they were much softer but seemed to be near. Doc closed his eyes and mumbled a little prayer.

Slowly, as a key rattled in the lock, Tony turned to look at the door. When it swung open he kept his face as impassive as he could.

The reinvented Charlie stuffed the last bite of a sandwich into his mouth as he entered the room, his left hand behind his back. Already barefoot and shirtless he wore only loose white pants with several large red blotches down the front. He glanced briefly at Doc, who stared back at him defiantly, and then shifted his attention to Tony.

“He lay on his stomach willingly, wanton and hungry for the promised hundred-dollar bill,” Charlie said with a smile that showed off a mouthful of chipped, yellow teeth.


“Even as I bound him he thought only of the money, resigned to my touch.” Charlie brought his arm from behind his back and took the large hunting knife into his right hand. The cutting edge
reflected the dim light, evidencing frequent, obsessive sharpening.

“Doc,” Tony warned, breaking eye contact with Charlie long enough to meet Doc’s enraged glare. “I don’t think he’s talking about you.”

“His impatient compliance faded only when I made the first long cut, angled under his right shoulder blade.”

“Wait!” Tony yelled as Charlie approached the bed. “Let’s talk about this.”

Charlie ignored him, running his left hand up the back of Doc’s softly furred thigh to rest on his buttock. He squeezed the flesh as if testing it before slapping it hard enough to leave a reddened handprint.

Doc flinched but didn’t make a sound until Charlie climbed onto the bed and straddled him. “Get off me!” he shouted, once again fighting his restraints. He gasped as the muscle just below his shoulder was sliced open. The reality of what was happening sunk in instantly leaving him frozen in shock and fear.

Tony gaped and fell back against the bookshelf in helpless rage as blood swelled and began to overflow the wound. His eyes burned but were too dry to form tears for his friend’s pain. He shook with enough anguish to rattle the chains on his wrists.

“Your turn,” Charlie told Tony as he looked over at him expectantly.

“To do what?” Tony asked with barely a wisp of breath.

“Recite the next passage.”

“Passage,” Tony muttered, attempting to recall their feeble plan to stall the inevitable. “You’re talking about Charlie Godwin’s daybook. You think I have it memorized?”

“You must,” Charlie said as he absently wiped the blade on his already stained pants. “You caught him. To do that you had to get inside his head.”

“There are only two things wrong with your theory,” Tony retorted in a carefully neutral tone. “First of all, we didn’t get the book until we took Godwin into custody. And I, personally, didn’t know what was in it until I read it in the newspaper along with John Q. Public. You’ve got to understand, I was pretty far down the food chain on the investigation, which leads me to the second flaw in your reasoning.”

“Which is?” Charlie asked, his interest obviously piqued.

“I didn’t have to get into Charlie’s head. All I had to do was stand on a street corner and let him find me. If he’d been into blondes we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. But you know what? I did get to watch him bawl like a baby when I read him his rights.”

“You’re ruining everything,” Charlie complained bitterly as he lay the knife down and jumped off the bed, storming out of the room.

Doc couldn’t seem to look away from the blade. He shivered slightly but didn’t move a muscle or make a sound. Before Tony could think of anything vaguely comforting to say Charlie was back thrusting a cheap plastic notebook under his nose.

“You’ll have to read it then,” Charlie told him angrily as he found the particular piece of laminated
newsprint he was looking for. “Here, the May fourth birthday.”

“You mean Eric Plumber, murder victim number three,” Tony corrected icily, refusing to even glance at the page.

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“Tim,” Kate greeted somberly as she passed his desk, followed closely by an ill-tempered Gibbs.

“Was Flora able to make a positive ID?” Gibbs barked out the question as he deposited his weapon into its usual drawer.

McGee looked up from his computer excitedly. “She was. Not only did she confirm that the man in the sketch was the same one Tony identified as Agent Gibbs, she was also certain she has never seen Michael Redding before. It looks like we might have another victim.”

“We know,” Gibbs stated sourly. “We found Redding’s vehicle at a bar called ‘Stiffies’.”

Kate held up an evidence bag. “There were blood splatters in the parking lot. I need to get these samples to Abby.”

“Wait a minute. Is ‘Stiffies’ a gay bar?” McGee asked with an odd expression on his face.

“Ya think?”

“That fits,” McGee said, disregarding the sarcasm as he explained. “When I went to speak to Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Bornemeier told me that Tony mentioned he’d had a drink with a friend at a gay bar before dinner last night.”

