In the Light of a New Day
by cernicalo

Summary

Dark clouds and middle age are catching up to DiNozzo.
Chapter 1

Tony dragged himself out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom. First he relieved himself and then turned on the water. He refused to look into the mirror wanting no proof that he looked as pathetic as he felt. He moved into the shower and used the sandpaper washcloth to scrub away the makeup he knew was smeared around his eyes. Once he was done he proceeded to wash away every trace of the night’s activities from his thighs and ass. It had been hard and good at the time but now it was gone without even leaving the soreness he’d hoped to take away as a reminder that he wasn’t alone. The fact that he felt nothing except for the tingling left by the rough washcloth seemed to emphasize how fleeting his moment of fantasy had been.

Tony refused to use the ancient coffeemaker in the room opting instead to walk to the lobby for a cup of coffee. He tossed his bag into his car and squinted into the morning sun with a sigh. He was tired both physically and mentally and he felt old. How long, he wondered, could he keep this up?

In the office he poured himself a cup of bitter coffee and dropped his key onto the desk and wandered out to his car. Getting into his car he told himself again that this was the last time and yet he still looked at the hotels along the strip as though making plans for the next go round.

Tony got home a couple of hours later and although it was the same distance as always, the drive back seemed to take forever and by the time he walked in the door he was dreading his list of Sunday tasks. There was no choice, though. He’d be screwed if they got a hot case. He mentally went through his task list. He had some errands to run and some laundry to do. Plus he knew he
needed to do some grocery shopping to get him through the week. He unpacked his bag and tossed his clubbing clothes into the hamper to be sorted later. It never occurred to him to turn the TV on. Normally it was the first thing he did to combat the quiet of his apartment but the last two trips out had left him feeling more out of sorts than ever, the depression that weighed heavily on him upon his return darker than that which originally drove him out to the distant clubs full of flashing light, throbbing music and sweaty, dancing bodies. And it had been awhile now that he’d finally realized that TV and movies couldn’t fill the void in his life.

He pulled the makeup case out of his bag and his face twisted in a grimace. He thought about his examination of his face as he readied for the night back at that hotel. He’d noticed a few more wrinkles and a gray hair here and there. At the time the promise of the night let him refuse to acknowledge what the mirror told him. He was getting too old to play the role of boy toy. It was getting harder and harder to get the guys he wanted interested in him. But he’d pressed forward regardless telling himself that the dim lighting in the club would hide a lot. So what if he did have to use a bit more cover up to hide the lines around eyes that had seen a bit too much of the darker side of humanity or to hide the shadows from too many sleepless nights. But here, now, in the light of day he found himself acknowledging the truth. He was quickly approaching the age range of those he sought for himself and he wondered if he would become one of those men with the silver hair searching for a hard body to pull close for a little while, to try and remember what it was to feel young and invincible against the rages of time. No, he wouldn’t. His fantasies always centered on an older figure but they were fantasies driven by desire for another, not fear for himself. So, with this realization, would his fantasy change as well? Would his fantasy change to that of someone his own age, someone his equal rather than someone dominant who would fuck him through the floor? Or could his fantasies accommodate the changes time wrought upon that one person he dreamt of, making the sex a little slower…maybe more tender…? And with a deep sigh he knew they would because every day brought another instance, another facial expression in that older face that would continue to fuel his imagination and feed his yearning. And he accepted that because, in the end, it was all he had.

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By Monday morning Tony had himself psyched up for the new week. Unfortunately, he was psyched up at 3 am and decided he may as well get up and get to work. Despite the way he felt about his personal life, his professional life was still one of excitement and deep satisfaction. He loved his job and, yeah, a lot of it had to do with the fact that he was still Gibbs’ Second. He just loved working for the man. So much so that he again turned down an offer of his own team even though it had been in sunny Florida. He thought back to that day when he’d been given the offer.

He had actually considered that assignment that afternoon and again later that night. He’d gone home, checked his mail and ‘whoo-hood’ in glee when he saw the latest issue of Playboy which only added fuel to the thought of scantily clad nubile flesh on a hot, sunny beach. Yeah, all those sweet young coeds partying it up at spring break. Mmm, mmmmm! He’d taken the issue upstairs, grabbed a beer and sat down to peruse the magazine. Then he looked at the latest Playboy spread and found himself trying to force away those thoughts that kept trying to sneak in lately but they were too strong. He looked at the firm breasts and slender thighs and then felt slightly creepy.
God, when had the girls gotten so young? He looked at the centerfold’s vital stats and realized that the current flavor of the month was born after he’d graduated from college. He had closed the magazine and tossed it on the coffee table in disgust and knew he would never accept the job offer. He wasn’t his father, perpetually chasing younger women in an effort to keep his own youth. But that wasn’t the major issue. No, the biggie was that he’d faced a certain truth about himself a long time ago. He ran a hand over his face. His truth. A truth that said a woman’s touch could never meet his innermost needs. But then, if he was honest, there was only one touch that would meet those needs and he’d eventually realized that it would never happen which left him…where?

He went back to the idea of leading his own team. It would happen one day he knew, especially if Gibbs decided to retire. He’d probably be offered the team. Could he take it? No. It wasn’t even a possibility. He would have to move somewhere else…anywhere else…once Gibbs decided to retire because he knew he couldn’t live in the same area as Gibbs if he’d never be able to see him. And the occasional stop over with a pizza and some beer just wouldn’t cut it.

Hmmmm, starting over in a new location, in a place where he wouldn’t have to pretend to be something he wasn’t. Where he would make friends and acquaintances who wouldn’t know him for anything other than what he chose to portray. Like being undercover, only this time he would be as himself. Could he do it? Could he live his life as an openly gay man? The thought alone made his stomach clench. He’d lived his life so far in the closet first because of his family and then because of his career choice that the thought was terrifying. But things were changing…he could be truthful…couldn’t he? He looked at the magazine. Maybe, in a new place where no one had any preconceptions about him, where he didn’t have to hide behind an image and he wouldn’t hurt or disappoint those he cared about. A memory of the disgust and disappointment on his father’s face flashed through his mind followed by the looks on his fellow officers’ faces when confronted by a member of the force who was openly gay. NCIS was different. He wasn’t a beat cop or a detective who might call for backup and be left hanging. It was possible to find some level of happiness; he had to believe that, even if his only option was to start over someplace new. He got up and tossed the magazine into the trash. He couldn’t think about this anymore because he simply wasn’t ready. He couldn’t leave Gibbs, yet, so in a typical DiNozzo move, he simply turned down the offer and refused to think about it.

He pulled into his parking place and sat there for a moment reliving the emotions his memories reawakened and he again found himself second-guessing his actions. Should he have taken the job? He stared blankly at the concrete wall in front of him. He’d found himself doing this a lot more lately, thinking about where he was in life which would inevitably lead to contemplating the day to come…or more like getting his game face on. With a deep sigh he knew it was the latter more than the former. He was looking forward to seeing Gibbs. That was a given. But could he keep doing this? God, wasn’t he getting too old to be the loyal St. Bernard or, he thought with disgust, more like an abused and pathetic little puppy, eager for any attention he could get. He shut his eyes as a surge of humiliation rolled through him. Did anyone else see him as pathetic as he felt he was? God, he couldn’t take that, couldn’t take his co-workers’ pity or scorn and then he had the sudden conviction that if he looked closely enough, that would be exactly what he would see. It was no wonder neither Ziva nor McGee had any respect for him. Why hadn’t he seen this before now?
“Gaaagh!” he said in disgust at himself. *Slow down, DiNozzo! You’re psyching yourself out and you can’t do that…it’ll blow the whole game.* He leaned back and took a deep breath. Yeah, a game…one he’d been playing for years and he had a hell of a lot invested in it. And he wasn’t about to give it up, yet.

He twisted his head, popping his neck slightly to relieve the tension he felt in his shoulders. *Remember who you are. You are Tony DiNozzo, Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo.* Game face on he let out a slightly forced laugh and then grabbed his backpack to start a new week.

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Monday morning dawned bright and clear but it had no effect on Gibbs as he made his way up to the bullpen after another uneventful weekend that consisted only of hours spent working on his boat and a bit too much bourbon while denying to himself that he was waiting for DiNozzo to show up. Watching the numbers change on the elevator panel his first thoughts were also the same as usual. How tired would DiNozzo be this morning? What young female kept his Senior Field Agent occupied all weekend long? Who and Where? Those were two very typical questions for any investigator except for the fact that this wasn’t an investigation, and yet he still he wanted to know. He didn’t know Who because Tony had already been gone on Saturday when he’d found a reason to drive by Tony’s apartment only to find his car gone, and that added When to the Where already on the list.

His face darkened because he was sure he’d hear all about it as soon as he entered the bullpen and the thought just pissed him off which lent itself to the typical Gibbs glare when the elevator doors opened causing two would-be passengers to scurry away rather than face that glare head-on. It gave Gibbs a sense of satisfaction as he silently approached the bullpen and paused to listen for that voice to tell the tale that would make his stomach churn and he had to wonder who the new woman was in Tony’s life. And there had to be one because Tony had never let so much time pass without dropping by so obviously she was keeping him busy. That thought darkened an already dark countenance and Gibbs felt the need to pause a bit. Feeling like he was right now he knew that if he saw Tony he’d just bite his head off so he detoured to the break room to get a cup of that horse piss they passed off as coffee. And maybe, if he was lucky, he’d miss the usual morning conversation.
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Tony had just finished printing out the monthly supply request and had dropped it on Gibbs’ desk when he heard McGee and Ziva entering the bullpen.

“You’re late, Probie!” he called out by way of a good morning.

McGee looked at his watch and rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t call 30 seconds exactly late, Tony. And good morning to you, too,” he said as he dropped his stuff behind his desk. Tony said his good morning to Ziva as he dropped a couple more files on her desk.

In less than a minute McGee had his computer booting up and he was reviewing the files that had mysteriously appeared in his IN box. McGee eyed Tony and wondered just how early he’d come in this morning. He made a mental note to review the tapes.

“It appears you were in earlier than usual for a Monday, Tony. Did you not have a good weekend?” Ziva asked with a sly smile. “Or was it so good that perhaps you did not bother to go to bed…to sleep…at all?”

Tony turned and looked at Ziva with his usual arrogant smirk. “I am the Senior Field Agent, Zeeevah…I have to make sure everything runs smoothly so that my little minions don’t flounder for lack of useful tasks. And for your information, I was NOT in any earlier than usual. I simply work better, faster and more efficiently that you obviously give me credit for…” he finished with a patently wounded look.

“Ah, so you did not spend a lonely weekend working on these files instead of enjoying the company of one of your little girls…?”

“Of course not, how can you even think that?” Tony said and threw a sour look over his shoulder at McGee’s disbelieving snort. “Trust me,” Tony said as he returned his attention to Ziva with complete sincerity, “I was not alone this weekend…” he said with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows just before he whipped around and, pointing an accusatory finger at McGee and vehemently stated “unlike our little McLonely here…”

But Tony was pulled up short by McGee’s smug grin. “Actually, Tony, I wasn’t alone this weekend either…”

Tony looked hard, examining McGee as though to determine if he was telling a falsehood. “Really….? You and your compu-geek cronies have a convention or something?”

“I was with friends, true, but I did spend most of my time with one in particular…”

“Do say, Elflord…” Tony said as he moved closer. “I mean it…do SAY…who did you spend your time with?”

Even Ziva was interested and she wandered over to hear about McGee’s love interest.

“One friend in particular, Tony,” McGee answered smugly. “You remember that cheerleader I was supposed to go to that Halloween party with? She was my date and we had a great time. So good, in fact, that I’m seeing her again this weekend.”

“Very good, Tim. It sounds as though things are going well,” Ziva said with a wide smile that was at once both supportive of Tim and derisive of Tony.
“Yeah,” Gibbs said as he made his presence known. “Better than mindless partying,” he growled out as he passed DiNozzo’s desk and he heard Ziva laugh.

Tony sobered up and felt a need to defend himself. “Not completely mindless, Boss…” he started but stopped at Gibbs’ glare and Ziva chuckled again as she returned to her desk.

“So what were you up to, Miss Holier Than Thou?” Tony shot over her way.

“Damon and I accompanied Abby to a Habitat for Humanity project. I learned how to install kitchen cabinets,” she said with a smug grin.

“Good for you, Ziva. Always good to learn something new,” Gibbs said with a smirk towards DiNozzo.

“I’ve helped Abby before,” Tony protested.

“Yeah, we’ve all heard about that, Tony,” McGee said with a smug laugh. “Abby said she had to go back the next day to fix what you worked on,” McGee finished with a smirk at Tony’s deeply offended glare.

Tony threw a deadly look at McGee and opened his mouth to protest but Gibbs cut him off with a bark to get to work. He pulled out his chair with a sullen glace back at McGee and contemplated how he was going to get back at him.

Tony spent the rest of the day doing what he always did upon his return from one of his trips. He spent the day subtly watching Gibbs, watching for any hint of something different going on in his life, or just cataloging his facial expressions. Yes, there was that intent look of concentration that said he was reading something interesting, but the tic in his jaw said he didn’t like what he read and he wondered if it was something that deserved to be briefed to the team. He looked back at his screen, his ability to multitask a thing of beauty. It had to be in order to keep his work up to Gibbs’ standards and still be able to covertly watch him as carefully as he did. And everything he took in through his observations made him realize how very short of the mark his latest choice had been and he sighed silently.

He didn’t know why he did this, tortured himself with how pitiable his attempts were to recreate the real thing. All it did was drive home what he didn’t have. But he couldn’t help it. It was like a compulsion, sort of like self-flagellation. Take this weekend’s pseudo-Gibbs, for instance.

He hadn’t been as dominant as Tony would have liked but he did start out strong, giving it to him pretty hard at first, but then he’d kind of floundered a bit as his endurance seemed to flag. Tony remembered running his hands over Tim’s…Ted’s…? Well, over somebody’s back and he’d noted that although he hadn’t been fat, his muscles were soft. They didn’t have the hard definition attained through hard work and life-long training habits instilled by the Marines. So what had it been about him? His hair was just graying at the temples and he had blue eyes but Tony knew that there’d been something else…his hands. That was it. Tim/Ted had calluses on his hands and that had fueled the fantasy for awhile. But just not long enough. Still, Tony told himself he wasn’t going to go out like that again. He needed to just concentrate on finding someone mainstream, someone he could introduce to Abby, McGee and Ziva…and Gibbs. Yeah, he just needed to buckle down and quit pining for the impossible.
Chapter 3

It was Wednesday night and Tony had broken his record. He hadn’t dropped in unannounced at Gibbs’ place in going on two weeks. But it was killing him. Maybe going cold turkey hadn’t been the best plan he’d ever had. Yeah, he still saw Gibbs at work so he wasn’t cutting himself completely off, but refusing to let himself go over after duty hours and on the occasional weekend took away all that time when he let himself just soak in Gibbs’ presence. He missed it, he missed Gibbs. And not to mention the fact that not going over there left him with a huge amount of time on his hands. And now his decision to stop even looking for the temporary stand-in really opened up his weekends.

But this was for the best, wasn’t it? He had to be putting some kind of crimp in Gibbs lifestyle, right?

Okay, maybe not.

But there had been a few times when Tony had gone over to find Gibbs out. And each time he told himself that Gibbs did so have a life and that he just wasn’t a part of it. Did Gibbs even want him around?

Gibbs never actually invited him over…he just never turned him away. Tony wasn’t really sure what Gibbs thought about his constant impromptu visits. He’d just look up from whatever it was he was doing and with either a nod or a small smile he’d acknowledge Tony’s presence. And that had always been enough to still the slight apprehension Tony felt when he first got there. Somehow he’d always feared he’d come in and interrupt something important Gibbs was involved in…or someone. It had never happened, but Tony lived in apprehension of the moment when it would. And then Gibbs would ask him to leave and Tony knew he’d never be able to go back again and that might, literally, kill him.

It was that knowledge, that Gibbs asking him not to come back just might be the blow that would tip him over the edge, that had made him come to the decision that he needed to move on from his obsessive need for Gibbs, hence the decision to keep Gibbs solely in the work area of his life. So, being typically Tony, he threw himself completely into his decision and simply refused to see Gibbs outside of NCIS. But it wasn’t working out too well so far. So he went back to his tried and true method of avoiding those things that caused him pain -- complete distraction. And since it was already Wednesday and the weekend was coming up fast, he needed to find one now.

Okay his first choices, after Gibbs of course, were unavailable (namely his teammates) and he told himself again that he would not make another ‘special’ trip. Abby was dating some new biochemist geek so she was busy this weekend. Ziva had a retreat of some type planned. Hmm, a retreat…Ziva. It didn’t make much sense to him and he wondered if it was a training camp to review the hundreds of ways she knew to kill a man. It could be. He knew she kept all of her skills up to speed and he gave a little shudder when he recalled the day he demanded his letter opener back from her. She claimed that she was only borrowing it but it had been on her desk for two days when he’d finally gotten the nerve to ask for it back. And oh boy, did she give it back to him. He’d had to relocate one of his memorandums to hide the hole left by her burying it the divider behind his desk. He still wasn’t sure if she’d thrown it while he’d been sitting there. Surely he’d have known if she’d thrown it…wouldn’t he?

At any rate, even his resident geek had a date planned. He was still seeing that cheerleader and no matter how long he’d been dating her Tony still couldn’t wrap his head around his little Probie dating such a hot babe. It boggled the mind. And he wouldn’t even consider what Gibbs was up to.
Sure, in the past he’d of dropped by with a pizza and beer and they’d have a good time but all it did was reinforce the fact that he’d never have what he dreamed about and, damnit, the truth was that sometimes it was just too painful to tease himself like that. And the way he was feeling lately, it was pure torture.

So the team was out. Next option…he pulled out his trusty little black book and ignored how very clichéd it was. As he flipped through the pages it suddenly struck him how very many names and phone numbers were crossed out. That’s it, he thought, I need a new book. He blew out a frustrated breath as he thumbéd through page after page trying desperately to put a face to the names and little personality traits that he’d annotated. Favorite perfumes, restaurants, colors, music all stared at him in the face. He’d written them down not out of genuine interest in the various women, it was so that he could get them to believe he was interested. It was a huge difference and he’d never really appreciated that before. Still, maybe one of them would still be interested in a quick date, a little food, a couple of drinks…maybe dancing. And then, if everything went well, they’d get a little closer and he’d have someone to hold and pretend with for a little while.

Two hours later he was at the end of his book without any definite plans at all and less than five names still intact in his book. He’d run the gamut of finding out how many of the girls had married, were in a serious relationship or were recovering from a serious relationship. Twice he was sure he heard the sound of children fighting or laughing in the background and he shook his head. It hadn’t been that long…had it? But then he did the math and yeah, it had been. He’d been at NCIS for nearly nine years. Nine years in this apartment, nine years of the DC party scene, nine years of working for and loving Gibbs. And what did he have to show for it? Zilch, that’s what.

He thought about having a drink or two and had actually picked up the bottle of very fine scotch but then discarded that idea and set it down on the end table. He’d always drawn the line at drinking alone, and had only occasionally broken that vow when things got really, really bad. Actually, that’s when he first started just dropping in on Gibbs. Just being around the man settled him and kept him from going down the road his parents had traveled. But now, without Gibbs to run to, he again contemplated that drink. But, fortunately, thinking of his parents had been enough to take that thought out of his head. For tonight, anyway. Instead he went to bed feeling completely dejected.

Fortunately, the next day they caught a murder case. Unfortunately, it was a case of spousal abuse that had ended up with LEOs picking the husband up off the BOLO. He’d made it nearly forty miles. Abby ran the forensics which pointed directly to him. Gibbs had his confession by lunchtime on Friday. They spent the rest of the day finishing up their reports.

Tony decided on a burger and a beer for dinner. He stopped off at a new burger restaurant and ate his burger at the bar. One of the bartenders was really cute and they started up a conversation in between customers. It was nice, casual, and Tony had a couple more beers than he’d intended to but it worked out and he ended up meeting Kristie for drinks an hour and a half later.

Tony enjoyed himself as much as he did with any new woman. He listened while she talked about school, complained about her job and he preened when she was suitably impressed with his job. He even showed her his badge. Eventually they ended up in bed at his place because of her roommate although he normally didn’t bring girls home with him because of a couple of issues. One, it was a hassle to get up and drive them home unless they were comfortable getting a cab or two, getting them to actually leave the next day. But she was cute in a bouncy sort of way and she told some good stories about her customers so he was good with it this time around.

Kristie turned out to be a very energetic lover and whatever she lacked in finesse she more than made up for in enthusiasm. After quite a while she began to doze during one of her stories for
which Tony was glad. It had been fun but now that the physical part was over he began to go over his tried and true lines about being on call and needing to be able to leave at a moment’s notice. He’d go through the usual routine and give her cab money, thank her and then tuck the piece of paper with her phone number into his wallet to transfer later to his book—or not. It was all well-practiced and would flow smoothly as it had a hundred times before. He fell asleep going through the motions in his head.

He was disturbed later by the sound of something falling. Instantly awake he reached for his weapon. It didn’t occur to him until he was half-way down the hall that he’d been alone in bed when he was awakened. He hit the light switch and saw Kristie trying to sneak out.

“I could have taken you home, you know,” he said when he saw Kristie fumbling around looking for her shoe. He found the color on her face interesting.

“No…ah…that’s okay,” she said with a slight stammer.

Tony looked at her. He’d snuck away in the dark of night from many women but he’d never had one sneak away from him. It was a new experience.

“I can call you a cab, Kristie. No need to run away…” he suggested and moved to the phone setting his gun down next to it.

Kristie, for her part, looked relieved and Tony wondered if it was because he was no longer armed or because she’d just realized that he wouldn’t make a scene. “Ten minutes,” he said and then he suggested she finish dressing which she did without delay but he really wanted to know why she felt the need to get away. He wondered if it was a Coyote Ugly type of situation for her. God, he hoped not.

“Do you mind telling me why you were sneaking out?” Tony asked with a smile. Smiling always helped to diffuse awkward situations. “Was it that bad?” he added in a joking manner and an extra bit of charm.

Kristie had the grace to look embarrassed. “No, you were great…really,” she said but her eyes slid down and to the left and Tony felt shock go through him. She was lying.

“Well, obviously not if you didn’t want to face me in the morning,” he said gently.

“It’s just that…umm…” Kristie hesitated and then moved to the window to watch for her cab. Guys were so sensitive about their performance in bed, but that held especially true for the older ones. “Tony, you’re great in bed but you’re just…well…a little needy, you know what I mean? I’m not ready for any serious commitments right now…especially with a guy who’s so much older than me…”

Tony felt like someone had punched him. He almost put his hand to his face to check for bleeding. Kristie was saved from saying anything else by the arrival of the cab and she waved down. With a quickly blown kiss she walked to the door.

Tony never considered himself much of a masochist…well, if you don’t count the whole multiple years loving from a distance thing, but he felt he had to ask.

“Can I call you sometime?”

Kristie again blushed lightly and shook her head. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Tony. It’s been nice. Bye,” she said quietly and then closed the door.
Tony stood there in his boxers just staring at the floor for an undetermined amount of time. The sudden tremor of his body brought him out of his dark thoughts and he realized how very chilled he felt. He checked his front door and then shut off the lights before making his way back to his bed. Lying under the covers he found it hard to get warm and wondered if the chill was really due to his body temperature. All in all, he felt very wretched and drained. He lay in bed for a long time after that, unable to fall asleep for contemplating how his life had changed so completely. But then, maybe it was him. His age, his job, his lot in life to always yearn for the things he couldn’t have. Things like a normal childhood, a mother who was alive and well, a father who loved him and was proud of him, someone who loved him for who he was. That’s just the hand you were dealt, DiNozzo, suck it up. And yet the questions remained, going round and round in his head until the first rays of sunrise slipped in through the openings in the drapes.

Since he was unable to sleep he decided to get up. There was plenty to do to keep busy over the weekend. A run to start would be good.
Chapter 4

Tony drove to the local park. He figured he’d run for awhile and, if he was lucky, maybe there’d be a game going on. When he got there he immediately saw Pete, a lawyer friend who was about four years younger than him. He walked over and saw Pete with several others, some whom he recognized but not all, getting ready for a pickup game of basketball.

“Tony! Great! We’re short a man. You up for a game?” Pete called out with a smile when he recognized Tony.

A game sounded good right now so Tony nodded and started to do some warm-up stretches. While he stretched Tony automatically looked at each man to size them up. They were all pretty young, a couple of them at least ten years younger than him which promised a pretty good game. Pete jogged over and Tony stood up to shake his hand.

“I was going to sit out but now that you’re here we can get going. How you been, man? Haven’t seen you around in awhile. That job of yours keeping you busy weekends?”

Pete rambled on while they both stretched and finally they were ready so they moved over to the court.

“Hey, this is Tony for those of you who don’t know him and be advised. If you call out for the ‘old man’ Tony’s going to be the one answering today!”

Pete laughingly dodged the punch Tony sent his way and moved off without seeing the grimace that crossed Tony’s face at his comment. Oh, yeah, really needed that one, Pete…

Two hours later Tony limped his way into his apartment. He went straight to the kitchen and pulled out an ice pack and a bottle of water then fumbled around in a kitchen cabinet until he found some ibuprofen and a towel. He swallowed them with the water and then slowly made his way to his couch. He put a pillow on his coffee table and then used his hands to lift his left leg. Wrapping the ice pack in the towel first, he gingerly set it on his throbbing knee. It was the same knee he’d injured in college all those years ago. The same knee injury that had killed his plans of playing professional ball. He drank some more water and then dropped his head onto the back of the couch and tried not to think of all those comments the other guys had thrown around while they played.

“Come on, old man…you can move faster than that!”

“That knee bothering you? My Dad swears by Advil for his arthritis. Maybe you should try it…”

Overall, the comments weren’t anything he hadn’t heard before. They weren’t anything he hadn’t used himself. But why did they rankle so badly now? And after a bit they’d started to piss him off so he pushed himself. And when his knee started to hurt, instead of easing off he had pushed himself even harder. God, why was he so stupid?

Once the swelling had gone down a bit Tony slowly and painfully limped his way to the bathroom so that he could shower. His leg was feeling a lot better but, through years of experience, he knew that he’d have to take it easy for a few days and, for once, he hoped they didn’t catch any major cases right away. For now he’d be the one smelling of Ben-Gay in the office and he could already hear the age cracks that would be coming his way.

By late Saturday Tony was going crazy. He’d cleaned his apartment and had gone shopping but he’d drawn the line at browsing because of his knee. He’d even taken in an afternoon movie but it
wasn’t enough. None of his current DVDs interested him and his knee was aching but he couldn’t just sit there. At a loss he decided to go to the office for awhile. Maybe something interesting would come up. As he drove he had the sudden compulsion to see if Abby was home. Even if she had a date she’d talk to him while she got ready. And who knew, maybe he’d hit a couple of clubs (but absolutely no dancing) and maybe he’d find some company. And even if the thought left him feeling completely empty inside it could still work.

Abby opened the door and Tony felt his stomach ease at her elated smile. He was ready for the full-body hug when it came and he laughed. Burying his face in her neck he delighted in her sweet scent, glad for once that she wasn’t wearing her gunpowder perfume. He wanted to lose himself in her feminine company not her quirks and then he felt immediately guilty. Abby was Abby and her quirks were part of who she was. Still, he was happy she was home so maybe she could make him feel better. She seemed glad to see him and she didn’t look like she was getting dressed up or anything.

“No date tonight, Abs?” he asked.

“Not tonight. Todd’s with friends. We went out last night and it got kind of late so I’m kicking back…” She continued talking but he kind of lost it for a bit. He shouldn’t be here, he realized. It smacked of using her to ease his loneliness rather than a true desire to visit his friend. It made him feel guilty and he had the sudden urge to leave but Abby was pulling him into her living room and he realized that she was still talking but he wasn’t quite sure what it was about.

“Tony, you’re limping! Is it your knee again? Hey, I’ve got some ibuprofen…want some? This is soooo great! I was just about to watch Saw 6, you know, to get ready for 7 and I was making the popcorn and wishing I had some company ‘cos you really need to hide your face for some of those scenes, right?’ Abby had deposited Tony on the couch and had walked into her kitchen still talking a mile a minute.

Saw 6…God, he so did not need that tonight. He ran a hand over his face. This had been a total mistake.

“So what happened to Charlie? I thought she was pretty cool…” Abby continued her monologue as she returned to the living room with the bowl of popcorn, a couple of beers, a glass of water and the bottle of ibuprofen.

Charlie? He hadn’t dated her in over a month, he realized as he slugged down a couple of the pills. Had it been that long since he’d chatted with Abby?

“Uhh, haven’t seen her in a while…I think she’s dating one of her professors…” Tony said and wondered if it was still true. Things had cooled down between them when he started getting “domesticated”. He still thought that was pretty funny. Just because he didn’t want to go clubbing every weekend wanting instead to watch TV and cuddle on the couch she felt he was slowing down too much for her.

“Oh, I’m sorry! She seemed cool but if she broke up with you then she probably wasn’t cool at all. So who are you dating now? Anyone special? I was kind of thinking of holding a little party here, you know, so you could meet Todd. Tony, I really think you’ll like him. He likes movies, too, but…oh, I almost forgot to tell you! He got his B.S. from Ohio State! How could I forget that…I told him all about you and he really wants to meet you because you saved my life like more than once between Ari and Mikal Mawher…ooh, I still can’t believe I actually dated that mental defective…”
Tony eased back into the couch with a smile and let Abby’s words flow over him. Being with her did help and he realized with a pang that Abby really was his best friend. Maybe he should talk to her, she had the biggest heart of anyone he knew and she’d been through her share of unhappy relationships, Mike Mawher just a case in point. And he’d been furious that she hadn’t come to him or Gibbs when it had gone sour. So maybe he should talk to her. He turned to look at her and saw her staring at him in concern and he realized that she’d become aware of his distraction.

“You can talk to me, you know. It’s been a long time and I thought we were friends,” she said with that little girl note in her voice that always got to him.

“We are friends, Abs, and I’m sorry I was lost there for a bit. I guess I was just trying to figure out how to start,” Tony said quietly.

“Maybe I can help. I know you’re afraid of coming out and with your job that’s probably a good thing…”

“Wait…whoa! Coming out? Abs…?” Tony said sitting up quickly, eyes widened with both shock and fear.

“Tony, I’ve known for a long time that you bat for both teams.” Abby said as she crawled closer to Tony on the couch and pushed him back gently. “It’s okay with me and I’ve never told anyone, honest!”

Tony started to say something in denial but nothing came out. He tried again with a wide grin and a shake of his head but again nothing came out. Abby put her hands on his chest and looked at him straight in the eye with all of the love she had for him.

“Tony, I love you. It’s okay,” she said gently. “And I know you haven’t been happy in a while. I was just hoping you’d come talk to me…”

Tony stared at her and felt himself crumble just a little bit. And when she pulled him into her arms he crumbled even more. Then, bit by bit, he told her what he’d been doing. And through it all Abby kept up the soothing circles on his back as she fought back her own tears for the loneliness he’d endured, the lies he felt he had to maintain, and the pain of loving someone who couldn’t love him back.

Tony could only wonder a bit later why he’d never actually told Abby about himself before. But he’d been living behind his masks for so long the thought of dropping one, even to a friend as good as Abby, absolutely terrified him. But she’d sworn herself to secrecy and he was sure no one else came even close to guessing about him so he still felt relatively safe.

Saw 6 remained sitting on the coffee table while they held one another and spoke quietly, often in hushed whispers as though to keep the outside world from hearing the profound secrets that could only be shared by best friends. They sat facing one another on the couch, their legs intertwined with the bowl of popcorn between them. They talked long into the night eventually stretching out together and cuddling.

At some point they both nodded off. Tony was awakened by the sound of someone entering Abby’s apartment. He struggled to get out of her embrace when a man walked up to him. He was still trying to sit up when Abby opened her eyes and with a big smile said hello to the intruder.

“Hi, Toddy! Did you have a good time?”

Tony looked from Abby to Toddy, the Intruder, and only then realized that he was still wrapped by
Abby’s strong legs.

“Uh, hi…you must be Todd…” he started while simultaneously pulling Abby’s calf out from between his legs.

“Hi, yes. And you must be Tony, right?”

Tony pulled himself up into a sitting position and then slowly stood up taking care to keep his weight off of his left leg as much as possible. He self-consciously ran a hand over his hair and put his hand out.

“Yeah, I’m Tony…I, uh, guess Abby’s mentioned me?”

“Ohio State, right?” Todd asked as he put his hand out to help a sleepy Abby stand. At Tony’s nod Todd continued unfazed at finding Abby cuddled up with another man.

“I think you were two years ahead of me,” he said with a smile down at Abby who laid her sleepy head against his chest. “We might still know some folks in common…uh, I didn’t know too many jocks but I did know a guy named Stan Carter who was in your class. He was gay, too, so maybe you knew him…”

Tony felt the color drain out of his face. Gay, too…?

“Ah, Todd, honey…remember that thing we talked about?” A very awake Abby was now chewing on her bottom lip, her green eyes wide.

“What…?” Todd asked as he looked down at Abby and only then saw the look of mortification on her face.

“Sorry, Todd,” Tony said with a plastic grin. “Never knew old Stan Carter, but look…I’ve got to go. Maybe we can get together some other time and talk about people we knew, okay?”

“Oh, sure, Tony….uh, look, I’ve obviously misspoken here…” Todd said as he looked from Abby’s now tear-filled eyes to Tony’s almost feral smile.

_Ya think, Toddy?_ Tony thought to himself as he forced himself to stillness even though everything in him was telling him to run, to hide.

“Tony, I meant no one at work! ” Abby began but Tony ignored her.

“Not to worry, Todd. Nice meeting you,” Tony said and spared a glance towards Abby.

“See ya, Abs,” he said and walked stiffly to the door.

“Tony! I’m sooo sorry…!” Abby called and reached for his arm but he pulled his arm out of her grasp in slow but firm move.

“I’ve got to go,” he said very seriously and wondered if his face showed the humiliation he was feeling. He turned and then left completely ignoring Abby’s cry of ‘Toneeeee!’

He wasn’t sure how he did it but he limped calmly back to his car and started it up. It wasn’t until he saw police lights suddenly start flashing that he realized he was still driving. Fortunately the LEOs weren’t after him, it was just their lights that had knocked him out of the fugue state he seemed to be operating under. He looked around for a bit until he realized he was actually driving towards Gibbs’ house and God knew that was the last place he wanted to be right now. He turned
around and headed back to his place.

Once he got there he sat on the couch and stared at nothing. Without thought he reached over to the end table which still held the bottle of scotch he’d placed there earlier in the week. He wondered idly why he hadn’t put it away while he cleaned earlier. Maybe his subconscious had told him that he would need it. Right now, though, he didn’t know nor did he care. He opened it up, brought it to his lips and took a large swig. He told himself that it was too good a scotch to just guzzle but for some reason his hand and mouth weren’t listening to his brain and he wondered if dear old Mom and Dad had done it just this way.
Hours later Tony rolled over when he realized that his cell phone was ringing. He fumbled for it and noticed that there were thirteen messages. He scrolled through the list. Abby and a couple from Tim but none from Gibbs. Good. He deleted all of them and then pulled himself upright. He saw the flashing light on his message machine. If Gibbs had wanted him there would have been a message on his cell phone so...he deleted everything on the machine and then made his way to the kitchen. He desperately needed liquid, non-alcoholic liquid. He glanced at his front door and saw several papers that had obviously been shoved underneath it. He ignored them as he opened the fridge for a bottle of water. He sipped carefully just in case his stomach wasn’t too pleased with what he’d done but everything seemed alright. He finished it and then turned to get some coffee going and then moved to the bathroom to take a shower. He didn’t think about anything, he just moved and took care of all those little things he normally took care of on Sunday afternoon.

Malaise, hmm, that’s a good word for what he was feeling, he realized when he wondered at the emptiness inside of him. You’d think he’d be a bit more upset to have a total stranger know his deepest, darkest secret, one he’d barely been able to voice to someone he’d considered his best friend. But he wasn’t. It seemed logical to him that Abby would share her opinions with her lover. Abby was a very sharing type of person. And the fact that she’d shared this tidbit about his personal life based on her own observations, not even needing his whispered confirmation, wasn’t exactly a mark against her, was it? He didn’t know. But if she figured this out about him, who else had? And that was the question of the hour.

Tony was saved from having to figure that out bright and early Monday morning when a case came in. It required extensive investigation so Tony never had to answer any of the emails, texts, phone calls and notes hand-carried by a confused McMessenger. But he did pay very close attention to both of his teammates as he tried to ascertain just what they knew, or thought they knew, about him. And although McGee shot him the occasional concerned and confused look, he didn’t approach for which Tony was very grateful. Ziva, of course, kept up her usual flirty/catty behavior and only made a few comments about his now mild limp and age-related injuries, so maybe he was in the clear for a little while.

Except with Gibbs, of course.

“What did you do to yourself now, DiNozzo?” Gibbs groused when Tony lagged behind at the crime scene.

“A little too much basketball, Boss, but its fine. Really,” Tony responded cheerfully amidst snickers from his teammates.

“You’re no good to me if you can’t keep yourself in one piece while off-duty, DiNozzo. Get a
move on!"

“On your six, Boss!” Tony called as he pushed to keep up with Gibbs.

But it didn’t seem to get any better as the days passed. Gibbs kept throwing angry glares in his direction and the head slaps were frequent. It only got worse when Gibbs noted Abby’s distraction.

Late one afternoon Tony let a sigh slip out and decided he needed a bit more caffeine if he was going to make it through the rest of the day. He was pouring himself a cup when he felt someone behind him and he felt his heart begin to pound and a smile came unbidden to his face. He knew it was Gibbs even before he could smell the essence of the man. And Gibbs was close, so close he could almost feel the heat radiating across his back in a way that was so like his fantasies that he had to bite the inside of his mouth to stifle the moan that was dying to be released. Then he remembered he was on Gibbs’ shit list.

“What’s going on, DiNozzo?”

The voice asked in a growl that sent a shiver up Tony’s back and he had to fight to keep the reaction from showing. Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath and turned around with his megawatt smile that he almost lost when he realized just how close Gibbs was standing to him. But he wasn’t a top undercover agent for nothing and he kept his smile bright even if his eyes widened just a fraction.

“Hey, Boss, need a refill?” he offered as he held up the coffee pot but he could see Gibbs was still not in a good mood, especially since Gibbs just stood there staring at him and Tony’s scalp almost crawled in anticipation of a hard head slap.

“Okay, no coffee, which I can’t really say that I blame you since I wouldn’t necessarily qualify this as being real coffee…”

“What is going on, DiNozzo?” Gibbs growled out in warning and shifted just a fraction closer and Tony shut up immediately.

“So…Boss, could you be a little more specific…?” Tony asked with a hopeful glint in his eye as he tried desperately not to step back, not that he really had any where to go, he was right up against the counter. Then he had a sudden vision of Gibbs leaning over him and goddamn if that wasn’t the wrong thing to think about as his dick gave a twitch. But Gibbs was in his face and that split
second of fantasy evaporated in the icy glare of those blue eyes. Okay, if Abby hadn’t told McGee there was no way she would have talked to Gibbs, especially since he’d told her how he felt about him…right? *Please, please, please…*

“Abby,” he said shortly. “We’ve got a dead petty officer and you have Abby’s head so messed up she can’t seem to work. Now, I don’t know what went on between you two and I don’t care but I need both of you focused, so you fix it!” Gibbs bit out. “Now!”

Tony let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. *Gibbs didn’t know!* He was probably just pissed about how slow he was because of his knee. So he gave Gibbs another bright smile. He’d known he couldn’t keep Abby at bay forever.

“No problem, Boss. Got it covered…”

Gibbs just glared at Tony, a part of him reveling in how close he was to Tony but mostly just overall pissed at him and he didn’t bother to hide it. So what in the hell had Tony been up to with whoever his latest flame was to mess up his knee again? He forcefully pushed away the thought of sexual acrobatics, but he wouldn’t put it past DiNozzo. At least Tony would think that it had to do with Abby rather than the fact that he wanted nothing more than to pin the younger man against the counter and slam into Tony’s ass. With a stiff nod he turned and stalked away hearing Tony let out a long breath of relief. It appeased him somewhat but not nearly enough to curb the anger he felt every time he thought of Tony with someone else. Even Abby.

Abby hovered near the partitions for a bit. She had come upstairs to try a more direct approach since Tony had refused to respond to all of her overtures. She felt terrible. It was always her mouth that got her into trouble. She’d realized one day that she was again gushing on about Tony and what a great agent he was, what a great friend and that he really was solid muscle under those designer clothes, and all of that to Todd of all people. It had finally come to a head when Todd groaned out that if she loved Tony so much why in the hell wasn’t she dating him?

And, as usual, her verbal diarrhea erupted as she tried to explain and then she had let slip her thoughts about Tony’s sexuality. And while that had soothed her relationship with Todd she’d been terrified that Tony would find out somehow. And, lo and behold, her fears came true.

She saw Tony go to his desk with a cup of coffee and she steeled herself to go and apologize again. Tim and Ziva were off following a lead or something and Tony was researching something on the computer. She saw Gibbs walk away, probably to talk to Ducky about their latest case so now was the best time even though everyone was really busy and she had a pile of work she needed to get done but she couldn’t because this thing between her and Tony was really getting her down and she couldn’t concentrate when her best friend was so mad at her and even if he was rightfully mad she couldn’t let it go on any longer and… *Stop! Just do it already!* She took a tentative step forward.
“Tony…?”

Tony had been aware of Abby hovering behind his desk for awhile and he’d wondered how long it was going to take before she got up the nerve to come closer. He was just about to turn around to make it easier for her when she said his name so softly. He looked up to see her big, green eyes filled with such sadness that it nearly broke his heart. He pushed back his chair and simply opened his arms. In a heartbeat she was sitting in his lap and he could feel her trembling in his arms but she remained amazingly silent so it was up to him. He rubbed circles on her back as he tried to soothe her and after a bit she lifted her head and he had to smile at the mess her mascara had made on her cheeks.

“Let’s go down to your lab, okay?” he said softly with a little smile and she smiled back even though it was shaky. She stood and he put his arm around her and led her off to the elevator.

Gibbs watched from a distance and felt himself relax a bit even though he was still blazingly angry. He had a case and his people were not at the top of their game. They needed to fix this and he would grant them a few moments but then he’d have to go down there and get them moving.

He didn’t know what was going on between the two but it seemed as though it was going to work out. He had to wonder, though, what it was that Abby had done that had come between them. And it was obvious to him that Abby felt really badly about something. But he was sure it wasn’t a Tony/Abby thing. They were good friends and he was sure their relationship didn’t go beyond that. Did it have to do with the new woman in Tony’s life? No, whoever she was he thought that she was too new to affect Tony and Abby’s friendship like that. Unless Abby really hated her for some reason and that thought somehow justified the anger Gibbs felt for this faceless female who had Tony wrapped around her finger. But regardless of his feelings on the matter, it would be fixed and they could figure out who’d shot the petty officer they’d found that morning.
Chapter 6

By Thursday Gibbs’ team had found the dealer responsible for PO Harter’s death and they had the evidence to prove it. Now it was just down to finishing up the paperwork. Gibbs looked around and noted everyone busy with satisfaction except for one thing. DiNozzo seemed to have lost whatever reserve of energy he normally tapped into. Yeah, he’d ragged McGee and Ziva throughout the case but there wasn’t the usual glee he’d come to expect from his Second, and he’d yet to crow over his accomplishments even when it had been DiNozzo who’d found the connection between Harter and the heroin that had been found on the destroyer after its recent tour in the Gulf. Right now Tony looked strained, as though it was taking a lot of effort to get through the rest of day. Again.

He didn’t know what was going on with his Senior Field Agent but whatever it was seemed to be sapping the life out of the man. Gibbs looked over and noted Tony making some nonsensical comment to Ziva who rolled her eyes. He barked out a laugh but Gibbs noted it didn’t reach his eyes. McGee got up and sauntered over to the printer and made another low comment which narrowed Tony’s eyes and although Ziva smirked at whatever it was Tony failed to respond. He just turned away and Gibbs saw the surprised look on Ziva’s face. She turned to McGee who shrugged and then went back to his desk.

Whatever had gone on between Tony and Abby was over, he was sure of that. So was it because, as usual, they’d put in long hours until their case was done and Tony hadn’t had time for personal pursuits? If that was the case his girlfriend had better get used to it quickly. Theirs was not a job that took a backseat to personal issues and if that was what Tony wanted now that he had someone special in his life, well then he’d have to find himself a new job. Gibbs was adamant about that regardless of the sick feeling he had in his gut at the thought of Tony leaving.

Gibbs kept a watch on Tony for the rest of the afternoon but his mood didn’t seem to improve. By the end of the day Gibbs noted that Tony’s mood actually seemed to worsen. And on top of that the man just seemed tired, tired down to his bones. He hoped Tony had no plans with whoever she was. His agent needed sleep if he was going to be a functioning member of his team. He’d let it go for now to see if Tony didn’t get over his funk after the weekend. And, maybe, he’d just swing by this weekend to see if he was home and maybe he’d be the one to pick up a pizza. And with that plan in mind Gibbs went back to finishing up his closing report.

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By Saturday morning Tony knew he’d break his promise to himself. But there wasn’t any choice. He had to get out. The need was like an itch under his skin but it wasn’t just the itch, it was the accompanying ache that drove him. Ever since that moment when Gibbs had gotten in his face and he’d felt the immediate upsurge in his pulse he knew he’d be leaving town again over the weekend. It was only a band-aid and he knew it but he didn’t have any other options.

And as he packed his clubbing clothes he debated on whether or not to take his makeup case. He really was too old to play that role but he was still in good shape, knew that he looked good and again he reminded himself about the lighting at the club. He could pull it off a few more times. After all, he was at his best when he was undercover, right? And even if this mask was closer to whom he really was it was still a mask. And he was Tony DiNozzo, the best undercover agent Gibbs said he’d ever worked with. And if that thought brought a pang to his chest at the undercover life he lived every day, he pushed the thought away. Tossing the case into his bag he zipped it up and went to his car.
Gibbs stared unseeingly at the flowering trees lining Tony’s street completely oblivious to the fleeting beauty of the season. He was pissed, it was only noon and Tony was already gone. Who the hell was she? Probably another beautiful, smart professional woman like Jeanne Benoit and the thought made his stomach clench yet again. Damnit! Why was he letting this eat him up so badly? Tony was a normal, 40-year old man. He was a good man and he deserved to find some happiness in his life. A wife, maybe some kids, and maybe this woman was the one for him. His eyes automatically tracked a single pale pink blossom that drifted onto his car with the light spring breeze but his thoughts remained on the younger man who was still very much in the prime of his life. Tony still had a lot of life ahead of him. *Tony* still had lots of choices...

Gibbs ran a hand over his face, but returned that hand to cover his eyes. He could feel the wrinkles under his fingertips, knew what he looked like even if it wasn’t too bad for a man his age. The fact remained that he was a *man*, a man in lo…lust with a much younger *straight* man. He needed to just let Tony be who he was, not who he wished he could be.

Gibbs had come to terms with his own sexuality decades before although he’d acted on it very rarely. It just didn’t fit in with the life he’d carved out for himself. And he’d been okay, for the most part, as long as you discounted the failed marriages and numerous failed relationships.

*Aw, hell*, he muttered as he started up his car. The Challenger roared to life and Gibbs had the sudden urge to just drive. The tires squealed as he pulled away to eat up the miles that did nothing to ease the pain in Gibbs’ heart.

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Tony groaned at the sound of his alarm clock. He tried to move but the pain was too intense at first. Then slowly, and with a lot of grunting and panting, he made his way to the bathroom. He took a long hot shower which eased a lot of his aches and allowed him to move a little more freely. He’d returned the previous afternoon, taken some ibuprofen and had gone straight to bed knowing even then that he would be in a world of hurt this morning. But now it was time to see just how bad things were. He looked in the mirror with aggrieved dismay. How in the hell was he going to explain the injuries on his face? A mugging? No, then they’d want to see the report…maybe even attempt to investigate. No, it had to be something that they’d pass off as a situation only *he* get into…yeah, something that *he* would screw up. With a pained expression and a sick feeling Tony decided on just what to say.

“Wow, Tony…what happened to you?” McGee asked in wide-eyed shock as Ziva looked on with both surprise and some mirth that made Tony’s stomach clench.

“A little altercation, huh? Dare I ask what the other guy looks like today?” McGee wondered.

“Oh, you can ask,” Tony said with a smug smile that was just a bit too bright, a bit too fake, but one that should lead them right where he wanted them to go. “But let’s just say that I more than held my own…”

“Riiiight,” McGee said as Ziva openly chuckled. “You held your own…”

Even though Tony was getting the exact reaction he wanted, it still rankled but he forced that down.

“Sure, McDoubter, you of all people know how…scrappy…I am in a fight,” Tony said with just the right amount of bravado that implied he was lying through his teeth. He was rewarded with
knowing looks being exchanged by both McGee and Ziva.

“So, Tony, what, if I may ask, prompted this little scrap of yours,” McGee taunted.

“I was defending a lady’s virtue, if you must know,” Tony said in a huff.

“Well, knowing you Tony, it was probably defending a lady of questionable virtue...” McGee shot out but then said ‘owww’ when Ziva punched him in the arm. It went a little way towards making Tony feel better. Ziva’s play punches weren’t exactly playful.

“Now, don’t go all judgmental on me, McSpinster. You’ve got to learn to grow beyond your prudish way of thinking...”

“That is correct, McGee. If Tony felt a lady needed protection he is honor-bound to step in and provide assistance,” Ziva said and watched Tony puff up a bit. “Of course, Tony, it is obvious that your ability to provide that protection may be less than required,” she smiled at Tony’s open-mouthed look of offense.

“I would recommend that we meet down in the gym for a refresher course in hand-to-hand combat methods...”

“Uh, no thanks, Ziva, my intent was to dissuade the unwanted interest, not to permanently maim the guy,” Tony said in a completely truthful manner.

“I would recommend some practice, DiNozzo,” Gibbs added in from out of nowhere.

Tony turned to see Gibbs staring at him hard as he examined the bruises and scrapes on Tony’s face.

“Looks like the floor might have hit you a couple times too many...” he said completely seriously.

Tony opened his mouth to argue the point but Gibbs was looking at him a bit too intently and Tony had the serious thought that maybe he knew what had really happened. But there was no way...he couldn’t know...

“Well...he was a big guy, Boss. A really big...big guy...” he said with a nod and a slight smile.

Tony felt the knot of fear in his stomach unravel only to be replaced with a sick feeling when Gibbs smirked and he realized that the man had been playing with him because he, too, had bought into the story he’d woven. And then he kicked himself for somehow hoping that Gibbs would see through the lies. Yup, just more proof that you really are as pathetic as you thought, DiNozzo. And with that thought he dropped his eyes because he was suddenly afraid to look too closely at those icy blue eyes and get the confirmation that Gibbs thought he was inept, too.

He didn’t look up again until Gibbs walked to his desk. Still feeling slightly ill, Tony moved to his own desk and resolved to lay low and to keep away from those all-seeing eyes. He tugged a bit more at his cuffs to make sure nothing was visible and got right to work making absolutely sure his movements were free and easy despite the fact that he wanted to just curl up in a corner and cry. But he straightened his back despite the pain, completely ignoring the pointed looks and knowing smirks his co-workers shot at him, and got to work. Besides, it was really Gibbs he was more worried about as those blue eyes seem to look right through him the rest of the day. And those looks were angry. Angrier than he’d ever seen and he wondered if Gibbs was re-thinking his position on the team. Tony let out a small gasp at that thought.

Being Gibbs’ Second was a position of incredible responsibility. Gibbs had to be wondering if he
was capable of it if it looked as though he couldn’t even take care of himself off-duty. God, he’d
fucked up. And upon that thought all of his insecurities came to fore and he truly felt that he was
worthless and that no one would ever love him. His father had known that and had told him over
and over again. No one had trusted him at his old jobs and he’d gone through partner after partner,
no one wanting to work with him until he’d met Gibbs. But now Gibbs was seeing him for the
fuck-up he is. Fuck-up, fucked up…both applied to him, especially after this last weekend.

And though he hated doing it, he couldn’t stop thinking back to what had happened. Lyle, and
there was no way that was his real name, looked more like Gibbs than any of the others only he
looked like the Gibbs after his return from Mexico, the Gibbs with the mustache. But that was
okay because he was most definitely a dom. He had that commanding tone that made Tony
instinctively respond. And per usual for a Monday morning, Tony’s thoughts traveled over the
comparisons only this time it was a pained re-living of the details as he stared blindly at his
monitor.

They’d gotten back to Tony’s room kissing and groping. Lyle pushed Tony away from the door
and the light switch leaving the room in almost total darkness.

“The light…”

“Shh, Scotty baby…bed lamp…” Lyle promised using the name that Tony had given for this
encounter just before he again claimed Tony’s mouth and sucked in his tongue for all he was
worth.

Tony moaned and pushed his groin into Lyle. Lyle kept him moving backwards and then followed
Tony down onto the bed. Lyle was all over him and it had been so good. He kissed him hard and
then shoved his tongue into his mouth in a demanding way that was a total turn-on. Yes, it had
been exactly what he’d wanted.

Lyle’s breath was hot against his neck as his hands roughly grabbed and pulled at his clothes and
Tony sucked in a deep breath at the feel of hot skin and hard muscles pushing him into the
mattress. In moments they were both naked and hard, their bodies pushing and straining against
each other and Tony had the stray thought that they must look a little silly because he was still
wearing his socks and he wondered if Lyle was but his thoughts were scattered when Lyle bit his
neck and then sucked hard while simultaneously reaching down and grabbing Tony’s dick and
squeezing making Tony moan and forget all about socks. They were going so fast that it came as
no surprise when Lyle pushed him over onto his stomach and straddled his thighs. Tony took a
deep breath glad that he’d taken the time to prepare himself before going out. He pushed himself
back against the hard dick that stabbed at him and wiggled a bit until he got it in between his butt
cheeks. He smiled at Lyle’s dark laugh and then he was pushed lower to lie flat on the bed.

“That what you want, baby? You want my dick up your ass?” he growled into Tony’s ear while
rubbing his hands over Tony’s back and up his arms. Lyle shifted up higher so that he now
straddled Tony’s hips and he rocked a bit so that his dick rubbed up and down Tony’s crack
earning a moan from the muscled form beneath him.

Tony moaned and let fantasy Gibbs position him however he wanted. He felt those rough hands
stroke down his right arm and pull it back but Tony was too lost to wonder.

Then, in a much practiced move, Lyle grabbed both of Tony’s wrists and in seconds he was
clicking his cuffs shut. Tony froze for a split second before he tried to rear up to dislodge the man
on his back but a well-placed knee prevented it.

“No, Lyle, I don’t want to play this way tonight…come on…” Tony began as his breath stilled in
shock and yet he tried to keep calm enough to talk his way out of this situation even though everything in him urged him to fight. _Jesus, DiNozzo, how’d you let him get you into this position?_ He never let a new fuck restrain him, never let _anyone_ tie him up. There just wasn’t anyone he trusted enough despite his fantasies. And with this type of lifestyle it was just too dangerous and he kicked himself over and over again for letting his guard drop, for letting the fantasy become too real. Gibbs would have had his six. He wouldn’t hurt Tony and Tony knew that deep inside of him. But this wasn’t Gibbs so he continued to struggle.

But Lyle must have sensed Tony’s break from fantasy and he laughed and then placed his hand over Tony’s mouth and Tony had cursed himself for not yelling out before now but he’d still been in shock that he’d let this happen. But he could get out of it, right? Without anyone calling the cops and him having to face the humiliation once they ran a check on him and learned he was a Federal Agent. Yeah, a forty-year old agent who let himself be cuffed naked and who should have fucking _known_ better. He had to get out of this…or at least get through it but he had to stay calm.

“No, Lyle, I don’t want to do it this way, okay? You need to know that I’m a Federal Officer. Let me up and we’ll forget all about this…”

“You’re a Fed? That’s rich, sweetcheeks, ‘cos I’m a cop, too…”

And before Tony could say another thing Lyle shoved a sock in his mouth and laughed as Tony continued to struggle. Lyle told Tony what a sweet ass he had and he ran his fingers over Tony’s quivering flesh and pulled apart the cheeks to run a finger over Tony’s hole. Then Tony figured he wanted to see what he had so, without moving off of Tony, he leaned over and finally turned on the light.

“Oh, yeah, this is going to be so good…” Lyle said and he slapped Tony’s butt hard. Tony didn’t make a sound so he slapped him twice more only harder. This time Tony did give a slight grunt but it obviously wasn’t enough and Tony learned that Lyle was into pain but not his own. But not only that…he learned that Lyle had a partner.

Tony could only figure that the light going on was a signal because shortly after heard the door open. He was faced away but he saw the reflection on the TV as another man walked in and it was obvious that he was a cop, too, and he had a sickly smile on his face that made Tony’s stomach turn over. The new guy moved to the head of the bed and began to stroke Tony’s face and back and then he clamped his hand down on Tony’s neck.

The next thing Tony knew was that Lyle had again shifted back on his thighs. He didn’t understand at first why the TV suddenly came on but it made sense when a searing lash burned across his ass that made Tony try to arch up but the hand at his nape kept him in place. He moaned loudly at the pain and Tony realized that Lyle was using his belt to spank him.

Spank? God, this was no spanking. He enjoyed spanking, loved it, in fact. But this was a beating, pure and simple. And after every stroke Lyle and the other guy would laugh.

“Oh, yeah, hit him again…”

“Look at that color…so sweet…”

Lyle paused for a bit.

“Says he’s a Fed…” he mentioned conversationally.

“Yeah, saw the badge,” the second guy said and then stroked Tony’s face again. “That why you’re
hiding by paying cash for a shithole motel room and using a fake ID? Too bad, huh? No way you’ll report this…there’ll be no evidence. I’ll make very sure of that, Anthony…”

Tony became very still except for his attempts to breathe around the sock in his mouth. They knew his real name. That meant that they’d gone through his car, probably while he’d been at the club.

“Besides, who’s he gonna tell?” Lyle paused in his strokes with the belt to lean down to Tony who was panting harshly through his nose in an effort to get air into his lungs. “You gonna tell your boss, Scotty? No, it’s Anthony, right? Or do you use Tony?”

The second guy leaned down and spoke quietly into Tony’s ear.

“You gonna tell him you came to this room, lying about your name, looking to get fucked and instead got fucked up? That oughtta go over real well. But you listen up, sweetcheeks, even if you decide to try and find us you’ll run smack dab into our alibi. And what are you going to say? Not much, so you lay back now. You show up here for one reason and one reason alone…you want to get fucked. Well, honey, this is your lucky night…”

And then Lyle started again with the belt and he kept on hitting Tony’s ass until it was on fire and Tony was yelling into his gag, furious and aching and scared because he knew that he was in some deep shit.

Lyle decided to flip Tony over and when he did he looked down at him hard and Tony could only guess what he looked like, his face had been pushed down hard into the bed and he knew his makeup was smeared. But then Lyle seemed to look pissed and disappointed.

“What kind of game is this? You’re a hell of a lot older than you made yourself out to be, you fuck,” Lyle growled just before he pulled back and punched Tony in the face. It went even further downhill from there.

At some point in between the beatings and the rapes Lyle leaned over and whispered into a semi-conscious Tony’s ear, “if you’d been as young and sweet as you’d made yourself out to be it might have gone a little easier, but you’re old enough to have been around the block a time or three. Still you’re good and you still have a hot, tight ass so if you want to play again, come on back, only next time not so much makeup. You look like shit after being ridden hard.”

That was the last thing that Tony remembered. He woke up at noon. Struggling to move despite the giant ball of pain that was his body, he stopped to rest for a moment on the edge of the bed and actually considered calling the cops. That thought lasted oh, about two seconds. Instead he eased himself to the floor and crawled into the bathroom and proceeded to wash away as much as he could.

He did have a momentary flash of panic when he didn’t see any used condoms in the room and then he remembered Lyle’s partner -- he never did get his name, real or not -- picking them up to putting them into a bag he shoved into his pocket. He gave a deep sigh of relief and then finished packing his things. Afterwards he grabbed his bag and left the room without a backward glance.
Gibbs watched as Tony finished up the overtime report. He was very subdued but that didn’t come as any surprise. He was probably sore as hell and Gibbs knew those marks on his face were probably matched by others under his clothes. But what had his jaw tight and made stomach clenched were the marks at his wrists, the marks he kept trying to cover up. Someone had used metal cuffs on Tony and had beaten him, pretty severely judging from the way he was moving. Now Gibbs knew that Tony wasn’t working on anything for Vance or anyone else. That left the injuries as a result of something personal and Gibbs knew Tony well enough to know the bar-fight story was just that, a story. That left one last option. But the thought of Tony involved in that sent a riot of emotions tumbling through him, the primary one being anger. It pissed him off to think that someone out there had taken advantage of Tony’s trust and hurt him.

Gibbs blew out a deep breath. He’d of bet his entire savings that Tony had never been involved in the scene before now. He was positive he’d of sensed that about him. So Gibbs had to wonder, just how new was Tony? Was he experimenting or did he just have the misfortune of finding the wrong kind of dom? Both of those questions twisted his gut in ways he wasn’t prepared to deal with.

Gibbs was by no means ignorant of the lifestyle. He had indulged himself more than a few times but he’d never found the right partner with whom to share that part of himself. Until he did he never went beyond a few sessions with any one person and even then he made damned sure they were both on the same page and that no one, absolutely no one, got hurt. He had no respect for a dom that would hurt their sub to the point of leaving marks like that. He continued to think about it. Tony was a sub, Gibbs had known that about Tony from the moment he’d laid eyes on him. It was confirmed the first time he’d head-slapped him. But Gibbs would stake his reputation on knowing his Senior Field Agent and he was sure Tony was not into that level of pain. So maybe it was a session that had gotten out of control? And whose idea was it? Tony’s? If so, whoever she was, she wasn’t much of a dom if she let Tony dictate what happened and how. And if it was hers, well he couldn’t really entertain that thought without also considering how to dispose of the body.

Gibbs watched as Tony winced while getting up to get his report out of the printer. That was it. He got up saying something about coffee and stepped away from his desk. When he was far enough away so as not to be heard he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Ducky. After a moment he returned to the bullpen.

“DiNozzo, you’re with me,” and then turning to McGee and Ziva he told them to keep working on their reports.

“On your six,” Tony answered energetically which was totally at odds with his less than graceful move to follow Gibbs out of the bullpen.

Tony tugged his cuffs down again and followed Gibbs into the elevator. It came as no surprise when Gibbs hit the emergency switch but Tony’s stomach clenched at the renewed anger he saw on Gibbs’ face. So was he angry because he believed the story or was he angry because he knew Tony was lying?

“Boss…”

“Don’t say a word, DiNozzo,” Gibbs growled. “I don’t know what you were thinking to let something like this happen but it makes me seriously question your judgment and that is something that is unacceptable for any member of my team. Especially for my Second!”
Tony swallowed against the lump in his throat.

“Ducky is alone right now. I’ve made sure of it. He will examine you and when he’s done you and I are gonna talk. Understand?”

Tony opened his mouth in an instinctual attempt to lie his way out of this but Gibbs cut him off with a glare.

“Understand?” he repeated in a growl.

“Got it, Boss,” Tony said and Gibbs turned around hit the switch again.

The elevator came to a stop a moment later and as Tony followed Gibbs down the hall to autopsy he contemplated how long it would take for the Director to find him another position if he didn’t just get outright fired for his stupidity. God, his father was right…he was going to end up in a ditch somewhere…

“Jethro, what was so…oh, my, Tony,” Ducky said as soon as Tony walked into autopsy behind Gibbs.

“Head to toe, Duck, and then call me,” was all Gibbs said and then he turned to Tony with a glare that forbade him from saying a word and then he turned and walked out of autopsy.

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Tim looked over at Ziva when Gibbs pulled Tony out of the bullpen and saw that she had her head bent down over her work. He wanted to say something to her but he didn’t know how to phrase it. God, he was so much better at putting his thoughts down on paper! He really hoped that Gibbs was taking Tony down to see Ducky. He hadn’t said anything but he could tell that Tony was in pain. He lifted a hand and smoothed down the back of his hair in an unconscious imitation of Tony. He was annoyed with himself. He was really worried about Tony but couldn’t find a way to say it without fear of being ridiculed by Tony himself. The fact was that they’d fallen into this joking/insulting manner of speaking to one another that he found hard to break out of. But he was quickly coming to hate it. Maybe Abby could come up with an idea?

Ziva sent her document to print, her face betraying nothing of the tumultuous thoughts running through her mind. She considered speaking with Gibbs but then decided against that course of action. Gibbs was probably just as aware as she was of the marks on Tony’s wrists and had no doubt taken him to see Ducky. The question that gnawed at her was whether or not Gibbs knew of Tony’s latest undercover assignment? That was the only logical conclusion she could come to that would explain the marks. She simply did not believe that Tony was into a sadomasochistic lifestyle to the extent that amount of damage implied. And of course she had not believed his story about a bar-fight. She knew he was quite capable of taking care of himself when necessary although she was being quite genuine with her offer to work with him on improving his skills.

No, he had to be undercover again and the situation had gotten out of hand which was unacceptable. Who was supposed to have had Tony’s six? She would love a moment with that person just so that she could explain, in painful detail, what it meant to be someone’s backup. But what also bothered her very deeply was that she thought they were passed the point of secrecy, but apparently not. And that thought both angered and saddened her. She had truly come to feel that being on this team was like finding a new family and it hurt to think that she was wrong.

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“Come along Tony, you may remove your clothing and put this on,” Ducky said as he handed Tony a sheet.

“What about Palmer? Won’t he come in?” Tony asked both angry and embarrassed at what was about to be revealed to Ducky.

“Mr. Palmer is attending a seminar today so we will be quite alone. I’ve also locked the door to prevent anyone from entering during your examination,” Ducky said matter-of-factly.

Tony took the sheet with ill-grace but didn’t know how else to act. He was about to be examined on an autopsy table and one of his most respected friends was going to find out what he’d allowed to happen. And it wasn’t like he had a choice in the matter. Gibbs had made that abundantly clear. But if he was going to be fired anyway, why should he submit to this further humiliation?

“Never mind, Ducky, I don’t need you to examine me,” he said as he dropped the sheet onto the autopsy table and turned to walk out but he was stopped dead in his tracks.

“Halt! Just where do you think you are going, young man?” Ducky ordered in a tone of voice Tony had never heard coming from the older man before. He turned around with wide eyes.

“Ducky?”

“I asked you where you thought you were going. We have an examination to accomplish. Those were our orders and I intend to comply. It would behoove you to comply as well,” Ducky stated in a no-nonsense manner. He stood straight and stared at Tony in a way that would have made Gibbs proud.

“Ducky,” Tony said as he tried to appease this surprising version of his old friend. “We both know that this exam won’t go well. I’m just saving us both a lot of time and trouble by going upstairs and packing my things. I’ll be out of everyone’s hair within minutes,” he concluded with a pained smile.

Ducky looked at Tony and saw the worry and shame that colored the younger man’s face. He stepped closer and his visage softened.

“Tony, you are hurt. Both Jethro and I recognize this. If you feel that you might lose your position here as a result of this exam, let me assure you that you couldn’t be more wrong. I care about you Tony, as does Jethro. You are in a great deal of pain. It’s plainly obvious and caring for you is of the utmost importance right now. But I can’t determine the severity of your injuries without an examination.”

Ducky looked up at Tony when he stepped closer and he placed a hand on Tony’s arm. “May I remind you that my treating you still falls under the rules of doctor/patient confidentiality? I won’t discuss my findings with Jethro except to say whether or not you should return to duty.”

Tony looked down at the hand on his arm. He was hurting -- hurting badly. But he was also humiliated beyond words. He felt tears pricking at the back of his eyes and he blinked rapidly to get rid of them. He wasn’t about to make this situation worse by sobbing into Ducky’s arms. No matter how much he wanted to.

“Okay, Ducky,” he said quietly and then proceeded to remove his jacket.

Ducky was quiet at first as he examined him. He asked very few questions but slowly he got Tony to admit that most of what happened was not consensual although Tony stated that it started out that way.
“But it turned out he had a partner.”

Ducky nodded and said nothing. Two men had restrained, raped and beaten his young friend. Ducky had known a single man would never have gotten the opportunity to do this. He kept a running commentary as he gently probed the bruised occipital bone of Tony’s left eye and then carefully cleaned the numerous abrasions and contusions which ran from his temple down across his jaw.

“Your lip is lacerated but fortunately it requires no suturing and yes, the swelling seems to be going down although it really should have been iced. Hmm, this bruising on your arms seems rather severe, I’m afraid, but I see no indication of anything other than soft tissue damage…”

Tony listened with half an ear since he was already familiar with his list of injuries. He found himself tensing because he knew the most difficult part was about to take place.

“Tony, I need you to roll over now,” Ducky said quietly.

Tony nodded and slowly turned over. He’d seen a glimpse of his backside when he’d gotten home but had refused to look again. He could only imagine what colors would have sprouted since his last look. Ducky’s hissed in-drawn breath was quickly cut off but it gave him an idea as to just how bad it looked now.

Ducky prided himself on his professionalism but he’d been unable to stop his immediate reaction to the damage he saw on the body of a young man he thought of as family. Tony was one massive bruise from his lower spine down to the top portion of his thighs with some scabbing visible, no doubt the result of the flesh breaking open under the beating.

Ducky clucked sorrowfully and verbally soothed Tony as he examined him which had the unfortunate effect of bringing tears back to Tony’s eyes. Ducky said nothing but a tissue magically appeared near Tony’s hand. He opened his palm to grab it desperately. Ducky merely patted him gently on the shoulder and continued his ministrations.

Oh, my poor, poor boy, Ducky thought to himself as he gently examined the painfully bruised area. He quietly questioned Tony over the implement used assuming that it had been a strap.

“His belt,” Tony answered quietly.

It was amazing that Tony was able to stand at all, let alone walk. Ducky noted that most of the damage from the beating obviously centered upon Tony’s posterior but now it was time for a more intrusive look.

“I’ll try to be as gentle as possible, Tony, but I need to know if any protection was used,” Ducky asked as he lubed his latex-covered finger.

“They used condoms,” came the quiet reply.

“Very good, Tony, although I’ll still take some blood samples to be sure,” Ducky said and then slowly continued his exam.

But despite how slowly and gently he moved, Tony still hissed in pain and he began to tremble. Ducky thought that it was as much a reaction to being touched there again as the pain of his examination.

“Almost done, Tony,” Ducky said as he gently probed Tony’s red and swollen sphincter. “Was any lubrication used at all?”
“I…uh…prepped myself before going out…” Tony admitted and Ducky saw the color race across the back of Tony’s neck.

“Well done, Tony, otherwise I’m afraid there would have been a great deal more damage. As it is there are some abrasions as well as some minor tearing but it should heal quite nicely,” he continued and then he removed his finger only to return a moment later with a generous amount of medicated cream.

Still Tony groaned in pain but it quickly subsided as the anesthetic properties of the cream took effect.

“There is one last thing, Tony. I’m going to give you some antibiotics as well as something for the pain. After this you are going to go home…”

“Ducky, I can’t…”

“Yes you will, young man,” Ducky said in that same tone of voice he’d used earlier and Tony immediately quieted. Ducky nodded approvingly. He finished up quickly and then helped Tony up.

“You may dress now, Tony. Do you need help?”

Tony looked down, red-faced with shame and almost said no. He wanted nothing more than to leave and find someplace to hide but he was hurting very badly. But before he could answer, Ducky was there kneeling before him with his shorts in his hands.

“Hush, Tony,” Ducky ordered when Tony began to balk. “The poor souls I normally attend to rarely require my services as a gentleman’s gentleman, or valet if you prefer, but I must say, I infinitely prefer you breathing unlike my regular patients, so if you please?” Ducky finished with a little shake of garment in his hands.

Tony couldn’t do anything but chuckle and slowly raise his leg. He’d had to lie down that morning to get dressed and he hadn’t relished getting down on the floor here to get dressed. If he had, he was sure he wouldn’t have been able to get up again.

It didn’t take long and Tony was infinitely grateful for Ducky’s no-nonsense attitude as he helped him. When they were done Tony sat down while Ducky gathered the medications.

“What are you going to tell Gibbs?” Tony asked worriedly.

Ducky moved back to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Jethro needs to know your fitness for duty and whether or not he must get professionally involved. Anything else must come from you. As for your records, I’m logging this as an illness and I am sending you home on sick leave for the rest of the week…”

“A whole week? Ducky…”

“You need time to heal, Tony, but you can be assured Jethro will not learn the more intimate details of your injuries from me. However, you must be prepared for his lecture on taking appropriate care of yourself while off-duty.”

Tony looked down refusing to meet Ducky’s eyes.

“It seems to me that there is some underlying reason why you placed yourself into this type of
situation…”

“I told you I didn’t know about the second guy…”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, my boy. Please understand that I’m not judging you. Not at all. I am concerned over your need for an anonymous sexual encounter. But if that is what you prefer, I’m merely saying that there is a great deal of care that must be taken.”

Tony looked away. He felt a need to explain himself to Ducky in an attempt to regain the respect he felt he’d lost today. But how could he tell him what it was he was really doing? He was sure Ducky would never tell anyone else, not even a lover, but God, he couldn’t bring himself to bare his soul a second time. Not even to Ducky. He just wasn’t strong enough right now. For the first time he wished he was being treated by a doctor whose opinion he didn’t give a damn about. He took a deep breath and decided to just let it lie for now and let Ducky think it was just a kink of his.

“Yeah, Ducky, I didn’t keep my head straight and things got out of hand. But trust me, I’ve learned my lesson,” he said with conviction because he sure as hell had. He’d never let the fantasy take over so much again. He wasn’t fool enough to think he’d never again pick up another mock-Gibbs.

Ducky knew Tony wasn’t being completely truthful and that there was much more going on here than he was saying, but he wouldn’t push him.

“Alright, Tony,” Ducky said as he lightly squeezed the tense shoulder under his hand. “If you ever feel the need to talk, I am quite a good listener despite my reputation as a raconteur.”

Tony smiled and slowly stood up. He had the little bag that Ducky had given him with his meds.

“See you next week, Ducky. Thanks,” he said as he slowly made his way out of autopsy.

“Tony, you will call me if you need anything,” Ducky called out more as an order than a request.

Tony gave him a nod and a smile and then turned and left. Ducky watched him leave with a deep frown on his face.
Chapter 8

Gibbs was in with Director Vance when his phone rang. He excused himself from Vance for a moment when he saw that it was Ducky.

“Well?” he said instead of hello.

“I’m sending Tony home for the rest of the week. My records state that he is ill, a mild bronchial infection that warrants extra care due to the status of his lungs, but that is all I’m annotating.”

“Yeah?” Gibbs question was a challenge. If Ducky was lying for Tony it was because it was very personal and Gibbs knew he wouldn’t get any details from him.

“Yes, and under the assumption that you are in a location where you cannot speak, let me say that Tony’s injuries were not his fault but he does need time to recover.”

Not his fault so that meant someone took the choice away from him. He could feel the anger that was becoming a constant when it came to Tony begin to simmer in his gut. He was damn well going to find out who in the hell this woman was to do this to his Tony.

“Understood. I’ll talk to you later,” he promised and then hung up. He turned to look back at Vance.

“Tony’s sick. He’ll be out for the rest of the week.”

“Sick? Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“Didn’t know how bad. I sent him to Ducky to find out. I’m going to take him home.”

Vance stared at Gibbs for a moment.

“You want a replacement for now?”

“Depends on if we catch a case. I’ll let you know.”

Vance nodded. “Alright. Get him home. We can finish this review later.”

Gibbs nodded and quickly left but instead of heading straight to the bullpen, he took the elevator down to autopsy.

