A Tale of Two Cases

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Summary

Written for NCIS Big Bang 2009. Crossover with the ATF AU version of Magnificent Seven. A hijacked weapons cache has Gibbs and his team flying to Denver to investigate. Meanwhile, guns are flooding the street from a new supplier and Chris Larabee’s team investigates. The cases collide when Tony and Ezra are taken by the gunrunner and their teams must work together to find and rescue them. Some case!fic, some pre-slash (Vin/Ezra), some actual slash (Tony/Gibbs), some whump and a Gibbs/Larabee staring contest.

Notes

As stated in the summary, this was an NCIS Big Bang 2009 fic, crossing over with Mog's ATF version of the Magnificent Seven boys (but there's no tag for that).

Many thanks to Sucuri for the beta. Also, special thanks to Shallan for giving me invaluable advice about Buckley AFB and then reading over the section to make sure it made sense. Yet more thanks go to Lyl_devil for making some lovely cover art, icons and a chapter divider. You should take a look and let her know how great it is.

I've never been to Denver, so I must confess to taking street names off a Google map and turning them into drug gang territories. Apologies to anyone living in Denver for that bit of creative licence.

One last thing: When I started writing this, I was right in the middle of a marathon showing
of all five seasons of *The Wire* that was being shown over three nights a week for several months. As a result, when I needed names for the OCs that pop up in this story, I ended up shuffling names of characters and actors in that show. So if they sound familiar, that’s why.

**Disclaimer:** I do not own NCIS, nor do I own The Magnificent Seven. My thanks go to Mog for creating the ATF version and allowing others to borrow it. No profit made.

**Link to Art:** [Pretty pics this way](#)

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**A Tale of Two Cases**

**Denver, Colorado**

Chris Larabee set the phone receiver back into its cradle and pushed up from his desk, moving to stand in the doorway of his office. “Listen up, we’ve got a new case,” he announced to the bullpen.

Six heads lifted from folders and computer screens to watch as he moved from the doorway to lean up against Buck Wilmington’s desk, crossing his arms and ankles.

“You gonna share?” Willmington asked with a smirk, apparently deciding that the time it took for Chris to walk the three steps needed to reach his desk and settle against it was too long for him to sit in anticipatory silence.

Chris was quite used to Buck’s impatience, however, and simply shot him a quelling look, which had the smirk deepening, but Buck’s hands raised in surrender.

“I just got off the phone with Major McCauly from Denver PD. Over the last week they’ve had a spate of gang shootings in the different districts—”

“Gangs aren’t really our thing, Pard,” Buck pointed out.

“Normally no,” Chris agreed, “but once the district chiefs got together for their weekly meeting, they realised that there must be a new gunrunner in town, because of the sheer number of weapons the gangs have suddenly got access to and from the odd bit of information some of the gang members let slip in interrogation.”

“Any fatalities?” Nathan Jackson asked.

“There were four civilian bystanders who got killed and another in hospital, while thirteen gang members died and at least one is in critical condition and not expected to survive. It’s believed others were injured, but not enough that they couldn’t escape. McCauly couldn’t tell me much, because the first few autopsy reports only just arrived before the meeting and he only skimmed them, because he knew he was sending them to us. The case files are being sent over. Nathan, Josiah, I want you to look through all the pathologist, forensics and doctors’ reports, see what you can find about those who have died and those that’re hanging on, and find out who we need to contact for the rest of the reports.”

“Sure thing,” Nathan said, while Josiah simply nodded. As a qualified EMT, Nathan was the natural choice for any medical jargon and Chris never hesitated in sending it his way. Josiah Sanchez was
the team profiler, but he knew a lot about forensic methods, too. There wasn’t much that he and Nathan couldn’t ferret out of a report between them.

Chris also knew that Ezra Standish and Vin Tanner had the best connections on the street, which was why he said, “Vin, Ezra, once the files get here, check for any information on the weapons used and then get hold of your informants. Find out where the guns are coming from and who’s supplying them.”

Two nods answered, coupled with the typically polite ‘of course, Mr. Larabee,’ from Ezra and the less polite, ‘sure, Cowboy,’ from Vin. Satisfied, Chris turned to his last two team members, Buck and JD Dunne. “I want you two to read through all the police reports, any victim or witness statements they’ve got. Put together a timeline and a map of the incidents. I also want to know which gangs are involved and what their territories are.” Two more affirmatives came his way and Chris nodded, content that his team would hop to the task just as soon as the files arrived.

“Good. In the meantime, finish up whatever you can that’s outstanding; this case may take awhile.”

Taking his own advice, Chris headed back into his office and started in on the mound of paperwork being in charge seemed to generate. He left his door open, enjoying the often boisterous camaraderie that usually accompanied Team Seven whatever they were doing.

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Anacostia, Washington DC

Leroy Jethro Gibbs had neither the time nor the patience for all the paperwork that came with his job. He’d finally managed to complete a batch and had delivered it to Director Shepard, so she was happy, which meant she wouldn’t be looking over his shoulder quite so much for a little while. Always a good thing.

He left her office and headed across the mezzanine to the stairs. As he walked down to the bullpen, he watched his team. Tony DiNozzo was on the phone, while Tim McGee and Ziva David were watching him intently. That meant that Tony was either having an inappropriate conversation with his current girlfriend, or he was getting details of a new case.

'It better be the second one,' Gibbs thought darkly. Judging by the serious expressions and the fact that DiNozzo was sitting up and taking notes, rather than leaning back with his feet on the desk, Gibbs thought it was a safe bet they’d got a new case.

Tony hung up just as Gibbs rounded the partition behind him, so he stepped in close and said, "What have we got, DiNozzo?"

Tony made a drama out of being surprised, putting a hand to his chest and gasping, "Don’t do that, Boss!” Gibbs wasn’t fooled, though he could tell from the smirks that McGee and Ziva were. He could and had snuck up on Tony, but nowhere near as often as Tony made out. But if Tony wanted the others to think he was oblivious, well, it wasn’t Gibbs’ place to interfere. And more fool McGee and Ziva for believing it.

"We’re going to Colorado, Boss. A weapon shipment bound for Iraq got hijacked.”

“How can Colorado have a naval base when it has no sea?” Ziva asked, confused.

“It’s actually a navy and marine reserve unit at Buckley air force base,” Tony supplied. “They moved there after 9/11 to help with gate security and training.”
“Isn’t Zach Andover out in Colorado, why isn’t he handling this?” Gibbs asked. He knew not every base had it’s own NCIS office, but there were usually one or two agents for any state which had a naval or marine presence. He remembered Zach transferring to Colorado a few years back.

“It was him I spoke to, actually. He said that he and his partner do handle stuff on the base when it crops up, but because it’s only a small reserve base, they don’t get much work. They’re predominantly assigned to a multi-agency anti-terror task force and they’re in the middle of something right now. He said that, seeing as it’s a fairly large quantity of weapons that’ve gone missing, he thought of you, Boss.” Tony quirked a small grin his way.

“How thoughtful of him,” Gibbs responded dryly, “did he tell you anything about how the weapons went missing?”

Tony smirked, then carried on, "Yeah, he gave me a rundown: The base sends two men and a truck to pick up the weapons, then they bring them back, they get loaded on a C-130 and shipped wherever. Only, this time, the weapons didn’t make it to the base. They found the empty truck a few blocks away; driver dead and the navigator in a bad way."

Gibbs took a moment to regret the waste of a life, then said, "Inside job?"

"Zach said, and I quote, 'I don’t want to influence your investigation with my genius,' end quote."

"More like the SOB couldn’t be bothered," Gibbs said with a frown.

"That’s exactly what I said, Boss,” Tony said, “he said I was starting to sound like you. I don’t think it was a compliment," he finished, sounding bemused.

McGee gave a startled laugh, which he desperately tried to turn into a cough when Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him. With a quirk of his lips he told Tony, "Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t."

Tony grinned before returning to business, "In fairness, Zach did point out that there are only two of them-"

"We did ok when there were only two of us," Gibbs interrupted. He knew it would make Tony smile to hear that and Gibbs liked it when Tony smiled. He gave himself a mental headslop, though-- he couldn’t interrupt too much just to get a smile. It would ruin his image of being all about the case. Still, he got what he wanted out of it when Tony grinned again.

"That’s because we are crime-solving gods, Boss, and other mortals can’t hope to be as good."

"You have a swelled head, Tony," Ziva said with a smirk.

"Are you saying that Gibbs *isn’t* a crime-solving god, Zeeva?" Tony asked.

Ziva spluttered, "No! That’s not what-"

"Back on track, people," Gibbs broke in, before they really got into their verbal war. That was another reason he couldn’t let his own banter go on too long: it encouraged his team to start and god knows they didn’t need any encouraging!

"Right, Boss. So, Zach said there’s only two of them, and they don’t have their own forensics or ME, but they did what they could- crime scene’s cordoned off, with a couple of local unis guarding it; they’ve bagged and tagged and had the body moved to the county morgue. He said he thought it might as well wait for Abby and Ducky rather than let the local boys start poking at it."
Gibbs was glad of Andover’s foresight- the less people examining the evidence, the less risk there was of it getting lost or contaminated. And while Gibbs knew that Abby was far from the only forensics expert in existence, she was the only one he knew, and therefore the only one he trusted. Same with Ducky. "So, when did all this happen?"

“The shipment was due yesterday at 1330 hours, the truck was found at around 1500, Zach and his partner managed to get away from the task force and to the scene by 1530. EMTs were still on site with the navigator, so Zach got their prints for elimination, then they processed, got the body removed and made sure everything was as secure as they could make it. Then they took all the evidence back to their office around about 1830.”

“So why the hell are we only just hearing about it now?” Gibbs demanded.

“Andover said they’d not long been back at their office and were writing up their reports when the task force chief called them in- one of the ops kicked up a gear and they were working that ‘til gone midnight, then they went home and crashed for a few hours, went back in to write up the task force report and then called us.”

“They dared to sleep during an active case?” Ziva said in mock disbelief.

Tony chuckled. “I guess that’s what happens when you don’t have Gibbs for a boss,” he replied.

Gibbs found himself once again watching Tony’s smile and gave himself a mental shake. He’d always noticed Tony, he’d have to be blind not to. Even straight guys knew Tony was good looking, and Gibbs wasn’t counted among their number. So yes, he’d noticed Tony, but it was starting to become much more frequent and Gibbs needed to get himself under control. He’d invented rule 12 for a reason, after seeing how colleagues had struggled and after his own experiences with Jenny Shepard. It was inappropriate for him to be harbouring feelings for a member of his team. What’s more, Tony wasn’t stupid; he’d start noticing if Gibbs didn’t watch himself, and that could make things awkward. Sure, Tony flirted with him, but then, he flirted with anything that moved. He didn’t mean anything by it for the most part and had never indicated any deeper feelings towards Gibbs.

“You can sleep when you’re dead, DiNozzo,” he said, pulling himself firmly back into investigator-mode. “Right. Ziva, head down to Abby and let her know everything we know so far. DiNozzo, head down to Ducky and fill him in. Ask if he wants to come with us, or stay here, bearing in mind the body’s already been moved from the crime scene.”

“Will do, Boss.”

“McGee, find us a plane; civilian if necessary, but if there’s a military flight headed straight to the base, that’d be even better.” Gibbs didn’t wait long enough to see McGee’s nod, already turning round and heading back up the stairs in order to fill Director Shepard in on the new case. Part way up the stairs he stopped and called down to the team: “Have you all got an overnight bag here?” There were nods from all three, so Gibbs said, “Get the earliest flight you can then, McGee, as no one needs to go home to pack first.”

That time he did catch McGee’s nod out of the corner of his eye as he carried on up the stairs.

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**Denver, Colorado**

A tap on the door frame had Chris looking up from his paperwork to see Josiah leaning into his office. “We’re ready to run through our findings, Chris,” he said.
“Ok, Josiah, head on over to the conference room and I’ll be with you in five. I’ve just got to dot the i’s and cross the t’s on this last report,” Chris replied. Josiah nodded and disappeared back into the bullpen. Chris checked his clock and saw that several hours had passed. He looked at his in and out boxes and gave a sigh- the in still had more in it than the out. He was convinced the stuff bred like rabbits as soon as two files got anywhere near each other.

He finished up the report he was on and triumphantly tossed it onto the out pile, before he stood and gave his back a good stretch, wincing at the popping noise. He made a mental note to talk Judge Travis into getting some more ergonomically designed chairs.

He made his way to the conference room, via the break room for a cup of coffee, and arrived to find all his team settled and involved in one of their usual bickering sessions. He didn’t even need to know what the conversation was about to know that Buck and JD had probably started it with an argument, but had quickly joined forces against Vin and Ezra, while Nate and Josiah looked on, making the odd comment to needle or soothe as they saw fit. Grinning and shaking his head, Chris announced himself by calling, “Children, don’t make me keep you after school.”

He took his seat and things quieted down quickly. That was one of the things Chris liked about the disparate bunch of men on his team- they played hard, but they could turn it off at the drop of a hat and be totally focused on the job. He looked around and said, “Nate, Josiah, you want to start us off?”

“Sure thing, Chris,” Nathan replied. He glanced to Josiah and received a small nod, indicating he should go first, so he pulled some photos from his file, stood and moved to the large white board they used for setting out cases.

“Okay, as you know from Major McCauley, there aren’t many autopsies completed yet. There were three reports in the files he sent over and another one has arrived since. The ME’s going to send them out as he completes them, but with so many dead, not to mention all the other unrelated bodies that come in in the course of a week, the guy’s swamped.”

He turned back to the board and picked up a marker pen, writing ‘Civilians’ in neat capitals in the top left corner. Setting the pen down, he pulled some blue-tack from the packet and stuck three photos up- a blond, blue eyed young woman, a little girl who couldn’t be anything but the woman’s daughter, and a mousy-brown haired man with brown eyes. “The first casualties were the Ellis family; mother, Faye, 33 and daughter, Jasmine, seven. Father, Mark, 35, is the critical patient. They were all, unsurprisingly, hit by stray bullets. Faye died instantly from a shot to the head, while Jasmine caught one in the thigh. It nicked her femoral artery and she bled out by the time she reached the hospital.”

Nathan paused for a moment and Chris knew he was letting the death of the little girl settle for a moment. Cases where children got hurt or killed always hit hard, especially for Chris, who always flashed back to the death of his own son, Adam.

"Mark Ellis is critical, but stable. He took one bullet to the chest, which collapsed his right lung. They’ve removed the bullet and reinflated the lung, but they’ve got him in a medically induced coma and on a respirator, so we won’t be able to question him for awhile. It’s possible, even probable, he won’t remember anything anyway, as he took a deep bullet graze to the left temple. He needed five stitches and it’s not unusual for a wound like that to cause some degree of amnesia."

"They know to get in touch with us when he wakes up, though?" JD asked, just beating Chris.

"Yeah. I called in case they weren’t aware of the fact that PD wasn’t on the case anymore, but one of McCauley’s men had already let them know."
Chris made a mental note to thank McCauley for that bit of foresight; even when the PDs called in the feds willingly, the change over didn’t always run smooth.

"Next vic was Tomas Munez, 26," Nathan said, sticking up a photo of a Latino man with mid-length, wavy black hair and soulful brown eyes. "He caught a through and through to the left shoulder, but the bullet lodged in his heart was what killed him. He died instantly.

“The last civilian to die was Jeff Johnson, 53. His autopsy is still pending, but he made it to the ER and the attending surgeon cited COD as ‘multiple GSW to the chest and abdomen leading to fatal blood loss’.”

Nathan drew a line under the five pictures, wrote the title 'gang members' and stuck up the 14 photos, two rows of seven, showing a mix of black and white young men. "Here we have Wendell Peters, 17, Clark Reddick, 18, Lance Pierce, 17, Dominic Gillan, 19, Seth Lombardozzi, 21, Jimmy Lovejoy, 21, Omar Wayans, 19, Michael Collins, 24, Daniel Moreland, 18, Dominick Wisdom, 23 and his brother Aiden, 17, Idris Woods, 20, Robert Harris, 19 and this guy, Thomas Little, 19, is the one in hospital. I’ve put these up in order of death; someone can sort them out into affiliations in a moment.

“So far we only have results for Peters and Reddick. COD for Peters was a head shot, he died instantly. Reddick took three bullets to his torso; he hung on for a few minutes, but was pronounced dead at the scene."

Chris looked at the array of photos and mused that even without Nathan’s titles, without even looking at the faces, it was obvious which were the gang members. All the photos had a paper square attached to the bottom right corner that contained name, age and COD, but that was where the similarities ended. All the civilian photos showed their subjects alive and happy, supplied to the police by loving family members. But the gang members had no one who cared enough to give photos to the authorities, maybe even no one who cared enough to have pictures full stop. Their pictures were all from morgue shots, or the mug shots in the system.

“As I said, the coroner’s going to send me the results as he finishes each autopsy, but it’s going to take awhile, as there are only two MEs and the Dr Jones’ colleague is handling all the other, unrelated, bodies.” Nathan finished his report and returned to his seat.

"What’s Little’s condition?" Buck asked.

"He took a through and through to the abdomen- which somehow missed all his organs- and two bullets to his thigh. They hit so close together that they shattered the bone. He’s had surgery to close the hole in his side and pin what’s left of his femur back together. The doctors say he’s stable and should pull through, though he’s in that crucial 24 hour period right now. He’s going to be on the good drugs for a few days, so it’s going to be awhile before he’s lucid enough for questioning."

Nathan sat back in his seat and Chris thanked him before saying, "Josiah, forensics?"

The big man had his elbows on the table and his fingers steepled as he started his report. "There’s not much I can tell you right now, Chris; all the weapons were recovered from the fourteen boys on the board, plus there were a few extra. It’s not yet clear if some of them were carrying two guns, or whether some of their friends dropped them.

“The first shooting was six days ago, so we’ve got finger print confirmation for the three guns recovered that day, they also matched some of the bullets: Peters was responsible for Faye Ellis and Reddick; one of the bullets in Mark Ellis came from Reddick, the other from Lance Pierce. Jasmine Ellis was killed by an as yet unknown weapon, though it wouldn’t surprise me if it turns out to be
one of the guns collected at a later scene.

The information’s going to be coming slowly for awhile now, though. PD’s techs are so backlogged that they only managed to get these few results done by today and then McCauley called a halt to the processing, so that everything could be shipped to our lab. It only arrived a few hours ago, so processing’s only just started. Also, they’ll only get the bullets still in bodies as and when an autopsy gets completed. It’s going to be a slow trickle.”

Chris couldn’t help but feel frustrated, even as he knew there was nothing that could’ve been done about it. Police labs were almost always over run and the pattern wasn’t noticed until recently, so there wouldn’t have been any rush jobs for the evidence, and it really was best that McCauley stopped all the evidence processing so that everything was easily and cleanly passed to the ATF’s lab, but still. He blew a small breath through his teeth, quiet enough that no one seemed to notice it.

“What about the guns?” Vin asked.

“Mostly M9s,” Josiah answered, opening a folder and withdrawing a handful of photos. He spread them across the surface of the table and Chris saw that they were evidence photos of the guns taken at the various crime scenes.

“There were also, worryingly, a few of these,” Josiah added, pulling two more photos from the file and slapping them down on top of the handgun pictures.

Chris leaned forwards a little to get a clear view and saw that both photos contained a snub-nosed submachine gun.

“P90s,” Vin said.

“Military,” Buck added.

“Most likely,” Josiah agreed.

Chris knew that the P90 was favoured by the military and quite a few police SWAT teams because it was light and had minimal recoil. “Any luck tracing the serial numbers?” he asked, turning his attention to Vin and Ezra for their reports.

Vin shook his head, “Not yet. I’ve put some calls into our military liaisons, but you know how they like to keep this sort of thing internal when they can.”

That was true enough. Chris and the team had faced off with the various arms of the military police force on numerous occasions. Even the fact that Buck, Vin and Chris himself had served in various military units didn’t seem to smooth the way much. More waiting.

“I also put in a few unofficial calls to some of my old buddies. They might be more likely to pass anything on that the official guys want to keep private,” Vin added.

“I have been looking at these photographs of the weapons, and confirming with the reports, that a lot of the serial numbers are sequential, or certainly close enough to be from the same batch,” Ezra informed the team. “It wasn’t picked up to begin with, as the reports were all separate, but it is now clear that all the guns come from one consignment, though it remains to be seen whether they were new weapons waiting to be sent out, or old ones being taken for disposal. The curious thing is that while the serial numbers are sequential, they’re not necessarily from the same gang.”
“Which means that both gangs have been supplied by one gunrunner,” Josiah surmised.

“Precisely, Mr. Sanchez,” Ezra confirmed.

“Well, if it wasn’t certain before, that pretty much clinches the military angle,” Buck said. “There’s no other agency likely to have such a big consignment of sequential serial numbers.”

“You’re guys on the streets got anything to say on the supplier?” Chris asked.

“We’re still waiting to hear back from most of them,” Vin said.

“We do have a few meetings arranged for later this evening, so hopefully we will glean some useful information at that juncture,” Ezra said. “What we can surmise from the information we have already is that this gunrunner is new in the area, but probably not new to the industry. It takes time and planning to be able to steal a large quantity of weapons, whether that theft is carried out through inside contacts or outside hijacking. It’s likely he’s built himself up in another state and is now broadening his horizons.”

“That said, he can’t be too established, because we’ve not been able to find him in any of the files we’ve got,” Vin added, sounding frustrated. Chris could understand the feeling; they already had files full of known gunrunners, they didn’t need another one joining an already fairly crowded market.

“Gangs don’t normally buy their guns in bulk, though, right?” JD asked. “Don’t they usually just get them from all over the place in small numbers?”

“Indeed they do, Mr. Dunne, which is one of the things that proves we have a new player in town. He, or indeed she, has managed to talk two gang leaders into parting with serious money to equip a good portion of their soldiers at once and, what’s more, they’ve done it in a very short time scale. With so many guns on hand, our seller needed too dispose of them quickly, as they would be difficult to house safely.”

“Ok. Have you contacted any of the ATF branches in other states?” Chris asked.

“Not yet, but it’s on our list of things to do before we start meeting snitches,” Vin said. “I’m also going to contact the FBI, see if they’ve heard anything. Though getting information from them is harder than getting it from the military.”

Chris didn’t miss the ‘I’ part of Vin’s statement. He and Ezra worked well together, sharing the work load without any hesitation, but there was one thing Ezra wouldn’t do unless he had absolutely no other choice and that was talk to the FBI. There was too much bad blood between them after Ezra was framed and forced to leave his job at the FBI not long before Chris snapped him up for his new team. Everyone knew Ezra’s dislike for the agency and made sure to make any calls themselves whenever possible. Ez never commented on it outright, but they all knew he was grateful for their understanding and support. It was one of the things that made Chris’ team so successful- they knew each other so well and were able to cover each other’s problem areas.

Vin pulled Chris’ attention back by finishing his and Ezra’s part of the report with: "There’s nothing else we can tell you until someone calls back, Cowboy."

"Ok. Buck, JD, what have you got for us?" Chris asked, turning to his final two team members with a questioning eyebrow lift.

"You wanna go sort them boys out?" Buck asked, waving his hand towards Nathan’s photos.
"Sure," JD said, pushing up from the table and moving to the whiteboard. He rearranged the gangbangers so that the top row contained eight, all black, with the remaining six black and white men on the bottom row. He slapped a hand on the top row, “These guys all belong to Russell Woodfield’s gang. This bottom row is filled with upstanding members of Joe Carver’s crew,” he tapped the back of his knuckles against the photos in question. “It’s the same old, same old; two rival gangs arguing over corner territory to sell their drugs, not caring about any innocent bystanders they might take out when they start gunning each other down.”

Buck took up the narrative as JD moved back to his seat at the table. “We’ve gone over all the statements. Unsurprisingly, there weren’t too many eye witnesses. Most people just cut and run and they’re all too scared to speak up. They’ve gotta live there, after all. The statements we have got don’t amount to much- two groups of young men suddenly started shooting at each other. They can’t even agree on how many shooters were involved, how many were black or white, whether they drove or ran away and which direction they went.

“Basically, the Woodfield boys hold the west and the Carver boys hold the east, with the centre of those territories on East and West Colfax Avenue. They’re trying to nibble away at each other’s corners there. Timeline is the first incident happened on Monday and involved the Ellis family, Peters, Reddick, Pierce and an unknown number of others. Tuesday we had Munez, Gillan, Lombardozzi, Lovejoy and Wayans. Wednesday seems to have been a rest day, then Thursday was Moreland, both Wisdoms and Woods, but no civilians. Friday was Johnson, Harris and Little.”

JD took over once more, revealing what there was from the first officers on the scene. “All four incidents were pretty much the same. The first responders found the civilian and/or gangbanger’s bodies, along with a few minor civilian injuries caused by things like flying glass from car or building windows that got hit by stray bullets. A lot of people in varying degrees of shock, too, but mostly they were all fine to leave after giving a statement. Any mobile gang members were long gone by the time the officers got there.”

It was frustrating, but not surprising that the reports held so little. These kinds of crimes went that way because the witnesses were too scared to come forward, or their nerves were too frazzled to be reliable for the most part. Chris leant forward a little and made quick eye contact with each of his team. “I know it’s frustrating. There are a lot of reports that amount to little information. These things always go like that and we need to remember that all we’re interested in is the guns. The locals and the DEA can deal with the gangbangers and their drugs; we just want to find out who the new gunrunner is.”

He got several nods and murmurs of agreement. It was tough for all of them to focus on that one aspect of the crimes, they all wanted to solve everything and help everybody. But they were all realists and knew they simply couldn’t do it; they weren’t supermen and the ATF’s remit didn’t cover gangland turf wars or anything to do with drugs. They had to focus on the bit they could solve and content themselves with passing on any relevant information they might pick up along the way. Didn’t mean they had to like it.

“Allright, let’s head on out, guys. There’s nothing we can do until we’ve got more information and we won’t be getting anymore of that tonight, except from Vin and Ezra. Let’s call it a night and come back fresh tomorrow.”

Chris didn’t need to tell them twice. It was almost like the teacher telling the kids that class was over: voices raised, they started teasing, bantering and shoving each other out of the door. Well, Buck, JD and Vin acted like unruly school kids at least, everyone else was a little more grown up about it, filing out of the room after a shared eye roll. It was time to head for the Saloon and a well-earned drink.
McGee had found a C-130 heading to Buckley that was due to fly out two hours after the case came in, which had given them enough time to gather all their gear together and finish up the reports they were working on.

The flight had been nearly four hours long, so Gibbs surreptitiously stretched himself and cracked his back once they’d touched down and he could stand for disembarking. C-130s weren’t known for their comfort, after all.

He surveyed his team- Ducky, Ziva and Tony all appeared unruffled. Ducky was an old hand at travelling with Gibbs on rickety, turbulence-prone military jets, while Ziva could, like Gibbs, sleep anywhere and put up with any amount of discomfort without letting on. Gibbs never quite knew with Tony, though. Sometimes his senior agent seemed totally relaxed, nodding off like he was flying in one of those fancy first class beds he’d seen one of the big airlines advertising recently, while other times he seemed a little green. Their flight to Denver had been one of DiNozzo’s good flights.

What was never in doubt was that McGee didn’t travel well when he didn’t have a comfy seat and a porthole. Neither, it seemed, did Jimmy Palmer, who had endured his virgin flight in the hands of a military pilot. Both young men looked positively green, a fact that Tony was taking full advantage of, with liberal help from Ziva.

“Finally! I don’t think much of the in-flight service- no hostesses, or meals, or even bags of peanuts. I’m starving! I could really go for a big, juicy steak right about now. Or, no, pizza. Maybe steak on a pizza? What do you think Probilicious? Jimmy, my little autopsy gremlin?”

Tony’s victims didn’t answer, too busy turning greener than they already were, so Ziva was the one to reply: “I do not think steak and pizza would work, Tony. I like my steak raw, with all the blood still inside, which would make the pizza too soft.”

Gibbs stifled a grin when Ziva’s slip of the tongue made Jimmy clap a hand to his mouth and McGee close his eyes as if in pain.

Tony didn’t stifle his grin, flashing all his teeth as he corrected Ziva, “Rare, Ziva. You like your steak rare, not raw. Although, come to think of it, there’s not all that much difference.”

Gibbs spotted Zach Andover and another man heading towards their group. He exchanged an amused glance with Ducky and then stepped up to deliver a slap to the back of Tony’s head.

“Hey!” Tony protested.

Gibbs smirked at him and said, “Stop taunting, start focusing. And you two, if you throw up, you’re cleaning up after yourselves.”

"I see some things haven’t changed," Andover said with a chuckle, as he reached the team shook and hands with Gibbs, Tony and Ducky. "You put in for that personal injury claim yet, DiNozzo?"

"I keep trying, but my boss won’t sign off on it for some reason. I’m pretty sure it’s the reason I get so many concussions, though," Tony grinned.

"DiNozzo, the reason you get so many concussions is because you keep sticking your damn fool head in the path of fists, walls, 2x4s and even the odd table lamp,” Gibbs pointed out reasonably.
“He’s got you there, Tony, my man,” Andover said with another chuckle.


