Summary

During Ellie Bishop's first week at NCIS, she accidentally breaks Rule 23. If she wants to live to see her second week, she better learn how to rely on her quirky, new team.

Notes

This story was written for the LJ Reverse Bang Challenge. It was inspired by the amazing work of Red_Pink_Dots. The original artwork included the season 15 team, but she was gracious to change it for me and let my plot bunny run wild. I can't thank her enough for reading the story as I went along and telling me what she did and didn't like. Without her inspiration, this story would never exist.

And as always, I can't think solariana on LJ enough for continuing to run the Bang challenges and encouraging new work into the NCIS fandom.

I sincerely hope you enjoy my most recent attempt.

- Inspired by Art for Mission: Improbable by unilocular by Red_Pink_Dots
Ellie Bishop tries to ignore the questioning glances from her new teammate, Tony DiNozzo. She knows how strange she must look. Sitting on her desk, laptop on her knees, earbuds buried in her ears, and candy bar wrappers strewn everywhere. When she first arrived, she was perfectly content to work on the floor behind her desk. That didn’t last more than a few days before her boss, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, growled, Use the desk. So, she is just doing what she was told.
Her eyes flick to Tony. “Is something wrong?”

His lips move before he pauses, clearly waiting for an answer. Then, he smirks. At the moment, she realizes the surveillance audio from their case is still pumping through her earbuds. Ripping them out of her ears, she flushes fiercely.

“Too much Lady Gaga again?” Tony asks.

She shakes her head. “Audio data from our case. Did you know Phillips was a Gemini?”

“I do now, but I’m not sure how it’s relevant.”

“I just thought it was interesting,” she says, twirling the earbud wire around her finger.

He half-nods. “Sure.”

“Agent DiNozzo.” When he stares at her, she flinches. “Tony. Am I doing something wrong?”

“The desk thing. It’s a little weird. Okay, more than a little weird.” He waves his hand at her current state. “They make chairs for that, you know.”

“I think better when I’m sitting like this.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Criss-cross applesauce?”

“Tailor-style,” she corrects.

“What’s with all those Twix bars?” Tony asks, gesturing to the growing pile by her knees.

“Breakfast,” she replies.

His grin broadens. “Of course.”

Tony apprises her for a long moment, tilting his head as though she is a specimen under a microscope. Her skin crawls as she twists the earbud wire around her finger until he hurts. He opens his mouth, but he seems to think better of it. He looks back to his casefile.

Ellie is just about to return to the audio when Leroy Jethro Gibbs swoops into the bullpen. He deposits his omnipresent cup of coffee on his desk. Then, he glares at Ellie.

“Thought I told you to use the desk,” he barks.

She glances down at her seating arrangement because she is using the desk. She didn’t interpret his order to use a chair and sit at it like Tony right now. Before she has a chance to ask him to clarify how exactly he expects her to use it, he turns to Tony.

“Where’s McGee?” he growls.

“On his way,” Tony says confidently.

Gibbs’ face pinches. “He’s late.”

Tony checks his computer clock. “Boss, it’s 0753. Yesterday, you said 0800.”

Apparently, Gibbs doesn’t operate on the normal space-time continuum. Granted, she arrived at 6AM—0600, she corrects herself. Part of her wanted to impress her new team, the other part just
needed to soak up her new environment without any distractions. She wanted to find her new safe place, the place to retreat when she needed a minute to herself. Because Gibbs barking orders and breathing down her neck constantly is so not helping her adjust.

“Got anything?” Gibbs asks.

“Not yet.” When Gibbs glares at him, Tony sports an easy smile. “Phillips is a Gemini.”

If looks could kill, Tony would be pushing up daisies right now. Somehow, Gibbs’ nasty glower doesn’t even phase him. If anything, Tony’s smirk seems to challenge him. Ellie slowly sinks into her desk chair. She feels a bit like Rodin’s The Thinker, but being a statue is far better than the receiving end of Gibbs’ ire. Suddenly, she needs to know what Tony had for breakfast to give him such balls of steel. Maybe she’ll try that instead of Twix bars tomorrow.

At that moment, Gibbs’ cell phone rings. He flips it open.

“Yeah, Gibbs.” There’s a long pause. “On my way, Abs.”

With another scowl at Tony, Gibbs rushes out of the bullpen. As soon as he’s gone, Ellie finds herself able to breathe again. She glances at Tony, who is now grinning.

“Saved by our resident forensic goddess again,” he says.

“Is he – “ she drops her voice “ – like that a lot?”

Tony’s expression goes blank. “That? That was nothing. Gibbs is actually in a good mood today.”

Ellie’s heart drops. Maybe taking this job was a horrible idea. When she left the NSA, her former boss wished her luck when he heard she was working for Gibbs. At the time, she thought it was just an expression, a nice send-off. Now, she thinks she might just need it.

“What’s he going to do to McGee for being late?” she blurts out.

“Well, technically, he isn’t late until – “ Tony makes a show of watching his desk clock “ – now.”

As if on cue, the doors elevator open. Tim McGee hustles into the bullpen, cheeks ruddy and backpack slung over his shoulder. He drops it behind his desk, shucks off his jacket, and fires up his computer. He collapses into his chair purposefully like he was there the whole morning.

He smiles broadly. “Good morning, guys.”

After returning it, Ellie gets back to work. She keeps one eye on Tim and Tony’s conversation and the other on her computer screen. She doesn’t restart the audio surveillance. She is busy doing her own surveillance right now by learning how this team interacts. Then, she’ll know how—and, if—she fits in.

“You’re late, McTardy,” Tony announces.

“It’s 0800,” Tim shoots back.

“That’s not what Gibbs thinks.”

Tim’s pleasant expression suddenly sours. “Has he already been in?”

“Oh yeah.” Grinning, Tony sing-songs: “You’re in so much trouble.”
Tim glances at Ellie, who carefully nods her agreement. Tim checks the time on his computer, his cell phone, and his watch. He frowns deeply as he twirls a dial on his watch. He tweaks his cell phone clock too. He types at his keyboard for a moment before stopping abruptly. Tony is staring him down.

“What?” Tim says, clearly annoyed.

“You’re wearing the same thing you did yesterday,” Tony replies.

Tim flushes ferociously. “Am not.”

“Are too.”

They both look at Ellie for her input. Biting her lower lip, she surveys Tim’s clothes: blue oxford, black dress pants, dark grey jacket. A neutral color palette made to look professional without trying too hard. However, the odds of pulling that color combination two days in a row and the odds of having two sets of the exact same brands is highly unusual. Ellie starts a rough calculation of the odds before stopping short. The clincher is a small spot of mustard on the collar of Tim’s shirt. Yesterday for lunch, he had a turkey sandwich with Dijon mustard—really? Who eats Dijon mustard anyway?—while Tony and Ellie both had corned beef. Instantly, Ellie is hungry again.

She makes a face. “Sorry, McGee, but – “

“Aha, told you!” Tony interrupts. “Even the Probie can tell!”

Somehow, Tim’s face turns even redder.

Tony wolf-whistles. “Did someone get McLucky last night?”

Tim leans forward. “So what if I did?”

Tony studies Tim for a long moment before shaking his head. “No, you didn’t. I can always tell. You should take advantage of an opportunity when a woman takes you home. It can’t happen all that often.”

“I’ll have you know, what Delilah and I have is special. There’s a real connection.” Looking away, Tim unconsciously smooths his jacket. “I don’t want to rush it.”

“Rushing it? You two have been dating for months, Tim.” He draws the word out again, “Months. You’re moving slower than that steam roller in Austin Powers.”

At the sudden turn in the conversation, Ellie clears her throat. Tony gestures at her as though to say, See? The probie agrees with me. She just doesn’t want Gibbs to catch them discussing their personal lives when they should be working.

Tim dramatically rolls his eyes. “We’ll get to it when the time is right.”

Tony mutters something under his breath. Tim narrows his eyes at Tony.

With the lull in conversation, Ellie can finally get back to work. She decides to take a break from the audio surveillance. She launches into a background search for their victim: Ransom Phillips, a Marine from New Jersey. She pulls his service record to check his birthday. August 8, 1982.


Tim peers over. “Got something, Bishop?”
“Yeah, I – uh, maybe.” She wavers. “Phillips’ birthday is in August.”

“And?”

“Well, on the audio tapes Phillips said he was a Gemini.”

When Tim stares at her questioningly, Tony quickly explains: “If he were born in August, he would be a Leo or a Virgo.”

“Since when are you into astrology, Tony?” Tim asks.

“Since Mercury went into retrograde,” Tony says. “And Tim, your week is going to be a doozy.”

Tim turns back to his computer. “I don’t want to know.”


For a moment, Ellie thought Tim and Tony forgot she was even here. Glancing at her Mac, she frowns deeply. Even though NCIS’ IT department issued her a PC when she arrived, she just couldn’t get used to it. There were too many buttons on the mouse and the Windows operating system was surprisingly counterintuitive. After the first day, she needed—no, craved—the familiarity of her old computer. After a requisition request—maybe, just a little begging—IT managed to get her a Mac and while it increased her productivity, there were a few things it just doesn’t work with…like the plasma screen.

She gestures at her computer. “Tony, it’s a Mac.”

“And?” He acts like it isn’t a big deal. When it so is.

“It isn’t exactly compatible with your network. I’d have to download a program to convert the data to Window. Then, I can put it on the plasma.”

Ellie swears Tony’s eyelid twitches.

Tim pulls a cable out of his desk. “I’ve got something to help with that, Bishop. It’ll connect the Mac – “ he says the word like a curse “ – to the plasma.”

“Thanks, McGee,” she says, smiling.

Jumping to her feet, Ellie grabs the cable from Tim and bounds towards the screen. She holds her Mac like a serving tray while attaching the cable to a port before hooking it up to the plasma. She places it on Gibbs’ desk without looking. She hears a splash before her sneakers feel wet.

Gibbs’ coffee cup is sideways on the floor. The lid is gone, the liquid soaking the carpet dark brown. Tony, who is in the middle of flicking a paper football at Tim, stops dead. Tim bites his lower lip. Both men scramble to their feet to join Ellie. They stand beside her with their hands on their hips as though they survey a crime scene.

“It’s gone, isn’t it?” Tony whispers.

“Oh yeah. It’s completely gone.” Tim sighs. “This is just great.”

Nervous energy washes over Ellie like when her husband gives her the silent treatment. She doesn’t understand why Tim and Tony are so anxious. She stoops to pick up the empty cup.
“What’s wrong?” Ellie asks.

“Rule 23,” Tim says as though it explains everything.

She wrinkles her nose. “What does that even mean?”

Tony nods seriously. “Gibbs has a set of rules to live by. One of the most important is Rule 23: ‘Never mess with a Marine’s coffee if you want to live.’”

Ellie genuinely laughs. “It’s just coffee.”

“She thinks it’s ‘just coffee,’ Tim.” Tony clasps Tim’s shoulder dramatically. The younger man shrugs him off. “Just coffee. That’s like saying my suit is just a suit. Does this look like a suit to you?” He holds open his jacket to display the blood red silk lining.

Ellie studies the black suit Tony wears. It fits him well and it has a slight sheen, but it still has pants and a jacket. Her husband has a closet full of nearly identical outfits at home.

*That must be a trick question.*

“Of course, it’s a suit,” she says definitively.

Tony is affronted. “It’s *Armani*, which is—“

“Not important,” Tim interrupts.

Tony shoots him a dirty look, which Tim returns. They turn to face each other. They’re squaring off again, trying to assert dominance over the situation. If she hadn’t grown up with a house full of brothers, Ellie might find the situation awkward. Instead, it’s funny because the pecking order will always be the same: Tony ordering Tim around solely because of age and job title.

Ellie starts out of the bullpen. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where do you think you’re going? Tony calls.

“Down to the cafeteria to get Gibbs more coffee.”

When Tim and Tony break out in raucous laughter, she comes back. For the life of her, she doesn’t understand what she could be missing. Maybe they weren’t kidding about Gibbs’ rule earlier, which means…well, shoot. She is a little too attached to living to give it up now. Not to mention, she really doesn’t want to go through the headache of getting another job. She doubts the NSA will take her back.

“What’s wrong with the coffee here?” she asks.

Tony grins. “‘Back when I was picking beans in Guatamela, we used to make fresh coffee—right off the trees, I mean. That was good. This is shit. But, hey, I’m in a police station.’”