“The waitress… uh, wait person remembered seeing Tony with Doc,” Kate confirmed. “In fact, she… he… Lola was quite taken with Tony.”

“Not now, Kate,” Gibbs warned.

“Sorry. Anyway, long story short, Tony left alone, Doc stayed and had a drink with this guy,” Kate said as she pointed to a copy of the sketch. “But Lola didn’t think they hit it off.”

“The perp followed Tony to the bar then fixated on Doc as his next victim?”

“Probably. Doc left a little while later with our mystery man close on his heels.”

“Hopefully not a mystery much longer,” McGee postulated. “I took the liberty of checking out Kenny’s computer since it was still in evidence.”

“And?” Gibbs asked impatiently as he crossed the aisle to stand in from of the junior agent’s desk.

“We’ve been working under the assumption that the killer has been tracking Tony for twelve years. But what if it was only Kenny trying to keep the promise to his mother?”

“And you think Kenny met the killer recently?” Kate asked.

“I do. At least I think he met someone with aspirations to become a serial killer and they started this spree together.”

“So where do potential murderers meet in relative isolation and safety,” Gibbs questioned as he tapped a finger on the top of McGee’s monitor.
“Don’t tell me they have chat rooms for this kind of thing,” Kate asked in disbelief.

“I found over fifty in only a few minutes of searching. Then I decided the quickest way to find out if I was right would be to check Kenny’s hard drive. Abby helped me and we hit pay dirt in no time. Kenny corresponded frequently with some guy with the screen name ikll4fn. They had a lot of long, violently erotic e-mails and then agreed to meet face to face at the Lincoln Memorial. That was six months ago and the messages stopped abruptly after that.”

“They wouldn’t have to e-mail if they saw each other every day.”

Gibbs frowned as he continued to puzzle out the screen name. “I kill for fun?”

“Yeah, that kind of says it all,” McGee agreed. “Abby’s working with the ISP now to get us a name and address.”

“Good work, McGee,” Gibbs said as he took the evidence bag from Kate. “I’ll be in the lab lighting a fire under Abby.”

“Abby doesn’t need anyone to light a fire under her,” McGee pouted after Gibbs was long out of ear shot. “She’s as worried about Tony as any of us.”

“That’s just Gibbs’ way,” Kate soothed. “And if any body can handle him, it’s Abby.”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed with a heartfelt sigh as he got back to work checking out the long list of local butcher shops and meat packing plants.
Chapter 15

For his refusal to cooperate, Charlie backhanded Tony hard enough to slam his head into the shelf behind him and send the cut and paste manifesto flying. Then he collected his precious notebook and took several minutes to clean the slight spatter of blood from the page it had been open to. “All this,” he said almost rationally as he waved a hand to indicate the neatly organized books on the shelves, “Worthless theories and outsiders’ perceptions. No vision. No real insight.”

Tony glared at him as he bent at the knees enough to press a knuckle to his split lip, ready for the next blow. “Looking for guidance?” he asked without reigning in his sarcasm. He sent an apologetic glance to Doc who stared back at him worriedly but didn’t stray from the plan to let Tony do the talking.

“Yes,” Charlie breathed reverently as he held the notebook to his chest and stroked the plastic cover. “It always seemed out of reach. And then I met Kenny and he had this. I’d never even heard of Charlie Godwin before.”

“I know what you did to Kenny. I saw the scars,” Tony accused.

“We did each birthday once.”

Tony recoiled in horror. “You mean you raped and tortured him ten times.”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Charlie denied, having the audacity to look offended. “I never hurt him bad. It was just symbolic. It was… cathartic.”

“I didn’t see his back but his chest and belly looked like a freakin’ roadmap.”

“Charlie tended to like them face down but I prefer to see the eyes. That’s why April second and August eighteenth are my favorites.”

“So why do Kenny?”

“He knew what he was. His grandmother made sure of that. She called him the spawn of the devil since he was ten years old. The old bat told him day after day that he would end up following in his father’s footsteps, she beat it into him. But when it came right down to it, he couldn’t find it in his soul to fulfill his destiny.”

“So he made himself a victim instead,” Tony surmised sadly. “I guess you two were the perfect S and M team.”

“The old woman couldn’t have prepared him better is she’d gift wrapped him and delivered him on a silver platter. But it wasn’t enough. And then I found out about you.”

“And decided to play cat and mouse.”

Charlie laughed. “It would have been a great game, wouldn’t it? But Kenny was too soft. He couldn’t stand to watch them suffer.”

“You’re saying Kenny is the one who shot those men?”