Zach turned his attention to the third old friend, “You’ve not killed either of them yet then, Ducky?”

“Much as I am sometimes sorely tempted, Zachary, I have enough customers without adding to the number myself. How about you, dear boy, how have you been?”

Gibbs watched the reunion with a fond smile, though he took care to keep it internal. It wouldn’t do for the troops to see his softer side. Zach was a good man, though. He’d helped out on cases, along with Chris Pacci, when Gibbs and Tony had been a two man team. He was a lot like Tony in that he got along with most people and didn’t seem to take Gibbs’ gruffness to heart. Gibbs had thought about getting him on his team permanently, but had quickly realised that he would lose his mind if he had to work with two mouthy, flirty, mischievous and borderline insubordinate men day in day out and, if forced to choose, he’d pick Tony every time. Which was something he didn’t like to examine too closely. He was brought out of his thoughts when he heard Zach saying:

“And some things do change. Don’t tell me you’ve managed to find three more people who can actually work with you, Gibbs?!”

Gibbs quirked a brow. “You saying I’m tough to work with, Andover?”

“Tough? No, not at all. I’m saying you’re nigh on impossible to work with. Look at me; I had to move several states over. So, who are these fine people?”

“Special Agent Tim McGee, Officer Ziva David and Assistant ME Jimmy Palmer,” Gibbs introduced as Andover shook each hand in turn.

He stepped back level with his partner and introduced him as Bobby Carver, who shook hands all round. Gibbs couldn’t help but notice the striking contrast between the partners. Andover was around Ducky’s height, leaning towards stocky, with dirty blonde hair and perpetual stubble, while Carver was around Tony’s height, African American, lean and lightly muscled, with a completely smooth head and face.

Gibbs brought the frivolities to a close, reminding them all why they were there by asking, “So, what have you got for us?”

”Ok. We have Gunnery Sergeant Michael McNulty waiting for you at the county morgue, Ducky. We don’t have any suitable facilities ourselves, unfortunately.”

”They know I’m coming though?” Ducky asked, probably worried the county coroner would start cutting up his body before he could get there.

”They do. I think they were quite relieved actually; they’ve had some sort of gang thing go down, leaving them with something like 15 bodies and only two MEs.”

”Oh dear,” Ducky said, sympathetically. ”Let us adjourn then, Mr. Palmer, and establish the good sergeant’s COD.”

Zach waved over a marine who had been loitering in the background. ”This is Corporal Sohn; he’ll be your driver for the day.”

”Come along then, Mr. Palmer; let’s not keep the good corporal waiting. I’ll call you when I have something, Jethro,” Ducky said, though he must’ve known Gibbs would more than likely get
impatient and call before he was ready. After all, he knew Gibbs as well as Gibbs knew himself. Sure enough, Ducky gave him a knowing look before heading off in the marine’s wake, leaving Jimmy scrambling to gather all the cases and trail along behind.

Gibbs snorted in amusement. No matter how often Ducky berated him in some fashion, telling him he should be nicer to his agents, he never seemed to extend the same courtesy to his own assistant. His musings were cut short when Zach started speaking again:

“Corporal Freamon is in the hospital with multiple gunshot wounds. They’re cautiously hopeful he’ll live, but he’s not going to be waking up anytime soon, so we don’t have any description of the bad guys, and they picked a site without any overlooking cameras that I could spot.

“The scene’s preserved as much as possible. We obviously looked through it all yesterday, as I told Tony over the phone. We’ve got all the evidence stored in our office, ready for shipping to Abby. I figured we could split up - I’ll take someone to the scene and Bobby can show someone else all the evidence. We can’t spare you a lot of time, unfortunately; the case we’re on is pretty hot right now and we’ve got reports due in like yesterday. The chiefs are letting us read you in on it all, but then we’ll have to love you and leave you.”

“Sounds like a plan. McGee, David, go with Carver. Catalogue everything so we’ve got a record this end, then see about getting it all back to Abby as quickly as possible. DiNozzo, with me.” Gibbs tipped his head towards Andover, who clapped his hands together once and then clapped one of them onto Carver’s shoulder. Hard.

Carver grinned a toothy grin and nudged Zach hard enough to make him stagger. Zach grinned, too, however, so Gibbs assumed it was a standard thing between them. “Catch you later, Carv,” Zach said.

“Yeah. Don’t forget we’ve got a nice evening of report writing planned and it’s your turn to pay for takeout.”

“Yeah, yeah. How come you always remember when it’s my turn to pay?”

“I’m just good like that,” Carver said, with another grin. He collected Ziva and McGee, helping carry the various bags they had with them, and led them across the tarmac.

“Well, gentlemen, if you’d like to follow me, your chariot awaits,” Zach said, smirking as he led them round to the other side of the plane and a waiting, typical government issue, car.

The drive to the scene was short and the three men were soon stepping out of the car and approaching a taped off area that was being guarded by two local LEOs, Zach carrying a file he’d pulled from the glove compartment. “Ah, rookies pull all the best jobs,” Tony remarked with a grin and, sure enough, Gibbs could see that the police officers were very young and watching the agents’ approach somewhat apprehensively.

“Relax, boys, we’re NCIS,” Andover reassured, pulling out his badge and offering it to the nearest kid. Gibbs and Tony did the same and they were allowed past the tape with no trouble.

Taking in the scene, what remained of it, Gibbs saw the truck, the shattered glass and bullet holes in the metal body. There was blood on the vehicle and a large pool of it on the ground immediately outside the passenger door, which was littered with the detritus the paramedics had left behind in their fight to save Corporal Freamon. The scene was also dotted with yellow evidence markers, though the evidence itself was already packed up back at the field office.
Gibbs moved to the back of the truck and looked inside the gaping doors at the empty compartment. Tony had headed to the front of the truck and Gibbs heard a low whistle, prompting him to head that way himself. As he came into view, Tony said, “They really did a number on this, Boss.”

Sure enough, when Gibbs reached the front of the truck, he could see what a mangled mess it had become- windscreen and lights all nothing more than shattered glass, radiator grill like Swiss cheese. He noticed that both front tyres had been shot out, too. It was a miracle the driver had kept the thing on the road and Gibbs assumed he hadn’t been killed until later, perhaps when he refused to cooperate, or maybe he just didn’t bleed out immediately. Ducky would likely be able to tell him that.

Once they’d had a look round, Zach approached and opened his folder. “I thought you’d appreciate seeing what evidence we lifted, which is why we left the markers in place.”

Gibbs nodded and thanked Zach. It was good thinking and made it that much easier for Gibbs and his team to take over a scene they hadn’t processed themselves. Tony came up behind Gibbs to peer over his shoulder at the photos and Gibbs forced his mind to stay on the job and not on the warmth he could feel coming from Tony’s body so close to his back.

Once they’d looked their fill, Gibbs turned to Zach: “You got time for us to do a quick pass?”

“Are you saying I and my esteemed partner might have missed something?” Andover asked, all mock-indignation and a teasing glint to his eyes. Gibbs quirked an eyebrow. “I’m *saying* Tony and I need to acquaint ourselves with the scene physically and not just with the photos. As you well know, Andover.”

Zach held up his hands in surrender, “Ok, ok. I’ll wait in the car. At least I can maybe take a nap and catch up on some of my much needed beauty sleep,” he chuckled, before putting action to word and settling himself into the driver’s seat and closing his eyes.

Tony and Gibbs studied the site for 20 minutes, familiarising themselves with the area and meshing that with the photos. There wasn’t anything new there- Andover had worked with Gibbs, so he knew what he was doing. "We’re not going to find anything, Boss,” Tony said, echoing Gibbs’ thoughts.

"Nope, but at least we can picture it all in our minds now. C’mon, let’s go wake up sleeping beauty and see what Ziva and McGee have got.”

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What Ziva and McGee had were a couple of sealed boxes. In the hour since Gibbs had split the team, they had gone through all the evidence with Bobby- not that there was all that much to go through.

By the time Gibbs, Tony and Zach arrived back at the base, the evidence was all sealed and ready to go to Abby. “The courier should be arriving any minute, Boss,” McGee informed him not long after he led the other two through the door.

“Good. Run us through what we’ve got,” Gibbs instructed.

Ziva opened her mouth to reply, but Andover jumped in,” Sorry, Officer David. Gibbs, we need to get back to our other job. Can you hold off on the evidence run down for a few minutes? I want to introduce you to the base commander before we head out.”
Gibbs nodded, “Ok, hold that thought, you two. Let’s go meet the man in charge.”

All six agents trooped out of the small office and across the tarmac to a low building which turned out to house the admin staff. As they walked, Gibbs asked the local agents about the base commander.

“Colonel Ervin Rawls is a good man. He’s the type who knows the names of all his staff right down to the lowliest private. He keeps an eye on things, but doesn’t micro manage- he trusts his people to do their jobs and most of them respect that he doesn’t watch over their shoulders. Which isn’t to say he won’t come down hard on anyone who steps out of line. This thing is hitting him hard, mostly because he’s lost one man and could still lose the other, but he also doesn’t like the idea of his guns running around in civilian hands, or the possibility that one of his men is involved somehow,” Carver informed him.

Zach led them into the building and over to a Warrant Officer sitting behind a desk. “Hey, Alex, is the colonel in?”

“Hi, Zach, Bobby. Yeah, he said you’d show up sometime this afternoon and I’m to let you go right in.”

“Great. Thanks, Alex,” Zach said.

NCIS wasn’t usually well liked amongst base personnel, often viewed as big brother just waiting for someone to step out of line, or as busy bodies, looking for trouble wherever they went. As Gibbs was pondering the first name basis the NCIS agents were on with the warrant officer and whether it was a one off occurrence, Zach headed over to the door bearing the colonel’s nameplate, rapped lightly and opened it enough to poke his head round it and say, “Afternoon, sir.”

“Zach! Come on in. Come to introduce your replacements on the case?”

As Gibbs followed Andover through the door, and watched the colonel shake his and Bobby’s hand familiarly, he reflected that obviously the warrant officer wasn’t a one off. Could it be that these two NCIS agents had won over the base, or at least key members of it? Zach had that quality where almost everyone liked him, like Tony, but it was still an achievement to be on first name terms with the base commander. He tuned back in to the conversation as the niceties ended and Colonel Rawls turned his attention to the incoming team.

Zach performed introductions and Rawls shook everyone’s hand. “Forgive me, Agent Gibbs, but how do I know you’ll do as good a job at solving this crime as Zach and Bobby would?”

Gibbs was about to answer when Andover jumped in. “I worked with Gibbs and DiNozzo for several years before moving out here, Erv. They had a high clearance rate when it was just the two of them and while I don’t personally know McGee or David, here, I can tell you that Gibbs only has the best on his team. He taught me almost everything I know.” Gibbs quirked a brow at the glowing praise, but couldn’t deny that it made him feel proud of his team and of Zach Andover.

“And besides,” Zach added, “Gibbs was a gunnery sergeant for the Marines.”

Rawls smiled. “Well, we all know the sergeants run the corps, and Zach obviously rates you highly, so welcome aboard, Gunny.”

“Thank you, sir,” Gibbs said. He was about to say more when Zach spoke up:

“Right, now introductions are made, me and Carv need to love you and leave you.” He pulled the keys to the NCIS car out of his pocket and tossed them to Gibbs. “You can take my car, we only
need one. Give us a call if you need anything else and we’ll help if we can. There’s a motel a few blocks away, get Corporal Sohn to show you the way when he brings Ducky back later on.”

“Will do. Now, run along and let us solve your case for you,” Gibbs said with a smirk.

Andover muttered something indistinct, but obviously uncomplimentary, and flipped Gibbs the bird as he and Carver left the colonel’s office and Rawls chuckled. “I see why he likes you, Gunny.”

Rawls had risen to shake hands, but he sat back down and waved at the two chairs in front of his desk and Gibbs took one. Gibbs watched Tony attempt to do the chivalrous thing and allow Ziva to take the second chair, but she glared at him and he sat without protest (or offering it to McGee).

“What do you need from me, Agent Gibbs?”

“I’ll need to talk to you, but it doesn’t need all four of us. Ziva, McGee, head back to Andover’s office and make sure the evidence gets to Abby, then get yourselves up to speed with this,” he handed over the case folder with all the crime scene information. The two junior agents left and Gibbs turned back to Rawls. “Ok, Colonel, I need you to tell me what the procedure is for weapons movements onto and off of the base. I need to know who could be a potential suspect and who else we need to talk to.” Gibbs looked at Rawls, but saw Tony opening his notebook. It was a tried and trusted system, leaving Gibbs free to watch body language while Tony took down the information.

Rawls sat back in his chair and collected his thoughts for a moment. “Ok… The weapons are brought in by truck to the receiving section of the base. They’re our trucks and our personnel. The unit isn’t very big, so we don’t have set drivers, it just falls to any available man, usually one of the sergeants, with another man accompanying him. The weapons come in and are unloaded, again by any available enlisted men, with a sergeant overseeing.

“Depending on what’s happening to the weapons, they’ll be moved to a C-130 for immediate shipping, or, if they’re staying on base overnight or longer, we store them in the ammo dump, otherwise known as the Air Guard Munitions Storage Facility. Because we’re only a reservist unit, we’ve not got anywhere of our own large enough to store any munitions or explosives that are being sent elsewhere, so we use the Air Guard facility.”

Gibbs nodded his understanding. “So, who oversees the transfer to the ammo dump?” If, as he suspected, someone from the Air Guard facility came into contact with the weapons when they were transferred to their care, it would be unlikely that anyone on that end was involved. It just didn’t seem likely that there would be a person, or persons, from both services working for the same gun runner.

Rawls confirmed his theory a moment later when he said, “My guys take it over to the ammo dump, with paperwork for what the shipment contains, which they would have confirmed when they off loaded it. That gets handed to a sergeant from the Air Guard side of things, who inspects the shipment to make sure they’re storing what we say they are, then it gets locked up in their facility until we ship it out, when it gets inspected by both services again. Then we truck it back to the transport, usually a C-130, where it’s all inspected a final time, by the ground team and the flight team and loaded aboard.”

"So, is there any way of knowing which personnel would know in advance that a delivery was due?" Tony asked.

"Well, the two receiving sergeants would know- they need to coordinate to make sure one of them is available at the delivery time. It’s not sensitive information, anyone could overhear the sergeants discussing it, or one of them might round up a few personnel to tell them to be available. Then
there’s anyone in the motor pool who might talk to the driver or see the truck leave. I’m afraid with us being a small unit, everyone pretty much knows everything that goes on. Sorry, I know that doesn’t help narrow your suspects, though I’m still hoping it turns out not to be one of my Marines."

"We’re all hoping that, sir," Gibbs said.

There wasn’t anything else Rawls could tell them, so they headed back to McGee and Ziva, hoping to finally get caught up on the evidence. The boxes were gone when Gibbs and Tony arrived at Andover’s office. "Evidence get off ok?" Gibbs asked.

"It did," Ziva confirmed. "It’s on a chartered plane, which should be in the air by now."

"You didn’t give it to a Marine to carry, did you?" Tony asked McGee.

Gibbs could hear the teasing note, but McGee obviously couldn’t, judging by the way he snapped back, "Yes, Tony, I gave all our evidence to a potential suspect!" he scowled at Tony, and the scowl grew when Tony innocently raised his hands and grinned.

"Easy there, Probie, just checking," he said and McGee, presumably realising Tony had been pulling his leg, blushed and looked away. Gibbs imagined he was berating himself for falling into Tony’s trap so easily once again.

"So, I presume the evidence tallies with the crime scene documents?" Gibbs said, getting them back on track.

"It does; not that there was very much collected," Ziva said. "There were a few .28 bullets lodged in the truck and a couple that were taken from Corporal Freamon during surgery, and we may get some more from Ducky’s autopsy, too. They policed their brass, though, and no casings were found."

"A lot of the bullets were mangled badly, so Abby may have a hard time getting any details off them," McGee added.

"Do you doubt our forensic goddess, Probie?" Tony asked.

"No, but there’s only so much even Abby can do, Tony," McGee responded acerbically.

Ziva ignored the exchange, simply going on with her report, "There were quite a few finger prints and some hairs taken from inside the vehicle, but it would not surprise me if they turn out to belong to the driver, navigator, maintenance crew and loaders; these thieves do not seem the type to forego gloves and maybe even baracudas."

All three men looked at Ziva bemusedly for a moment. “What?”

“Balaclava, Ziva. A baracuda is a fish,” Tony supplied, one eyebrow raised.

Shaking his head to clear it of the odd mental image that Ziva’s words had conjured, Gibbs had to agree with her assessment; you didn’t pick up your shell casings and then leave your prints lying around.

"We’ve got no way of knowing how many gunmen there were until Abby can get a look at the different bullet striations, but there had to have been at least two guys," Tony deduced.

"Explain," Gibbs said. He agreed with Tony’s assessment, but he liked to hear theories explained, because sometimes it was just interesting to see how Tony’s mind worked, but mostly it did McGee and Ziva good. Neither of them had a lot of investigative experience yet, they still struggled to intuit
Tony gave him a quick nod; he knew why Gibbs was asking. "Ok, first, that truck was full and those metal boxes are heavy. It would take a lot of effort to move them all alone, not to mention the extra time and the added risk of being spotted. Then there're the bullet holes to the front of the truck. If you look," and he pulled out one of the photos, "the trajectories indicate two different angles of fire. Sure, one guy could have shot, moved and shot again, but one against two? If it was me, I’d stand in the middle and move the gun, rather than risk getting hit while I moved," he mimed spraying an automatic rifle backwards and forwards.

"But how do you know one guy didn’t shoot while moving?" McGee asked.

"Look at the groupings, Probie, there’s not enough in the middle of the truck; they’re concentrated on the two front corners. For one man to run from one side to the other, whilst firing, there’d have to be more holes in the radiator grill. Also, going by the bullets found, they’re using something like a P90, which is light and compact, but still not a gun you can easily shoot one handed, which means he’d have to hold it at an awkward angle across his body to run fast and shoot, and that means the bullet holes would be much more scattered from the uneven movement combined with the recoils, but these two groupings are pretty consistent.” McGee nodded and Gibbs hid a proud smile. For all the bickering and all the pranks Tony pulled on McGee, he never held back when he could impart some of his knowledge and experience.

“There was also a small patch of tyre rubber a short way in front of the truck,” Ziva said, leafing through the photos again until she found the one she wanted. “The thieves must have pulled their own truck across the road to block it and then they could have fired from behind the protection of their open doors, which could explain the wide angle of fire.”

“That’s a good deduction, Ziva,” Tony said with a small grin and Ziva gave her own tiny pleased smile. “Maybe Abs can get a manufacturer from the tyre pattern and narrow down what sort of vehicle we’re looking for even more than the fact that it had to be big enough to carry the load.”

“My guess is it’ll come back military,” Gibbs said. “These guys are too clean; they must have at least one member with military or law enforcement training to know about leaving as little trace as possible.”

“That, or they watch too much CSI, Boss,” Tony suggested.

Gibbs scowled. “CSI?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Gibbs? I know you only have that poor excuse for a TV in your basement, but you can’t be seriously telling me that you’ve never even heard of the CSI franchise?”

Gibbs shook his head and Tony made a pained noise. Of course, Gibbs had heard of the franchise, though he’d never watched it. It got talked about in the break room often enough for Gibbs to overhear the odd snippet. But Tony didn’t need to know that; it was much more fun to tease him and give him a bit of his own medicine.

Never one to let his mind stray far from a case, he gave Tony a look and was pleased to see Tony instantly snap back into work-mode.

“I’d be surprised if this is their first robbery,” Tony said. “It’s too clean, even for people with training. They had to have practiced being this thorough.”

The idea was sound, so Gibbs decided: “McGee, get a search going for any other shipments of
weapons that’ve been stolen. Check all military and law enforcement services, even some of the bigger retail stores. And remember to check for any shipments of older weapons that were on their way to be destroyed.”

“On it, Boss,” McGee said, turning away to open his laptop and get the search going.

“Ok, while McGee is doing that, I want you two to track down the receiving sergeants and talk to them, then talk to whoever they tell you could’ve known about the delivery.”

“Yes, Boss,” Tony said at the same time Ziva acknowledged with a, ‘Yes, Gibbs’. “Where will you be, Boss?” Tony asked.

“With Ducky.”

“Uh, you realise he said he’d call when he had any news and he’s not called yet, right?” Tony pointed out. Gibbs just looked at Tony for a few moments and Tony gave a nervous laugh. “Of course you realise that and it’s never stopped you before. Have fun then, Boss. Come on, Ziva,” Tony babbled, carefully edging round Gibbs out of slapping distance. He turned at the door to give Gibbs a brief cheeky wink and smile and was then gone, Ziva trailing in his wake.

Gibbs smiled to himself. He always enjoyed it when Tony was in a playful mood. Well, that wasn’t strictly true; sometimes DiNozzo’s playfulness rubbed him the wrong way, but for the most part it lightened the atmosphere. He saw McGee watching him in what was probably supposed to be a surreptitious way, so he glared and was satisfied to see the eyes drop to the laptop screen and a blush stain McGee’s cheeks.

“Call me if you get anything.” he said and then was gone without even waiting for an answer.

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A couple of hours later, Gibbs was back in Andover’s office. As expected, Ducky hadn’t been quite ready for him, but it had been a straight forward autopsy and the ME had quickly been able to confirm that time of death was between 0800 and 1100 the previous morning and had extracted three bullets, including the fatal one to McNulty’s temporal lobe. They were all .28s, unsurprisingly.

Not long after that, McGee had called. He’d found three other robberies that fit the MO: the Marine Corps Logistics Base, Barstow; Camp Pendleton and Twentynine Palms, all in California. By the time Gibbs got back, McGee had put in file requests to the investigative teams responsible for each robbery and was busy looking through the unit personnel after having received a call from Tony with a list of likely candidates for knowing about the delivery.

McGee’s computer pinged and Gibbs looked up to see a smile form on the young agent’s face. “We’ve got a lead, Boss,” he said triumphantly.

“Well spit it out, McGee,” Gibbs demanded, impatient to solve the case now a lead had come in.

“It’s not much, but Corporal Clayton Carcetti was stationed at Camp Pendleton at the time of the robbery there. I haven’t found any connection to the other bases yet, but I can dig deeper into his files,” it was a half question.

“Do it, it’s the only lead we have so far,” Gibbs ordered, before pulling out his phone and telling DiNozzo to bring Carcetti to the office for interrogation.

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Things moved quickly after that. There wasn’t an interrogation room in Andover’s small office, so Carcetti sat in front of one of the two desks in the room, with Gibbs sitting opposite him, while McGee worked at the other one, Ziva loitered by the door and Tony slouched in the chair in front of McGee’s desk.

The lead was tenuous, so Gibbs started out questioning rather than interrogating, even though his gut was niggling at him. Carcetti was cool, calm and polite. But McGee soon found the connection to the other two bases- one Andrew Carcetti, cousin to Clayton, who was stationed at Twentynine Palms and had been at Barstow previously.

Realising he was in trouble, Carcetti had attempted to leave and was swiftly subdued and cuffed. Gibbs then got much more intensive in his questioning. Carcetti was a Marine and managed to hold out for awhile, but in the end, proving there was no honour among thieves, even familial ones, he spilled his part in the robberies in return for a reduced sentence.

“Ok, look, me and Andy, we don’t do nothing except tell our contact when there’s a big delivery coming in. Time and date, plus the route if we know it. That’s all we do.”

“And who’s your contact?” Gibbs demanded.

Carcetti looked rebellious for a moment, like he was going to clam up, but he was no different to all the other criminals Gibbs faced across interrogation tables all the time: once they’d started spilling their guts, the tended to tell the whole story, like some dam had burst. Sure enough: “My Uncle Mark, Andy’s dad; Marco Carcetti. We tell him when a shipment’s due, he has a team who heists the trucks. I’ve never met any of them and I don’t know any names. Mark’s smart, he knows that if we get caught, we can’t give any information about his operation beyond our part in it.”

“Is ‘Uncle Mark’ the end of the chain, or does he deliver to someone else?” Tony asked.

“He’s the boss, but he can’t be connected to any of the heists- He has a team of guys he sends in to do the robberies. I don’t know who they are, or anything else, so you needn’t bother asking. I don’t even know where Uncle Mark bases himself- though I think he moves around a lot; I just call him on his cell.”

Gibbs regarded the man for awhile, his thoughts racing. If Carcetti was telling the truth, and at this point there was no reason to doubt him, then they needed to get hold of this Marco Carcetti. But Gibbs imagined Carcetti the elder would be tougher to crack than his nephew. It was likely that they’d get little out of him in a direct interrogation, but they might be able to get something if they set up an undercover buyer and recorded the deal. He glanced at Tony and saw a gleam in his eye that showed his senior agent was thinking along similar lines- it was the same gleam he got whenever he had a chance to go undercover.

They needed more information first, though. “Do you know anything about how buyers contact him?”

“Not really. I guess they call him. Like I said, he tends to move around, so it’s not like buyers can walk up to his door. They have to call him.”

“Do you happen to know any names of his buyers?” Tony asked.

“No, not a single one. I told you, I just call him about a shipment, he doesn’t tell me nothing about the running of things,” Carcetti replied, starting to sound a bit miffed at the circular questioning. Well, he could just suck it up. Gibbs was also getting tired of the questioning; it wasn’t getting them anywhere.
He decided to get Carcetti out of his sight for awhile and put his head together with the team to see what plan they could come up with. “Ziva, escort our prisoner to the cell,” Gibbs ordered, referring to the single holding cell located in a room off the small office. There wasn’t much in the way of amenities in Andover’s office, but when all was said and done, it was a place for catching criminals, so someone had had the foresight to give the NCIS office somewhere to hold a suspect for a short while. They didn’t need Carcetti overhearing their planning session.

“Thoughts!” Gibbs barked as soon as Ziva returned and closed the connecting door behind her.

“If we want to find the missing weapons and shut down the operation, we need Uncle Mark,” Tony stated.

“We cannot simply arrest him, though,” Ziva said, “we have no evidence to charge him with, beyond his nephew having his phone number, which is easily explained away by their family relationship. He will get a lawyer and be instantly released.”

“McGee! Anything to add?” Gibbs demanded. He liked to get his agents’ brains thinking on a problem, they needed to be able to process information quickly and reason things out. Sometimes, things moved too quickly to spare the time to let them muddle through it and he and Tony would brainstorm and drag Tim and Ziva along in their wake. When decisions needed to be fast, they couldn’t afford the logical progression. But they had time for once and Gibbs was going to make sure both his junior agents got their minds working.

McGee started a little, still intimidated by Gibbs’ bark and often still surprised that his thoughts were wanted. He was getting better at putting his theories forward without prompting, but it was a work in progress. He rallied quickly enough, however: “Er… Well, it’s highly unlikely that Carcetti will be in the same place as the weapons, so even if we trace him by the GPS in his phone, it won’t tell us where the weapons are and, like Ziva said, he’s unlikely to confess to it all in interrogation when we’ve got no proof he’s ever been anywhere near a gun in his life.”

“Uh huh. So?” Gibbs prompted, looking at each of his team members.

“So, we need to go undercover, set up a buy and get the deal on tape, and then we can nail him,” Tony answered.

"But how do we get a meeting with Carcetti?" McGee questioned

"Easy, Probie; we call him."

"It’s not like calling the local pizza place, Tony," McGee objected.

"Of course it isn’t, McCynical, but how do you think any buyer meets their new supplier? They either have someone introduce them- but let’s face it, most people looking to buy large amounts of guns aren’t very sociable- or they hear a name through channels and contact them. It’s risky, of course, but what else can we do?"

"Maybe Clayton back there can introduce you," Gibbs mused.

Tony pondered for awhile and then said, "Yeah, that could work. Say I met him a few times in one of the bars he frequents and once he was drunk enough to start talking about it."

"Yeah, that might work if our boy through there is a drinker," Gibbs said.

As it turned out, things worked in their favour. Carcetti did like a drink and he frequented the type of bar where it wouldn’t be out of place to discuss arms deals. What’s more, Carcetti was very keen to
reduce his punishment, so he played a convincing part on the phone to his uncle. Gibbs didn’t think he was clever enough to be passing on any coded messages.

The next several hours were a waiting game: Tony was in the habit of carrying one or two untraceable mobiles for just such an occasion (another tip McGee could stand to learn; Ziva probably already kept several phones, if not necessarily for the same reason as Tony) and Carcetti had dutifully passed the number to his Uncle. It was a case of sit and wait 'til he phoned to arrange a meeting, which he did several hours later, arranging it for 9:00 the following evening.

That left them at a lose end for the rest of the day. They quickly processed Carcetti and then planned what they could of the meeting. There wasn’t much to plan, though. They hadn’t been told where the meeting would be, so there was no way to set up remote surveillance. They would’ve preferred to get to the meeting site several hours early to set up the cameras and directional mics so that they could catch it all on tape, without having to wire Tony and risk him being found out during a pat down, but they couldn’t do that- probably why Marco Carcetti kept the meeting place secret until last minute in the first place. So, they did what they could; namely located some surveillance equipment in one of Andover’s cabinets. Mostly it was a case of waiting for Abby and Ducky to come up with some results and for Corporal Freamon to come round so he could be questioned.