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Tony made his way slowly to his desk. He was feeling a bit better thanks to Ducky’s pain meds but he still needed to get home and wondered if McGee was available to drive. He looked around the bullpen but saw only Ziva working and decided not to say anything in case she offered to do the driving. He didn’t think he was up to the inevitable death-grip on the oh-shit handle for the entire trip.

“Hey Ziva, where’s McGee?”

“He is assisting Agent Norton’s team with the new software updates.”

“Why’s he doing that? Shouldn’t IT be handling it?”
“They are waterlogged so Tim is assisting when he is available.”

“What?”

“Waterlogged…overly full, yes?”

Tony sighed. “Close. When work is piled up its called backlogged, not waterlogged.”

Ziva’s only response was to raise her eyes heavenward for a moment with a sigh and Tony smiled.

“What about Gibbs?” he asked off-handedly despite the tightening in his belly at the ‘talk’ they were going to have. He thought back to what Ducky said about Gibbs not holding this against him but he couldn’t really believe that based on his anger in the elevator.

“He is in with the Director,” Ziva said as she studied Tony closely and then stood up and walked over to Tony when she saw that he was packing his backpack with what seemed to be all of his personal items.

“You are leaving.”

“Very observant, Ziva, ten points.”

“Ten points? What is the game?”

“There is no game, Ziva. Not anymore,” Tony said cryptically as he began shutting down his computer.

“Does that mean that your assignment has been terminated?”

Tony looked up at her with a shocked expression that was quickly erased. *I guess I am being fired…*

“So the news is out already, huh? You’d think I’d have received formal notice first,” he said quietly. *They can’t wait to get rid of me. Gibbs and Vance are probably going over suitable replacements right now…*

“There has been no formal notice of anything. Is Gibbs explaining your condition to the Director or is the Director explaining it to Gibbs?” Ziva asked hoping that Gibbs had been in on the undercover operation. But if so, what had happened?

“Oh, I’m sure Gibbs is explaining everything to Vance so I’m heading home to recuperate,” Tony said and wondered if he should just say his formal goodbye here and now. Yeah, that’d probably be best. Talk to everyone separately. He stood up.

“It’s been great, Ziva,” Tony said quietly as he pulled her in for a hug.

Ziva was surprised at first but then she realized what this was. She was very familiar with the surge of adrenaline-powered emotion that could easily overcome an operative when an operation does not completely go according to plan. Tony must have thought he was going to die at some point and that thought infuriated her. Why had she not been involved? Surely her skills might have helped prevent the injuries Tony was now suffering. He should never have gone in alone.

“You should not have done this, Tony. You should not have allowed yourself to be placed into that position,” Ziva said as she stiffened in anger.

Tony felt Ziva stiffen in his arms and it hurt to think that she disliked him so much that a hug was
repulsive. And how in the hell had she found out about what had happened? He let her go and stepped back.

“I’m sorry,” he said and it was devastatingly true. He was so sorry for everything he’d done, for who he was. He needed to get out...now. Screw waiting for a ride, he drove himself in that morning, he’d drive himself home.

“It is alright. You should go home and get well. There is work that is waiting to be done,” Ziva said thinking about her next task which was to give Gibbs a piece of her mind for allowing her partner to be put into such a dangerous position.

Feeling summarily dismissed by an agent who was his junior, Tony felt his face flush in anger and humiliation. But did it matter anymore? No, it didn’t. With a nod he grabbed his backpack and left.

Tony made it home in good time which was fortunate because the pain meds were really getting to him and he desperately needed to lie down. Slowly he pulled his backpack from his car and made his way indoors pausing only to brush away a couple of flowers than had landed on him as he walked. He picked one up and looked at it briefly feeling suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. Tears stung his eyes but he didn’t bother trying to force them back. Instead he moved to the seldom used elevator and pushed the button for his floor. He couldn’t take his eyes away from the small flower and figured that the pain medication Ducky had given him really sucked because he couldn’t seem to get a hold of his thoughts. All he could see was the fragile bloom he held between his thumb and forefinger.

Walking into his apartment he dropped his backpack by the door and made his way to this bedroom, unbuttoning his coat with one hand as he went. Then, with an ache in his heart he didn’t understand, he crushed the blossom in his fingers and dropped it on the floor. Stripping and throwing his clothes aside, Tony painfully crawled onto his bed and fell asleep completely unaware of the tears drying on his cheeks.

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“Ducky?” Gibbs called out when he didn’t immediately see his friend.

“I was wondering how long it would take you,” Ducky said as he looked up into Gibbs’ narrowed eyes.

“Well?”

Ducky sighed. He would protect Tony’s privacy but he was not happy about what he could tell Jethro.

“He has numerous areas with severe bruising and some lacerations. They will take time to heal. He should not be walking around nor should he be sitting for any length of time. This is why I’ve sent him home. He needs to be able to lie down as necessary dependent upon his level of pain. I’ve also given him something for that pain so he should not drive himself.”

“I’ll take him. But I want to know what happened to him. Was he jumped? Is there someone I need to track down?”

“I am not at liberty to say, as I’m sure you suspected. But what I will say is that he feels his position with NCIS is in jeopardy because of this. Where would he have gotten that ridiculous notion, Jethro?”
Gibbs blew out a breath of frustration and anger. Damnit, he’d told Tony that he was questioning his judgment but that didn’t mean he wanted him off the team.

“I told him I was questioning his judgment.”

“Oh, Jethro,” Ducky said with a sigh. “You are fully aware that we all make mistakes regardless of our age. I could point out a few of yours as well as my own. In this case, Tony may just need some mentoring.”

“Oh, but just tell me this, Ducky. Was it consensual and just got out of hand or do I need to investigate?”

Ducky debated how much to say but he felt he could point Jethro in the right direction. After all, he knew that Jethro was familiar with situations such as this and because of that he would be the ideal person to help Tony find what it was he was seeking.

“It got out of hand but do speak with Tony, Jethro. I believe he’s in a dark place right now and he doesn’t have the right answers.”

“I’ll straighten it out, Ducky,” he said and then turned to leave without another word.

He headed straight for the bullpen but found only Ziva at her desk.

“Where’s DiNozzo?”

“He went home, Gibbs.”

“McGee drive him?”

“No, he left by himself. Is there a problem?” Ziva questioned when she saw the look of anger on Gibbs’ face.

“Ducky gave him something for pain. How long ago did he leave?”

“Approximately fifteen minutes ago.”

Gibbs blew out a frustrated breath. Tony would be almost home by now. Fine, he’d head straight there and find out exactly what had happened.

“Gibbs,” Ziva said as she stood up from her desk and walked over to stand in front of Gibbs. “Why were we excluded from this operation? Perhaps if McGee and I had been involved we may have been able to prevent Tony from getting injured.”

“Operation? What are you talking about?”

“It seems that Tony has been involved in another undercover operation and that we were not told. I had hoped we were passed the point of such secrecy on this team.”

Gibbs looked at Ziva who stared back at him steadily while she waited for an answer. Of course she’d noticed Tony’s injuries. Hell, McGee probably had, too. It looked like he was going to have to do a bit of damage control which wouldn’t be easy since he only had his assumptions about the personal events surrounding Tony.

“I’m not at liberty to say what’s going on. You’ll just have to trust me when I say that there was nothing you or I could have done to prevent this. You’ll also have to trust me when I say that it will never happen again.”
He could see that his non-answer was insufficient but he really didn’t have time to worry about it right now. He needed to get to Tony’s place.

“I’m out for awhile. Call me on my cell if there’s a problem and don’t let Abby or McGee bother Tony.”

And saying that he turned and walked out knowing Ziva’s eyes were on him all the way to the elevator.

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“Abby,” Tim said warningly as he watched Abby chew on her fingernails. “What are you keeping from me?”

“I can’t, Timmy! I promised and I won’t break my promise. You can’t make me!” she cried and then whirled away to stand in front of her computer.

Tim pursed his lips. Abby knew something about what was going on with Tony but she wasn’t talking. Ziva had already mentioned that she thought it was another undercover operation, one that had gone south but he wasn’t sure.

“Abby, the only reason I’m asking is that Tony is really hurt…”

“What! Why didn’t you say anything before! Oh my God, oh my God! What happened to him, Tim? I’ve got to go see him!”

Tim watched Abby fly out of the lab at an amazing speed for someone wearing five-inch platform boots. He ran to catch up and together they entered the elevator.

Ziva looked up when Abby ran into the bullpen calling for Tony.

“He has gone home, Abby,” she said and was not surprised when McGee showed up a moment later.

“He’s hurt! I have to go see him…”

“Abby…” Tim began but Abby cut him off.

“I have to know what’s wrong with him! How was he hurt? Oh, God, oh God,” Abby said as she started to pace. “I know he hurt his knee but I thought he wasn’t doing his weekends anymore…”

“Abby,” Ziva interrupted with her hands on Abby’s biceps. “What do you mean by Tony’s weekends…”

But Abby stopped speaking, her eyes widening as she realized what it was she’d almost said.

“I…uh…I don’t…” but her words faded off into silence and her fingers again found their way to her mouth as she stared in wide-eyed horror at both Ziva and Tim.

“Abby…” Tim asked both concern and warning coloring his voice. “What do you know?”

But Abby wasn’t about to screw anything up again. She stood up straight and took a deep breath.

“All I know is that Tony is hurt but I don’t know how or why. I can’t talk about anything else so don’t ask. But I am going to go check on him to see if he’s alright.”
“Gibbs specifically told me not to let you or Tim go see him, yet,” Ziva told them both and then raised her hand at the argument she could see Abby was about to make. “Gibbs has gone to see him. I do not believe he wants to be disturbed.” The sudden smile Abby gave her took her by surprise.

“Gibbs went to see him? Then everything should be alright,” Abby said with a nod.

“I don’t understand what’s happening here…” McGee complained.

“Nor do I…” Ziva added.

“It’s simple. Gibbs will fix everything,” Abby stated with a smile and then she turned and flounced out of the bullpen leaving Ziva and McGee standing in open-mouthed wonder.
Gibbs drove at his usual speed to get to Tony’s apartment. On the way there he contemplated what he was going to say to Tony but his gut kept churning at the thought of what that woman had done. He knew Tony could take care of himself so he wasn’t overpowered but he could have been drugged or she’d lied to him and waited until he was bound. The other possibility was that she had someone else help her and that thought made his chest ache and his hands clench as he gritted his teeth. Damnit, he needed answers!

He pulled onto Tony’s street and saw that Tony’s car was in its usual parking spot. He felt a modicum of relief knowing he’d gotten home safely but he knew he wouldn’t be at ease until he’d seen Tony for himself. He quickly found a spot near the curb and got out of his car ignoring the soft pink blossoms he was crushing underfoot as he practically jogged into the apartment building.

Reaching Tony’s door he listened for a moment but heard no sound from within. He knocked and waited but received no answer so he pulled his keys from his pocket and simply unlocked the door. Once inside he immediately noted Tony’s backpack on the floor so he slowly made his way down the hall to the bedroom. He peered around the door frame only to see Tony leaning up on the bed with his gun pointing right at him and he froze.

Tony moaned slightly at a noise that interrupted his dream of being caught in a maelstrom of pink flowers that blinded and choked him until he didn’t know who or where he was. Gasping slightly it took him a bit before he realized that his front door had opened which meant that someone had entered his apartment and was probably moving down the hallway. The room spun as he reached towards his nightstand and grabbed his weapon. He’d just brought his arm up and aimed at the door when he realized that it was Gibbs. He immediately dropped his arm and then moaned as he let himself fall back on the bed with a groan. He lay there for a moment as he tried to clear his head and wondered vaguely if Gibbs was really there or if it was part of his dream.

He looked back towards the door and saw the furious expression on Gibb’s face. This was no dream, more like a nightmare. He heard nightmare Gibbs hiss out a breath and at that moment he realized that this Gibbs was real. His stomach clenched in fear and then he realized that Gibbs was looking at his body…but more specifically, he was looking at the bruises that covered his upper torso, the only part of his body that was currently visible. He unconsciously pulled the sheet up and then had the ludicrous thought that he might just look like a Victorian female as he did so. He might have laughed if he hadn’t been so worried about the anger on Gibbs’ face.

“Jesus, Tony…why would you let her…let anyone…do that to you!” Gibbs growled.

“Gibbs!” Tony hissed out through gritted teeth. “Don’t…just don’t… Damnit, let me get dressed…”

Gibbs blew out an angry breath through his own tightened jaw and briefly contemplated letting Tony just sleep. He knew he needed it, knew Tony was on medication, but he just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t walk away without knowing just what in the hell was going on.

“I’ll wait for you out here unless you need help…?”

Tony had to bite back the bitter bark of laughter that almost slipped out at the thought of letting Gibbs see the rest of the damage to his body. There was just no way in hell…

“I’m fine,” he bit out.
Gibbs gave him a skeptical look but then he nodded and stepped away from the door leaving Tony to get himself dressed. It took Tony several agonizing minutes to get some sweats and a t-shirt on, minutes spent desperately keeping quiet so that Gibbs wouldn’t know just how badly he’d been hurt. He made his way out to the living room and found Gibbs staring out through the window.

“You were supposed to let someone drive you home,” Gibbs said without turning around. Tony could see the tense set of his shoulders and he looked away.

“Didn’t want Ziva driving me and I didn’t know where McGee was. Decided not to wait,” Tony said as he walked slowly to the kitchen.

Tony glanced briefly at the clock but he couldn’t take another pain pill, yet, despite how much he still hurt. Besides, he still felt a bit loopy and he really needed to keep his head straight since it was obvious that Gibbs wasn’t going to let him slide on their little talk. He almost giggled at the thought of a ‘straight talk’. He wasn’t straight so what good was a talk?

Tony said nothing else but he began to make a pot of coffee even though he knew he wouldn’t drink any. He just needed a task to do while he waited for Gibbs to formally notify him that his ‘assignment had been terminated’, to use Ziva’s words. He closed his eyes for a moment and felt the world spin. Not good. Instead he pulled the makings for coffee out of the cupboard. He was caught by the movement of his fingers and he stared for a moment. His fingers were...fingering.

He grimaced as he tried to find the right word but his brain wouldn’t cooperate. He really shouldn’t be having any kind of important discussion right now. He turned to Gibbs to tell him that but he was still staring out of the window. Tony shrugged. It didn’t matter right now, nothing really mattered. Besides, just watching the grains of ground coffee slide into the filter were suddenly fascinating.

It was taking Gibbs awhile to push aside the fury that had burned through him when he’d seen what had been done to Tony. No one...absolutely no one...had the right to do that. Not to anyone but most especially not to Tony. And Gibbs knew that what he’d seen was only a part of what had been done. He closed his eyes for a moment in an effort to force down the rage that suffused him at that thought. He succeeded but he could still feel the need to protect Tony surging inside of him and it took every bit of willpower he possessed to keep from grabbing Tony and taking him away somewhere safe. He smirked grimly into the dark outside of the window at the thought of what Tony would say about that. No, he had to keep his own desires out of this, but first things first. Tony needed to know that he hadn’t lost his job. And Gibbs needed to know that whatever had happened would not happen again. Not as long as Tony was on his team. But he couldn’t make this personal. This had to be about the job, not him. He turned around and faced Tony.

“You’re not being fired,” Gibbs growled. “But this never happens again, understand? Your first duty is to NCIS.”

Tony waited for a moment, unsure of exactly what it was Gibbs was saying. He wasn’t being fired, but Gibbs’ use of ‘NCIS’ rather than ‘him’ made Tony’s stomach sink. He knew it meant he was off the team and he wanted to verify that but his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. Besides, he knew that Gibbs just didn’t work with those he didn’t respect. He was about to ask where he’d be assigned when Gibbs growled out another question.

“I want to know who she is.”

“Who?” Tony asked in confusion.

“Your girlfriend...the one who did this to you.”
The world tilted for a moment and Tony almost laughed but he wasn’t sure it wouldn’t come out as a sob. God, if ever there was proof of how pathetic Gibbs thought he was this was it. But was it better to let him think that he was so enthralled he’d let a woman do this or to tell him the truth about himself? No, he couldn’t tell the truth. The gruff, straight Marine had a low enough opinion of him as it is. He didn’t want to add disgust to the mixture. He took a deep breath and tried to still the sudden desire to vomit.

“No names, Gibbs. I’ll take care of it.”

Gibbs clenched his fists against the wounded look on Tony’s face. Jesus, he just wanted to grab him and kiss that look away. It was obvious he needed someone to take care of him and he wanted to be that person, damnit, but that just wasn’t possible.

“I know some people…women…they’re good doms and they know what they’re doing. They wouldn’t…hurt you…like this.”

Tony couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Although he’d never really played with anyone, he knew he couldn’t sub to a woman. That just wasn’t in him. But obviously Gibbs thought he was a complete sub and now he was actually trying to set him up with someone else, someone who wouldn’t ‘hurt’ him. Tony felt the heat crawl up his face. But at least Gibbs still thought he was straight.

“I don’t need a matchmaker, Gibbs,” Tony said quietly as he tried to remain still and not swing out at Gibbs for the pain he was now feeling.

“NCIS needs agents they can depend on!” Gibbs spit out angry all over again. I need to know I can depend on you to be on my six! Gibbs blew out another frustrated breath. Why was Tony making this so hard? Couldn’t he see that this woman was no good for him?

“This can’t go on, DiNozzo, and you know it. You can’t be a Senior Field Agent if you’re always playing injured so you end this!” And if he wouldn’t, Gibbs knew how to find out who this woman was and he’d fix it so that she never looked at Tony again.

Tony felt like he’d been punched. It was bad enough knowing he was already off Gibbs’ team but now Gibbs would get him fired anyway if he continued with his ‘abusive dom girlfriend’. God, it was so fucked up it was almost laughable. But the fact was that he couldn’t move to another team, he couldn’t work in the same building if he wasn’t working with Gibbs. He’d known that from the beginning which meant it really was time to leave D.C. Tony felt his vision grow dark around the edges and he wondered if it was that last thought or the drugs that had his head spinning. He didn’t know. All he knew was that he felt sick and he hurt, both inside and out. He needed Gibbs to leave.

“You don’t have to worry, Gibbs, this will never happen again. It’s over,” Tony promised. Because not only will I not be on your team, I’ll do my best to make sure I’m not even in this state. His disjointed mind started jumping to packing, moving out. He needed to get away from Gibbs and right now he doubted there was any place on the planet that was far enough away and that thought hurt so fucking much.

Gibbs stared hard at Tony. He doubted he’d ever seen such an intense look of pain on Tony’s face. But then it was replaced with a determined look and he hoped it meant he’d dump what’s-her-face. But Tony was pale and there was a fine sheen of sweat on his pale forehead. He felt a huge surge of guilt.

“You’re in pain. Where are your meds?” Gibbs asked looking around.
“I’m fine, just need to lie down for a bit and then I can do what I need to do. I think you should leave now.”

“You need any help getting things taken care of?” Gibbs offered thinking that Tony really needed someone to take care of him. He also figured that if anyone who’d do that to Tony might not give him up that easily and he could appreciate that to an extent. He would never have hurt Tony but if he ever had him, he’d sure as hell never give him up.

_Could this get any fucking worse?_ Tony asked himself in amazement, his head still wrapped around getting away and in his confusion he misinterpreted what it was Gibbs was saying. To his mind the last thing he needed was Gibbs helping him pack.

“No thanks, Gibbs, I’ve got it covered.”

Gibbs nodded again and walked to the door. He gave Tony one last intense look and then walked out.

As soon as he left Tony felt himself begin to shake. He made his way to the couch and sank down with his head in his hands. After a moment he let himself slip sideways until he was lying on his couch. He pulled the throw off the back of the couch to cover himself and let the darkness take him away.

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Vance reviewed Ducky’s report on DiNozzo the following afternoon. He’d continued to have problems with his lungs ever since his exposure to the plague which didn’t surprise him considering the climate here in D.C. The Florida assignment was still open and he wondered if that assignment wouldn’t be better for him. He knew that DiNozzo did not have his career options marked as being open to accepting new job offers, but that didn’t preclude his being offered promotions based on merit. He’d received three offers, this job being one of them, since Vance had been in his current position and he’d never accepted any of them. He didn’t know how many offers he’d turned down during his predecessors’ terms.

Gibbs had known of each and every offer but he’d never said anything, merely nodding in approval whenever he’d told him that DiNozzo had turned another one down. Vance had only questioned DiNozzo once, that first time he’d been offered a job after his return from his Agent Afloat position. DiNozzo’s response was that he wasn’t eager to break up the team again. Vance hadn’t agreed but it wasn’t his choice. But this time had to be different. DiNozzo wasn’t getting any younger and these health issues were going to catch up to him sooner or later. He hoped DiNozzo would understand reason but it still remained his choice.

Vance knew that offering this one again would piss Gibbs off but even he’d be able to understand that in the long run it would be better for DiNozzo to be somewhere warmer. Hell, he knew how much Gibbs liked the younger man. He didn’t think he’d hold this decision against him. With that in mind, he picked up the phone and called Agent DiNozzo.

Tony lazily flipped through a few more channels trying desperately to find something decent to watch on TV, something that would take his mind off of Gibbs’ words, his threats, something that would push away the numbness he felt inside. But he kept running through the words in his head and he kept coming up with the same interpretation. Gibbs wanted him either with a good dom or gone. He shook his head in amazement. Just how into the scene _was_ Gibbs if he knew some good female doms? Tony shuddered at the thought but not in a bad way. Gibbs, black leather, those calloused hands stroking through the leather strands of a cat… Oh, yeah, one of his favorite fantasies but suddenly it was shattered when the rest of the picture came to mind and he groaned.
God, he couldn’t even control his own mental images anymore because the picture expanded to show Gibbs with a red-headed sub…a red-headed female sub…writhing under his ministrations…

He dropped his head back onto the couch and sighed. He tried for the picture again with him under that leather cat but it didn’t work. He couldn’t conjure up anything pleasurable because those words just kept coming back and he felt shame all over again.

“I know some people…women…they’re good doms and they know what they’re doing. They wouldn’t…hurt you…like this.”

He rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb and took another drink of scotch. He’d eased off on the pain pills because he didn’t like the way they made him feel but this stuff, yeah he definitely saw the appeal. Besides Abby would kick his ass if she ever thought he was mixing pills and alcohol. Still, he was safe from censure…for a while at least.

Abby had been calling off and on all morning to find out how he was. He’d been monitoring his calls because at first he’d felt too raw to talk to her yet. Fortunately she said that they’d picked up a case and that she’d visit him as soon as she could but that she hoped everything was alright. She’d sounded so sad and worried that he’d finally picked up, telling her he’d been sleeping through everything because of Ducky’s pain pills.

He’d listened to her for quite awhile before he got up the energy to break into her worried and upset monologue to apologize for going out again when he’d promised her he wouldn’t that night at her place; a moment that now seemed so long ago. But for some reason she thought that everything was alright now because ‘Gibbs would fix everything’. He certainly had but he wasn’t about to get into a discussion over it. Fortunately for him Abby had to get off the phone because she had ‘piles and piles of evidence’ to process. She rang off with a promise to come visit as soon as they were clear from the case.

He took another sip and decided that he’d just have to haul his painful ass off of the couch to find a DVD. Then he’d have to do it again in a couple of hours. May as well get it over with he figured and then levered himself up. He was moving towards his collection when his phone rang again. He waited for the answering machine to pick up.

The machine finally did and Tony was surprised to hear Vance’s voice over the small speaker.

“Agent DiNozzo, this is Director Vance…” Tony picked up the phone.

“Sir, this is Agent DiNozzo.”

“I apologize if I woke you. How are you feeling?”

“Sore, Sir.”

“Sore?”

Tony suddenly remembered that Ducky had told everyone he was sick. “Yes, Sir…from coughing…”

“I see. Well, that’s the reason I called. I wanted to let you know that the Team Lead position in Florida was still open.”

“Florida?” Tony said, surprised that the plum assignment was still available. That would solve all his problems except one. His heart would still be broken. He turned to stare out of the window while Vance continued.
“If you think it would be better for you than staying here I can make it happen.”

Better for me? Of course it would be better, I’d have a job doing something I’m still good at, start over somewhere new. Get my head on straight and maybe even regain my self-respect…

“Agent DiNozzo?” Vance said and Tony realized that he’d been silent for too long.

“Yes, Sir…that would work.”

“So you’re saying you want the job?”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll take the job. How long before I can transfer?”

“Dr. Mallard has you on sick leave for the rest of the week. Do you want to take leave before reporting in?”

“No, Sir. I’m feeling much better. I can take care of a lot of issues this week and moving is no problem. I’ll arrange for my stuff to be packed and shipped. Can I report in next week?”

“Next week is not a problem,” Vance answered hiding his surprise at how quickly DiNozzo was willing to leave. “You’ll just need to be cleared by Dr. Mallard prior to. Is that going to be an issue?”

“No, Sir. I can have Ducky sign me off when he checks up on me at the end of the week.”

“Very well, I’ll get everything set up for you. I really think you made the right choice. Florida will be a better place for you.”

Tony grimaced but kept his voice even.

“Yes, Sir. I think so, too,” Tony answered. Vance hung up after that.

Tony stood there for quite awhile watching the wind whip through the trees outside. The sky had darkened with the threat of rain and the wind blew even more blossoms off of the trees outside. This was it, Tony thought, his chance to go somewhere and start over, show the world who he really was. But instead of being excited at the prospect he felt hollow inside. He watched the blossoms fall. That’s me, he thought. He’d arrived at NCIS full of hope and everything had been so bright and fresh, just like that first burst of spring. He’d honestly thought that this time he’d found what he was looking for, namely a place to call home, some good friends, things that he’d never known before. And he’d almost had it all.

He’d found friends and, surprisingly enough, he’d even fallen in love. But those things, like the fragile blossoms outside, were fading away. Fading? What, are you waxing poetic now, you moron? he smirked, it’s all blown to hell. He felt a deep pain in his chest at the thought of so much wasted time dreaming about something that would never happen. Still, this was his chance, maybe the only one he had left. And if he was lucky, he’d find a way to live without Gibbs in his life.
Tony ran his fingers through Abby’s pigtail as she hiccupped into his shirt. He reached over and grabbed another tissue to hand to her. God, he was going to miss her so much.

Things had moved very quickly since he told Vance he’d take the transfer. The hardest part was telling Abby that he was leaving. He’d just gotten up the nerve to tell her and had barely hung up the phone it seemed when she had shown up at his door on Wednesday night even though the case wasn’t over, yet.

“Why won’t you tell me what Gibbs said, Tony?” she whispered yet again. She was so mad at Gibbs. He was supposed to fix everything but now everything was so broken. Tony was leaving and nothing she’d said was making him change his mind. She had to think of something, some reason to make him understand that he couldn’t leave their family, leave her.

“Because it doesn’t matter, Abs. The point is that I’ve finally realized that I won’t ever find what I need if I stay here…”

“But I know lots of guys, Tony, real nice guys that I know you’d love!” she wailed as fresh tears streaked down her face. She’d been so shocked when he admitted on the phone what had really happened to him but what totally rocked her world was Gibbs’ reaction. She just didn’t understand at all.

“Even if I thought I could fall in love again, it’s too soon,” Tony answered sadly and then rubbed his hands over Abby’s back. “Would you do me a favor, though?”

“Of course, Tony…anything…”

“Don’t blame Gibbs, okay? It’s not his fault.”

“Tony…” Abby whined as she sat up.

“I don’t want you upset with him over this. It was never going to work out and that’s not on him, okay? So can you please try to not be mad at him?”

Abby chewed on her bottom lip for a bit and then looked up at Tony through her spikey wet lashes.

“I’ll try…” she promised quietly.

“That’s my girl,” Tony murmured as he brought her back into his arms.

“So when are you leaving?” She asked sadly.

“I report in next week…”

“TONY!” Abby cried and she sat up suddenly to stare at Tony. “It’s too soon! What about packing! And you have to have a going-away party and…”

“Whoa, slow down, Abs,” Tony said with his hands up. “First of all, no going-away party, please. I just can’t handle that…really, Abby…”

Tony had to turn away for a moment. There was just no way he could handle anything like that. So yeah, maybe it stunk of him sliding out in the middle of the night but it was better this way. After all, he’d only just skirted being fired.
“But Tony…!” came that little girl voice that killed him and Abby started another fresh round of tears. “We’re your friends…!”

Tony’s chest constricted. Yes, he’d always thought that Abby, McGee and Ziva were his friends… his best friends. But everything just seemed so confused lately and he wasn’t sure of anything anymore. Hell, he thought he’d done everything he could to maintain Gibbs’ respect and friendship and look at where that ended up. No, he couldn’t do it.

“I can’t, I’m sorry. Besides, I’ve already said goodbye to Ziva and I’ll call Mc Soon-to-be-Senior Field Agent later,” Tony said with his customary smirk. “I’ll see Ducky on Friday.”

“What about Gibbs?” Abby added in a small voice.

“We’ve said all we need to say. Hell, he practically offered to help me pack.”

Abby didn’t say anything else. She just dropped her head back onto Tony’s shoulder. The two most important men in her life had just hurt her very badly. Tony, who was like her brother, deciding to leave her behind and Gibbs, her Knight in Shining Armor, who had broken things for good it seemed. This time, though, she doubted he’d ever make his way back onto that pedestal, the same one he’d slipped from once before when he went to Mexico. She hiccuped slightly wishing this nightmare would end.

“I’m so sorry, Abby,” Tony murmured. And he was but there just wasn’t any other choice.

They stayed cuddled for a bit longer when Abby’s phone rang. Slowly she sat up and answered it.

“This is Abby…oh, okay. I’ll be there in twenty. Yeah…thanks, Terry.”

“Who was that?”

“Terry Norton. He was watching my babies for me while I came over here. I’ve got to go, though. They’ve got some answers for me and Gibbs will want that right away.”

“That’s Agent Norton from Vazquez’s team?”

“Yeah, he’s been working with Gibbs since Tuesday morning.”

Tony was stunned although he shouldn’t have been. He’d been sure Vance and Gibbs were looking for a replacement for him as early as Monday, the day he’d left.

“Terry’s a good guy,” he offered and couldn’t help but mentally list his strengths and weaknesses in an effort to decide if he was good enough to have Gibbs’ six. He wasn’t.

“McGee will still be Senior, though, right?” Gibbs would be fine with Tim and Ziva he told himself and desperately hoped it was true.

“I guess so. That’s what Timmy’s been doing so I’m sure it’ll stay that way. Ziva gets along with him which is a good thing.”

“Yeah, Gibbs would hate to have to explain why she broke an agent on their first case together…”

Tony was rewarded by a low chuckle from his girl. He put his hand on the side of her face and used his thumb to wipe away a stray tear and some of the black streaks.

“I’m going to miss you, Abby. But I promise to email as often as possible.”
“You’d better. Plus you have to find a really great place on the beach for when I come to visit, okay?”

“You’ve got it,” Tony promised and then walked Abby to the door.

“Can I come by to see you off on Saturday morning? I mean, you’re still really sore and I can help you pack your car.”

“Definitely. No way could I leave without another one of your famous hugs.”

Abby nodded and gave him another tremulous smile and a gentle hug and then turned and left. Tony watched her go until she disappeared around the corner to the stairs. With a sigh he continued to pack his DVD collection.

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On Thursday afternoon McGee rushed to find the financial information Gibbs had requested (yeah, requested, he smirked) on their prime suspect and wished for the hundredth time that Tony was back. Norton was okay but he was still learning the ropes. Fortunately, he knew how to handle some of the reports and generic team paperwork that Tony used to take care of although he was finding it hard to deal with Gibbs. McGee wondered if he’d make it through to the end of the case which was a doozy with several dead end leads. And with the way this case was going McGee sure as hell didn’t have time to learn about that stuff, yet, let alone take care of it and he marveled at how Tony had kept up with it even while they had cases going on. Tim knew he could multitask with the best of them but he’d been amazed to find out that Tony had done that, too. And he’d done it while seeming to be playing all the time. He shook his head in amazement but more in self-admonishment. He and Tony seemed to have lost touch lately, all of their conversation being more of the playful, smart-alecky cutting on one another than any real talking.

Abby had yelled at him when he’d gone to her with his concerns over Tony’s condition on Monday afternoon. ‘Men!’ she’d spat with disbelief when he’d told her that he no longer knew how to talk to Tony without being a smart-ass. ‘You just do it! Why over-think this? Are you so afraid of bruising your male ego that you’d let your friend hurt without even trying to find out what’s wrong?’

Her tone had been so scathing but she was right so he accepted her words and told himself he’d do something about it. His computer pinged when his search was done and he smiled. Yes! He sent the information over to print and then pulled out his phone. They’d been so busy with this case that he hadn’t called to see how Tony was doing but he would right now and, hopefully, he’d be off the phone before Gibbs came back from interrogation.

“God, Tony…I don’t know what to say,” McGee said a short while later when Tony told him that he was leaving for a position as a Team Lead in Florida.

“Goodbye and maybe good luck would work, Probie,” Tony said lightly which was at odds with how hard this conversation was turning out to be. They’d started out playing as usual but McGee had changed his tone and Tony was finding it far more difficult to say goodbye to him than he thought.

“Sure, Tony, along with thanks,” McGee said and found himself tightening his jaw, his stomach muscles, hell, his whole body in his effort to control his shock and sorrow at Tony’s leaving. He really was like a brother to him and they’d grown close over the last nine years.

“For what?”
“For everything you’ve taught me, Tony. I’m still not the agent you are but I’m a hell of a lot closer than I ever thought I’d be…so thanks, Tony. For everything.”

Tony felt as though a vise was crushing his chest and he had to blink his eyes rapidly for a bit. God, this sucked so badly.

“You know I’m not leaving until Saturday morning…maybe you could, you know…come over for a bit?”

“I’m doing everything I can to work this case, Tony, but I’ll be there at some point before you leave. You can count on it.”

They’d hung up shortly after that and McGee sat at his desk for a moment staring at the phone in his hand. He couldn’t believe Tony would just decide to up and leave like that. Sure, Tony had said stuff like it was time and that it was a promotion he couldn’t pass up but Tim had the feeling there was much more to it than that. He also thought that just maybe that bar-fight he’d been in had something to do with it, too. He looked at his watch and then jumped up to grab the information for Gibbs from the printer. He left it on his desk and then ran down to see Abby. If anyone knew what was going on with Tony it would be her and, if nothing else, he could get an update on the evidence she was processing.

The elevator doors opened and McGee quickly walked out noticing right away how deathly quiet Abby’s lab was and he had a flashback to the time immediately after Gibbs had left for Mexico. Sure enough, as soon as he walked into the lab he found her staring at a picture of Tony on her computer.

“Abby?”

“I don’t have anything for you yet, Tim,” she said in a dark voice. She didn’t even turn away from her monitor.

“I know, Abby,” Tim said as he came up behind her and wrapped her in his arms. They hadn’t dated in years but they were still very close friends.

“I just talked to Tony and he told me he was leaving. I was hoping you knew why.”

Instead of answering Abby curled around the strong arms holding her and let out a small sob.

“I know but I can’t tell you why, Timmy, but it’s a reason I can’t argue with,” she said quietly. A ping sounded behind her and she pulled herself away from Tim to see what her results were. Tim followed and stood next to her as she reviewed the readout.

“You were right, Tim…”

“That sample match the residue found at the first murder site…?” Gibbs asked as he walked into Abby’s lab carrying the ever-present Caf-Pow.

At the sound of Gibbs’ voice Tim felt Abby stiffen. She turned to face Gibbs but there was no smile of welcome, nothing of her usual warmth when it came to the man Tim knew she thought of as a father.

“Yes it did,” Abby said and if Gibbs was surprised at her behavior, he didn’t show it. He just set the drink on her table and looked at McGee.
“Well?”

Tim turned to look at him and then back at Abby. He quickly summarized the information he’d left on Gibbs’ desk and Gibbs nodded.

“Take Ziva, go bring Stowe in,” he said speaking of the petty officer whom they now knew murdered his girlfriend and her alleged sister in a complicated love triangle that involved drugs and prostitution. He turned back to Abby.

“Anything else?” Gibbs asked as he stood for a moment looking at Abby who now turned around to walk back to her computer. She hit a key and DiNozzo’s picture disappeared to be replaced by DNA scans confirming the relationship between the two women. He didn’t know what was going on with Abby but he was too busy to worry about it right now. Besides, she was probably just worried about Tony’s condition (hence the picture on her monitor) and he already knew Tony was getting better and that something like this would never happen again. He had faith in his Senior Field Agent.

“I’ve got a 96.7 % certainty that Marla Gerard and Stephanie Loring were sisters,” Abby said. She could feel Gibbs coming up to her to give her his usual kiss and she suddenly sidestepped it neatly and then turned around to look at Gibbs who was giving her a slightly quizzical look but it was interrupted by his ringing cell phone.

Gibbs was wondering just what in the hell was wrong with Abby but those thoughts were quickly dismissed when he saw that it was Vance calling.

“Gibbs…Mcgee and David are out picking him up now…yeah…” Gibbs said and then hung up. Vance wanted to see him but he could only give him a minute knowing that McGee was probably near the suspect’s home at that moment.

“Anything else?” Abby asked purposefully repeating Gibbs’ earlier question back to him. She’d promised Tony that she would try not to blame Gibbs but she was finding it hard to do.

“No, good job, Abby,” he said his mind already racing ahead to his case and then he left leaving Abby to fume silently.

As soon as he left she walked over to the table and picked up the Caf-Pow Gibbs had brought. She looked at it with a frown and then walked over to her trashcan and dropped it in.
Gibbs trotted up the stairs to see what it was Vance wanted. He was sure it was administrative in nature and that thought really chafed his ass. He hated to be interrupted when he was on a case, especially one like this. It was so convoluted it had everyone scratching their heads but fortunately McGee had found the one piece of evidence that linked Stowe to the first murder scene. Abby linking the two women had been the next crucial step but what he really needed was a confession. He gave a quick nod to Cynthia and then walked straight into Vance’s office.

Vance looked up at the opening of his door and his eyes narrowed when he saw Gibbs walk in. He was annoyed because Gibbs refused to answer his cell or read his email when he was on a case. Granted, it served him well when Gibbs was making progress but in this case he figured Gibbs would want to know that DiNozzo wasn’t returning to his team.

“It’s about time you stopped by…” Vance began but was immediately interrupted by the sound of Gibbs’ cell phone ringing. Gibbs pulled it out but he at least gave Vance the respect of a raised eyebrow questioning whether or not he should answer. Vance waited a moment just because he could and then he raised his finger granting Gibbs permission. He smirked when Gibbs rolled his eyes.

Gibbs looked down. It was McGee.

“Yeah…alright have Norton get a BOLO out. I’ll meet you at the hotel room. You start looking for anything that’ll tell you where he might have gone…”

Vance never said a word but he raised his eyebrows in Gibbs’ direction.

“Stowe rabbited…I’ve got to go…”

Vance knew better than to stand in the way of his agents so he just nodded and Gibbs left as quickly as he’d walked in. Vance blew out a quick breath. DiNozzo was leaving whether Gibbs approved or not but the man was still his supervisor and deserved formal notification of the change to his team from him even if DiNozzo’s departure had no doubt already been discussed amongst the team members. Nevertheless, he knew that when the dust from the current case settled he’d get an earful of Gibbs’ displeasure and he’d be ready for it. It never occurred to him that Gibbs might not know of DiNozzo’s decision.

Tony woke up to the sound of pounding at his door. He glanced at the clock and groaned. Two am. Groaning, he made his way over to the peephole in his door. He froze for a moment in fear when he saw Ziva standing there. Had something happened to Gibbs? He immediately opened up.

“Ziva…what…? Is Gibbs alright?”

Ziva pushed passed Tony into the darkened apartment.

“Gibbs is fine…oh, turn on a light, Tony!” Ziva blew out in exasperation.

The room suddenly brightened and Ziva saw Tony standing in rumpled sweats and a t-shirt. He looked awful and not just because of the bruising or the look of confusion on his face. It was obvious he wasn’t sleeping well and she could smell the alcohol on him. Something was very wrong with this picture. She took a deep breath and calmed herself.
“Were you not going to tell me?” she demanded the anger still palpable in her voice despite her efforts.

“Tell you what?” Tony asked still confused although relieved that Gibbs was alright.

“I want to know why you thought you could just leave without saying anything.”

Tony sighed. She hadn’t realized he was saying good-bye when he was last at the office. Well he had been a little shocked so maybe he hadn’t been too clear.

“Who told you?” Tony asked as he gestured her further into the room. He limped behind her and slowly settled himself on the couch after she seated herself in the armchair.

“McGee told me today while we searched our suspect’s hotel room. Why did McGee have to tell me such an important thing? Are we not friends? Why did you not tell me yourself?”

Tony looked at her. Although no expression showed on her face he could hear the hurt in her voice.

“I’m sorry, Ziva. I guess when you said that my assignment had been terminated I figured you knew I was leaving.” He couldn’t bring himself to say fired.

“I thought you were injured in another undercover operation, Tony, one that had gone badly but that had finally ended,” she said with a gesture to his face.

Tony smirked. “I told you it was a bar-fight.”

“You are a better fighter than that, Tony, unless there were more opponents than you let us believe.” She looked searchingly into his eyes. “Please tell me why you are leaving.”

Tony rubbed a hand over his face and then across the back of his head. He saw the earnest look on her face and knew himself for a fool. Although they sniped and quarreled, they had also flirted and played. Tony had always believed she was a friend. He knew she had his back. He stared into her dark eyes. When had it changed in his head? Why had he let himself believe that she didn’t care anymore? He thought about his conversation with McGee. Even that had gone completely differently than he would have supposed. He had the sudden belief that he had everything so very wrong.

Well, not everything. His relationship with Gibbs was still toast. And that was the crux of it all. He smiled a sad smile.

“It’s just time, Ziva. I’ve had several offers as a Team Lead and I finally decided to take this one…”

“You are lying, Tony. If all you wanted was a promotion you would have been crowing to the skies over the offer. You would have proclaimed to McGee and I from the highest mountain that your many talents and abilities had finally been rewarded. No, this is much more serious than that.”

She stood up to walk away from Tony and then she turned quickly.

“You are not running to something…you are running away. Who is she, Tony? This woman who has hurt you so badly you would rather leave the city than stay here where she lives…unattainable…”
Tony gasped but couldn’t say anything. Ziva was so close it shook him.

“No…what? Ziva!” he coughed. “You’ve got it all wrong!”

“Really?” Ziva raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “So this,” she said as she gestured to his body, “was not the result of a jealous lover and his friends persuading you that leaving was a good option?”

_Oh, God!_ Tony dropped his head into his hands. Gibbs thinks he has an abusive lover and Ziva thinks that his lover has an asshole boyfriend. He started to laugh. He wondered what McGee thought.

“No, Ziva. I just got involved in something I shouldn’t have but that’s over and done with. I just really do need to leave because I can’t get what I need here,” Tony said quietly coming as close to the truth as he thought he could.

Ziva said nothing for a moment. She’d had her suspicions for quite awhile about just what it was Tony might need. She had, after all, worked side by side with him for many years. She’d seen sides to him that others, apart from Gibbs and McGee, might not have seen although she knew Abby to be his best friend.

“Abby knows why you are leaving, does she not?”

Tony looked at her in confusion as he tried to fathom just what was going on in her mind.

Ziva gave him a small smile. Tony had not denied Abby’s knowledge therefore it was a reason he could discuss with her but not the rest of the team. Ziva knew he didn’t have any personal feelings for her. Yes, they had a bond but it was the bond of partners and siblings. McGee? No, they were like two puppies, partners as well. But Gibbs? She had always felt that the relationship between the two men was…complicated. It went beyond friendship and although she felt there were paternal elements, she did not believe that to be the main component of their relationship. Her suspicions suddenly crystallized in her mind.

“Ziva, please just leave it alone…”

Ziva immediately moved to kneel in front of Tony, her heart aching for him.

“Gibbs would not do this…” she said as she lightly touched his face.

Tony looked at her in shock. “Of course not!”

“…but the one you chose to be Gibbs did…”

“Ziva…no…” Tony said as he jumped up and walked away from her until he reached the wall damning himself because he’d confirmed her suspicions through his actions. He wrapped his arms around his stomach but remained silent.

Ziva followed him and tentatively reached a hand out to his shoulder but stopped.

“I do not know if this situation can be rectified, Tony, but I understand,” she said quietly.

Tony turned around and looked at Ziva and he really did see understanding in her eyes. She’d made so many jokes about lesbian lovers over the years that he thought it was just part of all the playing. He’d obviously sold her short. Still, this was all so painful he began his usual defense mechanism and started to fall into the expected Tony DiNozzo response. He opened his mouth to
ask for details but she put up a hand.

“Don’t Tony, no more playing…”

“I’m sorry…” he began but again Ziva stopped him.

“No, it is I who should be sorry and I am. I am sorry for only allowing myself to deal with the persona you show at work although I know there is so very much more beneath your surface. There are just times when it is easier to respond to your playful side, it is even easier to use you to as a punch line…”

Ziva paused at the sudden pained look.

“Yeah, most folks see me as a joke…” Tony whispered and Ziva saw her mistake.

“No, the bag in the gym, the one everyone hits over and over because it absorbs everything until the seams begin to fall apart…”

“A punching bag, Ziva.”

“Yes, punching bag. You have always absorbed everyone else’s pain and anger but perhaps your seams are now failing. And without you as a…a…” Ziva suddenly stopped and muttered something in her own language. “The material between two hard surfaces…a cushion…”

“A buffer…” Tony said wanting to laugh at her frustration but there was nothing funny about any of this.

“Buffer, yes…forgive me, Tony, but I find I am somewhat distraught,” she said with a sigh and a hand to her forehead. She closed her eyes but after a moment she opened them again and dropped her hand.

“I am afraid neither McGee nor I will be a good buffer when Gibbs is angriest and I believe he will be very angry for a very long time.”

“I can’t stay here anymore, Ziva.”

Ziva again raised her hand and this time she made it to her intended target. She softly laid her palm against Tony’s cheek.

“I know, Tony. Just know this…I will miss you. But perhaps, in time, we shall see one another again. After all NCIS is not such a large world, yes?”

In answer Tony pulled her into his arms and he sighed when he felt her relax into him unlike the last time. They spoke for a bit longer and then Ziva left to go back to the office. Their suspect had yet to be apprehended and he knew Gibbs was probably climbing the walls by now. He wanted desperately to go in and help but there was just no way. He’d burned his bridges.

Tony locked up and shut off the lights and made his way back to bed even though he knew he wouldn’t be sleeping any more that night.
Chapter 12

Gibbs practically threw the carafe across the room when he found that it was empty. It was almost three on Friday morning and nothing had come up on the BOLO for Stowe. He sighed and put it down and began grabbing the stuff he needed to make a fresh pot. He debated taking some back for Ziva, McGee and Norton but decided against it. They’d fallen asleep at their desks and he didn’t want to break into whatever shuteye they could get.

He leaned against the counter watching the coffee drip into the pot and his mind inevitably returned to Tony and he wondered how he was doing and wishing for the millionth time that he could be the one Tony turned to to fulfill his needs. He rubbed his hand over his tired eyes. He needed sleep, too, but there was just no way he’d be able to shut down long enough to get any decent sleep. As a sniper he’d learned to catch whatever rest where and when he could and it was still a skill he continually used, especially tonight.

He’d been livid when he found out that Ziva had taken off without a word. McGee had no answer as to her whereabouts but she had answered her cell and stated that she was on her way back. When he questioned her upon her return she said it had been a personal errand. Naturally he’d chewed her head off for taking personal time during a case but it didn’t seem to have any effect on her. She accepted his growls without a word and agreed that it would never happen again. Her calm acceptance had been strange. What had also been strange was her staring into his face so very intently as though trying to find something in his expression beyond what he was saying. And for the life of him, he sure didn’t know what it was she was looking for.

Later he’d seen both Ziva and McGee speaking quietly together. He interrupted and demanded a status which they’d given right away but ever since then both of them kept an eye on him as though they were expecting something but he ignored them. Norton kept an eye on him, too, but it was more like he was watching a snake that was ready to strike. He had to admit that that was the only thing even remotely satisfying lately but then Norton was only there because DiNozzo wasn’t and not having DiNozzo on his six really torqued him. So, generally, just about everything was pissing him off. He growled softly at the back of his throat. Abby was mad at him, too, and he didn’t know what was about, either. Christ, just what the fuck was going on?

Exasperated, Gibbs saw that about half of the carafe had brewed. Good enough. He had just walked back into the bullpen when he found McGee on the phone. He was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes but he gave Gibbs a look that said they had something.

Within minutes of getting off of the phone they were on the road. Stowe had been spotted in Brookville, PA, a drive of nearly five hours except, of course, when Gibbs drove. The four traveled through the night in silence, Ziva and Norton electing to continue their naps but McGee worked quietly on his laptop in the front with Gibbs.

At ten o’clock on Friday morning Ducky walked down the hallway pausing occasionally to allow workers from a moving company to maneuver various boxes down the hallway. He paid them no mind until he approached Tony’s apartment and saw to his deep dismay the source of the boxed belongings.

“Tony!” he called when he got to the door and turned towards the hallway and saw Tony speaking with a mover who had a clipboard in his hands. He looked up at Ducky’s call and Ducky found it difficult to track the numerous emotions that crossed the young man’s face. He settled on his
typical grin that hid everything behind a bright façade. Unfortunately, it was an expression Ducky was very accustomed to seeing on Tony when the situation was far from optimal.

“Hi, Ducky, I’ll be done here in a minute, okay?”

At Ducky’s nod Tony turned back to the mover and began to review the document clipped to the clipboard. Ducky took the opportunity to look around the now bare apartment with a sinking heart. It would seem that Jethro’s talk with Tony did not go as planned. He stood gazing out of the window at the trees lining the street. They were bright with the growth of new leaves having lost the last of the beautiful blossoms that had graced them only a week before. He knew the storm had quite a bit to do with that for the detritus of the last blooms of the season remained lying crushed and broken on the ground.

He remained mute while the movers took the last of the boxes out of the apartment. After a short time the apartment became deathly quiet. Ducky, who was quite used to being on his own with exception of those years he’d had his mother with him, found the quiet unnatural in relation to Tony. He’d always associated the young man with energy and light, adrenaline and warmth. What he felt now was the antithesis of those things and he felt a slight chill in the air.

He felt Tony come up beside him to stare out of the window though he remained silent.

“Will you tell me why, Tony?” Ducky asked as he turned to the taller man next to him.

“I’m tired of hiding myself, Ducky. I’m tired of the masks,” Tony said as he dropped his head a bit.

Ducky sighed sadly. “I’m so very sorry, then, that you found us wanting…”

At that Tony lifted his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I rather thought we were a family here, or at the very least friends. The fact that you feel you would not be accepted for who you truly are by us tells me that we’ve failed you in a very basic manner, Tony."

“Trust me, Ducky. It’s not you…or Abby, or McGee, Ziva or Jimmy. I might have had my head messed up for a little while, but I’m getting myself straightened out and I know that you all would have accepted this part of me if I’d been truthful…”

“There is one notable exception to your list.”

“Yeah,” Tony muttered.

Ducky’s astute gaze took in the dejected man before him. Although Tony’s injuries seemed to be healing well he knew that the shadows under the eyes and the pale features, not to mention the faint odor of alcohol, had little to do with Tony’s recent altercation.

“How long have you been in love with Jethro?”

Tony closed his eyes and smiled sadly. “For what seems like forever.”

“What was it he said that laid you so very low?”

“He offered to hook me up with a woman who wouldn’t hurt me…”

“Oh, dear…and I don’t suppose you enlightened him as to your preferences?”
“Contrary to all appearances I really do value my neck, Ducky. I had no desire to see it broken by an obviously very straight Marine.”

“Jethro is a hard taskmaster with a very definite personal code of honor but he has never struck me as narrow-minded. Are you very sure he doesn’t accept this part of you?” Ducky asked assuming that Tony had been honest about his nature.

“I want more from him than just his acceptance, Ducky. I need his respect and his friendship, both of which I’ve lost. And yeah, I do love him but that he won’t accept,” Tony said truly believing it. “I just can’t do this to myself anymore.”

Ducky couldn’t imagine what had transpired for Tony to be so sure he’d lost Jethro’s friendship, not to mention his respect. It was obvious that much more had transpired than he’d been aware. He could only imagine how difficult that conversation had been and yet, knowing how Jethro had felt about his team and about Tony in particular, he was still very surprised that they had been unable to come to some understanding that didn’t involve Tony’s departure from NCIS and, apparently, from the DC area.

“So you did not tell him of your feelings for him,” Ducky stated.

“No…how could I?” Tony said not hiding the sorrow in his eyes.

Whether or not Jethro could find it within himself to love Tony as much as he so very much deserved, was not for Ducky to say. Jethro was such a private man. It had taken Jethro’s recovery from a coma for Ducky to learn that Jethro had been married not three times, but four. And not only married, he’d learned that Jethro had had a child who, along with her mother, had been taken from him in a violent and horrific manner. No, he really couldn’t speak to Jethro’s ability to love Tony and for that he was very sorry.

Ducky patted Tony on his arm with a sigh. “I do understand, Tony, and I am so very sorry. I shall miss you, my boy.”

“Me, too, Ducky,” Tony said. He remained quiet for a moment more but then straightened up. “So, I guess I need you to check me over and clear me for travel.”

“Yes, of course,” Ducky said with a visible shake as he got back to the point of his visit. He again looked around the empty apartment.

“Do you intend to remain here until your departure?”

“Actually, I’m leaving tomorrow morning. All my stuff is going into storage until I have an address to ship it to. For tonight I’ve got a sleeping bag and some stuff I’ll throw in my car before I go. So that’s it except for this exam. Do you need me to lie down for this?”

“No, fortunately, I can do this with you upright.”

And Ducky proceeded to do just that while Tony filled him in on his new assignment. After a bit he declared Tony fit to travel and told Tony he would stop by to see Director Vance and apprise him of Tony’s status as well as signing any documentation that was required. And so, after another quick chat regarding Tony’s plans and a very warm embrace, Ducky left the apartment and headed back to NCIS with the express intention of speaking with Jethro. Unfortunately, he and his team were long gone by the time Ducky arrived there.

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McGee worked quietly while Gibbs drove. He was still working on the background checks for each of the murder victims. They were half-sisters having had the same mother but different fathers. He had his laptop up as he tried to determine some connection between the victims and the direction in which Stowe was headed.

He stared at his screen while a search ran on his computer. It gave him some time to digest what he and Ziva had spoken about earlier. Quite frankly, he was having a hard time wrapping his head around Ziva’s words. If she hadn’t been so earnest he would have chalked it up to some elaborate prank that Tony had come up with. But those bruises and lacerations hadn’t been a prank. Nor had the injured leg although he wasn’t sure if that had anything to do with what she had told him. All he knew was that for weeks everything had been off-kilter on the team. Gibbs was angry all the time, which in itself wasn’t unusual, but he seemed to be taking his anger out on Tony an awful lot. Now Tony had always been what Tim considered the pressure relief. Tony somehow deflected that anger. If Tony thought Gibbs was out of line, he called him on it. He still couldn’t believe that Moby Dick reference when Gibbs was after Ari. He realized that he had shaken his head and he quickly glanced at Gibbs to see if he’d noticed. He had.

“Anything yet?”

“No, still searching…”

Gibbs said nothing else so Tim went back to his musing. So Tony was gay…or probably bi which had been Ziva’s guess. So if it wasn’t a prank and Tony really did swing both ways, was that a big enough reason for him to take an assignment somewhere else? Or did Tony just think it was? No, Tony wouldn’t leave just because he was afraid to come out to the team. Tony was one of the bravest men he knew and he owed his life to him as did everyone else on the team including Abby. And he had to know it wouldn’t matter to the team, right? Ziva didn’t have a problem and she’d said so. Abby seemed to know a lot more than she was letting on but knowing her as well as he did, he knew she wasn’t an issue. Ducky and Jimmy? No, he was sure they wouldn’t be any problems there. Ducky was accepting of everyone and Tim figured that it was an extension of his job. Everyone was equal on Ducky’s tables and he never judged how they’d lived their lives. And Jimmy had to be one of the most generous and truly nice guys he’d ever met so he wouldn’t be a problem.

No, the only person he could see giving Tony a hard time was Gibbs. So is that what has been behind all of Gibbs’ recent anger? Did Tony try to come out to him and this had been Gibbs’ reaction? Somehow that didn’t fit in with what he knew about Gibbs. In the years he’d worked for the man Gibbs had shown himself to be nothing if not fair although he wouldn’t put it passed him to bend the rules if needed to see that justice was done. Tim had never heard him make any remarks that would constitute some personal issue with other people’s lifestyles. He really couldn’t see Gibbs having a problem with someone’s personal life as long as it didn’t affect the job. Then it seemed as though a light switch had been flipped. Tony’s personal life had affected the job. He’d gotten hurt doing whatever it was he’d been doing and that had probably led him to reveal his activities to Gibbs…and Gibbs had probably lowered the boom on him.

Tim gave himself a little mental pat on the back until he realized just what that said about both Tony and Gibbs. Would Tony have defied Gibbs? Yeah, actually, Tony would stand up to Gibbs and tell him to mind his own business. And he could just as easily see Gibbs telling him to either quit or get off the team. He knew for a fact that Gibbs could be pretty uncompromising. And he never said he was sorry or that he was wrong…

Son of a bitch… Tim blew out an angry breath. It was Gibbs’ fault that Tony was leaving. He was sure of it. Just then his computer beeped and he quickly reviewed the information.
“I’ve think I’ve got something, Gibbs…” McGee said breaking into the silence. “Stephanie Loring’s family once owned a lumber mill in Brooksville. It’s been inoperative since 1962…why would he head out there?” McGee wondered as he grabbed his cell phone.

Gibbs just looked at him and listened while McGee called in the possible destination to the Brooksville LEOS. They were nearly there so McGee fed Gibbs the directions to the mill. Once that was done he slipped back into silence. Occasionally Gibbs asked questions and each time McGee responded with short, concise answers. That McGee never addressed him as ‘Boss’ didn’t quite register.

In the early hours of Saturday morning, Gibbs sat alone in the bullpen feeling almost too tired to drive home. They’d returned to NCIS with their suspect just after midnight Friday and within a short time he had Stowe’s confession to go along with the suitcase full of cash that had been hidden in the decrepit mill. He’d released everyone to go home and get some rest telling them to be back in by noon to work on their reports. He would have liked to have given them the weekend off but he knew from experience that it was best to get the reports written as quickly as possible while the details were still fresh.

Even though he had decided to go home Gibbs found himself still sitting in the dark. He picked up his coffee and grimaced because it had gone cold but he drank it anyway. He never considered booting up his computer to check his email although he did pull out his cell phone. He’d missed three calls from Ducky. They’d been in and out of cell phone range all day. He doubted there was anything new from the autopsies but if there had been Ducky would have attempted to contact another member of the team if he didn’t answer and neither McGee nor Ziva had said anything. It occurred to him that Ducky may have wanted to discuss Tony’s condition since Ducky was supposed to check him out again that day. He looked at his watch again although he knew how late it was. No, if it was urgent Ducky would have again gone through one of the other team members or would have shown up in the bullpen. No, whatever it was could wait until tomorrow, he decided. He’d also have a chance to talk to Vance since he’d said that he’d be in to do some work and that he’d wait for a brief on the case until then.

He glanced at DiNozzo’s empty desk. He’d missed having the younger man with him this week. This case had been one huge run around with leads that went nowhere and evidence that didn’t seem to make sense. He had the feeling that if DiNozzo had been with them they’d have connected the dots a lot sooner. Hell, for all he knew this same set of circumstances were in some movie plot that only Tony would have known. He ran a hand over his face again and forced himself to get up. He needed to get home and get some rest if he was going to write all of this up tomorrow. And then, when they were done, maybe he’d swing by Tony’s place to see how he was doing.

The next morning Gibbs walked into NCIS at his usual ground-eating pace. It was still early, almost 11 am. He’d found himself awake by half passed nine despite not getting to bed until nearly four in the morning. Never being one to laze about unless there was someone with whom to laze, he decided to get up and start the day knowing that the sooner they were finished with the reports the sooner he could swing by to see Tony. So, after a quick breakfast and a stop for another large coffee (having drained his travel mug before he’d gotten half-way to work), he was ready to get his report done so that he could finally relax for what remained of the weekend. He turned the corner only to find Ducky waiting for him by his desk.

“IT’s Saturday, Ducky. What are you doing here?”

Ducky just gave Jethro a faint smile. “I wanted to speak with you, Jethro. It’s been a very busy week what with the case and the recent changes, so I wanted the opportunity to get your take on
things, so to speak. But I must admit that I just don’t understand how the situation has come to this point. Quite frankly, I thought I knew you better.”

Gibbs stared at Ducky in confusion.

“What situation and what changes? What are you talking about, Duck?”

“Why Tony’s new assignment to Florida…”

“He turned that down a few weeks ago, Ducky. He’s not going anywhere.”

Ducky stared intently at Jethro and realized that for whatever unimaginable reason, Jethro was not aware of Tony’s leaving.

“Oh, dear…”

“Talk to me, Duck…what’s happening?” Gibbs demanded.

“Tony did accept that assignment…he’s leaving today…” but Ducky found he was talking to Jethro’s back as Jethro suddenly ran out of the bullpen and up the steps towards the Director’s office taking them two at a time.

Gibbs burst into Vance’s office a few moments later.

“Leon, what the hell did you do?” he growled as he stalked up to Vance’s desk.

Leon Vance looked up when his door had nearly slammed open, a feat unto itself considering the weight of it. And even though he wasn’t surprised that it was Gibbs making the entrance, the fierce expression on the man’s face took him aback somewhat, a feeling he did not like. He leaned back in his chair and pulled the toothpick from his mouth.

“Specify,” Leon growled back.

“DiNozzo! What’s going on?” Gibbs practically yelled.

Leon sighed and replaced the toothpick between his teeth. “I’ve been trying to talk to you all week. You obviously don’t read your emails…”

“I’ve been working on a case!”

“To the complete exclusion of all else, obviously. It’s a small wonder you divorced three times,” Leon stated. “I would have thought, though, that you and DiNozzo would have discussed this. Don’t tell me you’ve been so involved that you haven’t even checked up on him because I don’t believe that.”

“Ducky’s been to see him and so has Abby. If there was something going on with him they would have told me.” But with a pang Gibbs realized that Abby’s recent attitude towards him did begin after her visit with Tony. *Fuck!*

“Well, obviously they didn’t. The fact is that DiNozzo has suffered several bouts of plague-related illnesses. Dr. Mallard annotated that he has recommended a warmer, dryer climate to DiNozzo but Florida is the best I can do. So, since he got sick…again…I offered the position…again. Why he accepted this time is his business but I would assume that he’s being sensible. I don’t know why he didn’t tell you but *I’m* telling you, finally. He reports in to the Panama City Beach office on Monday.”
Gibbs was silent for a moment as he digested what Vance said. Vance had based the offer on his belief that DiNozzo was sick. It was something he couldn't refute without saying that both he and Ducky had made false statements. He didn't care about getting himeself in trouble but he wouldn't put Ducky on the spot.

“He’s MY agent! If you had concerns over his health you should have come to me.”

Vance twirled the toothpick in his mouth, his eyes hard and steady on Gibbs who never flinched from the steel in the dark orbs.

“Actually, he’s MY agent…as are you. And I would have thought that you’d be more concerned for his welfare. I’m getting the impression that you think his presence on your team outweighs his health.”

“It hasn’t affected his performance,” Gibbs spit out angry now because he knew Tony had lingering issues with his lungs. But he’d trusted Tony to know when he needed to get treated.

“And it wouldn’t, he’s too good an agent for that. He deserves to have his own team…hell, you know that. You’ve written up the recommendations in his file yourself. But it doesn’t change anything. He accepted the assignment and he requested an early reporting date. So if you have any questions I would suggest you hurry over to his place to see if you can catch him before he leaves.”

Damnit, Leon was right. Tony did deserve his own team, had deserved it for a long time. And maybe Florida would be better for his health. But that wasn’t the issue. The issue was why DiNozzo had suddenly accepted the offer now…and without even talking to him about it! But considering the revelations of the last week and now this, just how little he knew about what was going on in Tony’s life hit him across the head like a two by four. His stomach roiled with the various emotions churning though him, chief amongst them being anger and fear. He needed to know what was going on and he was damn well going to find out.

With another growl he turned and stormed back out of the office. Vance watched him go with narrowed eyes. This situation was not good and he had no idea why it had gone down like this. All he knew for sure was that Gibbs was going to be a bigger bastard than ever until he finally accepted the fact that DiNozzo was gone through his own choice. He pulled the toothpick out of his mouth and looked at the chewed mass thoughtfully. He had the feeling he was going to have to buy a lot more toothpicks before this was over.
Chapter 13

Tony pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket and then threw his coat into the back seat. He stood up to give a last look at the street he’d lived on for the past nine years and blew out a soft sigh. The late morning sun shone down onto trees that were just beginning to leaf out in bright yellow-green furls. He was going to miss that. He’d always loved the changing seasons here despite his constant bitching about the snow and rain. The bitching had usually been more a diversionary tactic when things weren’t going so smoothly in the office, but for the most part, he really loved the changing seasons. Guess he wouldn’t have that anymore with nothing but sun all year-round except for the occasional hurricane. He smirked. That was going to take some getting used to so maybe a little bit of bitching wouldn’t be out of place.

He sighed again. It was hard to believe he was actually leaving but it was time. He still hadn’t worked up any enthusiasm for the position he was headed to. He’d barely looked into what part of Florida he was going to be living in except to get directions for driving there. He’d made reservations at a hotel relatively close to the offices for six pm on Sunday since it was a seventeen-hour drive. Under normal circumstances he would have enjoyed taking a more leisurely trip but right now all he wanted was to get out of town. He got into his car and looked at the cell phone still in his hand. He’d actually tried to call Gibbs several times but each time he’d fumbled over what he would say. Call it cowardice but he finally resorted to leaving a voice message rather than try to say goodbye in person. What they had said before had to be enough for now. Besides, Gibbs had told him to end this and he had, only in a method of his own choosing. Gibbs would just have to deal with that.

He was glad he’d talked Abby, Tim and Jimmy into leaving first. He really hadn’t wanted to drive away with them waving goodbye. That would have been just too cliché and he was tired of comparing his life to the movies. God, he was going to miss all of them. He thought of the sadness in Abby’s green eyes and the confusion and hurt in both Tim’s and Jimmy’s faces. They’d had a good talk while he finished up his packing and at some point he’d realized that both Tim and Jimmy had learned the truth about him and that it didn’t matter to them. He shook his head in wonder. That deep dark secret he thought he’d kept so well hidden for so many years was out in the open now...well, for the most part...and it hadn’t mattered to any of those he had considered his friends, his family. Damnit, why did he have to fall in love with Gibbs and screw everything up? Knowing what he did now about how good his friends were, he could have stayed here forever except for that. Par for the course for you, DiNozzo. He slid inside his car and closed the door with a firm pull. With one last look around he put his keys into the ignition and started up his car. He backed out of his space and pulled out into the quiet street.

Gibbs flew down the street in his Challenger. He looked into his rear view and then slammed his hands on the steering wheel, cursing himself for not jumping into a government vehicle instead of his personal car when he saw the flashing lights slide in behind him. He pulled over with a snarl while reaching for his badge. It took only a few minutes for the officer to receive confirmation over the radio from dispatch that a Director Vance from some federal agency had confirmed the urgency of Gibbs’ undertaking. But those few minutes filled Gibbs’ stomach with dread. He was going to be too late, he was positive of it.

He gave the officer a curt nod and sent Vance a mental thanks before he hit the gas, practically leaving rubber on the ground as he resumed his mission to stop DiNozzo. A short while later he pulled onto DiNozzo’s street. There was a car coming towards him and in a split second instant of
recognition he slammed on his brakes and turned the wheel, sliding to a stop and blocking the street.

Tony slammed on his brakes the instant he saw the bright yellow car headed towards him. He stopped a few feet from where Gibbs blocked him in. He was shocked and he could feel his stomach twist at the fierce expression on Gibbs’ face. This was not going to be good.

Gibbs opened his door torn between being elated that he wasn’t too late and furious that DiNozzo was actually going to leave the team…leave him. He slammed his car door noting Tony’s wince with satisfaction. He started walking deliberately towards Tony.

Tony jumped slightly and almost gulped when Gibbs slammed his car door and he had a mental picture of John Wayne pulling Maureen O’Hara out of that train car in the *Quiet Man*. His eyes narrowed. Oh, no. He was not Maureen O’Hara although from Gibbs’ expression he figured Gibbs would be more than happy to get a stick and beat him with it. He threw the car in Park and opened his door. He got out determined to meet Gibbs in the street like a man.

“Were you gonna tell me, DiNozzo?” Gibbs growled as he stepped closer.

Tony looked at Gibbs, at the fury emanating from him and the intensity of those blue eyes focused just on him and he wanted to kick himself for the perversity of his nature because damn, the man was hot and he could feel the lust building up inside of him despite the not unrealistic fear for his life.

Gibbs stalked closer, subconsciously registering the flood of emotions crossing Tony’s face but there was no time to think about it. Besides, all he wore now was a look of determination.

“Just doing what you told me, Gibbs. I’m ending it.”

“By running away?”

Tony shook his head and snorted. Running away was exactly what he was doing even if he’d sugar-coated it with saying he was just following orders. Still the end result was that he was no closer to knowing what to say to Gibbs now than he was each time he’d picked up his phone to say goodbye. He thought about that pathetic phone message he’d left and he felt ashamed. Gibbs deserved a better explanation.

“Gibbs, I really hope you understand this because I just can’t explain it any better. The simple truth is that I fell in love, okay?” Tony said skimming the truth as closely as he dared. “Only the person I love can’t love me back. Not gonna happen. Ever. So I just can’t stay here anymore.”

Gibbs stared at Tony and felt a huge hole open up inside of him. Tony had fallen in love. And he’d rather leave town than stay here and not have this woman. But why couldn’t he say anything? After working together for nine fucking years he couldn’t even say *goodbye*? The sense of betrayal he felt was nearly over-whelming.

“So your answer was to just walk away without even a fuck you?” he said through a throat tight with pent-up hurt and anger.

“I didn’t want you to see me as any more pathetic that you already did, Gibbs. You’ve never let your personal life get in the way of doing the job and that’s all I’ve been able to do lately. It had to stop and this is the only way I could do that.”

Tony paused as he stared into those blue eyes he’d come to know so well over the years. Gibbs was beyond pissed but he didn’t understand the pain he saw flash briefly. No, it couldn’t have
been pain, he decided. Had to have been disappointment and that thought sent his self-disgust soaring to new heights.

“I know I’ve disappointed you and I never wanted to do that. All I can say is I’m sorry,” Tony said quietly through a jaw so tight it was sending shooting pains to his temple. “I’ve got to go.”

Tony turned to walk back to his car but he was stopped by a steel clamp on his arm spinning him around with a growled order.

“No!”

He really should have been prepared for that, Tony thought belatedly, but somehow he hadn’t figured his leaving would have affected Gibbs like this. But the pain of trying to keep it together while saying goodbye spilled over into anger and he went with the spin and slammed his other arm into Gibbs’ forearm, breaking the hold.

“This is my only option. Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Gibbs!”

Gibbs backed up a step when Tony broke his hold but it was the continued anger in his eyes that kept him from reaching out again. How had things gotten to this point? He had thought that he and Tony were friends but somewhere along the way that had changed. What had he missed? How had he failed their friendship so completely that Tony had been unable to come to him with what was going on in his life?

Tony had never given any indication of it but Gibbs somehow knew that some omission on his part had caused him to fail Tony just as completely as he had his wives after Shannon. They’d made it abundantly clear, after all, as they each had stood in front of him screaming and hurling invectives, blaming him for their pain and unfulfilled needs. They had wanted parts of him that he couldn’t give; parts that belonged only to his past and that he felt had died with Shannon and Kelly. Was it that same inability to open up to his wives that caused this wall between him and Tony, a wall that Tony couldn’t breech when he needed help? All he knew was that Tony had just stopped showing up at his house and somehow that withdrawal was worse than all the fighting. But then he’d compounded that through his inadvertent indifference. He hadn’t even bothered trying to find out why Tony had stopped coming over other than to swing by Tony’s place a couple of times. Tony had never said a word, never asked for a thing. He never did when it was important. Why had he forgotten that?

It took Ducky’s push for him to seek Tony out. And that was after Tony had been hurt so badly that Ducky had sent him home for a week to heal.

Christ, Tony always seemed to read Gibbs so well, knew what he was thinking and acted accordingly. It was part of what made him invaluable as his Second. But Gibbs hadn’t reciprocated in any way. He had no idea what it was that Tony needed and it had come as more than a shock to find out that not only was Tony involved in an alternative lifestyle but that he’d fallen deeply in love with someone who was so obviously wrong for him. He realized with a sinking heart that he hadn’t known Tony any better than he’d known his last three wives. And then he wondered why he was even comparing Tony to them. It hadn’t been like that between them despite his secret desires. The fact remained, though, that his relationship to Tony had become one of the most important in his life, more important than those with the women he’d married save for Shannon. But he’d never acknowledged it, had pretty much refused to do so until now. And now it was too late.

“Damnit, Tony…!” Gibbs choked out, both angry and hurt beyond words.

The anger Tony had been feeling evaporated in the face of Gibbs’ obvious confusion and pain. Tony wondered if his heart would burst right out of his chest and he had a vision of those exploded
bodies in the Alien movies. He desperately wanted to say that it was all a mistake, that he wasn’t really leaving but he couldn’t. Loving Gibbs wasn’t a mistake but staying would be. He stared at the face he’d watched from afar and loved for nine long years and hardened himself to do what had to be done.

Gibbs had the feeling that Tony was burning his face into his memory as he just stared at him for a bit and Gibbs knew that he was missing something vitally important yet again but the look in Tony’s eyes told him that his realization didn’t matter. Gibbs might have gotten there before Tony had driven away but he was too late to prevent Tony from leaving. He raised his hand once more despite the sudden knowledge that it was futile…

“I’m sorry, Gibbs…really sorry. I just can’t do this anymore…” Tony choked out as he backed away and his eyes suddenly filled with tears. Horrified, he turned and stumbled back to his idling car. He needed to get away now before he disintegrated in the middle of the street, right in front of Gibbs. He jumped in threw it in reverse and backed away. He tried not to but he couldn’t help a glance in his rearview that showed Gibbs still standing in the street one arm raised. It wasn’t until hours later when he let himself flash back that he wondered if that final gesture had been another physical attempt to stop him or if it had been an aborted attempt at a farewell. He didn’t know. The only thing he was sure of was that their final scene would be replayed in his nightmares for a long time to come.

Gibbs watched Tony’s car drive away. He wasn’t even aware that his hand still hovered in mid-air from when he’d tried to stop Tony one more time. All he knew was the hollow feeling inside of him that had replaced the anger and hurt from a few minutes ago. A light, errant breeze rifling through his hair finally brought him to the realization that he was standing in an empty street. Woodenly, he turned and walked to his car. Without full awareness Gibbs drove home, his only thought being on the bottle of bourbon that sat on top of his refrigerator, the replacement to the bottle he’d killed off that night after speaking with Tony in his apartment. The same night he’d offered to introduce Tony to a ‘safe’ lady to give him what he needed.

He walked into his house and vaguely noted the beeping sound that said he had a message on his machine. Without bothering with a glass he opened the bottle and took a deep drink, wincing slightly as the alcohol burned every part of his mouth at once. He swallowed it and then followed that drink with a smaller one as he walked over to his machine. He briefly considered picking up the offensive thing and throwing it through the wall but the thought never made it to the part of his brain that enabled action. Instead he lifted the bottle and took another drink. He could already feel the numbness starting to branch out from the burning pool of alcohol in his stomach and he approved.

The machine beeped once again and Gibbs found himself automatically hitting the play button in an effort to stop it. With pained shock he heard the voice he’d decided he never wanted to hear again.

“Hi, Gibbs. Now I know you’re first inclination after…”

Gibbs hit the stop button and stood there for a moment torn between anguish and fury at both himself and DiNozzo. He closed his eyes and then took a deep breath. After a moment he stood straight and again hit the play button.