“He would have killed you too, to protect you. I knew what he was planning all along. That’s why I dumped the bodies in his back yard. As a warning. I don’t know what he did with the first one, but
“Silva got there first.”

“Aw, serendipity,” Charlie sighed. “If you hadn’t been injured, I would never have tried to grab you.”

“I’m not going to participate,” Tony reiterated with a determined set to his jaw.

“It would have been nice, but you don’t have to,” Charlie assured as he gently set the notebook aside and reached for his knife. “All you have to do is watch.”

***

“Richard Wells,” Gibbs said tersely as he moved to his desk after spending nearly forty minutes in the lab breathing down Abby’s neck. “We have an old address in California, a bogus social security number, and a stolen credit card.”

“Richard Wells,” McGee repeated as he rustled through a neat stack of printouts. “I have a Ricky Wells on one of my lists.”

“What lists?”

“Uh, I decided to check out the employees of all meat packing plants within a hundred-mile radius. I’ll branch out into the butcher shops next but that’s going to take a while. Here it is. Ricky Wells is listed as a part-time employee for a processing plant near Damascus, Maryland.”

“That’s quite a drive,” Kate mused doubtfully.

“But not an impossible one, two hours with traffic, less without. McGee…”

“I’m on it, Boss,” McGee assured as he looked up a number and dialed his phone.

“This would be a lot easier with a car registration or something we could actually work with,” Kate sighed as she began to pace.

“Did Kenny Black have a car?” Gibbs asked with a sudden inspiration.

Kate went straight to her computer and began to type. “He did,” she said after a minute. “A yellow ‘78 Monte Carlo that was previously registered to his grandmother, but the disposition is unknown since his death.”

“Could it be at the hospital?”

“Surely it would have been towed by now,” Kate guessed as she did another search. “Kenny would have been too sick to drive at the time anyway. He probably took a bus or a cab… Nope, it hasn’t been impounded.”

“APB,” Gibbs instructed.

Glad to have something useful to do, Kate nodded and picked up her phone.

“Boss,” McGee said as he hung up. “I spoke to Wells’ supervisor. Ricky is a ‘hatchet man’ at the plant. Basically he turns whole cow carcasses into half cow carcasses. He fits the general description of our perp but this guy insists he’s a model employee who seems to enjoy his job. The address listed on his employment application is outside of Mount Airy, which is only a few miles
from Damascus.”

“Let’s roll,” Gibbs ordered as he yanked open his desk drawer and holstered his weapon. “You too, Kate.”

“He’s alibied,” McGee offered tentatively as Kate grabbed her gun even as she finished up her call. “Barely.”

Gibbs stopped to glare. “Talk fast.”

“He went in to work some overtime last night around eleven but he was only there for an hour or so before he complained about being sick and left.”

“That’s no alibi,” Gibbs scoffed as he headed for the elevator. “Let’s go. Now!” he snapped as both of his agents ran to catch up.

***

Tony huddled in the pile of books he’d shaken from the shelves, oblivious to the blood dripping from the nearly healed stitches he had ripped out and the unnatural way his injured arm now hung from the handcuffs. Dazed and hoarse from shouting he’d tried pleading, threats, and offering up himself in Doc’s place. But nothing had slowed Charlie’s meticulous step by step torture as he quoted the words of the original monster. Except for the frequent, leisurely breaks Charlie took to go to the bathroom or make himself another sandwich.

Doc on the other hand hadn’t made a sound. Not until the actual rape and then he’d buried his face in the black plastic to muffle his single cry when Charlie roughly entered him. It was almost over now. Tony didn’t want to watch, didn’t want to grant Charlie’s desire for an audience but he simply could not look away. Much like the clichéd car wreck, he thought numbly.

Suddenly Doc turned to him with a look of startled confusion as Charlie roared angrily and pulled out. Bellowing like an injured animal, Charlie grabbed Doc by the hair and yanked his head back to expose his neck. He snatched up the knife beside his knee but hesitated before making the killing slice.

“No!” Tony screamed. Instead of ripping Doc’s throat apart Charlie made a half-assed swipe with the blade that cut at an awkward, non-lethal angle. With tears of frustration running down his face he dropped the knife and began to gather the drawstring waistband of his pants as he hastily backed off the bed. When Tony caught a glimpse of the flaccid penis he suddenly understood what must have happened and raised a disparaging eyebrow calculated to cause further degradation. Charlie glared back at him as he yanked up his pants and fled the room.

“Doc,” Tony called out huskily as soon as Charlie was gone. He chose to ignore the crashing sounds of the crazed man tearing the house apart in the other room.