Her eyes dart around the bullpen. “I didn’t think Washington had the appropriate climate to grow coffee beans.”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose. “No, Bishop. It’s from *The Usual Suspects*. You know, when Kevin Spacey as Keyser Soze is talking about the coffee in the police station.”

Ellie just stares at him blankly. When Tony checks with Tim, the younger man furrows his eyebrows. Tony sighs like no one will ever understand him.
Tim presses his lips together. “I think what Tony is trying to say is NCIS coffee is disgusting. Gibbs won’t touch it with a ten-foot pole.”

“Then I’ll just get him another one,” Ellie says.

“It isn’t that easy, Probie. Gibbs gets his coffee from…” Tony shoots a questioning glance at Tim, who shrugs. “Apparently, we have no idea. Great, now he’ll be even more Gibbsian than normal.”

Tim mirrors Tony’s serious expression. Ellie doesn’t want to know how Gibbs could be even worse than he already is. She picks up the empty cup to study the logo. It’s black and green with a cup of coffee in the center, surrounded by the words *Hot Fresh Coffee.*

“The logo is pretty generic,” she says hopelessly. “I have no idea what store it’s from.”

With a nod of resignation, Tim heads back to his desk. Something flashes in Tony’s eyes as he scoops the cup out of Ellie’s hand. He examines it for a long moment.

“You know, I bet we could figure it out,” he says.

Tim sinks into his desk chair. “I think we should focus on our case.”

“You’re already in the doghouse, McLate.”

“I was one minute early!”

“According to your unsynchronized watch, not Gibbs’ gut. Do you think the punishment will be better or worse if Gibbs is properly caffeinated?” Tim tilts his head as though to say, *I’m listening.* Tony dips his shoulders forward. “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to determine where this coffee came from and obtain a new one. This message will self-destruct in 5 seconds.”

Tim leans back in his chair. “Tony, no.”

After what Ellie suspects is the count of five, Tony wiggles the fingers on his free hand. He mutters, “Kabrrrm,” under his breath. Tim’s eyes nearly roll out of his head.

“We aren’t doing this,” Tim says.

“Come on, McPhelps. It’ll be fun.” When Tim doesn’t back down, Tony tries again: “Our Probie needs us. From one Probie to another, you should want to help her.”

Ellie plasters the most pathetic look she can manage on her face. Tim sighs at the sight of her.

His expression pinches. “This better not be difficult.”

A shit-eating grin spreads over Tony’s face. “*This isn’t mission difficult, it’s mission impossible. Difficult should be a walk in the park for us.*”

“What does that even mean?” Ellie asks, face paling.

“We’re going to replace Gibbs’ coffee without him knowing.”
“…just let the computer do the work,” Tim finishes.

Ellie stands beside him, half-leaning to watch him type. Several lines of code fly across the computer monitor before he stops abruptly. He taps the enter button with a flourish. When the code vanishes from the screen, it is replaced by a series of video images of city streets. Those images stay on the screen for a few moments, only to be replaced by a new set. Shifting back, Tim shoots Ellie a genuine smile. Even though she really wants to ask Tim how he worked his magic, she decides against it.

“It’ll find the coffee cup just like that?” Ellie asks.

“If there is one on the street to find.” Tim’s smile broadens. “Tell me your Mac can do that.”

Ellie looks away. She doesn’t have the heart to tell him the Mac can do that and so much more.

With a few clicks, Tim transfers his search to the plasma. More video images cycle through the screen. Just to the left of the videos, there is a picture of their “suspect”: the logo from Gibbs’ coffee cup.

In front of Tim’s desk, Tony watches them blankly.

“Tell me again what you’re doing, Tim.” He tries his best not to sound confused.

Nodding, Tim starts, “Using the same theory as facial recognition software, I – “

“Pretend I’m Gibbs.” For some inexplicable reason, Tony glances over his shoulder. When he doesn’t find what he expects, he relaxes. “An uncaffienated and thoroughly pissed off Gibbs.”

Tim’s smile goes tepid. “I’m scanning local traffic cameras for the logo. Then, we can build a likely location based on the concentration of coffee cups.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” Tony watches the screen. “How’d we get access to so many traffic cameras?”

Tim glances furtively at Ellie. Tilting her head, she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. When she joined the team, Tim and Tony told her results were the only thing to matter to Gibbs. And so, she did what she figured Gibbs would’ve wanted. Got the results, just like she did at the NSA. Except she isn’t quite sure what is and isn’t allowed here yet.

“Tim and I tapped into Metro’s network,” Ellie admits.

“Legally?” Tony asks.

When Ellie and Tim share another stealthy look, she blushes fiercely. Tim presses his lips together before he turns back to his computer. He won’t look at Tony. Ellie opens her mouth to admit exactly what she’s done: helping Tim hack into Metro’s network using an NSA backdoor she wrote.

Tony holds up his hand. “Nevermind, I don’t want to know.”

Tim’s computer suddenly beeps. On the screen, an image of a street appears. Tim clicks his mouse, zooming the image on a woman. Several more clicks and a grainy image of a cup appears. It looks oddly similar to the Gibbs’, but not quite the same. Tim is already in information gathering mode.
He brings up a location on a map. “There’s a strong concentration of these about three blocks west.”

There’s another ding and another map.

“And six blocks south.”

Again, more dings and more maps. They start just south of the Navy Yard before expanding throughout the whole city. Tim’s face lights up.

“What’s going on, McGoogle?” Tony asks.

“I think Gibbs’ coffee might be easier to find than we thought,” Tim says.

Ellie slips closer to the plasma. Tim’s program works in overdrive spawning maps, maps, and more maps. She compares the logo to the first image. It looks close enough to Gibbs’ to pass, but it just isn’t the same. The ring around the logo is the same as is the coloring, but at its heart is a mermaid, not a coffee cup. The devil’s in the details like her grandfather used to say.

“That’s a Starbucks cup,” Ellie announces.

Tim frowns. “That would explain why my program is going crazy.”

Tony joins Ellie to study the logo. “I never realized how similar the two are until now. I should’ve known. I only go there all the time.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Ellie surmises.

Tony tilts his head. “What makes you say that?”

“You just seem like the type.”

Tony raises his eyebrows. “Okay, then. What’s my order?”

Ellie gives Tony a once over. Expensive suit. Bright white shirt starched within an inch of its life. Uncuffed shoes by some designer she probably can’t pronounce, let alone even heard of. Hair styled in that I didn’t try, it just looks that good on its own kind of way. Style and substance.

“Skinny caramel macchiato half-caf with extra foam and drizzle,” she says.

Tony shakes his head. “Close.”

“Oh yeah? Where was I wrong?” Ellie is never wrong about coffee choices.

Tony looks at her closely. “I don’t drink decaf.”

He shoots Ellie a sly smile, which she matches. The sudden sound of furious typing erupts from Tim’s desk. He makes a few clicks before the plasma returns to the picture of the coffee cup logo. Silence, an exasperated huff, a mouse click, more typing.

“McGee?” Tony asks.

Ellie jumps in. “Grande café latte with an extra shot and no foam.”

“What?” Tim looks up, clearly confused.

Tony’s eyebrows raise when he glances at Ellie. Of course, she’s right. She is always right about
knowing what coffee people prefer. She tries to stifle a laugh because she’s done it again. But the
look on Tony’s face tells her that he wasn’t talking to her. She cringes inwardly.

“Is something wrong, McGee?” Tony asks.

“Like you can’t tell,” Tim says quickly. “I need to rewrite the parameters of my program. We’re
going to need more time and Gibbs should be back any second.”

“I’ll help,” Ellie says, grabbing her Mac and rushing to Tim’s aide.

Tony whips out his cell phone. “Time to call the reinforcements.”

At her lab bench, Abby Scuito works at her most recent project: making wax dolls of the team. She
puts the finishing touches on Wax Doll Tony’s hair before placing his disembodied head on the
shelf. She heats black wax over her Bunsen burner before beginning to sculpt his body. She has the
rough outline of his designer suit when the hair on the back of her neck rises.

“You’re early, Gibbs.”

Turning around, she shouldn’t be surprised to see Jethro Gibbs. She has something—not much, but
something—on their cold case. He watches her expectantly without offering a greeting. All business
today, it seems. She eyes the CafPow in Gibbs’ hand. Even though she already earned it—and
several more for the work she did—Gibbs keeps it just out of reach. He tilts his head towards the pile
of evidence on the table. She dons a pair of too-big gloves to go through it again.

Their case is straightforward: a fifteen-year-old murder investigation of NCIS informant, Ransom
Phillips. Typically, she loves coming through old evidence for that tiny detail to solve their case. But
it’s just another example where her predecessor did the bare minimum during the long coast into
retirement. Mistakes and screw-ups galore. The thought of how many breaks in the chain of
evidence, botched DNA, and incorrect ballistics twist her stomach in knots.

“Whaddya got, Abs?” Gibbs asks.

“There wasn’t much to process,” she says sadly. “It’s almost as though the whole case is an illusion.
It was here and now -- “ she waves her hands “ – it’s gone in the blink of an eye. Think like Harry
Houdini or David Copperfield or my personal favorite, Criss Angel. Nice dresser and a great
illusionist. Speaking of, he does this one illusion where he can make an entire airplane disappear.
Like poof! Gone right before your very eyes.”

Gibbs clears his throat.

“You’re right. We’ll discuss how you can try to cut me in half later.” She points to the evidence laid
out on her table. “Most of Phillips’ clothing was destroyed during a water leak in the evidence locker
in 2008. No murder weapon was found at the scene.”

“So you called me down here to tell me you have nothing?”

“Au contraire, mon frère.” Abby considers that for a moment. “Not that you’re my brother, Gibbs. I
always thought of you more as a father figure. Though I wouldn’t mind you being my brother if you
wanted to be. You could be that protective older brother I never had.”

He just stares at her. Laughing, her smile returns.
“But you aren’t here for that, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he repeats, jerking his head towards the evidence.

“I don’t have the clothes that Ransom Phillips was wearing when he died. But I do have a pair of gloves from the scene. The investigating agent thought they belonged to the killer.” Abby holds up a pair of crusted black gloves in an evidence bag. “I’m not entirely sure about that, because Ransom Phillips’ fingerprints were on the inside.”

Gibbs looks unimpressed. “So they’re the victim’s gloves?”

“That’s what I thought too until I tested for gunshot residue.” Abby eyes the CafPow, but Gibbs won’t cough it up without the results. “It’s on the outside of the glove, but only the right one.”

When she goes for the CafPow, Gibbs takes a step back.

“Fine,” she says, bring up a picture of their victim from an NCIS surveillance video. In the picture, he is holding a clipboard in his right hand and a pen in his left hand.

Abby holds her hands out. “Ransom Phillips was a lefty, so – “

“Odds are he wasn’t wearing those gloves when he died.”

Abby suddenly deflates. “Way to steal my thunder, Gibbs.”

She brightens when he gives her the CafPow. After taking a long sip, she puts drink on her lab bench beside the raging Bunsen burner. Wax Doll Tony’s disembodied head blankly watches them from the lab shelf, his body half-finished on the bench. She debates which expression to give Gibbs: perpetually pissed or smiling. She decides on smiling because that’s how he always looks at her. She’ll give Tim that serious face he has right before he hacks into something. But Ellie? Abby doesn’t know how to sculpt her features yet. Resolving to figure it out, she readies to dive into the evidence again.

Gibbs is halfway out of the lab when her cell phone beeps. He turns back, expectantly.

It’s a text from Tony, Abby-wan Kenobi, you’re our only hope.

She texts back, You need me to stall Gibbs?

Tony replies, I’ll owe you a CafPow.

Her response, Make it two.

Tony replies, Done. If he asks, tell him that Phillips is a Gemini.

“DiNozzo?” Gibbs asks.

Nodding, Abby replaces the cell phone on her lab bench. Something in the lab is starting to smell like burning plastic and she isn’t quite sure where it could be coming from. She glances at Major Mass Spec as though he could be the source of the stench.

“What’s he got?” Gibbs asks.

Abby is already pulling DMV files. “Phillips is a Gemini.”