“…hearing my voice is to hit the delete button and I can’t say that’d I’d blame you. But if you’re still listening I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I know, never say you’re sorry, but I really am because I know you’re pissed. I just couldn’t leave without at least trying to explain. I owe you far too much for that.”
He heard a pause and a low hiss of exhaled breath before the voice continued speaking rapidly. Gibbs figured Tony was rushing to say what he wanted before the tape ended.

“It’s like this. I’ve kind of lost control of my life. I find myself doing some things that I swore I’d never do and it has to stop. I know that doesn’t make much sense and I’m sorry for that, too. Maybe someday I’ll be able to explain it better…if you’re willing to listen.”

Gibbs heard another blown-out breath. He could hear the insecurity in Tony’s voice and knew he was struggling to finish. His chest, already tight with suppressed emotion, tightened even more in sympathy.

“Gibbs, I…I never meant to disappoint you. I just wanted to say thanks…for giving me a chance…for everything. I…uhh… (hitched breath). Goodbye, Jeth…” Beep.

For several moments Gibbs stood there with his chest heaving, the knowledge of what he’d let slip away swirling through his brain. Seconds after the final beep sounded, the machine impacted the wall with a loud crash. The pieces remained littered across the floor for many days to come.
Chapter 14

Tony looked out over the crowded club. It hadn’t taken him long to find this place. It was one of three clubs he’d found in his immediate area soon after coming into town although he hadn’t started clubbing right away. For these clubs he’d had to wait for the last of the bruises to fade. Yes, he’d also scoped out those clubs that he could have cruised with the bruises openly displayed but he would have had to act yet another part, a part that said he was showing them off as a sign of pride, of personal preference. There was nothing of his recent marks that he was proud of and he wanted nothing to do with men like those who made them. That experience, however, hadn’t dissuaded him from choosing men. He just had to be more careful. Eventually he’d look for more but he knew he wasn’t ready to explore that interest just yet. All he really wanted right now was to be with someone…but not in the alley and hotels were definitely out. Unfortunately, meeting someone he actually wanted to talk to was proving harder than it had ever been before.

He’d been in Florida for about six weeks now and this was his third weekend out but he had yet to even hook up with anyone. It was getting to him, making him feel jittery and off-balance. He knew he didn’t look desperate but deep down inside he kind of felt that way. Damnit, where was the old DiNozzo charm? He’d never had problems finding someone to be with before but right now, when he really needed to connect if only for a little while, it just wasn’t happening. He took another sip of his drink. He couldn’t afford to get drunk but fortunately what he’d had so far was settling his nerves. Unfortunately the alcohol was also making him too introspective; making him over-think everything, try too hard. God, he didn’t need this tonight. He spent far too much time thinking and drinking alone as it was and yet he couldn’t seem to help himself. Starting over here, at this point in his life, was proving to be quite difficult.

It used to be that he’d move from one location to another fairly easily. Starting out someplace new had been exciting and interesting. This time he hated it. He’d been settled back in D.C. or “domesticated” as Charlie had put it. He had a comfortable apartment, a great job and good friends. Really good friends despite the fact that they’d lost their connection for awhile. They’d found it again just before he’d left and he wondered yet again that if they’d reconnected sooner it might have changed things, stopped him for leaving. He just didn’t know anymore and second-guessing his split-second decision to accept this assignment had to stop. He still missed them, though. Shit.

He looked around at the hopping club and at the drink in his hand. It used to be that this was all he wanted…partying, good times. Not anymore, not now. Being here was worse than when he’d taken his tour as Agent Afloat. On board he wasn’t the only one lonely and missing friends and family not to mention that back then he at least had the feeling that Gibbs was working to get him back and that it would all be over. Not this time. He blew out a breath that was more of a sigh. He had to admit he hated this, the whole starting over thing. It left him feeling apprehensive and that apprehension had apparently settled in for the long haul in the form of a tight knot in his belly. But then it had been awhile since he’d had to start over, after all. Nine years in one place was definitely a record. Maybe he’d break that record here he thought briefly, but the accompanying sinking feeling told him he probably wouldn’t. The fact remained that he just did not want to be here and the knowledge that he’d done this to himself coursed through him in painful waves. He blew out a frustrated breath at the depression that seemed to be constantly taking over his thoughts. He firmly told himself to get a grip and give the assignment a chance. He had to. There was no other choice.

With that thought in mind he again scanned the crowd to see if anyone caught his interest. He had given a lot of thought to what sort of person he was looking for this time. No fake Gibbs and no
one too young. No femmes or subs. He wanted someone who was strong but not too dominant… at least not yet. *Don’t go there,* he admonished himself and continued looking realizing with a smirk that he was getting picky in his old age. Picky or just scared? He took another slightly larger sip of his drink.

Scared? Why should he be scared? Just because he was starting over in a new place without all of those bullshit rules he’d lived by nearly his entire life? He was free now, damnit! He was going to live the way he wanted, love whomever he wanted in whatever way he wanted. No reputation to live up to, no pretenses and no…no rules to live by. He took a deep breath. He realized his thoughts were getting slightly hysterical and that he needed to calm down. Yeah, he could do what he wanted now because there was no one’s opinion he had to live up to except his own. He looked around. Fuck it. A quick one would be good. He could do the alley just this once, but no hotels…

That resolved he signaled the bartender for another drink. Roberto brought it over with a smile which Tony returned. Tony eyed the faint marks that were just visible under Roberto’s leather vest and it sent a frisson of desire deep into his belly as he thought about what it would be like to completely let go with someone you trusted. *Too bad he’s in solid with Jaime,* Tony thought although he really wasn’t quite ready to go there, yet. It would be a long time before he could trust someone to that extent. He pushed away the sudden flash of Gibbs in black leather. Still, he owed it to himself to explore that desire, albeit slowly, because he refused to add another regret to the list growing in his head.

He stood at the end of the bar in a spot where he could survey most of the room. The crowd was mostly young as it usually was but his place in the crowd was different than before. He’d left off the makeup and the mesh shirts although his jeans were still sinfully tight. His silky green shirt showed off his muscular form to perfection. He’d rolled up the sleeves a bit since he was still trying to acclimate himself to the hotter weather. It was a good look. He caught a glimpse of himself in one of the mirrored panels in the wall. The flashing lights caught the lighter highlights in his hair caused by his increased time in the sun but he had the sudden worry that it looked like his hair was turning gray. *No, damnit, no. You look good, DiNozzo, you know you do,* he told himself adamantly but a nasty little voice niggled at the back of his mind teasing him…*yeah, for a guy your age…*

He pushed that dismal thought away and forced his eyes to rove over the dancing men, their firm sweaty bodies pulsing and grinding to a savage rhythm under the flashing lights. It made his groin tighten hungrily. He contemplated just going down there to start dancing, sliding up against all of that male flesh but then, just like the last two times he’d come out, something stopped him. Was it because that’s how he’d met Lyle? Lyle had slid up behind him on the dance floor, his muscular body pressing close as he ground his pelvis into Tony’s ass. When Tony turned and had seen that silver hair and blue eyes he was lost for the night and oh God had that been a mistake. He pushed those memories away as he took another slightly larger sip of his drink trying to still the sudden twist in his stomach and the shaking in his hands. No, he wouldn’t be going down to dance anytime soon.

He went back to watching the crowd. If his heart skipped a beat every time he spied the flash of silvered hair he ignored it. In among all the men he noted the occasional female couple. Overall, there were fewer het and les couples here and he assumed it was because of the overwhelming number of clubs that came to life along the Florida coast when the sun went down. Still, there were plenty of singles around to keep him interested enough although eyeing the abundant numbers of young men in their own skin-tight clothes and made-up eyes seemed to emphasize the age gap and he felt a pang of discomfort. A young blonde boy sidled up to him and Tony wondered briefly if he was even legal. He was pretty, he had to give him that, but he wasn’t what Tony was looking
for. With a gentle smile and a few words the young boy pouted prettily and disappeared into the crowd. Tony smirked. He’d played that part way too often for it to be even remotely appealing. No, he really needed someone his own age at the very least.

He continued watching the crowd and took another drink as his thoughts went back to the young blonde. Instead of being flattered that such a sweet young thing was interested in him all he felt was old. And one day, DiNozzo, you’ll be lucky to garner any interest at all. Next thing you know you’ll be cruising retirement homes for your preferred older guys… He grimaced. Jesus, this had been a mistake! It struck him that he just felt tired, tired of the whole scene and he knew he shouldn’t have come out tonight at all. What made him think that another one-night stand (assuming he’d find one) would ease that empty hole inside of him? Ha, fucking ha, no pun intended, he told himself, you’re such a pathetic loser. He decided he’d had enough. It was time to go back to that crappy one-room apartment he’d found until he got all these maudlin thoughts out of his head. Tony eyed the crowd one last time envying their good mood. Pushing away his drink he turned and started for the exit. He’d almost made it when he realized that he recognized someone. Yates…Steven Yates. He’d met him in HR his first day at the office.

“We work closely with CGCIS and AFOSI,” Special Agent Molina intoned as Tony followed his way-too-hot Senior Field Agent down the hallway. His mind automatically traveled down its usual paths when a beautiful woman was in his sight but the thoughts bounced around his head by rote with no real interest behind them. He smiled. She was his Second. Rule #12 was NOT going to be an issue. Besides, he knew there was no way he was going to fuck up here like he had in D.C.

“There are a lot of bases around here but the largest in our area, geographically speaking, is Tyndall AFB just down the road from us. I’ll be taking you around there later to get your ID and passes set up.”

“Okay, Coast Guard CIS and Air Force Office of Special Investigations, what about the FBI?” Tony asked as they walked down another hallway.

“We deal with them occasionally just like the Coast Guard and Air Force. We’ve had a few joint investigations and we keep them in the loop if there’s anything major going down, otherwise we hardly hear from them…”

Tony smiled. It would be nice to work without the heavy presence of other federal agencies looming over his shoulder. He followed his new Senior Field Agent as she gave him a quick tour of the NCIS building. She’d met him at the elevator upon his arrival and introduced herself. He figured she’d briefed the guards to give her a heads-up when he showed. It’s what he’d have done in the same position.

As she led him around he noticed a slightly more laid-back mood here than back in DC although his bruises did garnish some curious looks which he ignored. Despite that, the mood wasn’t any less professional, just not as…ate-up, for lack of a better phrase. He watched folks moving about their duties but he didn’t note the overall sense of self-importance and testosterone-filled ambiance he was familiar with when working alongside a bunch of gun-toting federal agents. He could get used to this.

She led him inside another set of offices. The sign on the door read Human Resources Division and he had a brief mental picture of Delores, the ex-Dragon Lady of HR. She still didn’t smile much, but ever since he’d given her that doll for Christmas she always had a little gleam in her eye for him and he no longer suffered the pains of incorrect personnel documentation. He had a brief flash of guilt for not stopping by to say goodbye to her or any of the other numerous NCIS office workers that had made his life easier. His only option now was to send off some email apologies.
Not perfect, but there’d just been no way he could have walked in to that building acting like everything was right in his world.

SA Molina introduced him to Steven Yates, the head of HR. Even if it hadn’t been blatantly obvious that slender, dark-haired man was gay, the quick once-over he got followed by a flash of approval which was quickly hidden would have given it away. He glanced at SA Molina and was relieved to see her smile warmly at Yates. It didn’t really matter but Tony was glad his Second didn’t appear to suffer from homophobia.

Tony’s flashback ceased as Steven jumped up upon recognizing him and rushed over.

“Please, please, please don’t tell me you stumbled in here by accident!” the slender dark-haired man gushed and Tony smiled. Yates was giving him an out.

Yates waited for a moment and Tony knew he had a decision to make. He could say it was an accident, that he’d unknowingly walked into a gay bar and was on his way out or he could be up front with this man who was still basically a stranger to him. There was something about the guy, though, that made Tony want to trust that understanding look along with the silent offer in the light brown eyes to let his presence in this club tonight slide away never to be mentioned again. He decided to go with his gut.

“No, no accident…” Tony said smiling down at the shorter man.

“My prayers have been answered!” Steven cried with a dramatic flourish that ended with his palm across his heart. Steven then pulled Tony until he’d reached their table. There were three other men and Steven proceeded to introduce Tony to his lover, Alan, and two other dear friends. Each man eyed him up and down and then announced that he was just too delicious to be alone and he was invited to join them.

For the first time in what seemed like forever Tony found himself laughing. With an easy shrug he sat at their table finding an easy camaraderie where, for the first time, he let himself be who he really was with a co-worker. It was a heady feeling.

“So, Steve, are you out at work?” Tony asked a while later.

“Of course, Tony. Hard for me to hide who and what I am,” Steve said with what could only be called a giggle which was echoed by others around the table. “But don’t worry, honey, I won’t tell a soul about you. I’m just an office worker and all of those incredibly macho agents put up with me because if they don’t… they might just find themselves suddenly putting in for TAD in Afghanistan…”

“I’m not announcing but I’m not hiding, either…” Tony said after the laughter had again died down.

“No, of course not, but even as civilians we do live and work in the land of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Just because none of that really applies to you, you deal with so many military types it pays to be discreet. And not to out anyone else, but you aren’t the only agent I’ve seen here. You’re just the prettiest!”

Tony relaxed a bit more. Although he still didn’t want to be assigned here he got the feeling that it might be all right. It would just take some time to settle in and eventually he knew he’d hit his stride. And by then maybe he’d find a way to deal with the aching loneliness that permeated him.
Chapter 15

With a final swipe of his hand over the smooth surface Gibbs stood up from his position near the cement floor. He groaned quietly as he stood up, swaying slightly as he placed the sander on the wooden platform and then brushed away the dust that covered his thighs. With a surprisingly steady hand considering what he’d already consumed this night, he reached behind him to grab the cup off of his workbench. He took a sip as he surveyed his work with a curiously blank mind. He did this every single night since that day, coming down to work on the large wooden frame with no thought as to the finished product. He merely set his hands to work in the familiar motions which allowed him to empty his thoughts and tire his body. That fatigue, along with his typical poison, allowed him to fall into a dreamless stupor every night for the few hours he allowed himself. The bleary eyes and throbbing head the next morning kept him well isolated during his work day. No one was even remotely tempted to come close which is all he wanted now.

Done, he again reached behind himself to blindly put the cup back onto the workbench, never once turning around. Later in the night that little trick would become harder to accomplish. Despite that he refused to turn around, refused to see what was behind him. It was because he was so familiar with the layout of his basement that he could that, he told himself, just a small feat to amuse himself in the silence of the night. It had nothing to do with the cardboard box full of plastic pieces that used to be his answering machine now sitting on the corner of the work bench. He should just throw that junk away. He’d take it with him when he went upstairs to go to bed tonight, he vowed. He’d just leave it by the kitchen trash that needed to go out tomorrow for the weekly pickup. It was trash now that he’d firmly decided not to take it to Abby to find whatever part it was that held the messages. Trash because he did not need to hear that voice apologize yet again or to wonder what it was that DiNozzo had almost said just before he said goodbye.

He stood eyeing the frame of the boat he was working on. This one was larger than the ‘Kelly’, the boat he’d given to Mike Franks for his little granddaughter. Unfortunately, that boat had ended up cut to pieces as Abby had searched for the slugs that would answer the question of who’d been trying to kill Mike and his family. They’d gotten their answers and he’d helped Mike get the men responsible. Franks and his family remained in Mexico living their lives together in that little house on the beach. He’d had a faint idea at the time that this one would be the final boat he’d build, the one that would be for his use in his retirement, maybe sailing her along the coast to visit Mike someday hence the overall larger size. He refused to acknowledge the occasional dream of a shadowy second figure accompanying him, a figure with broad shoulders and sun-kissed hair, a bright grin and sparkling hazel green eyes. It had just been a dream after all, an elusive vision that never had a chance in hell of coming true. Never. Especially now. He felt a wave of hopelessness rush through him because somehow, he just kept fucking up over and over again.

But why did he fuck every relationship up? Why couldn’t he get it right? And although this hadn’t been the relationship of his fantasies, those thoughts were known to no one but himself, it had still been an important one. Tony had been a friend. And Gibbs didn’t have so many of those that he could afford to fuck up like this and yet he had, fucked up again, killed the dream… He eyed the naked ribs standing before him and felt a wave of fury engulf him. The next thing he knew was the reverberation through his arms and chest as the sledge hammer shattered the wooden upright. Over and over he slammed the heavy metal against the softer wood until it splintered and broke,
the entire frame shifting under his blows until it teetered off one side of the platform on which it had rested and still he continued to rain blow after blow on the structure he’d spent hours constructing.

Chest heaving, sweat ran down stinging his eyes and mixing with the blood running from the multitude of tiny cuts that covered his face and still he tried to destroy the wooden embodiment of a future he’d never have. He kept swinging and swinging until he couldn’t lift his arms anymore. Eventually his body gave in to the strain and he slipped down to kneel among the ruins, the sledgehammer slipping from his fingers to land with a thump among the detritus around him. The sound of the falling tool vaguely registered in his exhausted brain as he sucked in huge gulps of air. He remained in place unthinking, unfeeling until his breathing slowed and his heart rate dropped. Numb, he forced himself to stand and then he dragged his body up the stairs to shower and finally collapse on his bed.

Despite his exhaustion, however, sleep remained elusive and Gibbs lay in the darkness staring up at the ceiling, feeling hollowed out as though all of the rage he’d vented on the wooden structure downstairs had taken everything he had in him leaving him an aching, empty shell. Why hadn’t he known? He was a trained observer of people. It was part of what made him a good investigator and he’d prided himself on knowing his team, especially Tony, so well. How could he not have noticed that Tony was going through something so profound? He’d been so blind and it had cost him…everything, he acknowledged bitterly. He thought back to all those times Tony had sat on the steps while he worked on his boat. A lot of the time he figured Tony just needed company, just needed someone to be there. But then Tony would also come to him when something was bothering him or when he sought solace after a bad case. His presence had provided the same solace to Gibbs although he’d never admitted it to himself let alone Tony. Grieving, Tony came to him after Dana Hutton’s death from a ricin-filled pellet. Disillusioned, he’d come by after his father’s visit. He thought about those times and many others where Tony would come by silently offering beer and pizza and he’d known, damnit, he could feel the loneliness and sometimes the hopelessness because it had matched his own. But they’d never spoken of it, never even acknowledged it.

But in all those times, during all their discussions, Gibbs knew for a fact that Tony had never given any hints of a major change in lifestyle, had never even mentioned the existence of this woman. So, not only had he gotten deep, he’d fallen in love and Gibbs had never seen it coming. And not only that, he’d missed the signs that said it was all going wrong, so wrong that Tony’s only answer was to leave. Leave the team. Leave him. Gibbs swallowed against the bitter taste in his mouth.

So, who in the hell was this woman? Gibbs had to know. So, as he had on two other occasions, he gathered all of his pain and shoved it down deep. He’d use it as fuel to drive his need to find her. He had contacts and he was going to use them. Gibbs ran a shaky hand over his eyes. Right now he needed sleep but he would find out who this woman was, he vowed, and on the tail of that decision he finally slipped into a thankfully dreamless sleep until he woke up in time to get back to work.
“Whatcha’ got, Lali?” Tony asked as he strode into the office after having lunch with Steven. He spread his lightweight linen jacket across the back of his chair and pulled off his shoulder holster. He was in a good mood which showed only through the gleam in his eyes as looked around their office. This building did not have the modern, wide open floor plan of his last job. Here his team had one large communal office as opposed to the other teams and divisions who kept a separate office for the team lead. Tony took one look at the arrangement and started scouting around for another space. In Tony’s mind separating him from his team negated the whole team concept. With everyone together it made campfires easier while allowing him the freedom to observe his new team members more closely, watching how they interacted and played off one another’s strengths and weaknesses. The only problem with having their own office, however, was the fact that he couldn’t sneak up on his team a la Gibbs-style, but he made up for it in ways just as inventive as when he’d been left in charge of his old team while Gibbs was gone. So, despite already knowing quite a bit of the information his team had learned, he asked for a report as soon as he walked in. He gave them a moment to jump to their task while he thought about just what had his eyes shining in satisfaction.

Steven had just arranged for him to meet with his neighbor, an elderly gentleman who was going to move in with his daughter and who’d opted to rent out his house. Steven, having seen Tony’s apartment, had declared it to be uninhabitable (an opinion with which Tony couldn’t really disagree). He’d then taken it upon himself to find more suitable digs for his friend. Thus when his neighbor had related his plans to move and then rent his furnished home Steven had immediately thought of Tony, especially since Tony had expressed concerns over his impending visit from an old friend from DC. As far as Steven was concerned this would be the perfect solution and Tony had to agree. He’d been to the home Steven owned with his long-time lover and had fallen in love with the area. On the bay in Parker, Steven’s home sat nestled in amongst palm trees and flowering bushes and was only a twenty-five minute drive from work. It was the perfect solution as long as Steven’s neighbor liked Tony but Steven had pushed away Tony’s concerns already knowing what a charmer Tony was and promising that he’d vouch for the fact that Tony was just a good guy. All in all, Tony was hoping to be in the house by the following week so yeah, he was in a pretty good mood especially since he also had a date that night, a feat in and of itself.

Tony found that settling into this new job had been a cakewalk compared to getting back into the saddle, sex-wise. After the first few weeks he’d finally hooked up with a couple of guys for some quick relief but then froze when it came to the actual fucking part. Being incredibly horny, he’d made do with some mutual hand jobs and a blowjob or two. He’d topped a couple of times and had enjoyed it but had yet to indulge in what used to be his preferred position. Unfortunately, the thought of bottoming had him breaking out in a sweat and he’d begun to fear that that pleasure would be forever denied to him because of his experience. Then his new friends had stepped into the picture.

After meeting them that first night in the club he began to see Steven and Alan socially. It was after the first few times out as a group when they noticed that Tony didn’t seem to relax enough to even dance while they were out. It had been Alan who had initially guessed that Tony had gone through a bad experience. But then that only made sense since Alan was a therapist and, really, just how karmic was that? Tony knew he’d never have sought out help if he’d stayed in DC but things were different here.

After a typical night involving copious amounts of alcohol Tony had found himself agreeing with Alan’s assessment and eventually he told them about Lyle. In time, he also told them about Gibbs.
Tony never stopped to wonder at his ability to open up his innermost secrets with these two men. He just took it as par for the course along with all of the changes in his life. Then Tony got his first taste of Momma Steven.

After some long talks with Alan Tony figured he was ready to try dating. Once Steven found that out and he had Alan’s blessing, he proceeded to point Tony towards men that he knew would be gentle and who wouldn’t push for more than what Tony was comfortable giving. Tonight’s date was a result of Steven’s match-making and Tony had high hopes that he’d take another step forward in his healing process. Yup, things were definitely looking up.

His attention was brought back to the job when his Second stepped forward smartly and he took a moment to again admire the professionalism and extreme competence the former Marine exuded with every move she made. Despite the summer heat and humidity, she wore a well-tailored dark brown suit with a creamy blouse that just hinted at the spectacular body he knew she kept hidden. Oh yeah, a spectacularly strong and well-muscled five foot ten body that he’d learned first-hand could hit him almost as hard as another former Marine of his acquaintance. He just wished she would relax a little more. In that way she also reminded him a lot of Ziva, definitely serious and almost as deadly. Lali would have made one hell of a Mossad officer. His attention was drawn to the picture she pulled up on the plasma screen.

“Petty Officer Gerald Hutchinson, currently assigned to the Naval Hospital at Pensacola, was found partially submerged in the Chactawatchee Bay near Freeport…”

It had taken awhile to identify the remains since the body had been in the water for awhile and had made an unfortunate acquaintance with at least one alligator. Tony shuddered at that. He’d had one run-in so far while jogging and had, despite city ordinances against shooting alligators, begun carrying his gun just in case he met another.

Tony ran a hand through his sweaty hair and listened while Lali, short for Eulalia ‘and I’ll kill anyone who calls me that’ Molina, continued her initial brief. There hadn’t been any evidence left at the scene mostly because the alligator and his friends had very nearly finished their job. If it hadn’t been for a squabble that had broken out over some choice bits of Petty Officer Hutchinson’s anatomy, the group of graduate students running a field study would never have noted the all-too-human arm that had flopped back and forth between two of the larger amphibians as they competed for their dinner. The only reason NCIS had been called was because some of the bloody scraps of clothing were still identifiable as being part of a naval uniform.

“Stan get…” Tony began.

“…getting Hutchinson’s duty history right…now…” Stan Cerna said as the history replaced the photo of Gerald Hutchinson on the screen. Stan stood as tall as Tony and had similar coloring and
build with one major difference…he kept his head clean-shaven. He’d been with the team nearly as long as Lali and Tony had already learned what an exceptional agent he was, which made him almost as good as Lali. Only problem was that Tony figured it wouldn’t be long before he lost Stan when a Senior Field Agent position opened on another team. He was ready for a promotion…again, just like Lali. He had the fleeting thought that this team should have been hers but he pushed it away as water under the bridge. He was here now and Lali was his Second and Tony had sent more than one silent thanks to his predecessor for the job he’d done training the two. Stan continued his brief about Hutchinson’s last known whereabouts.

“Okay, what do we know about…”

“…Hutchinson’s financial background looks pretty clean with the exception of a large down payment on a new house for his mother in New Mexico. I’m trying to track the source of those funds.” Stan finished.

“What was his…?”

“He was married,” Harold Theurer, the third and newest member (not to mention the youngest and shortest coming in at five foot nine) added with only a slight hesitancy. “So far we haven’t been able to contact his wife, Lorena Hutchinson.”

Tony was glad the fair-haired young agent finally seemed to be settling in with how Tony ran the team. Harry was a lot like McGee as far as computer-savvy went except that Harry had come up from Cyber Crimes to gain field experience. When Tony had first arrived he’d practically had to pry information out of Harry and even that had come out in a halting, questioning tone that had been infinitely worse than Probie McGee’s stuttered utterances when he’d first joined Gibbs’ team. McGee had at least given the impression that he was sure of his facts even if he was scared shitless of Gibbs.

“Keep working it. Anything from Sarah?” Tony asked absurdly pleased to at least get one full sentence out before another one of his agents jumped in.

“Dr. Lamont is still processing the remains. She said she’ll call when she had something,” Lali added speaking of their ME.

“Right,” Tony said with a determined look. “Lali, you and Stan check out that restaurant where Hutchinson was last seen. Harry and I’ll go talk to his commander and co-workers.”
Lali smirked as she grabbed her gear and then tossed the van keys to Stan. Tony knew she’d be on her laptop looking up more information while en route to Pensacola. Lali was nothing if not efficient. Tony tossed the second set of keys to Harry and then slipped his holster back on.

Lali was, just as Tony has suspected, deeply engrossed in her computer while Stan drove. Stan looked over and smirked. She was always working. Still, he enjoyed Lali’s company quite a bit but hesitated to make any moves in her direction. She took her job very seriously and he couldn’t fault her for that but it was killing him. He’d admitted to himself that he had a more than professional attachment to her some time ago. The only problem was that she’d never date him while they worked on the same team so, with that in mind he’d been seriously considering putting in a transfer request. Once he was off Tony’s team he’d be able to legitimately pursue her without causing any problems due to fraternization. But that course of action could cause problems, too. His putting in a transfer request so soon after getting a new team leader would look bad for him. He’d look like he couldn’t get along with the branch’s new favorite. Still, he had to do something. He was sure Lali was interested in Tony and who could blame her, really.

His new Team Lead was a good-looking guy with a sharp wit and yeah, he had also impressed Stan with his ability to pull hunches out of thin air that had, more often than not, paid off well much to the pleasure of the head of the branch. Stan scowled. Tony was the golden boy and how could Lali not be impressed by that? Plus he was just as dedicated to the job as Lali displaying a serious no-nonsense attitude that almost made him want to ask the guy to lighten up. The only plus Stan could think of was that Lali would never initiate anything with Tony as long as he was her boss. She lived and breathed the regulations. He ran a hand over his scalp. He had to do something, though. He could feel resentment building up inside of him every time he saw Lali’s eyes light up at some comment Tony made. He wanted that gleam in the dark eyes to be aimed at him.

So okay, he was jealous. He admitted that. But there was something off about Tony that he hadn’t been able to put his finger on and he was honest enough to admit that his jealousy had nothing to do with the fact that he still hadn’t figured out his new supervisor. He just got the impression that there was a lot more to Tony than he was willing to show. Sure he seemed like a fair and straightforward supervisor. He’d been clear and concise about his expectations of the team and what the team could expect from him. Certainly no one could fault the job he’d done in such a short time so far, but still Stan found himself holding back. It wasn’t distrust, exactly, but more of a general wariness that Stan knew resulted from feeling that Tony was keeping them at arm’s length.

Take the guy’s smile, for instance. Stan could tell that Tony’s smiles were mostly for show and in the weeks he’d been there he doubted he’d seen a single genuine one. The man oozed charm, flashed that pseudo smile and had just about every female drooling after him and yet he was pretty sure Tony hadn’t asked any of the ladies out despite their obvious interest. Maybe he just had a personal rule about dating anyone he worked with. Maybe…but then there were those times when they’d gone out together as a team for drinks and dinner or when he joined Tony for lunch and although the man was drawing the ladies to him like a magnet he had yet to see Tony follow up on any of those inviting looks, even if just moments before Tony had been eyeing whatever lady with appreciation. It was making him wonder.

And then there was all that time Tony seemed to spend with Yates in HR. He didn’t have anything against the guy but he knew his preferences and he figured Tony had to know as well. He
wondered if there was something more to their friendship. Now, Stan was no homophobe and he
really hoped that the uncertainty he felt about Tony was just that he might be hiding his sexual
preferences. He could deal with that. In fact, he really hoped that was the case, quite frankly. It
would ease his mind with regard to Lali.

Lali had commented that she thought someone had either hurt or betrayed Tony, said that she could
see sadness in his eyes. He really couldn’t brush that off very easily. Lali was not some air-headed
romantic. She was a damned fine federal agent and a good profiler to boot so whatever she thought
she saw was there…and it certainly drew her attention, much to Stan’s chagrin. So that brought
him back to square one. What he needed was to find some way to make sure that Lali’s interest in
Tony remained in the concerned-teammate arena. The question was how. He huffed out a breath
of frustration which was cut short by their arrival at the restaurant which was the last place
Hutchinson had been seen alive forcing Stan’s thoughts away from his Team Lead.

While Stan drove Lali read through the backgrounds on Hutchinson’s co-workers. She didn’t find
anything that raised any flags for her right off the bat but she continued her review while also
wondering what had brought that bright gleam to Tony’s eyes. It didn’t take long before she was
mentally kicking herself for not keeping her mind on the job. She really didn’t have any right to be
wondering about Tony’s personal life and yet she found herself doing so more and more. It
showed a disturbing lack of discipline on her part not to mention a lack of professionalism. He was
her supervisor and therefore completely off-limits, she reminded herself, and yet she wondered
what…and who…had put that pleased countenance on his face. It wasn’t much of a smile as far as
smiles go, but it was more than she was accustomed to seeing on him so far. That real smile,
although small, was something that, in her opinion, he did far too seldom and that was related, no
doubt, to the occasional flash of pain she saw in his eyes. It was intriguing. He was intriguing.
Tony DiNozzo was definitely a puzzle that she was finding very hard not to try and solve.
Chapter 16

Gibbs got a call about a case just as he walked into the office the next morning. McGee and Ziva walked in shortly afterwards and he briefed them. No one asked what had happened to his face. By early afternoon they’d determined that one of the key players, the victim’s roommate, had disappeared. He noted with approval that both McGee and Ziva were still hard at work searching for some clue as to the whereabouts of their missing ensign, the only person who might provide a clue to solving their current case. Before he even barked out a request for a status McGee jumped up with an update which he provided in a coldly efficient tone of voice that spoke of his own hidden anger but at the moment Gibbs couldn’t be bothered to wonder at the cause of it. Gibbs felt eyes on him and he looked up and glared at Vance. Vance merely looked on impassively as he twirled that damned toothpick in his mouth. Gibbs turned away determined to ignore him. Once McGee’s update was complete with a few added comments from Ziva, he growled at them both to get back to work. He gritted out that he was headed down to see Abby. McGee nodded and returned to his computer. With a final glance up to see that Vance had gone, Gibbs turned and left.

Ziva lifted her head from her computer and looked over at McGee. She could see the deep furrows in his brow as he concentrated on his monitor. Lately, those furrows were never far from his face. It also seemed that he never went home anymore since he was deeply engrossed in his work both when she arrived in the morning and also when she went home at night. She pondered the change in her once affable teammate. McGee also seemed to be angry all the time now and she feared that he was considering asking for a transfer. He had alluded to a possible opening on another team when they had gotten together for drinks two nights before but Abby had shushed him with large liquid eyes that quieted McGee’s words. Still, it had worked but even though Abby had pushed away his words that night she had not changed his decision, she feared. She had told Tony that neither she nor Tim could be the buffer for when Gibbs was angry. That had proven to be very true. And if Tim left she did not believe she would be able to handle Gibbs’ anger alone. It would very likely result in either Gibbs’ death or her own, possibly both. Something had to be done so she resolved to speak with Ducky, the only person who seemed to still be on speaking terms with Gibbs.

Once Gibbs got into the elevator he slapped on the emergency stop. He needed just a minute to prepare himself to see Abby and he shook his head. Ever since Tony had gone the tension on the team was palpable and it wasn’t exactly something he could head slap them over either. There were no outright accusations but he could see it in their eyes. In varying degrees they all blamed him for DiNozzo’s departure but he didn’t know why.

Ziva’s cool mask of indifference hadn’t changed all that much but she did seem more distant than usual despite the slight note of understanding in her eyes. Understanding of what he had no idea and that bugged him but it was acceptable. At least he didn’t get the feeling that she was looking at him and finding him wanting unlike McGee. Ever since Tony left Gibbs had noted that McGee had lost the last of the insecurity that seemed to plague him. Overall that was a good thing except for the newfound look of disdain in McGee’s eyes. It wasn’t an expression he would have expected from his once-timid younger agent.
In all his years as both an agent and in the military, Gibbs had never asked that anyone like him personally. He was a bastard after all. But personal like or dislike could be worked around. Respect, on the other hand, couldn’t. He got the feeling that McGee had lost all respect for him which was not a feeling he was accustomed to having. Generally, he figured he deserved some measure of respect for his actions on the job, if nothing else. Lately McGee had taken to questioning his actions. Normally Gibbs would have stomped down on him for it but he hadn’t, instead taking it in terms of McGee feeling out his place as 2IC. There were times, though, that it seemed more than that. He hadn’t done anything about it yet, but if McGee pushed it too much or his behavior caused problems with the team then he’d find himself moved to another team like he obviously wanted considering the rumors. So, that’s just the way it was and Gibbs hardened himself to the thought that it would be just another loss among many.

As his hand hovered over the emergency switch he had the errant thought that there was one more thing that bugged him, surprisingly. McGee had stopped calling him Boss. It was not something that Gibbs had ever asked for, DiNozzo had just slipped into using it back when they’d first met in Baltimore and McGee had followed suit. With Tony gone, though, McGee just called him Gibbs like everyone else. Gibbs found that he missed that little bit of familiarity.

What he missed the most, though, was Abby…his Abby. Besides his relationship with Tony, this was the relationship he had somehow screwed up the most. But there had to be a fix for this and he would find it. With that thought he slapped the emergency stop and continued his descent to Abby’s lab.

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Tony sat back with his sunglasses on while Harry drove. He was busy thinking about getting the rental house squared away before Abby came for her visit. Man, he was so looking forward to seeing her it almost hurt but he wondered if he could get away without giving her a tour of his new office. Probably not. One of the things she was already talking about was visiting the forensics lab so he knew he’d have to bring her in. It would still work out, though, once he explained that they wouldn’t be hanging with his new team off-duty. They would be visiting with Steven and Alan, though. Abby was going to love them.

While Tony contemplated Abby’s visit, Harry took the opportunity to study his new supervisor. He looked over at the man lounging in the seat next to him. He seemed to be relaxed which was always a good thing as far as Harry was concerned so he relaxed a minute amount, but not much. He was still too much in awe of the man next to him. When the assistant director had briefed them about their new team lead the first thing he’d done was jump on his computer to learn everything he could about Anthony Dinozzo. Upon learning that he’d been Senior Field Agent to Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs he’d almost lost his lunch. Special Agent Gibbs was a legend in NCIS and not just because of his team’s closure rate. No, the man was notorious for his temper and his determination to see justice done. And the stories! Harry had immediately recalled everything he’d ever heard about the monster hours the team worked while on cases, the number of not only local law enforcement officers but federal officers that had been tossed to the side in Gibbs’ effort
to find his suspect. Gibbs didn’t suffer fools gladly and Special Agent DiNozzo had worked with him for over nine years! Harry figured his days would be numbered the moment SA DiNozzo stepped foot into their office. And although SA DiNozzo hadn’t lowered the boom and kicked him out yet, Harry was sure it would happen eventually. He just wondered if he’d survive until then. With a nervous swallow, Harry concentrated on his driving.

Not unaware of his youngest team member’s subtle scrutiny and subsequent attack of nerves, Tony chose to let it slide for now and went back to his musing about Abby’s visit. Would Abby really understand his lack of desire to let his new team into his personal life? It wasn’t that he was ashamed of his chosen lifestyle and he wasn’t hiding it anymore, he could honestly say that his sexuality just hadn’t come up in conversation, yet. He needed to address it, though. It needed to come from him because the last thing he needed was for his team to find out inadvertently and have it cause a problem somewhere down the road. He’d had ample experience of personal issues coming out and causing problems. He thought about Gibbs’ and Ziva’s secrets as well as his own. The only person who didn’t seem to have any was Tim. Tim’s life seemed so much simpler and he was generally a pretty happy guy. Tony envied that about the younger man.

Yeah, a simpler life would be good. Maybe he’d find someone to be with, an Alan to his Steven. Maybe. Or if not, maybe he’d find a hobby that took up some of his time, yeah, like boatbuilding… It only took a second before he had to really stop from head-slapping himself. You’re not Gibbs, damnit! He felt himself grimace and then glanced at Harry to see if he’d noticed but he was busy driving very carefully with his supervisor in the seat next to him. He smirked. He could only imagine how often the boy would have to change his pants if he were ever cursed to sit in a car with Gibbs driving. He sighed quietly.

He wasn’t Gibbs and Abby would be the first one to point that out. But on the other hand, she’d also fully understand if he suddenly did turn to drinking bourbon and building a boat in his basement. He wondered if this new house even had a basement. He ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. No matter what, his life was his business but if any questions came up he’d answer them truthfully. He was proud to call Abby his friend and Abby would like his team and even if the lab wasn’t as cool as hers she’d still be jazzed to see it. And she would absolutely love Steven and Alan. He wasn’t hiding anything. Not anymore. He was too old to play that game.

Harry drove silently so the sigh he supervisor gave was pretty audible.

“Everything okay, Sir?” Harry questioned tentatively. SA DiNozzo -- Tony, he said to call him --- seemed pretty relaxed and happy. He wondered if it was because of his friend’s (girlfriend’s?) impending visit.

“Yeah, just fine, Harry,” Tony gave the young man a slight smile. He was grateful for the disruption of his thoughts. He really didn’t need any obvious physical signs of where his thoughts had been going. Instead, Tony turned his thoughts to the youngest member of his team.
Harry seemed so damn young to Tony and so insecure, worse than McGeek when he’d started on Gibbs’ team. He’d get there, though. Tony could see his potential. Both Lali and Stan were working with him, too, which was appropriate since they were senior to him. He thought about Stan. Stan was the closest to him in age but even he seemed young. Young and in love. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that he had the hots for Lali. Okay, well maybe Lali was the only one who didn’t realize it, especially since he’d seen her interested looks his way and that was something he needed to nip in the bud. He debated discussing Rule #12 and although that would help with Lali’s interest in him, he didn’t want to lose Stan just yet and if he read the situation right, Stan would transfer regardless of whether it was to a Senior Field Agent position or not, especially if he started talking about personal relationships among the team members. Besides, did he even want to do the whole rule thing? That was Gibbs’ world. And, yeah, he believed in the rules, knew for a fact that there were some damn good reasons for their existence but, yet again, he really didn’t want to be a carbon-copy of Gibbs like he’d tried once before. Yeah, that had worked so very well, he thought sarcastically as he recalled McGee and Ziva’s biting comments as he tried to fill Gibbs’ shoes while he ‘vacationed’ in Mexico after his coma. His good mood faded slightly. He paused in his thoughts to pull out his ID. They were at the entrance gate and would soon be at the clinic where Hutchinson had worked. His thoughts returned to Gibbs.

Gibbs had never asked to be called Boss, it just fit him. It didn’t fit Tony. He recalled his second day on the job. Stan was showing him their open case files and had put them on his desk with a casual ‘here you go, Boss’. Tony had turned to him with a raised finger.

“NEVER…call me Boss, understand? You can call me Tony or Special Agent DiNozzo or even Sir, but not Boss. Do I make myself clear?” he’d said as he eyed the rest of the team.

Stan had raised one fine-haired eyebrow and nodded. His ‘sure thing, Tony’ had earned him a satisfied nod from Tony who was pleased to see it replicated by Lali. Harry on the other hand had stuttered out a loud ‘Y-y-yes, Sir!’ Harry had continued to stutter every time he spoke with Tony for a few weeks after that.

Yeah, he was trying to do things his own way and it was working. He’d learned a hell of a lot from Gibbs even if he didn’t want to be a ‘Boss’. And although it was taking some time, he was making some progress in getting Harry to relax a bit. He’d been challenging him on a regular basis and it seemed to help. Tony knew it would just take some time. He just didn’t want to push too hard for fear of breaking the kid. No, he wasn’t a boss like Gibbs and never would be. It was getting better, though. He just hoped that Stan and Lali could work things out eventually without him having to get involved. It remained to be seen.

A few moments later they were at the clinic. Tony led the questioning with Harry throwing in a question here and there that once again highlighted a keen mind behind the youthful countenance of his youngest team member. It was while they were looking through Hutchinson’s desk that Harry noted the picture of Hutchinson with his wife at what appeared to be a family picnic. In the background was a younger man who looked enough like Hutchinson’s wife to make it obvious he was related in some manner. Later, Tony gave Harry a pat on the back and a ‘good job’ when he
identified the man as Lorena Hutchinson’s cousin, a known member of a local drug cartel and their first solid lead. The first thing Tony did upon returning to their office was to call for a campfire.
Chapter 17

Gibbs walked into Abby’s lab absent-mindedly rubbing his fingers against his palm and pushing away the feeling that he was forgetting something. The truth was that he forgot nothing. Abby just didn’t want the Caf-Pows anymore. Well, not from him, at least. He walked into the unnaturally quiet lab and noted his still-favorite technician hard at work between her two monitors which, fortunately for him, meant that there were only two others with pictures of a wide grin and flashing hazel-green eyes that still had the power to make his gut twist if he looked too closely.

“Anything, Abby?” He asked quietly as he came up to stand about three feet away from her. He may not have enjoyed Abby’s choice in music and he had never understood her ability to work with the near-painful din thumping around her but he had accepted that it was part of her. Or at least it used to be. Ever since Tony’s departure her lab had become a quiet place of work and Abby’s overall attitude had become one of trepidation although he had no idea why.

Abby turned at the sound of someone entering her lab. She knew even before she turned that it was Gibbs. She gave him a faint smile upon turning and then frowned slightly when she saw all the tiny cuts on his face.

“What happened to your…?”

“What have you got, Abby?” Gibbs asked, ignoring her question.

Once she would have pushed the issue. Not anymore. Nowadays it took all of her effort to keep her promise to Tony. And she was trying. She really was. But every time she looked at Gibbs she couldn’t help but wonder what it was about Tony that he found he couldn’t love. As far as she was concerned everything about Tony was totally and completely lovable. So why couldn’t Gibbs love him? And she didn’t mean physically love him because okay, not everyone was wired to love someone else regardless of their sex, but obviously Gibbs didn’t really love Tony at all even as a friend if he couldn’t accept this part of him. If he did she was positive that they should have been able to come to some kind of understanding and Tony wouldn’t have felt so compelled to leave, especially not the way he did. Because God, she was still fending off all kinds of rumors about Tony’s abrupt departure and Gibbs’ evil mood. But that wasn’t the only thing on her mind. She was worried because if Gibbs had so completely shut Tony down that he had to leave after nine years of being a family, did that mean that someday Gibbs would disapprove of something about her and shut her down too?

She blew out a little breath because she just couldn’t go down that road again. The last thing she needed was to make herself so scared and insecure again that she had to call Todd to meet her for lunch and hold her. Although he would...he so totally would…and then her lips turned up a little at the corners as she remembered what Todd holding her had led to just last weekend. But she couldn’t think about that right now. No. Gibbs was here for information and that was what she was going to give him.

“We have a match on the two .38 slugs. Both came from the same gun that’s registered to a Victor Caulkins. It was reported stolen in a sporting goods store robbery over two years ago.”

“Anything on the .45?”

“No, still running the ballistics on that one. It’s a little harder because of the amount of damage but I’ll get something for you, not to worry, Gibbs…”
“Never do, Abs,” Gibbs said quietly. He had found himself feeling a little bit of hope when he saw Abby’s lips turn up a little at the corners. Once he would have asked her what she was smiling about but not anymore. Hell, now he’d just about give his right arm if she’d give him one of her patented hugs. He really missed those.

“Your leave has been approved, Abby,” Gibbs mentioned as he stood with his hands in his pockets while studying the screen in front of him.

“Good. Thanks, Gibbs,” Abby said perfunctorily.

“You gonna go see Tony?” Gibbs asked and then turned to look at Abby. He saw her eyes widen and her lower lip automatically slide between her teeth.

“Its okay, Abs, I know you talk to him…just want to know how he is.”

Abby’s lower lip jutted out just a bit and Gibbs saw that wounded look slip back into her eyes, the look that always felt like someone had just shoved a knife blade into his heart. She saved him by looking down and away.

Abby was trying hard…really hard…and as long as they didn’t talk about Tony she figured she would eventually find her way back to feeling about Gibbs they way she used to. But she wasn’t ready yet.

“I don’t want to talk about him with you, Gibbs,” she finally said falling back on her sole method of self-defense. She really didn’t want to lose all the ground she’d gained in trying to fix her world.

Gibbs nodded in understanding and his gut twisted. He’d lost so much more than a friend when Tony left. Every one of his personal relationships with his team members seemed to be in jeopardy and it was bleeding over into their work since it was already evident in the way the team was functioning. It was to the point where he believed the team was in danger of falling apart. And McGee would be the first. Ziva, assuming they didn’t kill one another first, wouldn’t be far behind.

“Okay, Abby. Not gonna push ya. Let me know when you’ve got something,” he said as he turned to leave.

“You’ve got it, Gibbs,” Abby said to his departing back with obvious relief.

Gibbs didn’t head straight for the elevator after leaving Abby. Instead he found himself in a little used corridor. He needed a few moments to get his head back together. His team was disintegrating and they all blamed him for Tony’s departure. He got that. But that wasn’t all. There was this huge hole in his life and he didn’t know how to fix it. He snarled at the empty wall in front of him. He’d had team members leave before, damnit! He shouldn’t be letting this affect him this way. But this was Tony. The one he thought for sure would stick around. The one he thought he had time with…but he’d been wrong. Still, he had to fix this, there had to be an answer and he was damn well going to figure it out. Straightening his shoulders he stepped towards the elevator with a renewed sense of purpose.

A few moments later he walked into Autopsy. Palmer was cleaning something up at the sink and looked up as Gibbs walked in.

“Agent Gibbs,” he said with a nod of his head.

Gibbs nodded back struck again by the coolness of Palmer’s greeting. Tony’s departure had
affected a great many people. Even Delores in HR seemed to spit a little more than usual at him.

“Ducky?”

“He was dropping some documents off with Cynthia. He should be back at any moment…”

“Ah, Jethro,” Ducky said at that moment as he walked in. “To what do I owe this pleasure? What did you do to your face?”

“Nothing. Need to talk. Got a minute?”

“Of course, just a moment,” Ducky said with a raised finger as he turned to Jimmy. “Mr. Palmer, please be a good lad and straighten out the mess I found in the supply closet down the hall. Honestly, I don’t mind if people need supplies but to leave such a mess while they’re about it is completely uncalled for. If you find out just who it might be, Mr. Palmer, please let me know. I should like to have a serious discussion with them.”

“Of course, Dr. Mallard,” Jimmy said with a smile as he scooted out to take care of Ducky’s request.

Gibbs saw Palmer smile for the first time since his arrival. It used to be that a smile was never far from his face but now it was something he reserved for everyone else. His jaw tightened at the thought.

“Oh my, Jethro. Whatever it is that’s put that expression on your face on this fine afternoon must be serious indeed. Would you care for a cup of tea while we talk?”

Gibbs nodded and followed Ducky into his office. Ducky busied himself with the preparations while Jethro brooded for a moment. Ducky knew Jethro would begin speaking when he was ready and he had been waiting. Things had gone on far too long as it was.

“You were with Tony the day before he left. Did he say anything to you or did he swear you to secrecy, too?”

Ducky was quiet while he set out a small plate of shortbread biscuits. After a moment he looked up.

“We spoke, yes. But our discussion was quite personal, Jethro, not something I can rightfully discuss with you.”

Jethro blew out a breath and stood up to pace. “You came to me on the day he left. What were you going to say?”

Ducky sat back in his chair and crossed his hands over his stomach.

“I wanted to know why you didn’t know of Tony’s plans. I wanted to know how communication between you and Tony had deteriorated so completely.”

Jethro ran a hand over his face and was quiet for some time. Finally, he spoke. “I don’t know, Duck. He just stopped showing up at my house one day and then the next thing I know he’s getting hurt. First his leg and then getting beat up.”

“And you never saw fit to find out why,” Ducky stated. “Oh, Jethro, I am disappointed.” He took
a sip of his tea. “You know, I had noticed tension in you quite beyond the norm for some time before all of this occurred and it seemed to be directed at Tony. It may have some bearing on one point that came up in my discussion with Tony that I feel I can share with you. Tony felt that he’d lost your respect and, considering the esteem in which he holds you and his own tendency towards insecurity, I would venture that it may have had something to do with his decision to leave. Was he correct?”

“No! Tony was…is…the finest agent I’ve ever worked with. He’s always had my respect and there’s no one I’d rather have on my six.”

“And of course you’ve told him that…?”

Jethro glared at Ducky but he only chuckled in return. Jethro didn’t often give out compliments but it had been known to happen. Besides, Ducky was sure the issue wasn’t professional. Everything seemed to stem from some off-duty issue. So now he just had to get Jethro to examine the personal aspect of their relationship.

“So it wasn’t professional. Did he, personally, do anything to lose your respect? I know I asked you to speak with him after his latest injury, but did anything occur prior to that?”

“No. He didn’t do anything. It’s just…it seemed that I was pissed off at him all the time.”

“Just angry? No particular reason?”

Jethro blew out another breath but his face, as always, betrayed nothing of his thoughts. A reason…yeah, there was a reason. His feelings for Tony had been building up for years but he’d always been able to push them away, separate them between fantasies and the reality of his friendship with Tony. But in the last few months it had really started to get to him, more than normal at any rate. He found himself getting pissed every time Tony talked about the women in his life and that seemed to be all the time. And he took it out on Tony. So the constant pushing, the head slaps, the put-downs…it had probably gotten to be too much for him. But why hadn’t he said something? One of the things he could always count on was for Tony to let him know when he was out of line. He’d never been shy about standing up for himself or anyone else before. Damnit! Why hadn’t he said something?

“I was hard on him but he’s never been shy about calling me on it.”

“True unless he felt it was correct for you to be hard on him. So what was it he did, Jethro, to make you so angry?”

Ducky waited and watched. He noted Jethro’s clenched fists. Whatever it was he was considering was quite personal.

Jethro knew Ducky was waiting for him to say something. Where should he start? There were so many things about his life that he’d never shared with anyone but he’d learned firsthand how much that lack of trust could hurt a good friend. He had never said anything about the family he’d lost until it had all come to light when he’d been hurt in that blast and had ended up in a coma. It was long afterwards that he’d learned how much Ducky had been hurt by his omission.

Okay, so this secret wasn’t painful. It was just private. He could tell Ducky…but the question was where to start? Should he start with the fact that he’d always liked men as well as women? Ducky already knew about his predilections towards certain types of play. It was why he’d asked him to talk to Tony in the first place. Ducky just hadn’t known about his preference for playing with men let alone his fantasies about playing with Tony. Maybe he should just tell Ducky of the late night
visits where Tony would just come by to sit in the basement with him and just what that had come to mean to him. Gibbs blew out a breath. *Just answer the question, Marine. Tell him what’s been tearing you up for months... Namely, the fact that your fantasies weren’t enough anymore; that what you wanted, what you needed, was more than just sex with Tony. Only problem was that it was never going to happen and every story Tony told was like another nail in your heart because friendship alone wasn’t enough. And that pissed you off. Yeah, go ahead and spell that out and then tell him that you took your anger out on Tony.* Gibbs ground his jaws together. Yeah, all of this was private but it was also shameful and Ducky would rightfully point that out. Still, Ducky was one of his oldest friends but just how much could he comfortably admit to?

Jethro turned and stared at Ducky. Tony couldn’t have known why he was angry. He’d never said anything and Tony hadn’t asked and yet Tony had deserved to know. But just like always he’d let things go without a word, just like he had with his wives, keeping everything he thought and felt buried deep inside of him. And just like with his wives, his relationship with Tony went to hell. They hadn’t talked at all except for that one day but it had been enough. So Tony was gone and it was his fault.

Ducky was one of the most intelligent men Jethro knew. If he was honest with him he’d probably be able to provide some insight. And yet a part of him still wanted to just let it all go. Would his revealing this part of himself make any difference? Tony was gone. *But your team is falling apart,* a small voice said. Yeah, but it wasn’t like he was going to go and spill his guts to everyone just so that they’d understand. He didn’t operate that way. They would just have to deal with it and, in time, he knew either they would or they’d move on, he thought with a flash of annoyance. But Ducky deserved more from him. He blew out a long breath and kicked himself. If Ducky deserved it they all did. He did consider them a part of his family, too...

“It was all the women…the constant talk...” Jethro said quietly. His stomach was churning and he hoped Ducky would figure it out without him having to say it. Ducky waited for more but then his cell phone rang. His eyes never left Ducky’s as he answered his phone.

“Gibbs...”

“*Gibbs, Director Vance is looking for you...*” McGee emotionless formal tones informed him.

“Be right there,” Gibbs said and hung up. He remained silent for a moment longer and then turned towards the door.

“Thanks for the tea, Duck,” he threw over his shoulder just before he left leaving Ducky to ponder those last few words.
Chapter 18

Director Vance looked up from his papers as Gibbs walked in, as usual, without knocking first. He rolled the toothpick around his mouth in annoyance and saw Gibbs’ eyes zero in on the movement. It annoyed him even more knowing that Gibbs enjoyed pushing him. Well, he could do a little pushing of his own.

“Any progress on your current case?”

Gibbs cocked an eyebrow at Vance. He knew that wasn’t the reason he’d been called in and he really didn’t have the patience for bullshit but he knew Vance would get to the point in his own time.

“It’s going,” he answered shortly. They both knew it was early in the investigation. Gibbs was positive Vance knew Abby wasn’t even done with her analysis yet.

They stared at one another for a moment before Gibbs, frustrated by Vance’s silence, finally asked.

“I know you didn’t call me up here to talk about the case, Leon. What do you want?”

Vance smiled slightly. Gibbs had been as much of a terror around the building as he’d expected post-DiNozzo. His impatience, already legendary, had reached new heights and Vance had had to do some serious work to soothe ruffled feathers not only within the agency but with the FBI as well. It was a good thing Agent Fornell seemed to actually like Gibbs. Vance’s job would have been a lot more difficult without his help. So while Gibbs’ behavior had been expected, he’d really hoped not to see the numbers plainly listed in black in white on the report he held in his hand. That, coupled with the rumors that McGee had been asking about a potential opening on another team, had him concerned.

“I need an answer about the opening on your team. Have you even reviewed the personnel files I gave you?”

“Yeah, I don’t want any of them. Carstairs just notified HR that she’s pregnant so that limits her field duty. Olsen nearly failed his last firearms test and Jackson’s straight out of college and FLETC. I want someone more experienced. What about Norton?”

SA Terry Norton had helped Gibbs’ team out for a few days just before they found out DiNozzo wasn’t coming back.

“Norton will fill the senior position on Howard’s team,” Vance answered. “I hadn’t heard about Carstairs’ pregnancy so that takes her off the list for now and I don’t want to hold off until she’s field-qualified again to fill this position. So that leaves Olsen and Jackson. Olsen still passed his test and he will improve, especially if you take a hand in that,” he stated unequivocally. “As far as Jackson being green, you can train a probationary agent. McGee is a case in point. The fact remains that you’re a man down and from last month’s status reports your numbers have dipped again. You have to do something.”

Gibbs was glad Norton got the position that McGee had looked into. He really didn’t want to lose him. He needed to fix whatever was wrong and having a new man would detract from that without helping their closure rate. No, their problem went much deeper than being a man short on the team not to mention that he didn’t even want to think of seeing someone else sitting at DiNozzo’s desk.
Still, Vance was doing his job. Gibbs needed to do his.

“Olsen. Anything else?”

Vance nodded and lifted another paper from his desk.

“I’ve gotten another complaint from HR about you.”

“Let me guess…the mail guy?”

“Unlike your team, the rest of this agency can’t interpret your growling so you need to use your words,” Vance spit out. “Having said that, I’m sure you’re aware it is also unacceptable to throw unwanted mail back at the mail dispatcher. Next time something gets delivered in error just give it to McGee.”

Gibbs ran a hand over his face preventing Vance from hearing his reply.

“What did you say?”

“I said he’s damn lucky it was a letter and not a package!”

“That is enough, Agent Gibbs! I will not have you physically assaulting your co-workers or I will have you brought up on charges, is that clear?”

Gibbs knew he was right but damnit, it seemed as though he was surrounded by incompetents lately although he did have the niggling thought that it had been DiNozzo who’d smoothed over a lot of the day to day garbage. Okay, he’d get McGee to sort out the mail issue.

“Yeah, I’ll get it straightened out. Anything else?”

“You’ve hit your TFSD of 20. This is from HR for your review.”

Gibbs looked down at the stapled package of forms in his hands.

“Is there a reason HR thinks I’m interested in retiring?”

“Probably wishful thinking on their part.”

Gibbs smirked.

“I’ll present your pin at the end-of-month recognition ceremony.”

“Don’t bother, won’t be there.” Gibbs said of the small pin awarded to civil servants when they met the total federal service date of twenty years. Technically, he was eligible to retire but both men knew that wouldn’t happen regardless of how much HR or anyone else wanted it.

“I know. You never are. I just assumed that McGee would pick it up for you the way DiNozzo used to accept your awards.”

Gibbs said nothing. No, McGee wasn’t like Tony. When DiNozzo had done it the first time he assumed DiNozzo just liked the limelight. It was later that he figured out that Tony had done it because he’d been proud for him. He doubted McGee would if you considered his current frame of mind. Gibbs just shrugged in answer and looked away for a moment.

“That it, Leon?” he asked again.
“Yeah, that’s it,” Vance replied still unsatisfied with what was going with the team. Gibbs just nodded and then left. Vance spit out his splintered toothpick and pulled out a new one.

The next day Team Gibbs had their current case solved for them with the help of the local LEOs. It seemed their errant ensign and their victim had been involved with drug running when the ensign decided he wanted his roommate’s share of the take. Things blew up when the ensign shot his roommate and left to meet with his new best friends who, deciding they didn’t like the unannounced change in players, shot the ensign and then proceeded to take what was left of the cash and the two handguns the ensign had with him, a .38 and a .45. When those same not-so-best-friends were later arrested attempting to sell to an undercover cop the handguns were matched to an open case being investigated by NCIS. A few quick calls and a very determined silver-haired special agent resulted in the location of the ensign’s body. Case closed. The determined silver-haired special agent, however, was not appeased much to the dismay of his team. He was, in fact, quite pissed for three particular reasons that had nothing to do with the case.

The first reason was that he’d found out that Tony had left thinking that he’d lost his respect. Nothing could be further from the truth but he was at a loss over what, if anything, he should do about it. God, he hated having to deal with anything involving relationships, but this was eating at him. He respected the hell out of Tony and it bothered him to think that Tony didn’t know that. The apology on the machine now made a little more sense but still not enough and Gibbs hated not understanding. He considered calling but he sure wasn’t a conversationalist at the best of times so there was no way he’d be able to get things out in the open over the phone. Email was definitely out. The only thing he could come up with was to take a trip to Florida but there was just no way in hell he’d chase after Tony just to talk. He grimaced in distaste at that thought especially since neither of them had been able to say what they needed to when they had the chance. No, he just had to let things lie for now. Maybe later, like Tony had said on his machine, eventually he’d be able to explain. Gibbs knew for sure he’d be willing to listen.

The second reason was that he was getting damned tired of avoiding Ducky. He wasn’t ready to impart any more personal revelations just yet. Right now he had a personal mission and that took precedence over talking. It always had. Ducky would have to just accept that.

The third and most pressing reason was that the very determined special agent had come up empty on ascertaining just who the mystery lady was who’d royally screwed up his life. That was still an imperative because he had to at least set eyes on her, see this person who’d hurt Tony and who’d caused such chaos in his life, both personal and professional. He refused to believe he couldn’t come up with any leads at all and it torqued him.

Gibbs hoped that a desire to remain circumspect had led Tony to partake of one of the more private clubs in the DC area, several of those being clubs in which he, himself, had retained a membership. No one recognized the photo Gibbs had shown despite the fact that he’d explained that he was investigating an assault on a federal officer which was what he felt had occurred. He then went on to investigate the more public clubs, still without result. No one recalled seeing the handsome man nor did they have any clue as to whom the mysterious woman might have been who’d hurt him.

So if Tony hadn’t been a member of any of the local clubs Gibbs thought he might have decided to pursue his interest out of town. It would make sense for someone who wanted to make damn sure their personal life didn’t intersect with their professional one. The only problem was that as the area of search widened, the number of clubs increased dramatically. It would be impossible to cover that many locations on his own and yet he had no choice if he was to find this woman. But, truth be told, he’d rather be searching through the various clubs than wander through his empty house and even emptier basement, so he continued his search.
Chapter 19

Detective James Mulroney smiled to himself as he sauntered down the hallway towards the men’s room. He was in a particularly good mood which was typical when he was planning one of his “fun” weekends. Yeah, if this next one was anything like the last it would be so good. That last fine, firm, young Navy boy’s ass had been as sweet as they come. It had been especially good after he’d warmed it up real good with his belt. He’d cried such tasty tears, too. Burt, his partner, had said that finding military ass had been one of the best things to ever happen to them and he’d agreed. Of course he felt he really owed his thanks to that Navy cop, Anthony DiNozzo, for letting them in on the idea of having their fun with a group of young men who’d rather die than admit they had sex with a couple of men after cruising around in gay bars. That whole Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell idea was slicker than snot on a glass doorknob, slicker than that boy’s pretty little pussy after they’d come in it a couple of times. Oh, yeah, Scotty…oops, Anthony, had just opened up a huge door for them and they would be forever grateful.

Mulroney finished his business and was headed over to the break room when he was stopped by a newbie in their division, Robbins…Robinson…something like that.

“Hey, Mulroney, you got a call. She said she was your wife and she wanted to hold…I didn’t know you were married…?”

“Fuck! Divorced, thank you very much…uh…”

“Robinson,” the younger man supplied with a roll of his eyes and a smirk. He wasn’t too keen on the older detective. Both Mulroney and his partner pretty much snubbed anyone who’d been there less than a thousand years but he was cool with it. All he cared about was doing his job and going home to his pretty wife and the baby that was coming their way. So, with a negligent wave he continued on his way to the records office.

Mulroney dismissed the younger detective as soon as he was out of eyesight as he considered going to the break room regardless of the call. No, Patty would just turn around and call back a hundred more times. She was nothing if not persistent. He might as well get it over with.

“What? No way can I come down there this weekend, Patricia,” he growled into the phone a short while later. “I’m working…well, how sick is he?”

Mulroney looked up at the ceiling and then closed his eyes as he ran a hand through his silvery grey hair.

“Okay, okay, maybe I can get there on Saturday but I gotta leave on Sunday.” He looked back down at his desk with a scowl. He could feel Burt’s eyes on him and he deliberately turned away. “Of course he’ll understand…he was a cop, too, for chrissakes!”

He grabbed a pencil and tapped it on his desk calendar a few times listening with only half an ear while she ranted on about his being so far away from the family. Yeah, like he could really be who he was when everyone in the neighborhood knew his family going back three generations. Man, he couldn’t even sneeze without word getting back to his old man. Hell, he’d of left home years ago if he hadn’t gotten Patty knocked up when they were teenagers. He sighed lightly as he thought about Patty and the family. She’d lost the baby and had never gotten pregnant again. After awhile they just grew apart and then he’d finally figured out what he wanted and it wasn’t a sweet Irish girl from the neighborhood. So using the divorce as an excuse he left town never to look back unless someone called with family concerns. Like now when his old man was getting
Christ, he didn’t want to go back. Not that he really had anything against his old man, hell, he’d become a cop just like him and his uncles and grandfather before him. Naw, he just didn’t want to see his once robust father laid up in bed eaten away by cancer. His thoughts returned to the voice on the line and he realized that Patty was saying that they didn’t think he’d make it through the next week. He blew out a frustrated breath and then looked at his partner.

“I said I’d be there,” he spit out again once Patty finally shut up enough for him to say something. They spoke for another minute and then hung up.

“You going?”

“Yeah, got no choice. The old man’s close.”

Burt looked away. He’d been looking forward to Saturday night but he supposed they could put it off for a week. Jimmy’s Dad would kick soon and then they could get back to business. He nodded and surreptitiously rubbed his crotch with his left hand.

Mulroney caught the movement and his eyes narrowed as a surge of lust shot through him. He loved watching his partner’s face as he came inside of one of their sweet boys. They didn’t do each other…that was just wrong on some level he couldn’t explain but they definitely liked playing this game together and he wondered if Burt liked watching him as much as he liked watching Burt. He’d never ask, though. It was enough to know his partner enjoyed their games as much as he did. He ran his right hand through his thick mustache and thought for a moment. He caught his partner’s eye and then jerked his head.

“Coffee,” he said and then walked out confident that his partner was right behind him. He wasn’t wrong. He poured himself a cup and then poured one for Burt.

“Friday night…I’ll need that before I go back.”

Burt smiled. So maybe the weekend wasn’t ruined after all. He lifted his fist and knocked knuckles with his partner. Life was good.

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It didn’t take much longer for Tony’s team to find the connection between Lorena Hutchinson’s cousin and the death of her husband. A long talk with the obviously pregnant Lorena explaining the looming possibility of her giving birth to her child behind bars led to a swift and well-armed raid on a small river camp where several arrests were made as well as evidence of the stolen Navy supplies was found.

Harry stood in awe as he watched his Team Lead drag a confession out of his suspect, Arturo Venegas, a street-smart and cocky drug-dealer. Arturo had proven no match for the wily and Very Special Agent DiNozzo. He had, after all, gotten the better of the Director of Mossad at one time so a common street thug was no match. Tony easily learned how long PO Hutchinson had been appropriating Navy prescription medications for re-sale via Venegas. It had been a profitable association for both men from the very start allowing Hutchinson to work his way deeply into Venegas’ operation, so much so that Hutchinson had eventually married Lorena Castro, Arturo’s little cousin. It had all been going well until two things happened. First, Lorena got pregnant and then some of the appropriations had finally been noticed.

When Hutchinson realized that he was being watched, the possibility of prison time on top of
Lorena’s pregnancy finally made him realize just what it was he was putting at stake. He tried to pull out of the operation. This didn’t go over too well with Venegas and his friends. The end result was Hutchinson’s unscheduled swim with the ‘gators.

“Good job, everybody,” Tony said as Venegas was escorted back to his cell and he and his team walked into their office. He looked at his watch. It was only 2:30 in the afternoon. Excellent.

“Let’s get going on those reports so we can get out of here at a relatively decent time.”

“Got a hot date, Tony?” Stan asked, hoping it was true and that Lali was listening. This might be just what he needed to re-direct Lali’s interest in their team lead.

“Actually, I do,” Tony answered truthfully glad that the subject had finally come up. He’d been planning on telling his team but just hadn’t had the opportunity. He saw the quick look Stan had given Lali as he asked the question and Tony understood his intention at that moment. He decided to help the guy out and it was time to see if his team would react the way he expected.

“Anyone we know?” Stan asked nonchalantly.

“No, I don’t think you know him,” Tony said. He really had to work to hide a smile at Harry’s open-mouth shock. Lali was very cool although he did see her eyes widen fractionally with what looked like a flash of disappointment. It was quickly hidden though and Tony was impressed.

Stan just nodded with no surprise and just a hint of satisfaction evident although he kept his eyes on Lali. Tony waited for a moment. “If that’s gonna be a problem for any of you, talk to me. No repercussions. I need a strong team, _capice_?”

Tony saw the nods and turned to his desk. He’d studied his people and was pretty sure he knew how they’d react. He’d also thoroughly considered all of the ramifications of his revelation in terms of the agency should the information make its way further than just the team and he was ready for that, too. He felt confident that everything would work out.

“Here ya go, Probie,” Stan said as he pushed a beer towards his young partner.

“When will you stop calling me that?” Harry asked after a sip of his beer.

“Never, ever, ever…” Stan replied in a sing-song voice. “It’s kind of like a Mom, you know? Moms never consider their kids to be anything but their babies, regardless of their age. So that’s you, my son. You’ll always be My Little Probie. Get used to it.”

Harry just responded with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. He actually liked being called Probie. He’d just never admit to it. But being called Probie wasn’t what was on his mind tonight.

“Did you see that about him? Could you tell?”

Stan looked down at his beer. His first inclination was to say that he’d known all along, but he hadn’t. He could say that it would have been obvious to anyone with his superior investigative skills, but it wasn’t. Nah, he could be honest about this one.

“I had my suspicions but I was more interested in how he’d run the team. What about you?”

Harry studied his beer with a frown. He’d been in awe over DiNozzo’s reputation with SA Gibbs. He was even more awestruck upon seeing the man in action, both out in the field and during interrogations. And especially in that last interrogation which had been…_awesome_. His frown deepened. He needed a new word. But what bothered him was that he worried that he’d never
learn to read people the way that both Lali and Stan seemed to be able to and if he couldn’t, what kind of a field agent would he be?

“Bother you that much, huh?” Stan asked upon seeing the younger agent’s frown deepen. He was surprised. He would never have taken the young guy for a homophobe. He was going to have to tread lightly here. The kid was shaping up to be a good agent but there was no room for biases like that. Yeah, everyone was entitled to their own opinion but he needed to make sure the kid understood that despite Tony’s assurances, asking to be moved off of the team so soon after taking on a new Lead could have some negative consequences. He was still toying with the idea himself, after all, especially now that Tony was out of the running for Lali’s affections.

“What? Oh! Oh…no! No, th-that’s n-not it at all!” Harry stuttered out, shock evident all over his face.

Stan nearly laughed at Harry’s denial. “Okay, then, what’s the problem? Why were you frowning so hard it looked like your face had frozen like that?”

“Huh? No…nothing…I mean it doesn’t or didn’t, uh,” Harry stumbled to a confused halt as a blush worked its way across his face. He wasn’t very sure he wanted to admit to some kind of hero-worship.

Stan’s mouthed dropped open and his eyes widened. “Harry, are you saying that maybe you’re…uh, interested…in Tony…?”

“Oh, God,” Harry said as he closed his eyes in mortification. And then he started laughing. He opened his eyes to see Stan staring at him in complete confusion.

“No, Stan. I’m not interested in…Tony…like that,” he said still smiling at the misunderstanding. “His being gay doesn’t affect me one way or the other.”

“Then what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“I just kind of figured that you and Lali could see that about him and that maybe I’d missed something. Damnit, Stan…if I’m ever going to be a decent agent I’ve got to get better on my observational skills.”

“Don’t worry about that, kid. You’re coming along just fine. I just happened to notice a couple of things when I went out to lunch with Tony a few weeks ago. You were working on some program and Lali had a doctor’s appointment. Trust me, there’s nothing about Tony that’d make you think that about him. In fact, I’m not sure he’s totally gay, not the way I’ve seen him look at women. Maybe he’s bi.”

Stan noted with approval as some of the tension seemed to leave Harry’s shoulders. Tony’s admission had eased his own tension somewhat. He just needed to make sure that his sexuality was the only thing Tony was holding back.

“Thanks, Stan. Okay, so speaking of Lali, where is she? Is this going to be a problem for her?” Harry asked with a quick look at his watch since Lali had yet to show up.

“I’m not sure where she is. She didn’t say she wasn’t coming. As far as her and Tony, nah, I don’t see this as an issue. She’s too professional for that although she was a bit disappointed.”

“How do you know that? She didn’t react much so does that mean that she was…?” Harry asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows.
“I kind of suspected about Tony so yeah, I was watching her.”

“Watching her…for her reaction…so was that just out of your own twisted interest or are you and Lali…?” Harry finished with a finger waving back and forth. “How long? And how would that work with the two of you on the same team? Wouldn’t that be considered…?”

“Hey! There’s nothing twisted about me!” Stan retorted with a grin. “But yeah, it would be considered against regs since Lali’s technically my next level supervisor which is why I haven’t done anything about it, yet.”

“Yet. What are you thinking about doing?”

Stan sighed. Harry was a good friend, probably one of his best. He told Harry about everything he’d been thinking of lately.

“Wow,” Harry said when Stan had finished. “Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of asking for a transfer? After everything you just said it could hurt your career, too.”

“I haven’t decided anything. Hell, I don’t even know if Lali thinks of me like that,” Stan sighed.

Harry had his own opinion about that. He’d noted Lali looking at Stan and had often wondered about it but he wasn’t about to get involved. He liked his team…a lot. He didn’t want to break it up although he knew it was bound to happen at some point. But he also considered his teammates to be friends. He wanted them to be happy and he often thought Stan and Lali would be good together. He was saved from having to respond by the appearance of the Senior Field Agent herself.

“Hey, guys. Sorry I’m late,” said as she signaled for the waitress to bring another round. She’d taken her time getting to their usual watering hole for a couple of reasons. First off, she knew her team and knew that they’d use the time without her to talk it out and she wanted to give them that time. But she had also needed to take some time for herself to adjust to the new information about her Team Lead. Yeah, it had been a disappointment but she was nothing if not realistic. She was more interested in working with Tony than dating him regardless of how fascinating and good-looking the man was. The fact was that he had been part of one of the most noteworthy teams in NCIS and she wanted to learn from him. She smiled her thanks at the waitress when the beers showed up and she took a good long drink. Yeah, she’d needed to get over the personal disappointment of yet another fine looking man who turned out to be gay and she hadn’t really had all that many little fantasies about him… But she was honest with herself. She had been more disappointed to find out that she wasn’t getting the promotion she’d hoped for when Artie had retired. But she knew that Tony was a good choice for that position and her turn would come, she was sure of it. Right now she had to make sure the rest of her team was good.

“Okay, guys. You’ve been here for awhile and I know you two have been talking so I’m not going to beat around the bush. Is this going to be an issue?”

Stan just chuckled and Harry smiled. Typical Lali, they both thought, straightforward and to the point.

“Nope, no problem,” Harry answered first.

“Not for me, either,” Stan chimed in. “You?”

“I’m good,” she answered with a firm nod and Stan saw that it was true. He felt the small knot in his stomach let go.
Lali looked from one man to the other and was satisfied with what she saw. In fact, Stan looked pretty damned satisfied and more relaxed than he'd been for awhile. She had chalked it up to the usual wariness of getting a new supervisor but she wasn’t quite sure now. It was something to think about later.