Doc shook violently for a moment then began to wretch but there was nothing in his stomach to bring up. Tony looked on with concern as he tried to determine the severity of the wounds.

“Doc,” Tony said again when the worst of the dry heaves were over. “Are you okay?” he asked, wincing at the foolishness of the question. Doc was obviously not okay.

“I’m still alive,” Doc muttered faintly, not sounding very happy about it at the moment. He didn’t bother to make eye contact.
“Yeah,” Tony answered back with a quiver in his voice.

When Charlie staggered back into the room waving around Tony’s gun Doc closed his eyes and lay perfectly still. He didn’t even appear to be breathing as Charlie approached the bed.

“That’s right,” Tony goaded maliciously to draw Charlie’s attention away from Doc. “You should probably get rid of the witnesses or else you’ll go down as the most inept serial killer in history.”

“Shut up.”

“Not only can’t you keep an erection long enough to complete a rape, you’ve got a body count of exactly zero. Not the kind of notoriety you were looking for.”

“Shut up!” Charlie screeched. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“You couldn’t finish with the other two either, could you? I wondered why no one mentioned DNA. I thought maybe you were smart enough to use a condom, but I guess I overestimated your intelligence, didn’t I? You impotent, weak kneed son of a…”

Charlie lunged at Tony and yanked him up to his knees shoving the gun under his jaw.

“Go ahead,” Tony urged angrily. “Kill me. But then you lose your only living link to Godwin. I’m a better source of insight than those damned newspaper clippings and you know it.”

“I’ll kill your whore,” Charlie threatened with a barely controlled rage of his own.

Tony quickly backed down and changed tactics. “He’ll be dead soon anyway,” he bluffed even as he prayed it wasn’t true.

“There are others.”

“I caught Godwin,” Tony whispered, drawing Charlie in closer with a tone that bordered on seductive. “He chose me for you. That’s the way it’s gotta go down.”

“Yeah,” Charlie agreed as he set the gun on the floor so he could run his hands through Tony’s hair. Impulsively he leaned in and kissed him hard on the already damaged mouth. “Me and you. I wrote my own script for June fifteenth.”

“I can’t wait,” Tony said, carefully noting the location of the gun for the second the cuffs were unlocked.

“I’ll get back to you as soon as I take out the trash,” Charlie promised softly. As he turned to the motionless form on the bed he inattentively kicked the gun under the edge of the black plastic that now hung nearly to the floor.

Wanting to spit in disgust Tony settled for wiping his mouth on his shoulder leaving another streak of red on his tee-shirt. He knew he was at the end of his rope both physically and emotionally and hoped to hell Doc wasn’t as out of it as he appeared.

Charlie located the hunting knife and unceremoniously cut away the restraints from Doc’s feet and hands. In his haste he didn’t bother checking for a pulse as he dropped the still bloody blade onto the mattress before rolling Doc over.

Tony watched with rapt attention trying to determine if Doc was passed out, playing ‘possum, or really dead. When Charlie hefted the limp body over his shoulder Doc’s hand clenched as it
brushed the handle of the knife. Doc tucked the blade along his forearm, keeping his head down and making no other move to give himself away.

As Charlie cluelessly carried Doc out, Tony felt a perverse, out of control urge to laugh. It grew until his whole body shook in spite of the pain that traveled up his arm. But the laughter came out as a terrified, soul wrenching sob.
Chapter 16

The rural setting was perfect for Wells’ hobby – a rundown farmhouse far enough from the road no one would hear his victims scream. Despite heavy traffic Gibbs had managed to shave forty minutes off the estimated two-hour drive. He slowed a little to make the final turn in the Abby-assisted directions then immediately hit the gas. Fishtailing slightly, the rear of the car clipped a homemade ‘no trespassing’ sign at the edge of the property sending pieces of wood flying.

Kate bit her tongue and continued to hold on as they barreled down the narrow lane while McGee bounced around in the backseat trying to hang up from his conversation with the State Police.

“I’ve got local LEOs and an ambulance on standby,” McGee informed Gibbs.

Gibbs nodded and continued to drive. Less than half a mile later he stopped the sedan, parking behind a row of saplings that grew unchecked next to a barb-wire fence.

“Kate, you go right and I’ll go left,” Gibbs instructed quickly and quietly as he drew his weapon. “McGee, wait outside the front door until I yell. Watch out for crossfire if things go south. Got it?”

“Got it, Boss.”