Gibbs swivels to leave when she hits Ransom Phillips’ driver’s license. His birthday is in August.
Abby calls Gibbs back. “He’s actually a Leo.” When she has Gibbs’ full attention, she continues to press on. “Leo is a pretty cool sign, Gibbs. They’re creative, passionate, cheerful and stubborn. Huh. That sounds a lot like – “ she points to the half-built Tony statue “ – Tony, doesn’t it? Which is funny because he’s a Cancer. They’re supposed to be quiet and reserved which, Tony is so not.”

Gibbs’ stare morphs into a glare.

“I know, Gibbs. You sure have those Scorpio traits down pat. Curious and down for a good challenge. Mysterious, secretive and persuasive! You’re the – “

“Can I persuade you to tell me what you’ve got?”

Before she has a chance to speak, the smell of burning plastic worsens. By the time Abby notices the cause, it’s far too late. The flame of the Bunsen burner is melting the CafPow cup, the plastic running like candle wax. She doesn’t get a chance to move it before the CafPow is exposed to the flame. It ignites like napalm, going up in a tiny mushroom cloud. Gibbs snatches a random bottle from the top of her lab bench. Without checking, he pours it on the fire. The carnage isn’t as bad as she expects and the only casualty is Wax Doll Tony, who is a melted into a puddle of goo.

“Instinctive is another Scorpio trait,” Abby offers.

At that moment, an alarm booms through the lab. Her lab door slams shut, the lock clicks into place.

Gibbs shoots her a look.

She giggles nervously. “It’s the containment protocol for biohazards. Not that CafPow is, but one of its ingredients can be mistaken for one when ignited.” She points to the charred cup on her lab bench. “Like that. Anyway, the doors lock until one of the medical personnel come and check everything out to make sure we’re clear. Ducky or Jimmy should be here any minute.”

“They’re in Bethesda on a case,” Gibbs growls.

Without glancing in his direction, she motions to the pile of wax that was Wax Doll Tony. “Want to help me make a new Tony while we wait?”
Chapter 3

Sitting on the floor beside Tim’s desk, Ellie continues an internet search for coffee company logos. Every so often, Tim shoots her an odd look. If she were bothering him, she figured Tim would say something. Across the bullpen, Tony works their cold case alone. Whenever she asks if he needs help, Tony just shakes his head. He seems to think saving her own ass from Gibbs is more important than the case.

When Tim’s computer dings, he grumbles, “Finally.”

Tony looks up from his desk. “What do you have?”

After few clicks, the data transfers to the plasma. It shows a map of the neighborhood surrounding the Navy Yard. There are small green dots strewn about the map with an epicenter about six blocks north of the nearest Metro station. Ellie starts an internet search for coffee shops near the Metro station before cross-referencing their websites.

“This is the Mount Everest of hacks,” Tony says with a flourish.

Tim opens his mouth. Closes it. Shakes his head instead. “Nevermind. I don’t want to know.”

Smirking, Tony steeples his fingers. “So, where does Gibbs get his coffee?”

Frenetic typing ensues. “I’m going to cross-check businesses in the area against the location with coffee shops and places that might also sell coffee. Like diners and sandwich places.”

Tony opens his mouth.

“Yes, I’m excluding Starbucks from the parameters,” Tim continues.

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m asking rhetorical questions,” Tony shoots back with a grin.

Tim rolls his eyes hard enough to see his brain.

Ellie hits paydirt on Yelp. She scrolls through the pictures from the local establishments. In the background photo of a dry cleaners, there is a large group of people holding coffee cups identical to Gibbs’. Just to the left of the store, there is what appears to be a diner. She confirms the diner cups in other images from social media sites—Twitter, Facebook, Google. She can’t come up with a name.

“There’s a diner just off M Street SW,” Ellie announces.

“How’d you find that?” Tony asks.

“Using my google-fu,” she replies.

Above her, Tim snorts. She contorts herself to watch him work. He wears a painted-on smile as though he doesn’t believe she could have bested him. Even though she has the results—and she is absolutely right—he still runs his program.

Tony is gathering his gear. “Let’s go.”

Ellie scrambles to her feet, tripping and stumbling her way to her desk. She deposits the Mac on the spartan workspace. A few Twix wrappers flutter to the floor, but she’ll pick them up later. Then, she snatches her weapon and badge from the top drawer. The gun, a Sig Sauer, feels awkward and
leaden in her hands. She turns it over, frowning at how it might as well weigh a thousand pounds. She clips the holster to her jeans before shoving her creds in her back pocket.

Tim doesn’t move.

Tony shrugs his coat on. “Come on, McGee. Move it.”

“Shouldn’t we let my program finish?” Tim won’t look at Ellie. “Just in case.”

With an exasperated huff, Tony pauses at the entrance to the bullpen. Ellie sidles next to Tim. His program still churns away. In the bottom corner of his monitor, a red icon flashes ominously.

She points at it. “What’s that?”

He clicks on it, his cheeks going stark white. “Tony! There’s a biochemical leak in Abby’s lab! It’s on lockdown. We should – ”

“It’s nothing,” Tony interrupts. “I asked Abby to buy us some time. I wasn’t expecting fireworks, but…okay, maybe I should have. It is Abby, after all. I thought she’d make Gibbs fetch her another CafPow. But if a biochemical leak is how she chooses to stall him, who am I to argue?”

Tim hooks the video feed from Abby’s lab to the plasma. Abby is at her bench, using a pipet tip to transfer liquid from one container to another. With his back to the camera, Gibbs glares at the locked lab door. At that moment, he turns to look right at the camera. Both Tim and Ellie duck as though he might see them. Ellie doesn’t have to see his face to know how pissed Gibbs is. In fact, that’s the only expression she has seen since joining the team. The video feed cuts out, replaced by Tim’s program ending. He quickly makes a few clicks before bringing up a location on the screen. His brow furrows as though it couldn’t be true.

Ellie grins triumphantly. “Where does Gibbs get his coffee, McGee?”

“There’s a diner just off M Street SW.” He repeats her earlier words. “How did you figure that out before my program? That should’ve done it faster than any of us could have.”

Ellie shrugs. “I was an analyst at the NSA. Reaching conclusions with bits of random data was my job.”

Tim blinks incredulously. “But my computer has – “

“Relax your crack, Foghorn,” Tony interrupts.

“Are you ever going to stop quoting Mission: Impossible, Tony?” Tim tries to sound annoyed, but his heart isn’t in it.

That shit-eating grin envelopes Tony’s face. “Give me a break, Pops.”

Tim looks like he doesn’t know quite what to do. Somehow, Tony’s grin broadens. Ellie can’t fathom how these two haven’t shot either other in the bullpen yet, let alone be close friends like they claim.

“That’s from the movie too,” Ellie whispers.

Tim’s expression darkens as he grabs his gear. “Can we just get Gibbs’ coffee?”

Tony leads the way. “Let’s get lost!”
CHAPTER THREE

Finding the diner just off M St SW doesn’t take long. It is a squat building with large windows and intricate chromework running just underneath them. The bright sun reflects off the glass, nearly blinding Ellie. By the time they reach it, she thinks they might just pull this—whatever the heck this is—off without a hitch. As they draw closer, her heart sinks at the drawn blinds and dark windows. Her hope of staying on Gibbs’ team vanishes at the sight of the sign in the window: *Closed for Renovations.*

Putting his hands on his hips, Tony surveys the busy street. In both directions, the street is thick with people heading to and from the busy Metro stop. The only coffee cups Ellie recognizes are from the Starbucks a few blocks away.

“Are you two sure this is the right place?” Tony asks.

“Unless both of us are wrong,” Tim’s tone sounds like he never is.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Ellie agrees. “It came up on my feed. Someone on Twitter tweeted a picture with one of those cups in the background before we left the office.”

“I’ll start a new search,” Tim says.

He whips out his cellphone. Peering over his arm, Ellie isn’t surprised to see him linking to his desk computer. He taps on the screen a few times. A new search starts with little green dots popping up. Ellie is desperate to ask how he can hold Macs in such disdain, but still use an iPhone. Somehow, this just doesn’t feel like the right time.

Tony heads over to the door. He holds up a hand to block out the sun as he squints through the glass. For good measure, he jimmys the door. It is locked.

“They aren’t kidding,” he says. “That place is a construction site. The booths are all ripped up, but – His voice suddenly grows louder “ – I see it! The coffee maker and the cups are on the counter!”

Ellie hugs her arms to herself. Despite being a warm fall day, she is chilled to the bone. Her dream of being an NCIS agent is officially over before it’s even truly begun.

Tony rubs his hands together. “Okay, so here’s the plan. We’ll have to go inside and make the coffee ourselves. If we go through the front door, it might look suspicious. The roof would be safer to – “

“The roof!” Tim exclaims. “Have you lost your mind, Tony?”

Tony looks at him solemnly. “Not yet, I don’t think. It makes the most sense to get up on the roof and lower Bishop into the diner.”

“Lower Bishop into the diner,” Tim repeats slowly.

Tony glances at Ellie. “Is there an echo in here or is just me?”

“There’s an echo,” she says, half-smiling.

Tim grinds his teeth. “That’s a terrible idea.”

“The backdoor,” Ellie offers, “would be the easiest place to go in. If we’re talking about breaking and entering, which we aren’t.” She hazards a glance between the two men. “Are we?”

Tim points at Ellie. “See? That plan makes sense.”
“I know.” Tony laughs. “I wanted to see if you would buy it, Tim. Maybe I should start calling you McGuillable again.”

Tim just glares at Tony, who grins. Studying the two, Ellie wonders whether they’re proposing what she thinks they are. Entering the diner to make Gibbs a cup of coffee. A felony just for a cup of coffee doesn’t seem worth it to her. Then again, neither does getting murdered because she spilled some. Nothing has made any sense since she joined the team last week.

Tim looks up from his phone. “I’m finding out who owns the diner, Tony. We could just ask them.”

“Man, I don’t know. I’m going to miss being disreputable.” When Tim’s features pinch in annoyance, Tony laughs again. “Good idea, Tim. Let’s find their address and ask them to make a cup of joe. In the interest of national security and all.”

Tim clips a nod. “On it.”

Ellie double-takes between them. How the heck did the discussion of breaking and entering turn into finding the diner’s proprietor? While the two were verbally sparring, they must have been reading each other’s minds. Which Ellie might buy, if she believed in ESP.

While Tim taps at his cell phone, Tony climbs onto a trashcan to peer through the window. Ellie notices a woman about Gibbs’ age rushing down the opposite side of the street. Clutched in her hand is one of those coffee cups. Ellie clucks her tongue to catch the men’s attention. Tim and Tony delve into ideas to find its origin. Tony decides to set up a perimeter; Tim wants another internet search.

With the woman disappearing down the sidewalk, Ellie has her own idea. She checks to make sure no cars are coming before darting across the street. Behind her, Tony yells, “Bishop!” She doesn’t slow down until she catches up with the woman. When Ellie grabs the woman’s shoulder, she wheels around. Her brown eyes are agitated, her lips pinched in a tight line.

“What’s in the coffee, ma’am?” she asks.

The woman’s expression hardens further. “It’s not any of your – “

Ellie flashes her badge. “Yes, it is.”

Gaping, the woman stumbles over her words. “Uh, um…six sugars, lots of cream. Uh, maybe it was made from Peruvian beans?”

“Where’d you get it from?” The woman’s mouth flaps, making Ellie bark, “It’s a matter of national security, ma’am!”

Stunned, the woman points vaguely in the direction behind Ellie. “Max…from the diner has a temporary location on Hastings St. It’s halfway down the block, next to the pizza place and clothing store.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Ellie says, snapping her badge closed.

Without giving the woman a chance to respond, Ellie darts through the street traffic to reconvene with Tony and Tim. It takes more explaining than it probably should to get them moving. Within a few minutes, they are standing in front of a small storefront flanked by a pizza place with a red neon sign and a vintage clothing store. The pseudo-diner is as anonymous as the diner itself with a huge plate glass window, a few booths, and no sign name.

Ellie goes to stride into the restaurant, but Tony stops her. He leads Ellie and Tim a half-block north
of the diner. There, he looks them over. His expression is serious. Ellie’s heart skips a beat.

“Should either of you be caught or killed, I will disavow any knowledge of your actions,” he says.

Tim rolls his eyes again. “We’re just getting a cup of coffee.”

Ellie shakes her head. “If I understand what Tony is saying, it’s that Gibbs is a regular here. We don’t want to anything that could lead us to be recognized.” She turns to Tony for clarification. “That’s what you meant, right?”