“We’re a good team,” Lali continued. “…a really good team and I think Tony’s going to be good for us, but you two are my main concern.”

“Ah, Lali, you wound me!” Stan intoned with a feigned look of injured pride. “Do you really think we’d be so narrow-minded?”

“No, Cerna, I don’t, but I’d lay money that someday I’m gonna have to put my boot up your ass over a questionable joke here or there,” Lali said and laughed at Stan’s snort of laughter. She picked up her beer and raised it up. “To Team DiNozzo!”

“Team DiNozzo!” both men added as the three glasses came together.
Chapter 20

Abby ran her hand over Tim’s as they commiserated over lunch.

“I’m sorry about Terry getting that job you wanted.”

“No you’re not,” Tim said quietly knowing that Abby hated the thought of her family falling further apart.

“No, really…I am,” Abby insisted. “It’d have been better than having you miserable on Gibbs’ team and it wouldn’t have been like you were leaving, I’d still have my best friend with me.”

“I just don’t know how much longer….” Tim began wondering just how long it would be before he could get over the animosity he currently felt towards Gibbs. If he couldn’t, Cyber Crimes might be the only answer.

“What do you mean, Tim?” Abby cried shock written all over her face as she quickly straightened up.

Tim realized that he really should have censored his thoughts a bit more before opening his mouth. Either that or he should have at least been better prepared for the solid punch that landed on his shoulder.

“So since that job’s gone you’re not even considering moving downstairs? So does that mean you’re going to leave NCIS? Leave me like Tony did? Are you breaking up my family even more now?” Abby demanded, her arms waving in agitation and completely oblivious to the looks she was getting from some of the other lunch patrons.

Tim quickly grabbed Abby’s arms. “No, no Abby, I didn’t mean that,” he said quickly kicking himself as tears filled her green eyes. Abby had always been very emotional and she wore those emotions openly but now his friend was on the verge of being a total wreck. He slipped his hands down her arms until he held both of her hands in his.

“Well, what did you mean? I couldn’t handle you leaving, too, even if it was just back to Norfolk.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Abby. Honest,” Tim assured her as patted her hands. “I just meant that I’m trying to get a handle on my feelings and I don’t know how long that’ll take. I’m just so pissed at Gibbs for…well…not being the man I thought he was. He was always so fair, so…so noble, I guess. And all Tony ever wanted to do was please him but instead he got the shaft.”

“But you won’t, Timmy, he won’t kick you off the team because you’re so not gay which I know for a fact and I’ll tell Gibbs so that even if he really is a narrow-minded ass, he won’t…”

Tim quieted her with a finger over her lips. After a bit Tim dropped his hand and looked into her eyes.

“So, you’re not leaving the yard?” Abby asked softly as she chewed on her lower lip. She still needed reassurance.

“No, Abby, I promise you I’m not,” Tim said and smiled gently at Abby’s nod. “I’m just going to have to have a talk with Gibbs to get this off my chest. I won’t be able to work with him otherwise. And if that doesn’t work, well then I’ll have to seriously consider Vance’s offer.”
Abby nodded and sighed quietly knowing that she, too, would have to have a heart to heart with Gibbs. But it would have to wait. She had a trip coming up and she didn’t want to deal with anything negative right now because her sole goal was to convince Tony that he’d made a mistake by leaving and that he simply had to come back home.

Ducky added boiling water to the already-heated pot and then replaced the lid with a sigh, grateful for the brief respite before returning to the case of the poor young man who so recently occupied one of his tables. He adjusted the cozy over the pot and set out two cups. He then sat down to relax while his tea brewed. Physically he was quite fatigued due to the influx of several cases, one right after another it seemed. His mind, however, was not on their unusually heavy caseload. Instead his thoughts were on Jethro as they had been ever since the interrupted conversation from weeks before, more so since his conversation with Ziva. He’d known the team wasn’t operating smoothly ever since Tony’s departure, but he’d really had no idea things were as bad as Ziva had relayed. Jethro had been driving his team, and himself, relentlessly and although the team had performed it was taking more and more out of his friends with every passing day. That on top of what he’d discovered regarding Jethro’s activities had him quite concerned.

He simply had to get Jethro alone for a bit so that they could speak. And if the problem was what he suspected, well, at least he had a starting point from which to work. But getting that verification was proving quite difficult. It seemed as though Jethro regretted the few words they had shared and Jethro, in his typical fashion, simply refused to say anything at all and completely ignored his repeated requests for a bit of his time. Their only discussions thus far had revolved around their cases and when they weren’t working Jethro was off on some mission of his own leaving his house dark and empty every time Ducky had driven by in hopes of cornering his friend for their much-needed conversation.

Well, he had had enough. He could feel that things would soon come to a head, quite possibly in a most catastrophic manner and he would not allow that to happen. He glanced at his desk clock and looked up in time to see the subject of his ruminations stalk into his autopsy theater.

Gibbs glanced around, noted the lack of a body on the table as well as the absence of his ME and assistant. He saw Ducky in his office and marched inside.

“What have you got, Duck?” he asked surprised that Ducky had finished the autopsy so quickly. He usually had the timing down better so that he’d show up just about when Ducky would be finished.

“Approximately one more minute before my tea has finished brewing.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes. “The body, Ducky.”

“Alas, Jethro, that young man has infinity of time upon his hands unlike those of us still locked in our mortal coil…”

“I don’t have time for this, Dr. Mallard,” Gibbs responded with a growl. “What was the COD?”

“In a moment, dear friend. First I must insist that you take a moment and share a cup of tea with me…” Ducky answered mildly as he poured out two cups of tea. He then walked over to his door and locked it with a key which he then carefully placed into the pocked of his lab coat.

Gibbs stared at Ducky as though he’d lost his mind but then his face set itself in a look of stubborn refusal. He knew what this was about and not only did he not have the time, he certainly didn’t
have the inclination for it.

“I’ve said all I intend to say about that, Ducky. The subject is closed so you may as well open the
damn door.”

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t. Not while there is such tumult within your team, Jethro. You do know, of
course, that you are running them ragged, especially now that Special Agent Olsen has departed
which did not come as much of a surprise although he did last very nearly three weeks, correct?”

Gibbs gave his usual glare which Ducky ignored.

“Jethro, I am not the only one who has expressed concern.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes…Vance. The man was a complete pain in the ass but he was relentless.
Normally he would have appreciated that quality but not right now. He sighed. He might as well
get this over with.

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

Ducky gestured to the cup of tea. He took a sip of his own waiting for Gibbs to do the same. He
smiled as Gibbs blew out yet another frustrated breath before picking up his cup to take a sip.
Ducky smiled at the inevitable grimace.

“Your last words were that it was all the women. So tell me, how long have you been attracted to
Tony?”

Gibbs looked away, his jaw tightening convulsively and Ducky smiled. It was an answer of sorts
and it did confirm his supposition, however in doing so, it also left him greatly saddened. Such a
tragic lack of communication, it was very nearly Shakespearean in nature. Now, though, it
remained to be seen if he could nudge Jethro in the proper direction.

“Believe it or not, Jethro, I only ask as a concerned friend…”

“Thought Vance put you up to this.”

“Of course not, Jethro, the other concerned parties are also your friends. They see you running
yourself into the ground and I know that it is not only the heavy caseload but also whatever it is
you’re up to in your personal time.”

Gibbs steely glare shot daggers into Ducky’s eyes.

“No one’s followed me,” Gibbs said with certainty and then he recalled the dossier Ziva had
compiled on him. She’d never alluded to knowledge of his private activities.

“No, I doubt they have. I, however, know that you are out every evening on this personal mission
because I’ve been desperately seeking your time. Does this mission have anything to do with Tony
or your attraction to him?”

Gibbs, as usual, retreated into silence so Ducky continued.

“I know that you’ve been seen at some of the clubs you used to haunt and that you are supposedly
involved in an investigation. I can therefore assume that you are searching for something…or
someone… in relation to Tony.”

“I don’t appreciate you nosing into my affairs, Ducky, and this conversation is over.”
“Oh, I’m afraid not, my friend, although your reticence has answered a question or two. There are some things I wish to say before we leave this particular discussion. We have all seen how very detrimental the keeping of secrets has been to the smooth operation of your team…”

“Ducky…” Gibbs growled in warning.

“Please allow me to finish, Jethro. I’m not saying you need to discuss your private affairs with us, but you must know that your people, and I’m referring specifically to Abby, Timothy and Ziva, need to be able to trust you. Whatever happened between you and Tony has eroded that trust.”

“I’m not gonna talk about Tony to anybody!”

“No, no, of course not, but you need to stop wasting your time on this completely futile search of yours and instead concentrate on repairing the relationships at hand and one way to do that is to ensure they know you accept them as people as well as agents, something I fear they feel you failed to do with Tony.”

“What the hell, Ducky!” Gibbs exploded as he jumped up from his seat. He leaned over the desk into Ducky’s face as though he were in an interrogation room. Ducky just looked at him calmly and in the back of his mind he gave him high points for it but the thought slipped away in the face of his anger.

“Is that what they’re pissed about? They think I passed judgment on Tony and then threw him away? Damnit, all I wanted was to make sure his personal life didn’t interfere with the job and you know damn well his leaving was a surprise.”

“Yes, I do know that but what I also know is that both you and Tony are quite alike in so very many ways, neither of you allowing your friends to see the men you are inside let alone anyone else.” Ducky leaned forward in his chair and looked closely at Gibbs. “Did you think we would pass judgment on you?”

Gibbs said nothing, his mind racing as he considered his friend’s words and the truth of them. But there was more to it than that; surely Ducky had to know that. They’d both worked with the military for so long. Although things had changed, were changing, it was a hard mindset to break.

Ducky smiled gently.

“You’re my friend, Jethro, and no finer or more honorable man have I met in my life. Nothing has changed that opinion. I trust you will rectify the situation with your team.”

Gibbs just nodded knowing that Ducky, at least, accepted that part of him. “Okay, Duck, message received. Ensign Andrews?”

Ducky sighed and hoped that Jethro would thoroughly consider everything he’d said…and that he’d come to the appropriate conclusion because very much like young Abigail, he also believed there were always possibilities and second chances. He walked to the door and unlocked it. He then returned to the case at hand.

“Our young ensign was stabbed directly in the left ventricle of his heart causing his death at approximately 1130 last night. Your suspect is right-handed and is approximately 181 to 183cm tall. I’ve sent the specifications of the blade to Abby for analysis. He had a BAC of 0.16 but no evidence of other chemicals in his system. I noted no other anomalies during my examination.”

With a final nod Gibbs left autopsy leaving Ducky sitting alone in his office.
Chapter 21

Tony dropped his forearm over his eyes as he waited for his breathing to slow down. His body ached from his shoulders down to his calves, his ass throbbed and his mind thrummed pleasantly from the endorphins still rushing through him. It was just a taste of what he knew was possible but this was as far as he’d let himself go. It was enough for now.

After a bit he reached over with leaden arms for his glass and took a sip, ignoring the dark eyes that watched him from a few inches away. He felt a soft elegant hand stroke down his chest and he thought of calloused fingers.

“You drink too much, Tonio. I don’t like it,” the soft tenor sounded almost petulant and Tony could picture the pout. The voice was at odds with the generally forceful nature of its owner. “I shouldn’t have let you talk me into doing this for you tonight.”

“Alcohol has nothing to do with this, not to mention that you’ve never seen me drunk.”

“No, but I would prefer not to constantly taste the alcohol covering your own sweet flavor.”

Tony said nothing and felt a hand stroke down his side as the soft voice continued.

“I want you to come to me without your senses dulled so that I can truly make you fly.”

Tony stifled the smirk that threatened to shatter the small moment of calm he’d achieved. No alcohol? Not going to happen. He needed a drink just to let Daniel pretend to tie him up. Ever since that night with Lyle he refused to let anyone secure him to the point where he couldn’t get himself out. Despite his belief that keeping that little bit of control was counterproductive to the complete submission he sought, he knew there was no other way. Not for him. He simply didn’t trust anyone enough to give up everything that he was. There’d been only one man in his life he trusted that much but it was never going to happen with him, so this is what he was left with, using whatever Dom of the moment to take him as far as he was comfortable all the while imagining another hand wielding the strap, another voice demanding his submission.

Tony sighed. He had to keep trying. There had to be someone out there, some elusive man that would push all thoughts of Gibbs out of his mind. At least it was easier now to search for that ‘special someone’. With Steven’s help he’d gained entry into the exclusive clubs that catered to his needs and gave him hope that he’d find the right match.

His attention was drawn back to his bed partner who blew out a frustrated breath and Tony realized that he’d been ruminating too long.

“You’re not my master, Daniel,” Tony said pronouncing the Spanish version of the name perfectly.

“It is not for lack of desire on my part, querido, but I understand our relationship is too new to take that step. Still, I want you to think about it, Tonio. You need someone to take care of you. I want to be that man.”

“I’ll think about it, Daniel,” Tony answered although he knew it would never happen. It was just easier right now to pretend to consider it than to argue. He almost laughed. He’d left DC tired of all of the masks and lies and here he was, starting it all over again. And for what? He’d yet to experience that loss of self, that release that Steven had tried so hard to describe and God, he wanted it. At first he’d thought that it was just a matter of finding a Dom experienced enough to get him there, but he was wrong. It takes two to tango, DiNozzo, and you’re the one tripping up.
He was the one holding back and the end result so far was that he never fell far enough to achieve the release he so desperately wanted. Others had recognized his fear, his lack of trust, but so far none had broken through. Hell, some hadn’t even realized there was a problem. Daniel was one of those. Betcha Gibbs wouldn’t be…

“Let’s sleep now, querido,” came the imperious voice interrupting his thoughts. “We can discuss this further tomorrow.”

Tony sighed and debated whether or not to ask Daniel to leave. He knew Daniel would insist on staying by his side after their play because, all in all, Daniel really was a decent Dom. He just wasn’t the right one for Tony. Besides, the argument they’d no doubt have seemed like too much effort at the moment, so Tony settled in at Daniel’s urging and regretting not going to Daniel’s place instead. He’d found, though, that he liked using his own newly-furnished playroom, his own toys. He listened to the other man’s breath slow down into a soft, steady rhythm but he found sleep elusive. Instead he stared into the darkness as his thoughts continued to swirl, aching yet again for a respite from this own thoughts.

Okay, so Daniel was on his way out but still Tony remained hopeful and he marveled at that. It was an emotion that he hadn’t felt in a long time and he owed it all to Steven and Alan. Alan had been the first to realize that he’d had a bad experience, but even then he didn’t realize that he actually had a ‘problem’. Yeah, ‘problem’ was putting it mildly, Tony smirked. When the bruises had faded enough for him to start going out it never occurred to him that there’d be any issues. After all, he’d never in his life had any trouble with sex. He still recalled his shock when he’d frozen at a crucial moment, the sudden realization that he could barely let his date of the moment touch him let alone top him and he’d feared that Lyle had done more than just hurt him physically. But between them, Alan and Steven had helped him get through that, helped him re-build his confidence. He met a few guys and had gotten back on the horse, so to speak. Tony smiled. Yeah, he owed them both so much, especially since they’d also been the ones to open the doors to a world he’d been skirting for years.

Okay, so maybe his own natural curiosity had had a bit to do with it but the alcohol did, too, which was probably the only good thing to come from his drinking. He grimaced. Daniel hadn’t been the only one to hassle him about it, Momma Steven had made an appearance in that area as well and it was a subject that had been hit upon more than once with Alan, his friend and therapist. He knew it was something he’d have to work on. He just wasn’t ready for that, yet.

At any rate, he’d had several beers one night at Steven’s house and had been on his way to the bathroom when he’d opened the wrong door. Or was it the right door? Either way, both Steven and Alan had giggled madly at his expression when they realized their guest was frozen in the doorway to their playroom. His interest had been patently obvious. From that point on both Alan and Steven had taken it upon themselves to make sure Tony knew exactly what it was he would be getting involved with if he so chose. Slowly and with great care they’d given Tony a taste of how good things could be. And while they stated that they wouldn’t embark on a sexual relationship with him since they were exclusive with one another, they did everything they could to ensure Tony understood the lifestyle. All of this only served to whet Tony’s appetite.

He’d gone on his own from there but again, Momma Steven came to fore by keeping an eye on his potential partners and relaying what he knew of them. Daniel was a case in point. He was fun and the sex was great but he’d also been pushing for more just as Steven had warned him.

“I haven’t heard anything bad about Carrasco, Tony. He’s rich and handsome and full of enough
Latin machismo to make any boy swoon. I know for a fact that he’s disappointed his family to no end with his predilection for pretty men but he lives his own life regardless. I’ve also heard that he’s a Dom who tends to move fast when he sees someone he wants...maybe a bit too fast for some. I’m sure you’d hold his interest if you’re of a mind to test the waters but I don’t think he’s really strong enough for you…” Steven had said one evening as they sipped coffee after yet another wonderful dinner cooked by Alan, Steven’s partner. Tony’s coffee, as usual, had a healthy dose of whiskey added.

“A strong Dom, huh? Is that what you think I’m looking for?” Tony choked slightly surprised that Steven had seen that in him. He honestly thought he gave off a toppier vibe. It seemed that Steven knew him better than he’d realized and that thought surprisingly warmed Tony. In the past, that much knowledge would have scared him away.

“Sweetie, despite the big, bad macho Federal Agent persona you exude …”

“To perfection…!” called out Alan from the kitchen doorway as he dried his hands on a towel.

“...you can still see the needy sub hidden deep in your eyes.” Steven continued with a brief glance towards his lover.

Tony had nodded in agreement and noted with some surprise as Steven relaxed a tiny bit. He realized at that moment that Steven had been curious, maybe a little apprehensive, about relating just how well he could read Tony, something no one other than Gibbs had achieved. He gave Steven a warm smile.

“It’s okay, Tony, we’ve been there. Until you find the right guy it can be scary. But trust us, sweetie, we won’t let you go in the wrong direction. Besides, the best clubs require sponsorship. We can help you there and we promise that we will NOT let you get involved with anyone inappropriate…”

Tony had laughed at that but it hadn’t taken too long before Tony agreed and then later found that many of his personal restraints were slowly slipping away. With Steven and Alan’s support he began to tentatively explore the possibilities although it did take awhile because he was so deeply rooted in self-protection, a survival tactic learned through necessity in his relationship with his father and then later while dealing with teammates and brother law-enforcement officers. Through it all both men considered all of Tony’s potential partners, providing tidbits of background information without directly coming out and saying yea or nay. Tony often thought that he should be offended at this high-handed behavior, but instead he felt warmed by Steven’s desire to protect him from further hurt. He’d given tentative approval of Daniel Carrasco which pleased Tony but he recalled more of Steven’s words from that day.

“I think it’s going to take a special man to give you what you need,” Steven had decided. “Not just any Dom will do. I haven’t heard anything negative about Carrasco except that he moves fast. He’s strong and possessive, like all Doms are, but he doesn’t abuse his subs. I just don’t think he’s really strong enough for you... Still, he might be able to give you what you need. The question, though, is whether or not you’ll let him…”

But Tony hadn’t let him, not really. He never let Daniel tie him up so that he couldn’t get out if he wanted to and he never came to Daniel completely sober. Yes, he was strong and dominant but Tony knew he was the stronger of the two. Daniel had led a pretty cushy life and on several occasions he’d shown how spoiled he was. He had inherited his father’s store, high-end men’s fashions which was how Tony had met him, and he’d expanded the store into a chain with five branches so far. Quite frankly, the man was wealthy and he was used to getting what he wanted. The only problem was that Tony was used to men of a different caliber, men who’d fought for
what they wanted and what they believed in, men who lived their lives following a code of honor that sometimes made sense only to them. Tony sighed slightly as his thoughts went back to the man currently lying next to him. He figured that he’d be forever doomed to measuring all men against Gibbs and that they’d all be found wanting.

Tony’s fatigue finally caught up with him and he fell asleep still pondering that thought.
Chapter 22

Daniel woke up the next morning to find Tony strapping an ankle holster to his leg and then pulling down the leg of his sweat pants to cover it.

“Why are you awake so early, querido?” he asked sleepily. “And why are you carrying your gun?”

“I am going for a run and as a federal agent, Daniel, I am always armed,” Tony exaggerated with a smirk but refused to admit to his previous reptilian encounter. He looked at the hedonist lying in his bed. He’d awakened with the wish that he’d asked Daniel to leave the night before and resolved to end this. He wouldn’t just kick Daniel out of his bed like that, though. Daniel really had been good to him. Instead he’d break the news to him over dinner or something. So, since he wouldn’t take that step right now, he decided to go for a run and hoped that Daniel would be gone when he returned.

“Can we have breakfast when you return?” Daniel asked hopefully.

“I have quite a bit to do, Daniel. I’m not sure I’ll have time this morning. Maybe another time, alright?”

Tony saw Daniel frown and then pout slightly. He wondered when he’d stopped thinking it was cute.

“Very well, querido, it is just as well. I have a new shipment coming in tomorrow and I need to review the promotion plans,” Daniel finished with a dramatic sigh. He grabbed his clothes and began dressing.

Relieved Tony walked him to the door and tentatively promised to meet him for dinner later in the week as long as he didn’t have a case. It satisfied Daniel and Tony watched him leave. Once he was out of sight Tony did go for his usual run. His route now took him by the bay instead of by the marsh where he encountered the alligator. Both runs were interesting and scenic but he found he could relax a bit more when he wasn’t worried about getting his leg bitten off.

The weather was crisp as the sun rose on the new day. He infinitely preferred running in the early morning, enjoying the cool breeze coming in off the bay. In a little while the heavy humidity would build up and all the pretty little boys and girls would come out to try and cool off in the blue water. He shook his head as he ran. No one back in DC would ever believe that he didn’t live on the beach just to scope out the tanned young flesh so readily available everywhere you looked. And while he did enjoy the view (hell, yeah, he was guy, after all…) he just couldn’t get a good workout if he was constantly rubbernecking. Besides, he did his best thinking while he ran and he couldn’t do that with a multitude of distractions along the way.

He eyed the colors of the sunrise and looked at the scenery (and yes, watched out for large creepy crawlies) and contemplated the difference in the landscape between here and DC. It was now early fall but the heat and humidity were still high and although it would get cooler later in the year, it wouldn’t really get cold. He knew that he’d miss running through autumn leaves. On the plus side, at least he wouldn’t be shoveling snow either. Another plus was that whenever Abby could get time off work, they’d still be able to take in the beach. He couldn’t wait for her visit but he was sorry that things weren’t going well with the team. Abby had implied that maybe Tim was thinking of bailing, maybe looking to go back to cyber crimes. He hoped that wasn’t the case. He really needed to be in a Senior Field Agent position and eventually he needed to pull a tour as
Agent Afloat. Yeah, it was time to have a good talk with Probilicious, get his head on straight and make him realize he’d better not fuck up his career with a stupid move to cybercrimes. Yes, he’d set the boy straight.

His mind drifted to his own agents and his relief that both Lali and Stan had pulled their tours aboard ship. Fortunately Harry was still too green for that type of assignment and although both Lali and Stan were ready for promotion, he was just as glad that there wasn’t anything open just yet. He really liked his team. They all worked well together and he’d been reminded that his short tour as Gibbs’ replacement hadn’t been all that bad (as long as he didn’t think about the simultaneous undercover op and both Ziva and McGee’s resentment). There actually had been moments where he’d enjoyed aspects of being the Team Lead, but he had to say that he infinitely preferred the position here. There were, in fact, a lot of good things that have gone on since he’d moved here.

Tony’s feet pounded out a steady rhythm as he began to count the good things going for him since his move here. Good friends: Steven and Alan, primarily, for more reasons than he could probably count but his sanity being the main reason. Good team: They were top-notch and no one had mentioned word one about his personal revelation. He even saw the seemingly perpetual tension leave Stan’s shoulders although he was positive he’d yet to make a move in Lali’s direction. He had faith, though. Okay, back to the list. Good supervisor: He rarely saw his supervisor beyond the normal paperwork stuff unless there was a question. Also, the man wasn’t stingy with the compliments for a job well done. It made Tony feel good even if he still wasn’t used to it. Great house: He still couldn’t believe his new place and it was really starting to feel like home, especially with Steven’s decorating help which led his thoughts to the next thing on his list. Personal Life: His sex life was getting way better. He loved his playroom which overrode his usual reticence about bringing his dates back to his place. Of course, that may have had something to do with the fact that all of his dates had been men and, with men, once the sex was done they were usually more than happy to take off. And generally, Tony was good with that. He was still searching, after all.

Pound, pound, pound…

Give and take and plus and minus…the words rang through his head in time with his pounding feet. Yeah, all in all he was happy here although there were still a few minuses, the biggest being that he missed his other friends, Abby, McGeek, Ziva, Ducky, Jimmy and, of course, Gibbs. He remembered the night he’d told Steven and Alan of his friends in DC.

“We really didn’t talk until I told them I was leaving,” Tony told the couple. “I was too hurt with their snide comments but it turned out they’d been just as hurt by what they saw as my shutting them out.”

Discussing the situation with both Steven and Alan let Tony see both his and his friends’ actions in a different light. And looking back on several incidents Tony had realized they were right. He’d been depressed and his depression had allowed him to misinterpret his friends’ words and behavior causing a chasm to grow between them. Their discussion enabled him to come to a few realizations. For instance, he realized he wasn’t the only one to blame. He’d pushed his friends away and they’d let themselves be pushed, too involved in what was going on in their own lives to really see that something was off with him. But then he’d hidden it pretty well he allowed, unaware that his usual generous nature was again coming to fore. He had, however, refused to let anyone see his struggles with what he now realized had been some sort of a mid-life crisis. He could almost laugh at what he was sure were some text-book symptoms. He’d been so wrapped up in what he didn’t have in his life that he’d done some pretty stupid things. Granted, he didn’t go out and buy some ridiculously expensive sports car (already had that) and yeah, he’d dated some
girls that really were too young for him, but the worst thing was that he let his emotional state override his common sense. He’d let his dick control his weekends. He shuddered every time he thought back to those instances where he could have gotten off a lot worse than just being beaten up. He could have been killed or worse, ended up infected. Shit, by the standards he’d lived by all of his adult life he was still doing stupid things if you consider the amount of alcohol he indulged in. He was, apparently, his parents’ son after all.

But he was getting it all under control. He had a sudden flashback to the message he’d left on Gibbs’ machine. He’d apologized and in doing so had proven Gibbs right. Apologizing was a sign of weakness or, in his case, a sign of how broken he’d been. Gibbs’ll get over it, he figured, but at least he wasn’t broken (or as broken) anymore. He wasn’t lying to himself or to anyone around him. In a way, maybe he should be grateful that his whole world had been shaken up and that he’d come out of that with only bruises and scrapes. His hurts had healed. He was healing and eventually the biggest hurt, the one in his heart, would eventually heal, too. So looking at things in that light, he knew that his snap decision to leave DC had probably been the best one he’d made in a long time. On the heel of that thought he realized that the sun had risen well above the horizon.

He completed his last turn and ran the last leg home.

Tony grinned at the sight as he walked back to the beach with the two lemon ices he’d been dispatched to buy. Sitting out under a huge lacy black parasol was his Abby, liberally coated with high-SPF sunblock, watching Alan and Stephen play an energetic game of volleyball. She grinned cheekily as he handed her the treat and then settled down on the beach towel next to her. God, he’d missed her so much.

“Having a good time, Abs?”

“Yup…thoroughly enjoying all the eye-candy to be had. What about you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony answered as he watched a buff brunette spike the ball back over the net. Abby giggled which turned into a full-blown laugh as Steven took a header into the sand.

“Whoops…he made the return, though!” Tony laughed as the game continued.

Abby watched for a bit longer. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her long arms around her legs. She turned her head and rested her cheek on her knees and looked at the new Tony. He was tanned and his hair was not only longer but it was a bit lighter, too. She guessed he spent a bit of time in the sun but then, with herself as an exception, who wouldn’t when their job was in sunny Florida. She noticed that some of the lines had eased on her friend’s face and she wondered why she hadn’t really noticed them until they were gone and she felt another pang of regret for not being there for Tony when he needed her. They’d only had that one night together, really talking and sharing, when she’d fucked up so badly. Although Tony had forgiven her she still felt that she’d let him down in so many ways. She knew it was partly her fault that Tony had left regardless of what he said because it was only afterwards, after he’d left, that she had finally realized what a bad place he’d been in. Some friend she turned out to be. She shut her eyes for a moment as a wave of renewed guilt coursed through her.

She opened her eyes when Tony laughed again and saw that Tony actually looked happy and she felt a wave of resentment. She didn’t want him to be happy, not when she and Gibbs and Tim and even Ziva were so unhappy. She wanted him to be miserable so that she could talk him into coming home. It just made her feelings get even more muddled because she knew that Tony coming home wasn’t the answer either, not for him, and it sucked.
Despite it all, she really was his friend and she had to admit that she was kind of happy for him. He had the position he deserved and he had friends and although she knew he was still hurting, he seemed better than he’d been back in DC. He was finally exploring those interests she’d always known he had but that he’d refused to try…until now, obviously. That fact was brought home when he’d shown her his playroom which was just…wow. She could still feel his excitement as he showed her everything and he’d looked so satisfied, how could she not be happy for him? But he was changing so much!

She pouted as she continued her visual inspection and noted that Tony had also lost some weight although he was still very muscular. She’d been a little surprised to smell something cooking a short time after Tony brought her to his place that first night and although she knew that he knew how to cook, he’d rarely done it before. She always figured he just preferred take-out. The grilled fish had been pretty tasty. That, along with a salad and some fresh bread, had made a good dinner. Since then they’d eaten out, either with Tony’s neighbors, Steven and Alan, or down at one of the fantastic restaurants along the beach but she noted that Tony didn’t seem to eat so much junk food anymore. She knew that overall it was better for him health-wise and as he’d said, they weren’t getting any younger, she still felt it was another change to her Tony.

And that wasn’t all. It was at night, when they sat and talked, that she’d really noticed the half-empty bottle of scotch he was drinking from every evening. Then she found a brand new bottle in the pantry. That was not good and worried her because her old friend Tony rarely drank liquor. He used to stick to beer. But what really bothered her about this Tony was that he didn’t really smile all that much, well, not like the smiles she was used to seeing. This Tony was a lot more serious. She’d really missed his bright, white grin and, except for when he’d first seen her at the airport, it had been absent. Despite that, though, Tony seemed content, more at ease. It all just confused and scared her.

“I really like Steven, Tony, and Alan is way cool. They seem like really good friends,” she said.

Tony turned and looked at her with a small smile. “They’re good friends, Abby. The best.”

“Alan said he’s a therapist…?” Abby blatantly fished. She was trying to piece together what she could of Tony’s life here ever since her arrival.

“Yeah, he works at a clinic downtown. He’s also…ah…he’s my therapist, too.”

Abby gave him a small encouraging smile but her eyes were so filled with concern that Tony had to look away.

“He’s helping me work through some stuff. It’s really helping.”

“Is he working with you with the drinking?”

Tony choked out a small laugh. “Yeah, that’s on the agenda, too.” He gave Abby a sad little smile. She’d been desperately trying to convince him to return to DC, telling him stories about an angry Gibbs and a dysfunctional team. But the fact was that they were, in his opinion, more dysfunctional with him than without him. Leaving had been the best thing for him to do. He just needed to convince her of that.

“You know things weren’t so good for me back in DC, Abs. I was doing some…stupid…stuff. I’m more in control here. The job’s good and I’ve got a great team. So yeah, I’m not completely happy being away from you, but I am happier here, Abby. Please believe that…”

“But they’re not your family, Tonneee! Not like we are!” Abby wailed but turned away when she
realized that she’d drawn the attention of Steven. Alan, fortunately, was still engrossed in the

Tony pulled Abby into his arms. “No, Abby, maybe not like you guys are, yet…but they will be in
time. They’re good people, good friends. Abs, I can’t go back. Nothing’s going to change. You
know why.”

Yeah, she did, but in her heart she still felt that there was a fix to this and that Gibbs had to be a part
of it somehow. She just knew it. She looked at him, her green eyes awash in tears. “I’m not done
trying to talk you into coming home.”

Tony chuckled. “I’d be really surprised if you gave up so easily.” He stood up and held his hand
out to her. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up before the heat and humidity really hit and you, my little
magnolia blossom, begin to droop too badly. Besides, didn’t you want to see my forensics lab?”

Abby gave him a mutinous look but held out her hand readily enough. They picked up their things
and both Steven and Alan trotted over.

“All done for the day?” Alan asked as he grabbed a towel to wipe the sweat from his face and
neck.

“Yup, I promised Abby a tour of the office and the forensics lab before she leaves.”

“Still coming for dinner tonight?” Steven asked as he took Abby’s hand in his. He was very taken
with her and had no problem letting her know, much to Alan’s chagrin.

Abby gave a low chuckle that was absolutely sinful. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Tony and Abby took their leave and as they got into Tony’s car he leaned over to her and
whispered, “You know, if you weren’t a woman I think Alan would really be worried.”

Again Abby laughed. “If I weren’t a woman, he’d have reason!”

Later that afternoon Tony sat back while Abby got the grand tour. She’d been bouncing happily
from machine to machine comparing notes and discussing various testing methods with his, to his
mind, very dour and straight-laced forensic scientist, Charles Keitel. And just by being Abby, he
could tell that she’d made yet another conquest out of Charles (not Charley and never Chuck). He
turned when he heard someone enter the lab. It was Stan.

“Ms. Abby Sciuto, your fame precedes you,” Stan said with a smile as he took Abby’s hand.

“Really…” Abby responded with a saucy smile immediately liking the tall handsome man with the
shaved head.

“Oh, yes, Tony spoke highly of you,” Stan said as he flirted outrageously while leaving Charles
fuming in the background.

Tony thought it was hilarious. He debated bringing up her steady relationship with Todd but
decided she could do that if she wanted to. Instead he invited them all to lunch and they had a
blast.

Eventually it was time for Abby to leave. Tony watched her from the doorway as she packed her
things. He was concerned because she was so very quiet.

“Hey, Abs. I know there’s more going on in that whirlwind brain of yours than just packing.
What’s going on?”

“I know you say that coming here was good for you, Tony, and I can tell that things are going really well. You’ve got great friends and a great team…it’s just that you’ve changed since you’ve been here,” Abby said as she looked up at her friend. Her lower lip slipped in-between her teeth and she frowned for a bit. “You don’t smile like you used to and the only clowning around you’ve done is when we’re alone. Stan says that you’ve never made movie reference at all…”

Tony sighed. He’d been expecting this. He stepped away from the door and put his hands on her arms and then pulled her in for a hug. “Abby,” he said quietly into her hair. “Yeah, I guess I have changed but it was time, you know? I’m not the playboy or frat boy or comic relief anymore. I don’t have to be any of those things anymore.”

“But you don’t seem to play at all! No practical jokes, you hardly even smile! Not like you used to! I don’t believe you’re happy here, Tony,” she concluded stubbornly with a slight stamp of her foot.

Tony laughed but there was no real humor in it. He’d been in a pretty bad place when he first got here but it was getting better and he told her that. He ended up promising to smile more but he drew the line at pulling pranks.

“I’m the supervisor, Abs. I can’t go around rigging their keyboards. I have to leave that up to Stan although I do have to admit he’s not quite in my league…”

That made Abby giggle for a bit but then she looked up into Tony’s eyes. “You’re really not coming back, are you?”

“No, Abby, I’m not. This is my place now.”

And as much as she hated it she knew she had no choice but to accept it. It was a somber and very thoughtful Abby that flew back to DC.
Chapter 23

Frustrated, Tim yanked yet another nearly blank page out of his typewriter and, contrary to his normal habit of shredding his papers, this time he balled it up and tossed it across the room completely missing his trash can.

*Tony would have made that shot, he griped. But you’re not Tony and you never will be…* Tim leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Vance had offered him his old position in Cyber Crimes and he was almost frustrated enough to take it, especially after today. He had to admit, though, that Gibbs had been right to chew him out for not following Rule #15…always work as a team. He should have followed his gut and taken that alley instead of running by it. He knew that Ziva would take off to the right and with Gibbs on the left they would have forced their suspect to double back. If he had cut through that alley he would have been in place to box him in. Instead, their suspect got away and they’d spent the next four hours searching for him again. Gibbs hadn’t said anything and Tim had wondered if he’d even realized Tim’s error but he couldn’t be sure of that. Anyway, he always felt it was better to step up to the plate and admit your mistake. The almost-concussion inducing head slap had been well-deserved and Tim knew he’d never forget about working as a team again. Tony always said that Gibbs only head slapped if he cared. Tim just didn’t think Gibbs cared about him. And with things so crazy he hadn’t had a chance to talk to Gibbs. He wondered who Vance had on the sidelines to take his place. He’d never have offered Cyber Crimes if he didn’t have someone in mind. It rankled, though, to think that he’d be playing into Vance’s plans…whatever they were. His thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone.

“McGee.”

“Don’t do it…”

“What? Who is this?”

“It would be the worst Probie mistake ever…”

“Tony? Is that you?”

“Yup, it’s me and I understand you’re considering making a major game error here, McFumble.”

Tim blew out a breath. “Didn’t you have anything else to talk about while she visited?”

“Of course, but she’s my little whisperer of dark secrets and she’d never keep me in the dark on such major happenings. So tell me, McCyberCrimeMonster, just why you’re considering making such a boneheaded mistake. You’re the Senior Field Agent on a legendary team…”

“Legendary. Right,” Tim said as he ran his hand over his face. He’d never realized how much he would miss Tony, not only as a friend but now that he was the SFA he finally realized just how good Tony had been at the position before him. He was still floundering with some of the reports he was required to fill out despite Tony’s ‘brain book’ and he wondered just how in the *hell* Tony had made it all seem so effortless. Most of the time he found himself feeling completely out of his depth on one hand and seriously contemplating murdering Gibbs on the other...assuming Ziva didn’t beat him to it. But he had to keep trying...both he and Ziva were aware that their closure rate had dropped. He sighed, depression weighing him down and he found himself being uncharacteristically open with Tony.
“It might have been legendary while you were here, Tony, but I feel like we’re barely hanging on as a team. I’ve gotta be honest with you, neither Ziva nor I can handle Gibbs the way you could. Besides, you know how good I am with the technical side of stuff, maybe that’s where I should have been all along…”

“Oh, I can’t BELIEVE this! McHighandMighty is admitting he can’t cut it? Maybe you SHOULD slink off into the nether world, never to see the light of day while REAL field agents solve all the cases. Then, when you’re tagged for an Agent Afloat position, you’ll be puking your guts out not because of seasickness but because you’ll have to talk to REAL people, solve REAL cases that involve actually moving away from your monitor…”

“Tony…”

“Listen, McGee,” Tony’s voice lowered as he became serious. “Running downstairs isn’t the answer. You need to find a way to make it work and not just for the team…you need it for you! Have I taught you NOTHING? You are the glue that holds the team together now, my little prodigy. Keep Ziva and Gibbs from killing each other. Be a rock for Abby. Keep Gibbs from curling up into complete antisocial monster…”

“I can’t just absorb all of Gibbs’ shit the way you did!”

“And find some other way. Hell, yell back at him!”

And Tim almost had at one point. They’d been out in the field and Gibbs, lost in whatever foul headspace he seemed to constantly occupy these days, had turned on Ziva for whatever reason known only to him with his hand raised for a head slap. Only Ziva wasn’t putting up with that because she sidestepped it which earned her a look from Gibbs that Tim wasn’t sure he’d of been able to survive. The two had squared-off and Tim was positive they were going to go for blood but they’d been on a crime scene, for chrissakes! There were other officers there and he felt he had to do something. He still didn’t know what possessed him but he got between them. Tim still remembered Gibbs’ glare turned on him when he said,

“If you two are going to kill each other, could you at least do it a little less publicly?”

Tim had thanked God at that point because it worked. Gibbs had turned to Ziva and told her to get back to work and then he’d spun on his heel and stomped off leaving Tim almost shaking in his shoes. It had helped when Ziva had looked at him and said “Well done, McGee.”

Since then Gibbs had eased up on the head slaps but his attitude sure hadn’t changed.

“Tony, I just don’t know how I can respect someone who is so narrow-minded that he’d hold your sexuality against you.”

That statement was met with silence.

“I didn’t exactly tell him I was gay, Tim.”

“If you didn’t tell him then why did he kick you off the team?”

“He didn’t. I quit.”

“Tony, I don’t understand. Why would you just quit? He had to have said something…”

“Look, Probster, this call was about you, not me…”
“Yeah, well it seems to me we’re almost in the same boat here so you’re going to have to give me a good reason why I should try and work this out with Gibbs.” Tim heard a deep sigh.

“My problem was completely personal, Tim. I never told Gibbs exactly why I felt I had to go…”

Tim sat up with his mouth open in shock. He didn’t tell Gibbs he was gay? But what reason did he give Gibbs for leaving? And what did he tell him about his injuries because if Tim never really believed it was a mugging right after that bar fight, no way would Gibbs have… Was it gay bashing? Was he afraid Gibbs would find out and hold it against him?

“But didn’t he ask how you got hurt?”

“Look, McGee, can we just drop this? It’s all water under the bridge…”

So Gibbs did push and Tony must have lied rather than admit to being gay but after all these years you’d think these guys would have known each other well enough to get past all this… A light suddenly went on and Tim sat up straight.

“Oh My GOD! You’re in love with him!”

“What? Nah…come on, Probie…!”

Tim heard the spluttering and knew he was completely right because it made so much sense and oh, man, this was so fucked up. Gibbs was completely straight.

“I’m so sorry, Tony.” His quiet comment was met with silence.

“Yeah, well, I’m surprised, actually. I kind of figured that our talkative little sister might have let that little fact slip…”

Tim now understood Abby’s recent paranoia about discussing anything personal about Tony and he remembered one time when Tony and Abby seemed to have had a falling out. Yeah…it was also about the same time that he’d sensed some coolness between her and Todd although things seemed to have settled down between them. The only thing he didn’t understand was that if Abby had known about Tony’s feelings for Gibbs, did she think Gibbs had rejected Tony? Because if Tony never told Gibbs he was gay, let alone how he felt, Gibbs wouldn’t have had a chance to reject him… Did she realize that? Tim realized that he was going to have to have a talk with Abby.

“No, Tony, she never did. And I’m guessing you never told her what you just told me, right?”

“Let me guess, she’s still pissed at Gibbs…damn it, I told her this wasn’t on him…”

“Well, she’s been pretty unhappy since she came back from her visit with you. She told me you said you weren’t coming back and I think she’s still blaming Gibbs for that, at least partly…”

All Tim heard was a frustrated sigh. “Tony, would it be alright if I did talk to her about what you said? I think she’s mad at him about you and I don’t think she would be if she knew you didn’t tell Gibbs you were gay.”

“Yeah, talk to her, Probie. I’ll call her, too. You have to fix what’s going on back there. I’m just sorry I caused this by...well, not being open about everything. But I have to be honest, Tim. Things are going good for me here even though I miss all of you a lot.”

“That’s good, Tony. I’m really glad to hear that things are good for you. And don’t worry. I’ll work this out with Gibbs.”
The two men chatted for a bit more and by the time they hung up Tim had resolved to fix things somehow. He’d talk to Abby because she had to let this go. Tony had the right to tell whomever he wanted about his personal choices and she had to respect that. He could do this, fix the team, because he was, after all, Gibbs’ Senior Field Agent and no way was he not going to be at least as good at it (if not better) than Tony had been…even if it killed him.

Gibbs took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He’d sent his team home hours before but he remained to review, yet again, the meager amount of information they’d gathered on this latest case, a young female marine found raped and strangled in a filthy alley. He knew the key was the unknown woman who’d been with her at the bar but they couldn’t find any clue as to who she was beyond a vague description.

God, he was tired, bone-tired. He was burning the candle at both ends and now the Andrews case hadn’t even been finalized when this new case had come up and he was pissed. This new case was going nowhere fast and he thought it might already be going cold. But that wasn’t the only reason he was angry. He was furious with himself because for the first time in his career as an NCIS agent, he’d lost sight of what his job was all about. His drive to find their perpetrator wasn’t on behalf of their victim, for the young life lost to senseless violence. No, it was for personal reasons. Namely, he wanted the case solved because it was keeping him from finding that woman.

He dropped his head back and closed his eyes. In the long run he knew the end result wouldn’t change. He wouldn’t take shortcuts or take the easy answer. No, he wouldn’t give up until every single lead was exhausted and he was positive the case was cold. The difference here was that he’d never before let anything get in the way of finding justice for the victim, certainly not anything personal, and now here he was, almost too exhausted to do his primary job because he’d gone out, yet again despite his better judgment, in search of this phantom. The fact that his priorities were so torn was what had him seriously considering the retirement package that still sat on his desk, nearly forgotten except for now…tonight. He’d always told himself that if he ever reached the point where the case didn’t come first it was time to turn in his badge. And yet this realization wasn’t what had him so currently filled with self-loathing. It was that in his traitorous heart he’d come to correlate this mystery woman with that bastard Hernandez.

Back then he’d lost the only people who’d held meaning in his life and he took out his revenge on the man who’d taken them away from him. He’d dropped everything to track Pedro Hernandez to Mexico for killing his wife and child. And now, while he hadn’t left his job to search for the bitch, he felt close to that. But he couldn’t justify it…it didn’t compare. How could it? His wife and child had been his life, a living, breathing part of him and that part had been ripped away. Tony had been his friend, nothing more, nothing less, but certainly not in the same league as a murdered family. On top of that, how could he feel so empty through the loss of something that never was? And yet he did. It ate at him and it took almost everything in him to keep his search limited to his personal time. He was obsessed with it.

But how could he explain this obsession? He grimaced in self-disgust and shame…there was no legitimate reason for it. He knew that, especially since he knew about obsession being no stranger to it first with Hernandez and then Ari. Yeah, he could dance around the fact that Ari was really a terrorist to justify his obsessed need to kill him but the fact remained that he wanted him dead for killing Kate, as dead as Hernandez was. And now he wanted this bitch to pay for the pain he felt. So, that line of reasoning sort of begged the question…what was he going to do should he find the bitch? Was he going to kill her? For what…the abysmally poor decision to hurt Tony? For making Tony leave? Damnit, hurting her wouldn’t resolve anything. He’d still be just as angry and just as lost. Killing Hernandez had already proven that fact to him. And none of this would bring Tony
Again he eyed the retirement package despite knowing that he was too fucked up to make such a radical decision right now. Christ, he really needed to get his head on straight. He smirked to the empty room, wondering what Ducky would say to that last thought and then felt a frisson of apprehension. Ducky was, literally, the only man who now knew of that very private part of him. He needed to think about that because he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it although Ducky’s easy acceptance went a long way towards easing his mind. He wondered if he’d ever tell anyone else. Yeah, things were changing but the thought still made his gut twist. There’d have to be a damn good reason for him to ‘come out of the closet’. God! He roughly ran the fingers of both hands back and forth across his scalp and down over his face. He really was too fucking tired for this.

He decided to call it quits knowing he needed sleep and also knowing that sometimes his subconscious would continue working on the case and would, hopefully, give him some clue as to whatever it was they were missing. And maybe he could find his own answers, too.
Chapter 24

“No hard restraints, no blindfolds, no breath play. Safe words yellow for slow and red for stop,” the brown-haired man reminded the blonde as they walked into the backroom of the club. He looked around at the furnishings with a frisson of excitement and nervousness. He’d been with the blonde several times before but not in here, his favorite room apart from his own playroom. Since he’d broken up with Daniel he’d opted for one-nighters with other club members but lately he’d only been with this man with military-short hair and the obvious military bearing. Tony almost shook his head at his inability to break form. Still, he enjoyed being with the blonde, their scenes together were some of the most satisfying to date and he knew the blonde wanted more from him. It remained to be seen how far Tony could go tonight but Tony remained hopeful as he again eyed the room around him.

This room had the heavy-duty St. Andrews cross in the corner as opposed to bolts mounted on the wall like in the other rooms. He felt the excitement gather in his belly but then forced his eyes to move on. He eyed the spanking horse. How far could he go tonight? He felt his stomach flutter slightly but forced it down and took a deep breath. By the time he turned around he was able to grace his companion with a sultry smile and a nonchalance that belied his true emotional state. He leaned back against the padded table and waited.

The dark blonde man agreed to the same stipulations as in their previous encounters as he closed the door behind him. He heard the click of the lock. It was a formality, really. Management could get in within seconds if they thought things were getting out of hand. They wouldn’t need to, though. The blonde had decided that first night that he wanted to get to know this sexy man better; he wanted to earn his trust and knew that would take time. This man with the beautiful green eyes had proven to still be shy despite their previous encounters and despite the skin-on-skin dancing on the dance floor that was just shy of penetration. Even after several drinks the brunette remained reticent about whom he really was. He intrigued the blonde, this man who was willing to share his body in this impersonal space but who wouldn’t leave the club with him and who refused to reveal anything personal at all, not even his name. But what really spiked his interest was the fact that he hadn’t been able to drop the brunette very far at all so far. He could tell Green Eyes wanted it and yet he fought it at the same time. Perhaps tonight would be different. If nothing else, he intended to learn Green Eyes’ name.

“Strip,” the blonde said in a low voice and watched with a satisfied smile as the tall muscular brunette obeyed easily. He watched the sensuous movements that revealed deeply tanned skin with a light smattering of hair across the broad chest. Green Eyes was a bit older than he had originally thought upon their first meeting but was still undoubtedly gorgeous. The blonde pulled his eyes away long enough to glance at the selection of toys on the table. They were all new, wrapped in clear plastic that allowed the user to choose. He stroked a light brown cat. He’d start with that and then move on. He briefly eyed the blindfolds. He knew he could get Green Eyes to drop further if he’d wear one but it was one of the stipulations. The blonde was experienced enough to know that at some point someone had taken advantage of this beautiful man, someone had hurt him while he’d been restrained and blindfolded and now Green Eyes didn’t trust. The blonde couldn’t blame him for that but he hoped to be able to earn that trust eventually. He stepped over to Green Eyes and took his face in his hands and kissed him hard, pushing his tongue deeply into that sweet mouth and so it began.

Together they moved through the familiar steps to this dance. Amidst deep throated kisses and hot pulsing grasps Green Eyes found himself holding on to the corners of St. Andrews cross, the soft leather binding more for show than actual restraint. He pushed his face into his bicep which
brought his nose enticingly close to the frame and breathed deeply of the wooden scent. Head already swimming at the prospect of what was going to happen, the smell of the wood dropped Green Eyes further into his submission.

Sometime later Green Eyes gasped as another stripe was laid across his back. He could feel the endorphins swimming through his system but yet again he found himself stilled, unable to sink any further into the oblivion he sought and tears that had nothing to do with the pain/pleasure that was burned brightly across his back streaked down his face. He was close, he could almost feel it. Why couldn’t he open himself up?

“Drop deeper for me, beautiful...come on, give yourself to me. You know you want it. Why are you holding yourself back?”

Green Eyes shook his head silently, his sorrow evident. “I’m sorry, Sir,” he whispered. “I want to, believe me, please…”

“Shh, it’s alright,” the blonde assured him as he ran his hand through the sopping wet brown hair. He’d tried several toys this night, more than he had before. With each Green Eyes had been so responsive, so beautiful as he screamed and cried and still the blonde could see that it wouldn’t happen this night, that his beauty couldn’t give anymore of himself. He felt a wave of fury against that unknown bastard who’d hurt this sweet, sweet man, who’d betrayed and damaged him so.

“Let me take care of you now, beautiful,” the blonde said as he continued to stroke the soft sweaty skin. He heard a soft hiss as he lightly touched the reddened globes of that gorgeous ass. He dropped his fingers to stroke down the cleft. The hiss turned into a moan and he chuckled. He slicked his finger with some lube and slid it lightly across the puckered opening. Green Eyes pushed back against him eagerly.

“That’s right, my darling. I’m going to fuck this beautiful hole of yours, make you feel so good.”

With firm movements the blonde loosened that tiny hole to the accompaniment of panting moans that were driving him crazy. He pulled out and heard the sorrowful whimper.

“Just a moment...be patient...” he whispered as he rolled the condom over his leaking cock. Within moments he began to push his way into Green Eyes, groaning as the tight heat closed in around him. He set up a steady rhythm but it wasn’t enough and he quickened his pace until he was pounding stroke after hard stroke into the willing flesh before him. Green Eyes gasped and writhed against the wooden frame as the blonde beat mercilessly at his prostate.

“Hold it, sweet boy, hold it until I say you can...” he crooned as a reminder. He thrust himself inside the sweet, hot hole and felt his own climax building. All too soon the blonde felt the electric gathering deep in his belly. He groaned loudly as he shot his load into the man before him. He felt the muscles surrounding him flex and squeeze, milking more of his orgasm out of him. His dick twitched happily as he softened. He wasn’t done, yet. They played a bit more as Green Eyes moaned and twisted against the cross. He’d planned on moving him to the spanking horse but the brunette had whimpered at the thought of leaving the cross. The blonde man acquiesced to his beauty’s desires since he’d been such a good boy.

They began round two and again the blonde buried himself deeply inside the shuddering flesh. His beauty was so close and he was so pleased at how well he obeyed. It was time to reward him. He stroked and bit the richly tanned skin, tasting the salty sweat that streamed from Green Eyes’ nape and finally, finally wrapped his hand around the hard, leaking cock of his partner.

“Oh, Sir...I can’t...please...please...!”
“Yes, sweet boy, it’s alright…” and before he could finish his words his beauty began his own climax, howling out his pleasure as he painted the wooden cross with his seed. The blonde heard the name that Green Eyes screamed each time he came but he didn’t stop to wonder, too lost as his second orgasm swept him away in pulses of white light.

Breathing heavily, the blonde pulled slowly out of the brunette.

“Tell me your name,” he panted into one ear just before he nipped it with his teeth.

Green Eyes sucked in a breath as he attempted to answer. His name hovered on his lips but he debated with himself, the long list of names he’d used in the past running through his head as he considered maintaining his anonymity. However, this blonde Dom was intriguing and skilled; there was also something about him, something beyond the obvious military bearing. It made Tony want to trust him so maybe…maybe… he’d be the one. But it was too soon to tell, he reminded himself and yet, a first name wasn’t a full name.

“Tony,” he whispered.

The blonde nodded. “Derek,” he responded.

“Yes, Sir,” Tony agreed and earned a hand stroke through his hair.

“Good boy, Tony,” Derek said. He eyed the beautiful pattern on the golden skin and he knew he’d make arrangements to fuck Tony again. And soon he’d learn Tony’s full name and eventually, he’d learn who Gibbs was so that he could work on erasing the name from Tony’s thoughts.

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Unfortunately for Gibbs, sleeping on it didn’t help. It also looked like it hadn’t helped his team either. Still, he had to push them for more. They were missing something, damnit.

“Going for coffee. Find me something before I get back…” he barked out in warning as he left.

He waited for a heartbeat and then heard it…the deep groans as both Ziva and McGee began yet another review of the information they had. He would have smiled if the situation had warranted it. Instead he set off at a fast pace, his mind covering what they had and then let it sit in the back of his mind as he walked.

He’d awakened that morning not with thoughts of their case but with renewed determination to find this mysterious woman. But despite knowing how personally satisfying it would be to hurt her as much as Tony had been hurt, that wasn’t his intention. No, he wanted to know just what it was about her that had so enthralled Tony.

“…wasting your time on this completely futile search of yours…” Ducky had said.

Why futile? Was it because the situation was over and Tony was gone or did he mean that the woman was gone? Gibbs blew out a breath on that thought as he walked back with three cups of coffee. If this search was over, what did he have left? He pushed that thought away and instead wondered how Ducky would have known if she was gone unless he knew her. That would imply that she was, or had been, in the area and Gibbs was sure that if she were he’d of found her. That thought tickled something in his brain and he filed it away for the moment as another thought struck him. Maybe there was no woman. That thought stunned him so much he stopped walking. He remained frozen for only a moment and then began a fast stride back to the office unaware that his face had settled into a fierce glare of intent. He vaguely registered the guards leaping to get out of his way as he stalked passed them, his mind racing and his heart pounding. He needed to close
Gibbs received a call from Cynthia just as he returned from a coffee run. Vance wanted to see him. He set the coffee down on his desk in frustration. He needed to be working, damnit, not running up to brief their lack of progress.

“McGee,” Gibbs barked as he stalked into the bullpen and noted with approval as McGee jumped up from his desk in response. “You said that three members of Johannson’s platoon were on leave. I wanna know where they went and exactly when they left. Gonna see Vance, call me if you find anything. If you do, you can have the coffee I brought you.”

Gibbs spun on his heel and headed upstairs only vaguely hearing the ‘yes, Gibbs’ behind him although it served to relieve one portion of his mind a little bit. Despite this hold up with the case, things surprisingly seemed to be settling down with his team and that, at least, was easing some of the pressure. He was also getting a different read off of McGee, as though something had been settled with him although he still wasn’t sure if McGee wouldn’t jump ship at the first opportunity. Still, he was trying to work it although he was avoiding actually having any talks with his people. Instead he tried to ease up on the head slaps and demands as much as he could and still get the job done and that would either work or it wouldn’t. He really didn’t have time for anything else, especially now with this new direction his thoughts had taken.

“He’s waiting for you,” Cynthia told him in response to his raised eyebrows so Gibbs walked straight in. He saw Vance leaning against his desk speaking with a Navy Commander who was seated at the conference table. At a glance Gibbs noted the medical insignia on the officer’s uniform which was unusual. They generally only dealt with Navy doctors when at Bethesda, not in Vance’s office.

“Special Agent Gibbs,” Vance said standing straight as the Commander also stood to meet Gibbs. “This is Commander Hollister. Dr. Hollister is in charge of Bethesda’s Primary Care clinic. He has an interesting theory he’d like us to look into.”

Gibbs shook the Commander’s hand and the three men seated themselves at the table. Vance passed Gibbs a folder and they gave him a moment to scan the material inside. After a moment Gibbs looked up.

“There are no names on these cases. Did any of these men press charges?”

“No,” Hollister replied. “It wasn’t until I was reviewing the quarterly case files that I saw the similarity between these cases. Each man was treated by a different doctor. Per the medical histories, they all claim that it was consensual interludes with women that had gotten out of hand. I’ve personally contacted each individual in the form of a follow-up to see if I could obtain any further information but none of the men are giving out any more details. However, seeing the cases side by side it’s obvious that these men have gotten involved either with the same individual or group of individuals and they’re simply not speaking. I was hoping your agency could help find out if there really is a connection here.”

Vance looked at Gibbs knowing what was going through the agent’s mind. All of the men were treated and returned to limited duty. All had refused to admit any wrongdoing done against them so legally they had no real case. However, it was pretty clear that one or more assaults did take place and, for whatever reason, these men were refusing to pursue the issue. Vance figured they would probably continue to refuse to press charges even if Gibbs’ team did come up with a suspect. That in itself sent some alarms ringing through Vance’s head and he was sure Gibbs felt the same way. He looked at Gibbs and saw confirmation of those thoughts in the light blue eyes. Gibbs nodded at him. Just then Gibb’s cell rang.
“Good job, McGee. Get your coffee and go bring her in.” Gibbs hung up and gave Vance another nod which Vance correctly understood as the team getting a break in their case.

“Out of curiosity, Dr. Hollister,” Vance began using the Commander’s medical title, “would you mind telling me why you came to NCIS rather than report this through law enforcement channels? Several of these men were assigned to ships.”

Dr. Hollister looked down momentarily as he blew out a breath. The last thing he wanted out of this was to jeopardize anyone’s career when all these men did was seek medical care for their injuries. As far as he was concerned, neither he nor his staff had asked and these men didn’t tell.

“Quite frankly, you are a civilian agency, Director Vance. I was concerned about voicing my suspicions through regular military channels. I thought it best to come straight to you.”

Vance nodded once. “We’ll be contacting you, Dr. Hollister.”

"Thank you, Director Vance and Special Agent Gibbs, for agreeing to look into this and although I’m sure you’re fully aware of this, it would be remiss of me not to ask that you tread lightly since these men are undoubtedly victims of sexual assault and that they still have a right to doctor/patient confidentiality. I just couldn’t ignore my suspicion that someone is targeting our men.”

Both Gibbs and Vance nodded, no offence taken at the Commander’s words.

“We understand, Commander,” Gibbs added as they all stood together and Vance nodded. “However we will need names in order to investigate but I can assure you that these men will be treated with all of the consideration and discretion for which this situation calls,” Vance assured the Commander noting the relief in the man’s eyes. It was obvious he cared about the men he treated.

“I’ll get that information to you,” Hollister added and then departed.

Vance looked at Gibbs. He was aware of the tension on Gibbs’ team ever since DiNozzo’s departure and he was keeping a distant eye on it especially since their solve rate had dipped. He knew Gibbs was aware of his scrutiny and that he resented it but it wasn’t going to change until Vance was sure everything was settled.

“What do you think?”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed slightly. He knew that Vance was asking if his team was up for this case which had to be handled very carefully.

“Can’t haul them into interrogation. We’ll have to get close to at least one of them undercover.”

Vance nodded already knowing what Gibbs planned.

“McGee up for this?” Vance had never felt the need to really ask that in the past but then DiNozzo had been the go-to guy for undercover work. McGee had proven himself to be an able Senior Field Agent but he still had limited experience going undercover.

“McGee will do fine,” Gibbs said shortly trusting in his Second.

Vance nodded trusting in Gibbs’ word.

“Alright. Keep me informed,” he said and Gibbs nodded and left.
Burt ran a hand through his thinning hair and grimaced at the sweat that coated his palm. His partner was still in the Captain’s office getting his ass chewed. *Shit! What the fuck had gotten into Jimmy?* He swore to himself yet again as he thought about that piece of shit they’d brought in earlier. Man, the guy was a nothing. What had possessed Jimmy to go off on him like that? It had taken two of them, him and the Watch Officer, to pull Jimmy off that little scumbag but by then he was on the ground bleeding.

He looked back towards the Captain’s office and fleetingly imagined them hauling Jimmy out in cuffs. And then what? Would Jimmy start spilling his guts about everything else? No, no…don’t think like that, idiot! There was no way they’d be able to tie that stiff to them. He’d made sure of it, no clothes, ID, tags, no nothing that could immediately identify that Navy kid until they ran his teeth and he was sure there was nothing on the body –he’d washed it – to link it to them. No, the biggest problem was Jimmy himself. Ever since he’d come back from his old man’s funeral he’d been walking the razor’s edge wanting to go out every weekend instead of the one or two nights a month they’d agreed on let alone take two boys in one night. And they never hit the same clubs twice in a row except for last weekend and then, oh Jesus, what a mistake…

“That’s enough, Jimmy…enough!” Burt spit out as he pulled Jimmy away from the young kid they’d just been fucking. Fucking…hell…he’d been fucking. Jimmy had been beating. He moved back to the kid after hauling Jimmy away. He felt for a pulse but found nothing. Burt turned wide eyes to his partner who was standing off to the side stroking his cock with his eyes closed. He was completely unaware of the blood that coated his hands as he stroked his cock and played with his balls.

“Jimmy!” Burt hissed and then ran back to Jim and grabbed him by the shoulders. “He’s dead! Jimmy, listen to me…! Open your eyes, damnit!”

Finally Jimmy did and Burt couldn’t believe the question in his eyes.

“But…wha…?” Jimmy had slurred and then raised a blood-stained hand to Burt’s face, touching his partner with gentle fingers while continuing to fondle himself with the other hand but Burt wouldn’t have any of that. He grabbed Jimmy’s wrist with one hand and Jimmy’s chin with the other.

“Jimmy, listen to me…the kid’s dead. Do you understand? He’s dead!”

Jimmy eyes widened as he looked into his partner’s face and the words suddenly made sense. His shocked eyes took in the bloody body lying on the bed.

“Aw, Jesus…fuck! We gotta clean this up…dump the body…”

And Burt had nodded. Then, working as the partners they’d been for over ten years, they cleaned up every bit of evidence and washed the body down. They finally split up near dawn on Sunday morning determined to lay low.

Lay low, right, except for the fuck-up they were dealing with now and it wasn’t even 11 am on Monday because Jimmy had lost it down in booking when that little shit had said something and then lunged at Jimmy which had set Jimmy off. Burt had already given his statement and had even thrown in some shit about Jimmy having a lot of problems ever since his father had died. And it had been the truth. Burt had just left out the part about Jimmy’s problems manifesting themselves
as some extra beating on the boys they’d picked up for sex.

After that Burt had waited outside while the Captain chewed on Jimmy. He’d looked through the books and noted that there’d been no mention of any DOA’s being found in the Glen Burnie area. Hopefully there’d be no reports for awhile letting the alley rats do their thing for a bit longer.

Burt took another swig of his cold coffee and jumped a little when the Captain’s office door swung open. Burt walked out and then closed the door behind him. Without a word he walked by Burt’s desk. Burt watched him go and he turned when the Captain called his name. He felt his stomach curdle into a tight little ball as he made his way into the office. That ball un-coiled a bit when the Captain told him that Jimmy was going to see the station shrink and that he’d probably be placed on leave for awhile.

Burt nodded as though it was all a good thing and he made some noises about grieving and stress which the Captain echoed. Only then did Burt find out that the piece of shit downstairs was fine, some minor abrasions and a couple of stitches. The Watch Officer had corroborated the story by saying the suspect had attacked Detective Mulroney. Eventually Burt was let go and he took off in search of Jimmy. He found him in the break room sucking on some coffee. He walked up to him and lifted his eyebrows in question.

“Gotta see the shrink at two then go home. Captain’s gonna recommend a medical leave of absence since I didn’t take any personal time when the old man kicked. He figures its stress…got that? Stress.”

Jimmy laughed and Burt joined him.

“You going to do anything while you’re off?” Burt asked wondering if Jimmy would go see his mother again. He hoped not. Dealing with his mother after the funeral had been a big part of the problem. She wanted him to move back home, be closer to the family. She’d put a lot of pressure on Jimmy but that’s the last thing he wanted. Burt, too. There was no way Jimmy could indulge their little pastime back in the fishbowl world of his old neighborhood.

“Naw, thought I’d actually take a little break…get away for awhile. I’m thinking Florida. I know a guy who retired out there, place called Mexico Beach…”

“Never heard of it.”

“South of Panama City Beach. Nice place, good partying in Panama City.”

“Yeah? What kind of partying?”

“Anything you want, especially around spring break. And they got an Air Force Base and lots of Navy stations out that way…”

“Hmmm…never had Air Force. Think your friend would mind if I take a little vacation time, too?”

“Partner, you read my mind…” Jimmy said with a wink and then downed the rest of his coffee.

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Despite the quick review while in Vance’s office, Gibbs understood just how those men had received their injuries. He passed the files to Ducky for his input as he considered how to handle the case. Since they couldn’t arbitrarily pull the men in for questioning their only option was to try and get close to at least one of them to learn as much as they could about the assaults. Gibbs contemplated his options. If Tony had still been on his team there wouldn’t have been any
question about who to send in. Over the years Tony had worked a variety of undercover assignments, more than one putting him in the role of a gay man. He’d always pulled the assignment off with just a shrug and a gleam in his eye. Gibbs figured he could practically count the number of blushes McGee displayed while Tony worked those jobs, especially when he hammed it up for McGee’s benefit. He remembered one incident in particular when Tony had rubbed up against McGee in the van before going in. He’d said that he was just checking to see if McGee could feel the wire Tony had tucked into his skin-tight pants. McGee had turned beet-red and had pushed Tony away with a stuttered no. Ziva had laughed but Gibbs could only recall the surge of jealousy he’d felt at that moment. He’d wanted nothing more than to have Tony rubbing himself up against him that way.

Well, he didn’t have Tony anymore. McGee was his senior field agent now and he needed the experience. He’d also considered doing it himself but knew realistically that he was too old for the part. Just then McGee strolled into the bullpen.

“We’ve got Lance Corporal Timms in the conference room, Gibbs. She was on leave in the area for two days before traveling to her mother’s home. She was with Johannson the night she was killed.”

“Good. She see anything?”

“Well…we thought you’d want to interview her…”

“Nope, you handle it.”

McGee took a breath and nodded. It wasn’t much but Gibbs could see the minute straightening of his SFA’s shoulders just before he turned and left. Gibbs’ lips turned up slightly. He was sure he’d do alright.

A while later Gibbs was reviewing the files for their new case when he was called. McGee and Ziva had their suspect, the man that Timms had identified as chatting with Johannson before she and Timms left the bar that night. They had no evidence so everything depended upon getting a confession. Gibbs watched through the mirror while McGee got their suspect to admit to following their victim to her car. He smirked as he watched McGee work, his style a mix of both Tony’s and his but with an innocent ‘trust me’ face that he knew neither he nor Tony could pull off with such legitimacy. McGee was laying the pictures of Renee Johannson’s body across the table all the while talking about her being someone’s sister, someone’s friend. She had people who cared about her, who had loved her. It wasn’t much longer before McGee got his suspect to admit that he’d wanted her love, too. It was only a short while later when McGee got his confession. Gibbs turned to see the broad smile on Ziva’s face. She was proud of her partner and it showed.

He met McGee in the hallway outside of the interrogation room. McGee sported a broad smile at his success.

“Good job, McGee,” Gibbs said with a slap to McGee’s shoulder. “Get him booked and get back to the bullpen. We’ve got another case.”

“But what about the report?”

“The sooner you get back the sooner you can start. Then we’ll talk about you going undercover.”

McGee’s eyes widened as did his grin. *Undercover? COOL!*

Gibbs smirked at the smile that he didn’t think could get any wider and he had a sudden flash of
DiNozzo’s grin at the thought of an undercover assignment. It made his stomach twist. DiNozzo was one of the finest undercover operatives he’d ever worked with and while he was sure McGee would be good, there weren’t many that could compare to DiNozzo. DiNozzo’s promotion was a huge loss to him in many ways. He pushed the wistful thoughts aside and returned to the bullpen.
Chapter 26

Lali looked over and saw Tony reading through his reports but instead of the intense look of concentration she was accustomed to, he frowned slightly with a flash of annoyance quickly followed by that small smile she’d been seeing a lot of lately. Although it made her happy to see she knew he was annoyed with himself for his distraction. She couldn’t help but grin. Although he kept his private life very quiet, she knew he’d been seeing someone named Derek and she was pretty sure that he was the one putting that little smile on his face. She almost laughed aloud when he ran a frustrated hand over his face and announced that he was going for coffee. An attempt, no doubt, to get his mind back into the mundane reports he was supposed to be reviewing.

Tony got up, probably headed for the break room rather than out of the building, so she watched him go and then her glance moved over the rest of their team. Harry was busy working a search for Stan. He leaned closer to his monitor as a little frown formed in between his brows. It slipped away as an excited grin appeared. Looked like pay-dirt so maybe they’d have a new lead on that cold-case Stan was reviewing.

Tony got up, probably headed for the break room rather than out of the building, so she watched him go and then her glance moved over the rest of their team. Harry was busy working a search for Stan. He leaned closer to his monitor as a little frown formed in between his brows. It slipped away as an excited grin appeared. Looked like pay-dirt so maybe they’d have a new lead on that cold-case Stan was reviewing.

Finally her gaze went to Stan. She felt her mouth twitch slightly and she forced it to behave. She would’ve punched the person who pointed out that she and Tony sported that same little smile. And while the unknowing bystander might have assumed that they shared it for the same reason, which in fact they did, they would not have known that their reasons were two entirely different men, hers being the smooth-pated man sitting only four feet away from her. She let her thoughts wander a moment longer as she took in every detail of his appearance, from his expensive shoes to his fierce concentration on the file in front of him. After the tiniest of sighs she forced herself to get back into the supply report she was working on, one of the many reports that were the bane of an SFA’s life. She would not think about Stan anymore, she told herself firmly, nor would she think about the new team lead position opening up. It wasn’t supposed to be common knowledge just yet anyway but since she’d known Charley Peralta ever since she’d been on active duty, his decision to switch his gun for a fishing rod was no secret to her. She just wondered who would be in the running for the job. She was sure Tony would back her if she applied and if she got it, then maybe she could finally quit fighting that little smile.

Tony took his coffee to the patio that extended off the break room. His thoughts had been in turmoil ever since the weekend about an offer Derek had made.

“Tony, I want you to understand what it is I ultimately want from you. I want you to consider it.”

Tony’s breath hitched at the sight of the thick leather collar lying across Derek’s outstretched hand. His heart started thumping hard. Derek didn’t say anything else and Tony wondered why he didn’t ask what it was he wanted although it seemed he already knew…

It was too soon in their relationship for such an important step but Tony had promised to consider it telling himself that maybe Derek had already known his desire, that the ‘needy sub’ Steven and Alan had so clearly seen was visible to Derek as well. And Derek did know him quite well despite their relatively short time seeing one another. Derek knew where he worked, where he lived. He’d met Steven and Alan and had even spent time in their home. For the first time in his life Tony was
being open about who he was…and Derek still liked him. The joking/prankster side, the movies, the sports, the broodiness after that shitty murdered child case last month, Derek had accepted it all plus he’d taken Tony further in his submission than anyone else had. Tony also had the feeling that he was falling for Derek, too.

It’s too soon, he thought again as he stood staring out over the potted plants, but the thought of accepting was very tantalizing and opened a delicious ache in him…and let’s face it, he wasn’t getting any younger. He really wanted…no, he needed…to be wanted like that, completely and without reservation just for himself regardless of what he looked like or his name. It had just never happened before. Instead he’d become very good at providing the Tony that everyone wanted to see. The only problem was that he still had his own dreams and needs and when the two didn’t mesh, he got tossed away. Sexuality aside, his father wanted the mini-me businessman to follow in his footsteps, had even named him after himself and still insisted on calling him Junior. When he’d told his father that he didn’t want to be involved in the business, he was disowned. His bosses in his previous precincts wanted his skills but when they realized he wouldn’t turn a blind eye when told to or worse, got a hint of his sexuality, he was given the strong suggestion that it was time to move on. His girlfriends…well, he really couldn’t blame them for not wanting the real him. They wanted the Tony he’d shown them, the flashy car, the exciting job and expensive clothes…the university film professor, Anthony DiNardo. And with Gibbs, well, he’d been as real as he could given the circumstances but then he walked before the shit hit the fan and he could get tossed.

So, did he want what Derek was offering? Yeah, he did. And Derek did want him; he’d made that abundantly clear as he accepted everything about him that had come up. Both Steven and Alan had given their nod although Tony hadn’t told them of this latest development. The little smile again made its appearance on his face. While not marriage in a traditional sense, what Derek was offering was the closest thing to a real commitment that had ever come his way. Tony needed to consider it very carefully.

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Gibbs’ team began their investigation and found that several similar attacks had been reported in the civilian sector at the beginning of the year. By early spring the attacks had been perpetrated solely against military personnel but there didn’t seem to be a pattern in the dates.

“So by targeting military men they assumed there was less chance the attacks would be reported,” Ziva said to the room at large. “It is a case of DNADNT, yes?”

Gibbs looked at Ziva with one raised eyebrow.

“She means DADT, Boss,” McGee clarified and then turned back to Ziva. “You really need to start using contractions, Ziva, but yeah, there’s a greater probability due to the nature of the military.”

“The nature of the military…it will change when this DADT law is removed, yes?”

Gibbs had remained silent through the exchange. Yeah, he figured the law would be repealed and while he didn’t know how long it would take for the military mindset to change, it would happen eventually. There’d be holdouts, though. He recalled Captain Veitch, the submarine squadron commander they had to go through for him and Kate to board the Philadelphia, a sub they suspected had been infiltrated by an eco-terrorist. That captain had been adamant that women didn’t belong on a sub and had bitched about Kate going but Gibbs had set him straight. Women were not only allowed on subs, he figured it wouldn’t be long before the rest of the positions denied to women would soon become open. Still, it would take awhile for things to change but it
was about damn time. And while DADT had never applied to him as a civilian, he’d lived with the mindset most of his life. But now, when things were finally on the brink of change, he could honestly say that he’d never regretted more having to hide this part of himself. So, he wondered, was it too late for him? And now that Tony was gone from his life, did it even matter? His morose thoughts were interrupted by his team’s continued discussion.