With nothing else to do, Gibbs brought Rawls up to date and then they set about finding a hotel. Unfortunately, there was a conference on in town and most hotels were booked. They eventually managed to find one with three twin rooms. Gibbs was all set to room with Ducky, but Ziva beat him to the punch, claiming Ducky, as a gentleman, was the only one she could room with.

Gibbs didn’t believe that for a second- Ziva was quite capable of roaming with any one of them and they wouldn’t step out of line. He couldn’t challenge her though, there was no way it would look good for him to fight with her about who would sleep in the ME’s room. Which meant he’d have to room with Tony, because McGee and Palmer would probably die at the idea of spending a night alone with him, no matter that it was for sleeping.

He had no problem sleeping in a room with Tony…but that was the problem. He might just like it too much. No. He was a Marine; he could handle it. Or so he sternly told himself, anyway. Tony grinned at him and Gibbs mentally groaned. It was going to be a long night.

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**ATF HQ, Denver**

The morning dawned and Chris arrived at the office, followed by most of his team. There was no sign of Vin and Ezra, but Chris wasn’t worried; it was normal for them to come in a bit later when they’d been up all night with their sources.

Sure enough, they rolled in by 11am. "Look at this; arrivin' just in time for lunch. The work ethic of youngsters today is sorely lacking," Buck said, with a despairing shake of his head.

Vin gave him the middle finger, while Ezra primly straightened his cuffs and said, "Mr. Wilmington, unlike you, I am a great believer in quality over quantity." He quirked an eyebrow; the Ezra equivalent of a smirk.

Buck fell back dramatically, hands clutching his chest, "You wound me, Ez, you really do."

Chris walked into the main office before any more banter could be exchanged, knowing things could escalate given the chance, until he was left feeling like he was in charge of a bunch of big kids. "You two have any luck?"
"Luck had nothing to do with it, Mr. Larabee, but yes, we were successful."

"It took awhile, but we got a name, one Marco Carcetti," Vin revealed.

"Several of our sources gave us the same name and one had a number," Ezra added.

"Good work, you two. JD, see what you can find out about this guy and verify the number. Ezra, Vin, you know the drill; write it all up. Any more results come through?" Chris asked, addressing the last to Buck, Josiah and Nathan.

Nathan nodded, “There’s still no change on Thomas Little or Mark Ellis. We have had another autopsy result, though: Jeff Johnson, the last civilian. Pretty much as we expected from the hospital’s COD- he bled out from multiple bullet wounds to his chest and abdomen. The ME pulled six bullets out of him, which were all sent to forensics. The autopsy revealed that one bullet nicked the aorta. Johnson likely wouldn’t have survived even without that particular bullet, but the ME says that was the one which probably ended up killing him, just from the rate of blood loss from such a major artery.”

Chris looked to Josiah, who said, “I’ve had a few more forensics results matching the guns to their owners and some of the stray bullets to those guns, but no new results on any bullets pulled from bodies. Hopefully it won’t be long until the bullets from Jeff Johnson are analysed.”

Lastly came Buck’s report, which had even less information than Josiah’s had. “I’ve gone through the rest of the witness and police reports, along with JD, but there’s nothing of any use. Witnesses all say things happened so fast that they really can’t say for certain what happened beyond there being people shooting at each other. The police reports don’t really add much, either. Everyone on the scene was dead or nearly so, so they’ve got no witnesses who were actually involved in the incidents and no real leads for us to follow up, because most of the people for the earlier shootouts ended up dead in later ones.”

Buck’s tone conveyed the frustration Chris felt and that he suspected the others felt, too. They were in that tough stage of any case where it’s a case of sitting and waiting for other people to come up with results before they could move the case forwards. Luckily, Ezra and Vin had given them a solid-sounding lead, so it was a case of waiting to see what JD found out.

It didn’t take JD long to sit back from his computer screen. Chris read his expression and guessed that JD had found something out, but not a whole lot. A suspicion borne out when JD said, “Ok, Marco Carcetti, 42. He’s got a house up in the hills of Colorado Springs, no close neighbours. He also has his name on a few storage places. No record to speak of; if he’s selling guns, he’s never been caught and he doesn’t put the money into any account with his name on it. His name isn’t flagged by any other agencies, either. The number Vin and Ezra got is a burn phone, so I can’t trace it.” JD’s tone was full of frustration, just as Buck’s had been earlier.

“Looks like we phone the number and set up a buy, then,” Josiah said. It was the only way they’d be able to catch Carcetti in the act, it seemed. Chris turned to Standish and nodded slightly, handing things over to his undercover man to set up a meeting.

Ezra nodded back, then headed to his desk and pulled out one of his own untraceable phones from the drawer. He called the number and went through a few preliminary ground-testing exchanges, before getting down to the real business. Carcetti didn’t immediately offer a meeting time or place, however, wanting time to check out the alias Ezra had supplied. He promised to call back after he’d investigated and it was once more down to a case of sitting and waiting.

Luckily, the wait wasn’t a long one. Just short of an hour later, Carcetti was back on the phone...
arranging to meet Ezra at nine that night. Unfortunately, Carcetti didn’t give them a meeting place, so they couldn’t get there ahead of time to set up surveillance. It would all have to come from what they could hide on Ezra himself. Chris had to grudgingly admit that it was a sensible move on Carcetti’s part and probably for the very reason that no one would know where to set up cameras. It might explain why he’d never been caught so far.

The rest of the day was spent sorting out the equipment Ezra would need- a minute camera and microphone to be hidden in his clothes and a GPS tracker, also to be hidden on his person, just in case. A few more autopsy and forensic results trickled in, but the main focus of the team was on the undercover op.

At 8pm Carcetti phoned and announced that the meeting would be held in a private room of Martelli’s Bar, an expensive, but somewhat seedy bar located in Denver. Things kicked into high gear; Ezra changed into his undercover outfit; an Armani suit that screamed money and taste, but wasn’t his favourite or most expensive- he wasn’t so stupid as to risk his best suit on an op that had the chance of going south. The microphone was fitted under his collar tail and the camera was disguised as a tie pin, while the GPS tracker went into a hidden pocket on the inside of his suit coat.

Chris and the team piled into a non-descript van where all the camera and microphone receiving equipment was hidden and made their way to the bar. Vin and Chris were dressed suitably for the bar, as they would be going in as customers just to keep an eye on Ezra, while the other four would be sharing out the surveillance outside, with one on the camera screen, one on the mic feed and two watching the street.

Ezra would be following a few minutes later in his Jaguar, allowing the rest of the team a little time to get into position. With the short notice given by Carcetti, it was the best they could do.

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Mountain View Hotel, Denver

Gibbs woke cranky. He hadn’t had very much sleep, which he was actually quite used to; but it wasn’t usually due to the fact that he was lying there watching Tony sleep. He thanked whoever that at least they were in separate beds, as the urge to touch had been hard to ignore. And that was what had him feeling so cranky; the fact that his feelings were getting out of hand. He was a grown man for heaven’s sake, not a teenager!

The team gathered in the dining room for breakfast and Gibbs hoped they’d put his mood down to lack of coffee, but Ducky kept giving him knowing looks and Tony kept shooting him nervous glances, like he was wondering what he’d done. Gibbs scowled; it was one of those days and his gut was telling him that it wasn’t going to get any better.

Sure enough, the day dragged. They had Ducky’s autopsy results, but they didn’t say anything unexpected- multiple gunshot wounds from bullets that matched the ones collected at the scene. The killing shot was one that entered through the left temple and took a considerable amount of skull and brain with it when it exited the other side.

It was one of those annoying days that seemed to go fast and slow at the same time. The hours dragged because there wasn’t much work to do, just report writing. Abby broke up the day a little when she called with some results: the bullets were from P90s and she’d managed to get enough striations to compare and reveal that there were two different guns. She’d also traced the serial numbers to a cache stolen from Twentynine Palms, where Carcetti’s cousin was stationed; another nail in his coffin.
Gibbs called the NCIS agent stationed at Twentynine Palms and had Andrew Carcetti taken into custody, then it was back to the day dragging on. Yet 2100 seemed to loom ever nearer at the same time. He always worried when he sent Tony undercover. Tony was one of the best undercover operatives he’d worked with, able to think fast and completely submerge himself in his character, that wasn’t what Gibbs worried about. He worried about what the people Tony was involved with would do. They were usually armed, and violent along with it, and it always made Gibbs nervous. Added to which, his gut was niggling. There was nothing definite, but he just felt like something was going to go wrong. It wasn’t enough of a reaction to justify calling the meeting off, however.

The day rushed and dragged itself ever onwards and Gibbs’ gut kept that low level warning up for the whole day. He knew he’d been unnecessarily short with his team and wasn’t surprised that McGee was avoiding him as much as possible in the small office, while Ziva and Tony were shooting him, and each other, questioning looks. He wasn’t about to explain himself, though. He had no concrete reason for his gut feeling and the last thing Tony needed was to go to his meeting feeling nervous- that would be a sure fire way of proving Gibbs’ gut right!

Things suddenly sped up once 2000 arrived and Mark Carcetti called with the meeting details: a place called Martelli’s Bar. The team went to work; McGee brought up the bar’s location and directions, Ziva double-checked that the surveillance gear they’d scrounged from Zach’s drawers worked and Tony changed into a suitably expensive suit that he’d hired from a place in the town.

Gibbs also changed into slightly smarter clothes. He was going in to back Tony up at a distance and to get visuals on Carcetti and any other people he had with him.

However, that plan quickly fell apart. Gibbs arrived in the same car Zach had leant them, along with Ziva and McGee. The two junior agents were there to watch the monitoring equipment that Tony’s gadgets fed back to. Gibbs had a camera to take in with him which was disguised as a mobile phone. He could fiddle with it and it wouldn’t look suspicious if he pointed it towards Tony’s meeting. He also hoped it would deter anyone from trying to strike up a conversation with him by making him look busy.

The problem came when Gibbs approached the doorman.

“Your card or name, sir?” he asked in a tone that managed to be polite and menacing at the same time.

“Excuse me?” Gibbs asked.

“This is a members only establishment, sir, so I need your membership card, or I need your name so I can check my list of members’ expected guests,” the man said in that same tone.

Gibbs scowled. “I don’t have either, I didn’t realise this place was exclusive. Sorry to have bothered you,” he said, turning and heading back to the car. They’d parked behind a van, with the hope that it would look suspicious to see three people loitering in a car for however long the meeting would be. As Gibbs walked passed, he registered a blond passenger and a dark haired driver, but he was too busy fuming to think anything more about it as he climbed into the car and explained what had happened.

‘Damnit, Tony’s on his own,’ Gibbs thought; that flare of warning in his gut kicking up a notch.

Tony had given them a few minutes head start to allow them to get in position. Gibbs had only been back in the car for a minute when Tony’s rented Mustang arrived and parked next to a Jaguar. Tony climbed out and Gibbs had to smile at Tony eyeing the neighbouring car. Even when he was going into a serious situation, Tony couldn’t help admiring the finer things in life.
Gibbs pulled out his phone and dialled the number to the phone Tony was using for the op. It was stored in his phone for that just in case moment that no one had expected to come so soon. He watched Tony frown lightly as he pulled the phone from inside his jacket pocket and flipped it open. “Boothe,” he heard- Tony having answered with his alias, because he wouldn’t be able to tell it was Gibbs on the other end.

“It’s me, Tony,” Gibbs announced, “I’m in the car. The damn place is members only, so I couldn’t get in. You’re on your own in there, so be careful.” He watched Tony subtly scan the surrounding area, his eyes passing right over the car so that anyone watching wouldn’t know that Tony had taken any special note of it, but Gibbs saw the subtle nod from Tony as he spotted them.

“I’ll be fine, Boss. It’s just a sit down meeting to establish terms of trade. I’ll be in and out in no time. You’ll see.” Tony sounded positive and Gibbs wished he could believe him, as he sat in the car they’d borrowed from Andover, watching Tony step from his rented Mustang and disappear inside the bar after having his name checked against the list. All he could do now was watch and listen to the surveillance monitors along with Ziva and McGee.

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Martelli’s Bar, car park, Denver

Chris was fuming as he stalked back to the van. None of them had known it was a members only club, so Ezra would be on his own in there. Vin was tense beside him and Chris was struck with a thought he had on the odd occasion that there was something going on between Vin and Ezra, on Vin’s side if nothing else. He’d never asked- they were both very private men and as long as it didn’t affect work, Chris didn’t care who anyone slept with.

They got a small bit of luck in that Ezra arrived as they were walking away, so, as they passed each other, Vin was able to say, "Members only. You’re on your own." Ezra gave a tiny nod to say he’d understood and headed to the doorman before disappearing inside.

Chris and Vin made sure they were behind the van before they climbed inside. It would look suspicious to any of Carcetti’s men who might be watching from the club if they were seen getting into such a vehicle after being turned away. Chris caught Vin from the corner of his eye, giving the monitors a look as he passed. He left Vin to it and made his way to the passenger seat.

Buck was in the driver’s seat and he spared Chris an acknowledging look, but mostly he kept an eye on the club, snapping photos of everyone going in. They watched a fit-looking, gray haired man approach the door and get turned away. He scowled his way back to a non-descript sedan, a little way beyond the van, giving Buck a great face shot.

The man climbed into the car, but didn’t drive away and Chris could see another man and a woman in the car. "You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’, Pard?” Buck asked.

"Stakeout," Chris answered, wondering who would be sitting on the club and why and whether it would interfere with their case or put Ezra in danger. Before he could voice any of those questions, though, a silver Mustang pulled into the spot next to Ezra’s Jag. The man who got out was wearing a suit to rival Ezra’s. He ran an appreciative eye over the Jag as he shut and locked his own door, then he answered his phone and glanced quickly at the sedan, before heading inside.

"Ok, so there’s their undercover man, but who the hell are they?” Chris asked.

Buck shrugged, "Vice? DEA? If they use this place for illegal arms deals with no fear, it’s probably used for drugs and prostitution too."
Chris twisted round in his seat, "JD, is there any way to find out who they are?"

"Not really, Chris. If they’ve flagged it as a place of interest it’ll come up, but how many agencies do that? We haven’t. Sorry," he said, screwing his face up apologetically.

"Damnit," Chris said, then added, "not your fault, JD," when the younger man started to look guilty.

“Well, I can tell you that they aren’t DEA or vice,” Josiah said. Chris twisted further in his seat to see Josiah, who was sitting directly behind him. He was listening to Ezra’s microphone transmission, wearing a set of headphones, but he’d taken one side off his ear and had obviously been listening to the conversation in the van as well. With anyone else, Chris would’ve been worried that the listener might miss something important on Ezra’s end, but Josiah was excellent at listening to various conversations simultaneously and following them all perfectly. Something to do with his skill as a profiler maybe? Chris didn’t know, but it came in handy sometimes, so he didn’t question it.

“What makes you so sure?” Chris asked.

In answer, Josiah unplugged the headphone jack so that the feed came over the speakers instead and they could all hear it. A voice that presumably belonged to Marco Carcetti was finishing introductions between Edward Swanson- Ezra’s cover- and Philip Boothe. A quick look at the camera monitor confirmed that it was the man Chris had just watched go into the building.

“Damnit. Who are these people? Who else would be interested in arms trading?”

“One of the military investigative branches’d be my guess,” Vin said. “We know the weapons used were military hardware, so it makes sense that one of their agencies would be on it from the other end.”

Chris nodded. It really did make sense. “Any way of narrowing it down so I know who to sic Travis onto to make sure we get custody of Carcetti and his gang?”

“You could always go and ask those three in the car behind us,” Buck quipped, earning a glare from Chris. Though it might work once they’d left the vicinity of the club and wouldn’t risk being spotted.

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Gibbs listened to another buyer being introduced to Tony and frowned. His memory brought up the two men he’d seen sitting in the van as he walked passed. They hadn’t driven off, or got out and Gibbs looked at the van closely. It was certainly big enough to house surveillance equipment.

Ziva must have caught his frown, because she said, “Shall I run a check on this Swanson?”

Gibbs shook his head, but didn’t speak immediately, too busy working it out in his head. He was certain he was right when he said a few moments later, “No. He’s an undercover cop; the name won’t give us anything useful.”

“What? What makes you think that?” Ziva asked.

“That van,” Gibbs said, with a nod of his head. “I walked passed it on my way back to the car. There were two men in the front who haven’t got out, but they’ve not left either, so why are they hanging around outside a club? It’s got no company logos, but it is big enough for a few more men and surveillance equipment. It seems too much of a coincidence that Tony’s in there with another man and there’s another set of people out here doing exactly what we’re doing. McGee, any chance you can trace the agency that van belongs to?”
“I can run the plates, but it’ll depend on whether they’ve got it registered under some dummy name that can’t be traced back to them or not.” Gibbs nodded. He knew that not every vehicle could be traced to the agency that owned them. NCIS had its own set of vehicles like that, ones that were clean and could be used by undercover operatives, or protection details and couldn’t tip off those they were watching or hiding from, even if those people had access to the DMV database.

“Run ‘em anyway, McGee. You never know, we might get lucky.”

“Yes, boss.”

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Martelli’s Bar, private room, Denver

Ezra stepped into the building and headed towards the man standing at a little plinth to the right of the door. He made sure to angle the camera to get a shot of the man and also to show his team the layout of the bar and how many patrons there were. It paid to be overcautious with things like that, because you never knew when the customers might turn out to be plants that the felons had put in place as back up. He gave his false name and was escorted to a tastefully appointed back room and announced to Carcetti.

He thanked the host and walked into the room, as the door closed behind him he observed the man walking towards him, hand outstretched. He wasn’t overly tall, maybe 5’9”, 5’10”, muscular, but not heavy, white with short, slightly wavy brown hair and blue eyes. Ezra made sure to angle the camera in his tie pin for a good mug shot of Carcetti and the other man in the room- a bodyguard judging by the obvious gun bulge under his jacket and the at ease stance.

“Mr. Swanson, glad you could make it,” Carcetti said, sounding friendly enough given the situation and the inherent paranoia most arms dealers had. Vin had once commented that it reminded him of a documentary he’d caught about insects like spiders and praying mantis and the careful way they had to dance about during courtship, because the female would as likely eat the male as mate with him. Ezra secretly had to agree that the imagery, weird as it was, fit, even as he hoped he wasn’t taking the part of the male spider.

“I hope you don’t mind waiting a few moments before we get down to business? I’m waiting for someone else to arrive. Please help yourself to a drink while we wait, it shouldn’t be long,” Carcetti said.

Ezra frowned internally, but kept his face neutral. “Of course not,” he said, making his way to the small bar and pouring himself a small scotch with a lot of ice. He would drink to maintain his cover, but he didn’t want to get drunk and risk missing something important in a situation that could become dangerous. He wondered who Carcetti was waiting for. It could be one of his men, another buyer, or perhaps Carcetti wasn’t the man in charge and he was waiting on his boss.

Ezra didn’t have to wait long for an answer, as the door opened once again after a short knock and the host showed in a man he announced as Philip Boothe. Ezra gave him the once over- 6’1”, 6’2”, brown hair, hazel eyes, white, excellent taste in clothes. Carcetti greeted him as he had Ezra, with a careful handshake. Not a boss or a minion then.

“Edward Swanson, Philip Boothe,” Carcetti introduced. “I hope you both don’t mind that I set this meeting up this way. It’s just, you both called at similar times and it saves me having to go through it all twice on the same day.”

Ezra looked at Boothe and got an assessing once over in return. “As long as you don’t think you can
set up some sort of bidding war, I’ve got no problem with it,” Boothe said, helping himself to a drink and watering it down like Ezra had. Ezra’s mind was awhirl at the unexpected turn of events. This could make things more complicated. It was possible it was all an act and this Boothe was indeed in charge and paranoid enough to meet Ezra in disguise, he could be a buyer as he seemed, but that could mean Ezra would have to watch his back from two directions if things went south, or it was even possible that Ezra was standing next to a fellow lawman.

None of Ezra’s concerns showed on his face, though, as he said, “As Mr. Boothe says, as long as you don’t hope to increase your payment in a bidding war, I am content with this arrangement.”

Carcetti clapped his hands together once and gestured to the two comfortable chairs that were a respectable distance apart from each other on one side of a coffee table, while he sat down in another on the opposite side. Ezra and Boothe followed suit, sitting down and placing their drinks on the table.

“So, down to business then,” Carcetti said. “First, let me assure you that there will be no bidding war. I have plenty of merchandise and I can get more if needed, so there won’t be any need for you to fight over the supply. I know that when the time comes for you to place your orders, you will want to do so privately, but I can save us all a little bit of time by going over my terms and conditions just once. I will also give you a run down of the stock I have and the prices I charge.”

Ezra settled back in his seat, listening as Carcetti did as he’d said, running through his weapons, their prices, how he expected business to be conducted, money exchanged, weapons exchanged and so on. Ezra listened attentively to it all, but also watched Boothe closely. The man seemed as relaxed as Ezra was making himself look, seemed to be taking in what Carcetti was saying just as carefully as Ezra was and he was also not touching his drink, just like Ezra. It was making Ezra wonder if he really was sitting next to a fellow officer of the law. He knew he was good and this man seemed just as adept. Neither were doing anything remotely suspicious that would tip Carcetti off, but Ezra knew what to look for, seeing as he was doing it himself. This could be problematic, but hopefully not too much so, as Carcetti had already said that the deals would go down in private. As long as Ezra made sure he went first, his team would still be the ones to arrest Carcetti and take down his arms racket.

Carcetti finished his speech with: “I’ll leave you both now, for a few minutes, so you can work out your list of requirements and finances.” He pushed up out of his chair and said, “I will see you in five minutes, gentlemen,” then he left and pulled the door closed behind him. The silent bodyguard in the corner stayed where he was.

Ezra glanced at Boothe, who shrugged and raised an eyebrow, before turning away and pulling out a BlackBerry, presumably to work out his calculations… or at least look like that’s what he was doing. Ezra gave his own mental shrug and did the same.

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Tony sat ‘working out his list’ and wondering what the hell was going on. This Swanson character was unexpected. What Carcetti said about saving time made sense to a point, but how did Carcetti know he hadn’t invited two bitter rivals to the table and potentially ruined any deals? No, Tony’s gut was telling him something, he just didn’t know what, so did the only thing he could- went along with it and hoped his gadgets were getting it all.

He looked at Swanson out of the corner of his eye, as he’d been doing on and off for the whole meeting; he was shorter than Tony and had a Southern accent, but otherwise they had a lot in common- hazel-green eyes, brown hair, excellent taste in clothes and a killer smile and charm to match. He bet he knew who owned the Jag. He just couldn’t make up his mind about Swanson- was he really a buyer? Did Tony potentially have to watch his back from two directions?
He could see Swanson doing the same as he was; calculations on his PDA, while shooting little
glances Tony’s way. Tony didn’t get much longer to dwell on it though, as the five minutes passed
quickly and Carcetti was soon opening the door. Tony turned in his chair, instinctively not wanting
Carcetti at his back. He noticed Swanson doing the same.

He was glad he’d turned, because it gave him an extra second or two to assess the three burly,
obviously armed men who followed Carcetti in. He leaned forward and casually picked up his drink,
but stayed seated. He had the distinct feeling that things were about to go south, but he didn’t know
how trigger-happy the new guys were and didn’t want to make any moves that might seem
threatening. Still, he was prepared to move in an instant.

Swanson seemed to have the same instinct, because he calmly straightened his cuffs and asked, "Is
there a problem, Mr. Carcetti?"

"Well, gentlemen, I’m afraid there just might be."

"Is it about the money? I assure you I’m good for it. I can show you my account if you are
concerned," Tony offered. McGee and Abby had set up a convincing account just in case.

Carcetti gave him a toothy, but insincere smile, "You’re both very good, either one of you alone
might even have succeeded."

Tony’s blood ran cold, but he plastered on a bemused smile, "I’m sorry, I don’t follow."

"I admit that I, too, am confused," Swanson added.

"Well then, let me enlighten you both," Carcetti said with a malicious grin, "at least one of you is a
cop."

"What?!" Tony half asked, half laughed.

"I can assure you, sir, that I am no policeman. My attire alone should be enough to convince you of
that; no policeman would have such impeccable taste, nor the salary to afford it," was Swanson’s
reaction.

"Do you really think that if we were cops we’d send two people in on the same day?" Tony added
for good measure.

"That remains to be seen," Carcetti answered.

"And how are you going to decide? Have your boys beat us up? You really think by the time you
realise you’re wrong, that I’ll still deal with you?" Tony was worried. Had Carcetti really broken
Tony’s cover? Had he given himself away, or had someone else? Not that he could think of anyone
who could’ve dropped him in it. No, it was looking more and more likely that Swanson was
undercover too and they’d had the horribly bad luck of starting their ops the same day.

"Mr. Boothe makes an excellent point. This is hardly the way to foster a good working relationship,"
Swanson declared.

"If you turn out to be cops, I’m in trouble if I close a deal with you; if you are real buyers, then I
hope you will understand why I acted to safeguard our business. If you decide not to deal, well, there
are plenty of others who will."

That last part was depressingly true, Tony thought, but there was a little hope to be had: it didn’t
sound like Carcetti had taken into account any surveillance and he wasn’t about to bring it up.
"I suppose it is too much to hope we can simply leave and buy elsewhere? I do so abhor physical violence," Swanson asked.

Carcetti gestured and his four hoods moved to flank Tony and Swanson. "Well, if you come quietly and answer my questions without a fuss, there won’t be any need for violence," he said. A heavy hand landed on Tony’s left shoulder and he stood, all pretence of things being calm gone by that point.

He looked at Swanson, locking eyes for a moment, hoping to read the other man’s intent. A glint in the hazel eyes and a slight nod told him all he needed to know and he reacted, flinging his drink into the face of the man to his left and then jabbing his elbow into the gut of the man on his right. Right Hand Thug doubled over and clutched at his stomach, while Left Hand Thug yelped and wiped at the watered down whiskey stinging his eyes. Tony had a moment to glance at Swanson to see he was holding his own. Unfortunately, a moment was all he got; Left Hand Thug had managed to wipe his eyes clear enough to belt Tony in the jaw and, as he stumbled away slightly, Right Hand Thug whipped out a stun gun and shot Tony full of electricity.

Tony yelled and dropped bonelessly to the floor. He was vaguely aware of hitting his head on the coffee table on his way down and fuzzily thought he heard Swanson yell out, followed by a thud. The last threads of his consciousness were quickly dispatched by a vicious kick to the ribs. Tony didn’t even have enough awareness to grunt in pain before everything went black.

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Martelli’s Bar, car park, Denver

“I’ve got it, Boss. The van belongs to Denver ATF,” McGee announced triumphantly.

Gibbs grunted an acknowledgement, but didn’t take his eyes off the video screen. Things were getting tense in there. Tony and the other guy had been left alone for a few minutes, but Carcetti returned with extra muscle and Gibbs’ gut was screaming.

He felt Ziva and McGee watching over his shoulder, as things went south. The little camera didn’t show much, half the time, all they could see was the wall, or a glimpse of the ATF man struggling against his two opponents. But the soundtrack coming through the mic was clear enough and it didn’t sound pretty. Tony and Swanson put up a good fight, but they didn’t stand a chance once the tasers came out.

Gibbs’ fingers clenched into tight fists as the picture and mic turned to static. “McGee!” he demanded, wanting him to get the feeds back.

“Sorry, boss, but there’s nothing I can do. The electrical discharge from the taser knocked the camera and mic out. It’s possible they’ll come back on, but they’re probably fried. I can’t do anything to fix them.” McGee stuttered, something he’d managed to get over for the most part, so Gibbs forced himself to take a breath and calm down marginally.

“What about the GPS?”

McGee did something on his laptop, then announced, “It’s intermittent and it’s lost some of its signal strength, but we should be able to track it if needed as long as it doesn’t get any worse.”

A small mercy, at least, but Gibbs wasn’t willing to trust Tony’s safety to a failing electronic device if he didn’t have to. His agent was in the building across the street and Gibbs intended to march right in there and get him out again. With that in mind he flung open his door and climbed out of the car.
As he did so, his attention was caught by the blonde man getting out of the ATF van and his anger changed direction. If ATF hadn’t have been there, Tony wouldn’t have been in the mess he was. In Gibbs’ angry state, that made them responsible, so he stormed towards the blonde, only to be met half way and end up nose to nose with the man, who looked just as angry as he felt.

“Who the hell are you and what in hell are you doing here?” Blondie growled, as, simultaneously, Gibbs’ growled out:

“What in hell’s name is ATF doing here?”

They stood frozen, Gibbs waiting for an answer and Blondie evidently just as intent on getting a reply, neither willing to be the first to back down. He was peripherally aware of Ziva and McGee arriving behind him, backing him up. He could also sense some of the ATF man’s people doing the same, but his eyes never broke from the angry green stare.

What felt to Gibbs like hours, but was probably less than a minute later, there was a throat clearing sound from behind the ATF man and a deep voice said, “Gentlemen. Our teammates would be better served by cooperation than this alpha male posturing.”