“Let’s go get him,” Kate said determinedly as she slapped in a new clip.

They got out of the car and covertly made their way along the tree lined fence to the front of the house where they broke off as directed by Gibbs. In the detached garage they could see a partially covered motorcycle and the rusted-out shell of an old Mustang.

McGee climbed onto the porch and cautiously glanced through the tiny window on the door. The trashed room made him uneasy but he followed orders and stayed put.

Kate found the windows along the right side of the house to be securely covered with sheets, or in the case of the back room, a large red towel. She guardedly peeked around the corner then led with her gun. A ragged-out Monte Carlo that might have once been yellow was backed up to the porch with the trunk open. Gibbs was already checking the eviscerated body on the ground behind it for a pulse.

“That’s not a very efficient way to kill someone,” Kate mused as she backtracked the smeared, crimson trail that led out of the house.

“No, but it is a damned painful way,” Gibbs said grimly.

“Gibbs,” Kate gasped, rushing into the kitchen when she spotted a bloodied, naked man face down on the floor. She knocked the large knife away from the body and felt for a pulse. “It’s Doc.”

Gibbs entered a little more vigilantly and checked the small combination dining room/living room. “Is he alive?” he asked as he moved.

“Yeah, but he’s out cold. My God, it looks like he’s been flayed.” She stood up and yanked down the haphazardly folded sheet that was tacked over the window above the sink. After shaking the dust out of it she covered Doc and moved to follow Gibbs.

“Stay with him,” Gibbs instructed firmly. “McGee!” he called out as he stepped over a broken chair to get to the first bedroom. “Get that ambulance down here.”
The front door came crashing in as a slightly wild-eyed McGee exploded onto the scene.

“We’re clear. The perp is hanging out out back. Literally,” Gibbs told him as he checked the bedroom anyway. He came out holding a folded uniform top which he handed off to McGee. “There’s a whole shelf full of these.”

McGee dropped the shirt onto the back of the ratty couch as he pulled out his cell. He paused only a second to examine the torn sling already draped over the arm.

Meanwhile Gibbs moved past the empty bathroom to the other bedroom. “Tony?” he called out as he opened the unlocked door. “Son of a bitch.”

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When Doc didn’t return Tony thought the worst and gave in to despair. As he waited alone for whatever hellish script Charlie had written for him his feelings of shock and grief finally boiled over. He openly wept for Doc, for Kenny, for the unwitting bystanders who had been caught in Charlie’s sick game. Even for his own rapidly approaching demise and what he would have to go through to get there. When the emotional onslaught eventually passed he was blessedly numb. He dozed fitfully between scattered thoughts of death and revenge.

Later, hours or possibly days for all he knew, he became aware of footsteps in the hall. All higher brain function ceased and left him with the roar of panic in his ears and icy dread in the pit of his stomach. But when the door opened a spark of defiance rekindled in his soul. He tuned out the barrage of words and concentrated his thoughts on the gun that lay just out of sight.

Somehow he managed to keep his head down and his eyes closed as Charlie approached, but the gentle hand on his face undid him. He reacted violently, jumping back and kicking out with his feet. Only the agony of tearing muscle and shifting bone in his arm as it abruptly took his weight tempered his fight or flight instincts. A seemingly faraway voice repeated his name as arms grabbed him around the chest and raised him up. But he was too far gone to appreciate the situation.

“McGee, get in here! Unlock the cuffs before he rips his damned arm off.”

Panting through the pain Tony used it to focus his mind and push away his fear. The gun, the gun he chanted in his head. There was more talking and then his hands were released one by one. He bided his time and allowed himself to be lowered to the floor before making his move. With a surprising burst of speed considering the stiffness in his abused body, Tony rolled and reached out with his good arm. The metal felt odd in his deadened, blood deprived fingers but he held on as he forced himself up to his knees.

Hands grabbed him and Tony tried to wrestle free but there were too many, too strong. With a fierce snarl he tucked the weapon tight against his belly and doubled over it. He silently vowed to die before letting it go.

“DiNozzo!”

Tony froze in place as the familiar shout succeeded in breaking through his terror. “Gibbs?” he asked, astonished by his own lack of understanding.

“Give me the gun, Tony,” Gibbs urged in an impossibly tender tone as he ran a hand down Tony’s back.

“No,” Tony refused as he once again tried to struggle to his feet. He realized that the solid mass
that held him on his other side had to be McGee.

“It’s over,” Gibbs assured, not letting up on the reassuring touches. “He’s dead.”

“You?” Tony croaked out, finally looking Gibbs in the face.