“It should and none too soon, if you ask me,” Tim replied. “Then stuff like this wouldn’t be an issue. As far as the civilian victims go I’m sure we don’t have all the cases, just the ones that were reported to local LEOs. From the lack of a pattern I doubt anyone realized they had a serial rapist on their hands. We get a break with the military because any physical condition that impacts duty performance would have required medical clearance unless the active duty member was on leave status when it happened and healed up before reporting back in.”

“So while we do not know if there are more civilian victims, from the dates of the incidents it appears that they are now focusing solely on military men. What made them change their targets? There is nothing significantly different about the military victims and the civilians. Physically, they are similar in that they are all young men in their early twenties and in good physical condition and while the military men do not specify where they had their ‘consensual’ encounters, all of the civilians state they met one of the attackers at various clubs in Glen Burnie and while the sketches that were faxed are similar, all we truly know is that one of the men is older with grey hair and a mustache. The only other item of note is that there is an unusually long time in between attacks, but we do not know if we have a complete list of victims!” Ziva concluded as she threw her hands up in the air in frustration.

“Yeah,” McGee agreed and then his eyes widened and he turned to Gibbs. “Boss, do you know if Ducky has gotten any information on attacks in other branches?”

“Army or Air Force?”

McGee nodded. “I’m thinking we have more victims out there because Dr. Hollister would only have given us information on victims treated in Navy facilities. Looking at these dates I’m betting we’ve missed some and I’ll bet we’ll find someone who’ll be the first military victim who inadvertently got these dirt bags started in solely on the military.”

“Yes, but if this poor soul did not get medical care we are at a dead stop.”

“Dead end, Ziva, but only as far as this trail, I’ve still got McElroy…”

“Quit talking about it, McGee, and go find out!” Gibbs ordered with a shooing motion.

McGee jumped to it and Ziva smiled. She knew of McGee’s excitement at his first true undercover assignment. She made a point to herself to get him in the gym for some refresher hand-to-hand training. You never knew what might be needed and with that resolve she returned to her search.

Later that afternoon they’d set up how McGee would get close to Gary McElroy, the last of the victims. McElroy worked alongside several civilians in IT. It would be an easy matter to slip McGee in as a newly hired civilian worker. Gibbs just needed to make sure that McGee could convince McElroy that he was gay. He had a fleeting memory of Tony tossing him a bottle of Femme Glow moisturizer that belonged to McGee and he smirked. “McGee, with me.”

Tim looked up from the file he’d been reading and jumped up to follow Gibbs. They entered the elevator and McGee moved to the back. He wasn’t surprised when Gibbs hit the emergency switch.
“You gonna be okay with this?”

Tim swallowed once and looked down as his mind raced. Tony had always said that you had to find some aspect of the undercover persona that you could relate to and work with that. Only he wasn’t gay and Tony was, but you didn’t have to be gay to impersonate a gay guy. After all, just look at all the actors Tony had told him about who’d played gay roles…Russell Crowe, Antonio Banderas… uh, Tom Hanks. Yeah, there were lots of straight men who played gay roles. He didn’t have Tony’s undercover experience but he had to start somewhere and even if he wasn’t gay, he was sure he could pull this off. All he had to do was act interested in other men. Right. Except that Tony never had and he really was gay. No…stop it, he told himself.

“I may not have Tony’s personal experience, but I can do this."

Gibbs noted the emphasis McGee had placed on that one word. Yeah, DiNozzo had played this role before but he could tell that wasn’t what McGee was referring to.

“You got something you want to say, now’s the time to spit it out, McGee,” Gibbs growled and glared at his Senior.

Tim swallowed hard. He’d needed to talk to Gibbs for awhile but Tony’s last phone call had really thrown him for a loop. His overall anger at Gibbs had abated although it hadn’t disappeared but he knew it was time to come clean. He’d been blaming Gibbs for Tony’s departure but he’d been wrong. Tony had chosen to leave because he cared for Gibbs in a way he didn’t think Gibbs could reciprocate. Tony’s departure had also torn Gibbs up. It was painfully obvious to everyone who had the misfortune of having to deal with him. He absentmindedly rubbed the back of his head.

“I blamed you for Tony leaving and I was wrong. I won’t say I’m sorry, Boss, because…you know, sign of weakness and all, but I realize now that you had nothing to do with it. You’re you and Tony is the way he is…not that there’s anything wrong with that, but you’re not and that’s okay because neither am I but I can do this.”

Tim decided with a slight grimace that he’d almost channeled Abby there. He looked at Gibbs’ stone face and not for the first time wished that he could interpret Gibbs’ glare. Tony seemed to find various meanings in the set face but to Tim it all just looked the same…pissed and ready to kick someone’s ass.

Gibbs said nothing at hearing the near confirmation of his own thoughts about Tony.

“What changed your mind?”

“I’ve spoken with Tony and I understand his reasoning.”

Well, I wish to hell I did, Gibbs thought but remained silent, Ducky’s words again ringing through his head…concentrate on repairing the relationships at hand and one way to do that is to ensure they know you accept them as people as well as agents...

“McGee,” Gibbs began, “I’ve got no problem with anybody’s personal lifestyles as long as it doesn’t impact the job. I didn’t know anything about Tony or his personal pursuits and I sure as hell didn’t know that he chose to accept that assignment. If he’d of talked to me earlier maybe I could’ve helped him so that he didn’t get hurt, maybe stopped him from leaving.”

But even as he said it Gibbs doubted Tony would have said anything. He hadn’t let Gibbs know he was gay let alone that he was interested in other lifestyles. It hammered home yet again how little he’d known about Tony and his own failings as a friend.
Tim’s eyes widened comically. “Talked to you? About personal stuff?” McGee choked out in disbelief. “Gibbs, you’re the last guy on this earth who’d be open to talking about this stuff…uh, I mean…” McGee suddenly backpedaled at Gibbs’ intensified glare.

“You think I can’t handle a conversation about personal choices or alternate lifestyles? You think you can’t come to me with a personal problem?” Gibbs demanded with a step towards McGee.

But Tim didn’t give an inch. If anything, he stood up a little straighter which allowed him to tower slightly over Gibbs. He couldn’t believe Gibbs thought he was open to discussion about these matters. Hell, Tony hadn’t felt any of them were open to his being gay…or bi or whatever… but if they had been open, been better friends, they’d of learned about his trials before now. Well, he at least had admitted his error to Tony and together they were working on fixing their strained relationship. There was no way he was going to let Gibbs think he was blameless for Tony’s isolation.

“Gibbs, you don’t come across as even remotely approachable about anything personal so no, I don’t think Tony or any of us could talk to you about private issues. God, Gibbs! I’ve never known anyone as…as emotionally constipated as you!”

McGee’s eyes opened wide not believing he’d actually said what he had. Gibbs, too, was taken aback by McGee’s outburst but he was also impressed. Still, it meant that he’d obviously failed as a supervisor if his own people couldn’t tell him that they were having problems or that they wanted off his team. And whether he’d realized it or not, McGee had made some implications about Tony that lined up with his earlier thoughts.

“Emotionally constipated, McGee? Well, I suppose I know an ex-wife or two who’d agree…” Gibbs said thoughtfully, the nearly constant glare suddenly gone for the first time in months. “Maybe three?” Tim grinned.

“Yeah, three…but they all harped about it before actually walking out. I may not have been able to give them the answers they wanted but at least they gave me a chance.” Unlike DiNozzo, Gibbs’ tone implied.

And unlike me, Tim added to himself. He saw the flash of hurt in the intense blue eyes before it melded back into the familiar glare. He understood at that moment that Gibbs had known of his near defection. His eyes dropped to the ground as his cheeks pinked slightly but then he raised his eyes and looked at Gibbs square in the face.

“Understood, Boss,” he replied. “Looks like we all failed in Communication 101. It won’t happen again but I think you need to clear the air with Abby, too. She thinks you knew more than you did.”

“Yeah,” Gibbs agreed with a nod. “So, you’re good with this op?”

“I’m good…I’ve also got a couple of ideas based on credit card checks for our victims. There are two relatively local clubs they frequented as well as some other clubs in Glen Burnie, same as the civilian victims. McElroy tends to go out locally on Fridays and out to Glen Burnie once or twice a month. I’ll start showing my face around the local clubs tonight. Since its Friday maybe I’ll spot McElroy to help sell my cover. Abby’s already got my wire set up. Ziva’s got the comm van.”

“Good. Let me know when you’re ready to head out.”

“I’ve just got a couple of more things to look into.”
Gibbs nodded and hit the switch. They’d kept the elevator occupied for quite some time and in the back of his mind he was a little surprised that no one had complained. The doors opened and both men walked back into the bullpen. Gibbs looked up to see Vance staring down at them. He gave Gibbs a short nod which Gibbs returned and then he headed back to his office. Gibbs realized that Vance knew what had happened and had given them the time they needed to work things out. He just hoped that his talk with Abby would go as easily.
Chapter 27

A short while later McGee’s cover was set up for him to start work with McElroy the next morning but that night he would make the rounds of the two clubs. He hoped McElroy would decide tonight was a party night. Gibbs had a feeling in his gut that he’d be the one to lead them to their bad guys. Gibbs was reviewing the club layouts when he felt someone approach. He looked up.

“Jethro,” Ducky whispered urgently. “I must speak with you regarding these files.”

“Go ahead, Duck.”

“No, in private please,” Ducky said with a very intense look at Jethro.

“Alright…autopsy?” he asked, intrigued by Ducky’s urgency.

“Yes, yes, come along,” Ducky said and then turned to go without waiting for Jethro.

“I’ll be in autopsy,” he called to McGee who’d moved over to Ziva’s desk to look at something she had up on her computer. He saw McGee nod and then stepped out so that he could catch up to Ducky who was holding the elevator for him.

“Have you found out about assaults in the other branches?” Gibbs asked a bit later once they were in Ducky’s office. He raised an eyebrow as Ducky closed the door. “What’s going on?”

“I’m still awaiting word from my inquiries, however I must know…the injuries these men suffered, Jethro. Do they seem at all familiar to you?” Ducky asked.

“Apart from the fact that they were obviously sexually assaulted by one or more men, the answer’s no. Why?”

Ducky sighed. He’d hoped Jethro would have been more aware of Tony’s injuries but it was obvious the younger man had, as usual, downplayed their severity. Now he was torn by what he felt he could reasonably share with Jethro and what he felt was a private matter between Tony and himself. However, the nature of the injuries was such that he was positive the men identified in the files had encountered the same men that had accosted Tony all those months ago. But would including Tony in the group of victims help anything? He’d been no more eager to pursue the issue than any of the other men but perhaps as a trained investigator he might have more information about their perpetrators than the others. He was just about to tell Jethro when his infernal cell phone rang. Ducky blew out a frustrated breath.

“We got a body, Duck,” Jethro said when he got off the phone. “This will take precedence for a bit until we can get more information from McElroy but for all we know it could be related.”

“Related…oh, my,” Ducky said diverted from this thoughts that perhaps it would be best to wait telling Jethro until he could talk to Tony first. “I’ll just call Mr. Palmer and we will be with you immediately.”

“Actually, Duck, the body’s coming here. The Glen Burnie ME just ID’d the victim as Navy.”

“Why do you think this might be related to the current case?”

“Just got a lead that the assaults may have taken place in Glen Burnie, same place where the body
was found. Initial report from their ME said the victim was sexually assaulted. McGee says the injuries seem similar but that'll be for you to decide. What did you want to tell me, Ducky?"

“I believe it would be best to wait until I see this young man, Jethro. If these cases are related you can believe me, we will most definitely be speaking.”

Jethro eyed his friend and nodded. He turned and left autopsy.

Gibbs began his review the case file from Glen Burnie PD. There wasn’t much. The body had been found in an alley and had been there for a several days before it was found. So far the PD investigation hadn’t gone anywhere. Forensics had come up empty. He had Abby reviewing what had been found so far but it wasn’t much. He sent both McGee and Ziva to set up for their foray that night to the first of the two clubs but they weren’t to approach until he gave the word. The body had arrived late that afternoon and Ducky had immediately begun his examination. Gibbs needed to know what he’d found before he headed out to join McGee and David.

“Agent Gibbs,” Jimmy said by way of greeting when Gibbs walked into autopsy. He’d looked up when the doors opened but continued closing up the chest cavity of the body they’d received earlier from Glen Burnie. Ducky had reviewed the autopsy results and had performed his own examination of the body. He’d concurred with the original report which showed that the young man had met his untimely demise at the hands of at least two brutal rapists, one right-handed and the other left-handed.

“Where’s Ducky?” Gibbs asked noting with annoyance the absence of his ME.

“He’s on the phone, Agent Gibbs. He said it was important and not to disturb him,” Jimmy added as he finished his task. He moved away to begin cleaning the implements they’d used.

Gibbs practically growled in frustration. He’d give Ducky a couple of minutes to finish whatever it was he was doing and in the meantime decided to look at the body himself. The body looked like it had been in that alley at the mercy of rats for awhile which had no doubt hampered identification. He noted evidence of probable metal cuff usage on the wrists and deep bruising around the neck. What was left of the eyes had some evidence of hemorrhaging and he wondered if the young man was suffocated or if he died from the extensive damage that was obvious all over his torso. He glanced over his shoulder at Ducky and was relieved to see him hanging up the phone.

“Ah, Jethro,” Ducky said as he re-entered the outer room, “I expected you to be hovering over my shoulder.”

“Busy,” Gibbs answered in his usual terse manner. “What did you find?”

“Glen Burnie’s coroner performed a very adequate examination however I opted to take additional samples. Our poor young man met his demise approximately five days before he was found. His death was the result of a horrendous beating by at least two assailants who then attempted to sanitize the body.”

“Attempted?”

“Yes,” Ducky answered and then lifted one of the severely chewed hands. “Although most of this damage was caused by rodents there is still evidence that the finger pads had been removed, most likely by a sharp implement such as a knife. There is damage to the teeth and gums from a failed attempt to thwart that means of identification however what remained was sufficient to establish identity, no doubt why it took so long to get us involved. This poor lad was used rather horribly,
I’m afraid. There is evidence he was whipped by a strap, possibly a belt, and restrained with the use of metal handcuffs. After they were done, the assailants washed the body rather well. I was, however, able to retrieve several small fibers from our victim’s mouth, quite probably from a gag. Abby has them now.”

Gibbs said nothing for a moment. “That phone call related to this case?” Gibbs asked after a bit. It wasn’t like Ducky to be making personal phone calls in the middle of an autopsy.

Ducky blew out a small breath and looked down. He’d actually made more than one call. He hadn’t been able to get in contact with Tony with the first call so he felt limited on what he could discuss. He could, however, discuss the second call.

“This case reminded me of another similar one. I was attempting to gather information for you but unfortunately the person I needed to speak with wasn’t available. What I will say is that this young man’s injuries do indeed match those of the assault victims in the medical files you gave me. I then called Dr. Hollister. My examination of Seaman Rogers here led me to wonder at the timing of the attacks. I’ve still no word on additional cases. What I have found so far in these records was that most of the young men who were treated were not treated on the day of their attacks nor even on the following day. Those men did not seek medical care until, I assume, they believed it was absolutely necessary. That would affect the timeline.”

“Ziva thinks we have a particular case from early spring that pointed the killers strictly at military,” Gibbs said. “What’s your read on that?”

Ducky’s eyes shifted away for a moment. Ziva had relayed her theory which Ducky had added to his own. He believed Tony would have been the pivotal victim but he wasn’t ready to discuss that just yet. He looked back at Jethro.

“It would be hard to tell without more case files to examine to truly set the pattern. The only thing I can tell you with certainty is that the perpetrators are escalating not only in the timing but in the brutality as well. The attacks on military personnel began approximately the third week of April with subsequent attacks occurring every two weeks with a few exceptions, quite possibly your missing cases. Sometime in July the attacks began to occur more frequently, every weekend in fact until our young man here who was the second of two attacks on the same weekend. However, according to Dr. Hollister, there have been no new reports at any of the local military medical clinics in nearly three weeks. Perhaps he’ll have more to tell me later.”

“There’ve been no new reports of civilian attacks. I doubt they just stopped unless they decided to lay low when they killed Seaman Rogers.”

“Yes, that is a possibility however from the nature of the injuries poor young Rogers suffered, I don’t believe these animals are finished.”

Gibbs said nothing for a moment but he stared intently at his long-time friend. “There’s more,” he stated with certainty. “You holding out on me, Duck?”

“I’m afraid I can’t relay anything else at this time, Jethro. But without a doubt I will give you everything I can as soon as I am able to verify that it is, indeed, related to this case. Until then I’m afraid you will just have to trust me.”

Gibbs said nothing but nodded nevertheless and then turned and stalked away leaving Ducky standing alone in autopsy.

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Burt leaned back into his seat and watched behind darkly-shaded lenses as several young men played volleyball. He smirked lightly. The blonde one spiking the ball looked like their boy from two nights ago. The punk playing ball wasn’t military, though. He had some weird spiked hair that probably took two hours to get just right. Still, he had a nice ass and his slick, oiled skin looked like it would mark up real pretty, just like that sweet little Air Force boy did. His left hand strayed to his icy glass, one finger idly playing with the condensation as he thought about the pattern Jimmy had left. Yeah, real sweet. He was still concerned, though. He’d had to stop Jimmy once again before he got too rough. They couldn’t risk another one of their boys dying on them. He had the fleeting thought that it was a damn good thing they’d set up an alibi, fishing in bumfuck Pennsylvania of all things. He’d actually been surprised at how many guys had bought that story before they left…morons. Still, Jimmy was getting better.

His eyes automatically scanned his area again so he was aware of Jimmy leaving the men’s room. He watched his partner out of the corner of his eye as he made his way back to the table. Being here had been good for Jimmy; all that stress was easing up although he still worried about going back. There’ll probably be a bunch of messages waiting for him. Fuck. Jimmy would never have gone that far if not for his bitch mother and cunt ex-wife hassling him. But Jimmy was better now that they were here and he’d make damn sure things didn’t get so bad again. Jimmy was his partner and he knew how to take care of him. Burt picked up his glass and lifted it in Jimmy’s direction before taking another sip of his mojito.

Jimmy settled back into his seat and grinned before picking up his dark beer and mimicking Burt’s action before taking a long drink. Jimmy couldn’t see Burt’s eyes but he knew without asking just what Burt was thinking about.

“Which one?”

“Blonde, far left. Looks like our little zoomie.”

Jimmy chuckled and agreed. He wondered if he’d cry as sweetly as the last boy had. Probably. He knew how to make them all cry real nice.

They’d been cruising the Florida coast for just over two weeks now and they loved it. So many bars…they hadn’t hit the same one twice yet…and all of them filled with firm young college and military boys. They stuck with the military, though, just in case. But it was all good, plenty to choose from.

“Dark hair…” Jimmy said suddenly.

“Yeah, and dark skin…” Burt added.

“Oh, yeah, partner…tonight…” Jimmy smiled.

“Tonight,” Burt repeated and both men toasted.

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As soon as he left Ducky, Gibbs got a call from Ziva. McElroy had shown up at the first club. He told McGee to go in and keep an eye on him then he called Vance at home.

“This just turned into a murder investigation, Leon. Ducky just linked Seaman Rogers to the other assault victims.”

“That changes the rules. What’s the status of McGee’s op?”
“He’s scoping out the clubs tonight. There’s a good chance McElroy will be out, McGee was going to lay the groundwork for his meeting with him tomorrow. Now I’m going to bring him in for an interview. Something else you should know, we might have Army or Air Force victims. We’re looking into it but either way, it looks like the killers were escalating but suddenly stopped with Rogers.”

“There’s been no other reports?”

“No, but my guts telling me they just relocated. Ducky’s asked Dr. Hollister to go through the medical community channels to look for more victims.”

“They could have gone back to civilians…”

“Doubt it, Leon…they’ve been sticking strictly to military since last spring. I wanna send out a cross-tell,” Gibbs said referring to a notification across the board to all military law enforcement agencies.

“Do it and keep me informed.”

“Yeah,” Gibbs answered and then hung up. He needed to make one more stop and then he’d join Ziva and McGee.
Gibbs walked in to Abby’s lab and was surprised to hear some music playing in the background although it still wasn’t at the ear-splitting level of the past. Abby whirled around as he walked in and started in on her report without waiting to be asked.

“The fibers Ducky gave me were an organic cotton/hemp blend; specifically 53% recycled cotton, 23% hemp, 13% nylon, 7% acrylic and 4% polyester. This particular blend is used by eco-friendly US companies to make socks.”

“Eco-friendly socks?” Gibbs asked with surprise and wondered what was wrong with just plain white cotton.

“Sure, Gibbs, this particular blend is certified pesticide- and sweat-shop free so whoever’s sock this is…or was…made sure that their tootsies were covered with fibers grown naturally and made by companies who practice fair labor and wage standards.”

Gibbs blew out an ever so slightly exasperated breath. “Can you trace it?”

“Not really, although I can probably narrow it down to a couple of specific manufacturers but these socks are available over the internet and any number of local clothing stores. But if you can find me the sock, I’ll tell you who wore it before stuffing it in our victim’s mouth.”

Gibbs nodded so Abby continued.

“The soap used to wash the body is a generic blend used in your standard mini-bar found in your standard cheap motel or hotel. I already gave Tim the brand to look for.”

“Thanks, Abs,” Gibbs said and turned to leave.

“Wait…Gibbs!” Abby called out and trotted over to Gibbs when he turned around. She stood for a moment, shifting from foot to foot and chewing her bottom lip. “Tony’s not coming back,” she choked out.

Gibbs had already heard but as he looked into her rapidly-filling green eyes he could see her immense sense of loss and complete vulnerability. He knew how much Abby had been missing DiNozzo, knew…now…that she’d known more about him than he ever had and although that made his chest ache, it hurt him more to see the painful almost-acceptance of Tony’s decision in her eyes. He could also see in her trembling form just how much his girl was hurting right now, so he did the only thing he could and prayed it would work. He opened his arms and was filled with gratitude down to his bones when she practically jumped into them. He held her tight.

“Did you really think he would?” he asked gently into her hair. He ran his hands lovingly across her back as she shuddered slightly.

He’d run his own discreet inquiries into how Tony’s job was going and he knew, without any surprise at all, that Tony was impressing the hell out of his new supervisor. He’d overheard the conversations that were quickly hushed as he approached the bullpen that detailed how terrific Tony’s team was and how much they valued him. He had made his gut clench at the thought that Tony was getting the respect and recognition he deserved but that he’d so seldom gotten while he worked for him. Oh sure, Gibbs had made sure that his performance reports were always highly marked and that Tony had received the appropriate commendations in his file, but he’d never shut down the harassment Tony had constantly received from his co-workers, never called them on their
lack of respect despite the fact that they were junior to him in position. So, yet again, he’d led by example…a very poor one…by never really showing Tony the respect he was due as his Second. After all, he thought sarcastically, simply by virtue of being his Second that it implied his worth as a Special Agent, right? And everyone knew he didn’t suffer fools on his team…except for himself. He shut his eyes tightly as a wave of shame suffused him. He held Abby tighter and dropped his face lower into her neck. She returned the pressure. He was grateful but knew he didn’t deserve anyone’s comfort. He’d always respected Tony but it had taken Ducky to tell him that Tony didn’t feel he really had it, that he’d left DC thinking so very little of himself. He thought of the few, far too few, times when Tony would literally glow at some off-hand compliment from him. God, how could he have been so damned arrogant? So yeah, why would Tony ever consider coming back? He pulled back slightly from Abby, suddenly wondering if she knew how much he valued her while simultaneously hating his insecurity.

“I wanted him to, Gibbs, really badly,” Abby whispered painfully into his neck which brought him back to the here and now. She pulled back and looked into his face. Her mouth twisted a bit. “But…well…he’s doing good out there. He’s got good friends and he’s…happier…” her voice trailed off as a mascara-dark tear dripped down her cheek.

Abby was silent for a moment and Gibbs could only imagine how difficult that admission had been for her as he pulled out his handkerchief and gently wiped her face.

“But…uh, I also have to say that I’m disappointed, Gibbs…” Abby said as she took the hanky from his hand. She looked down for a moment and then looked back up at him with a slightly shocked gaze. “I’m disappointed in you…” she whispered in a tremulous voice that implied the impossible had occurred.

“Why me?” Gibbs asked with a frown although he could think of a thousand reasons.

“You’re supposed to know everything even if Tony’s really good at hiding stuff…”

“Abby…”

“No, Gibbs! You went over to see Tony before he left and I thought you’d make him change his mind but you didn’t and everything got so bad. And now Tim said that you didn’t even know Tony was leaving let alone that he was bi…” she suddenly pulled out of his arms, her eyes wide thinking she’d fucked up again but then she searched his face. “But you know now, don’t you?”

“Yeah…”

Abby went back to chewing her lip. She turned away, gesturing with her arms. “Tony said this wasn’t on you but how can I believe that?” She turned back to Gibbs. “I mean Tony was getting hurt inside, Gibbs,” she said and tapped at her heart. “… and then he got hurt real bad and you didn’t do anything! Tony is family and the two of you know each other better than anyone else…at least in everything except maybe the sexual preference part…but you had to know how Tony feels about you!”

Gibbs felt all of the breath leave him. He should have known…

Abby looked at Gibbs. “I know this is a lot more than just being too tall,” she said remembering her broken romance with Marty Pearson, the diminutive forensic specialist who’d broken off his relationship with Abby because he felt their physical differences were too great a hurdle. “But you can’t just leave Tony out of your life…this is killing you, too, Gibbs, and Tony’s trying and he is happier now that he’s out but he’s still kind of broken. There has to be something you can do to fix this…at least a little bit. You owe him, Gibbs!” she wailed.
Gibbs saw the hope in Abby’s eyes that he’d seen so many times before, her utter faith that he’d fix things and make them right. He almost wished she was still mad at him because he had no idea how to fix this except to give it time. He was also feeling a bit of resentment that everyone had been mad at him for something he’d been so woefully ignorant about but he pushed that aside. Tony was gone and getting on with his life, living it openly now but Abby was right, he did owe Tony. He’d failed him, didn’t have his six when he should have. The fact that Tony didn’t tell him what he was going through didn’t absolve him of anything…he’d known in his gut that something was up. So now it meant that he had to do something to fix what he could of his girl’s immediate world and maybe, eventually, he could try and fix Tony a little, too, and although that thought lit a tiny flame of hope, he knew he really didn’t have time to truly acknowledge it right now. He had to get back to McGee’s op. He also needed time to figure out what Ducky was holding back. The thought of another case that he might have known about had his gut churning.

He put his hands on her shoulders and brought his face close to her ear. “I’ll do what I can, Abs,” he promised and then kissed her on her temple before turning and leaving.

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McGee looked around the crowded club and then walked over to the bar. He was aware of the appraising glances he got as he walked across the room. He stopped himself from tugging at the black leather jacket and forced himself to settle his nerves. He looked good. Abby said he looked way hot and Ziva had agreed although he honestly thought the outfit was more Tony’s style. But then, he’d decided to sort of emulate Tony’s clubbing style when he’d picked out his clothes. He’d run it by Abby who’d squealed at his tight black jeans and leather boots. She’d added the jacket to his deep steel blue silk shirt and the earring he now sported in the ear opposite the one in which he wore his earwig. He let his own gaze take in the interested glances with a slight smile as he scanned the club and felt himself settle down even more. He heard Ziva comment that McElroy’s car had been spotted two blocks away and then he spotted McElroy at a table near the back of the room.

“I’ve got him,” he said quietly into his mike. McElroy was sitting alone. McGee moved to the end of the bar on the same side of the room so he could watch him and then ordered a drink. McElroy didn’t appear to be meeting anyone in particular although he did dance a few times. McGee just watched for a bit while he, too, danced and chatted with a few guys. He noted that McElroy refused what appeared to be a couple of invitations to the back room. He was watching McElroy when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He’d been doing a lot of training with Ziva in the past months so when he felt the hand he automatically took a step and whipped around. Without thought he crouched as his hands came up into a defensive position. It only took a second but he recognized the guy as one he’d danced with earlier. The guy stepped back at McGee’s reaction, his own hands coming up to show no offense intended. McGee realized that he’d over-reacted and he could have kicked himself from here to Sunday because he figured that he’d blown it, his first undercover op…crap!

“Whoa, sweetheart, didn’t mean to startle you,” the guy said with a slightly nervous laugh.

McGee dropped his hands and stood straighter. He heard Ziva demanding to know what was happening.

“Yeah, sorry…guess I’m just a little jumpy…” he said. “I’m fine…really…” he added for Ziva’s benefit. Yeah, that would be all he needed, Ziva rushing in to kick ass and save his butt…the crowning glory to his disastrous first undercover assignment…

“I was just going to ask you to dance but…uh…I guess you could use a drink instead?” The guy
asked, still hopeful.

It wasn’t difficult for McGee to act as though he was embarrassed because he really was. He needed to get rid of the guy, though.

“You know, I th-thought you were my ex…he kind of s-stalks me, you know?” McGee stammered not quite sure if it was playacting or real at this point. “But I don’t think he’s followed me, yet. You sh-should be okay if we dance again…” McGee trailed off as he scanned the room as though looking for someone. He heard an unlady-like snort in his ear. He realized it grounded him a bit.

The guy started looking around, too, but McGee’s act did the trick.

“Uh, maybe we’ll skip the drink…”

“Are you sure? Because I think he might still be in jail…” McGee found it very hard to keep a straight face with Ziva laughing but he kept up the pretense of searching the bar. His would-be suitor just turned around and walked away. McGee turned back to the bar and hunched over his drink as he tried to stifle his laughter. It didn’t take long because McGee knew he was there for a reason. He looked back over his shoulder and watched McElroy again while he listened to Ziva’s supportive and occasionally suggestive comments. McElroy was again approached but the man quickly moved on leaving McElroy sitting alone.

“I’m going to move in, Ziva,” McGee decided. He wanted to get a face-to-face in before they called it quits for the night. “Any word from Gibbs yet?”

“No, not yet, so go ahead, Tim,” Ziva said over the earwig so McGee walked over to McElroy.

“Hi…I noticed that you’re alone and I was wondering if I could share your table. I’d like to get away from the bar,” McGee said. He knew McElroy had seen what had just transpired and he hoped he could make it work.

McElroy eyed him suspiciously for a moment but then nodded so McGee sat down.

“Was he coming on too strong?” McElroy asked referring to Tim’s unwanted dance partner.

McGee looked down at his drink as he thought furiously over how to cover his behavior.

“Yeah, a bit. I…uh…I don’t like anyone coming up behind me…” he said and saw McElroy nod.

“Well, it looks like you can take care of yourself,” McElroy suggested.

“Yeah…maybe…I took some martial arts classes,” McGee said. “Had to…I - I wanted to be able to protect myself.”

“It’s important,” McElroy agreed earnestly and looked away for a bit but then turned back. “I’ve never seen you around here before.”

“Just moved here. I’m starting a new job tomorrow but I needed to get out for a bit. It’s…b-been awhile.”

“Yeah? Why’s that…?” McElroy asked leaning forward.

McGee could see McElroy’s intense desire to connect. At any other time it might have been creepy since they’d just met but since he knew the situation, he went with it.

“I-I just got through with a-a bad experience…”
McElroy nodded and looked away again. “Yeah…me, too…” he said almost too softly to hear.

At that moment McGee really hoped McElroy was getting help of some kind.

McGee watched McElroy as they continued to talk. McElroy was displaying some nervous behavior which McGee mimicked. It worked. McElroy began to identify with McGee and he started to open up although he refused to discuss his recent experience. As planned, McGee called it quits early claiming that he wanted an early night before starting his new job the next day. McElroy seemed disappointed but agreed since he had to work, too. In the end they did exchange phone numbers and they both left.

McGee drove around the block and then drove back to the comm. van. He entered only to find Gibbs sitting with Ziva.

“We got something new, Boss?”

“What we’ve got is a murder investigation. I want McElroy as well as the other victims in for interviews. Ducky’s just added two soldiers and an airman to the list, filled out those holes you had in your pattern but it stopped with Seaman Rogers,” Gibbs said as he looked at his two agents. “We’re looking into possible victims outside of our locale. I need a description of these guys now.”

“McElroy’s real shy, how am I going to get him to open up?” McGee asked perplexed.

“Looks like you’re gonna have to step it up a notch, Valentino,” Gibbs said with a smirk while Ziva chuckled.

McGee’s only answer was a deep blush.

The next morning the team received a package from Glen Burnie PD. It contained several articles of clothing found in a dumpster. Partial prints on the waistband button of the jeans and buttons on the shirt had been matched to Seaman Rogers. Gibbs had the package sent directly to Abby for processing. Gibbs was sure the bag would contain a pair of eco-friendly socks with Seaman Roger’s saliva. In the meantime McGee conducted his interview with Gary McElroy. They were in an interrogation room with Ziva on the other side of the two-way mirror.

As expected, McElroy was incensed at the subterfuge but appeared to understand when they explained what was happening. He paled considerably when shown the photo of Seaman Rogers. Although he’d never seen Rogers before it was patently obvious that he knew it could have been him on the table. It didn’t take long before McElroy related the halting story of his attack. When he was done McGee slid a card across the table. McElroy looked up at him questioningly.

“My sister went through a bad time…they helped her. I’m sure they’d help you, too.”

McElroy gave him a small smile. “Do you do this for all the victims?”

“I help wherever I can, Gary.”

McElroy nodded and McGee called for a sketch artist. When they were done he called for security to escort McElroy out. The artist handed the drawing to McGee and then left. McGee started to look down but McElroy stopped as he was leaving. McGee looked back up.

“I just needed to ask one thing before I go.”

McGee looked at him. “I…uhm…okay…”
“You’re not really gay, are you?”

“Ah…no, I’m not.” Tim said slightly confused as a blush worked its way across his cheeks. He glanced hurriedly at the mirror behind him and then at the security guard. He had the frightening thought that the rumor Tony had started so long ago would again make the rounds.

“Undercover, huh? You’re really good, you know?” McElroy said with a slightly wistful tone.

A grin spread across McGee’s face and he had the absurd wish that Tony had been there to hear that except, of course, that Tony would twist it all around. No, it was good just like this.

“Thanks, Gary. You take care of yourself, okay?”

McElroy smiled and left. McGee looked down at the sketch. He’d heard the description but hadn’t really visualized it. What he now held in his hand was a shock. “Uh, Ziva…you need to see this…”

Unfortunately, McElroy was only able to provide a description for one of the men. The same held true for all of the other victims. As they stood in the bullpen with the final sketch in their hands, both Ziva and McGee remained stunned with the eerie resemblance of their suspect to Gibbs. Gibbs, on the other hand, felt his stomach turn over as the final pieces fell into place and his head reeled (…and then he got hurt real bad…). Tony had been attacked by this bastard and at least one other man…Tony…his Tony…had been beaten and raped by a man wearing his face. Is that why Tony was with him that night? Gibbs chest tightened so much he could barely breathe. And then it was no wonder Tony had left like he had. There’d been no way in hell he could stay in DC with the reminder of what had happened sitting right there across the bullpen from him. Tony…

Gibbs said nothing as he turned and left the bullpen at nearly a run. He barely made it to the men’s room before losing everything in his stomach.
“I still don’t get how you knew Carlson was the murderer,” Harry asked as he and his teammates returned to their office after Greg Carlson had been taken to lockup for the murder of Commander Robert Serling. Serling had been murdered when he looked into the disappearance of his old friend, Miranda Steller.

“He was The Third Man, get it? 1949, starring Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton, directed by Carol Reed…” Tony looked at the rest of his team only to see surprised faces and he had a sudden flash of Abby telling him how much he’d changed.

“Uh, you’re a movie buff?” Harry asked with surprise.

“You could say that,” Tony replied with a wide smile that garnered even more surprised looks from his team.

“Okay, my children, now I’m not available tonight…already have a date, but you guys free tomorrow night? Yes?” Tony asked as he looked at his team who nodded along with him. “Great. My place, seven o’clock. I’ll have pizza, you bring beer,” Tony said as he watched his team nod again. Yeah, he’d drink beer. Abby would be proud. “And then I will enthral you with some of Hollywood’s greatest films, enlighten you with the best of the celluloid masterpieces,” he finished and then Tony laughed, a loud and happy sound that had his team joining in.

_Ah, life is...getting better_, he told himself as he picked up the stack of messages on his desk. Peripherally he noted the flashing light that said he had voicemail messages as well. He sat down while his team busied themselves with their reports. There were two messages from Ducky. He eyed the phone and knew that the voicemail was probably from his old friend as well and a foreboding filled his belly.

“Going out for coffee, you three get those reports done,” he called over his shoulder as he walked out cell phone in hand somehow already knowing he needed privacy for this call.

A short while later Lali looked up when Tony returned from his coffee run. She was curious when he told them to go home after they finished their reports saying he’d read them in the morning.

“I’ve got an appointment so I’m heading out,” Tony said as he picked up his jacket.

Lali looked at Tony in surprise. He’d made no mention of having an appointment before now and although she couldn’t pinpoint why, she just felt like something was off. She opened her mouth to ask if he was alright but he raised a hand as though in warning and left without another word. She looked at Stan but he just shrugged and got back to work. After another moment, she did as well.

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“You knew,” Gibbs growled at Ducky as he stomped into autopsy a short while later after cleaning himself up.

Palmer, who’d been filling out some forms, looked up in surprise as the obviously infuriated Senior Agent practically charged at his supervisor. He jumped up in alarm, torn between rushing to Dr. Mallard’s side and running out of the door. He’d always been incredibly intimidated by SA Gibbs but he’d also been intensely angered by his outrageous behavior towards his friend, Tony. Without a second thought he found himself standing in between the two men, his own eyes widening at his sudden proximity to blazing ice blue eyes. He hoped that if he fainted his body would protect his
highly respected supervisor for at least a few moments.

“Palmer...!” Gibbs growled in warning, ready to physically remove the boy from the target of his ire.

Ducky, completely unfazed by Gibbs’ ferocious behavior, simply placed his hands on Jimmy’s shoulders. “It’s quite alright, Mr. Palmer. Jethro means me no harm despite his blazing exterior. I would appreciate it if you would leave us for a bit while we speak in my office, there’s a good lad...” he finished with a light pat on Jimmy’s shoulder.

Jimmy, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to draw a breath into frozen lungs, was truly near the point of fainting. Ducky’s gentle touch brought him back to himself enough to let him draw in a shuddered breath but he refused to move an inch. Gibbs rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“I’m not going to hurt him, damnit!” Gibbs nearly shouted but then took a breath and continued in a more controlled voice. “I need to talk to him.”

Jimmy nodded and turned to look into kindly blue eyes as Ducky smiled.

“Thank you, dear boy. I truly appreciate your willingness to place your life on the line for me, so to speak, but I will be quite alright. Off you go, then...”

Jimmy, a final breath and a nod towards Dr. Mallard, gave one more suspicious look towards Gibbs and practically ran from the autopsy theater. His rapid departure was just enough to calm Gibbs down slightly. He turned back towards Ducky.

“Why, Ducky? Why didn’t you tell me about Tony? That’s who you called,” he said the last as a statement jumping straight to the point.

Ducky sighed, grateful at least that Jethro had finally figured things out. “Yes, I called him. I didn’t tell you before because he asked me not to, Jethro, and I am quite sure you are fully cognizant of the dictates of doctor/patient confidentiality.”

“If either of you had said something I woulda’ gone after the bastards back then, Ducky, no one would have had to die...”

Ducky’s eyes blazed for a moment but then softened. He knew Jethro was not blaming him or Tony but instead hated the sequence of events. “No one should ever have to die, Jethro, as you well know. Certainly not like this.”

Gibbs stared at Ducky. “Thought he’d been hurt by a woman...all this time. He lied to me.”

Ducky said nothing for a moment. He sincerely doubted Tony would baldly lie to the man he loved and respected beyond all others. “Did he say his injuries were caused by a woman?”

“He didn’t say they weren’t...”

“Ah, a lie of omission...or was it more his decision to not correct an assumption?” Ducky smiled faintly as Jethro’s eyes narrowed. Ducky well knew Jethro’s stance on assumptions. “Well, I wouldn’t presume to hazard a guess as to his motivation; he was under a great deal of stress at the time.”

Again Gibbs retreated into silence as his elevator conversation with McGee came to mind. Emotionally constipated, making assumptions, not following his gut...there was a lot of fucking up he needed to fix.
“Tony was the turning point for them, though. It was after he was attacked that they started in on military men.”

“Yes, I believe so. I’ve no doubt he told them that he was a federal officer in an attempt to stop what was happening but they must have decided he would not report it, especially if he was, as I suspect, using an alias at the time.” Ducky drew a deep breath. “Oh, how I deplore the mindset that prevents so many from openly living their lives as God made them.”

Gibbs looked away for a bit, suddenly ashamed at his own choices and yet proud of Tony for not denying his nature. If he’d only been more approachable Tony might have come to him when it happened instead of fearing his reaction. Gibbs damned himself again even as he felt amazement at Tony’s ability. Damn, the man was good at undercover…deep undercover if you consider how long he’d kept this secret from the people supposedly closest to him. He wondered how things would have been if he’d been honest about himself at any point in their relationship. Tony said that he’d fallen in love but that there was no chance that that love would be returned and he knew, now, that Tony had been talking about him. Christ, could they have…would they…but those questions were moot, especially knowing the bastard looked just like him. He brought a hand up to his face and covered his eyes. He wasn’t a man to dwell on what could have been but the sudden profound sense of loss that coursed through him extinguishing that tiny flame of hope he’d briefly harbored made his eyes prick with unaccustomed tears.

He looked up at the sudden clasp of strong hands on his biceps. Ducky’s deeply-understanding eyes looked back at him and he had the sudden feeling that Ducky knew exactly what it was he was feeling.

“You cannot change what has already happened, Jethro, but perhaps such a terrible lack of communication can yet be rectified.”

“Not possible, Duck, McElroy worked out a sketch. The bastard who did this looks just like me,” Gibbs admitted finally.

“Oh, dear…” Ducky said as he shook his head in sadness as he realized just why Tony’s path had crossed their suspect’s.

“But I’m gonna find him, Duck,” Gibbs swore. “I’ll make ’em pay for killing Rogers, for hurting Tony and all these other men.”

“Of course you will, Jethro, I’ve no doubt of that,” Ducky said with supreme confidence. “But may I also remind you that Tony is an extraordinarily strong man. He has proven it on many occasions. I believe there could be some hope yet for the resumption of at least friendship between the two of you.”

Gibbs said nothing but nodded and left with a determined stride.

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Tony didn’t know exactly where he was going, he just drove. Sometime later he found himself parked at some unknown beach. He watched the waves roll in, his thoughts in turmoil. Lyle had killed someone. He’d beaten a young seaman to death. Tony’s eyes closed as he recalled what Ducky had told him. It sounded as though Lyle and his partner had decided that DADT ass was where it’s at after having their fun with him and all because they knew the chance of the rape being reported was almost zilch. Oh God… he thought as he dropped his head. It was his fault that man had died. If he’d reported it instead of being such a chicken shit maybe he could’ve stopped them, kept them from escalating… How many men had been hurt because of him? He didn’t remember
if Ducky had been that specific. All he could remember was Ducky telling him it wasn’t his fault. *Fuck!* How could it *not* be his fault? If he’d done his job, reported it, and just been *honest* with Ducky, for chrissakes, then that boy wouldn’t be dead now. But no, he’d been too wrapped up in his own drama, too scared of what everyone would think of him if they found out his dirty little secret. *Oh, hell, admit it, DiNozzo! You were just too afraid of Gibbs finding out! Too damned afraid of what Gibbs would think of you…*

“God Damnit…God *Damnit!*” Tony shouted as he slammed his hands on the steering wheel. It took awhile but eventually Tony calmed down. He got out of the car and opened his trunk. He kept some supplies in there just in case he ever drove his own car to a crime scene. He opened a bag and pulled out a sketch pad. Returning to the car he proceeded to draw the faces that had haunted his nightmares ever since that night. He’d fax them to Gibbs along with a statement as soon as he got back to the office and then he’d call his supervisor and fill him in. He wasn’t sure what would happen from this point on but he’d do his damndest to get Lyle and his partner behind bars.

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“What’ve we got?” Major Steve Cadassian barked as he entered the emergency treatment room.

“Male, age 21, found unconscious in his dorm room,” replied SSgt Soliz as he helped move the young man from the gurney to the bed. “BP is 85/50, breathing irregular, heart rate is weak. Noted rectal bleeding, severe contusions and lacerations…”

“BP’s dropping,” interjected one of the nurses and all hands jumped to stabilize the young man.

Back at the dorm room the responding Security Forces officer, TSgt Jim Olsen, provided an initial report to Special Agent Paul Hanscomb, Air Force Office of Special Investigations at Tyndall AFB.

“Senior Airman Gerald Jenkins failed to report for duty and was later found unconscious here in his dorm room by Airman First Class Robert Simms, a coworker dispatched to check on him,” reported TSgt Olsen. “Initial indication is a possible sexual assault but it doesn’t appear to have occurred on premises. Per A1C Simms, Jenkins stated he intended to visit a friend off-base last night. It appears that upon Jenkins’ return to his room he showered and got into bed. He was found at 0735 by A1C Simms who then called 911.”

SA Hanscomb thanked the TSgt and then looked around the room and saw a pile of clothes on the floor near the bed. There were dark stains visible on the underwear which was inside the dark jeans as though the wearer had removed both items at the same time. This was the second sexual assault that had come across his desk in the last two weeks and he had a feeling it might be connected to that crosstell they’d been briefed on recently. He needed to get to the hospital to verify if the list of injuries was consistent with that report. If it was then he’d be making a visit to the local NCIS office.
“McGee, get a BOLO out on that drawing! Make sure it specifies that our suspects are law enforcement officers.” Gibbs barked. He still held Tony’s statement clutched in his hand where it had been ever since receiving it. He had yet to let anyone else read it although he’d briefed its contents to his team and to the Director. He looked up to see Vance staring down at him from the stairs. They’d had a very loud discussion earlier when Vance had tried to take the investigation away from them stating that they were too personally involved. Gibbs had refused to give it up and eventually Vance had relented but not until he’d chewed through at least three toothpicks. He was keeping a very close eye on them, though. Gibbs’ thoughts were interrupted by Ducky calling his name sharply.

“There’s been another assault,” Ducky said quickly. “Tyndall AFB.”

“That’s right in Tony’s backyard!” McGee exclaimed.

Ducky handed the report to Gibbs who scanned it quickly.

“He’s still alive, Jethro, but badly hurt,” Ducky said as Gibbs moved to his desk. He was about to pick up the phone to call Tony when Vance called out to him. Gibbs saw him close his cell phone and then say something to a tech. The tech jogged back to MTAC and Vance turned back to him.

“MTAC,” Vance said with a jerk of his head that said ‘come on’. He didn’t wait for a response, just turned and trotted up the stairs.

“McGee, get me on the next flight out to Florida,” Gibbs said as he started up the stairs.

“What about us, Gibbs?”

It was a valid question, it was their team’s case, but Gibbs didn’t want Tony to have to face the team now that his secret was out.

“Like you said, McGee, its Tony’s back yard. I’ll coordinate with his team; you head up things here,” he tossed over his shoulder before disappearing.

Tim said nothing as Gibbs turned away. He wasn’t exactly disappointed about not going. He wasn’t sure Tony would want to see them now that they knew the truth about what had happened to him all those months ago. He still couldn’t believe it; Tony had met up with these bastards and had hidden it. Sure, he hadn’t really bought the bar fight story but he didn’t pursue the issue, either. Later, when he found out that Tony was gay he thought it might have been gay-bashing, but this, God, he’d never considered that Tony had gone through this…and all alone. Never again, he vowed, never again would he cut himself off from a teammate…a friend…like that. I’ll make it up to you, Tony, I swear it…

He looked over at Ziva and noted an odd expression on her face. It almost looked as though she was satisfied about something but for the life of him he had no idea why, especially given what they now knew. Then he saw her give a truly evil smile and he felt his stomach flip. He gave a slight shake of his head knowing that while Tony would have pushed for an explanation, he would rather just not know. Besides, getting a plane ticket to Florida was a much easier task to deal with than figuring out Ziva’s convoluted thought processes.

Ziva watched as Gibbs jogged up the stairs. It pained her greatly to know what Tony had gone through all those months ago. The sketch had not come as that much of a surprise considering her
discussion with Tony that night. She only wished that she had learned about Tony so that she
could have helped him, although she doubted he would have accepted it. Men were very different
from women, but she would have been sure he knew he had her support. With what he had gone
through coupled with his desire for Gibbs, she did not blame him for leaving. She, too, would have
cut her ties to begin again elsewhere. In that, she and Tony were much alike. She felt some
satisfaction now, though, because she’d seen the realization in Gibbs eyes that he finally knew
about Tony’s feelings for him. And while it was deeply unfortunate that the knowledge was
accompanied by the intense pain she had seen flash in the blue eyes over the circumstances, it was
still for the best. Secrets upon secrets had been her way of life for too long and she was developing
a strong distaste for them. For now they must find these evil men. She smiled at the thought of
what she would like to do to them. Once that was done they could begin to rebuild from the ashes.

Gibbs bent over as his eye was scanned. As soon as the green light flashed the door opened. His
eyes narrowed when he realized all of the techs were leaving MTAC. Generally they were only
asked to leave if the communication had a strict security requirement or was deemed highly
sensitive in nature. He let them pass and although several of them nodded in his direction his eyes
were strictly glued on Vance who stood in front of the large screen. There was one tech left.

“Sir, this is the remote. Agent DiNozzo should be coming on in a moment.”

Vance accepted the small device with a nod. The tech then moved to leave, walking behind Gibbs
to the door. As soon as the door was secured behind him Gibbs moved up to Vance’s side. He
felt his stomach tighten but the only outward show was a slight lift to his chin as he readied
himself. Without a word Vance lifted his hand which held a small remote. A push of the button
removed the test screen and brought up an office. Gibbs watched Tony slide into the chair and face
the camera. Gibbs felt his breath leave his body in a small huff as he took in his former SFA’s
face. What he saw made his stomach twist and his fists clench and he understood why the techs
weren’t present. Most of them were Tony’s friends. He wouldn’t appreciate their presence for this
conversation.

“Director, Gibbs,” Tony said quietly by way of greeting.

Gibbs took in the pale face and set features. There was no hint of any emotion on Tony’s face but
the red-rimmed eyes spoke of at least one sleepless night and maybe a few too many drinks. While
Vance probably saw the set face and unemotional expression, Gibbs knew Tony well enough to see
the stress that fractionally tightened the normally full lips and the torment clouding the hazel-green
eyes.

“Report, Agent DiNozzo,” Vance began.

“I received a message from Dr. Mallard detailing the case currently assigned to Agent Gibbs’
team,” Tony stated in a professional monotone. “It paralleled my personal experience with the
same suspects. I faxed sketches and my statement to Agent Gibbs earlier this morning. At
approximately 0930 I was briefed of another assault on Tyndall AFB. I just transmitted that
information to you. AFOSI Agent Hanscomb will be providing a detailed list of the victim’s
injuries but from what we’ve discussed, I’m sure it’s the same guys. I’ve already sent out a BOLO
in our area.”

“Good,” responded Vance. “We received notification of this latest assault through medical
channels, Dr. Mallard confirmed the connection. Agent Gibbs will be flying out to your location to
assist with the investigation at your end.”

Tony had been surprised that Vance had heard about the latest attack so soon but he was shocked
at the thought of Gibbs joining them. Having Gibbs that close was the last thing he needed or
wanted right now. “Sir, if this is about my…experience…”

“That’s part of it,” Vance said cutting in. “But this is also Gibbs’ case and if the suspects are in your area I want him on site until they are in custody.”

“Director,” Tony began again but was cut off, this time by Gibbs who had remained silent up to this point.

“It wasn’t your fault, DiNozzo.” Gibbs saw anguish flare in Tony’s eyes just before the dark lashes came down.

“No, Gibbs…” Tony growled through clenched teeth. “We both know what I should have done back when…it happened…”

“I’m not gonna argue with you about that…” Gibbs paused at the slight tightening around Tony’s eyes which to Gibbs was as obvious as a full-blown flinch, still he pressed on. “But you weren’t the one to make those bastards turn the corner from rape to murder. That’s not on you, Tony.”

Tony’s eyes slid away from the camera. Gibbs saw him take what looked like a very painful swallow. He had the desperate need to reach out and touch Tony, run his hand over the back of his hair.

“Gibbs is right,” Vance interjected, “we don’t know what caused these men to escalate. You were one of many they hurt but having said that, because of your involvement in the case you cannot be a part of the investigation.”

Tony’s eyes shot back to the camera. “What?” Tony bit out. “Director, I need to be involved…”

Gibbs had also turned to glare at Vance. He also knew that Tony couldn’t head the investigation on that end but he would have preferred to tell Tony that himself.

“Tony,” Vance said in an almost gentle voice, “while you’ve been doing an excellent job leading your team despite this trauma, the fact remains that you were a victim, too. I’m asking that you trust Gibbs the way you always have and let him do his job. He will find these men.”

“Gibbs…?” Tony demanded. The last thing he wanted was to be pulled from the case but if he wasn’t going to be allowed to lead there was no one else he wanted to do the job more than Gibbs.

“I’ll get ‘em, Tony,” Gibbs promised. His face was set in a scowl. He was furious that Vance hadn’t discussed this with him first. “I’m on the next flight out.”

Tony nodded but didn’t say anything. His eyes were shuttered as he stared at Gibbs, there was so much to say but talking was the last thing he wanted to do, especially in front of an audience. At that moment he saw Gibbs nod and he knew with no surprise that he’d been understood.

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Gibbs was gone having taken the printout of his flight information from McGee and walking out without another word. Ziva and Tim silently watched him leave, both still lost to their thoughts over everything they’d learned recently. McGee’s thoughts were interrupted by a ding signaling an IM. He looked and saw that it was from Abby. Oh, God…it was up to him to tell her what was going on. With a deep breath he told Ziva where he was headed. He saw the understanding in her eyes and hoped that if he didn’t show back up in a reasonable amount of time she would take it upon herself to start looking for his body.
“Take this, McGee,” Ziva said while holding out a tissue box.

“Maybe you should come…” McGee started.

“Oh, no, McGee,” Ziva said with a definite shake of her head. “You are the Senior Field Agent. I regret not showing Tony my ultimate belief in his capability, I will not make the same mistake with you. You can do this.”

McGee just nodded sadly and turned to go. He chose not to acknowledge the small chuckle he heard as he left.
Burt eyed Jimmy as he downed another drink and wondered how much longer this would go on. It was bound to come to a head sooner or later. Probably sooner rather than later if shit hit the fan over their last boy. You’d think he’d be more worried about that than he was but he’d quit second-guessing what they did a long time ago. He doubted if Jimmy had ever second-guessed their actions. He just followed Jimmy’s lead like he always had. Only lately he’d had the thought that Jimmy was on an oil-slicked, down-hill slope and you’d think he’d be more worried about that. But he wasn’t. He felt his eye twitch. Well, he hadn’t been…till now. Things had changed night before last and he wasn’t sure what to make of it but he knew it was dangerous. Jimmy wasn’t talking, which in itself wasn’t unusual, but he had an edge to him that Burt didn’t like. Their boy that night had been sweet but something had set Jimmy off again. He’d had to pull Jimmy off the unconscious young man and they’d ended up tangled together on the floor.

Jimmy was lying on top of Burt. He had a kind of glazed look in his eye as he slowly continued to thrust only now he was thrusting against Burt. Burt froze but didn’t stop Jimmy. It seemed like he was in a daze, too. He thrust back and before long he’d pulled Jimmy’s face down, crushing Jimmy’s mouth down onto his own. He’d never kissed any of their boys, Jimmy did that. Hell, Burt had never kissed another man at all but the feel of Jimmy’s mustache against his mouth was good. They kept thrusting against each other, kissing, hard hands grasping and kneading and the whole time that boy lay bleeding on the bed. It didn’t take long for them both to cum but it kind of woke them both up. They’d stared hard at each other and then Jimmy had rolled off of him. Without a word they just cleaned everything up, cleaned up their boy and got him dressed. He’d been semi-conscious when they’d carried him out into the dark night and he was almost aware when they left him in an alley. They watched from a dark spot as the boy woke up completely. He struggled to stand, holding onto the wall. He sobbed a couple of times but then staggered out. Burt had heaved a sigh of relief and he and Jimmy had gone back to their room. Jimmy had picked the lock on an empty room and taken the bedding, replacing the bloodied bedding from their room and then stashed it in the trunk of their car. The next morning they made sure that everything was okay before they checked out and returned to Jimmy’s friend’s house. That had been yesterday and, with the exception of some minor comments, neither man had said much.

Burt took another sip of his drink. No, what had happened between them was dangerous. He didn’t bother to dwell on what they did with their boys. Ever since that one boy died their future was a foregone conclusion, it was just a question of when. But what happened that night…man, the thought of that getting out was worse than their boy being found and linked to them. Yeah, things were changing but him and Jimmy, they were part of the old guard. Nobody’d understand. If this got out it would bring everything they’d ever done into question even though on the job they were always stand up. You don’t lie to your brothers; you never make them question their trust in you. One whiff of that between them and him and Jimmy’d find themselves separated and without backup. Oh, yeah, going out that way was worse than going down for their boy because if it ever came close to that, he and Jimmy’d take care of it themselves.

He thought again of Jimmy on top of him and he absent-mindedly rubbed his crotch. He looked over at Jimmy and caught him looking. That made Burt stop for a moment but then he deliberately rubbed again, kind of like taunting the devil but he couldn’t help it. Jimmy’s eyes stayed glued to his hand for a bit and then they looked at each other. Burt didn’t say anything. Jimmy looked away, also mute. Burt narrowed his eyes but then looked away, too. They couldn’t do this, but dammit, it was causing a burning in his gut.

“Tonight?” Burt finally asked.

Gibbs wasn’t surprised that Tony was waiting for him when he got to Florida that evening. Tony walked towards him across the terminal and then stopped. This was Gibbs’ first real look at the man who’d been playing such a major role in all of his thoughts for months. It seemed as though he’d forgotten what a fine looking man Tony was. Yeah…fine. Hell of an understatement considering the sudden pounding of his heart and the constriction at his throat. He swallowed hard against that tightness especially as Tony drew nearer and he could see the pallor under his skin. The stress was clearly evident at the corner of his red-rimmed eyes and in the tightness of his jaw. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to pull Tony into his arms, to reassure him that everything would be alright and that he’d be with him every step of the way. But he couldn’t and the pain of that was a physical ache.

“Gibbs,” Tony said when Gibbs approached and now Gibbs could now see the slight wariness in the tired countenance. They had a lot to talk about but he wasn’t about to let Tony think he held what happened against him. He only had one option, though. He put his hand out in greeting.

“Good to see you, too.” Tony murmured and returned his handshake, unconsciously giving a warm squeeze.

To Gibbs, that small squeeze had a feeling of desperation to it and the need to pull Tony to him intensified. But before he could act on the thought Tony was pulling his hand back.

“Update,” Gibbs said as soon as they got into a dark blue sedan. Tony wasted no time in filling him in on everything else they’d learned since that morning while he drove them to his office. McGee had transmitted the files of all the victims. That information was briefed to the various agencies involved which included AFOSI and Army CID. Tony’s boss, Assistant Director Wright, had taken the lead until Gibbs was on site. Right now numerous teams made up of agents from the various agencies were out getting statements from the growing pool of victims. There’d been no hits yet on the BOLOs.

“Chillax, Probie,” Stan said quietly. He knew of Harry’s hero fixation. “Let’s make a good impression on Tony’s ex-boss, okay?”

Harry nodded once and it went smoothly from that point on although Harry didn’t say a word unless directly questioned.

Gibbs saw a lot of early McGee in Tony’s youngest team member and couldn’t help but notice the similarities between Stan and Tony. Lali was steady and looked like one hell of a capable SFA. It eased the slight concern he had about the team Tony had watching his six. He knew that Tony had already briefed them that he’d be sitting out on this investigation so he expected a certain amount of resentment at his presence. They were a professional group, though, and he knew he’d get no problems from them.

Gibbs got an update and then sent Tony’s team back out into the field to continue interviews with
victims and staff members of the clubs that had been identified. It was a delicate business, getting the victims to state where they’d been on the night of their attack. Gibbs wished the higher ups would hurry the hell up and repeal DADT already so that concern for their careers could be eliminated from all of the other stress their victims had to deal with.

Right here and now, though, one of the first things Gibbs had to do was interview Tony. They set up in a conference room, no recording, just the two of them. Gibbs wanted to go over everything with Tony himself. If anything new came out it would go straight into the case file and wouldn’t be reviewed by Tony’s team unless necessary. He intended to make sure that necessity never came up.

“How you holding up?” Gibbs asked when they were alone.

Tony snorted. He was pissed. He’d not only been pulled from this case, he’d been pulled from field duty pending a psych evaluation. He’d told his supervisor that he was already undergoing therapy on his own but the staff psychologist had to confer with Alan about Tony’s fitness for duty. Then, pending his own evaluation, he’d clear Tony for duty.

“Everything’s just peachy, Gibbs,” Tony said airily and Gibbs smirked in return.

“From what I’ve been hearing about you it’s more a formality, especially if you end up having to testify when we get these guys.”

Tony blew out a breath. “Yeah, I know. I just hate this…wait, what do you mean about what you’ve been hearing?”

Gibbs smirked. “That you’re a damned fine Team Lead, DiNozzo, what else?” That earned Gibbs a small, slightly disbelieving smile that still twisted his gut a little bit. “I knew you’d be good when you finally decided to go for it. Sorry to lose you, though, you were the best Senior Field Agent I’ve ever had,” Gibbs saw Tony frown just a little bit, “…when you quit screwing around and got focused,” he finished. At that Tony gave him a grin and sat up a bit straighter.

Gibbs nodded, a slight load lifting from his shoulders but it was time to get back to business. “Let’s get this over with.” Tony nodded and Gibbs could see him steeling himself. “I’ve got your statement with the facts. Now I want your impressions. What can you tell me about these guys? You were the only one who could identify the second one.”

Tony took a deep steadying breath and wished again that he’d sent Lali or Stan or hell, even Harry to go pick Gibbs up but no, he’d decided he needed to face this, face him, as soon as possible. And he was still reeling. Seeing Gibbs had hit him hard. When Gibbs had first walked into the terminal Tony had felt himself tense up. He’d tried to prepare himself but realized he’d failed miserably, especially when he first caught sight of that fierce expression on Gibbs’ face. Tony stopped dead in his tracks. He knew he’d disappointed Gibbs despite what he’d said in MTAC but that expression had made him freeze inside, it was worse than every disappointed and disgusted look he’d ever gotten from his Dad all rolled into one. At that moment he honestly wished Lyle had just killed him.

When Gibbs walked closer he tried to greet him but he wasn’t sure if anything had passed his frozen lips. When Gibbs put his hand out he was honestly shocked and then Gibbs said it was good to see him. The funny part was that he actually believed it. He automatically responded to the gesture and words and then the moment that warm, calloused hand gripped his he felt a jolt of the calm strength, understanding and steadiness that Gibbs exuded. God, he’d missed that. Why he didn’t just melt into a complete puddle of goo was beyond him. He held onto that hand as though it was his lifeline…and, actually, it was. Gibbs returned that pressure and Tony felt his heart start
beating again for the first time in months. Then, with a comfort and an ease that Tony knew he’d never achieved with anyone else, they turned as one and started walking out into the Florida sunshine. Tony didn’t know if the warmth he suddenly felt was because of the weather or the man walking beside him and, for now, it didn’t matter. Tony would take whatever he could when he could and deal with everything else later. Once Gibbs asked for an update things settled even more inside of him. He could do this.

“The whole thing was practiced,” Tony began. “These guys had been doing this for awhile. The second guy stayed out of sight but I heard the door open. I was facing away from it but I got a look at his reflection in the TV when he walked into the room…I remember that smile he had.” Tony paused to run a hand over his face. “I was a cop, Gibbs, you know that. I was fighting with everything I had but I was still looking, noting everything I could,” he said. “I am a trained investigator, right?” Tony added bitterly.

Gibbs saw the color rise in Tony’s face. He wished he could do something about the humiliation he knew the younger man was feeling but there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

“Why didn’t you report it, Tony?” Why didn’t you tell me?

“I couldn’t believe I’d gotten myself into that position, Gibbs. I didn’t want anyone to know what I’d been doing, who I’d been doing...” he added with a humorless snort. “Then, when it was over and I realized how bad it was, I…” deep breath “I thought that it was my fault,” Tony said quietly.

“Tony…”

“Gibbs, I’d been playing a role for a long time,” and not just one, his eyes seemed to say. “I was masquerading as a young guy, not…” Tony looked down, the phrase middle-aged on the tip of his tongue, “…as old as I really am.”

“You don’t match the profile of the other victims…” Gibbs agreed.

“No, and that pissed them off when they realized it. I figured they went harder on me because of it. I guess I was kind of in shock afterwards; I just wanted to get home.” Tony looked at Gibbs. “I identified myself as a federal agent but they knew I was there using a fake name. I know I’m the one that gave them the idea of choosing military men for their next targets.”

“It’s not your fault they killed a man, Tony…”

“Maybe not but if I had…told you…!” About me being gay, about cruising for a fuck…God! Tony slammed his hand down on the table then Gibbs’ phone rang.

Gibbs picked up his phone but paused to point a finger at Tony. “We’re not done here…” His eyes never left Tony’s as he barked his name into the phone. “Got a hit on the BOLO,” he said.
Chapter 32

It had been a hell of a fight with the Columbia Police Department to get them to admit that the sketches they sent out matched two of their detectives. McGee had been surprised that any of the PDs had responded at all and he really couldn’t blame them…it was nearly impossible to get any cop…local, federal, whatever…to turn on one of their own. But they’d gotten an anonymous tip that pointed them towards Columbia, a town about 20 miles west of Glen Burnie. Once he’d contacted them they had hemmed and hawed about it but finally admitted that the detectives (partners!) matching the descriptions were on leave. McGee figured the tip might have even come from the PD itself. Mulroney and Hamms might be cops but he doubted they were well-liked cops. The PD said they would contact them and get back with NCIS. It had taken some pushing from Vance to actually get them moving and then they said that neither man could be located, that they hadn’t shown up at their leave locations at all. No surprise since they’re in freakin’ FLORIDA, McGee thought to himself with a frown.

So now they had to find them and then, hopefully, their DNA would match the trace evidence Abby found on Seaman Roger’s clothing. The problem was finding them before they hurt or killed anyone else. To that end McGee was happy to pick up the phone to update Gibbs.

Once Gibbs told Tony there’d been a hit on the BOLO, he expected to be told to wait in the conference room but Gibbs motioned for him to follow. They went back to Tony’s office although Tony’s team wasn’t back yet.

“McGee sent pictures…pull ‘em up…” Gibbs said and turned to the screen mounted on the wall.

Tony immediately sat down at his computer. “Thought I wasn’t supposed to get involved…” he groused despite being grateful to be allowed to do this. He hit one more key and then turned to face the screen.

“That them?” Gibbs demanded while pointing at the screen but one look at Tony’s pale face answered the question and then Tony nodded. Gibbs looked back at the screen. Detectives James Mulroney and Burton Hamms stared back at him. Mulroney definitely resembled Gibbs with his silver/grey hair and blue eyes. The mustache was shorter, not as full as the one Gibbs had worn after his return from Mexico, but still very similar. Gibbs felt his hands fist as he glared at the photo. Hamms had darker hair, a long hooked nose and brown eyes. He glanced at their stats. Both men were tall, Hamms a full two inches taller than Tony. And these two men, together, had beaten and raped Tony. He glared at the pictures and if thoughts were actions both men would already be dead a hundred times over. But thoughts weren’t actions and he was going to find them.

Gibbs turned back to Tony only to see him still staring at the screen, his eyes wide and jaws clenched. Gibbs moved to block the sight but Tony stayed still, staring straight ahead.

“Tony…” he said in a quiet voice.

Gibbs saw Tony swallow once and then blink. Those hazel green eyes focused on his chest and then moved up to look him in the face. Tony’s eyes were filled with pain and shame. Peripherally, Gibbs heard someone enter the office.

“I’m gonna get ‘em,” Gibbs promised again and wished to hell they weren’t in the middle of NCIS.

Tony gave him a shaky nod and turned away. Gibbs moved to the front of his desk, blocking Tony from whoever came in. He saw Tony’s team and one other man. He straightened and faced them,
the movement drawing their attention to him and giving Tony a moment to recover. Gibbs pointed to the screen.

“I want their pictures sent out to every agency, two-man teams canvassing every club they’ve been at…”

“We just went to them…” said the one man who paused as Gibbs focused on him and stepped up, standing face to face, noses inches apart.

“You are…?”

“Special Agent Hanscomb, AFOSI… Agent…?”

Tony, who’d settled a bit at this point, watched Gibbs do his Gibbs-thing with a slight smile on his face and felt a thrill at the familiar stance and growling voice. All that intensity, those eyes focused as sharp as a laser…God, Gibbs in full, well, Gibbs-mode turned him on despite the head above his shoulders asking how he could even be thinking like that considering what was going on.

“Gibbs, NCIS,” came the low and very dangerous growl. “You tellin’ me, Special Agent Hanscomb, that Seaman Carl Rogers who was murdered and all those other men who were hurt, some of them Air Force and Army, don’t deserve justice? That they don’t warrant our best effort to find those two bastards?”

Hanscomb swallowed slightly at the icy blue glare burning a hole in him. He’d heard of Gibbs… hell, everyone in federal law enforcement had heard of NCIS Special Agent Gibbs…and he’d wished to hell he had just kept his mouth shut. (Shit, the rumors about that glare were true…!) But he did have a suggestion, so here goes…

“No, Agent Gibbs…didn’t say that,” came the quick reply. “I was just going to suggest we regroup and hit the clubs after 2100 hours. All the information we have from the local victims so far indicate that the suspects make contact with their victims later in the night, anywhere from 2300 to 0100. We…uh…party a little later here…”

Gibbs said nothing for a moment and then looked over to Tony who was grinning. Gibbs rolled his eyes and looked over to Lali who nodded in agreement. His gaze took in Stan who had a grin similar to Tony’s and to Harry who looked shell-shocked. He smirked and turned back to Hanscomb.

“Alright then,” he said with a slap to Hanscomb’s shoulder. “All teams meet back here at 2000.”

Hanscomb watched as Gibbs went to SA Molina to get a copy of the statements from the local victims and found himself grinning. He felt like he’d just successfully run with the bulls in Spain. Whew! He jumped towards Harry to start getting the pictures disseminated. He also needed to contact CID and his boss in order to update them. He felt energized and determined to give Agent Gibbs his very best effort. He also had a fleeting thought that maybe a transfer to NCIS would be interesting…

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Tony leaned back in his chair, reaching over his head to tap at a file cabinet behind him with a pencil. He was going crazy sitting here while absolutely everyone else was in the conference room going over the various clubs and the breakout of the teams. Several of the agents had stopped and picked up various types of fast food but Tony found that he couldn’t touch any of it. Gibbs had glared at him but Tony had just shrugged. Gibbs knew that he ate very little when a case was hot,
and this one was red hot, especially since SrA Jenkins died from his injuries less than two hours previously.

He closed his eyes as a pang of shame shot through him, cramping his stomach slightly and forcing him to shoot forward in his chair. Those animals were here and he couldn’t do anything to help stop them. Damn.

Tony’s cell phone rang and he looked at the display. Derek. Tony had called him earlier to cancel out on their date. Derek had not been happy when Tony had told him that something had come up at work. He had then pressed for a time when Tony would be finished but of course Tony couldn’t give him one. Things had been tense when they’d hung up and now, here was Derek trying to reach him again. Tony closed his eyes and rubbed the hand that still held the cell phone across his forehead. With a quick flip he opened it up.

“DiNozzo,” he snapped.

“Tony, we didn’t part on good terms. I don’t like that,” Derek said quietly.

Tony sighed. “I know, I don’t either but you’re going to have to understand that this is the way my job is, I can’t just stop working at quitting time.”

“Can you tell me what you’re so involved with?”

“No, I can’t do that either. You’ll just have to trust that I can’t get away right now.”

“I would understand if you decide I’m not what you want…”

“Oh, I still want you, Tony, but I also worry. I’ve seen your scars. I don’t want any more added to your collection.”

Tony snorted. “Neither do I, actually, but I won’t be involved in that way with this case.”

“Alright, but we’re still going to have to work this out. Have you eaten?”

“No, I wasn’t hungry.”

“Can you at least take a break? I worry about you, Tony,” Derek continued. “You know I’m a possessive man but I want to make this work. Meet me for a quick bite, you need to stay healthy.”

Tony looked down. Everything in him wanted to go into that conference room and find out what was going on but that just wasn’t possible. Oh, hell, why not step out for a bit. He needed a breath of fresh air anyway.

“Alright.”

“Good, meet me at Arno’s.”

Arno’s was a restaurant close to the beach, only fifteen minutes away from the office but it was also about ten minutes away from one of the clubs on the list Gibbs would be checking out.

“Maybe not Arno’s…”

“I’m already here, Tony. I’ll be waiting for you,” Derek said.

Nothing in their suspects’ MO identified restaurants, just clubs. It shouldn’t be a problem, Tony thought to himself. “Fine, I’ll be there in fifteen.”
“Good, I’ll have something waiting for you,” Derek said and hung up.

Tony looked at his cell phone for a moment but then wrote out a quick note. This shouldn’t take too long and with food already waiting he’d be back in less than an hour.

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Jimmy was antsy. He paced around the cheap motel they’d rented for the night. Burt was on the bed watching TV. Jimmy’s eyes would stray to his partner occasionally and then dart away in guilt. He didn’t want to think about Burt and what had happened but he couldn’t help it. He stretched his neck. He could feel the tension building up again. It happened a lot, that stress balling up like that, balling up so bad it sent streaks of pain over the back of his head. Things were going too fast and not fast enough. He needed another boy, needed to sink himself into a hot, tight hole so that he didn’t have to think anymore. He looked at Burt and again felt a wave of guilt. He was so pissed that night and he took it out on their boy. He didn’t mean to kill him. And now they were here and even though it was good, being together with their boys, it couldn’t last. He still should have told Burt, given him a chance to ask for another partner; should have at least explained why...

Fuck! He should never have called her, his ex, shouldn’t have asked about his Ma. She’s wastin’ away without your Dad, Jimmy…you need to come home…I had Father Nolan call your Captain, he said he could work a transfer...

What right did she have to do that? What fuckin’ right? And then he’d gone off on that punk and while leave was good he couldn’t stop thinking about what he had to go back to… He ran a hand over his face and wondered if his last boy had reported his injuries…might have had to considering all that blood. Just as well he had no intention of going back. He’d cleaned out his accounts before they hit the road. Burt hadn’t asked about all the cash they’d been spending but he wasn’t dumb. Jimmy figured he knew the score.

Still, he shouldn’t have brought Burt in on this. Just because he didn’t intend to go back, he’d never meant to ruin things for Burt. He smirked to himself. Naw, who was he kidding? Burt was as tied into events as he was and he damn-well knew it. End result? They’d started this trip together and they’d finish it together. He thought back to that night when he’d found Burt getting a blow job from a tranny. He always thought Gloria had left him because of the job but maybe it was because of the Blow Job. He smirked. Still, he’d never forget Burt’s eyes when he opened them to see him standing there, watching. Burt had been shocked at first but a smile had Burt grabbing that tranny’s head and slamming into her mouth, all the time keeping his eyes on him. Later, he got the balls to ask Burt along when he searched out a sweet boy for the night. You could say their relationship blossomed from there.

But as good as it was, what they did still wasn’t right…they shouldn’t have done it…it changed everything. Even now he couldn’t put a name to what had happened. He turned and paced the other direction. No, they shouldn’t have but fuck, he wanted to do it again. He pushed that away. What he needed was to find a sweet boy soon but it was still too early. They needed to kill some time before they hit the club he was thinking of. Tonight would be the first time they hit the same club twice but he remembered this one and he liked it. It was near the marina.