“He is right, Gibbs. We will not get Tony back like this,” Ziva said.

“Yeah, c’mom, Cowboy, this ain’t gonna help Ez,” came a Texas accent from the ATF side.

Gibbs and ‘Cowboy’ stared a moment longer and Gibbs saw the change in the other man’s eyes as reason returned. He probably had the same expression on his own face. They both stepped back and looked away at the same time, neither giving ground even as they relaxed fractionally.

Gibbs finally allowed himself to look at the other men arrayed before him. Three other white men— one moustached, one with long wavy hair and one who looked to be the oldest of the group- and one black were spread out behind ‘Cowboy’. Then he spotted a young white guy, looking about as baby-faced as McGee, in the back of the van at a monitoring station, though his attention was on the events outside. The long haired man shifted slightly, bringing Gibbs gaze back to him. While not much older than the kid in the van, he had a look about him that made him seem older, a look Gibbs recognised. He’d seen combat at some point. Sweeping his gaze across the men once more, he recognised the signs in several of the others, too. Maybe he’d be able to work with them after all.

The oldest ATF agent stepped forwards slightly. "Thank you," he said, and Gibbs recognised the voice as the one who had first spoken. "Now, you already know we’re ATF, and you’ve met our fearless leader, Chris Larabee. I’m Josiah Sanchez, that there is Nathan Jackson, Buck Willmington, Vin Tanner and JD Dunne in the van."

Gibbs nodded to each man and got some sort of nod, smile or wave in return. "Gibbs, NCIS. This is Ziva David and Tim McGee," Gibbs introduced.

"Ziva, that’s a pretty name for a pretty lady. Where’s it from?" the moustached man, Willmington, asked, sidling up to Ziva with a charming smile. He even went so far as to kiss the back of her hand, going so far as to keep hold of her fingers afterwards. Despite the situation, Gibbs couldn’t help but be amused as Willmington crashed and burned.

"It is Israeli. I am Mossad’s liaison officer to NCIS and I do not like to be touched by strangers, kindly remove your hand from my arm before I remove it from yours," Ziva said with a warning tone. Willmington’s teammates tried and failed to hide their amusement as they commiserated with him.
Gibbs decided he liked these men, which was good, because it really did make sense to work with ATF. McGee had said they were the local office, so they knew the area and had access to contacts he may need. He wasn’t even bothered about fighting over jurisdiction, not with Tony in trouble.

Before anyone could say more, the kid in the van, Dunne, called out, "Chris, Ezra’s tracker is moving!"

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Alarmed, Chris turned back to the van, crowding round JD along with the others. As he moved, he saw Gibbs turn and bark, "McGee," though the younger man had already started jogging back to the car. He returned a moment later carrying a laptop.

"Looks like Tony’s on the move, too, Boss," he said.

"Ziva," Gibbs barked and the woman melted away round the back of the building with nothing more than a nod.

"Buck, go with her," Chris said. Buck nodded and jogged after her.

"What’s your signal like?" JD asked McGee, causing Chris to turn his attention back to the van.

"Spotty," McGee answered.

"Yeah, ours too."

"What do you mean spotty? Why?" Vin demanded. It was a good question; one Chris had been about to ask himself.

"It was the tasers, Vin; the electrical charge fried the circuits."

"But I didn’t think tasers gave out that much power," Vin said, again just beating Chris to the punch.

"The problem is that, unlike the human body, which just momentarily loses motor function, these little bugs have circuits you need a magnifying glass to see. The wiring is thinner than a hair and the power surge just breaks them like a light bulb filament," Agent McGee replied.

"So, not that I’m complaining, but why are the GPS beacons still working?" Chris said.

"It’s a combination of things," JD said, "the trackers have more robust wiring for one and they’re better insulated by clothing as they’re generally hidden away, whereas mics and cameras are generally on the front around the chest, which is most likely where our guys got hit."

"More importantly, are they both being taken to the same place?" Gibbs asked. It was improbable, but not impossible that the two agents would be split up. The question bought Chris’ attention to Gibbs once more and he really assessed the man.

All he’d really noticed during their first encounter was silver hair and furious blue eyes. On closer inspection, he noticed that the silver hair was styled like a Marine; not quite so severe, but near enough that Chris didn’t think it was much of a guess to say Gibbs had been in the corps, or still was, Chris supposed, because they said no one really left the Marines unless they were dishonourably discharged.

“They’re both together, Boss,” McGee reported after a few moments consulting with JD.

Chris looked at McGee, who had climbed into the van next to JD. They were huddled together
comparing JD’s screen and McGee’s laptop, talking tech speak. They were the same; smart, tech-savvy, competent agents (at least he assumed McGee was competent; Gibbs didn’t seem the type to have him on the team if not), but still a little green, a little lacking in life experiences. As for Ziva, she’d said she was Mossad, but even if she hadn’t, Chris would have known she was dangerous from the look she’d given Buck (though, to be fair, Buck had that effect on a lot of women). He wondered what the story was behind NCIS having a Mossad liaison anyway.

Speaking of, Chris had to suppress a shocked jump when Gibbs said, “Ziva, report.” He hadn’t known she had returned and he wasn’t quite sure how Gibbs had known, because the other man hadn’t been looking towards where she’d come from either.

“I could not see much. There is an underfloor garage with a guard; I was unable to get in without being seen, not that I would have had time to do anything anyway- a black SUV pulled away almost as soon as I got there. It had all its lights off, so I could not see a licence plate, I am sorry.”

“Underground garage. And don’t apologise,” Gibbs casually corrected, leading Chris to believe that Ziva got her English mixed up fairly regularly. He was glad to see that Gibbs wasn’t going to shoot the messenger and didn’t blame Ziva for being unable to get more details.

“I know, it is a sign of weakness,” Ziva responded, also in a tone that spoke of regular repetition. Ok, so Gibbs wasn’t quite as forgiving as Chris had at first thought, but he still wasn’t blaming Ziva, so it was all good.

Buck had returned during Ziva’s report and Chris raised an eyebrow at him. Buck just shook his head. “What she said: black SUV, lights dark, no way to read the plate. It looked like an Escalade, but that doesn’t really help us much; there’s gotta be hundreds of ‘em round here.” Chris noticed that Buck was looking at Ziva with respect, rather than the leer from before. She’d obviously impressed him with her sneaking.

It looked like they’d have to rely on the intermittent GPS signal then.

“So, what’s next?” Vin asked. He probably sounded calm to everyone else, but Chris heard the tension in his voice.

“My suggestion would be that we send one of the cars after our agents, so they can be nearby when an opportunity arises. If JD and McGee stay in the van, hopefully we’ll get a pretty continuous signal between the two beacons and they can relay it to the car. We should head back to base, though. There’s no point leaving the van here; it’ll be too conspicuous, and we need to catch each other up on why our cases both led to Carcetti.” He looked at the other team leader for a reaction. It was a sound suggestion and normally Chris would say Gibbs could take it or leave it, but with Ezra in trouble, he was willing to play a bit more diplomatically. He got the impression that Gibbs worked the same way, but was also willing to set it aside for the sake of his missing man.

Gibbs nodded, “Yeah, it makes sense. Ziva.”

“I will take the car. Perhaps Mr. Willmington would care to accompany me?” Buck glanced at Chris, who nodded, and followed Ziva back to the NCIS car. It peeled away at quite a surprising speed a moment later. Gibbs smirked and Chris wondered what state Buck would be in next time he saw him.

“McGee!”

“Stay in the van and work with JD to keep Ziva and Buck updated. On it, Boss,” McGee responded quickly. Gibbs obviously liked an agent who could anticipate.
“And?” Obviously McGee hadn’t quite managed to anticipate everything and he stared at Gibbs like a deer in the headlights for a moment before tentatively responding.

“Call Abby to see if she can come up with any suggestions to improve the signal?”

Gibbs gave a nod and a slight smile and McGee relaxed, turning back to his laptop and pulling out his phone to, presumably, call this Abby person.

Chris took his turn handing out assignments, “Nate, you drive the van back, Josiah, Vin, you’re with me and Gibbs.”

With everyone assigned to a vehicle, Chris led his party to the car he and Vin had arrived in earlier.

The trip back to ATF headquarters was quiet; each man lost in their own thoughts. Chris presumed Buck and Ziva would bring each other up to speed, but he didn’t want to start explaining things until Nate, JD and McGee could all hear it, too. Gibbs did make a call to someone he called ‘Ducky’, giving a brief outline of what had happened and where to meet him. He hung up and said simply, “Our ME.”

That gave Chris pause. Why did the ME need to know all the details of the case? His experience of MEs was that they arrived when called to a dead body, they took it away and a report landed on his desk a day or so later to say why that person was dead. He hadn’t worked with NCIS often, but had run into them when he was a SEAL; he didn’t recall them having MEs on the teams he’d seen, they all seemed pretty much like any other federal agency in that they had them on staff, but they weren’t anything to do with the field teams.

This was a very odd team- first a Mossad liaison and then an ME. Chris wondered what other strange characters Gibbs might have in the woodwork.

Luckily it wasn’t a long drive and everyone was soon ensconced in the teams’ bullpen. JD transferred Ezra’s GPS tracking programme to his own computer and he and McGee settled in at JD’s desk. Apparently, Abby had been unable to think of anything they weren’t already doing to improve the signal.

Gibbs was off in a corner trying to calm Abby down after she’d phoned him in a panic on their way up to the office. She seemed very concerned for Tony, but it looked like Gibbs was winning, as he seemed to be winding up the conversation.

As he hung up, the elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal two men. One was fairly elderly and the other quite young. “Jethro,” the older man hailed and Gibbs turned. Jethro, huh? Chris realised the other man had never used his first name in his introduction and he could maybe see why that was.


There was a quick round of introductions and finally the two teams were able to bring each other up to speed. “So, Carcetti’s stealin’ the guns off your guys and sellin’ ‘em to ours. Very neat,” Vin summed up.

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"So, we’re up to speed. Has anyone got any new info to add?" Gibbs asked. "Duck?"

"Not really, Jethro. I did call the hospital for an update on Corporal Freamon, but there’s no change," Ducky responded.
"McGee, Dunne?"

"Well, neither we nor Abby could think of any way to boost the signal, but we’re doing ok so far," McGee said.

"Yeah, we’ve had a few patches where we lost both signals, but for the most part there’s at least one working. We’ve been in contact with Buck and Ziva, so they’re on the trail. They’re hanging about a mile back, so shouldn’t be spotted. Buck sounds a little car sick, though," JD said with a smile.

"That’s par for the course with Ziva or the boss' driving," McGee muttered. Gibbs had moved to look at the monitors over the younger men’s’ shoulders, so he was perfectly placed to deliver a head slap for that comment. He smirked at McGee’s surprised yelp.

"What about you two?" Larabee asked Jackson and Sanchez.

"Nothing that will help with finding Ezra and Tony," Sanchez said. "I’ve had some more forensics results, but they only tell us which people were killed by which people. Oh, and one of my contacts called about half an hour ago to tell me the weapons were stolen from Buckley," he finished with an ironic twist to his mouth.

"Yeah, that sounds about right for military intelligence," Gibbs said with a small grin.

Jackson then added, "It’s the same here: more autopsy results, all fatal gunshot wounds. No change with Ellis or Little’s conditions."

Gibbs was giving some thought to their next move when McGee called, "Boss, the signals have stopped moving!"

"They’ve been stationary for the last five minutes, so it’s not a case of traffic lights," JD added.

"Ok, send Ziva and Willmington in to do some recon," Gibbs said. He looked at Larabee for agreement. Normally he wouldn’t really care if he stepped on toes by ordering his men around, but he reminded himself that it wasn’t just Tony at risk.

There was no argument, though, Larabee just nodded and added, “Tell them to use their heads and not rush in recklessly.”

Dunne nodded and spoke into his radio. Then it was a case of tension-filled waiting in the office, everyone unconsciously shifting closer to Dunne’s desk and the small radio sitting on top of it. Gibbs hardly dared breathe. He hated being away from the action, from the potential to save Tony. He trusted Ziva and had to assume Larabee trusted Willmington, but it didn’t stop him wanting to be in the thick of it himself. They didn’t have to wait for long, however, as Buck’s voice soon came, tinny, but clear enough, over the radio. Clear enough to hear the defeat lacing his tone.

“Nothing here, guys. It’s an empty parking lot. All we’ve found is a heap of expensive clothes and tracking equipment. They must’ve been striped to avoid any unfound devices.”

“Goddamnit!” Gibbs growled. Tanner smacked his open palm down on Dunne’s desk in anger, while Larabee spun away to lean on his fists on another desk, head hanging as he tried to get a hold of his anger. The other men in the room also made various sounds of frustration and disappointment, but not as extreme.

“What now, Jethro?” Ducky asked.
“We find them, Ducky,” Gibbs answered as if it was that simple. “We need to track Carcetti’s movements. Does he own any buildings he could take them to? We know the general direction they went, but they could’ve easily doubled back once they dumped the trackers. He must have something in the city if he’s stealing and dealing the weapons here. McGee!”

“On it, Boss,” McGee responded, before starting to type away on his laptop.

“JD, help him. And you might as well get Buck and Ziva back here for now,” Larabee added.

Dunne nodded and made the call, then started typing just as quickly as McGee was.

Once again, Gibbs was forced to wait. There wasn’t really anything he could do until they knew where to start looking. Occasionally the search threw something up that Sanchez or Jackson looked into further, but they still hadn’t found anything concrete by the time Ziva and Willmington got back. Both of them were also drafted into following any leads McGee and Dunne threw up.

Gibbs noticed Ducky, Palmer and Jackson talking at one point. He focused on their conversation and gathered that it was to do with medical supplies. Ducky wouldn’t have access to his usual supplies for patching up the team, but it sounded like Jackson had some training and supplies to spare. That eased Gibbs’ mind a bit, knowing Tony could be patched up straight away if needed. He tried not to think of what state Tony could be in when they found him, but worst case scenarios kept creeping in when he let his guard down.

He gravitated towards Larabee and Tanner and ended up in a discussion about potential responses to given situations. They couldn’t make detailed plans, but they could cover the bases generically for a warehouse or private home situation and a few others besides. Gibbs discovered that he and Tanner shared a history as snipers, though Tanner had been a Ranger. That meant Gibbs had access to a rifle, as Tanner had a few on hand, and that gave them two men up high if the situation called for it.

As the night wore on, he also discovered he and Tanner shared a liking for strong coffee that no one else could stomach. It was a light moment in the worrying time when Tanner’s teammates gaped in disbelief when Gibbs happily gulped down what they referred to as tar and Tanner replied that obviously only snipers had good taste in coffee.

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Somewhere, presumably Colorado

Tony came back to consciousness slowly and painfully. It took a few moments to remember what had happened, but when it all came back he cracked his eyes open to assess his situation.

He was in a small, dark room; it had a tiny window just below the ceiling, which let a small amount of light in, but it wouldn’t be any good as an escape route- even if he could reach it, there was no way he’d fit through it and that was quite apart from the fact that the glass had wire mesh embedded in it. It made Tony think he was in an old warehouse or somewhere similar.

There was just enough light to see that there was nothing in the unadorned room but himself and the man he knew as Swanson, who was currently unconscious. It took his still sluggish brain a few moments to realise that Swanson was only wearing an undershirt and boxers and had his wrists cuffed and, in fact, he himself was in the same state.

‘Oh, this is not good,’ he thought, realising that all his surveillance devices were gone along with his clothes. It looked like Carcetti hadn’t overlooked them after all. If Swanson really was a cop, it was probable that all of his devices were gone, too.
Tony hauled himself up—slow going with his wrists bound and his body aching from the electrical current and what felt like a few size 12 bruises. His ribs ached, but nothing felt broken, thank heavens for small mercies.

Once he was upright, he stood in place for a minute, waiting for his equilibrium to settle so he wouldn’t end up straight back on the floor again. He felt nauseous and his right temple throbbed unhappily. He raised his hands and gently felt the area with his fingertips. Even the light pressure caused him to wince and when he pulled his hands away he saw some blood. He’d obviously hit his head at some point and got a concussion. Tony had had enough concussions in his time to know he didn’t have a serious one and the blood on his fingers wasn’t much and felt pretty tacky, so the wound wasn’t bleeding freely. He deemed it painful, but not serious and took a few breaths to try to combat the nausea. Once he was steady on his feet, and his stomach was under control, he went on a tour of his new accommodations, starting with Swanson.

The other man seemed largely unhurt, a few darkening bruises being the only obvious injuries. He’d probably be coming round soon; Tony seemed to remember Swanson getting tasered just before he passed out himself, but the smaller body could also take a little longer to shake off the current.

Satisfied that the other man was fine, Tony staggered his way to the door next. Unsurprisingly, it was locked; disappointingly, it had no pickable lock, as it was held shut by a sliding bolt on the outside. They weren’t getting out until they were let out.

Sighing, Tony turned and wandered round the perimeter. There was nothing of any interest; just a storage room that Tony estimated was about 12 feet square. The only feature was a light switch and, with nothing better to do, Tony flipped it on. He was rewarded by a thin glow from a naked bulb hanging from the high ceiling.

He had another look round in the slightly brighter room, but still found nothing. On the plus side, his legs were completely steady by the time he finished his second circuit and he was pretty sure there were no cameras or listening devices installed, so he and Swanson could chat without fear of being seen or heard. It would probably do them good to lay their cards on the table and work together to get out of the situation.

As if he knew he was being thought about, Swanson groaned and rolled onto his back. Tony hurried over and knelt beside him. “Hey, easy. The dizziness will wear off in a few minutes. Are you hurt anywhere?”

Swanson groaned again, then squinted up at Tony for a second. He waited patiently for the other man’s brain to come back online and a few moments later, Swanson said, “I don’t appear to have any major injuries, just the taser after effects and a few bruises. You?”

“The same, with the added joy of a mild concussion,” Tony said.

Swanson gazed about the room briefly, before focusing on Tony. Tony watched as he registered his lack of clothes, then looked down at his own body. “What an appalling state of undress! That was my second favourite suit.”

“Yeah, that was my reaction, too. Thank god I decided not to go with my favourite.” They exchanged small, brief, grins before things turned serious again.

“Do you have any idea where we are, or how long we’ve been unconscious?” Swanson asked.

“Nope. I’ve only been awake for about five minutes. I’ve looked round our humble abode, but it’s got nothing except the light. On the plus side, I didn’t spot any cameras or mics either,” Tony replied.
They stared at each other for a moment, Swanson having struggled into a sitting position and Tony still kneeling next to him. Eventually Tony broached the subject that was the elephant in the room.

“So, are you a cop?”

“Are you?” Swanson shot back, and fair enough, it was still a potentially dangerous situation to admit that sort of thing. But Tony figured they had to start trusting each other if they wanted to survive whatever Carcetti might throw at them. Rescue wasn’t going to come for awhile, not with any potential trackers dumped who knew where. Gibbs was probably on a wild goose chase even now. Tony took a moment to picture Gibbs in all is wild, angry glory as he found Tony’s clothes. It was the sort of image he brought out when he was stuck in a bad situation and awaiting rescue… which happened distressingly often.

He shook himself back into the real world and took a deep breath. Hoping his instincts were right, he stared into Swanson’s eyes and said, “Yeah. Tony DiNozzo, NCIS.”

Swanson gave a slow blink and let out a breath Tony hadn’t noticed he’d been holding. “Thank you for your trust,” he said, before adding, “Ezra Standish, ATF.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Tony said offering his hand. Swan- Standish shook it, though it was a little awkward with their cuffs.

“They will leave no stone unturned,” Standish said with confidence. “Our leader, Mr. Larabee, doesn’t like to lose one of his men. He’s very possessive and his temper is legendary. Carcetti doesn’t know what he’s let himself in for by taking me.”

Tony grinned, “Hey, that sounds just like my boss, Gibbs. Between the two of them, we’ll be out of here by dinner time. Oh god, unless they’ve met up and killed each other. With tempers like that colliding…!”

Standish chuckled, “I imagine we would’ve heard the explosion no matter how far away we are.”

That sobered them up. They had no idea how long they’d been unconscious, so they had no idea how far away they could be from their teams. They sat in silence for awhile. Tony was lost in thoughts of his team, of Gibbs, and how they’d be frantically searching for him, and he imagined Ezra was having similar thoughts. He just hoped they’d get some leads.

“This is ridiculous,” Ezra said after a time and Tony looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “This whole thing is ridiculous! I’m sitting here on a cold, concrete floor, in nothing but my undergarments, with a similarly attired stranger, handcuffed and locked in a room, with no idea of how long I’ve been here, or how far away I am from the place I was last conscious!”

Tony’s other brow hiked up to join the first. It looked like Ezra could give Abby a run for her money when it came to run on sentences and not stopping for breath. “Well, that about sums it up, but come on, James Bond did this all the time and he still managed to get the girl and look suave.”

“Your comparison is flawed, Mr. DiNozzo, as there was only one James Bond and I don’t plan on being one of the lesser characters,” Ezra said with a smile.

Tony chuckled, pleased to have at least been locked up with someone who got his references and humour. Being locked up with Gibbs would’ve been nice for the alone time (or maybe it would’ve been torturous being so close, with no witnesses, yet unable to act on his desire for fear of getting punched), but it would’ve undoubtedly led to a lot of head slaps. At least with Ezra he could swap a bit of banter, which was a sure way to keep their spirits up while they waited for something to happen.

Ezra considered it for a few seconds, before nodding. “Yes, that would be acceptable. I don’t suppose that means you’ve got some plastic explosive hidden in the elastic of your boxer shorts, does it?”

Tony laughed at that. “Unfortunately not; that pair is in the wash. But hey, we can at least address a couple of our problems. The light coming through that window is too yellow to be the sun, so that must mean it’s dark outside, or the street lights wouldn’t be on. We know we were at the club until about 11pm, and the sun comes up when?”

“Approximately 7am at this time of year,” Ezra supplied.

“Okay, so that gives us eight hours, less, because it doesn’t seem to be getting any lighter, so it can’t be too near dawn. So, let’s say it’s no later than five, which gives us six hours to account for.”

"Six hours is still quite a long time," Ezra pointed out.

"Ok, so let’s narrow it down a bit more- tasers don’t usually knock people out. I’m assuming this did me," he gestured to his injured head, "but what happened to you?"

Ezra frowned, "It’s a little fuzzy, but yes, now you mention it, I didn’t pass out from the taser. There was... a cloth; chloroform, I suppose."

"That would certainly explain the fuzziness," Tony agreed. "Ok, so a dose of chloroform lasts what, an hour?"

"About that, yes, but they must have dosed me twice at least, because one hour doesn’t seem long enough to set a false trail, get two grown, unconscious men out of their clothes and get here."

Tony nodded, "Makes sense. I’m pretty sure they must’ve dosed me at least once; this doesn’t feel like the sort of concussion that would’ve had me out for long, and trust me, I’ve had enough to know the nuances."

“So that gives us a window of two hours at a guess; I don’t feel cold enough to have been lying on this concrete floor for much more than an hour- it’s not seeped through to my bones yet. It’s better than nothing, I suppose,” Ezra said with a small frown. “Hopefully it doesn’t leave our colleagues many places to search for us.”

Satisfied that they’d done what they could to guess the time, conversation turned to other things. “Carcetti had chloroform on hand and he obviously had his suspicions about us from the get go, so why even set the meetings up?” Tony wondered.

“I presume he wants to know what we know about him, so he can alter his methods accordingly, which makes me assume that he will be back soon to question us,” Ezra responded.

‘And didn’t that just cheer the mood?’ Tony thought. They lapsed into silence for awhile after that, each lost in their own thoughts. Then, what felt like hours, but was probably only thirty minutes later, Tony heard footsteps approaching the door.

His instinct was to leap up and be ready to ambush whoever came in, but he really wasn’t feeling up to it- his head throbbed whenever he moved it, the cold really was starting to seep through to his bones by that point and his muscles still felt a little weak from the taser after effects. Plus, Carcetti didn’t seem to be stupid and would likely have bodyguards with him to subdue any escape attempts. Tony didn’t feel like getting tasered again.
Sure enough, Carcetti entered their makeshift cell after sliding the bolt back and was followed by three goons with tasers raised and primed. He glanced at them both, “Ah good, you’re both awake. Mr. Boothe, if you’ll follow me? I’ve got some questions for you.”

“Do I have a choice?” Tony asked. One of the goons strode forwards and yanked Tony upright, while the other two kept their tasers aimed. “I guess not,” he muttered, throwing a, "catch you later, Swanson," over his shoulder as he was hustled from the room, hoping to let Ezra know that he didn’t plan on talking.

He was taken to a larger room that obviously served as an office, as it had a desk and a couple of chairs. There was no computer, but that made sense if you didn’t want anyone to easily trace your illegal weapons cache. There was an old phone, but Tony suspected it had been there since the warehouse had been built- and he was sure it was a warehouse after seeing more of the architecture.

He was shoved into the chair in front of the desk. Carcetti perched on the desk itself, giving himself a slight height advantage. "Now, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way," he said.

"Do what?" Tony asked.

"Come now, 'Mr. Boothe','" and Tony could hear the air quotes, "you are going to tell me who you really are, who you work for and what you know. It’s up to you whether you simply tell me what I want to know, or whether we have to beat it out of you."

Tony leant back and crossed his legs, making himself appear as nonchalant as possible as he answered with, “Mr. Carcetti, I’ve already told you all of this. My name is Philip Boothe, I work for myself and what I know is that you supply weapons to people who want to buy them.”

“Cut the crap, Boothe! I found the surveillance equipment in yours and Swanson’s clothing.”

‘Well, that makes things harder,’ Tony thought, wracking his brain for an explanation. “Have you considered that I might be as paranoid as you seem to be? I think it’s fair to say I’ve got good reason to be paranoid, wouldn’t you?” he said, giving the chain of his handcuffs a rattle.

Carcetti scoffed. “I hardly think that’s likely. I’ll ask once more; who do you work for? Are you ATF?”

“I can say with one hundred percent honesty that I’m not ATF,” Tony said cheerfully, giving Carcetti his most winning smile.

Evidently it wasn’t winning enough, as Carcetti gave a tiny gesture and, suddenly, all the air left Tony’s lungs, driven out by the giant fist that rammed into his solar plexus. Tony folded over his legs, wheezing and coughing as he blinked watery eyes.

“I assure you there is much more where that came from,” Carcetti informed Tony with a smirk. “Now, are you going to talk?”

“Go to hell,” was Tony’s answer.

Carcetti sighed. “Very well. I see this one’s going to be stubborn. Take him into the next room and work him over. Don’t kill him, but otherwise, have fun. Maybe when Swanson sees the results of keeping silent, he’ll be more inclined to talk.”

Tony resigned himself to a painful future. He didn’t regret not talking, though. For one thing, as long as he was silent, Carcetti would keep him alive. As soon as he spilled his guts, Carcetti had no use for him. For another thing, Tony was just stubborn like that. He knew Gibbs would never give in
and he would do whatever he could to make sure he didn’t disappoint Gibbs by giving in himself.

Hands grabbed his upper arms and Tony found himself hauled unceremoniously out of the office and into the main body of the warehouse. It was by no means full, but there were a good few crates stacked up in one area. It was too dark to see what the labelling said, but Tony had the sneaking suspicion that he was looking at the stolen weapons and that didn’t bode well for his continued existence. Carcetti didn’t seem the type to show potential cops his illegal weapons stash and then set them free.

Not that Tony had long to dwell on that, as he had more immediate problems. The goons manhandled him until he stood under a large hook, while a third moved to a set of buttons hanging from a long cord alongside the hook. He pressed a button and the hook lowered enough for Tony’s handcuffs to be hooked over it, then he pressed another button and the hook started to raise upwards as its chain was reeled in. It was only stopped when Tony hung from his wrists with his toes barely touching the floor.

Tony grunted in pain as most of his weight settled on his wrists, causing the metal cuffs to bite into the skin. His eyes widened in dismay as he watched one of the goons removing his thick leather belt, while walking out of his line of sight and stopping behind him. That meant one of two things; either he was going to get a beating with the belt, or the guy planned on raping him. Tony’s blood ran cold and he thought, ‘I’ll take door number one’. A beating would hurt, but it was infinitely preferable to being violated. He just hoped Carcetti didn’t employ anyone too sadistic.

Tony was almost relieved when he heard the whistle of the belt through the air and felt the stinging slice of it hitting his back. He could cope with a beating. He concentrated on staying silent. The odd grunt of pain escaped him as the whipping went on, and tears welled in his eyes, but Tony was determined that he wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of screaming or letting those tears fall. As the beating dragged on, the force swung Tony around, making him lose the little traction his feet had on the floor and causing his entire weight to pull on the cuffs.

Blood ran slowly, but freely down his arms, soaking in a spreading patch across his t-shirt, a few little rivulets even making it as far as the hem of his boxers. Tony was also pretty sure that some of the whips had broken his skin, as his back felt damp. It could’ve been sweat, he supposed, but luck didn’t seem to have been on his side so far, so why should it start now?