“I’m glad someone understands.” Tony gestures at the clothing store. “Which is why we need disguises.”

“Disguises,” Tim repeats incredulously.

“Because it would be really, really bad if our covers got blown.”

Tim’s eyelid twitches. “If our covers got blown?”

“Hey Bishop, that echo is back.” Tony winks at Ellie.

Ellie stifles a laugh with her hand. Tim mutters a curse under his breath.

Without another word, Tony heads straight into the clothing store. Ellie follows. She isn’t sure whether she is supposed, but it feels like the right thing to do. She has never been part of a team before—the NSA analyst department was mish-mash of oddball, lone wolf types—but she thinks this is might be what it’s about. Her team is risking their necks—and Gibbs’ wrath—for her. So she will follow them straight down the rabbit hole. Well, Tony anyway.

Tim stays on the street, arms crossed and clearly waiting for Tony and Ellie to return. Looking at him through the window, Tony jerks his head to tell Tim to move his ass. Through the window, Ellie watches Tim throw his hands up and stomp inside.

Inside, the store is far tinier than it appeared outside. The sunlight pouring through the large front window makes the overhead lights unnecessary. The whole place reeks of must and mothballs. Racks of vintage clothing in a rainbow of colors line both walls. If Ellie stretched both arms out, she bets she could touch both walls at the same time. In both directions. She tries and fails, just barely. It’s a tight fit.

Tony furrows his brow. “Do I want to know?”

Flushing, she didn’t expect anyone to be watching. “Probably not.”

There’s a woman with dark purple hair and more facial piercings than a pin cushion at the cash register. As Tim joins them, he offers her a polite, “Good morning.” She doesn’t look up from her magazine. Instead, she just jabs her finger at Ellie and Tony. Tim curls his lips back into a grimace.

“Great customer service,” he hisses. “I want to say this is a terrible idea.”

“Your concern is duly noted, Tim. We’re doing it anyway.” Tony shoots a furtive glance around. Then, he drops his voice: “Remind me to look into this place when we get back.”

All Ellie sees is a clothing store. “What is wrong with it?”

Part of her wonders how long it’ll take for her to become that cynical. To suspect a small business owner struggling to sell vintage clothing as a drug dealer without any cause. Sure, rent is horrible in Washington and it appears as though no one has shopped here in years. She still wants to give this place the benefit of the doubt. After Tony tells them to find a disguise, she picks through the meager offerings in her size. There isn’t much. Okay, Tim and Tony might be onto something.

From the rack, Ellie plucks a 1980s sky blue power suit and an olive green flight jacket with military patches. As if there is any point of comparison, she turns to replace the suit.

From across the store, Tony stops her.

“Channel Sigourney Weaver in Working Girl, not Alien,” he orders.

Ellie glances between the clothes in her hands. “Huh?”

“Go with the suit.” Then, he turns back to berating Tim. “It’s the only thing in your size in the whole store, McGee. Just put it on or I’ll tell Gibbs you didn’t get in until 0930.”

Ellie catches Tim’s eye on the way into the changing room. All he has to offer is a sympathetic shrug before he ducks through the velvet eggplant curtain into the men’s side. Ellie lifts the heavy fabric away into the women’s changing area. A burnt-out light bulb in the ceiling makes it difficult to see. She shucks off her real clothes before slithering into the chilly polyester suit. It isn’t until she goes to button the jacket that she realizes it is double breasted with shoulder pads. She frowns at her reflection. The suit makes her look shorter and squatter than she really is with freakishly large shoulders. She might as well be playing football for OSU with these shoulders.

“Let’s see those disguises!” Tony calls from outside.

Holding her breath, Ellie steps out. She can’t find Tony anywhere. Instead, someone new entered the store. A middle-aged man wearing a grey hoodie and reflective aviator sunglasses. Maybe Tim and Tony were right about the drug front after all.

Tim heads out from behind the curtain. Ellie double-takes. At least, the man stepping out is supposed to be Tim. He looks nothing like the reserved, practical agent who entered the changing room. Now, he sports a pair of worn-to-death blue jeans, white T-shirt, and a broken-in black leather motorcycle jacket.

“McGee?” Ellie asks.

He glances over, clearly agitated. Tim. Definitely Tim.

“Tony told me I’d look like James Dean,” he grouses. “Whoever the heck that is.”

The man in the hoodie pipes up: “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that, McGee. Though you look more like a rebel without a clue than Rebel without a Cause.”

Ellie blinks. “Tony?”

Tim squares his shoulders. “Yeah, Tony. Well, you look like the Unabomber.”

“That’s kinda the point of a disguise.” Tony looks over his sunglasses. “You need to be so bland that you blend into the background or so ridiculous they only remember the disguise. Anything in between and the target might be able to remember your face.”

“The undercover variation of Rule 27,” Tim explains as though Ellie should understand. Before she
can ask, he gestures at Tony’s outfit. “The only thing they’ll remember is you getting arrested.”

Tony presses his lips together. “Fine, I’ll change.”

Tony pockets the sunglasses before plucking a random suit from the rack. On his way past, he reaches out with his free hand to muss Tim’s hair. Tim nearly falls over trying to chase Tony away.

“There,” he says, laughing. “Now, the look is complete. You show up at Delilah’s looking like that and you might just get lucky.”

“Knock it off, Tony.”

Tony grins. “All women love a bad boy. Just ask Bishop.”

When Tim glances to Ellie for support, she bites her lip. Appease Tim or tell the truth and agree with Tony. Even though she married a good guy—her husband is a buttoned up NSA lawyer, after all—there is a certain novelty to the bad boy. She pushes a breath through her teeth.

She settles for: “I plead the fifth”

Tony elbows Tim in the ribs. “Told ya so.”

And with that, he ducks into the men’s room with a flourish. In record time, Tony pops out in an elegant black tux. He fusses with the bow tie, then checks out his reflection in a large stand mirror.

“It’s more James Bond than Mission: Impossible.” He holds out the arm to inspect the stitching. “But I can make it work.” He grumbles something to himself in what Ellie thinks could be a Scottish accent.

Tony makes them gather their clothes, which they put in a duffel bag from the store’s inventory. Then, he leads the way to the cash register. The woman with the purple hair’s head snaps up, her surprised eyes darting over them. She smashes the buttons on the cash register like she never used it before. The total is ridiculously low—less than Ellie’s morning Starbucks run—and it occurs to her there wasn’t a price tag on any of the clothing. Putting on his most charming grin, Tony whips a gold credit card from his wallet. The woman stares at it menacingly before wrestling with the card reader. It takes a few tries before the ancient machine whirs to life and spits out a receipt. The woman hands it to Tony to sign, but the store doesn’t have a pen.

Ellie fumbles through her wallet, but Tim stops her.

“NCIS expense account,” he whispers. “That way I can track where the money later.”

She starts, “Do you really think – “

“Oh yeah.”

On their way out of the store, Tony snatches a pair of chunky, black eyeglass frames off a mannequin. He starts towards the register, but the woman yells, “Oh hell. Just take ‘em.”

Smiling, he puts them on. Once they’re back out on the busy street, the woman is creeps towards the store entrance. As soon as they hit the sidewalk, she clicks the lock in place. Ellie jumps at the noise. Tim and Tony share a nod.

“Definitely drugs,” they say in unison.
Dripping wax from the stick onto a piece of paper, Abby meticulously recreates Wax Doll Tony 2.0’s styled hair. She already remade his designer suit—down to his jet-black power tie—and his head with that perfect smile. Getting his hair just right is the difficult part. Part of her wonders whether she can talk Tony into sporting a shaved head, so he’ll mimic her doll. Life can imitate art, sometimes.

Wax Doll Tony 1.0 is still a melted puddle of wax on the top of her lab bench. She tried to scrape up his remains, but he is stuck like a piece of old chewing gum. She thought Gibbs muttered, Damn DiNozzo under his breath while she tried. In the end, she figures she’ll use a blow torch later. Leave it to his stubborn Cancer streak to make him stick around.

Abby checks over her shoulder. Gibbs is glaring at the locked lab door as though he could win the staring contest. As though he could open it by sheer will alone. Granted, he spent at least twenty minutes trying to yank it open before he just accepted they are stuck.

“It won’t open, Gibbs,” Abby says. “It’s sealed from the inside. They designed it that way to keep biological pathogens inside until the CDC could get here to clear everything. If we were exposed, we would need a hazmat team to crack the lock. So, for right now, we’re hermetically sealed like those single serve steaks in the freezer section.”

“Do I look like a steak to you, Abs?”

“Nope.” She drops her voice to add: “But you do look good enough to eat in that new suit.”

Gibbs turns around. “What?”

Flushing, she adds another swoop to Tony’s hair. “You are super sweet. To me. Thank you for being so sweet to me, Gibbs.”

His face pinches.

“Why don’t you help me make McGee next? I’m almost done with Tony 2.0.” She can’t bear to look at Wax Doll Tony 1.0’s melted corpse. “It’ll give us something to do while we wait for my computer simulation to finish. I’m running the blood from Ransom Phillips’ gloves.”

He resumes staring at the door.

“Ducky should be here any minute,” she tries.

Gibbs huffs. “Said it would be two hours, an hour ago.”

“Oh.”

When the spike of Wax Doll Tony 2.0’s hair falls over, frustration bubbles up inside Abby. She can’t get it right. It just doesn’t look like Tony. Of course, she can’t get it perfect because she doesn’t have a model. In order to get Wax Doll Tony 2.0’s hair right, she needs to compare him to his namesake.

That gives her a wicked idea. While Gibbs is stuck with her, she should take advantage of the opportunity to make his wax doll right. Mini-Gibbs, she decides to call it.

She sets Wax Doll Tony 2.0 up on the shelf. Right next the melted pieces of Wax Doll Tony 1.0 she
managed to scrape up.

“Just don’t look at him,” she cautions. “Though if Tony asks, I tried to make McGee first.”

Abby grabs her stereo remote from the lab bench. After a few clicks, the newest CD from The Zombie Cow Rebellion pumps through the lab. She sways to the thumping bass and heavy drums of the industrial gothrock. She shakes her hips, letting herself get into the mood to make another wax doll. If nothing else, it’ll help her work through the current case.

“Come over here Gibbs.” She begins to set up her wax. “I’m going to sculpt you.”

Gibbs turns to glare at her.

She tries not to laugh at how silly he looks. While he might look menacing to anyone else, she thinks he looks—dare she say—cute when he gets all angry. At that moment, she understands why he is so cranky. He hasn’t had any caffeine since they were locked in the lab. It’s been at least an hour. She doesn’t remember the last time he went that long without coffee while awake.

It might be time to break into her emergency stash of powdered CafPow for when she needs a hit of caffeine. Usually, she uses it when there isn’t a Gibbs in sight. She heads to her desk and pulls out a packet of CafPowder from the bottom drawer. In case of emergency, break glass. Or get that little package of powdered energy. Because, to her, an uncaffienated Gibbs constitutes an actual emergency. She grabs a bottle of water from the lab fridge on her way back.

First, she hands him the packet of CafPowder. He inspects it before nodding quickly. Before Abby can open the water bottle, Gibbs rips open the packet with his teeth. In one fell swoop, he throws his head back and chugs the powder.

Dumbfounded, Abby stares at him. “You know, Gibbs. You really aren’t supposed to do that. It’s going to make you feel like you just got hit by a car or are running away from a pack of hungry lions. Though, it would be a little weird if lions were loose in the building. Though if you were running from lions you probably wouldn’t be wondering where they came from. You would probably be – “

He shudders violently. Then, he gives a satisfied hm.

“But I guess it works,” she finishes.

With his eyes closed, Gibbs shudders again. He visibly relaxes before smiling slightly. Just like an addict after a hit. He really needs to cut back on the caffeine, Abby decides. She considers cutting back on CafPow occasionally, but there’s a difference between her and Gibbs. He’s addicted. Not her. She can quit anytime she wants. She just doesn’t want to.

She grabs Gibbs’ arm and guides him to the lab bench. Both the melted husk of Wax Doll Tony 1.0 and the gleaming bald head of Wax Doll Tony 2.0 keep careful watch over them. While she wouldn’t mind having another Tony around, it might just send Gibbs into retirement for real.

After checking the lighting, she makes him stand by the fume hood. Then, she grabs a ball of tan wax from the lab bench to make Gibbs’ head. If he will stand still long enough, she might as well sculpt his expression while she can get it just right.