“You hungry, Burt?” Jimmy asked his partner. There were some restaurants down near where they were going.

“I could eat,” came the laconic reply.

Jimmy smiled and grabbed the car keys, excitement and lust coursing through his veins.
Something was telling him that tonight would be spectacular.
Chapter 33

Derek ordered a grilled mahi mahi burger for Tony. He figured the timing would be good as long as his boy was on time and so far Tony had yet to disappoint him. Well, with the exception of his job. It annoyed him to be second to Tony’s career. He sipped his drink, irritation flooding through him not only at Tony but at the raucous behavior of the two couples at the next table. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He hated tourists.

Arno’s was located in the part of the marina which catered to tourists and nightlife. This part of the marina was filled with pleasure craft, everything from small skiffs to large, elegant yachts bobbing in their individual slips, many adorned with strings of colored lights adding to the festive atmosphere all around the well-lit docks. There were several restaurants as well as the inevitable shops selling tee shirts and painted shell knickknacks that said “Welcome to Florida”.

Tony was almost there but first he had to pass the other half of the harbor. His eyes scanned the low-lit working piers. This part of the harbor was filled with commercial fishing vessels, weathered and sturdy, built for work, not fancy cruising. His thoughts went to Gibbs as they inevitably did whenever he passed this area. These boats somehow reminded him of the older agent. Slightly weathered, each one built for function with strong, clean lines. In his mind’s eye he could picture them forging ahead in a raging sea, dependable and sturdy, protecting the souls within, keeping them safe and warm…

He laughed aloud at his ridiculous thoughts but just the same he knew that he hadn’t felt anything like that in what seemed like forever. He searched his mind and realized that he hadn’t felt secure or even content in a very long time, probably not since the last time he’d sat in Gibbs’ basement. He huffed out a small breath in surprise and in that moment knew that he wouldn’t be saying yes to Derek. He needed that feeling of safety and trust he’d only ever felt with one man. Although it hadn’t been very long, he just knew he’d never be able to say yes to anyone at all because deep in his heart he wasn’t over Gibbs and seeing the man, being near him tonight, made him realize that he may never get over him. Tony smiled sadly as he parked. He may as well get things over with.

Tony walked into the restaurant and automatically scanned the area. Derek was sitting near the window which overlooked the boardwalk and the marina. He was sitting close to a table with two couples, obvious tourists who’d already had a bit too much to drink based on how vocal they were. Tony idly noted the loud floral print shirts thinking that they were nothing like the classic patterns that Magnum used to wear. Tony corralled his thoughts and smiled as he approached Derek who was sitting at a table for two and like he’d promised, there was a plate waiting for him. Derek stood up as he approached and took Tony’s hand, unafraid of who saw them. He leaned over and kissed Tony lightly on the cheek in greeting which Tony returned. Tony heard a slight gasp from one of the women at the next table but he ignored it, focusing instead on Derek. Tony felt a sudden flash of regret that he couldn’t give Derek what he wanted but he wasn’t going to lie about it, either. Tony had his cell phone in his hand and laid it on the table. He wanted to keep a close eye on the time, aware that Gibbs would probably call if he came out of the meeting and found him gone. He saw Derek frown but figured his job wouldn’t be the only thing to piss Derek off tonight. Oh, well.

“Thanks…for this,” Tony says gesturing towards the food.

Derek blew out a small breath. “Eat,” he said. “You obviously can’t stay long.”

Tony sighed. “I’m sorry, Derek, but this is my job…and I love doing it…”
“I know, I know,” Derek says with a small shake of his head. “Let’s not talk about that right now, okay? Please, just eat and spend what time you can with me, alright?”

Tony looked down. He wasn’t at all hungry but he felt guilty. He picked up the burger and took a bite. He looked around a bit as he chewed noticing that both couples at the next table are staring openly at both him and Derek. He almost laughed at their expressions which were half disgusted and half fascinated. He wanted to reach out and hold Derek’s hand just to see their reaction but he wouldn’t use Derek like that, especially not now. Instead he forced himself to eat a fry.

Jimmy and Burt walked along the dock. They’d eaten at one of the shacks selling over-priced seafood and beer to all of the tourists. Slowly, they made their way back along the dock. The club they want to go to was just down the street. They’d parked their car down by the club earlier because finding parking would be almost impossible later on in the evening when everyone started to hit the bars. Both men scanned the crowd as they walked, long years of caution making them automatically aware of their surroundings. They approached a restaurant they’d heard about and had planned on trying but neither of the men felt like sitting at a table, they were both feeling a bit antsy, too excited about their plan to find a sweet boy for the night. So instead of visiting Arno’s, they had walked passed it to munch on fried shrimp and cold beer at a nearby crab shack.

Tony valiantly muddled through about half of his burger and some fries. He was sipping on sweet ice tea debating when to give Derek his answer when Derek reached out to hold his hand, just as Tony had contemplated doing earlier. At that moment, one of the men at the table next to them loudly exclaimed that he’d had enough. Both Tony and Derek turned just in time to see a large man in a nauseating yellow and pink shirt pull one of the women, probably his wife, out from the table all while shooting Tony and Derek disgusted looks. Unfortunately, the wife wasn’t quite ready to vacate the table. She stumbled as she was hauled out and fell against Tony forcing him to spill his drink all over his shirt.

Tony jumped up, wiping at his shirt, his face set in a scowl. Derek used his own napkin to soak up the puddle on the table as a waitress came over to help. The large man started complaining loudly about perverted behavior but neither Derek nor Tony responded since they hadn’t done more than hold hands or share chaste pecks on the cheek. They did, however, watch with amusement as the manager came over to usher out the now angry couples. Tony looked down at his shirt. It was a mess. The waitress brought Tony more napkins but he decided to go to the men’s room to try and wash away at least some of the stickiness. He walked away not realizing that he’d left his cell phone on table.

The commotion of the two couples leaving Arno’s drew Burt and Jimmy’s attention. Jimmy’s looked around and then suddenly slapped Burt across the stomach with the back of his hand.

“You’re not going to believe who I’m lookin’ at…” he said as he stared up at the restaurant windows.

Burt looked over to where Jimmy was staring and his eyes narrowed in recognition. “Who’d a thought…”

“Yeah, you believe in fate, Burt?”

“Not usually, Jimmy, but remember…he’s a cop…”

“Yeah…and I don’t give a shit, Burt. It’s fate, I tell ya…” Jimmy said with a smile.

Burt looked at Anthony. He’d fight but hopefully he could keep Jimmy from going too far. And he had been sweet. “Fate, huh? Think fate’s a bitch who’ll just fuck you up.”
Jimmy just laughed and after a beat, Burt joined in.

Gibbs closed up the files as the teams headed out of the conference room. They had enough agents to cover eight locations, nine if he and Tony went out together but he was still debating that. Everything in him wanted to keep Tony in the office where it was safe but he knew what staying behind would do to him. Their suspects weren’t targeting Tony, everything they had said it was just a coincidence that they were in Florida but his gut was warning him to be cautious. Gibbs decided that if Tony was with him he could at least keep an eye on him. Since the pattern they’d gotten from their victims had so far indicated their suspects went to a new club every time, he’d send most of the teams to the clubs that hadn’t been hit yet. To be on the safe side he and Tony would check out the clubs already hit. With that thought in mind Gibbs gathered up the documents and headed out to find Tony.

Not seeing Tony in the office he moved over to Tony’s desk thinking the younger man might have hit the head. When Tony didn’t appear right away Gibbs got annoyed.

“What’s Tony’s cell phone number?” he asked Lali who’d just entered the office. She gave him the number and Gibbs punched it in.

Derek had been waiting for Tony to return from the men’s room when he heard/felt a vibration on the table. Looking under one of the napkins Tony had used to wipe at his shirt he found Tony’s cell phone. He opted to answer it without bothering to look at the display.

“Hello?”

Thinking at first that he’d entered the number wrong Gibbs said, “I’m looking for Tony DiNozzo.”

“He’s away at the moment,” Derek answered. His eyebrows went up when he heard a distinct growl. “Who is this?”

“You tell him to call Gibbs!” came the angry reply.

“Gibbs? Although Tony had never discussed his past relationships, Derek had heard Tony call out Gibbs’ name often enough that the thought of the man sent a wave of jealous rage through him. Gibbs was the Dom from Tony’s past who’d hurt him so badly, Derek was sure of it, and now he was calling from DC. He’d be damned if he’d ever let Gibbs get his hands on his boy again.

“You listen up, Gibbs, and you listen good. There is no way in hell you’re getting your hands on Tony again, understand? He’s been hurt enough. He belongs to me, now, so you need to stay the fuck away!” Derek growled back. He looked around because that last bit had been a bit louder than he’d intended. He raised a hand in apology to a couple of tables and lowered his voice.

Gibbs’ eyes widened at the threat. He had no idea just who the hell was on the phone but he was damn sure going to find out.

“Who. Is. This?” he demanded again, his voice very quiet. Gibbs was furious. It was obvious Tony had gone out alone, which in itself pissed him off considering the murdering bastards that were out there, but the fact that he went out to meet this over-bearing, possessive asshole enraged him. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do first, kill this guy or kick Tony’s ass for getting involved with someone he was sure was wrong for him.

“My name is Derek Barstow, got it? Now you stay away from Tony because he belongs to me. I won’t tell you again.” Derek slammed the phone shut.
Gibbs pulled the phone away from his ear and closed it quietly. He didn’t say a word although he
turned when he heard his name being called.

“Agent Gibbs? Tony left a message on my desk,” Lali said as she stood and walked towards the
legendary Senior Agent. She had no idea who he’d just spoken with but she knew she’d hate to be
that person right about now. She stood ramrod straight as she gave the message…there was just
something about Agent Gibbs that made her come to complete attention. “He went out to get a bite
at Arno’s, about 15 minutes from here, said he’d be back by 2100. He probably went to meet
Derek…” she offered.

Gibbs turned an icy blue eye on Lali. “Who’s Derek?”

“He’s the man Tony’s been seeing…”

Gibbs eyes narrowed. Abby had said that Tony was out and obviously Tony’s team knew who he
was dating. “What do you know about him?”

“Not much…Tony keeps his private life pretty quiet.”

“Give me the directions. Is Arno’s close to Club Paradiso?” Gibbs asked knowing the general
locations of all of the clubs the teams were going to. Club Paradiso was the second club on the list
but the closest to the office.

“Yes,” Lali answered but moved to her desk when the phone rang. She wondered briefly who it
was that Gibbs had been speaking with before she answered. “Molina…where? Stay there, Derek,
we’re coming to you.”

“What?” Gibbs asked as Lali quickly grabbed her gun and started towards the door.

“Two men just grabbed Tony.”
No two ways about it, if I survive this Gibbs is going to kill me… Tony closed his eyes for a second against the throbbing in his head but then opened them as he slowly turned his head to see over his shoulder. All he got for his trouble was a gun shoved hard into his side, he grunted in pain through his gag.

“Keep your head down, Anthony, or I’ll put a hole through you here and now,” came one of the voices from Tony’s nightmares. Not Lyle, or James Mulroney, but his partner, Burton Hamms.

He dropped his head back down to the carpeting. He was wedged face-down in between the front and back seat of a sedan, his hands cuffed behind his back. Hamms had gotten in behind him, sitting in the center of the backseat. Hamms had jammed one foot down onto the back of Tony’s calves and then threw his other leg over Tony’s upper back. He laughed as he held the gun to Tony’s side with one hand and fondled Tony’s ass with the other. All Tony could do was hope they got to their destination as quickly as possible. His position not only made it difficult to breathe, it was a pretty embarrassing. At least they hadn’t taken his belt…it had a knife hidden in the buckle. He counted slowly in his head to keep himself calm.

Jimmy smiled as he drove slowly through the crowded streets. He couldn’t believe their luck. They’d walked into the restaurant and while Burt had talked to the hostess about seating he’d just waltzed on by towards the restrooms at the back of the restaurant. He waited right by the door to the men’s room. It didn’t take long before his boy walked out. Jimmy just moved in right behind him, one arm on Anthony’s bicep and his gun shoved in tight to Anthony’s side. They’d walked closely together through the kitchen, raising the eyebrows of only one person as they quickly walked through. *Ya gotta love Florida,* Jimmy laughed to himself. They were outside at the back of the restaurant in seconds.

Despite his efforts to keep his thoughts as controlled as his breathing, Tony couldn’t help replaying the events that put him ass-up in the back of this car while Mulroney drove them silently away from the restaurant.

“You don’t want to do this, Lyle…” Tony had said through clenched teeth. He was trying hard to keep the fear rolled tight into a little ball in his belly. His seeing Mulroney’s and Hamm’s faces on the screen back in his office had affected him more strongly than he’d thought possible. Having Mulroney so close he could feel his breath on his neck back in the restaurant had made him freeze long enough for Mulroney to pull his gun from its holster without a struggle. He was kicking himself like crazy and knew that this would be a major topic for discussion at his next therapy session...assuming he had another session.

“Shh, sweet Anthony,” Jimmy said. “Keep it quiet or not only will I blow a hole in you, I’ll start blasting this whole fucking place. I don’t care who I hit but it’ll be on you, got that?”

Tony sucked in another breath. There was no way he could have the death of anyone else on his conscience. He’d kept his eyes scanning the area as they exited the kitchen and wondered how in the hell the busy marina could be so vacant on this side of the buildings. Not to mention dark. He’d have to write a letter to the city about public safety when he got out of this.

They started down the steps and without warning Tony threw himself backwards. Mulroney’s gun hand went wide and Tony dove for his arm. They struggled and then Tony grunted when a blinding pain exploded across the back of his head. He didn’t pass out but it didn’t take much for Mulroney’s partner, Hamms, to get him cuffed. He frisked Tony and found his backup weapon.
Shoving a napkin stolen from the restaurant into Tony's mouth, Jimmy made Tony lay face-down on the filthy ground while Burt took off to get the car. Within moments Tony found himself sucking dust out of a carpeted floor mat in a sedan. At least it's a full-sized sedan and not a compact, he told himself humorlessly as they drove off.

Tony felt sick and wished desperately that he hadn’t eaten earlier. His position made his belt cut into his stomach so that not only was he having trouble breathing, he was afraid of throwing up, too. He wasn’t sure which was worse…suffocating because of his restricted breathing (and rapidly filling sinuses just added to the fun) or choking to death on his own vomit because of the napkin shoved in his mouth. Something was going to happen, though, and he desperately prayed for the long-shot…Gibbs finding him first.

Derek remained at the table, idly spinning Tony’s cell phone over and over in his hand. Tony was taking a very long time in the men’s room and he was becoming impatient. He glanced back towards the restrooms and saw two men. He was sure one of them was Tony. His eyes widened when the men walked across the back of the restaurant towards the kitchen. They walked very closely to one another. Fisting the cell phone in his hand, Derek got up to follow but was stopped by a waitress moving towards the kitchen.

“Sir, if you’re looking for the restrooms, they’re back this way…”

“No, those two men…” Derek started, trying to keep an eye on Tony but lost him when a waiter bearing a large tray exited the kitchen. He moved around the waiter and darted into the kitchen. He looked around again but he’d lost sight of Tony. He felt a hand on his arm, it was the manager.

“Sir, you’re not allowed to be here…”

“No…my friend…something’s wrong…” Eventually Derek explained the problem and then he and the manager went to the rear of the restaurant only to see a car with two men driving away. He knew that Tony was in trouble. His fists clenched and he realized he had Tony’s cell phone still in his hand. He quickly scrolled through the contacts list, found Lali’s name and hit dial.

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Jimmy blew out a frustrated breath as he drove slowly through the crowds. They’d been moving slowly through the area for too long, already. It was still early enough that there were families and shoppers still lining the streets. Generally, they wouldn’t find a boy until late in the night and by then the streets were almost empty making it easy to take their toy to the car and make their way to the hotel room for their night of fun. This, though, was getting on his nerves. Especially every time some pedestrian got too close to the car.

“Throw something over our boy’s ass, Burt…”

“Jeez, you had to use my name…?”

“Been thinking…our boy wasn’t too surprised after his first look at me. I’m thinking they know about us.”

Burt blew out a breath as he pulled off his shirt and dropped it over Anthony. He’d already been sweating, mostly from lust and excitement, but now Jimmy’s words sent a cold chill down his back. He tugged at his wife-beater which was sticking to his chest. It looked like their ride on that slippery slope was getting faster. He felt his heart rate pick up and he shoved his gun into Anthony’s side hard. The grunt didn’t help the ball he had forming in his belly.
“What’re we gonna do?”

Jimmy was silent as he slowly took a corner through a crowd of pedestrians. Off in the distance he could see the flash of blue and red lights. Chances were that it had to do with them. Someone musta seen them leave or maybe Anthony had a date at that restaurant…shit! Why hadn’t he looked more closely at who he musta been with? All that excitement at seeing Anthony again got him thinking with his dick instead of his head. They had to get out of here. He took another corner moving away from the flashing lights. There were fewer pedestrians on this road which took them away from the hotel and towards the other side of the marina. He continued his leisurely pace and drove away from the crowds and found his way to the boat launch. It was darker here so he parked and shut off the lights. There were more flashing lights off in the distance. Roadblocks, probably. He took a deep breath.

“Not looking too good, Burt.”

Burt leaned back. He’d seen the lights, too. A surprising calm had descended over him. He patted and caressed the ass in front of him, reaching in between Anthony’s legs to casually fondle his testicles. He chuckled at the grunt and wiggle that elicited.

“Nope…guessing we’re pretty fucked…” Burt looked calmly at Jimmy. It was dark but he could see the regret in his partner’s face as he nodded slowly in agreement.

Casually, he glanced out to the docks. There were some small buildings at the ends of a couple of them. One of the docks had just a few small boats tied up.

“Looks like a good place,” Burt said. Jimmy looked over. He was quiet but then nodded. He turned back to Burt with a smile.

“Let’s get this party started.”

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Gibbs drove the agency car like he always did and if he hadn’t been concentrating on driving at breakneck speeds in an unfamiliar area he might have been more impressed with Lali’s fortitude. She held on white-faced and thin-lipped but calmly giving directions as Gibbs got them to the restaurant in record time.

Without a word Gibbs jumped out of the car almost before it came to a complete stop.

Hanscomb’s team was already at the restaurant having been called by Lali while en route. They’d also called the local PD. All of the roads heading into this area should be blocked soon and he hoped they’d gotten to it in time.

He marched up to Hanscomb who was talking to a blonde man.

“Report!” he demanded as soon as he got close.

Hanscomb turned at Gibbs’ approach. “Derek Barstow, this is Special Agent Gibbs…”

“Gibbs! You’re supposed to be in DC,” Derek growled now adding pissed off to very scared.

“I’m not…now what happened?” Gibbs demanded.

Hanscomb raised slightly surprised eyebrows. He didn’t know that Gibbs and Barstow knew each other, but then, he’d been equally surprised to learn that Barstow was SA DiNozzo’s significant other. Without losing a beat he filled Gibbs in on what Barstow had told him.

Gibbs looked around the area and felt his stomach twist up but his mind worked like mad. Not only was there a huge number of people everywhere, there were numerous buildings, roadways,
and not to mention watercraft that had to be searched. Yeah, they had IDs on both men and a partial for the vehicle, but actually finding them was going to be a bitch. He was laying out strategy in his head, matching the visuals with the mental map he had. He turned intent on finding the local LEO liaison for an update on the search when he felt a hand on his arm. He turned back but was unprepared for the fist that connected with his face.

As punches go, it was a pretty good one but it didn’t knock Gibbs down. He’d been hit more than once in his life so he instinctively reacted. In a flash he turned back and grabbed the offending arm and spun Barstow bringing his arm up behind his back. Gibbs then locked his other arm locked across Barstow’s neck.

“I don’t have time for this shit,” he growled into Barstow’s ear. Peripherally he saw Hanscomb jump to pull them apart but he released Barstow just as quickly as he’d grabbed him, throwing him forward.

Derek staggered and nearly fell to his knees but he recovered and straightened, finally turning to face Gibbs, his eyes wide as he rubbed at his throat. He wasn’t about to back down, though.

“He doesn’t need you to hurt him anymore!”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed. He turned to Hanscomb. “Go get me an update on the roadblocks.”

Hanscomb eyed both men to be sure they weren’t going to go at it again. Satisfied they wouldn’t kill one another he nodded and quickly left in search of the liaison.

“I don’t know what DiNozzo told you but I’m not here to hurt him…I’m here to catch those bastards that took him.”

The two men stared at one another for a moment. Derek saw the resolve in Gibbs’ eyes and recognized him for the caliber of man he was. Tony had only briefly mentioned Gibbs in normal conversation and then only to say he was not only the best but that he was biggest bastard of an agent in NCIS. Derek remembered the jealousy he felt at the open admiration on Tony’s face then and that jealousy had grown every time Tony gasped Gibbs’ name during their sessions together. He’d sworn to wipe Gibbs’ name from Tony’s mind but he had yet to succeed. He had an inkling now as to why he’d failed…and it pissed him off even more. But there was no time now for that. Tony was out there and in trouble.

“You get him back, Gibbs, and then you and I are going to talk about that damage you’ve done.”

Gibbs, as usual, said nothing but his eyes blazed. Here was someone else blaming him for something he didn’t know anything about but he had no time for it now. He turned, his glare landing on Hanscomb, and then he was gone.

Derek watched him march off. Gibbs was as Alpha as they came and he stood back and watched as the other men around reacted to that. He didn’t know if he stood a chance should Gibbs decide he wanted Tony back but he was going to make damn sure that if Tony did go back, it would be Tony’s decision and not Gibbs’.
Chapter 35

Burt waited in the dark car while Jimmy went out and verified that the only road out of their area was blocked. The entire time he absentmindedly patted and caressed the ass in front of him, his mind curiously blank as they waited. It took him completely by surprise when Anthony started bucking and pushing.

“Stay the fuck still!” Burt hissed but Anthony kept struggling. He finally moved his legs and hauled Anthony up. Even in the dark he could see that Anthony’s eyes were wide in panic. Burt shoved the gun up to his temple. “One word and I’ll blow you the fuck away,” he warned and then pulled the napkin out of Anthony’s mouth. Anthony’s only response was to suck in huge amounts of air, one after another. Burt realized then that their boy had been close to suffocating. “Fuck!” he muttered but left Anthony alone to control his breathing. When it had slowed down a bit and it looked like Anthony was breathing okay through both his nose and mouth he moved to put the napkin back.

“Please don’t!” Tony gasped out.

Burt just looked at him and dropped the napkin. “I don’t want you dead.”

That gun against my head tends to make me believe otherwise, Tony thought but his mind was racing. Hamms didn’t want him dead but what about Mulroney?

“Then why’d you take me?” Tony asked although he already knew the answer. These two were hell-bent for someone tonight and just happened to come across him. Must have seemed like an omen. Well, better him that some other poor kid.

Hamms gave a humorless chuckle. “You believe in fate?”

Ding, ding, ding…! We have a winner… Tony thought and then gave himself a mental head slap. Focus, DiNozzo…!

“I think men make their own decisions. Whose decision was this?” Hamms didn’t answer but Tony already knew. These men were partners but it was Mulroney driving everything. It was Mulroney who’d chosen him (never mind that Tony had been sucked in by the silver hair and blue eyes that night). “You don’t have to be a part of this…”

“It’s too late…” Hamms said so emotionlessly that Tony felt a chill in his stomach. These men were going to end something soon, if not tonight. He just hoped he wasn’t part of that plan. Although he knew Gibbs was out there, he hoped he made it in time.

“Is it too late for you or for me?” Tony asked. He could feel Hamms’ despair.

“I don’t want you dead,” Hamms repeated but Tony wondered if he’d step up to the plate to stop Jimmy.

“I don’t want you dead,” Hamms repeated but Tony wondered if he’d step up to the plate to stop Jimmy.

“I know you don’t,” Tony said quietly, thinking hard. “Just like I know you didn’t want Carl Rogers dead,” he said looking at Hamms and then he felt his gut twinge, “…or Gerald Jenkins…” He was rewarded by a widening of Hamms’ eyes. His gut had been right; they hadn’t known the young man’s injuries had been fatal. “But you tried to stop Jimmy, didn’t you. And it’s getting worse.”

Burt looked at Tony and frowned. “You don’t know what he’s going through, you’ve got no idea,”
he growled.

“You’re right. What I do know is that you’re trying to protect him. He’s your partner, right? It’s what partners do…”

“Yeah,” Burt said and then looked at Tony. “You’re a cop, too.” Burt looked away again. “I can’t let him do that to you.”

Hamms had no interest in killing Anthony. The other boys had been mistakes. And Anthony is a cop…he couldn’t just cold-bloodedly kill him and he couldn’t let Jimmy do it, either. He was still contemplating what to do when he heard a noise. He had one arm against Anthony’s chest and the gun pointed straight at Anthony’s forehead. He looked around quickly but relaxed when he recognized his partner sliding out of the shadows. Jimmy quietly opened the door and gestured for Burt to get out. He did but not before tying the napkin over Anthony’s mouth and around his head. It wasn’t as effective a gag as shoving the napkin in Anthony’s mouth, but he could at least breathe around it.

“What d’ya know about boats?” Jimmy whispered when Burt finally stepped out.

“Don’t know jack shit…total landlubber…”

“Yeah, me too,” Jimmy said with a sigh. He’d run a quick reconnaissance of their area and found nothing but cops and more cops, talking to people and checking out buildings and cars. They were moving towards this side of the marina and with the roadway blocked they were penned in tight. He’d briefly contemplated stealing one of the boats but didn’t have a clue how to operate it and the noise they’d make would be just like lighting off a frigging flare.

“I’m sorry, Burt…”

“Shut the fuck up, Jimmy,” Burt replied. The fact that Jimmy had considered stealing a boat told him how hopeless their situation was. Even having a hostage wasn’t going to make this go any better. “Not like I didn’t know how this was gonna end.”

Jimmy looked at his partner, nothing more than a dark silhouette next to him. Yeah, they’d both known how this was going to end but suddenly, he wanted to know why.

“Never asked you why you went with me that first night.” Jimmy saw the shadow shift in a shrug.

Burt knew what night Jimmy was talking about only he didn’t have a real answer. He gave the only one that made sense to him.

“You’re my partner.”

Jimmy nodded, not knowing whether Burt could see it or not. “Yeah,” he responded knowing Burt would know what he meant. He always did.

“There’s a little shack at the end of the second dock or pier-thing from the left. Looks like a good place.”

Burt turned to look and saw the building Jimmy referred to. “Okay, I’ll get the stuff out of the trunk.”

Their stuff consisted of every spare round of ammunition they had. It wasn’t a lot but it would hold the cops off for awhile. While Burt got the stuff, Jimmy got Tony.
“Whadya’ got, McGee?” Gibbs spat into the phone. The search was going very slowly but based on witness reports they’d gotten so far, it didn’t look as though their suspects had made it passed the roadblocks. Gibbs monitored the radio he’d been given for any further updates. They also had the Coast Guard and Harbor Patrol watching for activity on the water but it didn’t look as though anyone had left the that way.

“Background on our suspects,” McGee responded. He was pacing, both he and Ziva were waiting to board their flight but he had to relay the latest information. While McGee had been glad at first about not accompanying Gibbs to Florida, not being there was killing him…especially now. Yeah, he was following Gibbs’ orders but everything in him was screaming that he should have been there, too. Granted, he could have easily been in on the same meeting so he wouldn’t have been able to stop Tony from stepping out, but then maybe Gibbs wouldn’t have left Tony alone…not with what he’d been through. And there’d been absolutely no hint that the suspects had targeted Tony but knowing Tony, if he’d realized their suspects were near or maybe figured out who they were targeting, he would have traded himself instead. He just hoped they could find him in time. But for now all he could do was relay the information they’d gathered on their suspects as well as the profile they’d worked up. It wasn’t good. McGee told Gibbs all about the death of Mulroney’s father and his family’s recent actions. He included the incident that sent Mulroney on forced medical leave as well as Hamms’ recent divorce.

“So these guys are loners, Boss. They kept themselves apart from the rest of their unit. No one’s come out and said it, but I get the feeling they weren’t well-liked at all…I think the tip we got came from someone in their department but there’s no proof of that yet…”

“No, you probably won’t find any, either. Let that go for now, McGee. Anything else?”

“Mulroney did a tour in the Army but not Hamms. Still, they were both ranked excellent on the firing range. It also looks like Mulroney had no intention of returning from this trip, Boss. He cleaned out his accounts before leaving.”

“What about Hamms?”

“He did, too, although it wasn’t much…looks like his wife took everything in the divorce.”

Gibbs smirked. That sounded familiar. “That it?”

“Yes, Boss…Ziva and I are on the next flight out…”

“Good,” was all Gibbs said before ending the call. It wasn’t a lot, but it told McGee that Gibbs wanted them there and that was enough.

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Tony was shoved and half-dragged down the pier by Mulroney. He could see the small building they were headed towards but wondered what the plan was. As they made their way there Mulroney suddenly stopped. There was a small skiff tied off alongside a larger boat.

“Hey, Burt…” Mulroney and Hamms moved closer. He gestured to the small craft thinking that maybe they could get away quietly.

“Won’t work, Jimmy,” Burt answered. “Look…” he said and gestured towards the open water just visible beyond the lighted buoys. Jimmy looked and saw a ship cutting across the entrance to the harbor. There were other ships moving back and forth obviously searching for something. They’d
never get out without being seen.

Jimmy didn’t say anything; he just pushed Tony towards the building. As they moved Burt cut loose whatever was tied off and pushed it away. He wanted a clear area around the building so that no one could sneak up on them. They got the door opened in moments and then they were inside what seemed to be some sort of small office. Next to the door was a counter that wrapped around two walls with several large windows over them. Opposite the entry was another window that looked almost directly over the water. Jimmy looked out and saw that there was probably only three feet of walkway between the building and the edge. He could see the hand grips of a ladder that disappeared down into the darkness. The rest of the office space was filled with some filing cabinets and a door to a bathroom and a storage room. Burt started looking around the floor. Jimmy shoved Tony down onto the floor under the counter opposite the window that faced the water. He didn’t know what Burt was looking for so he asked.

“Making sure there’s no opening from below…I don’t see anything so they’ll have to come at us from the water or the dock.”

Burt moved down near Tony and continued looking. Jimmy didn’t see it, but he reached out and squeezed Tony’s shoulder. Tony gave him a sharp look and then glanced back at Jimmy who was still looking through the window, using the muzzle of the gun in his hand to scratch at his chin. He tightened his fist around Burt’s gift.

Jimmy nodded but kept looking out of the window. “I see movement down where we left the car…won’t be long now.”

“Nope, not long,” Burt agreed.

Gibbs led Tony’s team down toward the working side of the harbor. He was impressed with how well they worked together. Lali was sharp and directed the other two men with quick, concise orders. From what he’d seen of her so far he figured she was ready for her own team although he hoped that she’d stay with Tony a bit longer. Gibbs needed to know that Tony had her on his six.

“Teams have started searching the storage buildings in the boatyard,” Hanscomb reported as soon as he walked up. The general consensus was that the warehouses and outbuildings were the most likely spot for the suspects to hide out. Gibbs didn’t say anything. His eyes kept moving over the area. He watched as the Harbor Patrol pulled a buoy line across the water separating the marina from the rest of the harbor. Short of swimming underwater, their suspects wouldn’t be able to get back over to that side, not that they’d want to. Access into the harbor was through the commercial side and was currently blocked by the Coast Guard.

Off to his left Gibbs saw several larger ships. There were spotlights skimming over the surface of the water, highlighting the water below the piers as well as the ships themselves. Closer to the marina were smaller piers. This area handled smaller commercial ventures. There were lots of boats here, party boats and harbor cruisers. Most were docked but there were a few moored further out. It was then his eye caught sight of a smaller vessel, maybe 35ft long. It seemed to belong to a fishing charter. It was bumping against another boat. He winced because he could tell there weren’t any fenders to keep the two boats from damaging each other and he realized it wasn’t tied off properly. Aft of the boat was a small skiff bobbing in the water, again not tied off. It bore the same color markings as the larger ship.

“Lali, find out where Golden Sun Charters dock their boats.”
Lali looked out to where Gibbs had been staring while getting her phone out. She was on the phone with the Harbor Master in seconds.
Chapter 36

Jimmy looked at Burt and then at Tony. Without a word he stepped over to Tony and pulled him forward and then threw him down onto his stomach. He straddled Tony’s thighs despite his struggles and started undoing his belt.

“What’re you doing, Jimmy?” Burt demanded looking at Jimmy’s angry face and Anthony’s wide, panicked eyes. “We don’t have time for that!”

“Fuck that, Burt! I need to fuck this boy, just one more time before it all goes to hell…”

“No, Jimmy…if we’re going out and you wanna fuck…then fuck me…”

Jimmy froze at those words. NO! Burt did not just say that…! “Are you outta your fucking mind, Burt? You know what’s gonna happen here…and you know how fucking confidential autopsy reports are. There’s no fucking way it’s gonna read that we did each other before going out…!”

The net was getting tight real fast. Burt shrugged his shoulders. “We should still let Anthony go.”

Jimmy jumped up off of Tony and got in Burt’s face. “What the fuck for?”

As soon as Jimmy got off of Tony he rolled over and started working his cuff. He couldn’t believe it when Burt had slipped a key into his hand but this was his chance and there was no fucking way he was going to let Mulroney touch him again. So while Burt distracted Jimmy, Tony quickly unlocked the cuffs. In seconds he had one side unlocked and was moving towards his belt buckle with its hidden knife.

“Jimmy, you said it yourself…it’s not looking too good. But with everything we’ve done we’ve never killed any cops. If we keep him here, that’s what’ll happen. I also don’t want to go down as a cop raper…”

“It’s too fucking late for that, isn’t it, Burt? We’ve already had this boy once…” At that moment Jimmy turned back to Tony and saw his hand at his belt. Without a sound he raised his gun and pointed it at Tony and then everything seemed to happen at once.

Tony rolled to the side and lifted his arm to throw his knife. But just as he threw Burt jumped forward. There was a gunshot and Burt fell nearly on top of Tony. Tony looked up and saw the hilt of his belt knife sticking out of Jimmy’s chest.

Jimmy stood there, eyes wide as he realized that he’d just shot Burt. He didn’t seem to notice the blade sticking out of his chest. Instead he roared and then pointed his gun at Tony but Tony was already moving. One shot hit the window in front of him but Tony kept going. Shielding his face with his forearms, Tony dove through the broken window. Fortunately, his momentum was enough that it carried him over the narrow walkway and straight into the water. He was aware of shots still being fired as he dove down into the darkness, only peripherally aware of the flashes of light flaring around him.

Tony struggled to get the gag out of his mouth as he sank into the cold darkness. Although in reality it was probably only a few seconds, it felt like it took much longer. Tony’s chest was tight with his need for oxygen but he kept calm and worked the knot. Once the gag was gone he shot upwards. Somewhere out there Gibbs was waiting for him and he wouldn’t disappoint him again. With that thought in mind he pushed himself upwards, gasping and coughing as he broke the surface. He looked around and saw the next pier over but he’d still be in the line of fire if he swam
into open water. Instead he swam back to shore, staying as close as possible to the pier foundation. He could see a short ladder up ahead so he made that his goal knowing in his heart that Gibbs would be there.

“Shots fired, one suspect in the water…”

Gibbs motioned with one arm and both Tony’s and Hanscomb’s teams spread out. They were first on site since figuring out where their suspects were hiding. He could see other teams moving towards them and taking cover. Spotlights now converged on the building and surrounding water. He could just make out the form of someone in the water. In a heartbeat he knew it was DiNozzo. He pulled out his radio.

“Man in water is the hostage…repeat…the man in the water is the hostage. He is a federal agent…”

“Cover me!” Gibbs barked to Lali as he scuttled down to the pier. He dropped flat as more shots rang out but he got to the side closest to where Tony was swimming in.

“Tony…here!” he called out. He heard a reply as he climbed down the short ladder to the water. In seconds he felt a hand grasp his. “You hurt?”

“No…” Tony answered with a short cough. Gibbs pulled him forward until he could grab the ladder for himself then Tony saw Gibbs move to the side of the ladder to let him up first and he wanted to hug the guy. He felt Gibbs’ arm cross over behind him and knew Gibbs would follow him up.

Once they were up Gibbs called for some cover fire. As soon as the shots sounded both Gibbs and Tony were up and running, keeping low until they were behind cover. Gibbs noted the handcuff hanging from Tony’s wrist as he checked him over for injuries. Amazingly, it didn’t even look like Tony got any cuts from the broken window he jumped through.

“I’m fine…” Tony protested seeing Gibbs intense scrutiny.

Gibbs reached out and head slapped…hard.

“Thanks, Boss…” Tony answered with a grimace and a rub to the back of his head. Despite the fact that his head was still sore from the knock he took earlier, that head slap from Gibbs was better than anything else he could imagine. It was like coming home.

They waited a bit longer but no more shots were forthcoming. They decided to move back to the control point, staying low the entire way. Once they were back in a safe position Lali moved up. The first thing she did was punch Tony in the arm.

“Owww! You guys are beating me up more than they did…” Tony whined but he was ignored. Hanscomb snickered, he’d seen the head slap. They were joined by the CID Team Lead and the SWAT Team Lead.

Gibbs smirked and then barked at Tony, “Report!”

Tony blew out a slightly petulant breath but then jumped right into his report. “They grabbed me at the restaurant…is Derek alright?”

“He’s fine but you won’t be if you don’t tell me what the hell happened down there…we’ll talk
about why later…”

Tony’s eyes opened wide. Yup, he was in deep shit and he really couldn’t say he didn’t deserve it.

Tony gave a quick glance at Lali and saw the fury in her eyes. *Deep shit…really, really deep shit…*

“Both suspects are injured. Mulroney shot Hamms in an altercation. I think he’s still alive. Mulroney has my belt knife in his chest. I don’t know how badly he’s injured but he was the one doing the shooting. They have their service weapons and some spare ammo, maybe forty rounds. The building is an office space and has the window I dove out of as well as windows in the south and east facing walls. The north wall facing us is a bathroom and a storage room.”

Gibbs nodded and relayed the information. He saw Harry and Stan move up and visually check over their team lead. They looked pissed, too, and Gibbs approved but it was time now to deal with these dirt bags.

“What’s their mindset, Tony? What did they fight about?”

Tony took a deep breath. What had happened to him was no secret but it sucked admitting to it.

“They fought over me. I got in a few words in with Hamms, maybe it worked,” Tony’s eyes slid away to look unseeingly out into the dark as he talked about the two men, formulating an accurate profile on the spot. “He’s a follower. He enjoys what they’ve done so far but he draws the line at killing cops. He’s the one who’s pushing for this to end here. It’s Mulroney who’s gone off the deep end, there was something traumatic in his recent history, I think, but Hamms has been trying to protect him. They’re partners.” Tony said the last and looked back at Gibbs. “They know they’re not going to get out of this and they won’t go to prison, they’ll make sure of it.”

“So they’re gonna do a Butch and Sundance…”

Tony’s eyes widened at the reference. A bright grin spread across Tony’s face which Gibbs returned with a smirk. He should have known that’d be a movie Gibbs would be familiar with.

“Good job, DiNozzo…”

Tony’s grin turned slightly stunned. Gibbs next words, however, caused that grin to turn into a scowl.

“…now head back to…” Gibbs started but Tony interrupted him.

“What? No!”

“I don’t want you anywhere near this when they come out shooting.”

Tony shook his head. It was one of his worst nightmares -- a shootout with Gibbs in the front and without him at his six.

“No, Gibbs…”

“You trust your team, Tony?”

“Yeah, but…” Tony began his eyes wide as he shook his head slowly in negation.

“They’ll have my back,” Gibbs said seriously. “Trust me, Tony, these guys are gonna go down but I’m not going to have anyone questioning your role here, understand?”
“Gibbs…!”

In an uncharacteristic move Gibbs reached out with one hand and squeezed his shoulder.
“Promised you I’d get them. You’ve got a good team, they’ll watch my six and I’ll watch theirs.”

“We’ve got this, Tony,” Lali added quietly.

Tony turned to look at her and there was steel in her gaze as well.

“If they get out of this alive, you’ll get to slam the door and throw away the key,” she promised.

Tony looked back at Gibbs and again at Lali. They were right, dammit, but he hated it. He
couldn’t say anything, there were no words. He just nodded and looked at each of them, Gibbs,
Lali, Stan and Harry.

“Go get ‘em,” he said thickly.

Gibbs nodded and turned to Hanscomb, the SWAT officer and the rest of the team leads. “These
men are going to come out shooting but I want every effort made to take them alive. Lieutenant,
you’ve got the right side of the pier. Hanscomb, you take your team and CID down to the pier left
of our suspects,” he said. “Harbor Patrol’s got the building from the south. We’ll go in first and
come at ‘em straight on so everyone watch your crossfire…”

“Wait a minute Gibbs,” started the Lieutenant. “These men are cops; they’re not under federal
jurisdiction…

Gibbs turned his glare onto the Lieutenant. “These cops killed two military men, Lieutenant.
They’re serial rapists whose victims were mostly military. I don’t give a damn if they’re cops…
you’re mine!”

The stare-down between the two men lasted only a few seconds but Tony was sure it seemed a lot
longer to the LT. When the Lieutenant looked away Tony very nearly laughed out loud.

“Let’s move,” Gibbs said and Tony watched them slip silently into the dark.
“Christ, Burt! Why’d ya hafta get in the middle?” Jimmy panted. He was holding Burt to his chest even though it was a sodden mess. He’d pulled out the knife Anthony had stuck him with and now the wound was bleeding freely. His whole chest hurt like a sonofabitch and it was getting hard to breathe. He looked down at the man he held cradled in his arms. Burt’s side was in the same condition as his chest. Oh, fuck…he couldn’t believe it, he’d shot his own partner. He closed his eyes, the pain of that thought worse than the vise crushing his chest. It didn’t matter, though. They weren’t going to be here much longer. He looked down at the hand he had pressed up against Burt’s side. He was done but maybe Burt wasn’t as bad as him. He prodded at Burt’s side as gently as he could. Burt gasped and grabbed Jimmy’s hand to stop him but Jimmy had felt enough. There wasn’t an exit wound and from the amount of blood and the stink...

“Doesn’t look good, does it, Jimmy,” Burt gasped out.

“Naw…I killed you, Burt. I’m so fucking sorry. I killed you and Anthony killed me. Just as well, though, ‘cos we’re fucked anyway. You know that, Burt, right? There’s no way I’m gonna let them lock us up…neither of us would last a night behind bars…”

Burt nodded heavily as he looked into his partner’s eyes, agreeing as he always did.

Jimmy saw the acceptance in his partner’s eyes and he hated himself. He was the one that brought them to this point, knew playing with the boys had been his idea. Going off the deep end was on him, too. It was all his fault, his fault that Burt was in this mess.

“Burt…”

“Can it, Jimmy,” Burt gasped. “Keep tellin’ you…walked in with my eyes wide open. It’s been good, too…” He choked on that last bit as another wave of pain coursed through him. He felt Jimmy’s hand grasp hard at his. It seemed to anchor him somewhat and he grinned slightly. His partner always knew what he needed. “Just promise me something, okay?”

Jimmy’s eyes never left his partner’s face. “You name it, Burt…”

“Don’t take out any of them out there…”

Jimmy almost laughed. “You were always the one to talk about brothers in blue…”

“Just promise me…” Burt grimaced at the last but then looked up at Jimmy. He grinned.

“Okay, okay…” Jimmy replied with a grin. They both knew what they had to do, so with slightly numb fingers, Jimmy loaded his partner’s gun and checked his own.

Tonys watched from a distance with clenched fists as Gibbs and his team approached the building. They had a portable barricade and a loudspeaker borrowed from the PD.

“Mulroney, Hamms…I’m Special Agent Gibbs, NCIS. You are surrounded. You need to throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up.”

Tony heard a voice, it was weak but he could still identify Mulroney.

“What the fuck is NCIS? This is what I think of your federal agency…” Mulroney ended his statement with a volley of gunfire that had Hanscomb’s team scrambling behind cover.
Tony saw Gibbs kneel behind Stan who held the barricade but still his heart was in his throat and he damned Gibbs for not letting him be there at his six. He chewed at his bottom lip. The shots were expected, provoked, actually. Tony knew Gibbs was trying to make them expend their ammunition. The men had nowhere to go. It didn’t make watching this any easier.

“It doesn’t have to end this way, Mulroney…!”

There was no answer. Gibbs turned and looked over his shoulder straight at Tony. Tony knew at that moment that there wasn’t anything Gibbs could do to change the outcome of this mess. Tony was correct in his profile but there was no triumph in that. The bastards would be getting off easily compared to their victims. Tony gave Gibbs a quick nod which Gibbs returned.

“This is your last chance, Mulroney!” Gibbs said.

But Mulroney’s answer was to come out of the building, gun blazing with Hamms one step behind him exactly as Tony figured they would. It all happened so fast, and despite Gibbs’ order to take them alive, someone fired off a shot and then everyone followed suit. It went from almost complete silence to a total warzone with weapons firing from every direction.

Gibbs never fired a shot. Despite his innate need to kill the bastards who’d hurt Tony, he also trusted in Tony’s profile and he’d been aware that after the initial volley every shot coming from both Mulroney and Hamms, both expert marksmen, went high. His long ago words to Kate echoed in his head, “…it was suicide by cop…” So while he couldn’t have stopped what these bastards had orchestrated, he sure as hell wasn’t going to help them get what they wanted. That distinction would have to be enough.

Tony watched both men go down. He was sure they were dead before they hit the wood of the pier. Still, momentum kept their bodies in motion. They tumbled forward until they finally came to rest and then all was again silent. A few seconds of complete quiet passed before Gibbs and Lali moved forward, Stan and Harry covering them. They kicked away the handguns and verified both men were dead. Tony sat back with a sigh, his heart still hammering away against his chest but noticeably slowing down. He watched Gibbs give a hand signal and then turn towards him. Tony could almost hear the words coming from Gibbs’ mouth: it’s done…

Later, it took both Lali and Gibbs to make Tony let himself be checked out by the EMT. Tony actually flinched at the glare Gibbs shot at him when he admitted to being knocked in the head earlier in the evening.

“Well, just add it to the list of things to talk about…”

Ziva and McGee showed up while the scene was still being processed. Neither of them, though, had eyes for the action going on around them. All they saw was their friend who was deeply engrossed in overseeing the processing of the scene. Although he joked lightly with several others, his tension was obvious to those who knew him. McGee looked down at Ziva and then, without a word, they both moved up to Tony.

“Hey, Ziva and McSenior…oomph!” Tony began with a wide smile just before he was enveloped in a huge hug from Ziva. He was momentarily surprised but returned it wholeheartedly. McGee just stood behind her, a wide grin on his face. Despite the circumstances, he really was glad to see Tony. When Ziva stepped back, McGee stepped forward and gave him a hug, too, albeit brief and full of manly back-slapping and some laughter.

“You are wet,” Ziva said, her voice was steady but her eyes were noticeably bright.

“It’s Florida, Zee-vah…everyone enjoys the water…”
Ziva’s eyes searched Tony’s for a bit. “Are you alright?”

And Tony grinned, that same bright grin that didn’t reach his eyes that they’d seen all too often when Tony had been back in DC. “Of course…it’s all over and I’m grrreat!”

“Riiight…where’s Gibbs?” McGee asked. If anyone could settle Tony it would be Gibbs.

“If you’re done with the group hug there’s work to do…” Gibbs said, showing up seemingly out of nowhere and interrupting the reunion.

Tony looked over and saw the glint in the blue eyes. “My team’s got this, Gibbs…” Tony said referring to the sudden appearance of McGee and Ziva.

“And my team’ll get with yours to write it up…tomorrow. With me, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said and then turned and started walking towards the parking lot.

Tony’s eyes widened just as his stomach seemed to drop. It looked like it was time to finish their earlier conversation. With a look at Tim and Ziva who both gave him a commiserating grimace and another one towards Lali who gave him a shooing motion, Tony turned and followed Gibbs.

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“Where to?” Gibbs asked when they got into the car.

“My place…I need to change…”

Gibbs nodded and they walked to the agency sedan. He figured they’d deal with getting Tony’s car later. With the exception of giving directions the drive was silent, both men lost in thought. Gibbs looked over at Tony. It was dark with only an occasional headlight flashing across the younger man’s face but Gibbs didn’t need any light to recognize the tension rolling off of Tony in waves.

He was practically vibrating with it. Gibbs’ protective instincts were already on overdrive because of those bastards but now, instead of the desire to destroy the threat, he felt a need to pull Tony close. He wanted to examine every square inch of the man to make sure he was whole and unharmed. He wanted to take care of him.

They had just pulled into the driveway and parked next to a closed garage when two figures came barreling towards the car. Tony’s first move was to stop Gibbs from pulling his weapon.

“My neighbors…friends…” he said quickly and then stepped out of the car into the arms of both Steven and Alan.

“We saw you on the news! Tony, are you alright!” Steven cried as both he and Alan hugged and kissed Tony repeatedly on the cheek, a few of the kisses falling lightly on his mouth, too.

Tony looked over at Gibbs and saw the not-unexpected glare. He pulled back a bit. “Hey, guys, I’m fine…really. It’s over…”

Alan looked Tony over critically. “Was that…?” Alan didn’t finish his statement but the news reporter said that the two men were accused of being serial rapists and murderers and had been tracked from the DC area. He figured they were the ones who’d hurt Tony so many months before.

“Yeah…they’re dead…we’ll talk about this later, okay?”

Alan just nodded and then looked over to Gibbs. Tony saw where he was looking and almost
grimaced but schooled his features. Oh, yeah…they’d definitely be talking later…

“Steven, Alan…this is Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs…”

“Gibbs…” Steven nearly squeaked, his eyes widening comically as he took in the older man with Tony. His eyes traveled over the fine looking older man and a saucy little smile curved his lips. He looked back at Tony who just rolled his eyes.

“Yes, that Gibbs…” Tony said but before he even finished Steven was around the car and putting his hand out to take Gibbs’ hand in both of his.

“We’ve heard so much about you…!” he cooed.

Tony was stunned at the amused look on Gibbs’ face. All Gibbs did was raise an eyebrow in Tony’s direction.

Fortunately Alan came to Tony’s rescue. “Yes, we have, Agent Gibbs. It’s a pleasure to meet you but we know you’ve had a long day…I’m quite sure we’ll have a chance to speak again. Come on, Steven…” Alan finished while pulling Steven away.

Gibbs watched them move back to their home next door. He turned back to Tony but saw that he was already half-way up the walkway to his own front door. In moments he’d unlocked the door and entered but left the door open. Gibbs took that as an invitation. He followed.

Once inside he took a look around. Tony was standing next to an open cabinet. He was pouring liquor into two glasses. From off to his left, Gibbs heard an electronic beep and knew it was an answering machine. He had a moment of déjà vu. That last message Tony had left at his house was still burned into his memory.

Gibbs looked around some more. It was different from Tony’s apartment back in DC. Back there Tony’s place was modern and sharp, full of electronic gadgets Gibbs always figured were part of that fancy entertainment system he’d been so proud of and although the apartment had been comfortable, it still had a slightly neglected air about it, as though the owner spent more time anywhere other than there. He almost laughed to himself. Tony’s apartment was a lot like his place. The only rooms Gibbs used besides his bedroom and basement were the kitchen and living room, the latter only on the rare occasion he had someone over.

This house, though, was vastly different. It looked well lived-in. Not to say that it was shabby or messy. No, this room looked comfortable and homey, as though Tony had friends over often and their shared laughter somehow permeated the furnishings and pictures around him. It looked a lot more settled. It looked, he thought with a pang, like a home. A home that Tony spent a lot of time in, maybe even a home he shared with someone else. Gibbs felt a flash of jealous anger at that thought because he pictured Barstow here and he didn’t like it. He looked back at Tony.

Tony filled a glass with amber liquid and slammed it. He took a breath and then refilled his glass and poured a second one for Gibbs. Tony carried the glasses over to Gibbs and handed him one. He stared at Gibbs for a moment. He had no idea where to start.

“Go shower, change…I’m not going anywhere,” Gibbs ordered gently, taking the decision out of his hands.

Tony nodded slightly. “Make yourself at home…” Tony said with a gesture to the living area and then turned and quickly walked down the hallway taking his glass with him.
Tony got to his room and closed the door. He leaned against it with his eyes closed. He was trying to regain some semblance of equilibrium because absolutely everything seemed so out of whack. So much had happened – seeing Mulroney and Hamms again, being kidnapped and the full realization that his past – his traumatic, painful past – was now fully known by everyone close to him but most especially by Gibbs. And now Gibbs was out there waiting for him in his living room. Gibbs was waiting to talk to him. Christ, he’d spent the entire ride home trying to figure out just what the hell he was going to say and he was no closer to an answer now than he was then.

“Aaaagh!” he muttered to himself as he lightly knocked his head back against the door. He distantly heard the beep of his answering machine and knew that it was Derek trying to reach him. If Gibbs hadn’t been prowling around out in his living room he would have been on the phone in a heartbeat. He desperately wanted to be taken down, he needed it. He felt like he was going to fly apart any second. With a blown out breath of frustration he lifted the glass that was still in his hand to his lips but his stomach churned at the thought of another drink. Instead he set the glass down and moved to the bathroom to shower knowing that he couldn’t keep Gibbs waiting forever.

Gibbs looked around a bit more. Tony said to make himself at home and while Gibbs knew what Tony had meant, he decided to take his words literally. First things first, he quickly looked through the house and saw the guestroom, bathroom, playroom...playroom. Although the playroom was really no surprise, imagining Barstow in this room with Tony sent such a fierce burning anger coursing through him that, by rights, should have made each play piece burst into flames. They didn’t, of course, so Gibbs quietly closed the door and continued looking through the house. He ended up in the kitchen and noted the attached laundry room with a door into the backyard. It was too dark to see what was back there but Gibbs could make out the faint lines of a structure of some sort. He made a mental note to ask Tony about it later. He turned back to the kitchen. Tony hadn’t eaten earlier and Gibbs intended to rectify that first and then, considering the playroom he’d found, he knew exactly what it was Tony needed. Talking would just have to wait.

Tony finished his shower but it hadn’t helped much. His movements continued to feel jerky and spasmodic as he dressed in soft sleep shorts and a t-shirt. He had the sudden desire to just run and run but instead he forced himself to walk out of his bedroom. He kept his arms wrapped around his middle because he had the faint suspicion that he would shatter at any moment. He entered the living room only to find it empty. Hearing a noise in the kitchen he found Gibbs stirring something on the stove. Naturally, the smell of coffee permeated the air and brought a faint smile to Tony’s lips. Gibbs looked up at that moment and Tony registered the sharp eyes looking him over. He felt a frisson of excitement skitter down his back at the intense scrutiny. It was matched by the puddle of warmth that curled in his belly at seeing Gibbs at his stove. He had the idle thought that he should be a better host but it slipped away when those blue eyes focused on his and he caught his breath.

Tony wondered if he’d entered a time warp of some kind because suddenly those blue eyes were inches from his own and it was like he was back at the pier again, sinking down into the dark
depths. Only this time the water wasn’t cold at all, he felt warmth suffuse his body as all those vibrating pieces of him settled down and slid back into their respective places. He let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and felt his knees go weak. It had to be lack of oxygen, right? Because he wanted nothing more than to slip down to his knees and just keep dropping down into the warm blue depths that regarded him so intently. Instead he felt a hand at his arm and a warm breath brush across his cheek.

“Sit down.”

Tony’s eyes dropped (why did that seem so right?) and he turned to the table. A chair moved away and the hand that was still on his arm pushed him down but his head was beginning to float.

“Tony, do you trust me?”

Tony kept his eyes down as he answered. “Yes.”

“Good boy. You need to settle down and I can help you with that. I want you to drop for me…”

Tony wanted to shout, he wanted to cry…he couldn’t drop. Not the way Gibbs wanted him to and not the way he needed to. He felt the prickling of tears at the back of his eyes as he was filled with a deep sorrow because he couldn’t do what Gibbs asked. He opened his mouth to admit his shame but a finger put gentle pressure against his lips. Somehow it felt like a benediction.

“Shhh…drop for me Tony…”

Tony felt the finger move away and he wanted to weep until he felt the hands that he knew to be hard and calloused run gently through his hair. Tony’s eyes closed completely at the pleasure those hands brought. They stroked through his hair and ran down over the tops of his shoulders, each stroke settling him more and more, filling him with calm and a deep feeling of safety. The stroking stopped and Tony wanted to beg Gibbs to continue but then a warm hand settled on his nape and suddenly everything made sense and the tears that he’d held at bay dripped down his face when he realized with a sudden painful clarity that this was what he’d been seeking, what Alan and Steven had tried so hard to explain. He’d only ever had a taste of it with anyone else and only then after struggling so hard. Tony knew he wasn’t completely into his subspace but he was deeper than he’d ever been and all it had taken was a gentle order from Gibbs and the touch of his hands. More tears dripped down Tony’s face. For the first time he was seeing the door finally opening but the knowledge that he’d never step through broke his heart. Gibbs wasn’t his.
“Its okay, Tony,” Gibbs said. “I’ve got you…”

No, you don’t have me…and I don’t have you. All I have is this moment, here, tonight. He felt the return of the stroking hands and he decided to take what he could so he let himself get lost in the feel of it. He pushed pain down, felt it recede for now. After a moment he felt a return of the calm those hands brought. His tears were dried and he heard a murmured “Good boy…” He felt pleasure fill his body despite the distant aching of his heart.

“Eat,” said the voice of his fantasies. Tony opened his eyes and looked down. Food had magically appeared before him. Soup, warm and delicious, snaked its way down his throat. He kept eating until it was gone. He drank the glass of water that was placed in his hand. The strong hand was back on his arm and he followed where it led him. He was lying down in his bed and the hand again stroked his hair.

“Sleep,” came the low voice and Tony closed his eyes. It never occurred to him to balk. Following Gibbs’ orders came as naturally as breathing so he slipped easily into sleep.

Gibbs watched over Tony as he slept. He’d known what condition Tony was in back at the pier and in the car. He knew exactly what it was that Tony needed so he decided that he would provide it. No way in hell was he going to call for Barstow regardless of what right that bastard might think he had. Right now Tony was in his care and he would see to his needs…and damn, what an eye-opener that had been!

Tony’s responsiveness had been the thing of fantasies and he had to fight down the jealous rage at the bastard who’d had the pleasure of training Tony so well. He wondered if it had been Barstow but somehow he couldn’t see it. Someone else had taught Tony how to obey so beautifully and he wondered why they weren’t still together. Stupid bastard, Gibbs thought, to let such a treasure get away.

Tony’s tears had been a shock, though, and he recalled Barstow’s words about Tony being damaged and he ached to know what that meant. He hadn’t dropped Tony all the way down. It wasn’t his right since Tony wasn’t his. He’d dropped him just enough so that Tony could rest but he knew that even at that depth he could have asked Tony anything and Tony would have answered. He wouldn’t do that, though. It was a matter of trust and he valued Tony’s trust more than anything. If he’d truly had Tony’s trust before now maybe none of this would have come to pass. Tony could have told him the truth about himself and maybe, once the topic was up for discussion, Gibbs could have been honest about himself, too.

Gibbs scowled into the dark of the room. After a bit he went and poured himself a cup of coffee and then he returned to stand watch over Tony, his boy for this one night. He wasn’t the type to dwell on ‘what if’s but he was no stranger to regret. Tony had always been perfectly matched to
him on the job, never blindly following orders like many mistakenly believed. He and Tony were just in synch with one another, so much so that Gibbs worked more smoothly with Tony than he ever had with anyone else. But if Tony disagreed with Gibbs’ decisions or his actions, he called him on it, something McGee had yet to do and Gibbs found that he missed that, missed the balance that Tony brought to the job, to the team.

And now, seeing Tony like this tonight, Gibbs knew that he was flawlessly matched to him in every way but it hurt…fuck, it hurt because tonight he’d gotten a glimpse of perfection that belonged to someone else.

Tony had responded so beautifully, so naturally. Gibbs filed away the sense memory of his hands in Tony’s hair and the strength of those broad shoulders under his hands. All the power contained in that strong body willingly bent in submission to him, even if only for a moment, was a dream come true and made every dominant fiber of his being vibrate with the feeling of power and arousal. Tony literally was everything Gibbs had ever wanted in a submissive. But he wasn’t his.

Gibbs took another sip of his now cool coffee and looked again at Tony as he slept peacefully, looking so soft and warm under the light covers. The lines of stress that he’d noted when he’d arrived in Florida had disappeared leaving Tony looking years younger. Gibbs felt a sense of relief that he’d been able to do that for Tony. He wanted to always be the one to do that for him. But what were his chances of that? Non-existent, that’s what. Tony had Barstow in his life and he had already made his position clear with regard to Tony as he challenged Gibbs’ right to be in Florida.

And after tonight Barstow was right. There was no reason for him to here. The case was closed and once the paperwork was done there’d be nothing holding Gibbs here. Nothing. He rubbed a hand over his face. He felt a tremor start deep in his belly and he set down his coffee cup with two shaking hands before it spilled everywhere. It’s just the reaction, he told himself. The residual adrenaline after everything they’d been through today. It was seeing Tony then losing him when he was taken, the hostage situation and then seeing him out in the water after he’d rescued himself. Of course he’d react. He still cared about Tony despite the way he’d left the team and left him standing out in the middle of the road; left him with partial explanations and nothing but a voice message that did nothing but open up a huge gaping hole in his chest and left him with more questions than answers.

Fuck.

Gibbs took a deep breath and fought to control himself. He wanted nothing more than to be able to dictate new rules to that exasperatingly beautiful man, rules that specified exactly what he could do and where he could go. He needed to be able to ensure his safety and security to every extent possible and to know that no one else would ever touch him. Damnit, he wanted to make Tony his, he wanted to be the one with the right to say he’s mine.
Gibbs took another deep breath to still the tremors that still shook his body as he fought down the anger that suffused him at the knowledge that he didn’t have that right and never would.

After a few more breaths the anger changed as he directed it at himself. What right did he even have to be angry? Tony was living the life he should have always had, one where he was honest and at peace with who he was. Not like him, a stupid old bastard so intensely private that even his closest friend didn’t know his true nature. He blew out a small breath. He wanted nothing more than to have Tony back in DC with him, working with him, living with him. It just wasn’t possible.

Gibbs knew there were no openings right now short of working Tony back in as his SFA again and that wasn’t happening. Tony had a new home here, a good job as a Team Lead and a good team. Why would Tony give any of that up for a demotion that would also be unfair to McGee?

Gibbs rubbed a hand over his face. It wasn’t something he did often but he was definitely getting ahead of himself. Here he was, contemplating getting Tony back in his life…and for what? To go back into the closet? Because that’s where Gibbs had been living his life of denial for a very long time. Hell, he’d never admitted his attraction to men, even to Shannon. That had been so far from his thoughts because both she and Kelly were everything to him, filling his heart and his mind every waking moment…and usually his dreams as well. Sometimes his mind would betray him and there would be the occasional dream that left him feeling hot and bothered…and guilty. So he pushed it away and became a master at keeping his private thoughts just that, private and unspoken because it didn’t fit in with who he was: a husband and father to his girls and a Marine in a military that kicked out anyone even suspected of being gay. Later, when he lost his girls, there was nothing but the overwhelming pain. It had led him down a road of near self-destruction where life itself didn’t matter. Indulging in secret desires was nowhere on the radar.

Gibbs paused as memories of drunken nights with faceless women…and men…flashed through his mind. Even that had been about pain instead of desire. He found himself caught up on an endless cycle, trying to drink away the pain while seeking more in an effort to atone for his failure to protect his girls. There’d been so many nights where he’d had a bottle in one hand and a gun in the other and debated which one to put to his mouth. At one point he had his eyes closed and he didn’t know which cold, hard object touched his lips, the gun or the bottle. At that moment he’d wondered how he’d lost all control of his life and it sickened him, especially knowing what Shannon would make of his current state, what his ever-practical rule-loving wife would say about his shameful self-indulgence…and he smiled. The thought of her anger sobered him somewhat and he stared at the gun in his hands. With his thoughts on his girls and the precious years that were stolen from them he felt ashamed that he’d considered throwing his life away. He put away his gun. He figured it was a step forward of sorts but he was still pretty lost…until the night he’d wandered into a fetish bar. It took awhile but in time he found the control he needed and he filled his nights and weekends with a lifestyle totally different from the man he was in the light of day.
But Gibbs wasn’t a man to lead a dual life and what he’d been doing simply didn’t fit in with his upbringing, his self-image or with his position with NIS, now NCIS, so he let it go. He decided to concentrate on other things instead: his job, his relationships (regardless of how fleeting), his boat and his bourbon. And while he didn’t let go of the lifestyle, he again buried his deepest desires as far back in the closet as he could and they had stayed that way, lying purposefully ignored for years. At least until a certain tall, beautiful, green-eyed, joking, brash, ridiculously brave young detective strolled into his life. And then every feeling he’d ruthlessly squashed for most of his life began to take over his dreams again, and not just his dreams. It seemed that every waking moment was filled with thoughts of what he’d like to do to that young detective, now a member of his team. His only saving grace was that DiNozzo was, as far as he’d known then, completely straight.

Except that Tony had then gone and thrown all those beliefs out of the window. He chuckled lightly. It wasn’t the first time DiNozzo had surprised him and he doubted it would be the last. What he’d learned had shocked and pained him but Tony had, yet again, gone out and proven just how strong a man he is by getting passed what had happened and starting a new life without lies or deceptions. So the question remained, why would he throw all of that away to lead a hidden life with Gibbs?

Well, Gibbs had now gone full circle in his thoughts and the answer he came to was that Tony wouldn’t…and Gibbs would never ask him to. So now the question was, could Gibbs dig his way out of the closet for Tony?

As far as jobs went, DC was out and he knew there was no place for him here in Florida…unless he retired. He stared into the darkness. Could he do that? He looked at Tony again. He’d learned so much more about him than he’d ever known before and he knew Tony really was perfect. He contemplated a life here in Florida. What would he do if he gave up his job? He wasn’t fool enough to think that he could just sit around waiting for Tony to get off of work so that they could spend time together. He quickly went through the list of usual jobs for retired law enforcement but knew that a security job or PI position wouldn’t work for him. And yet he’d be willing to try anyway. He would, in fact, fight for a chance to try because Tony was, without a doubt, a man worth fighting for…even if the initial battle was with himself to lead the same open life that Tony did. He looked around the darkened room as thoughts whirled through his head. First things first, he decided, and that was to find out if Tony still wanted him.

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McGee got off the phone with Abby. He’d called her last night to let her know Tony was okay but then she called again this morning wanting to talk to him. She got worried all over again because neither Gibbs nor Tony was in the office yet. He ended up promising that Tony would call her as soon as he walked in the door and swearing yet again that Tony was okay although he really couldn’t be sure of that considering the look he gave them last night. Still, he was with Gibbs…what could go wrong?
McGee pushed that thought away and looked around Tony’s office. He liked the idea of having an open office rather than just partitions between the separate teams although it did have its drawbacks, too, namely, that solid walls prevented you from keeping an ear on the rhythm of the agency as a whole. It was something he’d learned from Tony although he’d be loathed to admit it. It had been one of the things he’d hated about being down in Cyber Crimes. Being in the basement, locked in the dark world of computer screens and techno-babble, he’d been out of touch with what was going on with everyone around him, the other teams and the ins and outs of agency visitors. He found that he liked sitting where he was at, not only as a Senior Field Agent, but also out in the middle of all the action. It was alive and interesting, not to mention that it was also helping him to develop his hearing. He was smiling at that thought when he heard someone enter the office. It was Harry. He found himself immediately liking the younger agent and it also didn’t hurt that Harry was in awe over McGee’s status as part of the ‘legendary team’ as well as being Gibbs’ SFA. He preened a little bit and had the sudden thought that if he didn’t settle down he’d be growing his own peacock’s plumage. He shuddered slightly, God, he was becoming more and more like Tony every day!

His thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of Stan and Ziva. Those two had hit it off immediately; their quick-witted banter with the heavy sexual overtones sounded exactly like Tony and Ziva. He almost smiled until Lali walked in. Her dark brown eyes took in the pair ahead of her and narrowed. He’d have to be blind not to see the jealousy that raged in their dark depths.

“Kind of scary, huh?” Harry whispered. McGee turned, expecting to see fear in those innocent eyes but was instead surprised to see glee shining out.

“What do you see happening?” McGee asked just as quietly.

“Lali and Stan have been dancing around each other for a long time. Maybe this’ll push them in the right direction…”

McGee smiled back as he looked back over the trio. He chuckled. At least this will be fun to watch instead of worrying about what Gibbs and Tony were doing to each other and which, truth be told, he honestly didn’t want to know.
Chapter 39

Tony woke slowly from a deep sleep. He was floating comfortably, warm and content in a way he hadn’t experienced in longer than he could remember. Eventually he opened his eyes and saw how the morning light warmed his room and he had a momentary bout of confusion. Was it Saturday already? No, that wasn’t right. Memory suddenly returned and his eyes widened. He looked at his bedside clock and panic suddenly set in…it was 0730! He should have been at work half an hour ago! Gibbs…the case…

He jumped out of bed and hit the shower. He was sitting in his chair and putting on his socks when he noticed some indentations in the carpet. He frowned slightly and mentally filed away the slight anomaly to finish dressing. Less than fifteen minutes later he was striding down the hall when it suddenly hit him that Gibbs had been in his house last night. Where was he? And was that bacon he smelled cooking? He walked back into the kitchen and had a moment of déjà vu. Gibbs was standing in front of his stove and he was cooking…again.

“’Bout time you got up…I was about to call ya,” Gibbs said without turning around.

Tony stood frozen in the doorway. Gibbs looked over his shoulder and saw him standing there. He turned fully and closely scrutinized Tony. Tony was freshly showered and wearing a light grey linen suit and a pale blue shirt. He looked well-rested. Gibbs nodded in approval and turned back to the stove.

“Sit down, Tony,” Gibbs said quietly.

Tony found himself moving to obey without thought. He felt a flush on his face because of Gibbs’ scrutiny which deepened when he heard a low chuckle. He started to turn in his seat but an arm crossed in front of him to put down a cup of coffee. It was followed by a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. Tony was shocked as food continued to appear in front of him. He opened his mouth to ask just what the hell was going on but Gibbs put up a hand.

“Eat, Tony. We’ll talk later,” Gibbs said as he seated himself.

Tony could only imagine the look on his face because Gibbs smirked at him once before digging into his own breakfast. He automatically took a bite but his mind was whirling. Seeing Gibbs at his stove brought back everything that happened the night before: Gibbs taking control, taking care of him and, most shockingly, the ease with which he’d dropped for Gibbs and now those indentations made sense. Gibbs had sat in his chair and watched over his sleep and he wished to God there was more to this than Gibbs just taking care of someone he once called friend. The
longing for more suddenly filled him making his eyes sting and made swallowing almost impossible. He sat eyes down and mechanically chewed for a moment longer until he could force away the lump in his throat. With a couple of blinks of his eyes he had himself mostly under control. He wrestled his thoughts back in order.

“I’ve got to call in…” he said with a quick glance at Gibbs.

“Did it, told ‘em we’d be a little late,” Gibbs said simply as he took another bite of his breakfast. Although he seemed oblivious to Tony’s inner struggle, Tony knew better than that. There wasn’t anything that got by Gibbs. The thought that Gibbs knew he’d still be unsettled this morning and might need a bit more time warmed him and helped him settle even more. Tony blew out a quick breath then finally asked why he hadn’t heard the phone ring. Lali would have been calling for him when he didn’t show on time.

“Damn answering machine was getting on my nerves so I unhooked it.”

Gibbs unhooked it… Tony could picture Gibbs just ripping all the cords out of the wall. That mental image did the trick and he chuckled, finally at ease. He took a sip of his coffee (which was prepared perfectly, he noted). “And Lali didn’t question anything when you called?” Tony wondered but one look at Gibbs’ face answered that question. “No, of course she didn’t.”

Tony picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it. He saw Gibbs do the same and then grimace.

“Turkey bacon, DiNozzo?”

“It’s better for you…and I’ve been getting back into shape…”

Gibbs answer was another long head-to-toe look at Tony. Tony was mortified to feel himself blush again and he dropped his eyes. He had no idea what to make of these looks he was getting but he liked it. God above, if only Gibbs was gay…

“Always looked good to me…”

Tony’s eyes widened and his blush deepened and he wished to hell he’d stop doing that but a pleased if confused smile crossed his face anyway. He’d just opened his mouth to reply when there was a loud knock at the front door. Tony frowned but got up to answer. He really shouldn’t
have been surprised but yet he was when he found Derek standing on his front porch. He felt a flood of guilt because Derek had only briefly crossed his thoughts last night.

“Derek…hi…” Tony said.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone? I’ve been trying to reach you since last night…!”

“I came home…”

“I know that! Hours after everything was over I finally got a hold of Lali to ask where the hell you were. You can imagine my surprise when I found out you’d gone home,” Derek said hotly. “And then I wasn’t allowed to leave until I’d told my story to twenty different people,” he added bitterly. “By the time I got here last night all your lights were off…”

“He was sleeping…” Gibbs said from behind Tony.

Both Derek and Tony turned at Gibbs’ words.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Derek demanded.

“He took care of me…” Tony said and immediately regretted it when he saw Derek’s face, already flushed with anger, darken even more. Without waiting for anything else, Tony pushed Derek back out and then he closed the door leaving Gibbs alone inside. Gibbs walked to the front window and watched carefully while Tony and Derek argued. Gibbs phone rang at that moment. He answered and listened but only responded with a ‘yeah’ before hanging up. His eyes remained glued to the men outside.

*If he so much as raises a hand towards Tony…* Gibbs thought darkly even though he knew Tony was fully capable of taking care of himself. But Gibbs also knew how difficult it was for a sub to stand up to his dom, no doubt part of the reason Tony went to meet Barstow last night. He watched the men carefully, scrutinizing the body language of both men and noting their facial expressions. His eyes narrowed a bit and decided (much to his satisfaction) that even if Tony did consider Barstow his Dom, it wouldn’t be for much longer. The dynamics were all wrong. Barstow still wanted it, that much was obvious, and he might still think he was in control but Tony didn’t feel that way. Either Tony hadn’t given enough of himself to form that type of commitment or he was breaking it off. Either way Gibbs was pleased. Even more so when he saw Barstow storm off to his car and drive away. Tony stood quietly for a moment but then turned back towards the house.
Gibbs noted that Tony looked saddened but not heartbroken. That was good.

“You okay?” Gibbs asked when Tony re-entered the house.

“Yeah, although that wasn’t exactly how I envisioned breaking it off with him. He really isn’t a bad guy…”

Gibbs only response was a growl but he had to allow that Barstow had been concerned for Tony, he’d called in the kidnapping almost immediately after it had happened. And Tony wasn’t that bad a judge of character in his partners (unlike McGee and assuming you leave out one-night stands with psycho cops…).

“Still wasn’t right for you…”

Tony cocked his head to one side. “What’s going on here, Gibbs?” Gibbs’ reaction to Derek and his earlier behavior had all kinds of questions whirling. His gut was telling him one thing but his head said it couldn’t possibly be true.

“A lot more than we have time to go into right now but we will. Later. Preliminary autopsy report is in.”

Tony blew out a breath but nodded. The two men worked quickly to pick up their abandoned breakfast. Tony poured out two travel mugs of coffee and then they walked out of the house together. Tony whistled a jaunty tune and put his hand out for the car keys. Gibbs stared for a moment and then shrugged. He was in Tony’s sandbox. Gibbs contentedly rode shotgun as he sipped his coffee.