Tony didn’t know how long it went on for, but he eventually started to feel faint and unable to catch his breath. It could be down to blood loss, but Tony really didn’t think he was bleeding that much. He thought he remembered once hearing Ducky say that hanging like he was meant that the lungs couldn’t expand properly, which explained his being out of breath. He also suspected he was getting a little shocky.

It was eventually over, though; Carcetti calling a halt and having him thrown, all but unconscious, back into his makeshift cell where Ezra was waiting for him.

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Ezra was starting to feel the cold, so he forced himself to walk round his little room. He worried about what was being done to Tony. Yes, they were basically strangers, but they had an instant kinship; anyone who worked undercover had it, because they understood the dangers they each faced and it was usually a relief to find an ally and have a bit of back up.

He wasn’t sure how long he paced round the room for, but he guessed it must have been close to an hour. The little square of sky he could see through the window hadn’t grown any lighter, so by their rough calculations it must have been about 3:30am by the time he heard the scraping of the bolt being
pulled back.

He stopped pacing and faced the door, unsurprised when the first thing he saw were two tasers aimed his way. He wished he could say he was surprised when the next thing he saw was a bloody Tony shoved through the doorway and landing in a heap at his feet, but he’d had the distinct feeling that the other man would come back in worse condition than when he’d left. Tony reminded him a little of Vin; yes, Vin was quiet a lot of the time, but give him the opportunity to talk back unadvisedly to a villain holding him hostage and Vin was right there. Tony seemed to Ezra to have that same antagonistic streak.

He was already moving towards Tony as Carcetti left without saying a word, his goons filtering out behind him in a well rehearsed formation that spoke of military training of some sort. Ezra hardly spared them a second look, only glancing briefly at the door as the bolt slid home once more. He was far more concerned with assessing Tony’s injuries.

Tony was out cold and sporting a cut lip and what would be an impressive black eye. Ezra didn’t envy him the headache he was bound to have when he came round. He’d already been suffering a mild concussion and that was bound to be worse after obviously taking at least one or two hits to the head. Thankfully, while he certainly had some pain in the future, it looked worse than it was. It was clear to Ezra that Tony had been hanging from his cuffed wrists— they were well chewed where the cuffs had dug in— but the cuts weren’t bad enough that there was a risk of Tony bleeding out, though they’d certainly bled freely judging by the multiple rivulets that had run down his arms and soaked into the armpits and partially across the chest of his t-shirt. There was a lot of blood on the back of the t-shirt, too, but again, the material made it seem worse than it was.

Ezra manhandled Tony onto his side, not particularly easy considering there was a lot of him to move and it was all dead weight. But Ezra won in the end and carefully peeled the t-shirt up to reveal Tony’s back, after taking a moment to catch his breath; he still wasn’t completely over the effects of being electrocuted and drugged.

Tony’s back was a mess. He’d obviously been whipped quite a few times; Ezra guessed it had been a belt by the width of the welts. Luckily, the thin cotton of Tony’s t-shirt had absorbed enough of the force that most of the hits had just left bruising, rather than broken the skin. There were four tears in the t-shirt, though, where the hits had obviously had more force behind them. Those tears had corresponding cuts in the skin of Tony’s back and the blood had spread over a large area of material, making it look terrible.

The cuts had stopped bleeding, as had those on his wrists, but Ezra was a little worried about infection setting in. He had nothing to clean the wounds with and nothing to use as bandages— he couldn’t pull his own t-shirt apart, because his cuffed wrists couldn’t get the leverage required. All he could do was keep Tony on his side to make sure he wasn’t lying with his wounds against the dirty, dusty floor.

To that end, he awkwardly dragged Tony the few feet to the closest wall, apologising for any additional pain he was causing even though Tony was still unconscious. He sat with his own back pressed against the wall and his legs straight out in front of him, then rested Tony against his legs, so his nose was pressed into Ezra’s hip and his chest rested against Ezra’s thigh, with his arms trapped at an awkward angle, which wouldn’t be comfortable, but would keep his damaged wrists in the air and not on the floor. Then he settled in to wait for Tony to come round.

It was an intimate position and a small part of Ezra wished it was Vin pressed against him. Most of him, though, was glad that it wasn’t Vin lying beaten and unconscious in his underwear on a cold concrete floor. It was, thankfully, only a few minutes before Tony stirred; Ezra hoped that meant his
concussion hadn’t been exacerbated. Tony started to roll onto his back, moaning in pain, but Ezra grabbed his shoulder. "Don’t move, Tony, you’ve got cuts on your back that I’ve been unable to cover and this floor isn’t exactly spotless. How are you feeling?"

"I’m fine," Tony said, and Ezra was again reminded of Vin. Probably why he’d taken an instant liking to the man. “Help me up,” Tony said, struggling to get himself into a sitting position.

Ezra gave him a hand, their cuffs and Tony’s injuries making it awkward, but eventually he was upright, hunched slightly forward so his back didn’t lean against the wall. He listed to the side slightly, propping himself up against Ezra’s shoulder and they were pressed pretty tightly together, but Ezra found he didn’t mind, even though he didn’t usually allow anyone into his personal space except his teammates. The situation was tough, though, and it was nice to share a bit of body heat and companionship in their bleak surroundings.

“How long was I gone?” Tony asked in a raspy voice.

“Difficult to say. I would estimate about an hour, give or take.”

“Huh. It seemed longer,” Tony muttered.

“I can see how it might drag on a bit given the situation,” Ezra conceded wryly.

Tony gave him a small smirk. “Yeah, I was having too much fun for it to end quickly. Seriously, though, Carcetti tried the soft approach first- face to face meet in the office, a few looming goons and being all reasonable in his questioning. Once that failed to get him answers, he let his boys loose, though he did at least tell them not to make it so bad that I couldn’t answer questions later on. I’m no good to him dead, for now.”

“Anyway, I didn’t tell him anything. Said I’d had the surveillance equipment because I’m paranoid… with good reason. Of course, he didn’t buy it, but it’s all he got out of me. I’m afraid it will be your turn next and they might go harder on you after seeing how their first plan didn’t work on me.”

He looked contrite, as if it was somehow Tony’s fault that Carcetti and his minions liked to beat people for information. “I assure you, Mr. DiNozzo, that I have endured a few beatings in my time and have lived to tell the tale. This time will be no different and I am confident that Edward Swanson is the only name Carcetti will get from me.”

Unhappily, it wasn’t a great deal of time before Ezra got his chance to prove his assertion. The bolt slid back and Ezra was marched at taser point to a large room with a hook hanging from the ceiling and two chairs facing each other a little in front of it.

It looked like Tony’s worry had been well founded, Ezra thought with resignation and a little trepidation, as they pushed him into one of the chairs and Carcetti took the other. They were forgoing the softly, softly approach and jumping straight in with the scare tactics.

"Now, you’ve seen what happened to Mr. Boothe; that was because he was stubborn and refused to answer my questions truthfully. You can avoid a similar experience by being honest with me. So, all I want to know is who you really are, who you work for and what your agency knows. Simple.”

"Those are, indeed, simple questions," Ezra agreed and Carcetti smiled; a smile that slid away when Ezra finished his sentence: "but I fear you will not like my simple answers. My name is Edward Swanson, I work for myself and all I know about you is that you sell weapons, have a very suspect way of conducting deals that must lose you a good deal of custom and that you’re an extremely
Carcetti leant back in his chair. "I see," he said flatly. Then he lashed out with such unexpected speed that Ezra didn’t have time to brace himself, ending up in a heap on the floor. He tasted blood from a split lip and, to add insult to injury, the chair had fallen along with Ezra and had caught him on the elbow, so his arm was numb too.

Carcetti leant forward and grasped Ezra by the chin, thumb pressing against the forming bruise, making him wince. "One more chance, and bear in mind I found your surveillance equipment."

Ezra twisted out of Carcetti’s grip. "It’s as I told you. I have that equipment because someone changed the terms of a deal once, so now I like to get it all on tape as insurance."

Carcetti sat back again, tutting and shaking his head in mock disappointment. He gestured and two of his men came forward to haul Ezra up. They dragged him to the hook and strung him up by his wrists. 'Here we go,' Ezra thought with trepidation.

He wouldn’t dream of giving in, but that in no way meant he wasn’t afraid of what that would mean for him. They had, after all, beaten Tony unconscious! And ok, yes, Tony had a concussion where Ezra didn’t, but he didn’t think that really gave him much of an edge. Still, there was no way he would ever voluntarily give away information about a case, especially the focus of that case, no matter what some of his erstwhile FBI colleagues might say to the contrary.

They hoisted him up high enough that he knew his wrists would end up just as cut up as Tony’s. That foreknowledge didn’t do anything to lessen the pain of suddenly taking all his weight on his wrists, and he winced, but was determined not to give his captors the satisfaction of hearing him cry out, no matter what they did to him.

What they did was to comprehensively work him over with a belt. Ezra wondered briefly, inanely, if his goon was the same one who had whipped Tony. He certainly seemed to enjoy his work-something Ezra could admire when it didn’t mean agony for him. The beating seemed to Ezra like it went on for hours. He managed to bite his tongue—quite literally on a few occasions—for the most part, only letting gasps and hisses betray his pain. The odd cry got through, though, and Carcetti always smirked when that happened. He sat on the chair in front of Ezra, legs crossed, the picture of nonchalance, looking bored for the most part.

He didn’t ask Ezra any of his questions again, just watched his beating like it was some vaguely interesting TV show. When Ezra was hanging limply from his cuffs, barely reacting to the belt anymore, Carcetti appeared to lose all interest in what he was seeing and had Ezra removed from the hook and dragged back to the cell room.

The change of position for his arms felt like he was being stabbed in the shoulders and each jostling movement sent a wave of pain through Ezra, but his mind was so over-stimulated that he couldn’t react; he had nothing left to give. Distantly, he realised he was no longer being whipped, that he was being moved and that he probably looked a mess just as Tony had. He could no longer distinguish the individual strips of pain on his back, as it had all melded into one throbbing agony, but he knew that some of the blows must have broken skin and there was little chance he hadn’t mangled his wrists to some degree.

His mind clicked back into focus as his body thudded to the floor of his storeroom prison and he moaned weakly.

“Hey, easy there,” Tony’s voice soothed.
Ezra slitted his eyes open and peered at the other man, who was pale and looked slightly sweaty and out of breath. He wondered about that for a moment, but decided that it had probably taken a lot for Tony to move from the wall to where he lay just inside the doorway. He couldn’t understand how Tony had been as coherent as he had been when he first awoke, because Ezra himself couldn’t find the energy to say anything, let alone start asking questions.

“You look like I feel,” Tony informed him. “Can you move?”

Ezra just groaned, then made an embarrassing whimpering noise when Tony awkwardly, slowly hauled him over to the wall. It took longer than it should have and Ezra was starting to get more of a grip on reality by the time they reached their destination. He could see that Tony was moving very stiffly and looked even paler and sweatier by the time he eased himself to a sitting position, left side against the wall so he could face the doorway, yet keep his painful back from pressing against anything.

He manoeuvred Ezra a final time, until he lay on his left side with his head pillowed on Tony’s thigh. He managed the monumental task of pulling his legs into his body so that he was curled close to Tony instead of sprawled out and then they huddled miserably together, waiting for whatever would come through their door next.

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ATF Bullpen, Denver

The night passed slowly. Chris, Vin and Gibbs finished their strategy session fairly quickly and then it was a case of sitting and waiting for their more computer savvy teammates to find them a lead. During their planning talk, it became clear that Gibbs had been a Marine sniper.

A bit later on, Chris saw Vin and Gibbs talking- reminiscing, comparing notes, or something. Chris was just glad that someone was distracting his friend for a bit. Vin was good at hiding what he was feeling, but his worry was starting to bleed through a little and the others were starting to notice. Buck and Josiah had both cast glances Vin’s way when he wasn’t looking. Chris was noticing things too; things about Gibbs that had him wondering whether he also needed the distraction of his chat with Vin. Chris didn’t know Gibbs well enough to know if this level of agitation was normal for any of his team being in trouble, but it didn’t really fit with the general impression he had of the man.

The NCIS team seemed concerned, too. Chris spotted them shooting Gibbs furtive glances and saw the ME, ‘Ducky’, putting a supportive hand on Gibbs’ shoulder on a few occasions. Could it be that Gibbs was in the same situation as Vin? That could make things difficult.

Chris had absolutely no problem with men sleeping together. He didn’t care what anyone got up to as long as it was consensual. What did worry him was that he now had potentially two loose cannons going into a dangerous situation to rescue their love interests, or whatever, who could quite easily turn out to be dead.

Chris was clinging to the idea that Ezra was still alive, that Carcetti needed him and Gibbs’ man for information, maybe even bargaining chips. They were no use to him dead and if he was just going to kill them, he could’ve easily done it and dumped the bodies, rather than just the clothes. No. Ezra and Agent DiNozzo were alive and just waiting to be found.

He looked towards Vin once more and found him alone. He looked for Gibbs and found him standing behind JD and McGee. One of the computer screens had been given over to video feed
from the NCIS forensics expert, Abby Sciuto. She’d been a bit of a shock to Chris in her Goth outfit, tattoos and spiked collar- definitely not someone he could easily picture working for an agency so closely related to the military. Chris had mentally updated his list: Mossad liaison, medical examiner and Goth.

McGee seemed fairly straightforward and ‘what you see is what you get’ and Gibbs definitely didn’t seem to be anything other than what he appeared. It left Chris wondering what DiNozzo would turn out to be like. He supposed his own team of misfits and rogues would appear a little unlikely to outsiders, so he wasn’t judging Gibbs’ team, just amused by the surprises it was throwing up.

Gibbs and the others all deferred to her knowledge, even McGee, who seemed as competent with technology as JD was, deferred to Abby. However, she was also quite highly strung and Chris gathered that her worry for her missing friend had once more overcome her, leading to Gibbs having to calm her down and get her focused again. Chris could see where the worry was coming from, though, as he happened to be near enough to overhear one of her earlier rants, which had involved a laundry list of things DiNozzo had endured, including the plague, of all things!

He knew from the few previous times that it would take awhile to get Abby back on track, so he approached Vin and drew him a little further away for a semblance of privacy.

“How’re you holding up, Vin?”

“No worse than anyone else, I reckon,” Vin said, as he leant against the wall behind him, looking casual. Most people would have bought it, but not Chris.

“C’mon, Vin. I know you, remember; better even than I know myself, I sometimes think. Ezra’s abduction is hitting you hard.”

Vin’s focus sharpened at that. Chris could feel it, even though Vin’s posture didn’t change. It was something undefined that set the hairs on the back of his neck rising, something that spoke of a predator. It wasn’t directed at him very often and Chris was grateful for that; and he was a man who had his own no nonsense stare and predatory instincts.

"Don’t know what you mean," Vin tried, but Chris wasn’t going to let him get away with it.

"C’mon, Cowboy," Chris said, hoping the nickname would make Vin realise he was talking to him as his best friend, not his boss. Vin remained quiet for long enough that Chris didn’t think he’d say anything at all. They may well be best friends, who seemed to instinctively know so much about each other, but they were both still men for whom talking about feelings was difficult. He waited Vin out, though, and was rewarded with a slight drop of the shoulders and a sigh.

"It’s just, I like him...more than I should, you know?"

Chris nodded, "I know."

Vin’s eyes widened comically. "You know?!!"

Chris smiled, turning it into a grin when Vin glared at him. "Take it easy, Vin, your secret’s safe. I know you better than that lot out there, remember? Question is: what are you going to do about it?"

“Nothing,” Vin said, with finality.

“Why the hell not?” Chris demanded.

“What do you mean ‘why not’? Why do you think? There’s the anti-fraternisation regs for one thing,
the problems that come with being gay and in law enforcement for another. Plus, I don’t know what Ez feels for me. What if I confess all and he’s not interested? How do we work together after that? I don’t want to break the team up and I don’t want to have to leave.”

Chris took a second to marvel at how Vin managed to rant whilst keeping his voice to a whisper, when most people would’ve been all raised voice and arm waving by that point. Hell, Chris knew that if things were reversed, there was every possibility that he’d be storming off and slamming his office door behind him. But not Vin; he was too reserved, too private to want anyone knowing what they were talking about, especially not the relative strangers from NCIS. No, with Vin it was all in his eyes; stormy blue and, Chris fancied, snapping little bolts of lightning.

He acknowledged that maybe demanding why Vin wasn’t going to make a move was a little too forceful. Vin was stubborn and didn’t like to be questioned too hard about his feelings, even by Chris. Still, he wasn’t going to leave things alone without responding to Vin’s rant. Keeping his own voice quiet, he said, “First off, Ezra does like you. I’ve seen him watch you when he thinks no one’s looking. He’s good, but he can’t always hide his reactions, especially when you’ve been injured, or had a close call.” He smiled at Vin’s slightly widened eyes.

“That still leaves the regs,” Vin pointed out.

“What regs?” Chris said nonchalantly. “Look, I’m not suggesting you start making out in the office. I know you both and you’re pretty damn good at hiding what you’re feeling at the best of times. Ez does it for a living whenever he goes undercover, after all, and you’re so private it’s sometimes painful. You keep things discrete at the office, there’s no reason for it to get out. We have our own office and we rarely work with other teams, so there won’t be any prying eyes and none of the guys out there will tell a soul. As long as it doesn’t affect your jobs I can turn a blind eye.”

Vin took several moments to assimilate all that, then smiled softly at Chris, “Thanks, Cowboy.”

“No problem. Now, if you want to keep yourself busy for a few minutes, go get Ezra’s car from the bar. Buck found his car keys when he brought his clothes back, so they’re here somewhere. See if anyone from NCIS wants to fetch DiNozzo’s car back and then get one of the garage guys to give you a lift. They never have much to do overnight, so they’ll probably jump at the chance to get out of the building for a few minutes.”

Vin smiled gratefully, obviously happy to have something to do, even if it was only driving Ezra’s car back to the building. He clapped Chris on the shoulder, then wandered off to collect the keys and talk to Gibbs. A few minutes later, he was off with the assistant ME, Palmer, in tow. It made sense that Gibbs would send him- he was the only member of the team who couldn’t immediately contribute to the hunt.

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It was close to an hour later that Chris was roused from a fitful doze by Buck shouting, "I think we’ve got something!"

Everyone quickly gathered round and Buck started to explain. "These two fine gentlemen-" he
patted JD and McGee on the shoulder "-managed to track down some property that was under an assumed name, under a dummy company, under a false name. One of those pieces of property is a warehouse about an hour further along the road we found Ez & Tony’s clothes.”

Just like that the atmosphere changed. Where before everyone had been flagging- unsurprising since the ATF team had been in the office nearly 24 hours straight and the NCIS team were dealing with body clocks that thought it was two hours later than it was in Denver- suddenly it was like everyone had had a jolt of pure caffeine. Postures straightened, eyes lost their glassy look and they all became animated again.

“Can you get blueprints for the place?” Josiah asked.

"Not in any useful time frame," McGee said, "I assume we want to head out straight away?"

"Ya think, McGee?" Gibbs snapped. McGee flushed and looked away.

"No need to snap at the poor boy, Jethro," Ducky chastised. "Just because Tony isn’t here to deflect your anger, doesn’t mean you should lash out at others.”

“If Tony was here, Duck, this whole thing would be moot.”

“Just so, Jethro, but the situation is what it is and the fact remains that young Timothy isn’t as well versed in your moods as Anthony is.”

Gibbs’ face was a picture, somewhere between angry and contrite, like he was annoyed at being dressed down like that in front of relative strangers and subordinate agents, yet also fighting the feeling of being a naughty little boy. Chris sympathised- he often felt like that when Josiah took him to task over something. It didn’t seem to matter that he was the team leader.

Apparently, Gibbs didn’t like the feeling, as he removed himself to the break room with a gruff, “I need coffee.”

“My apologies, everyone,” Ducky said. “Jethro is very worried about Tony and he really doesn’t handle being worried very well. You mustn’t take his anger to heart, Timothy.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ducky. I’ve seen him like this before. I’ll be glad when Tony’s back to annoy him, though.”

“We all will, dear boy, we all will.”

As Gibbs still hadn’t returned, Chris decided to move things on without him. “Ok, no blueprints. It makes our job a little harder, but it’s not the end of the world. We hashed out a rough plan earlier: We’ll split into two teams, one going in the front, one the back, with Vin covering both teams from the rafters if the layout permits. There are two objectives- our guys and the bad guys. Even better if the missing weapons are there, too.

“I’m sure I don’t have to spell it out to anyone that we need to get hold of Carcetti and his goons before we look for Ezra and Tony. We don’t know what condition they’re in and it won’t do anyone any good if a gunman gets us in their sights while we’re trying to move wounded men.”

“We’ll get them in a pincer movement,” Gibbs said, emerging from the break room looking slightly calmer and carrying a cup of Vin’s swill. We have no idea how many men Carcetti has, or whether he’ll have guards on DiNozzo and Standish. In fact, we don’t know much at all, so everyone keep your eyes open and keep your teammates in sight. I know you’re all professionals, but it never hurts to reiterate this stuff, especially with the situation we’re going into.” There were nods all round.
“That said, if we find them before we find Carcetti and his men, and if it’s safe to do so, someone should stay with them in case Carcetti tries to reach them and use them as shields.”

Chris nodded at Gibbs’ last comment. It wasn’t impossible that Carcetti would hide behind Ezra and DiNozzo if he reached them first. They also couldn’t completely discount the idea that he might kill them anyway out of some sort of spite. If he or Gibbs could leave one of their own team members to guard Ezra and DiNozzo, that would give everyone else more peace of mind in the hunt for the bad guys. Of course, all this planning could be for nothing; they could walk in and take down Carcetti and co. within moments, without a fight. He’d believe that when he saw it, however.

“What teams will we be in?” Ziva asked.

“We thought it’d make the most sense to stick to our own teams,” Chris answered. “We know how our own teammates are likely to react, what their strengths and weaknesses are and it’s not the right situation to start mixing new people into that dynamic.”

“Makes sense,” Buck agreed. “So, who’s going in where?”

“Depends what the layout is. Your team’s bigger, so it makes more sense for you to take the loading docks and the larger central space, while we go in the side or back door,” Gibbs replied. He turned to Ducky, “You and Palmer need to stay outside, Duck. We’re walking into a potential fire fight, so it’s too dangerous for unarmed civilians, but we need you close in case anyone gets hit. Jackson’s an EMT, so he can see to Tony and Standish until it’s safe for you to come in.”

“Of course, Jethro,” Ducky replied with a nod.

“We can’t call an ambulance until we know we’re even in the right place, let alone whether anyone is injured. We just have to hope three medically trained people are enough to tide us over until an ambulance can arrive. There’s also the possibility that they won’t need to go to the hospital, so we need transport for a potential 13 people. We also need a prisoner transport.”

He looked around at the people assembled and did some quick calculations. “Ok, Buck, JD, you take the prisoner transport; Vin, Nathan and Josiah, you take one of the SUVs. Gibbs, I assume your team will take your sedan?” he looked over to the other man and received a nod. "Good. I’ll take my truck and you can ride with me, Gibbs."

It wasn’t a suggestion; he had something he wanted to say to the other team leader that needed to be said privately. Gibbs merely raised an eyebrow and nodded, seemingly realising that Chris had something on his mind. Besides, there wasn’t room to comfortably seat five in the NCIS car. By taking Chris’ truck as well, they had his back seat and a seat in the SUV with Vin and the others should Ezra and Tony be in a condition to ride back with them.

“Anymore questions?” Chris asked. Everyone looked at everyone else, as always seemed to happen with that sort of question, but no one had anything else to ask. “Right then, let’s go get our people,” he said.

The teams scrambled, gathering weapons, medical bags and various other bits of equipment and then trooped down to the garage.

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**Chris’ truck, on the road**

The small convoy headed out, Chris’ Dodge Ram in the lead. There was hardly any traffic at 4:45 in the morning, but Gibbs was a silent presence in the passenger seat for the first 15 minutes, while
Chris negotiated traffic lights and a few overnight freight lorries.

Once they reached the highway they needed to follow most of the way to Carcetti’s warehouse, Gibbs finally spoke. “So, you had something you wanted to talk about?”

Chris sighed, then said, “Yeah. Listen, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you in the right frame of mind to get the job done here?”

Gibbs had been looking out of the front window, but his head snapped round towards Chris at that question and those blue eyes bore a hole right through Chris. He wasn’t intimidated- he had his own Death Glare and that made him immune to anyone else’s… except maybe Vin’s.

“Meaning?” Gibbs barked.

“Meaning, I may not know you well, but I’m an investigator. I’ve watched you and your team these last few hours and they all seem anxious about you. I’ve seen you pacing, snapping, snarling, hell, you even gave McGee a slap round the head! Now, for all I know, that may be SOP for you, but to me it looks like someone on the edge of losing control. I should know, I’ve been there myself. So, what I want to know is whether you’re in a fit state to be walking into a potential fire fight without either getting yourself or one of your team killed, or without blowing away Carcetti and his goons without provocation?”

“You’re right, Larabee; you don’t know me, or how I interact with my team. I do whatever it takes to get the job done and if that involves pushing my team hard, then that’s what I’ll do!” Gibbs retorted.

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about, Gibbs!” Chris replied, feeling his temper flare at Gibbs’ non-answer. “Are you going to burst in there guns blazing, shooting anything that moves, looking for revenge for DiNozzo’s abduction? I’ve got a man in there too, remember, and my team will be coming into the building in front of you. I don’t want you going off half-cocked and hitting one of my guys by accident.”

“I’m not about to go in half-cocked and risk Tony’s life, Larabee!” Gibbs growled. “I was a Marine sniper- there’s nothing wrong with my aim, or my reflexes. If I shoot someone it’s because I meant to. I lost an agent recently and I don’t intend to lose any more. If Carcetti tries to harm me, or any of our people, I’ll take him down, if he surrenders, he’ll see justice in the courts. Besides, I’ve been down the revenge route before- it never turns out well.”

That was an intriguing sentence Chris thought as he locked eyes with Gibbs as best he could while speeding down the road. His mind flashed to the man who murdered his beloved wife and son and how hollow he’d still felt after avenging them. He wondered what had sent Gibbs down that road, but it wasn’t the sort of thing he could ask someone he’d only met a few hours ago. Gibbs glared right back and Chris finally nodded, “Ok. You see why I needed to ask?”

Gibbs grunted non-committally. “You have this same talk with Tanner?”

It was Chris’ turn to bristle. “What do you mean?”

“C’mon, Larabee. I’ve seen how antsy that boy is. You think I’ve been pacing? Well Tanner’s been just as active.”

And it may well be true, but Chris wasn’t going to accept this relative stranger doubting Vin’s ability. “Listen, Gibbs. Vin Tanner isn’t a boy. He’s just as professional as you say you are! He won’t let his concern for Ezra cloud his mind any more than the rest of my team will!”

The staring was repeated, this time Gibbs reading Chris’ sincerity. After a few moments, he nodded,
“Ok. Guess we’ve cleared all that up then.” And that seemed to be that as far as Gibbs was concerned. Truthfully, Chris was satisfied, too. Gibbs may hold his anger close to the surface, but he knew how to channel it when the time came.

Neither of them were ones for small talk, so the rest of the journey was carried out silently, aside from the odd bit of radio contact to the other cars. Chris found it wasn’t an oppressive silence, almost like they’d cleared the air and got the measure of each other with their face off.

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Carcetti’s warehouse, Colorado

Chris pulled into a lay-by about five minutes out from the warehouse and climbed out of his truck as the rest of the vehicles pulled in behind him. It was time for a few last minute instructions.

Everyone got out of their vehicles and congregated around Chris’ Ram. Chris saw that McGee was clutching his laptop and fleetingly wondered if the younger man was surgically attached to it.

“Boss, I got some pictures that might help,” he announced, setting the laptop down on the passenger side wing so Gibbs could see it. Everyone else crowded round as McGee said apologetically, “it’s not blueprints, I’m afraid, but I thought aerial photos would at least give us the outside of the building, so we can spot entrances and possible guard positions.”

“How old are these images?” Ziva asked.

“About two months,” McGee replied.

That was good. It meant things were unlikely to have changed significantly. Chris moved closer to get a better look and saw that the warehouse was a single unit and not part of an industrial complex. That was good, because it meant there wouldn’t be innocent bystanders, or not so innocent people who could spot them and alert Carcetti. The surrounding land was covered in scrub and there was a denser patch that looked like it would do as somewhere to hide the cars out of sight.

The road to the loading bays was wide and clear of the scrub and the space in front of the bays was clear, too, necessary for ease of delivery and collection. That meant Chris and his team had about a hundred yards of open ground to cover before they reached the doors.

The bushes grew nearer to the building on the other sides, only about 10 feet away at its closest, so Gibbs’ team shouldn’t have too much trouble reaching the back door.

There was a narrow stairway up to the roof halfway down the right hand wall, so it looked like Vin would be able to get up high. Unfortunately, the roof was quite flat, so it was possible that Carcetti would have a lookout up there.

Apparently, Vin spotted the same potential problem, as he said, "That roof looks like a good place for guards. I should go up first and take any out before the rest of you move in."