“Abs.” His voice is a warning.

She waves the wax over the Bunsen burner. “What are you going to do anyway, Gibbs? You’re stuck in the lab with me until Ducky gets back. We might as well have some fun.”
He stares at her.

“Okay, I’ll have fun. You just stand there and – “ she studies him for a moment‘ – channel your inner-Gibbs. How about you give me a smile?’”

He bares his teeth at her. They’re blood red from the CafPowder. She shudders.

“Nevermind,” she says. “Just got back to being Gibbs.”

He reverts to the impatient, *I want your results right now or else* Gibbs. After the first few years, the glare stopped bothering Abby. Now, it doesn’t even phase her. She rolls the wax into a ball and fashions it into Gibbs’ head. Then, she globs on some silver wax and starts sculpting Gibbs’ hair. His is so much easier than Tony’s. She is just about to start his face—she chooses the cranky expression because it’s closer to life—when he pulls out his cell phone.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Calling DiNozzo,” Gibbs replies.

“You can’t do that because – “

At that moment, her computer beeps. She places Mini-Gibbs’ wax head on the lab bench, but it rolls to the floor. Before she can pick it up, Gibbs steps on it.

“You just stepped on yourself, Gibbs,” she wails. “Wow, that sounds so much stranger when I said it. How do you step on yourself when you’re here and it just doesn’t – “

“Abs.” Gibbs jerks his head towards the beeping machine.

With a flourish, she clicks through the file on her computer.

“I knew it was hinky,” she whispers.

“What, Abs?” Gibbs asks.

“There was blood on the gloves from the crime scene. We assumed the killer wore them when they murdered Philips.” She summarizes the results displayed on her computer. “The blood on the gloves was type B+. Ransom Phillips was O-. So – “

“The blood couldn’t be his.” Gibbs nods. “Good work, Abs.”

Gibbs is halfway to the door when Abby calls him back. “It’s still locked. We’re stuck until Ducky gets back, remember?”

Growling, Gibbs pulls out his cell phone. Abby lights up with an idea.

“Gibbs! Gibbs! Gibbs!”

He quickly turns around. “What?”

“I’ve got an idea. It’s kinda crazy. Okay, well, like actually crazy. But it could be fun, right?”

He tilts his head. “What could be fun?”

“It helps if I tell you the idea, huh?” She taps her temple. “Duh. How about you and I solve the case together while we’re stuck? We haven’t done it in *years* and it’ll be so much fun. Not to mention, we
don’t have anything else to do. Let’s see if we can solve it together.” When he starts to call Tony, she puts her hands together pleadingly. “Please. Please. Please. It’ll be so much fun. If we don’t, we’ll have to start over on my wax doll.”

He pockets his cell phone.

“Oh boy, Gibbs! I’m so excited! This is going be so much fun.”

Gibbs stares at her like it’ll be anything but. Still, he moves towards her PCR machine and looks at it intently. They don’t even need it for their case—at least, not yet—but she doesn’t have the heart to tell him. He punches one of the buttons. Abby cringes at poor Mr. PCR’s pitiful chirps.

Gibbs pushes the button again. “Get me more dust, Abs. Then, tell me what this doohickey does.”

On her way to the lab, Abby hears Mr. PCR chirp again. Letting Gibbs lose in her lab is one of her worst ideas yet. Right up there with installing a home theater system in her office—now, Tony has no reason to go home! But if it’ll buy Tim and Tony time to help Ellie, it might just be worth it.

Mr. PCR begins bleating helplessly.

Maybe.
Ellie wishes she had switched her sneakers for something more formal. Her bright white Nikes, which didn’t turn a single head by the busy Metro station, make her self-conscious and awkward. While other women rush around in sneakers and suits, most are nearly twice Ellie’s age and don’t look like an extra from *Ghostbusters*. There is probably a better movie reference, but that’s the only 80s movie Ellie recognizes in Tony’s diatribe of “1980s cinema classics.” She calculates how many movie nights it will take to catch up with Tony’s knowledge; she settles on 1296, give or take a hundred.

Tony leads them a half-block away from the diner. He is the only one to look out of place here. In his tux, he might as well be headed to a wedding. On an early Tuesday.

“Let’s get our cover story straight,” he says.

“Cover story,” Tim repeats carefully.

Tony stares him down. “To make sure we get the coffee without getting caught, McGee. Because right now, it’s Sigourney Weaver, James Dean, and Cary Grant walk into a diner. Which, if you ask me, sounds more like the start of a joke…”

“This whole thing is a joke,” Tim mutters.

Tony makes of a show of ignoring him. “Hey Bishop. That echo’s back.”

Laughing, Ellie plays along. “Yeah, it keeps happening. Doesn’t it?”

Tim throws his hands up. “Maybe we should just say we’re here for a replacement cup of coffee. You know, so our boss doesn’t murder us. How’s that for a cover story?”

“We can do better than that.” Tony studies his outfit. “Let’s try this one. I was stood up at the altar this morning. My fiancée left me for another man. Who just so happens to be McGee.” He hems and haws. “Okay, we might have to suspend our belief there. But anyway, I’m wandering the city streets all morning until I just happen to find him a diner with my fiancée.” He looks at Ellie. “Who is a huge fan of shoulder pads.”

“That would make too much of a scene,” Tim counters. Then he furrows his brow, reconsidering: “Would that mean I get to punch you, Tony?”

“We’d have to fight,” Tony says. “Though I doubt you’d get to lay one on me.”

Tim squares his shoulders. “Yeah, right. I’d kick your ass.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Sure.”

“Look guys,” Ellie says, “as much as I would love to watch you fight over me. It’s Tuesday. Where would we be having a big church wedding on at nine AM? And why am I in a suit, not a wedding dress?”

Both of men glance at Ellie like they forgot she was there.

“Yeah, good point,” Tony concedes.

Cupping his hand to his chin, he stares out across the street. He is so intense, Ellie thinks if she listens
hard enough, she might just hear the gears churning in his brain. Tim is already on his cellphone.

Ellie twirls her hair around her finger. Standing here reminds her of the long hours she used to spend locked away in the NSA library basement. She used to daydream about being an operative—not just an analyst—while she gnawed on Twizzlers, pretzels, and string cheese. She shifts through her mental inventory for a case that might work right now. One sticks in her mind. That one from the time she figured out Twizzlers mashed into a purple Laffy Taffy and white Airheads was to die for.

“I have an idea,” she announces.

Tony glances over, clearly interested. Even Tim offers his attention. She takes their silence as the go-ahead. Knowing it’s an important moment to prove herself, she swallows hard.

“When I was at the NSA, we had a case involving three known terrorists. They had all married into the same family. They were in-laws. They kept meeting in public places and discussing things like sparklers and fireworks. Of course, we assumed it was code for an attack. We had all departments on standby with a possible attack looming. Eventually, we figured out they were planning an actual party.”

“And?” Tony asks.

“That could be our cover,” Ellie says. “We’re planning a surprise birthday party for our father-in-law. That would explain how we’re so different, but still together.”

“That’s just crazy enough to work.” Tony nods. “Where are our spouses?”

“At work, obviously.”

Tim opens his mouth, but Tony claps his hands. “Alright, let’s go with it. Now, before we start. Remember that if you are—”

“Caught or killed, you will disavow any knowledge of our actions,” Tim finishes. “Yeah, yeah. I think we get it, Tony. If we get killed in a diner, we’ve got bigger problems than that. Can we please just get this over with?”

Tony snorts. “Yeah.”

Before long, to return to the makeshift diner. Tim leads while Tony and Ellie walk shoulder-to-shoulder. On the way, he gives her a crash course on going undercover. Don’t draw attention to yourself unless you need to. Keep your cover intact no matter what. Be specific—to a fault—with your backstory. He quotes some rule, but Ellie doesn’t catch it. And always follow your partner’s lead if you need to. It’s just like dancing, Tony says. Too bad for the team, but Ellie was born with two left feet.

Once inside the diner, it becomes immediately clear the location is meant to be temporary. A place to keep customers happy while the main location is renovated. The interior is the size of a postage stamp—cozy, Ellie thinks kindly. There are with a few tables packed so tightly that Ellie and the men must slide sideways to get through. Two booths are packed against the left wall. On the right, there is a white, linoleum counter with a few red vinyl stools. The smell of fresh coffee and bacon fill Ellie’s nose; they remind her of her husband cooking breakfast on the weekends. When they have time to, well…she feels her entire body flush from her head to her toes.

Tony starts animatedly talking. “…finally got the booking at the lake like we planned on. Maybe we can take the boat out on the water with the kids. That would be fun, don’t you think? Now, we just need to order the cake and decorations. I was thinking about blue and silver balloons for…uh, um…”
our, uh…Pap…uh, Pop-pop…our, uh Gib – ”

“Father-in-law,” Tim suggests.

“Right, our father-in-law.”

A short, African-American woman sorts silverware behind the counter. Her salt and pepper hair is styled into a tight chignon. Her white uniform, covered by a red apron, is immaculate. Her nametag reads Max. At the sight of customers, she stops her work to beam a broad smile at them.

“Take a seat anywhere you like,” she says. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“We’re just here for a coffee to-go,” Tony says.

“Sure. What can I get you?”

Tony grins. “Large, black.”

When Max turns around to grab a paper cup, Ellie’s heart lifts. All their work, reconnaissance, and antics were for this. The cup is identical to the one Gibbs carries into the bullpen daily, the exact same one she spilled earlier. Ellie might just live to see her second week on the team. Though, she doubts Gibbs could kill her for spilling his coffee. Not legally, anyway.

“What kind of coffee?” Max asks.

At that moment, Ellie notices the three carafes on the hot plates behind her, the huge glass jars full of coffee beans on the counter, the menu propped up that reads, Coffee List. Her stomach drops.

When Tony’s eyes bore into her, Ellie barely manages a shrug. She can read people to figure out what type of drink they prefer, but she never even thought about the exact type of coffee bean. There are too many nuances, too many variables. To her, a coffee bean is a coffee bean is a coffee bean. Standing here now, she understands how wrong she truly is.

Max gestures to the pots. “I’ve got a robust Kona blend, a shade-grown Tanzanian, and a single origin Indian Malabar going. They started about 10 minutes ago.”

Tony gapes at the myriad of pots like a dead fish. He tilts his head and pushes up his fake glasses. He glances at Tim, who shrugs as though they were presented with the Kobayashi Maru. Tony elbows Ellie in the ribs. Biting her lip, she hisses, “I have no idea.”

Studying them, Max slides a menu across the counter. “Or would you prefer to look at the list? I can make a pot, if you find something you like.”

Tony chuckles nervously.

They end up in one of the booths with Tony and Ellie on one side and Tim on the other. Max’s coffee list might as well be a wine list at a fancy restaurant. The type of bean is listed with the flavor profile beside it. Twenty-five types in all. Words like floral notes and chocolate undertones and complex nuttiness are littered across the page. Ellie has no idea what any of it means, let alone how it relates to Gibbs. Based on his personality profile, he should be simple and easy to please. As happy with a bargain brand made at home as he would be with burnt tar from a greasy spoon.

Tony stares at the menu as though it’s in a foreign language. When Tim motions for it, Tony surrenders without complaint. At the sight of list, Tim’s frown deepens.
“What should we do?” he asks. “Just pick one and hope for the best?”

“Here it is.” Tony jabs his finger at the menu. “The Peruvian Bourbon. Gibbs likes Bourbon.”

Tim shakes his head. “This says it has a sweet flavor.”

“Yeah, Gibbs isn’t sweet.” Tony is still scrutinizing the upside-down menu. “Let’s try the Ziggy Chefs. It says dark roast. Gibbs likes dark roasts.” His face pinches. “Maybe.”

“Do you mean the Yirgacheffe?” Tim asks.

“Yeah, maybe.” Tony grimaces. “I think.”

“That one says, ‘Its pungent, floral aroma gives way to an earthy, complex flavor that finishes with a hint of blueberry.” Tim looks up. “What does that even mean? Does Gibbs even like blueberries?”

“I – uh, you know what. I don’t know.” Tony bites his lip. “I’ve never seen him eat a piece of fruit.”

Tim shifts back in the seat. “This is just great.”

At the same time, they both look at Ellie. She shrinks back. For a moment, they forgot about her.

Tony slides the menu towards her. “You’re the analyst. Analyze away.”