“No, as much as I wanted to, I didn’t kill him,” Gibbs confessed. “It looks like Redding gutted him with a hunting knife. Justifiable, I’d say.”

Still not ready to hand over his weapon Tony sniffed once and tried again to get up but was easily subdued. His gun hand twitched visibly.

“If I thought it would help I’d let you empty a clip into the lifeless bastard,” Gibbs said sympathetically. “But the paper work would bury us.”

“He’s dead?” Tony asked one more time just to be sure.

“Oh yeah, he’s frying in hell by now.”

“Good,” Tony muttered as he reluctantly handed his gun to McGee and let Gibbs support him in a semi-reclining position that kept his head off the matted rug. “What about Doc?”

Gibbs sighed. “Still breathing,” he said knowing Tony was already well aware of the man’s condition.

“I knew you’d find us,” Tony muttered. Absently he flexed and relaxed the fingers of his good hand.

“Sorry we’re late,” Gibbs said culpably as he took inventory of Tony’s injuries.

McGee disappeared out the door and returned a minute later with a bottle of water which he unscrewed the top and handed to Gibbs. “The ambulance is close,” he informed them needlessly as sirens blared in the background.

Tony winced at the pressure on his split lip but managed a few sips as Gibbs held the bottle for him. “Boss?” he asked as he weakly pushed the water away.

“Yeah, Tony?”

“I’m gonna pass out now.” And he did.
Chapter 17

Epilogue
Two Weeks Later

Kate almost felt guilty for breaking Tony’s self-imposed visitor moratorium. While she respected his desire for privacy she also resented a little the way he shut everyone out once he got out of the hospital. She’d respected his wishes and even given him a week to wallow but now she was on a mission. And just maybe, she thought, after seeing her he’d finally crack and let everyone else back into his life too.

As she made her way to Tony’s apartment the door across the hall opened and a fifty-something man of Hispanic persuasion stepped out. “Thanks again, Miss Flora. You take care now,” he said in a pseudo-Southern accent that sounded vaguely familiar. As he turned to leave he flipped a heavily rhinestoned cape in a dry cleaner’s bag over his shoulder and nodded his pompadour in Kate’s direction in greeting.

After politely returning the nod, and suppressing a smile for the too long, too bushy sideburns, Kate lifted her hand to knock on Tony’s door then froze. She whirled around to watch the man put on an enormous pair of sunglasses then stared after him as he fairly swaggered away. Just as he rounded the corner out of sight Tony’s door flew open giving her a start.

“Rena,” Kate blurted out. “I think I just saw Flora’s Elvis.”


Still unsure of her welcome, Kate lingered in the hall. “I realize Tony doesn’t want to see anyone yet…” she began hesitantly.

“So maybe you came to see me,” Mrs. Bornemeier said with a wink as she tugged the undecided agent inside.

“Right,” Kate agreed, making an effort to relax. “It certainly is quiet around here.”

“That’s by design. And don’t think there aren’t a lot of ruffled feathers about it,” Mrs. Bornemeier replied with an evil grin as she shut the door. “Tony said he wasn’t up to any the mother-henning so I’ve kept the Gerital squad at bay.”

Kate resisted the urge to snort at the biggest hen of them all, glad Tony had someone who refused to leave him all alone. “How is he?” she asked instead.

The older women idly tucked a stray wisp of hair into her loose bun as she considered how best to respond. “Well I don’t think he’s taking as much of his pain medicine as he should. But he doesn’t complain, just spends his time playing that stupid video game. All that violence hour after hour, it can’t be good for him.”

“I know he’s still hurting physically,” Kate pressed worriedly. “But how is he?”

“He’s restless. Distant.” Mrs. Bornemeier’s eyes suddenly got misty. “I don’t know what happened and he’s not talking but it’s like something’s broken inside of him. He’s lost his spark.”

Kate swallowed the lump in her throat and willed herself not to get choked up. “He’s been through
“I gathered that,” Mrs. Bornemeier sighed as she patted Kate’s arm and headed for the kitchen. “Come on honey, I think what this conversation needs is java. And fudge. Lot’s of fudge. Tony, you have company,” she added loudly for the recluse’s benefit.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you call him Tony,” Kate noted as she followed. Closer to Tony’s room she could hear the tinny gaming music complete with canned explosions and sound effects but Tony didn’t put in an appearance.

“He calls me Rena now,” Mrs. Bornemeier explained as she poured coffee and motioned Kate to the table where they both took a seat. “He’s says it’s impossible to stand on formality since I’ve seen him in his all-together. He needs a lot more help with bathing and such this time,” she added at the shocked look Kate tried to hide.