Chris didn’t like sending people in alone if he could avoid it, but he knew Vin could look after himself and it was certainly better than alerting Carcetti and putting Ezra and DiNozzo at further risk. "Ok, we’ll give you five minutes to take out any guards and find a good position. There’s a door over in the right hand corner, look,” he said, pointing it out.

Gibbs had been studying the photo intently and he grunted what Chris took to be approval at the plan. “My guess would be that he’d only put one guard up there. There’s no way in other than the road to the loading bays, so there’s not much point wasting men looking in other directions. If we
pull the vehicles off of the road here,” he gestured at the thicket Chris had spotted earlier to the right of the road, “we can hide them in this denser patch and approach the building from the right. He’s likely to have any ground sentries stick close to the bays as well, so we might meet one at the back door, but I reckon your team’ll catch the most, Larabee.”

Chris nodded; Gibbs was right. In an isolated place like this, Carcetti didn’t need to worry himself too much about people coming in from anywhere other than the road, so it made sense that the guards would be concentrated on that side. They didn’t know how many men Carcetti had got. The nephew Gibbs’ team had arrested hadn’t known beyond him having a team. Abby had been in touch during the course of the night to tell Gibbs that the evidence had pointed to three gunmen hitting the truck carrying the weapons to Buckley Air Force base, but they could add at least one more to that total, because Carcetti had had four men at the club, and that was assuming that they were the same people. They just didn’t know. Hell, Carcetti might not have a single guard, believing himself safe in his isolated warehouse.

Chris clapped his hands together once and rubbed them briskly. “Right, let’s get this show on the road. We park in the spot Gibbs pointed out, grab our gear, Vin goes in, then our two teams, we take down the bad guys, rescue our agents, call in Ducky and Palmer and go home for a nice long sleep,” he stated confidently.


Feeling energised once again, the teams scrambled back into their vehicles. “McGee,” Gibbs called, just as the man was about to climb into the sedan. He turned to Gibbs with a questioning look. “Good job,” Gibbs said and McGee beamed and flushed slightly. Chris surmised that Gibbs didn’t give praise often and that he’d just made McGee’s day. He glanced at Gibbs and caught him smiling faintly as he climbed into the passenger side of the Ram.

A few minutes later, Chris pulled up once again, the other vehicles squeezing in around him. It wasn’t a large thicket, but it was just enough to hide the bulk of the vehicles. The teams took a few minutes to pull on Kevlar and arm themselves and Nathan grabbed his small rucksack of medical supplies. The sky was just starting to show the first few streaks of dawn, but there was still an hour or so before the sun came up, so they also donned night vision goggles. Finally ready, they set off near silently. Chris, Vin, Buck, Gibbs and Ziva all had training and were like ghosts, Nathan and Josiah also managed to be pretty silent. Only the two youngest, JD and McGee, made any noise, but even they didn’t do too badly, despite all the fallen leaves under foot and the night vision.

It took them another ten minutes to reach a point where they were able to see the warehouse while crouching behind some of the last few bushes. Chris, Vin and Gibbs all had field glasses, which they produced, switched to night vision and scanned the area.

“I can see a man on the roof,” Vin whispered.

“I got him,” Gibbs agreed. “Looks like he’s the only one, though.”

Chris focused on the loading bay, but the angle wasn’t good. “I can’t tell who may or may not be round the front. Once Vin takes out the guy on the roof, I’ll move to the wall and see if I can peek round and get a better idea.”

“Guess my five minutes start now, then,” Vin said and then he was gone, stealing through the bushes like a shadow. This was the part Chris hated; waiting for word, chaffing to get on with the action. He glanced round at the assembled people and saw similar feelings reflected on all their faces to one degree or another.
It was the longest five minutes of Chris’ life and the relief that swept through him when he heard Vin’s whisper over the radio nearly made him stagger.

“The guard’s down. He’s still alive- I tasered him, cuffed him and gagged him. I’m now in position inside. There’re a lot of crates in here, some of ‘em stacked pretty high. I can’t see anyone at the moment, but there are some covered rooms- offices and storerooms, I guess- to the left of the main room and also some towards the back, so both teams have potential to find our guys or the bad guys and I won’t be able to help up here.”

“Ok, Vin. Sit tight, we’ll be coming in in a few minutes. Let us know if anyone comes out of those rooms.”

He didn’t wait for Vin’s acknowledgement, instead turning to the assembled people around him.

“Ok, you heard Vin. I’m going to see what I can see round that corner.”

He crept over to the wall and crouched down, before peering round the corner into the loading area. The space was floodlit, so he had to lift his goggles before he spotted the lone guard. Unfortunately, he was on the far side of the bay, so he’d see Chris approaching long before Chris could silence him. He looked beyond the guard and saw that the bushes grew quite close to the building.

Pulling back to his waiting teammates, he said, “One guy, on the far side. I’m going to double back a ways and cross the road, then I can creep up on him in the bushes on the far side. Give me five minutes, and someone let Vin know there’s a delay. Gibbs, you and your team might as well head round back and check for any guards.”

Gibbs nodded, “Good call, we’ll let you know what the situation is in a few minutes.” With that he was gone, Ziva and McGee trailing in his wake.

Chris wasted no time creeping up on the guard. They were all armed with tasers as well as ordinary weapons. Chris and his team were all trained to kill if needed, wound where possible and although most of them had taken a life or two, they never enjoyed it. With the need for silence being the paramount objective here, it was just simpler to knock the guy out. If Chris shot to wound, there was the possibility that those inside would hear him, but Chris wouldn’t simply gun the man down, no matter how unsavoury he may be. It was what separated the good and the bad guys.

The man wasn’t a very good guard. He’d obviously let the quiet and boredom lull him and Chris was able to get right up behind him. He jabbed the taser into his neck and the man jerked and writhed for a few moments, then, when the current switched off, he sagged against Chris’ chest.

Chris quickly lowered him to the floor, cuffed him and gagged him, then dragged him out of sight so that any of his comrades wouldn’t immediately notice something was wrong if they came out of the door. He also made sure the man’s rifle was well out of his reach, but also not lying around to raise the alarm.

He stole across the floodlit space, keeping to the small patches of shadow as much as possible. When he reached the far corner, he leant round and beckoned his team over. They hurried to meet him as he slipped round to the dark side of the building.

“How’s Gibbs doing?” he whispered, having switched his own receiver off for fear of the guard overhearing any chatter.

“No guards, but the door was locked. He said he could pick it, though and he’ll give the radio two clicks when they’re inside,” Josiah reported, just as they all heard a double click. Buck grinned at the timing.
“Here we go then, boys, the guard’s taken care of, so it’s in we go.” He heard a whispered ‘we’re coming in’ behind him as someone let Vin know. It was said so quietly that Chris couldn’t tell who had spoken.

There were two large roll-up doors for the transport vehicles to deliver and collect, but Chris led his team through the human-sized door to the right hand side of the building. They filed in slowly, covering all directions, eyes and ears straining for any bad guys.

Chris saw what Vin meant about the crates- some of them were piled in stacks four high, which put the top about 10 feet high. They slowly spread out and cleared the large area. Chris rounded one particular stack of crates and stopped dead at the sight before him: There were two chairs, one lying on its side and hanging next to them was a hook suspended on a chain. The floor beneath the hook had several rusty coloured stains, which Chris knew was blood without going any closer. Red rage flooded his system momentarily, before training forced it back. He knew Vin must have seen the macabre scene from his vantage point and hoped he’d been as successful in locking the anger away.

Gibbs and his team filtered out from the stacks opposite him and Chris saw the varying degrees of rage that passed across their faces. Gibbs looked particularly murderous, but, like Chris, he knew how to contain it and turn it into a useful feeling, rather than let it take control and make him reckless.

The teams converged and had a quiet, terse exchange of information, “No one in the big room, so it looks like it’s a case of doubling back and checking out our respective store rooms,” Gibbs whispered. Chris nodded and the teams melted away again.

He took a moment to glance up to the rafters and activate his radio. “Nothing yet, Vin. We’re going to check out the rooms. Hold position in case anyone makes a break for it.” He got a brief affirmative in return.

Chris led the team to the enclosed rooms in one corner of the warehouse. They used the stacks as cover, leapfrogging each other to cover their backs. He assessed the area ahead- four small rooms, two each side of a short corridor. The two rooms on the left appeared to be store rooms and the back wall of those two rooms was the front wall of the warehouse. The furthest room on the right was another storeroom, while the nearer room was some sort of office, judging by the windows. Luckily, there were metal blinds pulled down, so they would be able to approach without being seen. Muted light spilled from between the slats of the blind; obviously they needed to clear that room first.

They were almost there- one stack of crates away- when gunfire erupted from behind them, form the direction Gibbs’ team had gone in. “Damnit!” he swore, adrenalin surging through him.

He was on the verge of sending someone back to see what was going on and to help Gibbs, but at that moment three armed men burst out of the office. Chris knew that Vin would be watching Gibbs’ team as much as his own and had to trust that that was enough; he had more immediate concerns.

Two of the men moved into the main warehouse, obviously intent on helping out their colleagues. They wore the same non-descript black outfit as the guard Chris had taken care of earlier. The third man wore an expensive suit and was hurrying to the further left hand door, gun drawn.

Chris assumed two things at that point, the first was that the man in the suit was Carcetti; the second was that he was going to take care of Ezra and DiNozzo. That wasn’t happening on Chris’ watch.

He signalled his team to deal with the two minions, while he darted after Carcetti, who was already sliding the door bolt back.

“ATF, freeze! Drop your weapon!” he shouted, his own gun already aimed. Carcetti froze for a
second, but then started turning, bringing his pistol up as he did and Chris didn’t hesitate to put a bullet in him. Carcetti cried out in pain, gun dropping from numb fingers as he reached his left hand across to press at the wound in his right shoulder. He staggered back against the door he’d been about to open and Chris moved forwards, ruthlessly cuffing the man, despite the cry of pain as his injured arm was pulled behind him.

He shoved Carcetti none too gently to the side of the door and down to the floor. “Sit there,” he ordered. “Don’t move, don’t speak and I may let you get some medical treatment.” Carcetti did as he was told and Chris turned, collected Carcetti’s dropped M9 and finished sliding back the bolt to open the door.

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Inside their little room, still huddled together for warmth and a bit of human comfort, Tony and Ezra jumped when they heard gunfire break out.

“Sounds like the cavalry’s here,” Tony said quietly, pain and a lack of energy making his voice sound dull even as he was relieved that their ordeal might finally be over.

“And not a moment too soon,” Ezra murmured. “I just wish I had the energy to stand up and greet our rescuers in a more dignified manner than huddling and bleeding on the floor.”

“Amen to that,” Tony muttered. There was no way he was getting up anytime soon without help, though; the shock, cold, concussion, lack of food or water and the beating-induced stiffness, not to mention the agony that shot through his back every time he moved had ganged up on him and left him pretty much boneless on the floor.

All they could do was watch the door as the bolt started to slide back. There was some muffled shouting and a gun shot, then the bolt started to slide once more and, this time, the door opened to let weak light filter in.

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Chris took a deep breath as he pulled open the door, trying to prepare himself for anything. What he found was a very dimly lit, featureless room and two miserable looking men huddled together and shivering, but alive. Ezra was lying with his head in the lap of the man Chris had seen going into the club after Ezra. He took a quick look down the corridor, but the gunfire had stopped and he could see his team had the two bad guys on the ground, so he moved into the room.

He felt rage sweep through him as he got closer and saw the blood on Ezra’s back. It was all he could do not to rush back outside and give Carcetti the kicking he deserved. Common sense prevailed, however, and these two needed him more. He crouched next to them and took a closer look at the injuries he could see.

“Hey, Ez, how you doin’?”

“Mr. Larabee, glad you could make it,” Ezra said. His voice was rough, but the relief at seeing his friend was as clear as day to Chris. He gave Ezra a small smile and gently patted him on the shoulder.

Then he turned his attention to the other man, “Agent DiNozzo, my name is Chris Larabee, I’m Ezra’s boss.”

Hazel-green eyes mostly focused on him, but Chris could see that the man wasn’t quite tracking. He was obviously aware enough to realise what Chris knowing his name meant, though; “You know
my name. Does that mean you’ve met Gibbs?”

“I’ve had that pleasure, yeah,” Chris replied.

DiNozzo cracked a small smile and said, “I’m sorry about that.”

Chris huffed a laugh, “Don’t worry about it; I gave as good as I got. Now you two hang in there a moment and I’ll get you some help.” He activated his radio and announced “I’ve got them, they’re alive. They could do with a bit of patching up, though, Nate. What’s going on with you guys?”

“Our bad guys are all under control,” Buck’s voice announced. Chris felt a wash of relief at hearing it confirmed.

“We had a bit of trouble, but we’ve got it sorted,” Gibbs’ said. Chris was happy to hear it, given that that was where the shooting had started and he’d had no way of knowing who was winning, as he didn’t want to risk distracting anyone at a crucial moment by calling over the radio for an update.

“That’s good to hear. Vin, you can come on down now. Nate, we’re in the second room on the left. We need to get Carcetti and his goons loaded into the transport and then get forensics out here to collect evidence. Carcetti’s down here in the corridor; I caught him trying to finish off Ezra and DiNozzo.”

He knew the NCIS team worked crime scenes, but he didn’t know whether Gibbs and co. would feel up to it under the circumstances. He needn’t have worried, though, as Nate and Vin arrived in the doorway, Gibbs’ voice announced, “We’re on it and your guys offered to help once the truck’s loaded. We’ve got the equipment in the car. It’ll be good to keep ’em all occupied while Jackson takes a look. I’ll get Ducky and Palmer in to help, too. Tell DiNozzo I’ll come see him in a minute.” Chris heard the slight note of longing and worry, along with the relief, in Gibbs’ voice.

“Will do,” he promised, passing the message on as he stepped back to stand next to Vin and let Nathan get a look at his patients. He put a hand on Vin’s shoulder, partly in comfort and partly to stop him getting in Nate’s way.

“Hey, Ezra,” Nate said as he crouched down. “Tony, I’m Nathan and I’m going to patch you two up. Ducky and Jimmy are here, too, but we made them wait outside, so they may be a few minutes.”

“Kay, no civilians in a firelight,” Tony muttered.

“Exactly. Ok, Ezra, how are you doing?”

“I’m very glad to see you, Nathan,” Ezra said, and the fact that he dropped the formality and used Nate’s first name was proof enough to Chris that his teammate was hurting. “I am cold, stiff, tired, hungry, thirsty and, most of all, in pain. Whatever Tony tells you, he feels the same and also seems to have a concussion.”

“Hey, c’mon, Ezra, I’m fine,” Tony protested, though his words were starting to sound just a little slurred to Chris. He presumed the adrenalin was wearing off now they were rescued.

“This man reminds me forcibly of Mr. Tanner- claiming to be fine even when it is clearly not the case,” Ezra announced.

Vin gave a small smile, “Hey, stop castin’ aspersions, Standish,” he protested.

“My my, such big words,” Ezra teased with a watery chuckle.
Vin’s smile grew, “I like to save ‘em for special occasions,” he said.

Chris watched Nathan working for a few minutes, then said, “what’s the verdict, Nate?”

“Nothing too terrible. There’s not as much blood as it seems and the cuts have already stopped bleeding by themselves. You two did good to keep the cuts off the floor,” Nathan added, turning his attention back to his charges. “That should minimise the chance of infection.”

“They’ve both taken a beating, hence the soreness and stiffness. There’s a lot of bruising on their backs. Their wrists are cut up from the hand cuffs- we need to get them off, so I can get some bandages on- but again, the bleeding’s stopped.

“Tony is, indeed, concussed, but it’s mild enough that I can safely give him painkillers, so I’m going to give them both a shot before moving them.”

He put actions to words and injected the two men with a painkiller. Chris presumed it must be fast acting, because he could see Ezra and Tony both relax slightly not a minute later.

“Vin, can you give me a hand to move Ezra?” Nathan asked. Vin jumped at the chance and Chris wondered whether Nathan just asked because he was there, or because he’d picked up on Vin’s anxiety earlier. As he was pondering this, Ducky, Palmer and Gibbs materialised in the doorway.

“Oh my!” Ducky exclaimed, before hurrying in. “Anthony, my boy, it’s so good to see you.”

“Hey, Duck, Boss and my little autopsy gremlin!”

Chris blinked. Autopsy gremlin? He could only mean Palmer, as he’d named the other two. Palmer didn’t seem to mind the odd nickname, smiling fondly at Tony.

Gibbs also smirked, “You loopy, DiNozzo?” he asked.

“Nope,” Tony shook his head vigorously, almost falling backwards, but saved by Ducky. “Maybe a little,” he amended.

“Uh huh.”

“He reacts to the painkillers? It’s only a mild dose, because of the concussion, but if I’d realised, I could’ve given him Vin’s medication.” Nathan said, sounding guilty even though there was no reason for him to feel that way.

“Not to worry, dear boy,” Ducky said. “It’s entirely my fault for failing to mention it earlier. It won’t harm Anthony in any case, he just gets a little spaced out.”

“Another thing he has in common with you, Vin,” Ezra said.

“Oh yeah? What else do we have in common, then?”

“Well, as I said before, you both seem to insist you are fine, when you are clearly injured; you both have the alarming tendency to talk back to villains who have you at their mercy and now it appears you both get stoned on perfectly ordinary painkillers.”

Gibbs snorted. “That sounds like DiNozzo alright. You been answering back again, Tony?”

“I had to, Boss, he kept asking the same questions over and over. I didn’t tell him what he wanted to know though,” Tony said, sounding very earnest with the last sentence.
It got Gibbs moving. He’d stayed out of the way, even though Chris had seen the desire to get closer like Vin had been able to do. That little need for approval was apparently more than Gibbs could stand, though, as he moved to stand by Tony, reaching out to stroke his hair. “I know you didn’t tell him anything, Tony. You did good.” Tony grinned and leant against Gibbs’ leg.

It didn’t take long for Nathan, Ducky and Jimmy to patch Ezra and Tony up as much as possibly—bandaging the open wounds, cleaning away the blood. Gibbs picked the handcuff locks in a matter of moments and the medics were able to bandage their patients’ wrists as well.

They decided that Tony and Ezra needed to go to the hospital: the biggest concern being potential hypothermia from the lack of clothing and the cold room. Ducky muttered something about the plague and Chris remembered Abby saying something about it back at the office. His mind still boggled at how Tony had managed to catch the plague of all things!

“Don’t need the hospital, Boss,” Tony whined. “I hate hospitals; they always poke me and prod me and wake me up in the middle of the night. I don’t want any blue lights and no Brad Pitt.”

Chris frowned. ‘No blue lights?’ He presumed Tony was talking about ambulance lights, but that didn’t account for the momentary sadness on the faces of Tony’s friends. And what the hell had Brad Pitt got to do with anything? Tony really did seem to make about as much sense as Vin did on painkillers.

But then Ducky said, “Now, Anthony, you know Bradley was only looking after you when he did all those things.”

“He broke my leg, Ducky!” Tony exclaimed.

“That was a long time ago, Tony. You shouldn’t hold him responsible for that now,” Ducky replied and that made Chris even more confused. He wasn’t the only one, judging by the looks on Ezra, Vin and Nathan’s faces.

Gibbs obviously picked up on their confusion and took pity on them. “To cut a long story short, Tony had a doctor called Brad Pitt. It turned out they’d been at college at the same time and Pitt broke Tony’s leg during a football game.”

Huh, well, looked like Tony wasn’t making things up after all.

Inevitably, the rest of the team finally turned up and the room became very crowded, but very happy. Chris didn’t have the heart to shoo them all away, and it seemed Gibbs was feeling indulgent, too, as he stayed quiet.

“Probilicious!” Tony exclaimed happily.

McGee blushed a little, but smiled as he said, “Hi, Tony.” He looked at Ducky and added, “Painkillers, huh?”

“Indeed, Timothy. Our Anthony is currently a very happy man.”

“Who knew there’d be anyone else as loopy as Vin on painkillers?” Buck ribbed.

“Yeah, yeah, Buck. I’ve already had all that from Ez,” Vin said, though he grinned as he complained.

After a few minutes, Ducky took charge, ushering most of them back out of the room, calling for an ambulance and tending briefly to the worst of the wounds received by Carcetti and his men. He also
bandaged a bullet graze on Gibbs’ arm that Chris had failed to notice, due to a combination of having his focus on Ezra and Gibbs wearing a dark windbreaker that hid the blood. Not that he seemed to have bled much. He scowled and growled at Ducky, who ignored him with an air of long practice, but eventually gave in when Tony said something about it only being fair that Gibbs get a bandage as well as him. The childish logic worked where all of Ducky’s arguments and persuasion had failed and Chris hid a smile at how easily Tony got his own way.

Finally the time came to leave the premises. There was evidence to process, bad guys to lock up and good guys (and a few bad guys) to get to the hospital. There were also reports to write and paperwork to fill out, but Chris didn’t expect that would get done until the next day.

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St Anthony Central Hospital, Denver

Things moved quickly once the ambulances arrived, even though it felt to Gibbs that everything was moving at a snail’s pace. He and Larabee worked smoothly to get the scene organised. In fact, Gibbs was surprised at just how well they worked, directing each other’s teams without raising each other’s hackles. He caught a few surprised looks from both teams and had to hide the odd smirk. He could play nice when it mattered, and the quicker the scene was sorted, the quicker he could get to Tony’s bedside.

Everyone wanted to be at the hospital, but they were all professionals and they did their jobs. Gibbs suspected it helped that the two men being treated weren’t in life threatening condition and there was no need to rush to their bedsides just in case. Gibbs was beyond relieved about that- he’d had enough close calls with Tony over the years and was glad this time was one of the lesser incidents.

In the end, Tony and Standish were sent in the same ambulance - they didn’t need to lay down on the gurneys, in fact with their backs, it was better that they sat up anyway. Ducky went with them to brief the doctors on what treatment they’d already given and because Gibbs always felt better if there was someone there who could tell them about Tony’s scarred lungs and reaction to painkillers.

Carcetti and one of his goons had been wounded badly enough that they needed a trip to the hospital, though it was nothing life threatening, so they were loaded into the second ambulance. Jackson went with them for security as much as to give the doctors the lowdown.

The teams bagged and tagged all the portable evidence, which Ziva and McGee took back to ATF headquarters, along with the sketches and photos, including pictures of Tony and Standish’s wounds. Sanchez volunteered to stay at the warehouse until a team arrived to collect the crates of weapons.

One of the goons- the one who winged Gibbs- had been killed when both he and Ziva had returned fire. Palmer was tasked with waiting for the coroner’s wagon to collect the body. The remaining five henchmen were loaded into the prisoner truck and taken to ATF headquarters by Willmington and Dunne, which meant Larabee could use his Ram to head to the hospital with Gibbs and Tanner, and the ATF car was left for Sanchez and Palmer to use once they were able to leave the scene.

The sun was up by the time they reached the hospital. They asked after their teammates at the nurses’ station and were directed to a waiting room. They found Ducky and Jackson slumped in chairs. They looked exhausted, especially Ducky, who was starting to look his age. Everyone had been up for over 24 hours by that point and the adrenalin was well and truly gone with the rescue.

“How are they?” Tanner asked.

“They’re both doing well, Vincent,” Ducky replied. “As you know, Nathan and I cleaned their
wounds and bandaged them up, we did what we could, but the area wasn’t sterile, so the doctors took a look and irrigated the wounds again to make sure we didn’t miss something. They’ve had clean bandages and some of the worst lacerations had butterfly strips applied to hold the wounds closed. They weren’t deep enough to require stitches, thankfully.

“The biggest fear, especially for Tony, was hypothermia from that cold room. Luckily, they weren’t cold enough for that to be a big problem, but the doctors have them both on warm saline IVs to raise their core temperatures to be sure. They also have IVs to combat dehydration, as they weren’t given anything to eat or drink during their captivity. I believe they will be allowed to eat something once their treatment has been completed.

“Tony also has a sizeable goose egg on his left temple, which accounts for his concussion. Only a mild one for once. I swear that boy needs a helmet with the amount of head trauma he suffers!”

“I don’t think he’d go for that, Duck, unless Armani makes one,” Gibbs quipped, happy to hear Tony would live to fight another day.

“I dare say you are right, Jethro,” Ducky acknowledged with a slight smile.

“When can we see them?” Gibbs asked.

“We’re waiting for the doctors to come back,” Jackson said. “They came and told us where they were so far with treatment, but they’re just waiting for the IVs to finish and a few other things before they give us the final verdict. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Gibbs took a seat next to Ducky and Larabee and Tanner also sat down. “How about Carcetti and his goon?” Larabee asked.

“Neither of them is seriously injured. The bullets were through and throughs, so they’re getting stitches, painkillers, antibiotics and the goon, one Andrew Tompkins, is having a blood transfusion, but they’ll be released today. I’ve got them both secured to their beds and hospital security is watching them closely. I called a couple of guys from the office to come out to guard them and transport them to the cells once they’re released. They should be here any minute.”

“It probably won’t be long before the rest of the gang turns up either,” Tanner said. Gibbs hoped he’d get a minute or two alone with Tony before the others arrived, but he wasn’t going to begrudge them their time with him after the work they’d done to find and rescue him.

Gibbs was just contemplating going in search of coffee when a young woman in scrubs arrived in the waiting room. “Doctor Hannigan, what news?” Ducky asked.

“I see we have some new people here, so I’ll go from the top. Both Agent Standish and Agent DiNozzo have finished their IVs. We gave them warm saline to combat any potential hypothermia, rehydrated them and gave them an IV to replace nutrients until they can have some real food. They’ve had antibiotics to hopefully stave off any potential infection and painkillers because their backs are deeply and comprehensively bruised and it will hurt for them to move even slightly for a good few days. Agent DiNozzo is still reacting a little to the painkillers, though we gave him something different to try to combat that and he’s on a slightly reduced rate due to his mild concussion, as we don’t want him to fall asleep just yet.

“The lacerations have all been cleaned and rebandaged and we also applied some medicated cream to stop the wounds drying out and reinforce the antibiotics. It also contains aloe, which helps reduce any scarring, though I don’t think any of the wounds were deep enough to scar. We’ve avoided putting stitches in by using butterfly tape instead, so that will also lessen any scarring.
“We want to keep them both in overnight, just to make sure no infection sets in, but they should hopefully be ok to go home tomorrow. We’re moving them to a double room together shortly. I understand Agent DiNozzo isn’t local?” Dr. Hannigan asked.

Gibbs shook his head, “No, we’re based in DC.”

“Ok, well, he’s not going to be able to travel for three or four days at least. The bruising on his back will make it painful for him to sit in chairs, be it plane or car. The same for Agent Standish actually. They’re both going to be most comfortable lying in their stomachs for a while and will need help getting around, because they’re going to be incredibly stiff until the swelling goes down.”

“Not a problem, Doc. When can we see them?” Gibbs asked.

“Give us another half an hour to get them moved to their room and then they can have visitors. Just don’t overdo it with numbers or length of time spent with them- they’re both going to be tired. Don’t worry if Agent DiNozzo nods off, we’ll let him sleep once he’s settled and a nurse will wake him every few hours.

“A nurse will come and get you when they’re settled and now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got patients to attend to.” And with that, Dr. Hannigan headed out of the room to a chorus of thanks.

Gibbs looked round the room to see his companions smiling and he felt his own mouth tug up at the corners. Their teams were whole again and neither man had suffered as badly as they could have so easily suffered. The cases were solved, barring the confessions and Gibbs was looking forward to sitting on the opposite side of a table to Carcetti. He wouldn’t be surprised if Larabee joined him; they’d make a good team, bad cop and worse cop. He’d flip a coin to see who had which role.

Knowing he had a bit of time, he went off on the coffee hunt he’d been contemplating beforehand, Tanner accompanying him. They promised to bring some back for the others, too.

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35 minutes later, caffeinated and joined by Ziva, McGee, Willmington and Dunne, Gibbs and the others followed a nurse to the new waiting room. He idly wondered at the sight the nine of them must make striding down the halls. There was certainly the odd glance shooting their way as they passed.

In short order they were settled in a new set of fairly uncomfortable chairs. The only difference Gibbs could see was that the walls in the last room had been a pastel pea green colour and the new ones were some kind of pale pinkish-brown that probably had some sort of pretentious name like ‘antique rose’.

Dr. Hannigan arrived not long after they did. She stopped in the doorway and raised an eyebrow. "Are you people breeding? Every time I come to update you, you’ve doubled!"

There were a few chuckles and Larabee said, "Sorry about that, Doc, there’re only two more of us to arrive; promise."

"That’s good to know. I’m telling you now, though; 11 are too many to go in all at once. Half of you can go in at a time, for no more than 10 minutes each. Your friends are exhausted and, quite frankly, none of you look much better. I suggest you all go and get some food and sleep. Agents DiNozzo and Standish are in no danger and what they most need right now is rest. They’ll be going home tomorrow if all goes to plan and they’ll need help for awhile, until the bruises reduce- you can visit them then."
Everyone agreed- it did make sense, after all- but Gibbs was secretly determined to stick with Tony until he was released.