She stares at the menu with a sinking feeling in her chest. Based on the descriptions, there are so many options that could fit Gibbs and so many that couldn’t. Things like robust and heavy-bodied and deep intensity sound like they could fit Gibbs’ palate while he would probably never go for sweet and floral and fruity. All the coffees might as well have similar descriptions.

Ellie sighs. Before she has anything to offer, Max heads over with a trio of water glasses. There are a few regular menus under her arm. Tony waves his hand to tell them to get back in character.

“Do you think we should get the ponies for the kids like we talked about?” he asks seriously.

Tim shrugs. “Leia and I don’t have kids yet. So how would I know?”

Tony tries to murder Tim with a glare before turning expectantly to Ellie. She chokes under the pressure because she can’t think. She just can’t think. What names did she and her husband like for their future children? Oh hell, she can’t remember those either. She blurts out the first thing to come to mind.

“Donatello and Raphael love ponies,” she says.

Tony stares at her like she just blew their entire op. When Max arrives at the table, she puts down the water glasses and moves the menus around. She tilts her head at Tony, but he won’t look at her.

“What can I get you?” she asks him.

He smiles that disarming smile of his. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Just in case you decide to stay for breakfast,” Max says, before returning to the silverware.

Tony glances between Ellie and Tim. “I’m not sure which one of you is worse. Star Wars, Tim? Really, you are so predictable.” Tim just smirks. “But Bishop, I expected more from you. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, come on. Who’s their dad? Splinter?”
“Jake,” Ellie says, fumbling with her ring.

Before Tony can harass Ellie more, Tim jumps in. “Fine, Tony. What’s your wife’s name?”

“Brigitte.” They both blankly stare at him. “As in, Brigitte Bardo.” Neither Ellie nor Tim give any indication they know who that is. He huffs. “Come on. She was just as famous as Gidget.”

Ellie looks at Tim. “Who’s Gidget?”

Tim motions at Ellie to stop her line of questioning. Tony nearly turns purple as he starts sputtering. When Max glances over, he pretends to be choking on his water.

Tim points to the menu. “Do you remember why we’re here? Gibbs’ coffee.”

Tony is too busy staring them down. “When this is over, we’re having a movie night.” Tim tries to protest, but Tony snaps his fingers. “It’s an order—no, a direct order, Luke and April. No arguments. No ifs, ands, or buts. Something classic like Beach Party with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello.”

Ellie mouths, Who? Tim just shrugs.

Tim slides the coffee menu towards Ellie. “Just try again, Bishop. We need to figure this out.”

And as she’s pouring over the coffee menu and trying to decode exactly what those descriptive words mean, Tim and Tony study the food menu. Max keeps checking on them. She pulls a pad out of her apron, then plucks the pen out from behind her ear.

“Hurry up, Bishop,” Tony hisses. “She’s coming.”

Flabbergasted, Ellie picks the one that sounds the most Gibbs-like. No floral notes, no chocolate, no subtle undertones of any kind. Just a dark roast with big, bold flavor and a woodsy finish. Whatever the heck that means.

“Sumatran,” she breathes.

Tim and Tony share a look. The shake of Tim’s head is almost imperceptible. Ellie gets it. Even she knows, she doesn’t sound confident. Not at all. She probably wouldn’t trust herself either. It’s part of being a team, she thinks, that trust is earned, not blindly given.

Tony follows Tim’s lead. “Quick, order something to eat. Tim, you try that coffee Bishop suggested. I’ll check in with Abby.”

Ellie doesn’t have to look at the food menu. When Max sidles up to the edge of the table, Ellie orders fried eggs, a stack of pancakes, bacon, sausage, some toast and a large chocolate milk. The men stare at her, dumbfounded, until she asks, “what?” She is hungry enough to eat more than that, but decides not to make a show too early into her time with them. Tony orders a plate of eggs and toast while Tim goes for “just coffee. The Sumatran one.” Max smiles knowingly and says she’ll bring him some scrambled eggs and toast. Tim tries to protest, but she smiles like a woman used to getting her way.

After Max goes to get Tim’s coffee, Tony’s cell phone beeps. He pulls it out.

“It looks like we’ve got some time,” Tony says. “Abby says Gibbs is still in her lab. Though, she also said he’s being a typical Scorpio right now. Hm, that does explain a lot.”
Tim blinks. “What are you talking about?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to get it,” Tony shoots back. “You are a Virgo, after all.”

Before Tim can say anything, Max returns with his coffee and Ellie’s chocolate milk. Max shoots Tony a questioning glance. He just smiles politely to say he isn’t ready.

“That’s one of my favorites,” Max says to Tim. “I hope you enjoy it.”

Nodding, she turns to leave. Tim takes a sip of his coffee. After first, he makes a satisfied face. Then, he reconsidered and shakes his head.

He offers it to Tony. “I don’t think that is it.”

After taking a sip, Tony frowns deeply. “I tried it once by accident and that’s definitely not it.”

Ellie sighs. “There’s too many to figure out the right coffee. What should we do now, Agent DiNozzo?”

From her perch, Max perks up. “DiNozzo? I’ve heard that name before.”

At the mention of his name, Tony turns to Ellie. His face shifts quickly from surprise to anger. Ellie flushes at the realization that she just blew their entire mission. Not that it mattered much, but she still screwed up her first undercover op. The team will never trust her again.

“Er, uh, Tony,” she fumbles. “Frankie Avalon?”

Max is already on the move. Tim scrambles to get out of the booth. But in a flash, Tony jumps out of his seat. He plops himself next to Tim, trapping the younger man. When he turns to face Tony, Tim’s expression is tight with annoyance. Ellie slinks towards the edge of the seat, trying to figure out whose lead to follow. Follow Tim and run like hell. Or Tony and stay behind to face Max.

“Guys, she’s coming,” Ellie hisses.

Tony is too busy harassing Tim to notice. “What do you think you’re doing, McGee?”

“Disavowing any knowledge of you,” Tim replies.

“I was only kidding about that.” Tony smacks the back of Tim’s head. “Teams go down together.”
Max is closing in on them. Ellie’s eyes slip from the waitress to Tim and Tony. Right now, the men are glaring each other down. Ellie saw those expressions enough while growing up with her brothers to know what they mean. Tim’s says, *Move your ass,* while Tony’s reads, *Make me, punk.*

“DiNozzo.” Max drawls the name out. “That’s one you don’t hear every day.”

Blanching, Tony swivels towards her. Tim looks about ready to scale over Tony like a mountain and bolt for the front door. Ellie bets she could outrun them.


With an expression like a deer in the headlights, Tim quickly shakes his head. Ellie smiles politely and coughs out, “No.”

“Ah.” Max’s face turns wistful. “There’s a nice, older gentleman who comes here. He works with someone named DiNozzo. I thought you three might know him.”

Since she started at NCIS, Ellie has heard a lot of choice words used to describe Gibbs. Compulsive. Determined. Obsessive. Bastard. Dogged. Ball-buster. Grade A asshole. Not once, did anyone—not even the people who seemed to like him—even use the word *nice.*

Tim says what they’re all thinking. “Gibbs is *nice?*”

Tony kicks Tim under the table. The younger man flushes fiercely.
“Yeah.” When she surveys their somber faces, Max’s smile fades. “Isn’t he?”

Tony goes in for the save. “Of course, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is one of the nicest people you’ll ever meet.”

“It’s funny how small the world is,” she says, drawing closer. “Meeting people who know one of my favorite customers. How do you three know him?”

“He’s our boss,” Ellie offers brightly.

Based on the glares she earns, she thinks she might have done something wrong. Oh yeah, she blew their cover completely. Again.

“That’s wonderful,” Max says like she means it.

When Ellie glances at Tim, he appears shell-shocked. Almost like he didn’t realize Gibbs could have a persona outside the office so different than who he truly is. Tony is holding it together better, just barely. He looks like he might burst out laughing. Ellie tries to calculate how long it’ll take for her to reach the exit. Though if she makes a run for it, she won’t be able to show her face at NCIS again. And she left her Mac and the rest of her candy bars there.

Sighing, Tony accepts their cover is blown. First, he points to Ellie, “That’s Bishop and ” then, Tim “ – McGee.” and himself, “I’m DiNozzo.”

Max’s grin broadens. “Ah, you’re the one he always talks to on the phone. It’s nice to put a face to the name. It’s a very different name.” She rolls the name off her tongue as though tasting it. “DiNozzo.”

Tony’s face pinches. “Yeah, you won’t find too many people with it.”

“Do you three work nearby?” Max asks. “With how often, I see Gibbs. Every day and sometimes, several times. I highly doubt he’s taking the Metro to get here.”

“We’re a few blocks away,” Tony offers.

Just enough to answer the question without giving away too much information. Brilliant, Ellie decides. Even though their cover is blown, Tony is still trying to minimize the damage.

Max nods. “You’re feds, right?”

Tony blanches. “‘Anonymity was like a warm blanket.’”

“That’s from the first Mission: Impossible movie. I love that movie.” When Tony’s face lights up, Max’s smile is knowing. “I would say you were FBI, but there’s no field office around here. I know Gibbs is a fed, but I never asked which agency. And well, now it’s been so long, it’d be awkward to ask.”

The three agents just stare at her.

Tilting her head, Max surveys their clothes. The waitress’ genial smile dissipates for something more, dare Ellie say, ominous. Her laser focused eyes rake over the three of them. Her stance switches from relaxed to militaristic, back ramrod straight and arms crossed. The hairs on the back of Ellie’s neck rise. For a moment, she feels more exposed than she has in her entire life.

“The outfits didn’t confuse me,” she says. “It’s why I figured you were feds as soon as you walked
in. We used to have a saying in the Agency. ‘Make sure they either don’t see you or only see you.’” She smirks at their clothes. “You three obviously opted to go with only see you.”

“You were in Intelligence?” Ellie asks.

“My husband and I worked for the CIA until we retired ten years ago. Pancakes and scrambled eggs were preferable to coups and state secrets at the time.” Half-nodding, Max studies them again. “You can tell a lot about a person just by looking at them.”

Tony takes the bait. “Oh yeah?”

She stares at Tony intensely. To his credit, he doesn’t shrink down.

“For starters, you don’t wear glasses,” she says.

“That’s an easy one.” Tony slowly removes the glasses. “Only glass lenses in the frames. You’d be able to tell because my eyes don’t look any different through them.”

Max nods. “Let’s try again. You’re packing a weapon on your right hip. Back-up weapon is on your left ankle and there’s a knife in your belt buckle. And before you ask, I recognize it because my husband has one. You’re obviously the leader. You spend too much time watching movies based on – “ she gestures at the three of them “ – the way you chose these disguises. Working Girl, Rebel Without a Cause, and pretty much any Cary Grant movie. What’s more is that there are bags under your eyes and you’re pretty pale. That tells me that you spent last night drinking until way past bedtime. Based on your coloring, it isn’t the first time this week. I’m going to go with gin as your drink of choice.” She gives Tony a once-over. “No, Scotch. Definitely Scotch. With the clothes you picked for yourself, you put too much stock into what others think. You always put on a show to hide your true personality from everyone. Yourself included.”

For the first time since Ellie met him, Tony is completely speechless. His mouth gapes, his eyes grow wide. He is sheet white.

Tim is laughing. “Wow, Tony. She’s got your number.”

“You’re McGee, right?” When Tim freezes, Max starts on him. “You’re a southpaw. That jacket doesn’t completely cover the holster on your left hip. It looks like you forgot your back-up, but there is a knife on your back. Right-side.” Tim unconsciously shifts in the seat. “You had a date last night. It looks like a good one. Slightly greasy hair, so no time to shower today. There’s a hicky on your neck. You spent the night and enjoyed each other’s company, it seems. I’m going to stop there, but I think it’s pretty clear what happened.” She smirks at him. When Tony turns to give Tim hell, the younger man flips up his collar to hide the spot on his neck. “Based on how you hunch your shoulders, you spend too much time sitting in front of something. I’m going to guess a computer since you don’t look like the forensics type. And you don’t appear to be comfortable in that outfit, so I’d wager that you’re set in your ways. Very set in your ways. You might want to try something new for a change.”

Blanching, Tim looks as nauseous as Tony does.