“I guess that makes sense.”

Mrs. Bornemeier intercepted Kate’s hand as she reached for the sugar bowl. “We are going to get our Tony back, aren’t we?” she asked, searching Kate’s eyes for the truth.

“I hope so,” Kate answered earnestly. “But it’s going to take some time.”

***

Full of fudge for courage, Kate ultimately let Mrs. Bornemeier herd her down the hall to the lion’s den. She stood at the bedroom door and watched him for a few minutes noting the lines of concentration etched on his forehead as he studiously ignored her. Propped up against the headboard wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms Tony worked the control effortlessly with his left hand, a sure sign Mrs. Bornemeier hadn’t been exaggerating the amount of time and energy he spent on the video game.

The sight of DiNozzo with his arm encased in plaster from shoulder to wrist, bent horizontally at the elbow and jutting out at a ninety-degree angle might have otherwise been amusing. Especially with the support strut that transferred the weight of his extremity to his similarly wrapped midsection. But the depth of Tony’s emotional pain was still evident on his face and a little too raw even for Kate. She winced at the slight discoloration of the skin around his exposed wrist from the all but healed bruises and abrasions, a much more poignant reminder of how he’d been mistreated than the pristine white cast.

“How can you do that?” she finally asked to force him to acknowledge her as she put her bag down on the dresser.

“Takes a little practice,” Tony offered without bothering to look away from the TV.

“I meant spending all day playing that thing.”

“It’s therapeutic,” Tony insisted crabbily.

Kate waited him out for a few more minutes but he remained focused on the screen. “I still think you look like a coat rack,” she said at last.

The barb achieved the desired result and Tony smirked a little. “I remember going into surgery. I was all doped up but Ducky was there. He promised I wouldn’t have to wear that stupid sling anymore.”
“Be careful what you wish for,” Kate teased, reaching out to tweak his elevated fingers, pleased when he allowed it and even squeezed back a bit.

“You got past Rena, did you?”

“She’s a good neighbor.”

“Yeah, but a lousy watchdog,” Tony sulked. “I told her I wanted to be alone.”

“So she slipped up once.”

Tony grinned but it was a weak imitation of his usual hundred-watt smile. “Yeah right. Once.”

“Gibbs dropped in, didn’t he?” Kate asked, not at all surprised their boss had been by to check on Tony. She moved to sit on the foot of the bed, trying not to look at the gruesome graphics on the screen.

“He’s one of the more frequent visitors. Down in front.”

“Ducky, too?” Kate asked as she got out of the way and stood next to the nightstand instead.

“Every day. Rena says he gets mobbed at the door to the building like a movie star. I think he enjoys the attention. Or maybe he just likes soup.”

Kate started to frown. “Abby?”

“Where do you think I got the cool Xbox? And before you ask, McGee rewired this thing so I could handle it better with one hand. But to be fair, I did call him.”

With an irritable huff Kate put her hands on her hips. “And not one of them said a word about it to me.”

“That’s because they all think they’re the only one. Well, except for Gibbs. I suspect he knows everything as usual,” Tony observed, obviously relishing the opportunity to yank Kate’s chain.

“Everyone came to see you but me.”

“I know,” Tony said in mock offense. “Even considering your anal propensity to follow the rules I still expected you two days ago. I owe Gibbs ten bucks. He bet you’d hold out a whole week.”

Feeling like she was setting Tony up, Kate was suddenly unable to play along with the comforting banter. “I talked to Doc,” she revealed hastily. “He, uh… how’s he doing?”

“He says he’s fine.”

“Sure he is.”

“Yeah… he got out of the hospital a couple days ago. And sometime in the next few weeks he’ll be moving back to Chicago. He said it was time to swallow his pride and mend some fences.”

“That’s good,” Tony approved with a melancholy smile. “I’m glad he got the chance to do that.”

“He said he wants to see you to say good-bye but he doesn’t think he can handle your guilt on top
of his own hang-ups. But I really think you should meet with him, for both your sakes.”

Tony turned off the game and dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. “I can’t face him.”

“Sure you can,” Kate tried to be supportive without being pushy.

“You don’t understand. I let him down,” Tony agonized. “Don’t you see that? I failed him.”

“He doesn’t see it that way.”

“Then he’s wrong!”

“You’re angry,” Kate acknowledged carefully. “That’s perfectly understandable.”