“Whatcha got, Lali?” Tony asked as he and Gibbs walked into the office half an hour later. Ziva and Lali both looked up from the file they were reviewing at the question. Tony almost did a double take at seeing both stunningly beautiful women look up together. He had a completely inappropriate visual at that moment and wasn’t surprised when a palm connected to the back of his head. He saw Lali’s eyes widen and Ziva smirk and then he laughed and caught the geek twins gawking, Harry with shocked look on his face and McGee with a broad smile. Tony could honestly say he hadn’t felt happier than at that moment in longer than he could remember. It was a moment to be cherished.
Lali gave Tony a quick once over but noted no new injuries. She’d been aware of strained undercurrents between both Team Leads as well as both David’s and McGee’s concern when Gibbs had called in earlier, but what she saw when they entered eased her mind. Tony looked better than he had since all of this started. She would venture to say that he looked more relaxed and happier now than in all the time she’d known him. It made her wonder.

“Dr. Lamont is on her way up with her findings,” Lali said as she started her update. “The rental car used by Mulroney and Hamms is being processed as we speak but we found bloody bedding in the trunk. It’s a DNA match to SrA Jenkins. We found an address in the car leading us to a house in Mexico Beach. Special Agent Hanscomb took a team down to check that out. I sent Stan with him.”

Tony nodded and looked at Gibbs who gave an approving nod back. Just then Dr. Sarah Lamont walked in so Tony made the introductions and then Sarah got down to business. Her report showed that Tony’s knife had nicked a major artery in Mulroney’s chest causing him to hemorrhage quite heavily. She was, in fact, quite surprised that he’d made it out the door at all let alone run the few feet he had before being shot 12 times. Hamms, on the other hand, would have lingered on painfully for awhile before finally dying from his first gunshot wound if not for his being shot 10 more times. Mulroney’s bullet had ricocheted off a rib and had then torn through Hamm’s descending colon and also nicking the inferior mesenteric artery. That, she said, had been a massive injury.

When she was done Tony stayed silent for a moment.

“Would they have known they were dying, Sarah?” Tony finally asked.

“I’m quite sure they would have but then I don’t think it would have mattered, Tony. I concur with your profile; they had no intention of surviving.”

Sarah was chasing a degree in Forensic Psychology just like her friend and mentor, Dr. Donald Mallard, so he trusted her opinion with this just as he would Ducky’s. Tony accepted her opinion and let it go. Mulroney and Hamms had chosen their own path. So, he needed to get his statement written. He turned to his desk only to find Lali standing next to it with her arms were crossed. Uh, oh, he thought but figured he might as well get it over with. After all, Gibbs was next in line to chew off whatever ass he had left after Lali was done with him.

Gibbs smirked when he saw Lali pull Tony out of the office. He wasn’t sure how long she was going to take but he figured he might as well use the time to update Vance…after he found some more coffee.
Sometime later Gibbs saw Tony re-enter the office. His face was carefully blank but then he turned to Gibbs and gave a slight rueful grimace that made Gibbs chuckle. He, too, had been in the line of fire from a pissed off SFA (namely Tony) for what in hindsight he had to admit was stubborn, boneheaded behavior. It only served to raise his opinion of Lali another notch.

Tony sat down to write up his report as did Gibbs. Long years of practice and a concise writing style that nearly matched his curt speech patterns allowed Gibbs to finish relatively quickly. A little while later Tony was also done. With a grin Tony handed his report to Gibbs to review and waited patiently until Gibbs realized that Tony was waiting on his report. With a roll of his eyes, Gibbs handed it over so that Tony could review it as well. Once that was done they passed their reports to McGee and Lali to be included with the rest of the documentation.

There was a scheduled briefing with both Director Vance and Assistant Director Wright which went without a hitch except that Vance told Gibbs he’d scheduled a special debrief to SecNav immediately upon his return. The case was already garnering widespread interest not only because of the number of victims involved but also due to the timing since DADT was on the verge of being repealed. Gibbs agreed and they finished the brief. Leaving the comm center Tony chatted idly about going over all of the other reports from the other members of the teams. Gibbs listened only peripherally. He’d contemplated pushing back his flight but now that wasn’t possible. Gibbs decided to pull Tony aside for some of their needed conversation now.
They entered the same conference room they’d used earlier. Tony walked in, his hands in his pockets, and idly looked around the room. He wasn’t sure where this particular conversation was going but thanks to the previous night’s rest he felt better prepared to handle whatever Gibbs wanted to dish out.

“You were wrong, Tony.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. He knew he shouldn’t have gone out to meet Derek, but it had worked out which, as far as he was concerned, meant he hadn’t been totally wrong. But if Gibbs was talking about something other than Derek that opening line certainly threw him for a loop. “About what, exactly?”

“You’ve never disappointed me…”

“What?”

“Your last phone message to me. You said that you needed control of your life. Seems to me you’ve got it, always did. Your decision to come here and you made it work. You also said you disappointed me. Just wanted you to know that you never have. Exasperated me, scared me, amused me, intrigued me and you sure as hell frustrated me but you’ve NEVER disappointed me. I told you when I got here that you were the best Senior Field Agent I’ve ever had. That’s the truth but the whole truth is that you’re the best young agent I’ve ever worked with period. I figured you knew how good you were but sometimes the words need to be said. What you did yesterday just proved it again.”

Tony was speechless. Not only had Gibbs made the longest speech he’d ever heard him make, but he’d complimented him to boot. He cocked his head to one side.

“Well…first of all, thank you. But you and I both know that I screwed up by going out without backup. Hell, Lali chewed me a good one already. I kind of expected you to do the same.”

“Did it once. Ya probably deserve another because going out alone was a boneheaded thing to do, but I understand why you did it.”
“You understand…you mind telling me what exactly you understand about a rookie mistake?”

Gibbs rolled his eyes slightly. “Based on what we knew about their MO, the chances of Mulroney and Hamms meeting up with you were slim. Second, you and I both know that they were hunting and would have targeted someone else…someone less able to deal with them than you.”

Tony rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He nodded slowly. He’d come to the same conclusion himself but he also knew that if it had been one of his people doing the same thing, Lali or Stan or Harry, he’d be just as pissed as Lali had been. He absentmindedly rubbed the spot on his shoulder where she’d punched him last night. It hadn’t exactly been a love tap and her words earlier today, just had hard-hitting as her punch, had left him with no doubt about how she’d felt about his stunt. He’d half expected another head slap from Gibbs. He certainly didn’t expect his understanding. Who the hell was this alien Gibbs?

“You get that but it’s never stopped you before. There’s gotta be more…”

Gibbs glared. Tony figured he was pushing his luck in trying to get Gibbs to talk but there were just too many questions flying around in his head about what his gut was trying to tell him.

Fuck! Gibbs hadn’t had any intention of going down this road right now, sure as hell not in the office, but he also knew through his many failed relationships that some subjects had to be dealt with when the opportunity arose. He’d had way too many experiences with letting things slide because he hated talking only to have them blow up in his face. He decided to bite the bullet.

“I know how hard it is to go against your Dom…” Gibbs ventured.

Tony’s eyes widened. “What? You think I went out because Derek ordered me to?” he exploded unable to believe that Gibbs thought he’d let his personal life override his job or his common sense. “My private life is just that…PRIVATE. Just because Derek wanted that control over me in our personal life, it sure as hell doesn’t extend to my job…!”

“Hell, DiNozzo…all I said was that I understood…didn’t say I agreed with it!”

“If that’s what you thought then you should be head-slapping me into next year!”

“And I would if you were mine…!”” Gibbs growled, his eyes flashing in the familiar way that made
Tony’s spine tingle.

Tony froze for a moment. And that’s what it boiled down to…he didn’t belong to Gibbs. Not as an agent and not in their personal lives.

He looked at Gibbs sadly. “But I’m not yours, Gibbs. Not anymore. And even if I still worked for you, your control wouldn’t extend into our personal lives…”

“It could’ve…” slipped out before Gibbs could stop it.

Tony felt his mouth drop open as he felt his world get rocked. All those thoughts he had earlier popped back into his mind, all those fantasies of Gibbs standing over him, dominating him, whirled almost faster than he could comprehend. He took a deep breath as he struggled to re-group. He needed to get this clear. “How? You’re no stranger to what it all means. There’s no way I could just go part way. I want it all and I bet you would, too, and that’d be impossible because I’m a guy and you’re straight…”

“Never said I was straight…”

Tony physically took a step backwards and he decided he couldn’t possibly have heard what he thought he had… “What are you…?” He started but nothing else came out. Did Gibbs actually say he wasn’t straight? Oh, God, oh, God…oh, GODDAMN! Fury boiled through him. All the years…wasted fucking years…the longing, the pain, the loneliness… He leapt forward and grabbed Gibbs jacket by the lapels.

“What the fuck do you mean you never said you were straight? Four marriages, Gibbs! Four! And who knows how many women!”

Gibbs grabbed Tony’s wrists. Tony’s anger was a physical force and he knew his own was climbing to meet it but he had to stop it. Fighting wasn’t going to get them anywhere but he had to admit it felt damn good to be this close to Tony and all that emotion pouring off of him…he was practically vibrating with it…just like last night only this time instead of it making Gibbs want to take care of Tony, it made him want to bend him over the conference table. He wanted to sink into him, claim him, and fuck him so hard Tony would forget any other man he’d ever known. He needed to make Tony his own but before that could happen they needed to get everything out in the open.

“Tony, listen to me…you’ve got to understand that it’s a part of me that I spent years pushing away. I didn’t advertise but then neither did you. I never had a clue you went that way until the
shit hit the fan and you fucking left!  Hell, I had everyone back in DC pissed off at me because they thought I made you leave."

Tony’s eyes searched Gibbs’ for the truth in what he said despite knowing it wasn’t necessary. Gibbs never lied to him. Everyone had blamed Gibbs? But he’d told them… So many things happened that shouldn’t have… He let his fingers uncurl but Gibbs’ hands never left his wrists. He looked down, the anger slipping away leaving only grief in its wake. He shuddered slightly. All that pain, the Gibbs stand-ins, Mulroney…none of it had to happen…

Tony wasn’t aware of the tears that ran down his face but Gibbs saw them fall with painful clarity.

“I’m so sorry, Tony…” Gibbs said through a throat tight with his own tears. His hands gentled and his thumbs made gentle, soothing circles against the inside of Tony’s wrists.

Tony was caught by the gentle movement of Gibbs’ thumbs but the choked apology shocked him back to awareness. He looked up to see Gibbs’ eyes awash in tears, a second shock after the apology.

“Never say you’re…”

“Shh, Tony, don’t… my fault it went on that long. Should’a told you about myself, about how I felt about you. I should’a opened up somehow. Ended up hurting you worse than Ducky…”

Tony wasn’t sure how Gibbs had hurt Ducky and maybe someday he’d understand but right now he felt a burning in his chest and his breath hitched at the look in Gibbs’ eyes. Regret, desire and maybe a little bit of fear…the same things Tony was sure showed in his own eyes.

“How you felt about me?” Tony whispered.

“Wanted you…still do…”

Tony stared into the icy blue eyes, closer now than they’d ever been in ten years and he suddenly became aware of just how close he was to Gibbs and, wouldn’t you know it, his body decided to use the adrenaline coursing through him in another fashion. He felt his pants get tighter and he knew he needed some space. There was too much he needed to understand and he couldn’t do that when Gibbs’ proximity was doing crazy things to his dick. He tried to step back but Gibbs didn’t let go of his wrists and he didn’t want to think about that because his body was already going in that direction, he didn’t need his mind going there, too. He looked down and jiggled his hands.
“Please let go…” he said with a calm he was far from feeling.

Gibbs felt his heart plummet. It was too late. He searched Tony’s face but Tony refused to look up. He loosened his hold on Tony’s wrists despite being loathed to let go. He never wanted to let go but did anyway and stepped back.

“It’s too late…” Gibbs said, reiterating his thoughts.

As soon as Gibbs stepped back Tony took a deep breath but his eyes shot up at the devastation in Gibbs’ voice. “No…” he choked out but Gibbs’ eyes spoke of anger and pain, disbelief and loss.

“No,” Tony repeated softly. “It’s not too late. I don’t think it ever could be…”

In a heartbeat Gibbs was up against him, one hand on his chin and the other buried in his hair and Tony felt bone-deep lust slam into him. Tony opened his mouth in a slight gasp and that was all the invitation Gibbs needed before he took Tony’s mouth in a hard, searing kiss. Tony moaned when Gibbs’ tongue pushed into his mouth and took possession of him. In that moment everything he’d ever fantasized about, every touch from a stand-in, paled in comparison to the reality of Gibbs’ demanding mouth, his hands clutching and holding him. Tony willingly gave himself over to the reality as the taste of Gibbs flooded his senses making coffee, mint and a touch of sweet vanilla his favorite flavor. His arms surrounded Gibbs’ shoulders and pulled him in tight. He could feel Gibbs’ heart pounding against his chest in counterpoint to his own. Gibbs’ hand moved from his chin to his waist to pull him in closer. Tony could feel Gibbs’ body pushing against his, felt Gibbs’ cock hard against his own and he wanted to melt into it. God, the things Gibbs did with his mouth, his lips and tongue. Tony couldn’t think beyond the sliding, wet slip of his tongue against the one in his mouth. He sucked greedily and pushed his pelvis forward, shifting and opening his stance so Gibbs could push his thigh in between his legs. Lost to everything but the feel of Gibbs against him, of the tongue fucking his mouth, Tony rocked against Gibbs’ thigh uncaring that they were still at work. All he could think about was getting Gibbs to fuck him. He was completely unaware of the pleading sounds he made.

Gibbs’ domination seemed to last forever and Tony moaned again needing to breathe but refusing to pull away. Gibbs finally did, needing a breath of his own but he only pulled back far enough to suck in Tony’s lower lip. He spent a few devastating moments just suckling and nipping. Tony thought his knees would go out from under him. His heart was pounding in his ears and he realized he was breathing in panting little gasps. Gibbs eventually pulled back. Tony tried to follow with his lips but Gibbs slid his mouth to Tony’s ear.

“Shh, I’ve got you, easy now…” he whispered and Tony whimpered. Tony couldn’t see the soft
smile or the look of pure pleasure on Gibbs’ face. All he heard were more whispered words that should have made more sense but didn’t. Tony felt a hand stroke the back of his head and he sucked in a shaky breath. Gibbs moved his head so that their foreheads were touching as though he hated to lose contact. Tony was grateful for the continued touch. His head was reeling and he needed to be grounded. As though sensing his need, Gibbs eased him back to reality by scratching softly into the skin at the back of Tony’s head while rubbing soft, soothing circles across Tony’s lower back. As Tony calmed he became aware of senses other than taste and touch. He found himself breathing deeply of the clean scent of soap and the ever-present and heady scent of freshly sanded wood and he felt as though he’d come home. They stayed that way for awhile, silent and holding one another as their hearts slowed and breathing evened out.

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Lali again looked towards the hallway as though Tony would magically re-appear. She’d been concerned when the two Team Leads had disappeared into the conference room earlier, more so when the muffled sound of raised voices could be heard. But everything had quieted down although the conference room door had remained firmly closed. She thought that Gibbs, like her, had a few choice words for Tony after yesterday, and while Tony looked a lot better today there were still some heavy undercurrents between the men that both baffled and unsettled her. She didn’t know if it was those undercurrents that made her gut twinge or if something else was on the wind. Either way, she knew that something was up and it related to those two in the conference room. She looked around and nearly smiled. She wasn’t the only one to think something was up as she saw McGee look at the doorway, too. The only problem was that she detected a faint apprehension in his glance. She didn’t like that at all and decided that she’d have to keep her eyes open.

McGee looked at the door with a slightly worried frown and then quickly glanced over to Ziva. Her face was calm but he saw the concern in her eyes, too. Neither of them knew what was going on but McGee was sure whatever was happening in there needed to happen. He just wasn’t sure if he’d be happy with the outcome, whatever it was. He wondered if Gibbs was trying to talk Tony into coming back and if so, he wondered in what capacity Tony would return. Surely Tony wouldn’t take a demotion to be back on Gibbs’ team, would he? No, not with what he knew about how Tony felt. So maybe they were just talking, fixing their friendship. He blew out a small breath. He hoped that was the case but his insecurities wouldn’t let him leave it at that. He liked being Gibbs’ Senior and although he’d admitted to himself that there was still a lot he could learn from Tony, he really didn’t want a return to the competition between them. Well, until they came out all of his speculation was useless so he returned to the files in front of him.

Harry tried to ignore what was going on around him. He saw Lali watching the doorway the same as Special Agent McGee was (Tim, he corrected with a slight smile). Even the seriously scary Special Agent David kept her eyes on the doorway although she did it in a much more subtle manner. If he hadn’t been watching her out of the corner of his eye he probably wouldn’t even have seen her glance that way. She was so cool and hot, man, was she hot... He closed his eyes not quite believing how confused his thoughts were but yeah, she was hot. So okay, he didn’t know what was going on but he’d learned to just be quiet and listen. Eventually he’d get a clue or
if Stan would hurry up and get back. Maybe he could shed some light on all of the tension. Until then maybe just one more glance and…oh, yeah…she was so hot!

Ziva very nearly smiled again as she saw the young agent…Harry…glance back at her. She knew exactly what he was thinking and while it was amusing, it was not enough to take her mind off of the two men in the conference room. She glanced back at Special Agent Molina, Lali, and her eyebrow twitched upwards. The woman may be competent but Ziva did not like her proprietary air when it came to Tony, even it was within her right as Tony’s Senior. It annoyed her but she was not jealous…well, perhaps not really which was an acknowledgement she rarely made. She was aware of her need to maintain the interest of the men around her regardless of whether or not she chose to return it. Tony was one man with whom she had loved to play. His confession of his feelings for Gibbs had changed her game but did not change her possessiveness. Tony had been her partner and she still felt a need to be protective and Agent Molina had yet to prove herself. Unfortunately, there would be no time to verify the mettle of the woman so she chose to unsettle her instead. She’d seen the other agent’s jealousy with regard to Stan so, until it was time to leave, she would play with Stan and enjoy the jealous display. A small smile crossed her mouth at the thought of the handsome man. She could tell he was a prat boy…frat? Yes, a frat boy, much like Tony. However, unlike Tony, Ziva was sure the man returned Molina’s affections. Her eyes narrowed. It was just as well they were all scheduled to return to DC that evening or she would have to devise a method to test Molina’s capabilities. On the tail of that thought her glance again grazed over the doorway and she wondered if the two men could actually come to some accord. She hoped so. Gibbs needed to focus on his work. He simply could not continue with his attention so divided.

Lali looked up when someone entered the office but it wasn’t Tony or Gibbs. It was Stan and Hanscomb. She couldn’t help but feel a little let down and it must have shown on her face because Stan gave her an outraged look.

“Hey!” Stan complained but smiled at her rolled eyes and when he heard Harry chuckle.

Lali ignored him while she dialed Tony. They didn’t need Stan’s report right away but she was looking for a reason to pull the men out of the conference room. She couldn’t have explained why, she just knew that she needed to lay eyes on her supervisor. She needed to verify that he was alright.

“Stan’s back,” she said when Tony answered and she relaxed when he said he was on his way.
“So much wasted time…” Tony said after finally pulling back a bit. Both men kept their arms around one another, neither wanting to be the first to pull back from that earth-shattering first kiss.

First kiss! Tony thought to himself in amazement. Jesus, only Gibbs’ self-control had kept them from fucking right there on the conference table. Tony felt the color rise in his face and he felt Gibbs tighten his arms around him and nuzzle into his neck. Tony had the fleeting thought that if Gibbs kept that up it wouldn’t take much to make him lose his mind again. They needed to get back on track.

“Not just your fault, though. It was my fault too, Boss…” Tony said and Gibbs pulled back to look at him.

“Jethro…”

“Jethro,” Tony chuckled into the shining blue eyes but then sobered. “I never told anyone about myself. Abby guessed and I confirmed it. I honestly thought I was still going to keep it a secret but then she told her boyfriend…”

“That what you two fought about?”

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed without surprise that Jethro had known. And now he felt like he had to come clean about everything. He pulled slowly away from Jethro although the arms around his waist resisted slightly. He smiled a bit to ease his actions but he did finally step back.

“I need to tell you this but I can’t think when you’re touching me,” Tony said with false lightness that still earned an upwards curl at the corner of that wicked mouth and a knowing gleam in the blue eyes. “Anyway, I even told Abby about my going out on weekends, about looking for… stand-ins…for you…”

The gleam turned to regret which darkened Jethro’s eyes for the emotional pain the subject matter would bring up. “Mulroney…?” he asked in a low voice and Tony nodded.

“Glad the bastard’s dead…”

Chapter 41
Tony nodded again quickly but turned away slightly and brought his arms up to cross in front of his chest. Jethro understood that subject was closed. Tony turned back after a bit. He chewed lightly on his lower lip which made Jethro zero in again on his mouth and the still kiss-swollen lips but the hazel green eyes were dark with concern and Tony didn't drop his arms which said they weren’t done talking, yet. Jethro moved to lean against the conference table.

“So everyone was pissed? Ducky? Even Abby?”

Jethro accepted the change of topic although this one was no easier.

“Disappointed Ducky, thought the team was going to break up. McGee was looking at Cyber Crimes and Abby’d barely talk to me, wouldn’t take any CafPows…”

That made Tony smile faintly. “You know I did tell her that none of this was on you…”

“Yeah, she said that.”

“Was she the one who told you…?” Tony asked uncertainly, using one hand to gesture subtly towards himself. He remembered the night he found out that Abby had told her boyfriend about him.

“Naw, I figured it out…eventually…” Jethro said and his eyes slid away. Tony raised an eyebrow in question at Jethro’s obvious embarrassment.

“ Took me longer than it should have,” Jethro admitted when he looked back at Tony with a self-deprecating twist to his lips that made Tony want to kiss him again. “She just filled in the holes.”

Tony nodded slowly and then laughed softly, his arms finally dropping from their protective posture. “You know, I used to think I knew you so well…”

“Too private,” Jethro said with a shake of his head. “Didn’t let anyone close and rarely acted on it. You were more honest. Just wish you weren’t so damn good undercover,” Jethro answered equally softly, his voice heavy with regret. “All that time wanting me…you never asked…”
“Ask? I was positive you were straight!” Tony said, surprise coloring his voice. “Hell, everyone thought you were straight...even Ducky and you've been friends with him for years. And all this time I thought being a bastard just came naturally. I didn’t know it was because you were repressed...”

Gibbs snorted but then sobered. “That’s not the only reason...” He knew that Tony knew about Shannon and Kelly. Tony nodded solemnly in unspoken understanding and he smiled faintly in return.

Now it was Tony’s turn to look embarrassed. “I, uh, have to admit that I was also in a pretty bad place,” Tony said, changing the subject with a light tap to his temple. “I wasn’t exactly talking to anyone.” Tony sighed but then pinned Gibbs with that bright green gaze. “So, talk to you, huh? You do know you’re not the most approachable guy when it comes to personal stuff, right?” he added with a smirk.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that...”

Tony cocked his head to one side with a slight smile guessing that Jethro had probably heard it more than once in his life.

“So despite all that you’re still saying we should have talked before now...”

Gibbs shook his head slightly but Tony knew it wasn’t in negation. “Always thought talk was over-rated...” Jethro muttered ruefully more to himself than to Tony but Tony understood. Being a functional mute had worked for Jethro for years.

“Yeah, kinda girly, but sometimes things just have to be said.”

“They do,” Jethro agreed with a nod. There was still a lot that needed to be said and he needed to be frank...about himself. He looked straight into Tony’s eyes and this time Gibbs crossed his arms. He hated doing this just when they’d come to an accord but he wasn’t about to start anything with Tony unless he was completely honest. He hoped Tony would understand what he was about to say.

“Tony, I kept this part of me hidden most of my life. It didn’t fit in with my job or even my image of myself. I want to change that but I need time. I can’t make any promises...”
Tony looked hard at Jethro and took a deep breath, all the tension that had drained away now back in force. No promises? About what? Being able to come out? Setting up something here or back in DC? And if Jethro couldn’t…or wouldn’t…come back here, where did that leave them? He didn’t think there was a job for him back in DC. He felt his stomach drop to his feet at the thought of losing what he’d just found. Way to go, DiNozzo, did you really think a few kisses would mean sunshine and roses from here on out? Tony felt acutely aware of everything, the sudden pounding of his heart in his too-tight chest and the flaring of his nostrils as he tried to draw in a breath. He knew Jethro noted these things, knew he saw the effort it was taking for him to keep control but all he saw was the intense look in those blue eyes he still loved so very much. He almost wanted to just tell Jethro he’d go back with him and live his life in whatever manner Jethro wanted…but in the very second that thought crossed his mind he realized he couldn’t. If he did he’d lose absolutely everything he’d gained so far and it was just too damned important. He needed to make sure Jethro understood that.

Tony’s physical response confirmed Jethro’s fears. He stood up to take a step towards Tony but Tony again stepped back and put a hand up. Jethro decided he was getting damned tired of this little dance.

“Hey, that wasn’t a rejection…just need to work some things out…”

“I can’t go back to DC, Jethro,” Tony said. He dropped his hand and stood straight, almost at attention. His decision was firm and Jethro needed to understand that he wouldn’t vacillate on this point. “Not if it means losing what I’ve gained here…and especially not if it means hiding us. Being here, living my life openly, isn’t just what I want…it’s what I need…” He was right, he felt it deep in his gut, but it scared the shit out of him and he wondered if he was fucking up the rest of his life. “But it’s up to you. You have to decide if I’m worth giving up the life you built for yourself because I have to tell you, I can’t go back to living behind all those masks. I can’t go back to hiding.”

Tony blinked several times against the prickling of tears but Jethro could see the hard resolve in those beautiful eyes and in the firming of that gorgeous mouth.

“So that’s the deal, Jethro. You’re going to have to make a decision, whether here or back in DC, if you want me the truth is going to have to come out...about both of us.”

“Yeah,” Jethro said understanding and pride shining from his eyes because Tony had again impressed the hell out of him. “I understand that,” Jethro said nodding. “I’m not asking you to give up anything you’ve worked for, what you deserve. You need to know that I wanna be with you and that I will work this out. But I’m laying out my cards here, I just don’t know how long it’ll take…”
Tony nodded but the words weren’t exactly registering. He looked down because his mind was spinning. At that moment he wasn’t quite sure of anything other than the fact that everything he’d ever dreamt of was so close...so close he could almost taste it but he knew what a monumental decision it was to finally come out. And then add the complete upheaval if Jethro came to stay. He’d have to leave everything in his life behind, his house, Ducky and Abby... Hell, if not for the events that led up to his leaving DC Tony wasn’t sure he’d have ever come out either although he’d like to think that it would have happened eventually. But to leave everything and everyone behind... Jethro wasn’t like him, he had so much more than Tony ever did, memories, connections... What if Jethro decided he wasn’t worth it? God, why did he have to open his mouth and start making demands? He suddenly felt frozen inside as every fear and insecurity he ever had cramped his stomach. But the decision had to be Jethro’s. He refused to influence it because if he did he’d never be sure that Jethro really wanted him. He almost laughed because he knew how stupid that sounded, even in his own head. Jethro did want him. He knew that. The question was how much. He shoved down his fear and forced his face into a bland mask. So what they needed was a little bit more time. He could do that. And if Jethro decided he couldn’t do it, well he’d deal with all of that later. Tony felt himself settle as he pulled the mental cloak tighter around him. He didn’t attempt to hide what he was doing. Jethro knew him too well for that. He was in control by the time he looked up at Jethro.

“So we wait. Hell, it’s been ten years already, what’s a little while longer?” Tony said with a determined smile. He was saved from saying anything else by the ringing of his phone. He answered quickly. He noticed Jethro’s eyes narrow but Tony was solid, nothing could get to him right now.

“Stan and Hanscomb are back,” Tony told Jethro as soon as he hung up and then smiled. Jethro said nothing but nodded. Tony decided he actually looked grateful and Tony wondered if it was for agreeing to wait or because of the current end to their discussion. Probably both, he decided. Tony felt wrung out and if he felt that way he figured Jethro was probably at the point where he’d be happy to never say another word for the rest of his life.

They moved towards the door but just as Tony reached to open it Jethro stopped him with a hand to his wrist. Tony looked back at him in question and then smiled at the gratitude and caring he saw in the blue eyes (Tony hesitated to label it ‘love’ just yet). Jethro put his hands up to frame Tony’s face. He placed the lightest of kisses on Tony’s lips and then stepped back. It was a thank you and a promise all rolled into one. Tony just nodded slightly, understanding shining in the green depths of his eyes. He turned back to open the door and had the idle thought that Jethro had a thing for holding his wrists and then he kicked himself because he so did not need to go there right now, especially knowing that Jethro was leaving that night and they may never get a chance to be together if everything came crashing down.

They left the room but no one would ever have known that Tony’s heart was pounding in fear at his last thought or that Gibbs was re-living every second that he held Tony in his arms, swearing to himself that he’d make that their future. Gibbs had seen the flash of fear in Tony’s eyes and had watched as he put up the self-protective walls. He didn’t blame him for reacting that way and had, in fact, expected it but he was also grateful that Tony had allowed it to show. He was not about to
let Tony down. He swore it to himself with a steely determination that would have sent everyone scurrying out of his way if he’d let it show in his eyes. No, both men were experts at hiding their thoughts and were very aware that the ability would be crucial in the coming weeks.

They walked down the hallway and Tony was hit by the scent of pepperoni. He glanced at his watch and was surprised to find that it was early afternoon. He wasn’t sure how long he and Jethro had been in the conference room but the day was definitely moving along and that made his stomach flip. He didn’t want Jethro to leave but there were things back in DC that needed to be done. What he was sure of was that he needed to appear at ease for everyone waiting for them because he didn’t need their worry on top of his own. He licked his lips lightly and frowned at the still swollen feel to them. He ran a hand through his hair anyway knowing Lali and probably both McGee and Ziva would be looking at him very carefully. So, since he was Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, one of the best undercover agents around, he knew that a diversion was what was needed now. He laughed out loud just as they entered the office which brought them to the attention of everyone there and a path was immediately made for the newcomers to grab some food.

Gibbs smirked as soon as Tony laughed out loud. He knew that the laugh and bright grin would keep everyone from seeing Tony’s now only slightly swollen lips and would ease the concern both teams were no doubt feeling. He didn’t worry about his own thinner lips. They didn’t react as much as Tony’s fuller, more sensuous mouth did. Try as he might, he couldn’t get his thoughts off the taste of Tony’s mouth or the soft sounds he made as he opened himself up. It had taken everything he had not to throw Tony down onto that table and claim him right there. What held him back was the knowledge that he couldn’t go any further until he knew for sure that everything was lined up. Only then could he could go about erasing that fear he’d seen in those hazel green eyes. He cleared his throat a bit as he kicked himself for letting his mind go there and forced himself to think of Tony’s acting ability instead.

Once everyone was situated with food and drink, Stan and Hanscomb outlined what they’d found. It wasn’t much beyond the two men’s personal effects and a cell phone. The cell phone showed several calls from a number identified as belonging to Mulroney’s ex-wife and one call from Mulroney’s boss. McGee added what he knew of Mulroney’s recent past, namely the loss of his father and the request from the family priest for Mulroney to return home, again confirming Tony’s profile. Gibbs jumped on the phone to have some agents go out to interview the ex-wife. He wanted everything they could get before he briefed SecNav. After eating they spent the afternoon putting together the details of the men’s activities.

Determined to keep his own thoughts at bay and to allay any concerns from those around him, Tony kept busy and by early evening all of the reports had been correlated and packed for McGee and Ziva to hand-carry back. The autopsies were complete and the reports scheduled to follow upon completion. The bodies were scheduled for transport the next day. Both teams buttoned up what they needed. Tony had even pulled McGee and Ziva aside for a little chat. He’d been warmed by their positive comments about his team and his new position although he could see a little bit of catty Ziva coming out when they talked about Lali. It was all good, though. He
understood that it was her way of showing she cared about him.

McGee had surprised him by admitting that there was more he could have learned from Tony and referenced a couple of cases where they really could have used his cop instincts. He even apologized for letting his ego get in the way which had made Tony crow and McGee blush when everyone turned their way.

“So maybe if you’re a good little agent and you wish real hard the Fairy Director will grant you another cop on your team, McCinderfella,” Tony teased with a smirk.

“Tony, are you saying that Director Vance is a fairy…a homosexual like you?” Ziva said with a frown. It angered her to think that he was lying to his wife who was a wonderful woman.

Tony rolled his eyes. “No, Ziva, trust me, I’m sure he is very pleased with his heterosexuality as is Mrs. Vance,” Tony said with a quick look at McGee when he snickered. “All I was saying is that both you and McGee would be very lucky to get another cop on your team.”

“Yes, well, perhaps you are right. Perhaps someone with police experience would not be so easily frightened by Gibbs and we would not always be short an agent. Still, we do miss you Tony but I am pleased you are doing well here.”

McGee agreed and the trio shared another few laughs. All too soon it was time to take Gibbs and his team to the airport. Tony felt his insides twisting at the thought of Jethro leaving and he wasn’t quite sure he’d be able to maintain his bearing while seeing them depart. Throughout the drive to the airport and the walk into the terminal Tony kept telling himself that the sooner Gibbs got back the sooner he’d be able to take care of his business. Unfortunately, telling himself that really didn’t help the lump of ice in his belly. A flash of his badge allowed him to accompany them all the way to the gate.

“Take care of yourself, Tony,” Ziva said. She kissed him softly on the cheek after gracing him with a heartfelt hug. McGee shook his hand and slapped him on the back and then the two moved away to give Gibbs his chance to say goodbye. They expected a few words, a glare or a smirk and maybe a handshake. To say they were shocked when Gibbs stepped forward and hugged Tony hard was putting it mildly. But because they were standing off to the side and Gibbs was careful to position himself right, they completely missed the small kiss he placed near Tony’s ear.

Then Gibbs stood back to look at Tony with his hands still on Tony’s biceps. After a quick slap to one arm Gibbs turned and stalked to the gate, the expected glare firmly in place. With a quick glance back to a stone-faced Tony, Ziva and McGee gave a final wave and hurriedly followed
Gibbs onto the aircraft.

Tony watched the jet back away from the terminal with a leaden heart despite the promise he’d seen in the blue eyes. He stayed by the window, watching as the jet taxied away and then finally, when the jet was a small speck in the distance, a lone tear slipped down his face.
Chapter 42

A heavily scowling Gibbs returned to the empty bullpen after completing his briefing to SecNav. If McGee or Ziva had seen his face they would have thought the briefing had gone badly. It hadn’t. Gibbs had actually been congratulated on a job well done, something he considered complete and total bullshit. While Gibbs never sought praise he at least appreciated it when praise was offered for a job that was completed satisfactorily. When praise was offered for the wrong reasons it just set his teeth on edge. Today the multi-agency team which he’d led had been praised not for closing the case but for the fact that both Mulroney and Hamms had been killed rather than taken alive to stand trial.

Gibbs couldn’t exactly blame those in public positions who had to deal with this crap. He understood the need to avoid the blame the media would heap on society in general and on the military and police forces in particular for their stance on homosexuality. All that would do is divide people and make the job harder for those sworn to protect and defend. And while this whole case highlighted the desperate need for change, he just hated that the fact that Mulroney and Hamms were murderous bastards that still would have found an outlet in violence towards others would be forgotten. He hated that those bastards had gotten off so fucking easy which wasn’t justice in his book. The only saving grace was that without a trial the victims and their families would be allowed to grieve in private. He blew out a frustrated breath. It was all a complicated mess that left a sour taste in his mouth and he was glad to be done with it.

Gibbs sighed. It was time to get on with the business at hand. It wasn’t going to be easy and he would have liked to have started with Vance but he was scheduled to be in briefings the rest of the day. The day wouldn’t go to waste, though, despite the fact that talking about such private matters was worse than pulling teeth but Tony was worth it so Gibbs walked to the elevator. It was time to visit Ducky and Abby.

“So, have you had a sit-down with the NCIS head doctor yet?” Tony asked Alan when he walked into his living room the afternoon following Jethro’s departure. Once again Tony was grateful that Alan had agreed to see him at his home rather than having Tony go into his office downtown. There’d been far too many sessions where it was all Tony could do to walk next door to his own home when they were done. It also made it easier for Alan and Steven to swing by and check on him after a particularly difficult session. While arranging this session Tony had briefly mentioned what happened that night and he kind of figured that he was probably going to be very glad for their proximity.

“We met this morning. He’d barely gotten the report of what happened,” Alan replied. “I’m afraid he’s not going to be willing to put you back in the field any time soon. You’re also going to have some sessions with him.”
Tony groaned and put his head in his hands. “If I start spouting what’s really rattling around in my head I’d never get back out in the field!”

Alan chuckled. “You always have choices, Tony.”

Tony looked up at Alan through the criss-cross web of his fingers. He huffed out a snort and then pulled his hands away from his face. “Are you suggesting that I not be completely truthful with the Keeper of the Golden Ticket?”

This time it was Alan’s turn to snort. “And by Golden Ticket you mean the thumbs-up to get you back into the field, right? No, Tony. I’m not saying that at all. I’m merely suggesting that you limit what you discuss with Dr. Dodson to those subjects that you know he’s interested in… namely, your first meeting with Mulroney and your abduction. Period. You’ve got me for everything else.”

Tony smiled. “I do have you, don’t I. You and Steven have helped me more than anyone else ever has…”

“Anyone except Gibbs. Now, now…” Alan said with a hand up when Tony began to protest. “We’ve talked a lot since you’ve been here and you may not be fully aware of just how much Gibbs is a part of your thought processes. I know that he came into your life at a low point. You told me yourself that you weren’t sure if you would have survived long enough to give your two-week notice. Homophobia can be a very strong unifying force just like any other bias and not just in the military or police force. But you never told Gibbs why you jumped on his job offer, right?”

1. “For Gibbs it’s all about doing the best you can as long as it’s for the right reasons.”

“I’d gotten the impression that he was pretty black and white in his beliefs.”

“Oh, he is in terms of right and wrong, he just doesn’t always go by the playbook. You could say that he makes up his game plan as he goes along but the end result is always about justice.”

“You respect him…”
“I respect the hell out of him, always have…”

“Good. It’s important, especially if you end up having the relationship you mentioned earlier. So let’s get started on that…”

Their session that afternoon lasted quite awhile as Tony laid out every fear he’d suffered since that moment in the conference room. In the background Tony heard some muffled noises that told him Steven was home although he never entered Alan’s office. By the time they were done with their session Steven had dinner ready. He noted how wrung out Tony was so he kept conversation light and funny over the comforting meal he’d made and by the time they were done Tony was visibly much more at ease. Steven had invited him to stay the night with them but Tony had declined. He had the need to slip into his own bed, to sleep as he had the night that Gibbs had watched over him.

Later, when Tony went home, he was acutely aware of the silence in his house. After he got ready for bed he sat there for a moment, staring at the indentations left by his bedroom chair. He imagined Gibbs sitting there all night, watching while he slept and he felt an intense longing for the older man.

Talking with Alan had eased his fears considerably and he kicked himself for getting so worked up. Alan had said that it was understandable considering what he’d been through in the last few days but it was still embarrassing. He did trust Jethro to do what he’d promised, whatever that entailed, so that they could be together. He had to. So now he wondered just what that was. Would he force Vance to make a position for him back in DC? He snorted at the thought of how that conversation would go when Gibbs marched in and demanded a job for his lover. He figured Vance would probably bite his toothpick completely in half.

Tony pulled the cover up over his shoulder and stared into the darkness. There weren’t any openings here and he couldn’t see Jethro retiring just yet. The man was too vital, too driven. Yeah, he could work on his boat but Tony couldn’t see him doing only that. Maybe a part-time job? It would have to be something pretty interesting although his quirky mind conjured up Gibbs as a Wal-Mart greeter. NOT, Tony snorted into his pillow. He sobered after a moment unsure about what the future would bring. Maybe he could take his job and then he would be Jethro’s 24/7 love slave. Yeah, that could actually work, he told himself with a smile as his libido kicked in.

Tony imagined himself as Pet, waiting by the door for his Master to arrive. Tony’s hand snaked down into his shorts to take hold of his filling dick although he knew that as a slave, Pet wouldn’t be permitted such privileges. No, Jethro (Master!) wouldn’t allow Pet any release unless he’d earned it. Tony ran his thumb over his slit as he thought about kneeling and waiting. Pet would be naked except for his collar. For some reason, every time he fantasized about this scenario Tony
saw himself with nipple rings. His cock twitched at the thought. Would Jethro want him pierced? Tony felt his stomach twist in a hungry throb that was answered by another twitch of his dick. Jethro would definitely want some type of mark showing his ownership, wouldn’t he? Tony was sure he’d have a collar but what about when they left the house? Wait, wait…down, DiNozzo. Stick with the fantasy for now. Tony took a deep breath and let himself sink back into his make-believe world. Would Master even let Pet leave the house or would he keep him hidden away, safe and secure until called upon to provide pleasure for his Master? Tony groaned into the darkness and then squeezed his now-hard dick.

Pet held his breath when he heard a car enter the driveway. He didn’t let it out until he was sure he recognized Master’s car since he was not allowed to see anyone else. Pet felt a frisson of excitement skitter up his spine. He was glad Master hadn’t been too late tonight. Pet had only been waiting by the door for an hour but he was used to waiting much longer if need be. Pet heard the steps as they approached the front door. He could feel his anticipation climbing. It made his cock twitch in its enclosure and he bit his lip to stifle the moan that threatened to escape because he knew his Master would hear. His Master heard every sound he made. Pet saw the movement of the doorknob as Master unlocked the door. He saw it turn ever so slowly and he nearly moaned again because his Master knew he was watching, knew his heart rate was climbing…

Tony moaned silently into the dark as he stroked his cock. He moved his hand up and down slowly, twisting just slightly at every upstroke to lightly pinch his tip. He moaned and decided to do this right. He pulled off his sleep-shorts and then reached into his nightstand for his favorite vibrator and some lube. With those items in easy reach he went back to stroking his dick. He fondled his balls, tugging lightly on the hairs and occasionally letting his fingers slide back just a bit to tease at his perineum, to stroke over the small tender patch of skin with a whisper-light touch.

Master opened the door to see his Pet holding himself tightly in position. Without a word he stepped inside and closed the door. He removed his coat and steadily proceeded to remove his holster and badge to place them on the small stand by the door. He removed the small case that held his cuffs but held them for a moment until he heard it…yes, that small hitch in his Pet’s breathing that told him his Pet knew what it was he held in his hands and just what it was he was considering. He wouldn’t use them although he’d threatened (promised?) often enough. No, the cuffs would leave marks on this Pet’s beautiful skin and that simply wouldn’t do. The leather cuffs were much more to his liking. He merely enjoyed teasing his Pet, enjoyed seeing the physical reaction his Pet displayed when he pulled certain…toys…out for their mutual pleasure.

Master moved over to the bookcase where his lockbox was kept. He placed his gun inside and locked it. He placed his badge and the cuff case on top all the while watching his Pet. Pet could feel Master’s eyes on him, knew when Master stepped up behind Pet and lightly brought his hand to stroke through his hair. Pet couldn’t help the soft exhalation of pleasure as he was stroked again. Pet loved to be touched. Master moved to stand in front of Pet.

“Eyes up, Pet,” he said softly. Pet looked up, love and complete surrender shining from his eyes.
Without hesitation Pet unfastened the heavy belt. He leaned forward to breathe deeply of the combined scent of leather and his Master but knowing what lay beneath the cloth made his mouth water. In moments he had his Master in hand and he was running his nose across the firm flesh, delighting in the musk of Master’s arousal. His tongue slipped out to sample the feast, delicately tracing the vein underneath and the curved head. He dipped his tongue into the leaking slit. Pet stroked Master with his tongue, sliding it along the hard length. He turned to bring Master’s luscious head to his lips. He opened his mouth and sucked in his tasty treat. He was rewarded with a deep, guttural sound that spoke of his Master’s pleasure.

Tony gasped and squeezed his cock and then resumed the strokes making them longer and faster as he imagined a thick cock in his mouth. He brought his other hand to his mouth and began sucking on his fingers.

Master grasped Pet’s hair to hold him while he fucked Pet’s mouth. Pet relaxed his throat so that he could take in as much of his Master as possible. Pet inhaled deeply, every breath filled with the scent of musk mixed with the clean scent of soap and freshly sanded wood…

Tony sucked harder on his fingers and tasted… coffee, mint and a touch of sweet vanilla and in that moment he was rocketed back into the conference room, back into Jethro’s arms. He could feel Jethro’s heart pounding against his chest in counterpoint to his own, could feel Jethro’s cock hard against his and he wanted to melt into it. Tony couldn’t think beyond the sliding, wet slip of his tongue against the one in his mouth and he sucked greedily and then groaned, his back arching off the bed as he climaxed, shooting hot strands of semen over his fist and across his stomach.

Tony moaned softly and relaxed as the spasms died away leaving him slightly out of breath and with a happily twitching dick. His fingers slid out of his mouth and he smiled. He could honestly say that it was the first time he’d cum from the memory of a kiss. He used his shorts to wipe himself off and then settled back, slipping easily into sleep with the feeling that Jethro was, once again, watching over his slumber.

“Ah, Jethro, it’s so good to see you’ve returned,” Ducky said happily when Gibbs walked into autopsy. Jimmy looked up but only smiled faintly at Ducky’s pleasure. Although he’d spoken with both Tim and Abby, he still found it hard to accept that Gibbs hadn’t known about Tony, that he wasn’t somehow involved. Still, both Tim and Abby seem to have forgiven Gibbs and it wasn’t in his nature to hold a grudge so he thought that eventually he’d regain his equanimity although he
doubted he’d ever be as stupidly in awe of the senior agent as he’d been in the past.

“Ducky, Palmer,” Gibbs said by way of greeting. On the way down from the bullpen Gibbs had decided to speak with Ducky first and then Abby rather than taking them on together. “Ya got a minute, Duck?”

“Of course, Jethro, please come into my office. You know I’m expecting the two cases to come in later this afternoon. I do so hesitate to refer to them as ‘gentlemen’ the way I do with all my other visitors here,” Ducky said as he gestured Gibbs to a seat. He looked at Gibbs over the rim of his eyeglasses for a moment before dropping his eyes. “I’m sorry to admit that I was disappointed to learn the situation had been resolved in this manner. I’d rather hoped those two would have lived long and uncomfortable lives behind bars…”

“Yeah, Duck, me too,” Gibbs said.

“Still, what’s done is done and I shall endeavor to do my part to complete the documentation on this case although I’d say my portion shall be very little indeed. Dr. Sarah Lamont is a highly valued colleague of mine, very capable and is, I believe, also pursuing a degree akin to my own. You know, Jethro, I remember when…”

“Duck, I need to talk to you…”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Ducky said with a smile. “Please go on…” he said and then paused when Gibbs didn’t immediately say anything. He decided to help the conversation along.

“Allow me to thank you again, my friend, for calling to let me know that Tony had come through his ordeal unscathed. It was a message I was most happy to relay to Abby. So tell me, Jethro, how is Tony getting on?”

Gibbs smiled faintly. He knew that Ducky had just been waiting for him to show up so that they could talk about his trip to Florida. It amused him, though, when Ducky got right to the point.

“Tony’s doing good out there. Real good considering everything he’s been through. He’s the one who actually took the suspects down. The only thing the rest of us did was finish the job. He’s… he’s also got someone to talk to about everything that’s happened. He is doing good, Duck.”
“I did read the report. Anthony has always been a very resourceful individual. And his aim with that blade of his is quite good. We shall have to ensure he obtains a proper replacement for that most ingenious weapon.” Again Ducky paused but then he smiled gently. “I’m so very glad to hear that he has a confidant. It’s very important, Jethro, to have someone with whom you are comfortable sharing your thoughts. So tell me, how did you find Tony? What did you see?”

Gibbs knew exactly what Ducky was asking. He looked down at the floor finding the words a little difficult to voice.

“I saw…my future…our future…if I can make things work…” He heard Ducky sigh deeply. He knew without looking that Ducky was smiling. He looked up at his friend and returned his smile.

“Well then, my friend, we shall ensure that whatever must be done shall be done. It’s been far too long since you were happy and you deserve it, as much as dear Tony deserves to be happy. This must be worked through, however. I don’t imagine Tony can just come back here…”

“Don’t know yet, maybe not. It might mean me leaving, maybe retiring…”

Ducky noted the distant look in Jethro’s eyes. He knew how difficult it had been for Jethro to admit to him, his friend of many years, just how it was he felt about Tony. What he was contemplating was a tremendous change in his life. However, Jethro was not a man to shy away from that which must be done, especially if it involves someone he cares for so very deeply. Nevertheless, it was going to be a complicated task for Jethro to leave this part of his life behind and should the reason for his departure become known it could make things even more difficult for the intensely private man. Still, if anyone was capable of overcoming difficulties to obtain this most desirable outcome it was Leroy Jethro Gibbs and Ducky swore to himself at that moment to do everything in his power to assist.

“Well, then, all I can hope for is that you have a spare bedroom to loan to an old friend on occasion. It’s been a great many years since I’ve partaken of Florida’s delights.”

Gibbs sat back and grinned which grew wider when Ducky pulled out a bottle and two glasses. He poured a bit in each glass and handed one to Gibbs.

“This is an old Scottish wedding blessing,” Ducky said pausing at Gibbs’ bark of laughter, “although it is unfortunate that Tony is not here to share in this moment perhaps I can rectify that one day soon.” He raised his glass, a movement mirrored by Gibbs and then with a twinkle in his eye and a lively Scottish brogue, he said:
“May the best you've ever seen  
Be the worst you'll ever see.
May the mouse never leave your pantry  
With a tear-drop in his eye.
May you always keep healthy and hearty  
Until you're old enough to die.
May you always be just as happy  
As we wish you now to be.”

The two men touched their glasses and drank down the contents. Gibbs thanked his good friend and then left to go speak with Abby. He could only hope that the conversation would go as well.
Gibbs walked towards Abby’s lab, Caff-Pow in hand and paused for a moment as the ear-shattering thumping echoed through the hallway. He stood there for a moment, glad for the return of his Abby but unsure now what his new pronouncement would do to the surprisingly fragile young woman he thought of as a daughter.

He walked in and smiled when he saw Abby dancing and typing at the same time. He saw her spin suddenly and dash over to the mass spectrometer (what she called Major Mass Spec) and wondered just how in the hell she could have heard that thing beep with all the other noise going on. She turned at that moment and noticed him standing there. In a flash she shut off the music and came charging at him to throw her arms around his neck. He caught her with one arm although he did stagger back a step.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she crowed making him laugh. He looked at her with one raised eyebrow although he knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You rescued Tony! And he’s fine, both Ducky and Timmy told me what happened but Tony really is okay, right? I mean it had to have been hard to be taken by those scumbags especially since he was the same dirt bag who hurt Tony before, but Tony got him back and he’s really alright, at least physically because I don’t know what being back in that guy’s clutches would do to his psyche, I mean I know he’s probably talked to Alan already and you know Alan, right? Of course you do because Tony would have had to let you know about Alan in order for you to come back because you wouldn’t have come back at all if there was a chance that Tony wasn’t alright, both mentally and physically…”

Gibbs had enough and placed a finger against Abby’s lips and stopping the river of words that spilled out and handed her the drink.

“Tony’s fine, Abs.”

Gibbs was rewarded by yet another strong one-armed hug and he smiled although it was wistful. This next part wouldn’t be easy but he needed to move things along.

“Abs…”

There was something about Gibbs’ voice that made Abby stop for a moment. She pulled back with
a questioning look on her face. Gibbs didn’t say anything right away which sent a bolt of fear straight to her stomach.

“What, Gibbs? No, wait…don’t tell me because something tells me I’m not going to like it.”

“Abby, Tony and I did a lot of talking while I was there…”

“You, Gibbs? You talked?”

“I do know how, you know…”

“Well, yeah, Gibbs, but you don’t like to talk and if you and Tony talked, well, that might be okay but I’m getting the feeling that maybe it’s just kind of okay but also that maybe I’m not going to like it so that makes it not okay…”

“Abby, there’s something about me you don’t know…hell, no one knew but the gist of it is that I’m trying to figure out a way for Tony and I to be together…probably down in Florida…”

With that statement, Abby completely shut up. Her green eyes widened and she searched through Gibbs’ blue eyes looking for something, maybe a joke but Gibbs didn’t make jokes like this, Gibbs didn’t really joke much at all. But this was so completely out of the realm of possibility for her that she had trouble grasping what it was that Gibbs had just said. Did Gibbs just want to be with Tony or did Gibbs want to be with Tony? Oh MY GOD! Ohmygodohmygodohmygod…did Gibbs really just say that?

“What are you saying, Gibbs?” she asked in a very uncharacteristically quiet voice.

Gibbs sighed and wondered if he’d screwed up by starting this conversation here in the lab. Maybe it would have been better at his house, with lots of alcohol…

“It’s a vacation, right? You’re friends…” she said with a slightly hopeful note because she desperately hoped Gibbs was just talking about a vacation, not that he ever really took vacations although he did go to Mexico although that didn’t start out as a vacation but he did come back so it was more like a vacation than Gibbs actually walking out, leaving her, abandoning them all, really…
“More than friends, Abs…”

“When…since WHEN…?” Abby practically shrieked because Gibbs did not sound like he was talking about a vacation at all…

“Always wanted it…didn’t know he did…”

“But you two figured it all out while you were there…”

Gibbs nodded once and Abby retreated back into silence which was so unnatural for her that Gibbs began to worry. He worried even more when she stepped back from him.

“Abby…?” he questioned taking a step towards her and he had the fleeting thought that he’d be happy never to do this dance again.

“No, Gibbs,” Abby said with one finger in the air which stopped him cold. “You’re telling me you’re trying to leave and while a part of me says that I should really be happy about this, about you and Tony, the both of you,” she said with a wide, circular gesture towards Gibbs that somehow encompassed Tony, too. “But I’m not going to lie to you. I’m not happy and I need to think about this right now.”

Gibbs stared at her for a moment as he tried to read her expression but it was closed to him and he had a sudden feeling of déjà vu because it was like they’d gone back to that time just after Tony left. He hated it but knew he didn’t have a choice here. He nodded.

“Okay, Abs,” he said quietly and left her standing there. He hoped to hear the din start up as he walked out but the lab remained eerily silent. He slammed his hand onto the elevator button as he felt his chest tighten. His girl was hurt and confused. And she was pissed…at him. Just like before. Only this time he knew he deserved every bit of it.

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When Gibbs got back to the bullpen he saw both Ziva and McGee finishing up some paperwork. It was only a quarter after four but he needed to get out.
“Go home,” he growled as he rounded his desk.

Both McGee and Ziva looked up in surprise.

“Boss, ah, great, but can you tell us how the briefing went first?” McGee said as he took in the deep scowl. A year ago the look alone would have had him scurrying out of the office. Not anymore.

Gibbs glared at McGee who looked back in concern but never wavered. He sighed and looked over to Ziva who was quietly packing up her things but who clearly wasn’t going to leave until she also knew if everything was alright. He debated not saying a word but his agents deserved to at least know they weren’t in trouble.

“Fine, SecNav’s happy.”

McGee’s concern lifted and he smiled but then frowned again. “But you’re not…”

Gibbs turned an exasperated look back towards McGee who finally understood that whatever was on Gibbs’ mind was not related to their latest case.

“Right, well, we’ll just be heading out now…” McGee said and began to gather up his things.

“McGee,” Gibbs said suddenly and Tim looked up from grabbing his coat.

“You and Zee-ver…Abby,” he said while looking down at his desk. Tim spared a quick glance at Ziva and then looked back at Gibbs. So, whatever it was that was bothering Gibbs involved Abby and that was Gibbs’ way of getting them involved.

“I’ll take care of it…whatever…it…is…” he said relieved when Gibbs nodded once and turned to his monitor. It seemed no more was forthcoming so he grabbed the last of his things. “Good night, Boss,” he said and it was echoed by Ziva. With one last look back at Gibbs who remained staring at his monitor, they both left to head straight down to Abby’s lab.
Once they left Gibbs pulled up the regulations concerning personnel assignment as well as the open-job listings NCIS-wide and settled in to read.

Both Ziva and McGee knew something was wrong even before the elevator doors opened. Usually they would have felt the reverberations from Abby’s music as soon as they reached the basement but there was nothing. The doors opened and the silence made them wonder if Abby was even there but one quick look down the hallway showed that the door to her lab was open which meant that she was somewhere in the vicinity. McGee’s first thought as they looked around the empty outer lab was that maybe Abby was with Ducky but a quick touch to his arm made him look at Ziva. He saw her looking into Abby’s office and he felt his stomach tighten. She was sitting there in the silence just staring off into space. She held the telephone receiver in her hand but he knew there was no one on the line and he wondered who she’d talked to/hoped to talk to. Either way, he thought, this is so not good…

“Hey Abs,” Tim said as he entered her lab but Abby remained deep in thought, quietly chewing on her bottom lip.

“Abby,” Ziva called softly but also got no response so Tim moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder.

“What happened down there, Timmy?” Abby asked without turning her head although she did put down the phone.

“Uh, what do you mean?”

Finally Abby looked at both Ziva and Tim. “What happened while you were in Florida, Tim? What happened with Tony?” she questioned, enunciating her words in a slow and distinct manner which made Tim think she thought he was an idiot.

“We, uh, well…we got there after it was over and they were processing the scene…Tony was kind of worked up like he gets sometimes…but he wasn’t hurt, he was just you know, being Tony…” McGee decided that he did kind of sound like an idiot.

“Abby, what is the problem?” Ziva asked quietly taking over for Tim.

“Gibbs…actually, Gibbs and Tony. You saw them together there, right? But did you see them together?”
“Tony was agitated after being kidnapped which is not unexpected, but Gibbs took him home. When they returned the next day Tony truly was…fine…” Ziva said with an expressive gesture of her hands. “The next day they spoke for some time in the conference room. When they re-joined us Tony was in a much better mood…he was laughing and seemed quite normal.”

“But you didn’t see anything out of the ordinary?”

“Everything seemed fine when they were together but I don’t think they’re together…” Tim said with a frown. “Gibbs isn’t…they weren’t…well, Gibbs did hug Tony but I don’t think…” he trailed off when Abby jumped out of her chair to pace across the room.

“Gibbs hugged Tony? And you didn’t think that was noteworthy? What kind of investigators are you!”

Abby was practically yelling and Ziva reached out to place a hand on her arm.

“Abby,” she said in a calming voice. “Are you saying that Tony and Gibbs are together, as in a couple…yes? And if Gibbs told you this then I should think you would be happy for them.” Ziva stated calmly although she felt hurt that Gibbs had not said anything to that effect to them despite their time together since departing Florida. But then if Gibbs was contemplating a serious relationship with Tony it would make sense to tell Abby and quite possibly Ducky first considering the length of time they’d known one another. Yes, and Abby is like a daughter to Gibbs so that, too, made sense.

“Gibbs didn’t say anything to you?”

“He told us to talk to you. He obviously knows you’re having some trouble with this…”

“Some trouble? And you aren’t? Don’t you realize that Gibbs is thinking of leaving us? To go to Florida, like, permanently?”

“Abby, he hasn’t talked to us so no, we didn’t know about this and yes, I’m going to have to really think about what this all means but the only thing that comes to mind right now is if Gibbs suddenly turned gay for Tony and Tony has always had a thing for Gibbs and you’re saying that now they’re together, well like Ziva said, shouldn’t we be happy for them?” Tim asked despite the fact that he was sort of reeling over Abby’s bombshell.
But Abby’s only response was to scrunch up her face in consternation.

“Nooooo….oooooh, I’ve got to think about this! I have to go…that is, you have to go because this is my lab so you, both of you, out…” she said and made a shooing motion.

“Abby…” Tim protested.

“No! We’ll talk about this later…”

Tim rolled his eyes but followed Ziva’s lead and stepped out of the lab. The automatic door closed behind them and they turned to see Abby pacing back and forth with her hands waving in the air as she talked (yelled? debated?) with herself. Tim blew out a frustrated breath and then turned to leave the lab with Ziva right beside him.

“Why do you think Gibbs didn’t tell us this himself?” Tim wondered.

“Perhaps Abby’s less than glowing response made him reticent…” Ziva replied as she hit the elevator button.

“Gibbs? Reticent? Well, I guess you could call his almost complete lack of conversational skills ‘reticent’.” Tim said as he watched the glowing numbers change and the doors open. “But he did tell us to talk to Abby so he probably figured she’d tell us. Still wish I knew for sure what was going on…” They stepped into the elevator and turned around.

“Yes, and also what exactly this means for our team…” Ziva added as the doors closed.

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After Tim and Ziva left Gibbs continued going through the regs for a few more minutes. Eventually he sat back and grabbed his cell phone. He stared at it for a bit, no expression on his face until a look of fierce determination crossed his features. He dialed a number.
“Ted, Jethro Gibbs…yeah, staying busy. Need a favor, though. Who was the realtor you worked with last year when you were thinking of selling?” Gibbs wrote down the phone number.
“Yeah…thinking about it. Good, I’ll let you know…thanks.”
Chapter 44

It was 4 pm sharp when Lali nodded to Mrs. Chalmers, Assistant Director Wright’s secretary. She knocked twice on the door, heard a muffled ‘come’ and then opened the door. She wasn’t quite sure why Director Wright had called for her but she had her hopes. A short while later she walked down the hallway to the bullpen. She looked calm and serene but inside she was a tight knot of excitement. When she entered the bullpen Tony was seated at his desk going over some reports and Stan was leaning over Harry’s shoulder as they looked at something on Harry’s monitor. She didn’t say anything but she knew that Tony was aware of her entrance. She was about to make her announcement when Tony interrupted her.

“So when can I expect that desk to be cleaned out, Lali?” Tony asked without looking up. After a bit he did look up but his face was hard as he waited for her answer.

Lali’s eyes narrowed. Tony knew of her promotion, he would have had to provide his recommendation. Somehow she would have thought he’d be happy for her or at the very least had found acceptance of the change. She hadn’t expected this response. Tony looked really angry. She looked hard but could not detect any hint of joking. Was he that upset at the thought of losing her as his SFA? While some might consider that as positive, all it did was sadden her although not enough to make her consider turning down her own team. She’d been working towards this promotion for a long time. Peripherally she saw Stan and Harry look up in surprise. She moved to stand in front of Tony’s desk. He really must have fought against this, she thought to herself, and now he’s pissed that he lost. She saw a muscle jump in his jaw. His eyes were dark green chips of ice and she felt her muscles tense as though readying herself for a fight.

“I’ll have the desk cleaned out in ten minutes. Will that be acceptable?”

Tony merely glanced at his watch and then back at Lali who was now standing at attention in front of his desk. His eyes narrowed and he looked her over from head to foot and then back again. Behind her he could see Stan and Harry standing up behind her, eyes wide in confused concern.

“I’ll give you the ten,” Tony bit out as he stood up. “And then I expect you to report to Salty’s Sea and Sun to buy the first round, Supervisory Special Agent Molina,” he finished with a now-wide grin. It was only when Lali’s face was contorted with a fierce glare that Tony broke out in a loud laugh which doubled when he caught sight of Stan’s open mouth and Harry’s still confused countenance.

“Gentlemen,” Tony said to Stan and Harry, “meet NCIS’ newest Team Lead. Lali will be heading Charley Peralta’s team upon his retirement.” Then Tony started clapping as Harry and Stan gave Lali some huge congratulatory hugs.
“You really had me going,” Lali said later after a couple of rounds at Salty’s. “I honestly thought you were pissed. You’re an incredible actor, Tony. I heard you were good at undercover work but I had no idea how good. You must have a lot of experience.”

Tony chuckled. “You could say that,” he said and took another sip of beer and glanced at the rest of their group. Stan and Harry were laughing over something Charley Peralta was saying. Charley’s retirement ceremony was scheduled the following Friday. Lali would actively start taking over on Monday to give her time to go through their active cases and to free up Charley to do his out-processing.

Now his team was going to be doing a bit of shifting around starting Monday, too. Stan would be moving into Lali’s position as SFA. It would be a good move and Tony knew that Stan was ready. Now it was up to Tony to start reviewing files to fill the opening. He’d probably get a probie straight out of FLET-C which was fine since they were off rotation pending his clearance which was the only thing he really didn’t want to think about. Well, maybe not the only thing.

Lali hadn’t been completely wrong in her assessment of his response. It wasn’t fair but he couldn’t help feeling a small bit of resentment over the timing of everything. He’d approved Lali’s appointment and promotion before there’d ever been a hint of a potential relationship with Jethro. If things had happened a little differently, Jethro could have easily slipped into the lead position after Charley. He looked down at his beer and wished it was something a bit stronger. It just seemed as though he couldn’t catch a break to save life. No, that wasn’t true, he corrected with a slight sigh. He got a hell of a break which allowed him to get away from Mulroney. So, yeah, he’d gotten those kinds of breaks. He’d survived the plague, played catch me with killers and bombs and had even been cleared of murder charges…twice. But just what the hell was it with him and relationships? He shook his head ruefully and took another sip of beer. This time, though, it was out of his hands. The ball was in Gibbs’ court and no matter how much it was killing him, all he could do was wait.

“So, do you know much about your new team?” Tony finally asked after another long silence.

Lali smiled. She was becoming accustomed to Tony’s introspective moments which seem to have increased with Agent Gibbs’ departure although she wasn’t sure if it was due to the case they’d just help close or if there was something else, maybe something having to do with Agent Gibbs. Her hunch was that it was more the latter than the former. She’d offered an ear but Tony had just smiled and thanked her telling her he was good.

“Hawkins has been Charley’s SFA for about a year now although he’s been on the team for four. He’s a good man and I’m lucky to have him. Schlessinger’s been with the team almost as long and is another good agent. Then there’s Rose Zuniga, the probie. She’s still got a bit of a chip on her
shoulder but I’ve spoken with her a few times and I think it’ll be good.”

Tony smiled at her assessment. He didn’t know those agents as well as Lali did but he trusted her judgment. He was happy for her. Really.

“Well, here’s to your new team,” he said standing up. Turning to the rest of the room he lifted his mug. “To Team Molina!” he shouted out and laughed when it was echoed by everyone in the bar.

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“So when did all of this come about?” Vance demanded.

“Firmed up this last trip,” Gibbs said calmly although his stomach was tied up in a knot.

Vance stared at his Senior Supervisory Special Agent, his go-to guy for the toughest cases, the Agency’s top investigator with the highest clearance rate of any other team (now that his numbers were back up from that slight dip after DiNozzo’s departure…). And now he finds out that Gibbs and DiNozzo are in a ‘relationship’. He gritted his teeth and bit through his toothpick. Turning his head he spit the pieces out on the carpet and automatically grabbed another one from his pocket.

“This was the reason DiNozzo left. Not his health.”

Gibbs blew out a slight breath through his nose. He wasn’t about to out Ducky. “His health was an issue. Florida’s a better place for him than here. But it also had to do with Mulroney and yeah, it had to do with me, too. Ya happy, Leon?”

“No, I’m not happy, Gibbs!” Vance growled and leaned forward onto his desk with his fists. “You’re telling me you had an unlawful homosexual relationship WITH YOUR SUBORDINATE! How many people knew about this?”

Gibbs gritted his teeth and leaned on the other side of Vance’s desk in a mirrored posture.

“I’m tellin’ ya now, Leon, there was no ‘unlawful relationship’ with DiNozzo while he was here and there sure as hell isn’t one now. Nothing happened, ya got that? We came to an understanding
while I was in Florida…”

“And now you’re gay…”

“Actually the term is bisexual but what I am in my personal life is none of your damn business and you know that. DADT never applied to civilians. All I’m asking is if there’s a job for me at that office. It was as a friend that I told you about the change in our relationship so that you’d know specifically not to consider any position where either Tony or I could be accused of fraternization. Never thought you’d be a homophobe, Leon.”

Vance stood straight at that accusation but his hands never relaxed.

“I am not a homophobe…”

“Yeah?” Gibbs asked as he, too, stood straight. “Then tell me why you’re so pissed.”

Vance chose not to answer that question. If pressed, he honestly couldn’t have answered at that moment and that was going to take some serious thought…later.

“I’ll have to look into this, Gibbs. There are no positions open at the Panama City Beach office nor are there any positions available here. I’ll get back to you on this.”

That was as clear a dismissal as any Vance had given Gibbs. He stared at Vance for a moment more before turning to leave the office. Just as he got to the door Vance made one more statement.

“I will look into all viable possibilities, Gibbs, but I suggest you come up with other alternatives.”

Without looking back, Gibbs nodded and left the office. He didn’t say anything as he trotted down the steps. Looking at the bullpen he saw Ziva and McGee at their desks. He wanted more than anything to step out and get some coffee, clear his head, but he knew he needed to speak with both of them. They were the only ones he hadn’t spoken with directly but he knew they’d spoken with Abby the night before and he was positive Vance was going to talk to them next. He really didn’t care about that part because nothing ‘unlawful’ had occurred. He also decided then and there that he hated that word.
“Ziva, McGee, with me,” he said as he walked by the bullpen. He heard a somewhat frantic rustling but both agents were on his heels by the time he reached the elevator. Both agents had their gear and he gave them a quick approving nod. His team was ready for whatever he needed.

“Have we got a case, Boss?” McGee asked as they entered the elevator.


McGee and Ziva exchanged somewhat confused glances but didn’t ask anything else as they stuck with Gibbs while he left the building on his way to the nearest coffee shop.

The confused glances turned to surprise when Gibbs bought the round of preferred caffeinated beverages and then led them to a table in the corner of the coffee shop. By the time they sat down they knew that this was Gibbs way of telling them what was going on so they waited patiently while Gibbs sipped his coffee and stared out of the window. Eventually, they knew some form of actual dialogue would take place.

“You talked to Abby,” Gibbs finally said.

“Yeah, we did. She’s still upset.”

Gibbs remained silent but looked expectantly at both McGee and Ziva. McGee jumped in first.

“Let me say this first, Boss. I’ve got no problem with you and Tony,” McGee started. “Kind of a surprise…about you, I mean. We…well, we already knew about Tony and how he…felt…”

“About you, Gibbs,” Ziva cut in smoothly and she heard McGee sigh in relief. She smiled slightly because they’d never discussed that aspect of Tony’s feelings but it was obvious now that Tim had known about Tony as well. “May I join in Tim’s statement that I have no issue with a relationship between you and Tony, although it is somewhat of a surprise. I did not know you…swing…that way.”

Gibbs snorted and smiled slightly. He remained silent.

“Abby says that you are considering moving to Florida…to be with Tony, yes?”
Gibbs nodded slightly.

“There’s no chance of pulling Tony back here?” McGee asked. He figured it sounded okay, not too shaky or concerned.

“Won’t demote ya, Tim,” Gibbs said. “No jobs right now. Might retire.”

McGee blew out a breath at the words he never thought he’d hear but Ziva remained silent and calm.

“Maybe if you retire Tony could come back in your position…?”

“Tony’s locked in for twelve months.”

“Perhaps Vance can…”

“Federal civilian regulation, not just NCIS.”

Ziva said nothing. She should have known that Gibbs would have already reviewed all pertinent regulations. She watched as Gibbs downed the last of his coffee and stood up. She moved to gather her things already knowing that this conversation was over but she had one last thought.

“Does Vance know about you and Tony? Is this an issue with him?”

Gibbs looked down at her, his face inscrutable as always. “He knows. You two get back to work.”

Ziva searched his eyes wondering how that conversation had gone. She got the impression that it had not gone well and that thought angered her. She said nothing else and stood as well. Both she and McGee picked up their still full cups as Gibbs went for a refill. She assumed Gibbs would follow when he was ready. She was sure Vance would be asking questions, especially if Gibbs was looking at the regulations. She needed to speak with McGee. It would behoove them to be on the same page.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

I owe those who’ve read up to this point an apology. It seems that numerous paragraphs didn’t make it when I started uploading this story. I think I’ve corrected everything with this chapter, but if anyone notes some seemingly odd and disjointed flow to the story, please let me know so that I can fix it. Thanks!

Gibbs’s team caught a case upon their return to the bullpen. It started out looking clear-cut but then they dug deeper because that’s what they did and they found more questions than answers so they kept digging. After several days of digging and sleeping at their desks and eating when they could, they found the answers to their questions and had not one but two men in custody. The caught their next case before they finished their reports and so it continued with case after case coming their way. Gibbs might have thought Vance had played a part in their workload but he knew the other teams were just as busy.

Through it all Gibbs missed the hell out of DiNozzo, the agent, although he had no concerns with either McGee or Ziva’s efforts, he just knew that his job ran so much smoother with Very Special Agent DiNozzo at his side. His personal life ran much smoother with Tony in it, too. The cases and personal projects he buried himself in weren’t enough to ease the lonely ache in his gut and his chest and he was forcibly reminded that no matter how much experience he had with separation from a loved one, it never got easier. He missed the nights where he worked on his boat with Tony sitting on the stairs rattling on about whatever thought crossed his constantly buzzing mind. What he really missed was the taste of Tony’s mouth and the way he felt pressed up against him, hard and straining. He just missed Tony, his hoped-for lover, who was never far from his thoughts although he hadn’t found the time to call. Tony had, of course, but as just another example of their lousy timing, he’d been ass-deep in his cases or had someone around so he couldn’t talk each and every time. He told himself that he’d call when he got home tonight no matter how hard it was because talking on the phone just wasn’t his way.

What he wanted to say couldn’t be said over the phone so he tried sending emails. They were never long and usually ended up sounding more like bitching than anything else because what ended up on the screen did not quite match what he was thinking and feeling as he wrote the words. Somehow, though, he hoped Tony understood that when he typed that he had to get McGee started on a running program, what he really meant was that he missed Tony’s athletic ability because he needed someone who could keep up with not only their suspects but with him as well.

When he said that he had had to get Ziva more acclimated to American idioms because she couldn’t quite catch some of the nuances of colloquial speech patterns (although what he actually typed was ‘Ziva needs a damn translator’), he meant that he missed having Tony either in the interrogation room or behind the mirror listening in because Tony understood people and what they were really trying to say.
When he said that he had to get a probie who understood English, he meant he needed someone who understood Gibbs-speak and who knew what it was he needed without him having to actually say the words.

When he said that all teams should have at least one former police officer on the team, he meant that he missed Tony’s instincts. And when he said that he was being careful in the field, he meant that he missed having Tony on his six.

There were other things he wanted to say to let Tony know he was thinking of him but the words themselves never made it out of his mouth or to the screen. He told Tony his basement was empty and when Tony asked what happened to the boat his only answer was that ‘it broke’ never once alluding to the all-encompassing rage and pain he was feeling the night he took a sledge hammer to it and shattered it to splinters. What he really wanted to say was that the basement had been empty even before that because Tony had stopped coming over but when he read what he’d typed, it looked too stupid and needy and he didn’t want to appear that way even if it was true.

In the long run he knew that what he wanted to say couldn’t be typed into words. He could only truly express himself with his actions, with his hands and with his body, with touches both hard and soft, with his lips, tongue and with his teeth. What he wanted to say could only be said when he had Tony in his arms. In the meantime he said what he could and hoped Tony would understand and then he smirked because Tony understood him better than anyone save for Shannon.

What he didn’t want to say was anything about that bastard Vance and the fact that he actually did go and talk to not only McGee and Ziva but to Ducky, too. He also didn’t want to say that Vance had yet to come up with any options that entailed Gibbs actually keeping his job. No, the only thing Vance did was ask him to stay until he found a replacement. Considering their workload it seemed a reasonable request especially since Gibbs was trying to get his house settled, so he agreed.

Gibbs was actually glad Vance hadn’t spoken with Abby. She had returned to her previous treatment of him and he didn’t really know what to do about it. Her behavior not only disappointed him, it hurt. He only told Tony that Abby was mad at him again. He became even more disappointed in his girl to learn that she wasn’t returning Tony’s emails, either. Gibbs’ disappointment resulted in him being even a bigger bastard at work but, fortunately, McGee seemed to be getting the hang of being in the line of fire.