Ellie almost laughs at Max’s descriptions of the two men. Sure, it sounds like Max could be right. Ellie doesn’t know Tim and Tony well enough yet to be certain. But a snap judgement based on the way someone looks goes against everything Ellie learned at the NSA. She used to build carefully curated profiles based on hours and hours of reconnaissance and information. While she can guess what type of coffee people prefer on sight, that’s a parlor trick, a fun game she picked up over the years. To know someone, it takes months of research. To truly understand them, years.
Yet still, Ellie is intrigued. She isn’t sure whether she wants to yell, My turn, or for the vinyl seat to swallow her whole. She bites her lip. Before she has a choice, Max turns to her.

“You’re new to the team, Bishop,” Max says. “I can tell based on how you carry yourself. You’ve got your gun on your right hip. With the way you walk, you tell everyone it’s there and it makes you uncomfortable. I’m not entirely convinced you know how to use it. You have no back-up and no knife. Based on the way you keep observing, I would be you were an analyst or a – ” When Ellie flinches, Max nods slightly “ – just an analyst. With the ring, I know you really are married. I don’t think it’s as happy as you think because you clam up whenever anyone mentions your pretend spouses. You’re confident and capable, but I don’t think you’re happy. You will make a good agent one day.”

Ellie cringes violently. She fiddles with her ring. Thinks of Jake and how they’ve barely seen each other lately. She opens her mouth. Thinks of all the happy memories she and Jake share.

“You’re close, but not quite,” Ellie says quietly.

Max smiles pitifully. “I know.”

Ellie changes the subject. “We’re with NCIS.”

“Naval Criminal Investigative Service,” Max says thoughtfully. “I should’ve guessed that one. We aren’t that far from the Navy Yard. It makes sense with Gibbs being a Marine.”

The agents share a glance.

“The haircut,” Max explains.

Before they get a chance to reply, someone rings a bell. In the blink of an eye, she morphs from a hardened former operative to a lighthearted waitress.

“Order’s up,” she says sweetly. “Be right back.”

When she leaves them alone, Tony pushes a breath through his teeth. Tim leans back in the seat, shaking his head. Ellie curls the edge of her napkin.

“Wow, that was crazy,” Ellie whispers.

“Yeah, she’s just a ray of sunshine,” Tim mutters.

Tony shrugs. “Definitely more on the nose than I generally like. I can see why Gibbs probably likes her. She sees through the bullshit.” When Tim goes to speak, Tony continues. “All of the bullshit. Like how you didn’t tell me the hot and heavy details about your date, McGotLucky?”

Tim narrows his eyes. “Because it’s none of your business, DiNosy.”

“How long did it take you to come up with that?” Tony asks, waggling his eyebrows.

“Just now.” Tim nods emphatically. “I came up with it just now.”

Tony smirks. “Yeah, sure.”

Mercifully, the tension from Max’s inspections are slowly dissipating. No one seems to want to discuss their teammates’ analysis, lest they have to discuss their own. While Tim and Tony verbally spar, Ellie twirls her wedding ring. Her thoughts wander to Jake and everything they’ve been through. While the transfer to NCIS strained things between them, it’s just a rough patch. That’s it,
she tells herself, a rough patch. Max is wrong—completely wrong—about Ellie, no matter how right she was about the men.

It takes Max three trips to bring all the food—namely because of Ellie’s order. Max places six plates in front of her, Tony’s eggs with him, and what appears to be a breakfast burrito in front of Tim. When he looks up at her questioningly, she puts a hand on her hip.

“Lucky guess,” she says.

Tony cracks up. “She’s got your number, McGee.”

Tim glowers at Tony before smiling at Max. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She remains at the side of the table. “Look, I have to ask. What are you three doing here anyway? You went through a lot of effort—she gestures to their clothes—for something. And none of you seem like the type to invade your boss’ turf without a good reason.”

“Coffee,” Ellie says.

Max presses her lips together. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

Ellie starts, “We—“

Tony clearing his throat cuts her off. When she glances at Tim and Tony, they’re both carefully watching her. She feels the flush creep over her cheeks. She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

“Okay, fine. I spilled Gibbs’ coffee and we need another one. We just—Tony clears his throat again—fine, I can’t figure out what kind he drinks. And…and there’s a rule.”

Max stares at Tim and Tony. “What’s the rule?”

“Don’t mess with a Marine’s coffee if you want to live,” Tim offers.

Max lets out a hearty laugh. “My husband was a Marine. I mess with his coffee all the time and I’m still kicking. Not to mention, Gibbs wouldn’t hurt a fly. Let alone, any of you. Underneath that rough packaging, he’s actually quite the gentle soul with a good heart.”

Now, it’s the agents’ turn to hoot with laughter. In the end, they agree to disagree. Max claiming Leroy Jethro Gibbs is as sweet as pie and the agents knowing he strikes fear into the Devil himself.

“So let me get this straight,” Max says when it’s quiet again. “You three were so worried about Gibbs catching you replacing his coffee that you bought those ridiculous costumes to figure it out.”

Ellie flushes again. “Yeah.”

Max tilts her head. “You could’ve just asked.”

Tim shoots Tony a dirty look that says, See? I told you so. Tony makes a show of ignoring him by looking at everything and anything, except Tim.

Max begins to turn around. “I keep Gibbs’ usual in the back. Let me go make some.”

Ellie brightens. “Thank you so much.”

“Not a problem,” Max says.
Tony grins while Tim leans back in the seat, obviously relaxed. When Ellie glances at the table, the pile of menus are there. She flips to the coffee menu, still not knowing what Gibbs’ “usual” is.

Ellie calls after Max: “What kind of coffee does Gibbs drink?”

“Jamaican Blue Mountain.”

And with that, Max is gone.

Ellie reads the description: “The coffee is known for flavors of mellow wood with soft floral notes and a sweet finish. That doesn’t sound like Gibbs, does it?”

Tony shrugs. “It probably tastes like sawdust, which would be up his alley.”

“Does it matter?” Tim asks. “We’re getting it. We just need to remember the kind for next time.”

“There had better not be a next time,” Tony says resolutely.

Even though she nods, Ellie isn’t sure Tony is right. Statistically, Gibbs—or one of them—is going to spill the coffee at some point in time. Though, it sure as hell won’t be her. She already learned her lesson.

When Ellie slurps her chocolate milk, she readies to dig into her feast. Tim and Tony share a look.

“Are you really going to eat all that?” Tim asks.

Ellie shrugs. “Probably.”

Tony extends his hand to Tim. “Twenty bucks says she can.”

Tim scoffs. “You’re on.”

By the time Max returns with their coffee, Tony is twenty dollars richer and Ellie is considering a slice of the shoo-fly pie on the counter. Maybe she could just get a couple pieces to go instead. Tim and Tony cleared their plates as well. Smiling, Max passes Ellie the coffee.

“Can I get you three anything else?” Max asks.

Before Ellie can utter shoo-fly pie, Tony says, “We’re good, thanks. Just the check.”

Max is already clearing their plates. “I put it on Gibbs’ tab.”

Tony’s expression turns panicked before he notices Max’s sly smile.

“It’s on the house,” she says. “It’s the least I can do for some of NCIS’ finest.”

“Thank you,” the agents chorus.

Ellie is about to order a piece of pie to go when Tony’s phone beeps. At the sight of the text, his eyes widen. Instantly, he jumps to his feet.

Tim’s head snaps up. “Tony?”

“Ducky just got back,” Tony says. “He’s going to spring Gibbs from Abby’s lab any minute.”

And with that, Tim and Tony are tripping over each other with thanks and apologies. Max stands out of their way, waving and telling them to come back soon. Ellie picks up the coffee cup and
scrambles after them. Once out of the restaurant, Tim and Tony bolt towards NCIS in a dead run. Struggling to keep up and not spill the coffee, Ellie watches their backs disappear into the crowd on the sidewalk.

She is so much slower than she remembers.
In the end, Abby couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t subject her babies to Gibbs and his button smashing. When Major Mass Spec didn’t process his results fast enough, Gibbs smashed the Run button over and over again until Abby thought it would fall off. He ripped the tip off her favorite pipetter. And poor Mr. PCR makes a weird little screaming noise whenever Gibbs gets too close. She doesn’t know what Gibbs did while she was getting more CafPowder. Thankfully, they reached a lull in the work not long ago.

Now, Abby puts the finishing touches on Wax-doll Gibbs’ menacing scowl. She hates to admit it, but it looks pretty darn good. Using a live model—Real Gibbs has been scowling at her since the lab locked down—gives her doll a true-to-life feel. Now, she just has to plan a way to get the rest of the team to the lab while she makes their likenesses. Tim will be easy; he likes to hide out down here from Gibbs under the guise of ‘helping’. Tony and the new girl—Ellie Bishop—might be more difficult. But right now, Abby has nothing but time to plan.

There isn’t much else to do. Her lab equipment is doing most of the heavy lifting for them. Major Mass Spec is analyzing an unknown chemical on Ransom Phillips’ gloves. Mr. PCR is amplifying the DNA from their blood splatter to hopefully get enough to run through the DNA database. Her computer runs a picture of who the original investigators thought was Ransom Phillips through the Missing Persons’ Database. Right now, she and Gibbs are the only ones not truly working.

Though, she loves how streamlined the process became while spending quality time with Gibbs. She pulls a result and summarizes the findings while Gibbs reaches the conclusion. In less than two hours, they made more progress on this case than anyone in fifteen years. She knew they could be a dream team, but damn…she needs to lock Gibbs in her lab more often. If they can solve the case in the next sixteen minutes, it’ll be a new personal best for her.

Just as she’s finishing the curl of Wax Doll Gibbs’ lip, her phone bleats. Excited, she figures it’s Tony—Real Tony—with a status update. Though, it’s not like any of them bothered to update her while she was keeping Gibbs busy anyway. Her heart sinks at the sender.

Jimmy Palmer’s text reads, *Dr. Mallard and I just got back. I’ll be up in a sec to unlock the lab. Is Agent Gibbs mad?*

Sneaking a glance at Gibbs, she surveys his deepening scowl and irritated eyes. The CafPowder took the edge off his crankiness and he isn’t twitching anymore. But he doesn’t look particularly happy. Well, no less happy than when they don’t have a lead and no idea.

Before she can respond, Jimmy texts again, *Actually, please don’t tell Gibbs we’re back yet. I need to get the body set up for Dr. Mallard. I’ll be up soon.*

Gibbs peers over. “Ducky back yet?”

Abby laughs nervously. “No, a friend of mine just got tickets to LaserFace this weekend and wanted to know if I wanted to go. They’re a new local band who are just amazing. They say if you listen hard enough, you actually feel like you’re levitating.”

To his credit, Gibbs tries to look interested. It just comes off as annoyed. But Abby has enough time to shoot Tony a text, *Ducky’s back and you better be too. Gibbs will be upstairs soon. And don’t forget, I need my CafPow and more CafPowder. Gibbs keeps eating it.*
She puts her cell phone back on her lab bench. Then, she puts the finishing touches on Wax-Doll Gibbs. Buttons on his plaid sportcoat. Laces on his shoes. A little extra curl to his lips to compensate for the newly deepened scowl. When she holds up Wax Doll Gibbs, he earns a glare from Real Gibbs.

Abby grins broadly. “Isn’t he cute?”

“Yeah, real cute.”

Before he can say what he really thinks, Major Mass Spec and her computer bleat for her attention. Mr. PCR just chugs away to himself. She dives into Major Mass Spec first because, out of all of her machines, he is the neediest. But he also does everything she asks and never lets her down. Unlike her computer, who throws up the blue screen of surrender whenever he feels lazy.

Gibbs reaches the machine before she does. He goes after the buttons, but she slides between them. She makes a few adjustments. Stares at the screen.

“Just like we thought!” she exclaims, pointing at the chemical make-up on the screen.

Gibbs tilts his head. Abby sighs. Obviously, Gibbs’ telepathy isn’t working. She expected him to look at her and just know what she knows. Just like he always does. But today, he doesn’t. Maybe it isn’t good that he was locked in her lab all morning. Not being loose in the field tends to mess with his mojo.

She makes a face. “The trace chemical on Phillips’ gloves was C4. Homemade and a very specific blend.”

“Which means Phillips could’ve been a bomb maker.” Gibbs frowns. “Not a drug runner like Daley thought.”

Abby turns to her computer next. There, she finds a match from the Missing Persons’ Database. When she brings up the picture of the missing person, it is identical to the image of the corpse right down to the scar.