Dr. Hannigan was satisfied, though, and she asked who was going in first. Gibbs hung back, telling Ziva, McGee and Ducky that they could see Tony first, then to head back to their rooms for some rest.

“T’ll stay a little longer, Jethro, and wait for Mr. Palmer to arrive. You two go ahead, but don’t wear him out.”

Gibbs suspected Ducky was hanging around for more than Palmer’s benefit, but he didn’t mind having the company.

A glance at Larabee’s team showed that Tanner, Willmington and Dunne had gone in first to visit their friend. Jackson headed off down the corridor to see about Carcetti and Tompkins. He wasn’t gone long. “They’re both fixed up and Pulaski and Adams are taking them to join the rest of our catch just as soon as the paperwork’s done,” he reported.

He’d not even finished sitting down when Sanchez strode in, Palmer trailing in his wake, they were both brought up to speed and a few minutes after that, the first wave of visitors reappeared. Willmington and Dunne left right after, but Tanner hung back, saying he’d wait for Larabee. McGee and Ziva also said they’d wait so that Ducky and Palmer could ride back with them. No one said anything about how Gibbs would be getting back- obviously they realised he had no intention of leaving.

He walked into the room with the others, each team splitting off to their relevant teammate once they got through the doorway. He could hear the ATF men greeting each other, but tuned them out, focusing instead on Tony.

He looked better than he had in the warehouse. All the blood was gone and he had some colour back in his face, which had been paler than his usual tan when they found him. He was lying on his front, with a light blanket pulled up to his shoulders, and he looked terribly vulnerable. It wasn’t a good look on Tony and Gibbs was suddenly glad that the visits were limited to 10 minutes. He had a feeling Tony would be uncomfortable with everyone looming over his unprotected back, knowing he couldn’t easily move to protect himself. It was one of those primal things people felt in these situations, the animal brain subconsciously noticing these things. Besides, he knew Tony and the man hated to seem vulnerable to anyone. He was still resolved to stay with Tony, however.

“Hey, guys, did anyone bring me any food? I’m starving,” Tony said in greeting. He sounded a little slurred to Gibbs, probably a combination of the drugs, the tiredness and the position he was in.

“Sorry, Tony, but you have to suffer through hospital food for now,” Ducky said.

“That’s so unfair, Ducky. The food in hospitals can’t really be classed as food. It should be sent to Abby for forensic testing. Jimmy, you’ll help a buddy out, won’t you? I’ll take anything: a pizza, a sandwich, even a candy bar.”

“Sorry, Tony, but I think Dr. Mallard would kill me if I did that. And anyway, just think how wonderful that first bite of pizza will taste after the hospital food. It’ll taste so much better than if you ate it now.” Palmer said with a smile.

Tony whined and Gibbs said, “Suck it up, DiNozzo. If you behave yourself tonight, I’ll buy you a pizza tomorrow.” He gave Tony a small grin, but inside he was troubled. Tony’s comment about Abby had made Gibbs realise that in all the commotion, he’d not called her to say Tony was ok. That
was unforgivable, no matter how busy he’d been, and he knew it was going to take a lot more than Caff-Pow to make it up to her. Surely McGee had spoken to her? He was in so much trouble.

The 10 minutes were up unreasonably quickly and everyone filed out to the waiting room again. Gibbs saw his team off and, again, no one said anything about him going with them. In fact, Ducky’s parting action was a pat on the shoulder and the instruction to, “Talk to the boy, Jethro.” Gibbs didn’t bother to ask what Ducky meant; Ducky knew him too well. He just inclined his head.

The ATF people left at the same time, various farewells being given as they walked out into the hall. After a few minutes, Gibbs was alone at last… or nearly alone. He turned back to the seats and found Tanner sitting there watching him back.

Gibbs sat in the seat one over from Tanner and the younger man looked at him for a moment, before saying, “I guess it’s not just coffee and history as a sniper we’ve got in common, then.”

Gibbs gave his own assessing stare, piercing blue gaze locking onto piercing blue gaze for a couple of seconds, before he gave a small shrug. “Guess so.”

They lapsed into silence after that tacit acknowledgement. It was comfortable; neither man was inclined to speak when they didn’t have to. After a minute, Gibbs pulled out his phone and took a deep breath, then he dialled Abby’s number.

“Gibbs! Gibbs, is it you? Did you find Tony? McGee said you did…”

“Abs-”

“Is he ok? Is he there, can I speak to him? Why didn’t you call me before?…”

“Abs-“

“Answer me Gibbs!!”

“Abby!”

“What, Gibbs? Why are you shouting at me?”

“Abby, just calm down and let me get a word in, will ya?”

“Sorry, Bossman,” Abby said contritely.

“It’s ok. Now, Tony’s going to be fine. He’s a little beaten up and the hospital’s keeping him over night, ’cause he’s got another concussion, but he’s going to be fine. He’s resting now, though, but I’ll tell him you wanted to talk to him and you can call him in the morning.”

“You’re going to stay with him, though, right, Gibbs?”

“I am. I’ve sent everyone else back to the hotel to get some rest, but I’m staying with Tony.”

“Good. You will talk to him, won’t you? Tell me you will, Gibbs. You’ve got lots of grovelling to do to make up for not calling me straight away and I’ll take part of that payment as you talking to Tony and telling him how you feel.” Gibbs could picture the stern face she had to be pulling and it made him smile, even as he wondered just how obvious his feelings were that everyone seemed to be picking them up and commenting on them. Abby knew him almost as well as Ducky did, however, so it wasn’t such a big surprise she’d guessed his feelings.

“I’ll see, Abs. I’m not promising anything, it depends what the situation is, but maybe.”
The squeal that came down the phone line was way out of proportion to his non-committal answer and he pulled the headset away from his ear momentarily. He caught Tanner staring at the phone in bemusement and said, “She’s glad Tony’s ok.” Tanner just nodded and gave a small smile.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about, Gibbs, Tony wants you as much as you want him.”

“I’m not talking about it anymore, Abs,” Gibbs warned.

“Maybe not now, but I expect details when you get back here. Remember, you owe me, Mister.”

“We’ll see,” Gibbs said and then, in typical Gibbs-fashion, he hung up without any form of goodbye.

Silence descended once more, until, 15 or so minutes later Tanner said, “You think it’s safe to sneak back in now?”

“We can try,” Gibbs replied.

They smirked at each other and crept back down the corridor and into Tony and Standish’s room. Both men were sleeping, so Gibbs settled in next to Tony and Tanner took the chair next to Standish.

Gibbs studied Tony for awhile, just glad to get the chance to look at him again after the last few hellish hours where he wasn’t sure he’d see Tony alive again. He’d spent enough nights sharing motel rooms with DiNozzo to know that the man looked unfeasibly innocent when he slept. There were none of the masks he wore while awake. Gibbs was better than most at seeing through those masks, but he could still see the difference when they were all down. One day he hoped to see that while Tony was awake.

On impulse he reached his hand up to Tony’s head and gently stroked his fingers through Tony’s hair. It was slightly stiff from sweat and dust, but Gibbs enjoyed the sensation of it brushing against his fingers nonetheless.

After a few minutes, he noticed that Tony was watching him through nearly closed eyes and he smiled. “Hey, DiNozzo, didn’t mean to wake you.”

“’S ok, ’s nice,” Tony slurred.

“Go back to sleep, Tony, I’ve got your six,” Gibbs said gently. Much as he wanted to talk with Tony, to hear his voice and really know he was alive, he could see how much of an effort it was just for Tony to have opened his eyes even the little slits that he’d managed. Talking could wait.

He didn’t know how long he carried on running his fingers over Tony’s scalp in a soothing manner. Eventually he dozed off, hand stilling, but not leaving Tony’s head.

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Gibbs woke when a nurse came in to check on the two patients, unashamedly leaving his hand in Tony’s hair. Let her draw her own conclusions. She looked from him to Tanner, who was in a similar position, then looked at her charges. “You two shouldn’t be in here,” she started, expression disapproving, “but seeing as how my patients are sleeping soundly and you obviously haven’t disturbed them, I’ll let you stay for now.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Tanner said, all Texan drawl and boyish smile.

The nurse blushed faintly and completed her checks, then hurried out. Gibbs and Tanner smirked at each other across the expanse of beds.
The day wore on like that until lunch time, when the nurse woke Tony for his concussion check and told them that lunch would be along in another 15 minutes and she’d be back the to help Tony and Standish sit up. It wasn’t going to be fun and Gibbs didn’t think Tony would want him to stick around for that part. Sure enough, when Gibbs said: “I’m hungry, too, now that food’s been mentioned. I think I’ll head down to the cafeteria, see what sandwiches they’ve got. Unless you want me to stay, Tony?”

Tony replied with: “No, that’s ok, Boss, you go and eat. I’m sure I’ll manage with the pretty nurse to help me and Ducky will lecture me if I let you starve.”

Gibbs let Tony get away with it, but also let him know with a look that he knew what Tony was doing. Tony looked sheepish.

When the nurse and the food arrived a little while later, Gibbs made himself scarce, glancing to his side when Tanner stepped up beside him.

“Standish has got too much pride to let himself be seen in pain, too, huh?” he said.

“Yep. I guess when he was busy noticing all the similarities between me and DiNozzo, he conveniently forgot to see his own. I could eat, though, so it’s no big deal to let him win this time.”

They reached the cafeteria and examined the sandwich offerings. When they’d both picked a package, gathered coffee and paid, they moved to a quiet table and started eating.

Gibbs had gone for chicken salad, reasoning that even hospital chefs would be able to manage the simple ingredients. Tanner, though, had picked some spicy tortilla wrap affair and topped the meal off with two chocolate bars. Gibbs smiled to himself and Tanner caught it.

“What?” he said, looking down at his food and back up at Gibbs.

“Sorry, it’s just I’ve spotted another similarity you share with Tony- spicy stuff and junk food.”

“A man of good taste, obviously,” Tanner responded, before taking a large bite of his wrap.

‘At least he doesn’t talk with his mouth full,’ Gibbs mused, thinking about one of Tony’s less attractive habits.

They finished quickly and headed back to the room, peering through the window to check the coast was clear, before entering and resuming their chairs.

“Hey, Boss, have a good meal?” Tony said, sounding subdued.

“I had a hospital cafeteria sandwich, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said pointedly.

“Yeah. Stupid question, sorry,” Tony said with a small smile.

“How’re you doing?” Gibbs asked. He could see the pain lines around Tony’s eyes and mouth and knew it had cost him to sit up.

“It wasn’t fun, Boss, but I’m fine,” was Tony’s predictable answer.

“That’s good, Tony. You still look tired, get some rest,” he said. Gibbs could see that Tony wanted to protest, but it was a losing battle.

“Who knew sitting up would be so tiring?” he mumbled, before succumbing; his eyes sliding shut. Gibbs smiled fondly and settled in.
Things remained peaceful until afternoon visiting hours started and the teams reappeared. They filed into the room a few at a time and didn’t stay for long, so either a nurse had said something, or Ducky and Jackson had.

Larabee arrived in due course and sat with his agent for awhile, then he approached Gibbs and Tony. “How are you feeling, Agent DiNozzo?”

“Fine thanks, Agent… Larabee was it?”

“That’s right, but you can call me Chris.”

“Tony, then,” DiNozzo offered in reply.

Larabee smiled and said a few more words, before turning to Gibbs. “I’m heading to the office to question Carcetti, do you want in?”

Gibbs was torn. He wanted to take Carcetti down for what he’d done, but he didn’t want to leave Tony. Tony must have seen that, because he said, “You should go, Boss, make sure Carcetti gets what he deserves.”

Gibbs was about to agree anyway, but then Ducky arrived and Tony added, “Ducky will keep an eye on me for you while you’re gone, won’t you, Duck?”

Ducky raised an eyebrow and looked between them, but agreed straight away, “Of course, dear boy. I’d be delighted.”

That cemented Gibbs answer, “Ok, but just Carcetti. He’s the one in charge making all the decisions and the contacts. His minions can be questioned by someone else.”

“Fair enough,” Larabee agreed and he was soon once again sitting in the Ram.

“How do you want to play this?” Gibbs asked.

Larabee glanced across and shrugged, “He’s not gonna crack easily, I figure we should go in hard from the start. No good cop, bad cop; he’ll see right through it.”

“That suits me just fine,” Gibbs said with a feral grin that was returned by Larabee. Carcetti wouldn’t know what hit him.

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Interrogation Room, ATF Headquarters

Carcetti didn’t know what hit him. Larabee told Gibbs that he’d had the man taken to interrogation before he’d even arrived at the hospital, so the man had had ample time to stew.

They entered the observation room first and watched their prey through the one way glass. He was sitting up straight, aiming for a look of unconcern, but Gibbs could see the strain it was taking to keep himself composed all that time without even knowing if there was anyone watching to appreciate the display. The man also had to be hurting- the painkillers he’d had at the hospital had worn off and Larabee had said he couldn’t have anymore until after he’d been interrogated, because he needed to be lucid to answer questions. There was an agent in the room guarding Carcetti, but he might as well have been a statue, silent and looming in a corner of the room.

Technically, Gibbs didn’t need Carcetti to confess. He already had the two younger Carcettis in
custody, with confessions implicating Marco Carcetti. He had the paper trail to the warehouse where they’d found Carcetti, crates full of weapons and two kidnapped federal agents. Plus they had the conversation and video footage taken while both those agents were undercover.

No, it was just a formality for Gibbs, but he had no intention of letting Carcetti get charged without getting in his face for what he’d done to Tony. He may not need the confession, but he wanted one and he was going to get one.

Besides, he knew that Larabee did need a confession to tie Carcetti into the weapons used in the gang shootings. That part wasn’t so cut and dried and the evidence was too circumstantial and they didn’t have any living gang members they could ask, because most of the ones from the recent shootings were dead and they likely hadn’t bought the guns anyway, so there was no direct link.

“Shall we?” he said after a few minutes of observation.

“After you,” Larabee replied, sweeping his arm out in front of him.

Gibbs exited the observation room and opened the door to interrogation. He strode in and sat in one of the chairs opposite Carcetti, Larabee joining him once he’d dismissed the guard and closed the door. They both sat and stared at Carcetti without speaking. After a few minutes Gibbs looked away, feigning boredom, and pulled his ever-present knife from its hiding place, using it to clean under his nails.

Carcetti tried to keep his composure, but Gibbs could see little telltale beads of sweat at his temples. Eventually, he spoke, “Are you just going to sit there all day? Ask me your questions, or release me. And I want my lawyer.” His tone was defiant, but Gibbs knew they were getting to him.

“Your lawyer can’t help you, Carcetti. You’re in a lot of trouble and we have a lot of evidence to prove it. “You kidnapped and assaulted two federal agents and are responsible for the death of several civilians and a US Marine.”

“I haven’t killed anyone!”

“No, but you supplied the weapons, which we’ve recovered, and you were caught in your own warehouse, with stacks of those very same weapons and two beaten federal agents.”

“You can’t prove any of that was me, though. You arrested other men at that warehouse. I didn’t know anything about what they were storing there and I was about to release those two agents when this man shot me!” Carcetti said, waving at Larabee.

Larabee banged his hand down on the table with a resounding crack, making Carcetti jump. Truth be told, it startled Gibbs, too, but he was able to hide his reaction and just carried on staring at Carcetti.

“Cut the crap, Carcetti!” Larabee growled, “those were our men and you know what us cops are like when one of our own gets hurt.” He leant forwards in his chair, crowding Carcetti without actually moving.

Gibbs stood and walked to lean on the wall behind Carcetti, taking his knife with him. It was a classic technique, splitting the suspect’s focus. Carcetti couldn’t look at Gibbs, without looking away from Larabee and Larabee was looking at him in a way that Carcetti wouldn’t want to look away from. Of course, Carcetti could see Gibbs in the mirrored glass, but Gibbs was positioned so that most of his body was blocked by the reflection of Carcetti himself, so the other man couldn’t see what Gibbs might be up to and he would be aware that Gibbs still had his knife.

Gibbs smirked internally when he saw Carcetti’s shoulders tense up another few notches. He was
careful to keep the smile off his face, though.

“I want the names of everyone you’ve sold weapons to, particularly those connected to the Woodfield and Carver gangs,” Larabee demanded.

“And I want my lawyer,” Carcetti repeated, aiming for defiant, but not quite hitting the mark.

Gibbs stepped forwards until he was all but touching Carcetti’s back. He leant down, resting the hand with the knife on the table next to Carcetti’s arm, and spoke directly into his ear, while making eye contact with Carcetti in the mirror. “You’ve got a decision to make, Carcetti. Either you tell us what we want to know and face the courts, or you deny it all face, well, who knows quite what you’ll face?” He flicked his eyes downwards to the knife, then back up to Carcetti’s reflection. Carcetti’s breath hitched slightly and Gibbs gave him a feral smile, before resuming his place against the wall.

Larabee sat back himself, shoving a pad of paper and a pencil across to Carcetti. “Write your lawyer’s details down,” he said and Carcetti did so with a shaking hand.

Larabee tore the piece of paper off the pad and stood, heading out of the room with Gibbs on his heels. “We’re calling his lawyer. Keep him in there until the lawyer arrives and call me once they’re ready to talk again,” Larabee instructed the guard who was waiting in the hall. The man nodded and stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him.

“That was fun,” Gibbs said, putting his knife away.

Larabee smirked. “It was, wasn’t it? I just wish he hadn’t played the lawyer card.”

“It was always gonna happen, Larabee. A man like that is always going to have a lawyer on hand. It won’t make any difference. We’ve got so much evidence on him that he’s going down, it’s just up to him who he takes down with him. He doesn’t strike me as the martyr-type; he’ll take as many others as he can down with him out of spite.”

“It doesn’t hurt that you gave him some food for thought,” Larabee replied with a grin.

“Nope. It doesn’t hurt at all,” Gibbs agreed.

Sure, it wasn’t the out and out confession they would’ve wished for, but Carcetti was never going to be that easy to crack. He may be running scared, but he wasn’t stupid. He masterminded the theft and sale of all those weapons, after all, and a stupid man wouldn’t have been able to do that. No, he was scared, but Gibbs didn’t kid himself that Carcetti was stupid just because he hadn’t done much to argue his innocence. In fact, that proved he was smart- he knew he was caught and he was looking at damage limitation. The less he said, the less he might slip up and he’d obviously taken one look at Gibbs and Larabee and known he wouldn’t be able to talk them into believing his innocence or get them to look the other way for a reward. This was the best outcome they could’ve hoped for once the man cried lawyer. They’d stretched the interview out as long as they could, but neither man wanted to risk Carcetti getting off on some technicality because he’d been pressured into a confession. They’d get another crack at him after the lawyer had been, and Gibbs was confident that he and Larabee could scare the truth out of him in the end.

“Back to the hospital, then?” Larabee asked.

“You even need to ask?” Gibbs replied.

“I guess not,” Larabee said, leading the way back out to the garage.
St Anthony Central Hospital, Denver

Back at the hospital, Gibbs resumed his seat next to Tony’s bed, while Larabee headed over to Standish and Tanner.

Gibbs looked Tony over- he looked better than he had after getting some sleep and some real food, even if it was only hospital food. The pain lines had faded round his eyes, too, though he didn’t seem particularly high when he said, “Hey, Boss. Did he confess?”

“Not yet, he lawyered up, but we scared him good. We’ll go back in a little while and get it all out of him,” Gibbs said confidently.

“Ah, Gibbs, you’ve let me down,” Tony said, sounding disappointed.

Gibbs was surprised by the comment and by how much it hurt, but before he could protest, a Southern drawl came from across the room.

“Do I detect the sound of $20 winging its way to me, Mr. DiNozzo?”

“Looks like it, Ez,” Tony replied.

Gibbs let out a quiet sigh of relief; Tony wasn’t really disappointed in him, it was just a bet. Still, he knew he’d be analysing that painful feeling later on.

“Let me get this straight, Ezra. You made a bet with DiNozzo about whether we’d get Carcetti to confess and you win because we didn’t?” Larabee said, putting a little bit of danger into his tone.

Standish’s face was turned towards Tony still, so Gibbs could see the green eyes widen and he saw Tony smirk.

“Now, Mr. Larabee,” Standish began, “I simply meant that Carcetti was likely to request a lawyer and at least pretend to be unmoved by any of your techniques. He has faced many unsavoury people in his line of work after all and must have developed a thick skin.”

“So wait, not only am I no good at getting a confession first time, but now I’m unsavoury, too?!” Larabee exclaimed. “Geez, Ezra, you sure know how to make a guy feel special.” Gibbs could tell he was trying to keep his voice stern and wounded, but he could hear the humour underneath it.

“Mr. Larabee, you know full well that’s not what I meant!”

“You need a ladder there, Ez? That hole you’re digging’s gettin’ mighty deep,” Tanner said.

Standish scowled at him, “You are absolutely no help at all, Mr. Tanner!”

“Relax, Ezra. I’m not gonna hurt you this time on account of your altered state from all those drugs you’re on,” Larabee said.

“Very magnanimous of you, Mr. Larabee,” Standish replied.

“Is that a thank you? If so, you’re welcome,” Larabee said, looking up as the door opened and Ducky walked in.

“Ah, Jethro, you’re back. Did you have any success?”

“Have you been betting, too, Duck? He lawyered up, but he’s going to talk later on.”

“Betting, Jethro? Whatever do you mean?”
“These two clowns have been betting on whether we would get a confession or not,” Gibbs informed him, injecting disapproval into his voice.

“I see,” Ducky replied, frowning at the two slightly guilty expressions being sent his way. “I can assure you they waited until I had left the room to make that bet.”

They settled down after that, mostly listening to Ducky and Standish relating tall tales from their pasts. Before much longer, Tony and Standish started to flag.

“I don’t get it. Why am I so tired when I’ve not done anything but sleep and lie here all day?” Tony said, petulantly.

“On the contrary, Anthony, you’re body is working very hard to heal itself. You should take a nap for a few hours, then it will be time for your concussion check and dinner,” Ducky replied.

Tony grumbled some more, but wasn’t able to resist the pull of sleep and Standish followed him down a little later. Larabee and Ducky left at that point and Gibbs and Tanner settled down into their companionable silence.

Gibbs found he was unable to resist reaching out and carding his fingers through Tony’s hair once again and he smiled when Tony pushed into the movement. His thoughts turned back to that jolt of pain he’d felt when he thought Tony was disappointed in him. That had been a surprising feeling, as a lot of people were quite often disappointed in him for some reason or another- usually Jen and usually because he’d said something impolite. But the thought of failing Tony had been unpleasant and it gave him pause, because if he confessed his feelings and they started some kind of relationship, Gibbs knew he’d end up disappointing Tony more than once.

He looked down when a hand pulled his out of Tony’s hair and laced their fingers. Tony was awake again, barely, watching Gibbs through slitted eyes and smiling very faintly. “You’re thinking too much,” he told Gibbs, before pulling Gibbs’ hand under the covers and snuggling it under his chin.

Ok, it looked like the painkillers were still messing with Tony, just not making him loopy this time. Still, it was nice and no one was looking- Tanner was focused on his own vigil over Standish. Gibbs left his hand where it was and grinned, suddenly feeling a lot less pensive than he had a few moments before.

A few hours later, a nurse came in, looking unsurprised to see the two visitors. Obviously she’d been briefed by her colleague. She smiled and did her checks, waking Tony and checking he knew his name and a few other details. “It’ll be meal time in a few minutes,” she said as she left.

Sure enough, the meal trolley came round not long after, accompanied by some nurses to help Tony and Standish sit up. Once again, Gibbs and Tanner made themselves scarce and got their own food at the cafeteria, then stocked up on coffee.

When they returned, it was to the sight of Tony and Standish sitting up, though their meals had gone. They were both resting on strange inflatable pillows that were horseshoe shaped. Gibbs’ eyebrow raised and Tony grinned, suddenly feeling a lot less pensive than he had a few moments before.

“The nurses said we should try sitting up for a bit longer if we’re going home tomorrow.”

“You comfortable?” Gibbs wanted to know.

Tony pulled a face. “It’s not the most comfortable thing ever. It supports my shoulders, neck and the outer edges of my rib cage, but has no back, so the worst of the bruises aren’t actually in contact with anything. There were a few stray lashes though, so there are one or two bruises under pressure, but
it’s better than lying on my front all day, because I find it harder to breath like that.”

“Ok, just let me know if it gets too uncomfortable,” Gibbs said.

The quiet didn’t last long, as evening visiting hours started and the rest of the teams descended once more. McGee brought his laptop along and Tony had a brief video reunion with Abby, who squealed and generally made everyone smile with her happiness.

Larabee arrived and pulled Gibbs aside. “Carcetti’s ready to talk.”

Gibbs excused himself, promising he’d be back shortly and then he and Larabee strode out of the hospital to his truck and were soon on their way to face Carcetti again.

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ATF Headquarters, Denver

It was actually quite an anti-climax, Chris thought as he and Gibbs walked back out of the interrogation room not half an hour after walking in it. He’d been all geared up to scare Carcetti a bit more and Gibbs had seemed just as eager if the glint in his eye was any indication.

They’d been thwarted, however. As soon as they sat down, Carcetti’s lawyer had said, “My client wishes to propose a deal. He will confess to all charges and give you all the names of his buyers and in return, you will get him a lower sentence and will give him protection against any of his clients wishing to even the score.”

Gibbs and Chris had looked at each other, but really, it was a good deal and would certainly help ATF take down a lot of gunmen out there. They’d agreed and Carcetti had started writing. He hadn’t said a word to anyone, just sat there looking shell-shocked. He probably hadn’t believed his little empire could come crashing down around his ears quite so easily.

As they walked down the corridor, set on returning to the hospital again, Orin Travis had rounded the corner ahead of them. “Ah, Chris, there you are. I hear your big case is coming to a head?”

Chris had been keeping his boss up to date with the investigation as and when he had the chance, so Travis knew the basics, but he was pretty hands off when it came to Chris and his team, trusting them to get the job done. Chris appreciated that, but it also made him wonder who’d been talking, as he’d not had the chance to tell Orin about this latest development.

Something must have shown on his face, because Travis smiled and said, “I had a call from Judge Pryzbylewski congratulating the team on a good case.”

Pryzbylewski was the judge Chris had called to get the paperwork started on Carcetti’s deal. “Ah, I see, sir. Sir, this is Special Agent Jethro Gibbs of NCIS, Gibbs, this is Deputy Director Orin Travis,” Chris introduced.

“Gibbs, hmm? It’s good to finally meet you,” Orin said with a smile, shaking Gibbs’ hand.

Gibbs looked about as confused as Chris felt. “I’m sorry, sir, but do I know you?” Gibbs asked.

“No, but I know Ducky and he talks about you and your team a lot.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if there’s anyone left in the US who doesn’t know Ducky,” Gibbs said in fond exasperation.
“When you’ve been around as long as we have, Agent Gibbs, you find there are a lot of people you’ve met over the years.”

“No doubt, sir.”

“Now, tell me how Ezra and… Tony, is it?” Gibbs nodded, “Tell me how they’re doing.”

Chris and Gibbs went over Ezra and Tony’s conditions and then briefed him more fully on the details of the case, including the confessions of all the henchmen from Carcetti’s gang that Buck, JD, Josiah, Nathan, McGee and Ziva had been busy getting when they hadn’t been at the hospital. They finished up with Travis saying, “Well done once again. I’ll call your director, Gibbs and sort out who will be prosecuting whom and when. You’ll have to remind me of her name. Ducky has told me, but it’s slipped my mind currently.”

“Jennifer Shepard, sir.”

“Jennifer Shepard. Of course, of course! Thank you. Now, I can see you want to get back to your injured teammates, so I’ll let you get off.”

Hands were shaken once again and Gibbs and Chris continued their way down the corridor. They didn’t get far before Travis called out, “Oh, by the way, Chris; tell Inez that the first round is on me!”

“Thanks, Orin,” Chris said with a grin and a half salute.

“Inez?” Gibbs asked.

“She runs The Saloon, our local watering hole. We usually head there when we crack a case… and when we don’t. We should head over there tomorrow, once our guys are out of the hospital,” Chris explained. He was looking forward to getting to the bar for a well earned drink and some of Inez’s delicious snacks.

“Sounds good,” Gibbs said.

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St Anthony Central Hospital, Denver

When they got back to the hospital, the teams had gone for the day, all except Vin, of course. Chris stayed for a while and he and Gibbs brought their teammates up to date with all the confessions and everything else.

Doctor Hannigan appeared at just gone 9pm. “I’m surprised to find so many healthy people in this room with visiting hours over an hour ago,” she said with a grin and a raised brow.

“Don’t worry, Doctor, I’m not staying,” Chris said with a smile.

Dr. Hannigan clearly didn’t miss the fact that Vin and Gibbs had remained quiet, but she obviously chose not to comment, instead turning her attention to her patients. She did some quick checks, including shining a light in Tony’s eyes. “How’s the head?” she asked.

“It’s down to an ordinary head ache now,” he informed her.

“Good. I think we can forego anymore two-hour checks, but you tell the nurses if it flairs up again.” She was talking to Tony, but it was Gibbs who replied, making Chris grin, because that’s what he had to do when it was Vin in the hospital.
“I will, Doc. I’ll keep an eye on him- I’ve had enough experience of DiNozzo with a concussion to know what to look for.”