“Spare me the psycho-analysis, I start seeing the department shrink on Monday. I don’t need any extra sessions with you, thank you very much.”

“That’s great. I think that’s the best thing for you.”

“Well I don’t. And I have to complete eighteen hours of therapy before they’ll even let me back on desk duty.”

Kate frantically searched her brain for a silver lining. “That’ll give your arm time to heal while you get your head together,” she offered knowing how lame it sounded.

“My head is fine.”

“Tony, you were just as much a victim as Doc was,” Kate insisted. She immediately regretted it.

“Don’t ever say that,” Tony snapped, pointing at her with his good hand as his voice steadily grew in volume. “I was there. I know what happened and to who. Don’t you dare presume to tell me what’s what in all this.”

She let him vent, holding up a hand to forestall a wide-eyed Mrs. Bornemeier when she appeared in the door.

Tony abruptly halted his tirade and closed his eyes as he took a few deep breaths. “I couldn’t stop him,” he went on softly as he dropped his chin to his chest. “I couldn’t even look away,” he finished in defeat as he furtively wiped his eyes.

He looked miserable but pulled back when Kate reached for him. She sat on the edge of the bed anyway and watched helplessly. The anger finally seemed to drain away leaving his face blank and eerily calm.

“I gave up.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is. That sick bastard broke my spirit. For a little while.” They sat in silence for a few minutes. “Don’t tell Gibbs, okay?”

“Nothing to tell,” Kate vowed, meaning it.

“I’m sorry I took my aggression out on you,” Tony apologized. “That’s what the video game is supposed to be for. I guess I’m just not very good company right now.”
“I understand,” Kate said as she got up and went to get her bag, bringing it back with her. “I’ll go if you still want to be alone.”

Tony nodded. “Just for a little while longer.”

“Call if you need anything. Even if you just need someone to yell at,” Kate offered sincerely.

“I said I was sorry,” Tony pouted as he glanced up at her through his eyelashes with just the teeniest suggestion of a flutter. “Don’t be mad.”

“Does the little boy lost routine work on Rena?” Kate asked, putting every effort into not escalating Tony’s already heightened insecurities by keeping the conversation as normal as possible.

“Of course.”

Mrs. Bornemeier, who had continued to hover in the doorway harrumphed in contention and disappeared back down the hall.

Tony managed a devilish smile at the rapid retreat. “You can come back and see me. If you want,” he invited.

“I will,” Kate agreed as she paused before reaching into her handbag. “I brought you something.”

“A present?” Tony asked, actually perking up a little.

“Oh God,” Kate quickly backpedaled, imagining her good intentions blowing up in her face. “I guess I didn’t think this through. I’m so sorry, Tony. This was a bad idea.”

“Gimme,” Tony persisted. He grabbed the strap of her bag and reeled her in then pulled her hand out still holding a small white box. “Is that what I think it is?” he asked in surprise.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I thought maybe you could crush it or something,” Kate suggested sheepishly. “Scatter the glass? For closure.”

“Open it,” Tony requested as he turned his whole body to put his feet on the floor.

Kate sighed and did as she was asked. Sitting the box aside she held the imperfect angel up by a piece of string since its golden chain was long gone. One wing was chipped badly but the light danced brilliantly over the fractured surfaces.

“I guess it’s not evidence anymore.”

“This was the one that was left over,” Kate explained. “They found it in Kenny’s closet. Abby spent hours putting it back together.”

“This one is for Doc,” Tony decided, apparently mesmerized by the display of light as he reached out to take it. “He was the twelfth victim. It’s fitting his is the one that was shattered I suppose, since he lived to carry the scars.”

“Doc’s scars are going to heal. So are yours.”

Tony laughed. “Scars don’t heal, Kate. Scars are what are left to remind you of the things that hurt
you.”

“I meant that figuratively,” Kate muttered under her breath.

“Does Abby know what you planned for this thing?”

“Yeah, we dreamed the idea up together. I guarantee it didn’t sound so bizarre in her lab at three a.m.”

“Things never do,” Tony agreed with a been-there, done-that nod. “Can I keep it?”

“I’m surprised you’d want to,” Kate stammered. “But, yeah, it’s yours.”

“Thanks.”

Kate leaned in and kissed him on the forehead. “I’m really leaving this time.”

“Don’t let the screen door hit you in the ass,” Tony said with a weary but genuine smile.

“Turn off that damn game,” Kate shot back. She stopped in the door to watch Tony carefully settle the angel on his nightstand. “And call Doc.”

“I will,” Tony promised. “Just not today.”

The End

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