“Is a bomb maker.” Abby points to her screen. “I got a hit on the picture of the dead guy. It looks like he might be Arthur Douglas, 34. His mother reported him missing fourteen years ago.” She brings up more information with a few clicks. “He’s got a fun history with arrests for forgery, gun possession, and impersonating a cop from 1995-2003.”

Gibbs surveys the information. “Petty criminal looking for a big score.”

“And Phillips?” she asks.

“Dirtbag looking for a way out. Can you prove the vic is Douglas?”

Abby nods resolutely. “As soon as Mr. PCR fin – “ Mr. PCR beeps. “Nevermind. As soon as I get the DNA sample from Metro and compare the two.”

Gibbs suddenly turns more serious. “What about Phillips being a bomb maker?”

“Every bombmaker has their own signature.” Abby rushes back to Major Mass Spec and Gibbs follows. “I haven’t seen that blend yet and it’s distinctive enough that I would’ve remembered if I’d seen it. I’ll run it through the database and reach out to some friends to see if I get any information.”
Abandoning Wax-Doll Gibbs for now, Abby dives back into her computer to search for Ransom Phillips’ bomb making signature. Gibbs waits, breathing down her neck, for a while. Then, he leaves for a moment. When he returns, he has the rest of Abby’s CafPowder packers in his hands. He chugs a few of them. Thankfully, she quickly comes up empty on her preliminary search.

“It looks like Ransom Phillips hasn’t made a bomb for a while,” she says.

“It’s always just a matter of time,” Gibbs says.

He throws his head back to swallow the last packet of CafPowder. Before Abby can calculate the LD50 for Gibbs’ body weight, a strange whoosing sound echoes through the lab. It’s the containment seal to the lab door being broken. Gibbs is already on the move.

Jimmy Palmer steps inside, grinning sheepishly. “Hey guys. Sorry, it took so – “

When Gibbs doesn’t slow down, Jimmy dives out of the way. Then, just like that, Gibbs is gone. With his back flat against the wall, Jimmy’s face is tense. He clutches a clipboard to his chest.

“What was that all about?” he asks.

“We made a break in the case.” Abby nearly panics. “I need to let them know!”

Jimmy joins her by the lab bench. “Let who know what?”

Scooping up her cell phone, Abby frantically texts Tony, Gibbs is loose. I repeat, Gibbs is on the loose. Get back to your battle stations ASAP. We made a break in the case. She only manages to send the basic details, rapid-fire, about Phillips’ gloves. Jimmy leans to examine the results on her computer screen.

Before she texts Tony about how Phillips isn’t Phillips, Jimmy’s clipboard gets a little too close to the billowing Bunsen burner. His papers catch fire and he drops them right onto the lab bench. Abby scrambles to put the flames out by smothering them with a nearby towel.

By the time she is done, Wax-Doll Gibbs is melted like the Wicked Witch of the West.
Chapter 8

Even at a break-neck sprint, Ellie still trails Tim and Tony by half a block. She keeps her eyes locked on the back of Tim’s leather jacket, Tony’s tuxedo and the bag with their clothes. She bobs and weaves through commuters with the skill and grace of a quarterback. Her fancy footwork, while managing to not spill Gibbs’ coffee, would make her football-playing brothers proud.

Thankfully, Tim and Tony’s every man for himself mentality only lasts a few blocks. Tim looks over his shoulder, his expression surprised when he notices Ellie. He grabs Tony’s arm. Tony glances back and he frowns deeply. They slow down, just enough to let Ellie catch up.

Ellie’s feet slap against the pavement. The thudding reverberates through her joints, making her knees ache. Her lungs are scream for more air because when she inhales, she can’t get enough. Sweat pours down her back, her body feels like it’s engulfed in flames. Why in the hell did they use so much polyester in the 80s? The fabric just doesn’t breathe.

When they pass the Metro station, the sidewalk grows even thicker with commuters. Tony lets out a sudden Outta the way! The people around them make space and then, the rest of the commuters move to stare at them as they run past. Ellie realizes how strange they look: a guy in a tuxedo, an extra from Grease and her, the time traveler from the era of Madonna and hair bands. A few people glance around like they expect a camera crew to swoop past like Candid Camera.

They make it back to NCIS in one piece. In the lobby, Tim and Tony make small talk with the security guard while their creds are checked, and their bodies scanned with the metal detector. It takes everything Ellie has in her to stay upright. She can’t hear anything over the whoosh whoosh of her heart in her ears. The security guard stands in front of her, his lips moving. She manages a small smile and nods. He waves her through the security check-point.

They’re halfway to the elevator, walking slowly and in line, when Tony’s phone chirps in rapid succession. It is still bleating when he pulls it out of his pocket.

He checks the texts. “Abby made a break in the case and – oh crap, Gibbs is on his way back up.”

And they’re running again. At least, Ellie thinks she is. Her legs feel too much like jelly for her to be certain what they’re doing anymore. All she knows is somehow she makes it into the elevator. Maybe Tim and Tony drug her the last few yards. Thankfully, the coffee is still clutched in her shaking hands. As soon as the doors close, it’s silent except for her strident breathing. Somehow, neither Tim nor Tony seem particularly fazed by the run. While they are a little sweaty, they look like they will live to see tomorrow. Ellie doubts she’ll make it to lunch.

“I hate coffee,” Tim mutters.

Ellie smiles weakly. “Me too.”

“I’ll remind you two of that on our next all-nighter.” Tony’s eyes are still on his phone. “To sum up Abby’s review of the evidence, Ransom Phillips’ fingerprints were inside a pair of gloves and gunshot residue was on the outside of the right one. According to Abby, Phillips was a lefty based on the surveillance footage.” Then, he pauses. “Hm, Abby stopped texting. Okay guys, go with the theories!”

Ellie’s gaze whips between the two men. She doesn’t know quite what she is supposed to do. Based on the way Tim cups his hand to his chin and Tony’s gaze turns pensive, she surmises they’re
supposed to solve the case right now. The elevator slowly climbs to the fourth floor. They have four floors to solve a years-old cold case. She doesn’t know whether to burst out in laughter or tears.

Tim presses his lips together. “Could someone have stolen Phillips’ gloves, killed him and ditched them at the scene?”

“That makes sense,” Tony says. “But that doesn’t explain why Phillips said he was Gemini.”

“Maybe he didn’t know about astrology.”

“Eh, everyone knows their astrological sign.”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t.”

“That’s because you’re a Virgo.” Tony shoots Ellie a glance. “Bishop?”

The number three flashes over the top of the elevator door. Pressure builds up in Ellie and she feels like is about to explode. She blurts out the first thing to come to mind. She is pretty sure it’s the plot to some movie she saw at some point in time. Her mind and heart are racing too much for her to think.

“Someone was impersonating Phillips,” Ellie rambles. “Hence why he said he was Gemini and a lefty. Ransom Phillips killed the person pretending to be him and disappeared.”

The elevator door opens and in the daylight, Ellie comes back to reality. They rush to their desks. Tony tosses Tim the bag of their clothes and the younger man stuffs it into his desk. The men get settled while Ellie carefully places Gibbs’ coffee in the exact spot where he left it. She moves his trashcan ahead a few inches to cover the brown spot on the floor. She picks up her Mac and climbs on top of her desk. She sits, legs together and ducked behind the screen.

“Ransom Phillips could still be alive, huh,” Tim considers.

Ellie flushes fiercely. “Okay, it was a stupid theory.”

Both men are typing at their keyboards while Ellie reloads her audio files. Before she can put in her earphones, Gibbs rushes into the bullpen. His expression is darker than usual, his blue eyes icy. He snatches up his coffee and clutches it protectively.

He glares at Tim. “Thanks for joining us, McGee.”

Tim doesn’t flinch.

“Whaddya got?” Gibbs continues.

Tony takes one for the team. “Ransom Phillips could still be alive, Boss.”

Gibbs’ angry expression lasers on Tony. He swigs his coffee as though to prevent himself from ripping the agent apart. At the taste, his eyebrows rise. He takes a longer, deeper sip. His expression inexplicably softens. He tilts his head as though to say, *I’m listening.*

Emboldened, Tony stands up. “Surveillance and audio files show key details that make Ransom Phillips *Ransom Phillips* are wrong. So either Phillips forgot who he was or someone *Single White Female*’d him.”

Gibbs stares at Tony.
“Someone began impersonating him to a different cartel. Phillips was already informing to the feds to avoid jail time. If his employers found out about that, he was a dead man. If they thought he was working for another cartel, he was an even deader man.” Tony considers that. “I’m not sure how that would work. But the walls were closing in around him. The only way to skip town was in a casket.”

“He killed the imposter.” Gibbs sips the coffee again. “And the ME didn’t catch it?”

After checking a file, Tim jumps in. “Ducky wasn’t the original ME, Boss. Phillips’ NCIS contact ID’d from the body.” There’s a couple clicks before a picture of a corpse and DMV picture appear on the screen. “They look awfully close, don’t you think?”

Ellie gasps at how similar the two bodies are. Except on the DMV photo, Phillips has a small scar in his eyebrow…which is missing on the corpse.

“Dental records?”

Tim shakes his head. “The ME didn’t request them.”

Ellie accesses the internal network to check the NCIS agent, Luke Daley, who served at Phillips’ contact. When she notices the man was at the center of several IA investigations, she lets out a little gasp.

Gibbs turns to her. “Bishop?”

“Agent Daley had several, um….uh. He was, uh…” Even though Gibbs stares her down, she can’t bring herself to say it.

Tony pipes up. “He was dirty, Boss. He was the subject of a nasty IA review before he ate his gun seven years ago. So he could’ve – ”

“Given a bad ID,” Gibbs finishes. “Abby already told me that.”

Tim and Tony share a surprised glance. Ellie can’t help wondering how often Gibbs knows the answer, but makes his team stumble through the case to figure it out. Then again, there’s something about knowing the answer and being able to prove it from multiple angles.

“Didja know Phillips was a bomb maker too?” Gibbs asks.

Ellie’s mouth pulls into a little ‘o’ while Tim and Tony just frown. They start back to work while Gibbs just stands there like he expects something. What he is waiting for, Ellie has no idea. She scrolls through her audio files, taps at her keyboard as though inspiration might whack her upside the head. She knows Gibbs will be pissed if she isn’t working, but she doesn’t know what she is supposed to do.

“I just checked one of Phillips’ old bank accounts,” Tim says. “It started getting regular direct deposits about three years ago after being dormant. They’re paychecks from a bar near Dupont Circle.”


“I’ll text you the address,” Tim offers.

When Ellie slides off her desk, she remembers she is still wearing her 80s power suit. She reaches for her go-bag to go change, but Tony clears his throat. He is jerking his head towards the elevator, telling her to move her ass. That’s when she notices the slight smirk Gibbs wears. As she grabs her
creds, she watches Tim remove their bag of clothes from his desk.

Gibbs doesn’t turn around. “Keep the jacket, McGee. Your girlfriend will like it.”

Tim’s whole face blazes red. Silently snickering, Tony makes a face at Tim. On his way past Gibbs, the team leader whacks the back of Tony’s head. Sobering up, Tony straightens. Tim makes a face back at Tony. They remind her of her older brothers. Always actively trying to one-up each other, but ready to do whatever it takes to protect the other. A sudden homesickness overtakes her, but she lets herself wonder whether these people could ever becomes a makeshift family.

She grabs her creds and clips her holster to her skirt. She can barely contain her excitement on the way to elevator. Once the doors close, Tony half-smiles at Ellie. She can barely stay still because she is bouncing in her sneakers. What she wouldn’t give for a KitKat right now.

“Are you excited for your first arrest?” Tony asks.

“I can’t wait,” she breathes. “Can I put the cuffs on?”

He chuckles. “The Probie always gets to do the honors on their first time.”

Her face lights up. Then, her stomach growls again.

Tony raises his eyebrows. “Good G-d, Bishop. Are you hungry already?”

She half-smiles. “I could always eat.”

“We’ll grab a pizza after we get our dirtbag,” he offers. “Something with sausage and onions.”

“And maybe some pineapple and bacon.” She grins. “Oh! Do you think they would put French fries on it too? I bet it would be amazing with Ranch dressing.”

He bares his teeth. “That sounds gross.”

She doesn’t bother explaining because Tony doesn’t get it. Very few people—not even Jake—do. For her new life as an agent, she needs a new food just for them.

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