Dr. Hannigan assessed Gibbs for a moment, then nodded, obviously accepting him at his word.

“That’s settled then. Now, what about the pillows, how are they working for you both?”

“There is some slight discomfort, but that will be the case whatever position I take,” Ezra said.

“Yeah, what he said,” Tony added.

“That’s good. You can try sleeping on them, or you can sleep on your sides if you feel up to it. Whatever’s most comfortable. I’ll send a nurse in to change your bandages, reapply the antibiotic ointment and give you another painkiller, then you should be able to rest for the night.”

She turned to Chris and said, not unkindly, “You need to go now, come back tomorrow with the rest of the mob.” Then she focused on Vin and Gibbs, “You two can stay, so long as you let my patients rest and don’t disturb anyone. The nurses tell me you’ve been here all along and not caused any trouble, so just see that you carry on that way.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorused, causing grins all round.

“Ok then. I’ll be back in the morning and we’ll assess whether you can be released. Get a good night’s sleep everyone.”

With that, she headed out of the room and Chris followed obediently along behind her and headed to his ranch for a long awaited sleep of his own.

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Not long after Chris and the doctor left, two nurses arrived. One of them pulled the dividing curtain closed between Ezra and Tony’s beds.

“If you two gentlemen could excuse us?” one of the nurses said, causing Vin and Gibbs to leave the room with promises to come back in a few minutes.

Ezra’s nurse was perfectly pleasant and competent, removing the bandages from his wrists, applying the salve and covering them with new bandages in short order. But then came the hard part.

Ezra’s back was so stiff from all the bruising that it was terribly uncomfortable to move. He’d found that once he’d settled against the horseshoe pillow, he’d been pretty comfortable, considering, but even the slightest movement set off little stabbing pains. He knew that leaning forward and then holding himself there while the dressings were changed was going to hurt even with the nurse helping him.

Sure enough, Ezra’s life for the next five minutes centred on the burning muscles of his back and the desperate need not to cry out. By the time he lay back again, his breaths were coming in heaving gasps and he was sweating.

“There, all done,” the nurse said. “I’ll give you your painkiller now, so you should start to feel better in a minute.” She emptied a syringe into the IV port that was still attached to his hand, even though the IVs had been removed hours ago and, sure enough, he started to relax as the pain ebbed away.

The nurse packed up and left, shortly followed by Tony’s nurse. Neither of them had opened the curtain, so Ezra couldn’t see Tony, but he could hear his breathing evening out. “You sound like I
“I feel like you feel, I bet,” Tony chuckled. They lay quietly for a few moments, getting their breaths back and letting the pain ebb away.

It was Tony who broke the silence, “So… Are you going to tell him?”

“That’s very cryptic,” Ezra said, turning his head to the curtain, even though he couldn’t see through it. “Am I going to tell whom what?”

“Are you going to tell Vin Tanner how you feel about him?”

Ezra’s eyes widened. That was unexpected and a little unnerving- he didn’t think he’d been that obvious. Still, two could play at that game. “I haven’t yet decided. Are you going to talk to Mr. Gibbs?”

Tony sighed. “I don’t know. If you’re worried about how Vin feels, I think the fact that he’s stayed by your side the whole time you’ve been here should answer that question.”

“Agent Gibbs hasn’t left you except for interrogating Carcetti,” Ezra pointed out.

“I know, but it’s different for me, Ez, Gibbs is my boss. You don’t have that problem with Vin. Besides, Gibbs has this big list of rules and number 12 is ‘never date a co-worker’.” Ezra detected a note of despair in his new friend’s tone and that wouldn’t do.

“I think it’s a safe bet to say he’s thinking about changing that rule. He wouldn’t be spending so much time here otherwise.”

The man in question returned, along with Vin, before Tony could formulate a response. “Just think about it, Tony,” he said, before turning his attention to Vin, who was sitting next to his bed once more.

“Hey, Ez, how’re you feeling?”

“Well enough now that the painkiller has kicked in, Mr. Tanner, thank you.”

They sat and watched each other for a time and Ezra reflected on how good looking Vin was with those blue eyes and long wavy hair. He was lithe and graceful, polite and quiet, with the soul of a poet. He took a long time to trust someone, but once he did, that person would never regret the effort they expended to win him over, because he was loyal and generous to a fault. He was also starting to blush faintly, which Ezra privately thought was adorable.

“What?” Vin asked with a bemused smile. He darted his eyes to the side and Ezra took a deep breath and then acted before he could think himself out of it. He reached up and gently brushed his fingers over Vin’s cheekbone, brushing his hair away from his face and catching it behind his ear.

Vin’s eyes snapped up to stare at Ezra in shock and Ezra felt like time stopped as he waited out Vin’s assessing stare. “Ezra?” he asked, sounding unbearably vulnerable.

“Yes, Vin,” he replied, hoping the use of ‘Vin’ rather than his usual formality would answer the question Vin hadn’t been able to ask aloud, but that had been clear in his eyes.

Vin stared at him a moment longer and Ezra held his breath, then let it all out in a rush when Vin slowly leaned in, watching him all the way, and gently pressed his lips to Ezra’s. It wasn’t really a kiss, more of a question, one that Ezra answered by reaching up to cup the back of Vin’s head and
draw him in for a real kiss.

It was chaste and sweet, close mouthed. Just testing the waters between them. Vin pulled back slightly, just enough to rest his forehead against Ezra’s and gaze into his eyes.

“Do you really want this, Ezra? It’s not just some weird side effect of the drugs or the ordeal you’ve been through?”

Trust Vin- so convinced he was unworthy of affection that he immediately assumed Ezra was only interested because he was under the influence of mind altering drugs. “I’m sure, Vin. I have been for awhile, I just didn’t know how to bring it up, but then, I thought I was going to die without ever telling you how I feel. It made me realise that I shouldn’t waste time on wondering ‘what if’.” Again, Ezra dropped his formal manner. He hid behind the ceremony and politeness, keeping people at arms length by addressing them by rank or title. He hoped Vin would understand what he was offering by addressing him so casually.

Vin smiled shyly and leaned in again. This time the kiss went on for a bit longer as they opened to each other, exploring lips and teeth, gently duelling tongues. Ezra moved his fingers into the thick hair at the back of Vin’s neck, while Vin lifted both hands and lightly gripped Ezra’s face between them, cupping his jaw and moving him to just where Vin wanted him.

Ezra sighed into the kiss and smiled against Vin’s lips, feeling it returned. They eventually pulled away, in need of air. Vin smiled at him, eyes sparkling with happiness and Ezra imagined he had much the same expression on his own face. A yawn came out of nowhere and he grinned sheepishly, while Vin chuckled. “Sorry,” he said. “Nah, you need your rest, Ez. We’ve got plenty of time to carry this on when you’re feeling a bit better. I’m staying here with you until you’re released, after all.”

“But, when I’m released, you’d be so kind as to spend a little time at my house? I’m going to need help and while I wouldn’t wish to be a burden to you, I would like to be able to spend some uninterrupted time with you,” Ezra said. He really didn’t want to put Vin out and worried he’d overstepped the bounds.

But he needn’t have worried, as Vin beamed at him and said, “Of course I’ll stay and help you out, Ez. I’d been waiting for the right moment to volunteer myself anyway, if only to save you from Nate’s lectures, ‘Siah’s stories, or Buck’s antics. Now I’ve got even more incentive. Now, get some rest. The quicker you sleep, the quicker it’ll be mornin’ and you can be released into my care.”

Ezra smiled and it stayed on his face as he slipped into sleep with the feeling of Vin’s fingers running through his hair.

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Ezra and Vin were very quiet, but what they didn’t know was that the two men on the other side of the curtain had exceptionally good hearing. Tony was glad for his new found friends- they were good guys and they deserved to be happy, especially after what Ezra had been through with Carcetti. He just wished it would be so easy for himself. He sighed and tried to get his mind off the subject.

“You ok, Tony?” Gibbs asked.

Tony turned away from the curtain to look at Gibbs, though he only glanced at the man before looking down. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m happy for them, you know? They deserve to be happy.”
“What about you? Do you deserve to be happy?” Gibbs asked, in an odd tone of voice.

Tony frowned and looked up, only to be caught in an intense gaze. “Boss?” he whispered. Surely this couldn’t be what he thought it was? He wasn’t that lucky.

But Gibbs was leaning in, watching Tony with that same intensity, until closing his eyes at the last second and brushing his lips against Tony’s.

Tony gasped and returned the kiss with interest. Gibbs reached his hand up to cup Tony’s jaw and Tony, in turn, gripped Gibbs’ wrist, holding him in place. The kiss was slow and sweet, exploratory. Tony ran his tongue along Gibbs’ lips, then delved inside when they parted for him. He wasn’t surprised at the faint hint of coffee he could taste, but that was only part of what Gibbs tasted like, mostly it was just some undefined Gibbs-taste, which Tony decided he liked quite a lot. It was also damn hot—man could Gibbs kiss!

Gibbs pulled back before things could get too out of control, though, which was probably for the best given where they were, but that didn’t really appease Tony and he whined in displeasure. Gibbs grinned at him and caressed the back of Tony’s head where he would normally have aimed a slap. It made a pleasant change and Tony closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, almost purring in pleasure.

Gibbs chuckled, but didn’t let up, instead bringing his other hand up to join in, massaging Tony’s scalp until he was pretty much boneless and unconscious.

“Go to sleep, Tony,” he heard Gibbs whisper, then he felt a light kiss to the tip of his nose, but he was too far gone to open his eyes at that point and he allowed himself to take that last step into sleep.

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A trolley with a squeaky wheel going past in the corridor outside was what woke Gibbs in the morning. His neck was stiff from sleeping in the uncomfortable chair all night, but he decided it was worth the discomfort when he turned towards Tony after finding one of his hands had been hijacked when he tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes.

Tony had managed to turn himself on his side, despite him having been on his back when Gibbs nodded off. Gibbs wondered whether he’d woken in the night, or whether it had just been instinctual to turn towards Gibbs. He liked to think it was the second option, but the first was more likely. Either way, Tony had found his hand during the night and had twined their fingers together and tucked their joined hands under his chin. He looked disturbingly sweet and innocent like that and Gibbs smiled fondly.

Tony, of course, chose that moment to wake up. Gibbs didn’t mind being caught out when it got that soft smile from Tony in return. “Hey,” Tony said, voice rough from sleep.

“Hey yourself, Tony.”

Not long after that, the routine they’d got into kicked in. Nurses arrived to check their patients and give them breakfast, so Gibbs headed out with Tanner on the quest for their own breakfast. Gibbs didn’t feel like going to the cafeteria again, so he suggested they head outside to a coffee shop he’d spotted when he’d been going back and forth to ATF with Larabee.

Tanner agreed readily, obviously just as sick of the swill the hospital called coffee. They sat at one of the tables by the window, eating bagels and drinking large mugs of good black coffee. They didn’t talk much, as was their way, but as they were heading back to the hospital, Gibbs turned to Tanner
and said, “You talked to him, then?”

“Well, more like he talked to me, but yeah, things were said. You?”

“Yeah, we said things, too.”

“Good,” Tanner replied.

It surprised Gibbs that he was willing to share even that much with Tanner. After all, they were virtual strangers, they’d known each other for a day, but the shared worry and waiting had created a kind of camaraderie between them. It probably also helped that there were a lot of little similarities Gibbs had spotted between the four of them, Tanner did a lot of things like Tony did and that made him comfortable, like an old friend.

Just as they reached the hospital, Gibbs’ phone rang. “You go on up, I’ve got to get this,” he said when he saw it was Jen calling. Tanner nodded and vanished into the building.

“Gibbs,” he announced in his customary greeting.

“Jethro. How are you? How’s Tony?”

“We’re good, Jen. Tony should be released later today.”

“That’s excellent news. When will you be back? The body of a Marine has been found and I could do with your team on it, as the others are already working cases.”

Gibbs scowled. His team needed a rest, especially Tony. Lord knew he wasn’t above working them into the ground, but that was only during an active case and he always gave them time off to recuperate afterwards. “The team’s exhausted, Jenny, and in any case, Tony can’t come back for a few days anyway.”

“Why not? I thought you just said he was going to be released.”

“He is, but his back’s a mess, Jen. He can hardly move without hurting something and there’s no way he could sit in a plane or a car with his back pressed against a seat back for hours.”

He could hear Jen’s mounting frustration as she said, “Well, can’t the rest of you come back and leave Tony there?”

Gibbs actually took the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a second. Had she really just suggested that? “I can’t leave Tony here alone. It’s way above and beyond to expect one of the ATF team to look after him and there’s no way I’m leaving him alone in the hotel when he can’t move! The others can fly back today, but I’m staying with Tony. I’ve got plenty of leave saved up.”

“That’s no good, Jethro. Neither David or McGee are experienced enough to run an investigation!”

“I know that, Jen, but I’m not leaving Tony, so those are your options- use exhausted, inexperienced agents to investigate, or give it to one of the other teams. There must be someone on cold cases in the building, give it to them.”

He could easily picture the scowl on her face as she said, “Fine, I’ll give it to someone else and your team can rest, but Gibbs, I need Ducky and Palmer back here to do the autopsy and you should send Ziva and McGee back to help Abby collate all the evidence she’s been processing for this case.”
It made sense to Gibbs. Abby had been working just as much as everyone else and she deserved a break, too. If Ziva and McGee helped her to catalogue all the evidence, she’d be able to get some sleep that bit sooner. It would also mean he could concentrate on Tony.

“Ok, I’ll get them on a plane later today, but they won’t be in the office until tomorrow. You should pull rank and send Abby home, or I can call her if you’d prefer?”

“Thank you,” Jen said somewhat sarcastically. Then she sighed, “I’ll talk to Abby.” He didn’t know what the problem was- he was doing what she wanted after all.

“I’ll see them tomorrow and you and Tony soon, then,” she said, before ringing off.

Gibbs put his phone away, muttering to himself in a high voice, “Excellent work on solving this case, Jethro.” “Why thank you, Director Shepard, good of you to notice,” he answered in his normal voice. He scowled all the way back up to Tony’s room, but then took a breath and shook it off.

He walked in to find Tony, Standish and Tanner grinning at each other.

“What have you three been plotting?” Gibbs asked.

“Nothing, Boss. For once I’m completely innocent. We’re just happy ’cause Amanda’s been in and given us the all clear to leave once the paperwork’s all completed.”

“Amanda?” Gibbs asked.

“Doc Hannigan,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes.

Gibbs huffed out a quick laugh. “Why am I not surprised that you’ve learnt the woman’s name, DiNozzo?”

“It’s just polite, Gibbs. She fixed me up after all,” Tony replied with a grin.

Gibbs was glad that Tony was being released, of course he was, but it did mean he’d have to think about logistics.

He didn’t get far when Tony said, “So, Vin said you got a call. Anything to do with the case?”

“No, Tony. It was Jen, she’s got a dead Marine she wants the team working on back in DC.”

Tony’s face fell, “Oh. When are you all leaving?”

“I’m not, Tony. I told her that the team’s exhausted, that you can’t fly home for a few days at least and that I’m not leaving you alone with this lot,” he waved at Standish, Tanner and Larabee, who’d walked into the room during the tail end of his sentence.

“Well, good morning to you, too, Gibbs,” Larabee said with a smirk.

“I bet that went down well,” Tony said with a cheeky grin.

“Yeah, like a lead balloon. We compromised- the rest of the team will go home later today, but Ducky and Palmer are doing that one autopsy and Ziva and McGee are going to help Abby sort out all the evidence for this case and then they’re all getting some rest.”

The rest of both teams arrived in short order and Gibbs informed his lot of the latest proceedings.

Willmington over heard and announced, “No one is flying anywhere until we’ve had a celebratory
drink at the Saloon!"

“That’s right,” Larabee added, “Orin said the first round was on him, after all.”

“Of course,” Ducky exclaimed. “I’d completely forgotten in all the excitement that Orin Travis is in Denver. How foolish of me! I must pay him a visit before I leave.”

“We should go to the Saloon as soon as Ezra and Tony are released,” Jackson said. “They’ll be given a fresh dose of painkillers before they start moving, so we should be able to get a drink in at Inez’s before they need to go and rest, then Ducky can visit Travis and still have plenty of time to pack for the flight. Uh, when is the flight?”

Gibbs glanced at McGee, expecting him to produce a laptop, but it was actually Dunne who brought forth a computer and started searching. “Ok, there’s a flight at 4pm, one at 6:15, or one at 7:45,” he announced, looking round.

Gibbs left it up to those going back and Ducky said, “6:15 sounds good to me. It will give us plenty of time to do what we need to here, but also means we won’t arrive home too late.” Everyone agreed and Dunne booked their places over the internet.

Half an hour later, Tony and Standish were signed out after Doctor Hannigan was assured that Tanner and Gibbs would be keeping a close eye on her patients. It was a happy, if slow, procession that headed out to the fleet of vehicles the teams had arrived in. Gibbs kept an eye on Tony, but, as Jackson had thought, he’d been pumped full of painkillers to make the journey as easy as possible.

The Saloon was an old fashioned bar, with Old West memorabilia and lots of rough wood panelling. It was tasteful, though, not one of those themed places that seemed to keep springing up everywhere. Inez, the owner, was a lovely lady, very welcoming and obviously very fond of Larabee’s team, even Willmington, who she deflected skilfully through long practice.

Gibbs had one drink of very nice bourbon, which he nursed, and Tony had to stick to lemonade due to the drugs, but they had a pleasant time and Inez made a mean plate of buffalo wings and potato skins.

Everyone was in fine spirits, glad to have solved the case and got their teammates back in mostly one piece. Tony and Standish started to tire quickly, though and things wound down sooner than anyone would have really liked, but it couldn’t be helped. Before they all started to disperse, Inez insisted on taking a photograph, saying that for one day her Magnificent Seven had become the Magnificent Thirteen and she wanted evidence to prove it.

That had drawn a few confused looks, until Sanchez pointed out that their team had picked up the Magnificent Seven nickname somewhere down the line and it had stuck. Gibbs had smiled, happy enough to be lumped together with Larabee’s team.

Soon enough, though, things broke up. Ducky went off to meet his old friend Travis, Tanner whisked Standish away, or, more precisely, Willmington and Dunne took them back to Standish’s house on the way back to their own, because Tanner’s Jeep was still at the office from the day before.

Gibbs’ team, sans Ducky, were all set to head back to the hotel to pack, when Larabee spoke up. “Listen, Gibbs, you and Tony should stay at my place until Tony’s well enough to fly home. I’ve got plenty of room and it’ll be more comfortable for Tony. There’re three steps from the driveway up to the veranda, but the house itself is all one level. It’ll also save NCIS’ budget, which might make your director a little happier about you staying here for a few extra days. I’ll be at work most of the time,
so you’ll have the place pretty much to yourselves.”

Gibbs looked at Tony, who shrugged. “That sounds great, thanks, Chris.” He saw Larabee smile at his use of his given name for the first time and hoped it conveyed his real gratitude for the offer. He knew the message had been received when Larabee nodded to him.

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**Chris’ Ranch, Denver**

Larabee’s house turned out to be a sprawling ranch complete with a few horses and no other houses for miles around. The kind of place Gibbs could appreciate.

True to his word, after pottering about, showing Tony to the guest bedroom and then Gibbs around the whole house and outbuildings, Larabee had vanished back to ATF for the rest of the day.

Tony had slept most of the time, recovering after the excitement of the saloon and the stress of all the travelling. Gibbs, though he would never admit it to anyone, spent most of the day watching Tony sleep.

The three of them spent a pleasant evening together, chatting and getting to know each other as friends rather than fellow law enforcers. Larabee turned out to be a pretty good cook, too. They all retired earlier than normal, as they needed to catch up on their sleep.

The next few days were restful. Larabee was out most of the day, leaving Gibbs and Tony alone. Gibbs took it easy, watching the horses, helping Tony, going for a run round the fenced in fields Larabee had said belonged to him. He also spent time in the work shed. Larabee had a project on the go- a gate that had been damaged. He fixed it up, because he liked woodwork and it soothed him and he missed his boat, but also as a way of saying thanks to Larabee for putting them up.

By the time he’d repaired it and was re-hanging it, two days had passed since Tony had been released. He was still slow, but the pain wasn’t anywhere near as bad and he could finally move about on his own.

Gibbs stepped back from the gate, checking that it was hanging square and that it still opened and closed smoothly.

“Looking good,” Tony said and Gibbs turned to find him sitting on the top step of the veranda, leaning his shoulder against the rail post.

“The gate or me?” Gibbs teased with a grin.

“Both,” Tony said, grinning back.

Gibbs walked over to where Tony sat and leaned in for a kiss. They explored each other’s mouths for a few minutes, then Tony pulled back and wrinkled his nose. “You stink of sweat,” he said, eyes twinkling.

“So do you,” Gibbs pointed out. Tony hadn’t been able to shower for the last few days due to the wounds on his back and although he’d washed with a damp cloth, it wasn’t the same.

“Guess we both need a shower then,” Tony said suggestively.

Gibbs grinned. “That sounds like an excellent plan, DiNozzo,” he agreed. Tony was finally well enough to have a shower. He could stand without too much discomfort and all but the two cuts that
had needed the butterfly tape were healed enough to withstand the shower spray. Dr. Hannigan had said he could shower after a few days as long as he made sure all the wounds were carefully dried and the salve was applied afterwards and the two taped wounds were covered with waterproof bandages to keep them dry for a bit longer.

Tony grinned, pulled Gibbs in for a quick kiss and said, “What are we waiting for? We can kill three birds with one stone!”

“Three birds, Tony?”

“Yes. Bird one- you get clean, bird two- I get clean and bird three- we finally get to see each other naked and I love shower sex.”

“I see. Three birds it is then. Let’s go, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said, pulling Tony up and gently shoving him towards the house.

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Larabee’s shower was big enough for the two of them with room to spare, but they stood pretty close under the spray. They really did need to get clean, but they didn’t have to be clinical about it.

They explored each other’s bodies slowly, lathering each other up and slowly clearing away the grime, finding each other’s hot spots and ticklish spots as they went. Gibbs discovered that the night in the hospital wasn’t a fluke and Tony truly enjoyed getting his head massaged so much that he purred and nearly collapsed he was so boneless by the time Gibbs rinsed the shampoo out.

Once they were both clean, their touches got a little more meaningful. Tony rubbed his thumbs over Gibbs’ nipples, grinning against his lips when the sensation caused Gibbs to moan.

Tony’s nipples weren’t quite so sensitive, but Gibbs discovered that a tongue in the belly button was a sure way to make Tony cry out in pleasure.

They teased each other for a long time, building the tension slowly, only reaching for each other’s cocks when they were rock hard and leaking. Gibbs found Tony’s cock to be a nice handful, long and lean like Tony himself. He was also delightfully responsive to the tiniest squeeze or pull, moaning and cursing, or kissing Gibbs anywhere he could reach.

Tony wasn’t idle, however, doing his own exploration of Gibbs cock, learning how to get the loudest moan from him. Before they could get too carried away, though, the shower started to get cold.

They laughed, kissed briefly and got out to dry off. By the time Gibbs had made sure all of Tony’s wounds were sufficiently dry and had put the cream and bandages on them, their ardour had cooled somewhat, but that just meant they could have more fun stoking it back up again.

Tony still couldn’t comfortably lie on his back, so they lay on their sides on the guest bed, facing each other from a few inches apart. Once again hands explored. Tony found the ticklish spot on Gibbs’ ribs and Gibbs found that the back of Tony’s left knee was incredibly sensitive, making him moan at the slightest brush of fingers.

Soon they were fully hard and desperate once more. Tony was almost devouring Gibbs’ mouth and making breathy moans every time Gibbs jacked his cock, which Gibbs was doing very slowly, enjoying driving Tony out of his mind. Tony was running his own hands all over Gibbs, pulling and tweaking his nipples, squeezing his ass, his cock, even his balls, which Gibbs found to be a particularly intense feeling.
Gibbs finally decided it was time to take Tony over the edge. The man was completely incoherent and breathing hard. He sped his strokes up, jacking Tony harder, squeezing tighter and adding a twist of his wrist on the upstroke. He smiled as Tony’s breath started to hitch and his touches started to falter against Gibbs’ body.

Gibbs thought Tony was about to come, when Tony suddenly clamped his hand round Gibbs’ wrist, stilling his strokes. Gibbs looked into lust-blown eyes and nearly came on the spot when Tony’s deep, sexy voice demanded, “Fuck me, Gibbs. Right now.”

Gibbs had to close his eyes and breathe for a second or two before he could look at Tony again. “Hell yeah, you don’t need to tell me twice. Have you got any stuff?” His own voice was pretty rough, too.

“Yeah, condoms in my bag and you can use that stuff you’ve been putting on my cuts for lube.”

That sounded like an excellent idea to Gibbs’ lust-filled brain, so he quickly hopped off the bed and gathered the necessary items. When he turned back to the bed he nearly dropped his acquisitions at the sight of Tony lying on his stomach with his legs spread invitingly.

“God, Tony,” he groaned. The man was beautiful even marked up as he was. Gibbs was glad that Tony wasn’t showing any hesitation at presenting his bruised and bandaged back to Gibbs, he wasn’t ashamed of the injury, as Gibbs had half feared he would be, knowing how Tony liked to look good at all times. Obviously Gibbs was privileged to be allowed to see all of Tony in any condition and it was a privilege he intended to relish.

“What are you waiting for?” Tony demanded impatiently.

Gibbs smirked and shook his head. “Nothing, DiNozzo, just admiring the view.”

“Well, can you-“

Whatever Tony had been going to demand, was abruptly cut off by a moan as Gibbs, without further ado, slowly but surely pressed a well-lubed finger inside Tony. He was so tight and hot that Gibbs had to grip the base of his cock tight to stop himself from coming right then.

The time was fast approaching where neither one of them could take the teasing anymore, but Gibbs took a few minutes to find and play with Tony’s prostate until he was a moaning, incoherent mess, writhing on the bed.

“Now, or I’m going to come without you inside me!” Tony managed to choke out.

Gibbs desperately wanted to be inside Tony when he came, so he quickly, but carefully added a second, then third, finger, working Tony open as quickly as he dared and being careful to avoid his prostate.

“Now! Gibbs! Fuck me now!” Tony yelled.

Gibbs chuckled unsteadily. “Demanding, aren’t you?” he said, though he didn’t waste any time getting the condom on himself and lubing up.

He took a deep breath and lined himself up with Tony’s hole, pushing in carefully and making sure he kept his chest away from Tony’s back. He didn’t want to inadvertently catch one of the bruises and hurt Tony at a time he should be giving him pleasure.

He finally bottomed out, inside Tony as far as he could go, with his balls resting against Tony’s ass.
They both moaned at the sensation and Gibbs could feel Tony’s muscles rippling gently against his cock. He held still for a moment to give them time to adjust, but he started moving carefully when Tony said, “Gibbs!”

He rocked carefully at first, wanting to ease Tony into it, but Tony squeezed his ass tight around Gibbs’ cock and that was it, Gibbs couldn’t hold back anymore and it seemed Tony didn’t want him to anyway, so he started to quicken his strokes, thrusting harder and harder until he was pounding into Tony almost brutally, the noises Tony was making only driving him on harder.

At that pace, it wasn’t long before he felt his orgasm building and he reached round to take Tony in his hand again, pulling, squeezing and twisting his cock in the way that seemed to work so well before and had Tony crying out in ecstasy this time round. He angled himself until he was hitting Tony’s prostate with each thrust and that was all Tony could stand it seemed.

With a final cry of Gibbs’ name, Tony exploded over Gibbs’ hand and the bed covers beneath him. His body locked up tight, squeezing Gibbs’ cock almost unbearably for a long second, before rhythmically squeezing and relaxing in time to Tony’s pulsing release. That sensation was enough to finally pull Gibbs over the edge, milking his own release from him in a mind-blowing orgasm.

Gibbs sagged, exhausted, but with enough about him to manage not to fall on Tony’s back. He pulled out after a few moments catching his breath, then dealt with the condom and grabbed one of their still-damp towels and cleaned the lube and come as much as possible, then he fought the covers out from under a boneless Tony.

“We’re going to need another shower,” Tony mumbled thickly, obviously on the brink of sleep and in no fit state to take a shower even if there was any hot water left.

“We used up all the water, remember? We’ll have to do it later, after a nap.”

“Good plan,” Tony replied, sounding a little more with it.

Gibbs collapsed on his back and Tony shuffled over to drape himself over Gibbs’ chest.

“Hi,” he said with a grin.

“Hi, yourself,” Gibbs replied, pulling Tony into a sloppy kiss, neither of them up to much finesse at that point.

“That was amazing. We should do it again. And again,” Tony said.

Gibbs grinned and kissed the tip of his nose, “Yeah we should.”

As they settled down for some much needed sleep, Gibbs realised that, although it was still too new for either of them to be comfortable using the word ‘love’ to describe what they had, there was no denying that that was where they were headed and Gibbs found that that thought didn’t scare him as much as he had thought it would.

The end.

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