Gibbs had no boat to work on to soothe his inner turmoil but working on his house helped. The real estate agent had given him some suggestions on things to do to make the house easier to sell. Unfortunately, she’d also been honest about the currently depressed housing market. He should be able to sell the house but probably not for what it was really worth and not quickly. He told her
he’d think about it but still went about making the changes she’d suggested. He considered renting but he was a possessive man. He didn’t want strangers touching anything that belonged to him, just as he didn’t want to use certain items that had been used by others before him.

With that in mind, he spent time on some plans for future projects despite not being able to start them right away, certainly not when he’d have to make arrangements to move them and especially since he refused to leave his projects open to viewing by potential buyers. No, he’d have to wait before he could build all new equipment for Tony’s playroom. Besides, it wasn’t as though they would need the new equipment right away. He had a great many things in mind for Tony until he built the unique items he wanted. He smiled to himself as he made plans and drew, imagining and planning the types of wood and leather he would use, built to his own specifications and with Tony’s dimensions in mind.

In this way Gibbs kept busy while he awaited one of Tony’s emails because the emails themselves involved more than merely reading them. He often found himself having to look up some of the movie references Tony included. It helped that Tony had also sent him a link to some movie webpage, IMD...something. He still wasn’t sure what the acronym stood for but he could at least find the movies Tony was referencing. He hadn’t told anyone, but he even rented some of them. He found he couldn’t get interested in a lot of them but at least he understood what Tony was talking about. At least, most of the time.

Generally, though, Tony’s emails were light and funny and he found that he could almost hear Tony’s voice as he read them. He had to agree that their timing was lousy with regard to Lali’s promotion although he couldn’t say that she hadn’t earned it. It was just that her getting that job made it that much harder for him and Tony to get together but he was working it. So instead he asked about the new probie. He told Tony it was good that he was back in the field but that he was just as glad Tony was still having sessions with Alan. That was his way of saying he worried about Tony. Still, he wanted to do more.

During the course of four marriages he could honestly say that he did learn a thing or two. One of them was to let your partner know you were thinking about them. The only problem was that since Tony wasn’t there he couldn’t change the oil on his car or do any of other things that to him said “I’m thinking of you”. He wasn’t about to send Tony flowers…but maybe chocolates? Where once he would have asked Abby about which ones to send, he didn’t feel he could do that right now and he wasn’t about to ask McGee or Ziva. What he determined instead was that Tony could use a new storage shelf for his DVDs. It was something that could be packed with whatever furniture he decided to take with him and Tony did need it. He remembered the stack of DVDs on the floor next to that ridiculously large TV. Yes, that was something he could work on tonight...after he called Tony. Tomorrow night he’d be busy and that thought made him frown.

He had a meeting with a friend of his, a financial advisor he’d worked with for years. He wanted to know if, should push come to shove, he could retire and walk away and not be dependent on Tony. The only problem was that his finances hadn’t been planned that way. He always figured he’d work until they forced him out or until he was killed in the line of duty. One way or the other, he hadn’t figured he’d ever have reason to retire early. Now he did.
Tony turned away from the monitor in frustration and grabbed the nearest piece of paper and wadded it up. He aimed towards the trashcan and threw. He missed. Par for the course, he thought to himself. He’d just read another one of Jethro’s emails and he felt like he was missing something there, too. He turned back to the monitor to re-read the email. Nope, Jethro talked about work, the team and the latest project on his house. That was it. The same things he’d talked about on the phone last night. The only saving grace was that Tony could soak in the sound of Jethro’s voice as he talked about re-finishing his deck. At least he’d said that he could have put Tony to work if he’d been around which, in Gibbs-speak, meant that they could have spent some time together. Tony had even said, although with some trepidation, that he missed Jethro. Jethro had been silent for a bit which tore at Tony because he wasn’t sure if he’d crossed some line since he didn’t know how Jethro operated within a homosexual relationship…if he’d ever even had one. He couldn’t remember it now but he’d been just about to make some lame joke to recall the words when Jethro had finally responded with a “yeah, me, too.” And while that wasn’t a whole lot, it had definitely kept Tony’s stomach from tying itself into knots. The only problem was that it just wasn’t enough.

Now Tony knew, intellectually, that conversation was not among Jethro’s strengths. He’d learned over the years (sometimes rather painfully) to read Jethro’s eyes and his body language in order to know what Jethro was thinking. Not having that extra input, though, definitely made it difficult to believe that Jethro was doing more than just living his own life the way he always had. He never talked about what it was he was doing in order for them to be together. Tony had tried asking but Jethro’s only answer was that he was working it. Well, what the fuck was he working?

Tony had already looked into open positions throughout NCIS. There weren’t two openings in any one location which would let them be together even if he could move so soon after being re-assigned. That meant that, at the very least, they were looking at being separated over six more months assuming, of course, there’d even be some openings available then. He blew out another frustrated breath. He’d worked with the military long enough to know how hard long-term separations were on a relationship let alone one as new as theirs. He wasn’t even sure if you could call what they had between them a ‘relationship’. Not yet. They’d barely had the time to acknowledge the fact that they wanted to be together let alone how anything would work out between them. He knew Jethro was a Dom and he looked forward to learning everything that would entail but right now it felt as though he’d never get the chance. God, if he was missing Jethro this much after sharing just those few moments together, how in the hell do people with real commitments handle being apart? But that was the point, wasn’t it? He didn’t have a commitment with Jethro because he said he couldn’t make any promises and God that sucked. What if Jethro decided that he’d made a mistake? What if he decided that in the long run he wasn’t worth all of the effort it would take to come out to Florida? Fuck!

All of his life things just never seemed to work out quite right, not in his jobs and not in his relationships. Hell, he couldn’t even include his family in that thought and that was one of the most basic relationships that most people just seemed to take for granted. When he got hired into NCIS it seemed as though he’d finally found his rightful place, a place where he fit both professionally and personally. He found people who actually cared for him…and whom he’d found himself caring for in return. So what did he do? He fucked it all up by falling in love with
his Boss. So sure, Jethro had said that he wanted to be with Tony, too (and wasn’t that still so fucking unbelievable?), but as more and more time went by without any real evidence of a solution, he was finding his own insecurities raising their ugly heads at every turn. It was always hardest at night, too, especially as he wandered around his empty house for hours, nothing holding his interest as he tried to stay away from that bottle and then later, when he lay awake in bed aching and alone, unable to comfort himself in any way as he waited through the long hours for morning to come just so he could do it all over again. At work he threw himself into their cases with a single-mindedness that surprised both Stan and Harry and impressed their probie, Megan. Even then, in the light of day, there were times when he was positive that he’d just dreamt those brief moments with Jethro and that he’d wake up at any moment to find himself just as alone as he’d been when he first got to Florida.

Alan had assured him that Jethro had truly been there, that he’d met him and that he had spent the night in Tony’s home. Unfortunately, he couldn’t attest to the kisses in the conference room and right now that was what Tony needed most, some form of assurance that he hadn’t made it all up. He turned to his computer and started to formulate that need into words that Jethro would read and to which he’d hopefully respond. He stopped after the first few words, suddenly too embarrassed to ask for reassurance like some needy female and besides, who was he kidding? Did he actually think he could get Jethro to respond with heartfelt, emotional words? That was so not going to happen. He couldn’t get him to say hardly anything personal in their private emails and it was even worse over the phone. He wondered how Shannon had dealt with their separations. He forced his thoughts away from there because Shannon had been a woman and he was sure Jethro had made allowances for her needs. But he had the same needs and…oh, boy, that thought didn’t help his self-image at all. Tony slapped his own head and sighed again. Sexual stereotypes aside, he had to admit that there were times when he just needed to hear Jethro’s voice and this was one of them.

Tony looked around his office. Stan and Harry had taken Megan out to lunch so he had time. He just hoped Jethro wasn’t in the middle of another case or worse, driving like he was last time. He was positive he’d heard a squeak from McGee which was promptly followed the dopplered howl of a car horn. He pictured Ziva in the back seat digging her fingers into the upholstery despite the too-calm expression on her face. Jethro, on the other hand, seemed almost casual on the phone. Tony had suggested…strongly…that he call back later but Jethro had continued on with some vague references to terrorists while Tony’s stomach was twisting in ways he’d never thought were physically possible. Jethro had finally acceded to his request that they talk later and then Tony had sat on tenterhooks the rest of the day waiting for the call to tell him that Jethro and his entire team had perished in a fiery crash. Thankfully that call had never come but since then Tony had avoided calling during the day unless he really needed to…like now. He pulled out his cell phone and was surprised when it rang in his hand. He frowned when he looked at the display. It was Derek.

They hadn’t spoken since their less-than-optimal breakup although Derek had been trying to reach him. Tony just hadn’t answered any of the messages or emails. He sighed. He really should get this over with.

“DiNozzo,” he answered.
“Tony…it’s Derek.”

“Well, this is a surprise,” Tony said with feigned pleasure.

“And why would that be, Tony? You know that I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Derek,” Tony said with a sigh. “I’m sorry about the way things went down at my place, but it doesn’t change anything. I’m with Jethro now.”

“If that’s the case, where is he? Why are you alone every night?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Are you following me?” he asked in a tight voice although he knew that wasn’t the case because it was second nature for him to check for things like that. It didn’t, however, preclude Derek from staking out his home.

“Of course not, baby,” Derek said soothingly. “But I have driven by your place a few times…”

“Derek…”

“No, just hear me out, okay? I’m worried about you and I don’t think you can blame me for that. He hurt you before. I just don’t want you hurt again.”

Tony rubbed his thumb and forefinger over his eyes. He’d never told Derek all of the details about his departure from DC. Derek had just assumed Gibbs was responsible for the unique scars he now sported and Tony had never corrected that assumption. Now, however, it bothered Tony that Derek still thought so poorly of Gibbs.

“You know that it was Mulroney who hurt me, not Gibbs,” Tony said.

“Maybe that one time, but are you really going to tell me that Gibbs has never hurt you?”

Tony, whose emotions were so close to the surface right now, couldn’t say anything for the moment. Gibbs had hurt him in the past even if it had never been intentional and Tony was hurting right now… Then he kicked himself. It wasn’t the same thing!
“Derek, Gibbs won’t hurt me…you’re going to have to believe me…”

“That’s hard for me to do, baby, without some more explanation. Why don’t we have dinner together and you can spell it all out for me,” Derek suggested. “I know it’s hard for you right now with Gibbs so far away. I just don’t want you to be alone. Dinner and maybe a couple of drinks and we’ll talk, that’s all, okay? How about Valenti’s, say 7:30. I can pick you up.”

Tony’s first instinct was to say no but he was literally going crazy. Besides, he told himself, Derek still cared for him and this way he could ease Derek’s mind about Jethro.

“Okay, Derek, we’ll have dinner but I’ll meet you there, alright? Seven thirty at Valenti’s…”
Leon Vance sat in his study with a glass on cognac in his hand. Soothing jazz played in the background and the house was quiet now that his wife was putting the kids to bed. He leaned back and closed his eyes and tried to lose himself in the music. He failed.

“Not working tonight,” his wife said knowingly of the music and drink as she ran a warm hand over his shoulder.

Leon smiled. His wife knew him so well, cared for him and their children and kept a warm and comfortable home. She was beautiful and loving and gentle although she had a strength about her that often amazed him. She was wise and funny and embodied everything he could ever want in a woman and he knew he was lucky to have her as his wife and companion. So why couldn’t Gibbs find someone like Jackie?

“Frowning that hard has got to hurt,” Jackie said with a smile. “Is it anything you can talk about?”

Leon hadn’t realized that he was frowning but he could feel his face smooth out as soon as his wife had spoken. He almost said that he couldn’t but then stopped himself. His wife knew him better than anyone else in the world. Maybe she could help him figure out why the thought of Gibbs and DiNozzo had set his teeth on edge so badly. He’d always considered himself an open-minded man. He’d never considered himself a homophobe but the way he’d been feeling lately had him doubting himself, especially after running his inquiries through the rest of Gibbs’ team.

While both McGee and David had been very professional in their response to his inquiries, it left him with no doubt that they’d discussed the ‘relationship’ quite extensively at some point and were quite comfortable with it. They had made it clear that they supported Gibbs and DiNozzo and they vehemently denied that any unprofessional behavior had ever occurred although he noted with amusement that they were very clear that they were specifically referring to Gibbs’ and DiNozzo’s romantic relationship rather than the usual way in which the, in his opinion, unorthodox team operated. It had eased his mind to know that there’d been no evidence of any fraternization and he tried very hard to tell himself that it was that alone which eased his mind and not the nature of the fraternization itself. He just wished that he’d stopped his questioning after speaking with David and McGee.

While he thought he’d been very careful in his questioning, Dr. Mallard had sussed his true concerns leaving him feeling deeply ashamed of himself although he remained quite chagrined at the charming way in which the elder gentleman had gone about it. Vance took another sip of his drink as he tried to understand the roots of his unrest as Dr. Mallard recommended he should and he realized he’d left Jackie waiting patiently for an answer. He smiled ruefully at her in apology.

“I found out something personal about someone and it’s bothering me more than I think it should.”
“What was it you found out?”

“That this man I’ve known for a long time, who’s been married more than once, is now in a relationship with another man.”

Jackie’s eyebrows went up for a moment but then her head tilted to one side as a thoughtful expression crossed her features.

“You’ve never been a narrow-minded man, Leon. While I know that you don’t understand the desire itself, it’s never bothered you to know someone is gay. This time, though, the news took you by surprise, didn’t it?”

Leon’s expression told Jackie that it had been quite a shock.

“And, since you work hard to consider every angle of a given situation and to really know the people you work with, this news bothered you because you never saw it coming,” Jackie concluded with a gentle smile to ease the sting of her words. “Your pride was hurt, Leon.”

Now Leon was really frowning. Was that what was bothering him? Was it that Gibbs had surprised him? Was he really that arrogant? He shook his head in automatic denial.

“No? Alright,” Jackie said as she considered the situation. “So this man being gay is not the problem. Is the relationship going to cause a problem? Do they work together?”

“Not anymore. They’re separated. This man asked for a position to be closer to his…friend.”

Jackie smiled again. “You don’t think too much of this ‘friend’, do you?”

“How do you know that?”

“I know you, Leon. You don’t think this man’s partner is good enough for him. Is he a problem at work?”
Leon rubbed a hand over his face. What could he say about DiNozzo? The man was erratic, immature and had a very questionable sense of humor. He was the same type of agent as Gibbs, one of the old school (dark ages, actually) who refused to utilize the technological advances available to him. Despite that, however, he was an excellent agent, well deserving of the promotion he’d given him. He was an excellent undercover operative and Gibbs trusted him implicitly.

“No.”

DiNozzo was probably the only person who could put up with Gibbs on any given day but especially when he was at his worst as he had proven over and over again during the past years. But was he what Gibbs needed in his personal life?

“So you just don’t like the man,” Jackie surmised. “He doesn’t act the way you think he should. But is it really your decision to make, Leon?”

Leon looked at his wife and wondered if he’d spoken those last thoughts aloud but he knew he hadn’t. It didn’t matter, though. He shook his head in answer to her question. It wasn’t his decision. And it was obvious that Gibbs needed DiNozzo in his life in whatever capacity worked for him…for them.

“No, but I can’t create a position just so that they can be together. I can’t show that level of favoritism.”

“No, you can’t. Just don’t block whatever opportunity comes up for Jethro to be with Tony.”

“I never told you who I was thinking about…”

“You didn’t have to, Leon. You’ve been worried about Jethro Gibbs ever since Agent DiNozzo took that job in Florida,” Jackie said as she moved over to rub Leon’s shoulders.

Leon shook his head in wonder and then smiled.

“You were right,” he said as he covered one of his wife’s hands with his one of his own.
“Mmm, about which part?” Jackie said as she bent down and wrapped her arms around Leon’s neck.

“All of it…my pride, worrying about my agent…and about DiNozzo.” Leon didn’t have to turn around to know Jackie was smiling.

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Leon shook his head. “I honestly don’t know. But if I don’t figure something out, I’ll lose one of my best agents.”

“You’ll figure something out, Leon, you always do. But even if Jethro does leave, you’ll find a way to be happy for him.”

“Oh I will, huh?”

“Yes, you will because you are a good man, Leon Vance. Now come on. It’s time for bed,” Jackie said and kissed Leon on his temple.

Leon smiled and thought again about what a lucky man he was and then followed his wife to bed.

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Tony groaned and dropped his head back onto the couch. He contemplated going out to another movie but he’d already seen all of the latest first-run movies and he honestly didn’t feel like going out alone. There wasn’t anything on TV tonight and none of his DVDs interested him. Neither Steven nor Alan was home tonight, Stan and Lali were out together, Harry had class tonight and Megan had mentioned something about friends. He’d even called Tim and Ziva to shoot the breeze although in reality he was trying to find out what Jethro was up to. The only thing they could tell him was that Jethro was a bigger bastard than ever and that everyone was staying away. They told him about Abby’s constant calls but that she still wasn’t talking to Gibbs. That came as no surprise because she wasn’t answering him, either. He knew he wouldn’t even try to call Jethro tonight just as he hadn’t all week. The way he was feeling tonight, their non-conversation would only make him feel worse than he already did. He thought about going out to the gym but he’d already worked out at the office before coming home. He tried calling Abby but she didn’t pick up and he ended up leaving yet another message. All in all, he felt wretchedly alone and he
desperately wished Jethro was there because he needed to be taken down although if Jethro was there then maybe he’d be going down… NO, No, nonono…stop that!

Tony sighed again and thought about ordering a pizza even though he wasn’t at all hungry but the food would at least lessen the temptation of the bottle locked in his cabinet. He was actually proud of himself because it didn’t beckon the way it had when he first got to Florida but tonight it seemed as though all bets were off. Even then it wasn’t that he really want a drink, it was just something to do…

He was about to order the pizza but decided instead to go out and get it himself. That, at least, would take up a bit more time. He grabbed his keys and was headed towards the door when his phone rang. It was Derek again. His eyes narrowed and he peeked through the curtains but didn’t see anyone sitting outside and decided he was being ridiculous. When he answered he heard loud music in the background and realized that he really was getting paranoid.

“What’s up, Derek?”

“Well, I figured you’re sitting at home alone…again…and I thought you might like to join me at the Sundowner. They’ve got a great band playing…listen…”

Tony smiled at the thought of Derek holding his cell phone out towards the stage of his favorite club. The music was tinny coming through the tiny speakers but he could tell that the band really was good. He just wasn’t sure about going out to meet Derek again. They’d had a really good time over dinner a couple of weeks ago. There’d been no other invitations although Derek called two or three times a week just to talk. Tony had to admit that the phone calls had been welcome distractions each time and tonight was no different. He made a spur of the moment decision to go ahead and take Derek up on his invitation since it was just to listen to some music. What could it hurt?

“It sounds good, Derek,” Tony said when Derek came back on the phone. “How about I see you there in about 20 minutes?”

“That’s great, baby. See you in 20,” Derek said and then hung up.

There was a small niggling at the back of Tony’s mind but he chose to ignore it. He wasn’t cheating on Jethro. He was just going out with a friend. Besides, he really needed to tell Derek to quit calling him ‘baby’ even if he knew that it was just a habit. Yeah, some music and a couple of beers and it would be another day done. Tony headed out.
Chapter 47

Todd was worried. In fact, he had been ever since that phone call a few weeks ago but Abby had yet to tell him what it was about. Since then, Abby hadn’t been herself and he’d known her long enough to know that it had something to do with work. Abby was a brilliant scientist who adored her job and the people she worked with. It was an odd day that she didn’t mention Gibbs and company at least once. Well, with the exception of that time just after Tony left. That had been a few dark weeks where his normally ebullient girl had retreated into a dark, angry silence. It had taken awhile but things had settled down, especially after Abby’s trip to Florida to visit Tony. So, whatever had happened now obviously involved Gibbs (again) and now probably Tony, because those were the only names that weren’t crossing his girl’s lips and Todd was determined to get to the bottom of his girl’s unhappiness.

Todd grabbed another piece of sausage to chop while Abby cut up the chicken for the batch of jambalaya she was making. Abby was talking about the toxicology seminar they were both scheduled to attend the following week and Todd smiled realizing how grateful he was that their professions were close enough to overlap on things like that. Todd was grateful for a lot of things in his life but none more so than his Abby. He listened while she spoke knowing that eventually she’d start talking about what was bothering her. Being almost as good at multi-tasking as she was, he let his mind wander a bit while she talked about the seminar, the food she was making and her Aunt Mathilde. She was focusing a lot on her family lately and cooking comfort foods like the jambalaya meant that she was feeling a loss of some kind that made her feel both insecure and vulnerable.

Insecurity and vulnerability weren’t traits that anyone who didn’t know Abby would associate with her. She is a very strong woman, confident in her abilities and unafraid to live her life as she sees fit. Her choice in attire was a case in point. He remembered the first time he saw her…a shocking nine years earlier. He’d been invited to a bowling night by a friend of his, Sister Rosita. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the bowling Goth in the flouncy pink and black skull skirt he met that night, but he’d had a good time. The second time he saw her was nearly a year later when she’d been called onstage at a Brain Matter concert by the lead singer. Again she’d made an impression on him as she bounced around wearing a black leather mini skirt, studded black platform boots and a tight neon green skull shirt as she joined in during the chorus to “Dead Babe Party Dolls”. They had ended up partying together that night and went out on a few dates but a job opportunity derailed their budding relationship and took him to Boston for nearly seven years.

When he returned, it was through Sister Rosita’s infinite wisdom and sneaky planning that he again met up with her. It was then that he noticed that she’d changed somewhat. The Abby he came to know the second time around was a bit needier and her style had changed a bit. Now she wore more plaid skirts and knee-hi socks and other more ‘cutsie’ (for lack of a better word) clothing styles, although still with a twist all her own. He had to admit he’d never seen a Hello Kitty skeleton shirt before but she had one. He didn’t mind the subtle changes; she was still the same brilliant, quirky, sweet girl he’d met years before despite the fact that those years hadn’t been all that easy for her. He found out that in the time they’d been apart she’d come close to losing Tony more than once (who would have believed plague was still around?), that she did, in fact, lose a
close friend named Kate to a sniper and that Gibbs had disappeared to Mexico for three months although he did come back. His girl had even been shot at and stalked. Through all of it she had Gibbs and company protecting and caring for her. It was no surprise that she cared so deeply for the family of her heart but he had to wonder just what it was that her almost-father Gibbs and distant, almost-brother Tony had done.

They continued working together to throw in some more ingredients and Todd wondered at the large amount she was making. Of course they could freeze some, but Abby didn’t normally cook this amount unless she was cooking for her team or she was very deeply disturbed. He decided to nudge the conversation towards the folks she worked with and was rewarded with a few hints that eventually turned into a full-blown rant. *Ah, Todd thought to himself, now I understand…*

“NO! It’s wrong! How can he do that? It wasn’t bad enough that Tony left and broke up our family but now Gibbs is going to go, too?”

Todd looked at the woman he’d realized some time ago that he was in love with although he’d yet to say the words. While her quirky nature and brilliant mind had been what attracted him at first (and okay, she was absolutely gorgeous to boot), he’d also come to learn that her exterior hid not only her huge, generous heart but a surprising fragility as well. All in all, the whole package that was Abby was one that enthralled him but right now her very deep insecurity was showing and he wanted nothing more than to soothe those feelings away. His Abby couldn’t bear to think of anything disrupting the small core of people she considered her family and now that Gibbs had announced his plan to build a life with Tony, she was left feeling abandoned. Well, it was up to him to fix that.

“Honey, you’ve got to look at this from a different perspective and, no, I don’t mean you need to stand on your head,” Todd chuckled when she scrunched up her face at him. “You’ve always said that all of your co-workers were like a family. Well, what happens to families when the kids grow up? They go on to their own lives but it doesn’t mean they break off their connection. You still talk to your parents and to your brother, right?”

But now Abby was frowning and chewing her bottom lip. Her eyes were dark liquid pools and he wasn’t sure she was in a completely receptive mood for the analogy he was about to give her. Okaaay, maybe a different angle…

“You know you’ve told me a lot about Gibbs and he sounds like a fascinating man...all those years as a Marine before moving to NCIS. The military is a tough life and takes a lot of dedication.”

“You are so *totally right* which is why Gibbs does everything in his almost super-human power to make sure all those men and women get the justice they deserve,” she said with a definitive shake of her head and bounce of her pig-tails.
“And Tony was a police officer…that’s another tough job. You know I still feel bad about opening my mouth that night. I had no idea he was still in the closet back then…”

“Oh, yeah…you know like the military, the police force is another real tight-knit organization, not that there’s anything wrong with that. It just makes it hard for anyone who’s different.”

“Gibbs was married four times. That must have been so hard on his wives…”

“It was hard on Gibbs, too, especially with his first wife. I told you how she and their daughter were murdered while he was overseas. Poor Gibbs! And then he married all these redheads but they weren’t right for him and I was really hoping he wouldn’t get too serious about that Col Mann…she was just totally wrong.”

“Sounds like he’s had a hard time trying to find someone who’ll put up with him…”

With that statement Abby whirled around and waved her spoon threateningly in his direction.

“Watch it, mister! Gibbs is a wonderful man! He just needs the right person who’ll understand him…”

Todd laughed and held his hands up in surrender. “Of course he is, babe, otherwise you wouldn’t love him so much. You understand him. But you also told me no one understands him like Tony.” He took the spoon out of her hand and continued stirring the pot.

“That’s right, there’s like this connection between those two,” Abby said as she tapped her two index fingers together. “They can almost read each other’s minds although I think that’s mostly on Gibbs’ part because I still think he’s psychic, the way he always shows up just when my babies have something to tell me…”

“It’s too bad you don’t support a relationship between Gibbs and Tony…” he added almost indifferently.

“Who said I didn’t support it!” Abby exclaimed as she whirled to face Todd. “I’ve been thinking about it and those two are so perfect for each other! I mean I didn’t think so before because I
didn’t know Gibbs was into men but now that I think about all those ex-wives, except for Shannon, of course, it just makes so much sense and Tony’s been in love with him for…well forever. But first Tony leaves and now if Gibbs goes then who’ll be there if I need them, like, when things go south, you know?” Abby said gesticulating wildly with her arms. “Because it doesn’t happen often but there’ve been times when it’s gotten hairy, I mean Timmy is good but even though he’s a senior field agent now, he’s not Tony and no way is he Gibbs…Oh!”

Todd nodded in agreement with everything she was saying and only then realized that his girl’s insecurity stemmed not from the thought of losing a family member but more because Gibbs was leaving and she considered him her protector. His girl was afraid. He also saw that as he realized this Abby’s eyes had widened. Abby had come to a realization of her own.

“I’ve been so selfish, haven’t I?”

Todd stepped towards her and pulled her into his arms. “Oh, babe, you’re scared and given some of the stuff you’ve told me, I can’t say that I blame you. Half the time I’m terrified of letting you go to work,” Todd said as he looked into Abby’s eyes. “But I also know that I can’t stop you from doing what you love. You are as dedicated to your job as any of the agents you work with. It’s a calling.”

Abby was quiet in his arms but he could see her mind working. “Todd, I never think about these things when I’m here at home with you, but when I’m at work it’s like I can’t think of anything else. I’m constantly calling Timmy and Ziva and even Ducky…”

“But not Gibbs…”

“Oh, God, I’m so stupid…he must think I hate him but I don’t, really I don’t,” Abby said quietly as she chewed her bottom lip and frowned. “It’s just that I kind of thought that if I didn’t talk to him I wouldn’t feel the constant need to have him hold me, like to protect me even though there’s nothing going on…”

“But even if there were, you have to know that no matter who’s there, they’ll protect you, too. I know that Tim would lay his life down for you if the need came up.”

“He pulled me out of the lab when it got filled with cyanide gas…”

Todd just closed his eyes and pulled Abby in tighter. His girl hadn’t told him that story, yet. He
wasn’t sure he wanted to know. “Abby, sweetheart…you know, I think there’ll be an opening coming up with my company…”

“Oh, thank you, honey,” Abby said with a fierce hug. “But you were right, you know. My job is a calling for me. I can’t leave it. I’m good at what I do and what I do makes a difference…n-not that what you do doesn’t make a difference, that wasn’t what I meant, it’s just that I need to do what I’m doing and you’re right, everyone I work with is so good I know I’ll be safe…”

Todd just laughed and pulled Abby in closer. He’d gone through all of this in his head a long time ago when he first realized he was falling for Abby. As much as he hated that her job occasionally put her in danger, he couldn’t stop her from doing what she loved.

“That’s right, but there’s more, isn’t there? You’re also hurt because you’re going to miss them and it’ll change things at work.”

“YES! Yes, that’s right, Todd!” She said pulling back and looking at Todd. “This will break up the team and what if I hate the new Team Lead they bring in? What if he doesn’t get me and makes me want to change?”

“Honey, then you’ll have to show ‘em just how brilliant you are and that it has nothing to do with how you dress or the music you listen to and besides, it won’t be like you won’t have Tim, Ziva and Ducky on your side, right? You won’t be alone, Abby. And even if Tim and Ziva take another job and Ducky retires you won’t be alone because I’m not going anywhere…ever…”

“Oh, Todd, I’d absolutely die if you ever left!” Abby said throwing her arms around Todd again and knowing it was true because she’d known for awhile now that she was falling in love with him and it sounded as though he felt the same way, too. But why would he? She felt the prickling of tears in her eyes as she pulled back and looked into his dark brown eyes.

“I really would, you know? But after this, I’ve got to wonder why you’d stick with someone like me. I’ve just proven how insecure and selfish and horrible I can be…”

“No, you’re not, Abby. All you’ve shown me is that when you find someone to love you love them with your whole heart, your whole soul, and I’d like to think that I fit in there, too, because I have to tell you, Abby, that I love you…”

“Oh, Todd,” Abby said in a low voice, shaky now with the same tears that filled her eyes. “I love
you, too…”

Her tears spilled over as Todd claimed her mouth in a hard kiss. His heart filled with joy at hearing the words he’d dreamt of for so long and he pulled her even closer as he deepened the kiss, telling her with his hands and with his mouth just what she meant to him. He pulled back long enough to catch his breath but then he peppered her face with small kisses until she laughed in sheer joy all the while chanting her name and telling her she was his forever.

“I love you, Todd…love you forever…” Abby responded in between tiny gasps and breathy moans and then all discussion ceased for quite some time.

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“Go ahead, baby, call him,” Derek urged.

“Don’t call me that…” Tony said without any heat despite the fact that he was getting damned annoyed and not only at Derek, but at Jethro, too.

“I don’t think you should, Tony,” Steven chimed in while shooting a glare at Derek. “It’s better if you call tonight, when you’re sure he’s not working.”

Tony looked over at Steven knowing he was right. The last two times Tony had called during duty hours hadn’t gone too well. The second call had, in fact, left him feeling almost sick with worry. Still, Tony was undecided. He looked out over the water. Steven sat next to him radiating concern and Derek, on the other hand, was smiling. He was pushing for him to call again to prove that Gibbs had no time for him and while Tony was getting pretty tired of it Derek had, unfortunately, been right each time. Derek was of the mind that Gibbs just didn’t want to talk to Tony because he hadn’t found a way to tell him that he wasn’t planning on joining him after all.

Tony wished yet again that he and Steven had opted to go somewhere else for lunch so that they wouldn’t have run into Derek but what he really wished was that Derek hadn’t overheard their conversation. Tony had been expressing his fear that Jethro really had changed his mind about coming to Florida and it just wasn’t something that he wanted to admit in front of Derek. Especially now that Derek was proving once and for all that Steven and Alan had been right about him all along.

Neither Alan nor Steven approved of the time Tony had been spending with Derek because they
thought he was only interested in renewing their relationship. At first Tony thought they were wrong because he felt that despite everything else, he and Derek could remain friends and Derek had agreed. So, when Steven and Alan and the rest of his team weren’t available to help Tony during those moments when his doubts started to become too much, Derek had stepped in and provided Tony with some much-needed diversion. On those few occasions when they did go out, Derek was on his best behavior (with the exception of still calling him ‘baby’). However, recently his behavior had begun to change and today was a case in point which made Tony finally realize that Alan and Steven had been right all along.

“Steven’s right, don’t bother calling,” Derek agreed snidely. “Gibbs probably has another high-profile case and is too busy to talk to you anyway.”

Unknowingly, Derek had hit upon a minor sore point for Tony, one that he had never realized before coming to Florida. The fact was that Tony missed the nature of the cases handled by Gibbs’ team. While the cases his team handled certainly couldn’t be called unimportant, there was a lot to be said for being a member of a Major Case Response Team that had the highest clearance rate in the agency and that answered directly to the Director of NCIS and hence, the Secretary of the Navy.

“Well, that’s true, Derek, I don’t want to pull Jethro away from chasing terrorists or serial murderers or any of the other high-profile cases his team catches,” Tony said almost bitterly and then stopped himself. He didn’t really just say that, did he? Christ, how many of Jethro’s ex-wives had said something just like that? He suddenly felt sick with disgust at himself. He looked at Steven who looked back at him in surprise. While it was true that Jethro did head up the MCRT so of course they got the high-profile cases, he knew that his job was just as important. So where had that thought come from?

Derek was surprised, too. While he’d been working on his campaign to get Tony to see that Jethro wasn’t good enough for him, he didn’t expect that sentiment to come out. But maybe it was a good thing. He really didn’t like Tony’s job, not only because he thought it was too dangerous but because he didn’t like coming in second to Tony’s career. In Derek’s perfect world, Tony was completely and totally his, his 24/7 sub who waited for Derek to show up so that he could lavish his devotion upon him. So maybe he could work with this but before he could say anything Steven jumped in.

“Tony, you know you’re job is just as important,” Steven stated quietly, for once not giving into his naturally dramatic nature. “You’re still out there stopping murderers and drug runners and anyone else who’s a bad guy to the Navy and Marines. And I’m sure there are terrorists here somewhere for you to catch…!”

Tony smiled slightly at his well-meaning friend. He knew that! Of course he knew that. He’d just been so unhappy lately that he’d actually considered quitting NCIS and going back to DC so that he
could be with Jethro, even if he had to find another job somewhere. He’d also contemplated going back to being Jethro’s second, despite Rule 12 and the whole fraternization thing, because he missed working with him and he missed being the one to go undercover. It just seemed that he was unhappy with everything lately, he was frustrated and lonely and yeah, he was insecure but he knew he shouldn’t blame his frustration on his job. He really did love his job and he was good at it. He also enjoyed being Team Lead even if he hadn’t yet been able to go undercover on any of their cases.

He sighed. It was just that he’d never wanted anything in life as badly as he did this relationship with Jethro. Missing him was like the deep longing ache he felt as a little boy when he’d cried for his Mom, all alone in his room in the middle of the night. Knowing that he couldn’t go to his father over his pain caused its own unique torment. Over the years he’d learned to accept those losses but to lose this relationship, after having had just a taste of what could be, would literally kill him. He was positive of it. He again looked at Steven, at the worry so obvious on his face, and he felt instant regret.

“Yeah, there are plenty of bad guys out there for me to catch so please forget I said that, okay?” Tony asked sincerely. “I’m just frustrated. I really didn’t mean anything by that. I love my job!” he added with a laugh looking at Steven’s hopeful face. He also noticed Derek’s frown but that wasn’t surprising. He knew that Derek hated his job and would be more than happy to see him doing something else. He just didn’t have any say in the matter and Tony knew he’d have to remind Derek of that.

“I still think you should call Gibbs, Tony,” Derek said trying to get Tony back on the subject of Gibbs’ failure to act. “Besides, it’s almost lunch-time, right? He’s bound to take a break sometime,” he added hopefully. While he knew he was taking a chance that Gibbs might actually talk to Tony and ease his mind this time, he was still willing to bet on the opposite based on all the failed conversations and what he knew about Gibbs from what Tony had told him so far.

Tony blew out an annoyed breath and looked at Derek. The man seemed to be on a mission today and he felt the sudden need to prove him wrong. Besides, he was sure his luck wasn’t so bad that he’d catch Jethro driving again. And now, more than ever, he really needed to talk to Jethro. He picked up his cell phone.

“Tony…” Steven said in warning but stopped at Tony’s raised finger.

“Gibbs!” came the fierce answer once the ringing stopped and Tony looked at Steven and Derek with a sinking heart knowing that he’d screwed up again.
Gibbs was in a foul mood and his conversation with Ducky sure as hell hadn’t helped. It seemed as though everything was conspiring against him. He’d gotten the numbers back from his friend and they didn’t look good. He was still on the hook for alimony for another three years and the rest of his funds were tied up in accounts he couldn’t touch without paying heavy penalties for early withdrawal. His best investment, his home, was on the market for less than it was valued and had yet to draw in any potential buyers. What the hell was wrong with the mortgage companies nowadays? They used to give out money like candy to everybody regardless of their financial situation. Suddenly everyone is living in these huge homes. So, what happens then? The bottom falls out of the market and now everyone is upside down on their mortgages so they walk away and the market is glutted with empty houses. Now in order to get a loan it seems as though you have to give up your first-born and have a ridiculous down-payment so hardly anyone qualifies anymore. And to top it off, do you think Vance can come up with anyone as a potential replacement for him? Hell, no!

Gibbs finished the last of his coffee and glanced at the clock. It was nearly eleven-thirty but it seemed as though the day was already longer than it should have been. He really hadn’t needed that talk this morning but he’d gone down to see if Duck had come up with any new information since finishing the autopsy. He hadn’t which made Gibbs’ jaw clench, but he’d at least given some more samples to Abby so Gibbs hoped that she’d come up with something. He was about to leave when Duck asked how Tony was so Gibbs gave him an update. Ducky had then chided him on the distinct lack of personal information in his recitation. Gibbs had to allow that he didn’t like talking about that stuff and again Ducky chided him and said that he hoped he was more forthcoming with Tony and he wondered what Tony’s thoughts were on Gibbs’ potential retirement and the sale of his house. Gibbs had to admit that he hadn’t told Tony any of those details.

Gibbs ran a hand over his mouth and sat with his chin in his hand for a moment. Jeez, he’d always hated that disappointed look Ducky got on his face when he failed some aspect of Personal Relationships 101. God knows he’d seen it enough throughout his marriages…and subsequent divorces…but he really hadn’t expected to see it again. Hell, to be honest, he’d been hoping not to see it at all this time around…and certainly not so soon. But, Christ, what did Ducky expect him to do? Go whining to Tony about all the details that just weren’t going well? He honestly thought that listing everything he was doing and the problems with each would make Tony feel as though he was complaining about the hassle or worse, that the work he was doing to bring them together was too much trouble. He knew of Tony’s innate insecurity. Tony’s first thought would be that he was not worth the effort and Gibbs sure as hell didn’t want Tony to think that. It would have to be enough that he’d told Tony he was taking care of things despite Tony’s repeated requests to know what it was he was doing. He thought that Tony didn’t need a detailed list of retirement plans and plans to sell the house and financial issues…especially when it looked as though he was failing to accomplish any of them. Besides, he’d never been a man to heap worry on his partner. Unfortunately, it never occurred to him what the flip side of this coin was, that his failure to share his burden shut out his partner and left him adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Instead he decided that it was better to just get everything done so that he could get to Florida as soon as possible. He picked up his cup, remembered it was empty, and glared at it as though that would make it magically refill. It didn’t.
Gibbs continued scowling as he stalked his way through the halls of NCIS. It had been a long time since he’d paid attention as people scrambled to get out of his way but he was glad of it today as he made his way to the break room for more and thinking that Ziva and McGee had better hurry up and get back from canvassing the apartment building or there’d be hell to pay. It was then he noticed three people standing in a group so intent on their conversation that they failed to notice him approaching. That got his attention so he listened in as he poured a cup.

“Jeez, Once DADT got repealed I knew they’d be coming out of the woodwork! I just never would have thought he’d be gay…” said one guy that Gibbs thought might work in one of the back offices.

“Shit! Don’t go saying that so loud, you moron! First of all, it’s a rumor and second, it’s none of our damned business so quit talking about it. Where’d you hear it anyway?” Gibbs recognized that voice. Searles was one of the cyber crimes guys.

“I overheard Casey down in HR talking about it…said it nearly broke everyone’s heart and the only way it’d be worse is if DiNozzo was gay, too,” said a third voice Gibbs didn’t recognize but he was pretty sure he was another paper pusher.

Gibbs couldn’t believe it. They had to have been talking about him but how in the hell did they find out? Damn Vance and his inquiries! Either that or the people in HR were too damn nosey for their own good.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Searles continued. “We’re a civilian agency so DADT never applied. So even if all the team leads were gay it just doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, but we work with the military so the mindset is still there…” argued the first voice.

“Then it’ll change! All it takes is a little time. I think racial integration was a bigger issue way back when and that eventually worked even without all the training and special emphasis this is getting. All it takes is time, so what is your problem?” Searles demanded.

“It’s this,” replied the first man. “What if one of your teammates suddenly announces he’s a fag. You still think you can trust him after he’s been lying about himself all this time? No, I think it’ll be a problem with the military, and you know what? It’s still going to be a problem right here, within our agency. Especially with the field agents and how they function as a team. So suddenly everyone learns Gibbs has been lying to everyone about this. You think McGee will still trust him
Gibbs had heard enough. While one part of him was pissed that they were sticking their noses into his very personal business, the other part acknowledged that the three men were addressing a potential problem with the functioning of the agency. He approached the group just as the third man again spoke.

“I think Searles is right,” said the third man. “Gibbs’ business is his own and he’ll take care of his own team. Everyone else, especially you Hal, needs to keep their nose out of it.”

None of the men heard Gibbs as he walked straight up to the first man, Hal.

“Whether or not I’m gay is my own damned business. Ya got a problem with that?” Gibbs said very quietly as he stepped into Hal’s personal space making all three men jump.

Hal’s eyes widened in sudden fear at finding Gibbs so close. “I…ah…Agent Gibbs…”

But Gibbs didn’t let Hal finish. “Whether or not any member of this organization is gay is not a topic for idle speculation.”

He looked around and saw three sets of wide eyes staring back at him and not just a little bit of color crawling up the faces of the three startled and embarrassed men. He waited until all three nodded their understanding before continuing.

“Searles is it?” Gibbs asked turning to the second man and received a nod in return. “You’ve got it right. It’ll be awhile before we see any issues resulting from repealing DADT, assuming we see any at all. Regardless, none of that should have any effect on how we do our jobs, understand? I’m also telling you all right now…don’t go looking for problems where they don’t exist. If something comes up it will be dealt with then and there.”

Gibbs looked at each man and noted that both Searles and the third man met his eyes with a nod and firm looks. Hal, on the other hand, was defiant despite his embarrassment at having been caught. He kept his eyes focused on a point over Gibbs’ shoulder which served to piss Gibbs off even more.

“You still got a problem?” Gibbs demanded in a voice that any smart man would have recognized
as deadly. Hal, obviously, wasn’t a smart man and then he made his first mistake.

“Yeah, I’ve got a problem if you’re a fag…is that what you are?”

Peripherally, Gibbs noted the other two men step back as one of them muttered a horrified “oh, Jesus…”

“Already said it’s none of your damn business,” Gibbs growled and pushed even further into Hal’s space so that they were now chest to chest.

Hal made his second mistake by attempting to push Gibbs back. One split second later he found his face smashed up against the wall as his arm was shoved up his back at an extremely painful angle.

Just as Gibbs had listened in to the three men’s original conversation, Vance had also listened in. He’d been on his way to the bullpen after a quick trip to HR to find Gibbs so that they could revisit their earlier discussion. He hadn’t wanted to call Gibbs to his office, deciding instead that he wanted to invite him up. When he saw Gibbs walking towards the break room he decided to follow and now he was glad he had.

“Stand down, Gibbs,” Vance ordered immediately upon seeing the men.

“Director…Gibbs just attacked me…!” Hal cried making his third and final mistake.

“Gibbs! I said Stand. Down,” Vance ordered a second time and was relieved when Gibbs let the man go and stepped back.

“Director…” Hal began again as he rubbed his arm but Vance merely held up one hand.

“Save it, Mr. Strauch. I heard everything. Agent Searles will accompany you while you clean out your desk.”

“What?”
“You’re fired, Mr. Strauch. You’ve been warned about expressing your views and it’s been fully documented. I won’t have anyone working for this agency who displays such blatant bigotry. Nor will I have liars working for me,” Vance said and almost smiled at the wide-eyed shock on Strauch’s face. “Oh, yes…I heard every word spoken here and you can be assured I’ll have statements from both Special Agents Gibbs and Searles as well as from Mr. Horn as to your exact sentiments as well as your actions here this morning.”

“You’ll hear from my lawyer…” Strauch threatened.

“Fine. I’ll look forward to it,” Vance said and then pulled out his cell phone and called for a security team. He then turned to the other men standing in the hallway. “Special Agent Searles, please accompany Mr. Strauch to his desk so that he can gather his personal items.”

“Yes, Sir,” Searles replied. Just then two security guards jogged down the hallway. Vance gave them their directions and everyone left leaving Vance and Gibbs alone.

Vance was shocked. He had no idea that his inquiries to HR would have this result and he was determined to find out exactly who was talking.

Gibbs was silent but his fury was obvious as he grabbed his abandoned coffee cup from the break room. He glared at Vance as he took another sip of coffee.

“Gibbs, we need to talk. Will you come with me to my office?” Vance asked knowing that Gibbs could probably use the time to cool down a bit more. He was grateful when Gibbs nodded. They were walking to the elevator when Gibbs cell phone rang. He answered without looking at the caller ID.

“Gibbs!” he practically shouted making Vance pity whoever was on the other end.

“Jethro, it’s me,” Tony said quietly already regretting making the call. “Got time to talk?”

“Not now, DiNozzo!” Gibbs snarled and then hung up.

Vance looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Jackie would have had my hide.”
And it was at that moment that Gibbs cursed himself six ways to Sunday.

Gibbs still said nothing as he closed the door once they were in Vance’s office. He expected Vance to move to his desk but he didn’t. Instead when Vance merely turned and looked at him, gesturing him to a seat on the couch.

Gibbs had no intention of making anything easier for Vance so he ignored the offer. Instead he decided to go on the offensive.

“Wasn’t that a bit hypocritical of you, Leon?” Gibbs asked with a thumbed gesture over his shoulder.

Vance took a deep breath. “I deserved that, Jethro, although I’m really not a homophobe.” Vance raised his hand at Gibbs’ snort of disbelief. “But I do have it on good authority that I don’t like to be surprised. Apparently I don’t react well.”

Gibbs looked away in mild amusement. He turned back to Vance, his expression inviting the man to continue.

“I thought I knew you, Jethro, and I don’t like to be proven wrong.”

“So I didn’t fit the little box you put me in…”

“No, and the fact that I keep trying to do that is my problem not yours, so let me apologize for my reaction to your announcement and request. I don’t begrudge you whatever happiness you can find, I mean that. I also owe you another apology, Jethro,” Vance said quietly.

Gibbs cocked his head and waited.

“I apologize for inadvertently outing you to this agency.”

“They said it was someone in HR…”
“…who, no doubt, made speculations about you based on my inquiry. You can be assured that I will deal with that situation immediately.”

“Can’t fire everyone who doesn’t approve, Leon.”

“No, but we are living in a new day, Jethro, and if people can’t keep up with the changes they need to move out of the way.”

“That another pitch for all your agents being tech savvy?”

Vance smiled. He knew that Gibbs would suspect him of using this situation as an opportunity to get rid of an ‘old-timer’ and although that might have been the case in the past, it wasn’t true anymore. He’d learned just how valuable agents like Gibbs were.

“That’s part of it, but only a part. This agency needs to keep experienced agents on hand to train the new agents coming on board who will combine the best of both worlds. I need to keep you, Gibbs, for the benefit of this agency. I’ve come to appreciate not only your experience and innate talents, but DiNozzo’s as well.”

That earned him a raised eyebrow and he chuckled. “I wouldn’t have offered him a lead position if I didn’t think he was capable,” he reminded Gibbs. “Unfortunately, no matter how much I want to keep you, as of right now, there aren’t any positions you can move into in Florida and there’s no two openings in any one location forecasted for when DiNozzo is able to re-locate. I’m sorry, Jethro. I just hope this doesn’t mean that I’ll lose both of you.”

Gibbs blew out a quiet breath. It was the same information he’d gotten so he’d already resigned himself to an early retirement, regardless of the financial constraints.

“No, just me. You still tryin’ to find my replacement?”

“Yes, but there’s been no takers. You know your job is too critical for an inexperienced Team Lead so I had to limit it to lateral moves only, not promotions. It seems, though, that no one is keen on following in your footsteps. I will find someone, though. It just might take a little time. I know this is difficult but I have to make sure. Can you still stay on until I do find your replacement?”
Gibbs wanted to say not only no but hell, no. He couldn’t, though. He had too much integrity to leave his team in a lurch like that because of his personal desires. He gave Leon a reluctant nod which was accepted with a nod in return.

“Gibbs, I will continue to work this but if you do end up retiring, I want you to know that both Jackie and I wish you and DiNozzo the very best.”

“Thanks, Leon,” Gibbs said with a nod and then turned and left the office, his mind already working on how he was going to make this one up to Tony.
“Jethro, it’s me,” Tony said quietly, already regretting making the call. “Got time to talk?”

“Not now, DiNozzo!” Jethro snarled and then hung up and Tony felt his heart break. Derek was right. He’d been right all along. Jethro…Gibbs…didn’t have any room in his life for him. He got it now.

Without saying another word Tony closed his cell phone and stood. He ignored Steven’s outstretched hand and softly plaintive “Tony?” Derek’s triumphant smile normally would have infuriated him but it was lost to the all-encompassing emptiness he felt. Only years of experience in hiding his true self saved him at this point. He gave both men a small smile and a calm façade that belied his true emotional state.

“Well, looks like that wasn’t one of my best ideas,” he said with a small laugh that did nothing to remove the concern on Steven’s face but left Derek with a look of confusion that would have been kind of funny under other circumstances. “And now I see that I’ve used up my whole lunch break. Gotta get back to work. I’ll see you tonight Steven. Derek, I’ll talk to you later,” he finished as though it had been a typical lunch date. He was glad he didn’t have to ride back in the same car as Steven since they’d met at the restaurant. There was no way he could have dealt with any questions at this point. So, with a final wave he put on his sunglasses and sauntered back out to his car looking to all the world like a man who hadn’t just had his dreams shattered.

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Gibbs pulled out his phone and tried to call Tony as soon as he left Vance’s office. Tony’s cell went straight to voice mail and he cursed himself again. He made his way to the bullpen and was relieved to see that both McGee and Ziva had returned. Unfortunately, that relief was short-lived when he saw Fornell sitting at his desk. He shoved down his anger and worry in favor of finding out what news his team had for him. He ignored Fornell completely. Gibbs growled when he was told that they hadn’t gotten anything new. He almost snapped at Fornell when he chuckled but then the phone rang and McGee answered. It was Abby.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Gibbs spit out. “Go see what she has!”

This time Fornell laughed openly as both Ziva and McGee jumped up and practically ran out of the bullpen.
“You lost, Tobias?” Gibbs demanded as he finally faced Fornell.

“Actually, I came to help with rumor control.”

Gibbs stilled and his frown deepened even more. He waited.

“There’s a somewhat shocking, but highly amusing, rumor going around that you’re gay, Gibbs.”

Fornell actually thought he’d get a laugh out of his statement. He was taken completely by surprise when Gibbs instead gestured almost violently for him to follow him to their regular conference room. Without waiting for a response Gibbs marched towards the elevators. Fornell made a conscious decision to close his mouth and then he stood up to follow his old friend. Gibbs was waiting for him with the doors held open but Fornell paused, still unsure about what was going on.

“You afraid people will think we share more than an ex-wife?” growled Gibbs.

“Damnit, Jethro!” Fornell spit out, more surprised than anything else but he did finally get in the elevator with Gibbs. As soon as Gibbs slammed on the emergency stop Fornell turned to him. “What the hell is going on? And why do I have to find out from my secretary that my old friend has suddenly decided to come out of the closet?” He stepped closer to Gibbs. “Is it true?”

Gibbs said nothing for a moment although he did see Fornell roll his eyes. “Yeah,” he admitted after a moment although after his latest fuck-up there was a chance he’d be spending the rest of his life celibate, gay or not.

“Since when?”

Gibbs considered not answering any more questions because he needed to get a hold of Tony now but it seemed as though he was fucking up both left and right already, he didn’t want to alienate anyone else right now. Besides, what was he going to do if Tony wouldn’t take his calls?

“Always been bi, Tobias. Just kept it quiet.”
“So, what, the repeal of DADT made you decide to fly a rainbow over your house?”

“I don’t have time for this Tobias. Is this going to be a problem?”

Fornell stared at Gibbs for a moment and then his eyes widened. “It really *is* true, then?” he asked in wonder.

Gibbs only answer was to glare back at Fornell.

“Also heard you’re looking at moving to Florida…”

“Damnit! Doesn’t anyone understand the meaning of ‘personal information’?” Gibbs nearly yelled.

Fornell rolled his eyes. “What the hell’s in Florida? Or should I say who…?” Fornell demanded as he glared right back at Gibbs and then his eyebrows went up. “Oh, wait a minute…don’t tell me you and DiNotso…?”

Gibbs didn’t say anything as he stared back at Fornell, daring him to say anything negative about Tony.

Fornell was silent for a moment and then began to laugh. He laughed for a full minute before he caught his breath. Wiping one eye he looked back at Gibbs who just stood there waiting for him to finish.

“Well, I gotta say you do have fine taste in men, Jethro.” He started laughing again at Gibbs’ growl and he raised his hands. “Don’t worry, Jethro. You can trust me when I say that although we might have shared the same taste in a particular woman, you have no need to worry about that happening now. In fact, would you mind if I’m the one to tell Diane about this? I’m dying to see the look on her face.” Fornell waited expectantly although he had the feeling there was a lot more going on than what Jethro was saying and he wondered what else was on his friend’s mind.

Jethro just sighed and looked up because if he didn’t fix this there’d be nothing to tell Diane. But he was a Marine and he would not accept defeat. He looked at Fornell.
“Go ahead,” Gibbs said as he slammed his hand bringing the elevator back into service.

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Tony’s desk phone rang again and he sighed imperceptibly. He doubted that it was Jethro again, not this soon. Without glancing at the caller ID he guessed that it was Steven, or maybe even Alan at this point. It didn’t matter. He had an idea in mind but he just wanted to think about it a bit more. Contrary to what they were probably thinking he didn’t intend to make any rash decisions like just breaking it off with Jethro (and it was *Jethro*…not Gibbs!). He’d just needed to calm down from his initial hurt at being shut down…again…which was compounded by having it happen in front of both Derek and Steven, but he wasn’t a girl, damnit, and he wasn’t about to fall to pieces over what was generally a pretty standard response from Gibbs if he was in the middle of something important. Once he got over that he kicked himself royally for letting Derek’s attitude push him into calling instead of waiting until after work the way Steven had suggested.

In the end, though, it was his fault. He knew what Jethro was like during a case and he really didn’t know what was going on during that particular moment and although that didn’t excuse his behavior, it did let him cut Jethro a little bit of slack – at least until they got a chance to talk it out. But what it really boiled down to was that he needed to trust Jethro. Unfortunately, he also had to acknowledge that he needed more from him if they were going to make this whole distance thing work. The phone rang again and Tony rolled his eyes as he looked at the caller ID.

“DiNozzo,” he answered calmly.

“Tony,” came an equally calm voice. *Running true to form, Steven,* Tony told himself at the sound of Alan’s voice. “Of course you knew Steven would call me. I just wanted to let you know that I’m free this evening if you want to come by to talk.”

Tony smiled gently. “I know, Alan, and I will. Just give me a little time, okay? But I am fine. Really. So I’d appreciate it if you could put Steven’s mind at ease because he refuses to believe me right now.”

“You sound as though you’ve made a decision, Tony, and while that’s a good thing I hope you’ll use me as a sounding board before you do anything you may regret later.”

Tony actually laughed at that. The ‘doing’ wasn’t going to be on his part. He was merely going to make a request. Everything else would fall into place from there. Regardless of the outcome, though, at least he would know what was happening because right now, the waiting and not knowing was playing havoc with both his imagination and insecurity and it had to stop.
“Understood, Alan. I’ve got to go now. I’ll talk to you later,” Tony promised and then hung up. He still wanted Alan’s input so he printed out the email he was planning on sending. Leaving it face-down on his desk he also decided to forward it home in case he decided to tweak it a bit before actually sending it to Jethro. He’d just gotten back to his work when his cell phone rang again and he looked at it for a brief moment to see who it was. He’d been rejecting all of Jethro’s calls this afternoon but this one just made him frown. Derek. He easily rejected that call as well because what he had to say to Derek would be said at a time and place of his choice, not over the phone. Then, with an ease born of a lifetime of shoving his personal needs into a tiny little box, Tony got back to work on their current case.

A short while later Tony got a call to report to his supervisor’s office to go over some reports. Harry was digging through their suspect’s hard-drive and Stan and Megan were going over the witness statements. He let Stan know where he was going to be and then gathered up several files before heading out.

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Gibbs was still pissed. He’d tried to contact Tony all day but the man was refusing his calls and didn’t even bother to open his emails (which Gibbs verified once McGee showed him how to get read receipts). He’d even called Steven in HR only to get hung up on. He slammed the phone down and considered contacting Steven’s supervisor but then he calmed himself enough to realize how wrong that would have been. He thought briefly of that asshole, Strauch, and although that had been wrong, too, he couldn’t find it in himself to feel badly about shoving the guy against the wall. With the way this day was going Strauch had been lucky he hadn’t pulled his gun and shot him. Gibbs glared at the world around him. He’d never been the target of bigotry before. It was more than a little unsettling, especially once word got around about what had happened. He found himself the object of both covert looks and outright stares, many incredulous and some disgusted, and while he never really gave a damn what others thought of him, the open curiosity got on his nerves. Vance had called it a new day and said that anyone who couldn’t keep up with the changes had to move out of the way. Well, it may be a new day but as far as he was concerned everything still looked the same. He wished everything would just blow the hell over already.

Okay, calling Steven hadn’t worked out. How about Alan? He had McGee track down Steven’s home phone number hoping to catch Alan at home. Gibbs decided to make the call away from the bullpen because he was getting sick and tired of the worried looks being tossed his way by both McGee and Ziva. Alan, at least, took his call but it sure didn’t do a lot of good. He refused to discuss his ‘patient’ with him. It made Gibbs want to shoot him, too. He contemplated just jumping on a plane but they were in the middle of a case, he had to concentrate on that first. Unfortunately, it made the afternoon extremely long and difficult for anyone who had to deal with Gibbs.

Sometime later Gibbs decided he had to try and call Tony again. He told McGee that he was going for coffee and then he stepped out of the building. He paused along the walkway near the river and pulled out his cell phone.
Derek weighed his options. He could either show up at Tony’s place tonight knowing that even though the younger man was pretty pissed at him, he’d still be able to talk to him a bit or he could go on the offensive and go straight to his office right now while he was still reeling from the shock of that call. He was confident enough of his dominant capabilities to believe that he’d get through Tony’s defenses (which he was positive were pretty shaky right now) enough to make him understand that he was the right man to take care of him. He wouldn’t push his needs aside the way Gibbs had. He’d known for quite a while now that Tony needed to be taken down, he needed to release his tension and just let go. He wanted to do that for him. He always wanted to do that for him and he was sure that, with time, Tony would be able to drop completely for him. He just needed to get Gibbs out of the picture. He couldn’t believe how well that lunch-time phone call had played out. Tony must be devastated and Derek wanted to be the one to pick up the pieces.

The more he thought about it the more he knew he had to act quickly. He gave Tony a quick call but wasn’t surprised to see his call rejected which didn’t daunt him. Having been to Tony’s office a few times he knew he had to get approval to get through security but he felt that even if Tony refused to let him up to the office, he could at least get Tony to come and speak with him, if for no other reason than to avoid a possible scene. Either way, he would have a moment to speak with him which was all he figured he needed.

Stan leaned over Megan’s shoulder and pointed out a few details of the case they were going over when he got a call about a question in the evidence locker. He contemplated taking Megan with him but he’d already gone over the evidence procedures with her so he told her to hang tight while he took care of the question which he figured would only take him a few minutes. Megan agreed easily because she figured she could use the time to re-read some of the witness interviews without Stan waiting on her.

Megan was finding her new position fascinating although she wasn’t too fond of being called Probie all the time but she was getting used to it. Her teammates were a fun bunch of guys and she knew she’d learn a lot from them. While she didn’t really care about their personal lives (although Stan and Lali made a real cute couple) she’d been really surprised to learn that her team lead was gay. It didn’t mean much, of course, except for the fact that Tony was such a good-looking guy it made her wonder what his SO looked like. When she’d first arrived she heard it mention in passing that he was seeing someone named Derek and she’d idly imagined what he might look like which led her down the road of all kinds of inappropriate mental pictures of Tony up close and personal with another guy. She always kicked herself for letting her imagination get away from her like that but, what the hell, it was fun. Stan had only been gone a couple of minutes when she got a call from security that Derek Barstow was there to see her team lead. She ended up speaking with him on the phone and told him that Tony wasn’t in but he insisted that he didn’t mind waiting. Megan figured it probably wasn’t an issue so she approved his entry. Besides, she was dying to see what he looked like and, if she was lucky, Tony would be back soon so that she could see them together.
Tony was nearly done with his review with his supervisor when he realized that he’d forgotten one of the files he needed so he called his office to ask Stan or Megan to bring it up. He couldn’t believe it when Megan answered and told him that Mr. Barstow was waiting to speak with him, something he never would have thought that Derek would do especially after what had happened at lunch. Nevertheless, there wasn’t much he could do about it right now except to hurry up and finish his meeting so that he could get rid of Derek. Unfortunately, he needed that file. Upon learning that Megan was alone in the office he decided to bite the bullet and ask her to quickly bring him the file because he figured Derek would be alright if he was alone for a couple of minutes.

Derek smiled politely when Tony’s newest team member told him she needed to run a quick errand. He agreed to sit in the office and wait for her return. Leaning back in Tony’s chair, he made himself comfortable. Leaning back lasted all of five seconds before he was hunched over Tony’s desk as he thought over exactly what it was he wanted to say to Tony. Absentmindedly, he straightened out the stacks of paper noting one sheet that was turned face-down. He turned it over and set it on top of the stack in front of him. It didn’t take long for the words to suddenly come into focus and he unashamedly read the entire email. He knew Tony’s act at lunch had been just that – an act. The desk phone rang and his eyes automatically went to the call ID screen. Gibbs. Oh, ho! Here was a golden opportunity he couldn’t possibly resist and his mind started to whirl. He picked up the handset as he returned the email to its original position, face-down on Tony’s desk.

“NCIS,” he said in a very professional voice.

Gibbs was relieved when the phone was answered but he didn’t recognize the voice.

“This is Special Agent Gibbs. I need to speak with Special Agent DiNozzo.”

“Gibbs! What a surprise! I’m sorry but Tony stepped out of the office. He should be back in a minute. Can I take a message?”

Gibbs frowned fiercely at the sinking realization that he was speaking with Barstow. What the hell was he doing answering the phone in Tony’s office? Where the hell was Tony?

“What are you doing there, Barstow?”

“Tony and I have a late lunch date, Gibbs. Not our usual time, really, but because of his job we try
to fit it in whenever we can.”

Derek’s statement was met with silence and he smirked. It didn’t surprise him to hear a low-throated growl followed by a demand. He figured the man really only had one setting…angry.

“I wanna talk to Tony. Now.”

“That’s not going to happen, Gibbs. Not only did he step out but he’s been declaring that it’s over ever since your conversation earlier and I’ve got to say that I really should thank you for that. He’s had enough, Gibbs. Every time you ignored Tony’s needs he’s turned to me and now you’ve screwed up for the last time. Tony finally understands what a bastard you are and he’s had enough and intends to tell you to your face. Don’t worry, though, he’ll let you know when and where. Oh, and a word of advice? Don’t bother calling again.”

With a final smirk Derek hung up the phone and leaned back and none too soon. Megan walked back into the office and told him that Tony would be with him in just a few moments. Derek smiled and got ready. Talking with Gibbs was just the beginning and now he had to gear up for the main event.
Chapter 50

Gibbs stared at the phone in his hand. This was eerily reminiscent of the time he’d walked in to find wife number three in bed with another man. At that time he’d already known that the marriage was on the rocks and he recalled feeling a vast sense of disappointment, not only in her but in himself for failing, yet again, to fulfill the needs of the woman he loved. This time, however, he felt like a huge vise had closed around his chest and he vaguely wondered if this was what a heart attack felt like. He tried to draw in a breath but found it nearly impossible.

“Sir, are you alright?”

The question brought Gibbs back from the distant realms of his memory and he found himself automatically pulling in that elusive breath. He turned to find a young woman he didn’t recognize standing at his side with one hand on his forearm. He realized he was leaning on the railing but he still had to look down to see her. He forced himself to focus on her face and noted that she had green eyes. They weren’t the same shade of green as Tony’s but close enough for it to again cause another shadowy pain to pierce his chest and he had the errant thought that Ducky had been right to be so disappointed in him, he’d screwed things up badly.

“I’m fine,” he found himself saying to the young lady as he straightened his posture back to its normal position and the world seemed to right itself somewhat. The green eyes that Gibbs decided weren’t at all like Tony’s looked him over once again and he was relieved to see that she apparently believed him.

“Alright, then,” she said with a smile and then turned to walk away with only one last slightly questioning look over her shoulder.

Gibbs watched her walk away but his thoughts were on Tony…and Barstow. His initial pain was quickly turning back into anger but he used every trick at his command to rein it in. His eyes narrowed as he forced himself to think clearly while he considered Barstow’s words. There’d been something wrong with that conversation (besides the fact that he never got a chance to speak with Tony). He took a deep breath and thought about it carefully. Barstow had been tense, but that could have just been because he was speaking with Gibbs on the phone. Gibbs was used to that reaction and, considering their last two contacts, it’s not unexpected. However, he could also have been lying. While he couldn’t discount the fact that Barstow had been in Tony’s office it didn’t necessarily follow that it had been for the reason Barstow had stated. Tony hadn’t been there to dispute Barstow’s statements and the fact that it had been Barstow to answer the phone led him to believe that there’d been no one else from Tony’s team present, either. Why he, as an unescorted visitor, would have been left alone in the office at all was a question that he couldn’t answer but he’d figure that out later. Barstow said that Tony wanted a face-to-face at his determination, well then, he’d give Tony some space because right now he needed to close this case. But then he was going to talk to Tony even if it meant he had to get on the next flight out regardless of whatever
dramatic gesture Tony might want. He had to make Tony understand that he was trying to get them together even if, ultimately, he’d been going about it the wrong way. He also had to get Barstow the hell away from Tony. Overall, he was bound and determined to talk, damnit, if it was the last thing he did.

Tony walked at a rapid pace to get back to his office only to find Derek lounging in his chair at his desk. It pissed him off royally.

“Derek, you need to come with me. Right now,” he said in a tight voice which immediately made both Stan and Megan look up from their paperwork. Tony noted Stan straighten at his tone and come around his desk and he almost smiled. It looked like Stan was ready to back him up even if he had no clue what was happening. Megan had also readied herself and Tony could almost see the sudden tension roll off of her. Unfortunately, her tension was also accompanied by worry. He’d have to let her know that she hadn’t messed up having had no way of knowing the status of his and Derek’s relationship. That thought made him take a quick glance at his desk. He noted the page that was still face-down and, after a moment, discarded it as a concern.

Derek also noted the suddenly alert stance of Tony’s team but he pasted an easy smile on his face. He had to play this very carefully.

“Sure, Tony,” he said as he stood. He walked around the desk and came to stand close to Tony but Tony stepped away and gestured for him to lead the way out of the office. They walked through security and out into the open. Derek decided he needed to say something.

“I came to apologize, Tony,” he said as they rounded the side of the building. “I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

Tony eyed Derek once they stopped beside Derek’s car. “Well, you did and it’s too bad you were right but what I want to know is why.”

“Gibbs isn’t good enough for you, Tony. I just wanted you to see what type of man he is.”

“I know what kind of man he is. What I’m not so sure of is what kind of man you are. You called yourself my friend but friends don’t do what you did. I think you want me back and I’m telling you right now it’s not going to happen. Despite what happened earlier, I’m still with Gibbs,” Tony said
as he stared straight into Derek’s eyes.

“Tony,” Derek said in a placating tone. “Don’t you realize he’ll only keep on hurting you?” Derek took a step closer and lifted his right hand up to Tony’s nape. “I’ll take care of you…”

But Tony wasn’t interested in Derek’s promises. He pulled back from Derek’s hand and saw the answering flash of anger in Derek’s eyes which was accompanied by a tightening of his hand. Tony immediately lifted his left arm and wrapped it around Derek’s right arm, immobilizing it while at the same time using his foot to block Derek’s as he pushed him backwards over the hood of the car. Tony’s right hand went straight to Derek’s throat. He leaned over Derek whose eyes were now wide in shock.

“I don’t want or need you to take care of me, Derek. I’ll be seeing Gibbs soon and everything will work out,” Tony said in a very quiet voice. “So it’s time for you to leave now and I don’t want to see you again, understand?”

Tony was aware of the sound of running footprints. The parking lot was, of course, under surveillance as was the rest of the building. He let go of Derek and stood up as the security guards came near.

“Mr. Barstow needs to be escorted off the premises,” Tony told security. “And please make sure he’s added to the ‘unwelcome visitors’ list,” he finished pleasantly.

Derek stood up slowly, his face red with anger and embarrassment. He was still rubbing his neck as the guards took his information. It’s not over, yet, Tony, he told himself as he watched Tony walk away. You’ll always be mine.

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Gibbs let his team go home early since they needed to be back by 0500. Their case was at a standstill and, for the first time in his life, he hoped it would go cold. Their only possible lead was currently on his way back from a deployment and was due in by 0600. Until then all they could do was wait so he’d gone home, poured himself a generous shot of bourbon and tried to figure out how to fix things. Suddenly, he heard footsteps overhead. One part of him was furious because he didn’t want to have to deal with anyone except Tony right now and the other part of him rejoiced. It was Abby.
Abby set the generous portion of jambalaya on the kitchen counter in Gibbs’ house and then eyed the basement door. At Todd’s prodding she’d finally gotten up the nerve to come and speak with Gibbs so that she could fix things. She needed to let him know what her problem was because even if nothing got any better once Gibbs left, she really needed him to know that she honestly did love him and wanted only the best for him and Tony and that she was really, really sorry for behaving like a childish brat.

When she entered Gibbs’ quiet house she immediately noticed that he’d made some upgrades. It made her stomach clench because she’d heard he was thinking of putting his house on the market in preparation for his retirement. Just the thought of his leaving again brought tears to her eyes but she was determined to at least set things straight with the man she thought of as a father. If nothing else, she wanted him to understand how she felt even if there was nothing he could do about it so here she was, and she was going to go downstairs and fix this. She was. Really. Okay, then, here I go. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin and told herself that she could do this because Todd told her she was strong and that she had a responsibility to make this right and she wasn’t about to disappoint him. She loved Todd and that was something else she needed to tell Gibbs even if maybe that would have been better over dinner or something but nevertheless, she was here. So, this was it. With a nod she walked up to the basement door and opened it with a determined swing and took three…almost four…determined steps before she faltered. Then, chewing her bottom lip, she took another tentative step and then another until she was half-way down the stairs and then stopped.

Gibbs was packing tools into a box. He didn’t turn around even though Abby stopped on the stairs and stood silently for a moment. Peripherally he noted a pair of the thick-soled boots Abby favored just visible past the basement ceiling and he smirked as he watched one boot lift as though to take a step down but it wavered there in mid-air for a bit. He deliberately dropped a tool into his box and watched as the boot slowly descended onto the next step. He rustled around some more and the other boot joined its partner. He kept up the racket and watched as the boots fully materialized and were slowly followed by a shapely pair of thighs (damn, when was the hem of that girl’s skirt gonna show!) and then slowly the frilly hem of a black skirt appeared (finally) followed by some chain-clad hips. And although he expected the rest of Abby’s body to slowly materialize, he almost laughed aloud when what appeared next was her almost upside-down, pale, pig-tail framed face as she leaned waaay over to peek into the basement.

“Gibbs…”

“Glad to see you, Abs,” Gibbs said quietly, finally turning to face her.

“Really?” Abby asked, finally descending completely into the basement. “Even though I’ve been so unfair to you? I don’t deserve anything good and I know that, but I think you at least deserve an explanation for my really…bad…behavior…” Abby said as she took the last two steps down into the basement. She slowly approached Gibbs and looked hard into his eyes as though searching for some proof that he thought as badly of her as she thought of herself. She didn’t see any.
“I’m really happy for you and Tony, you know,” she said softly.

“I know that, Abs,”

“But I really needed to explain why I’ve been so awful,” she cried suddenly and Gibbs thought she was going to burst into tears and he really hated that but he had to give her the space to say what she’d come to say.

“It’s just that I’m afraid, Gibbs!”

“I know, Abs,” Gibbs said quietly.

“You know? How do you know? I mean, well, you’re Gibbs so of course you know but…how do you know?”

Gibbs smiled gently. “I know you offered to show Palmer how to shoot a weapon,” he said and then stepped closer to Abby. “I know you’ve been on McGee to get his hand-to-hand qualification up-to-date…”

Abby pursed her lips in a slightly chagrined expression. “A lot of things have happened to our family over the years, Gibbs,” she said and immediately hated the whiny tone to her voice but she couldn’t help it and then began shifting her weight from foot to foot. “But through everything you’ve always been there, watching over us and protecting us…protecting me.”

“Aw, Abs,” Gibbs said and finally, he opened up his arms and was rewarded by Abby’s fierce hug only this wasn’t his exuberant and out-going Abby, this was his scared and hurt little-girl Abby and he hated when she felt this way.

“I wasn’t too worried when Tony left because I still had you there and even though I know Tim and Ziva will do everything they can to make sure our family is okay because Timmy’s big and strong, although not as strong as Tony or you but he did pull me out of the lab that time and I know Ziva will kill anybody who comes near, but she’s just so tiny compared to me because I’m not exactly a small person and it all boils down to the fact that they just aren’t you…”
Abby’s voice hitched on that last word and it made Gibbs’ chest clench hard. He pulled Abby tighter into his arms and rubbed a hand down her back.

“Do you trust me?”

“Always, Gibbs…”

“Then you gotta know that I’m always gonna make sure you’re safe...no matter where I am.”

“But how, Gibbs? I mean…” Abby said looking up and then stopped. “Right…trust you…I can do that, I mean, I always have and I’m not going to stop now even though you’re going to be so far away…”

Abby’s voice cracked on that but Gibbs stopped the flow of words with one finger and then just pulled Abby back into his arms and kissed her temple. He felt her nod against his chest and then he held her for a long time.

A while later Abby pulled back and told Gibbs about the jambalaya she’d made.

“And there’s something else real important, Gibbs,” she began as they made their way upstairs. “There’s someone I want you to meet. His name is Todd…”
“Tell me what’s not in the file,” Vance said the following morning after tapping the file on his desk once. Vance wasn’t sure how long Gibbs would be available since their lead had panned out and both David and McGee were bringing in their suspect so he wanted all the particulars as soon as possible so that he could take action if he liked what he heard about the recent applicant for Gibbs’ position. Since it was Friday, he could make the offer and give the applicant the weekend to think it over. Vance then leaned back in his chair and crossed his fingers to wait, accustomed as he was to Gibbs’ long silences.

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed slightly as he gathered his thoughts. He was exhausted not only from the latest case but from an inability to sleep from worrying about Tony. Tony was mad at him and while he deserved every bit of it, he couldn’t fix it with Tony still refusing his calls. Gibbs’ only option now was to give him some time to cool down. With that in mind he’d thrown himself back into their case since their victim’s ex-boyfriend landed in interrogation at 0630. They were rewarded with another solid lead which McGee and Ziva were now chasing down. Then he got Vance’s call about the application he’d received and Gibbs had given a sigh of relief because Vance was willing to discuss Supervisory Special Agent Dustin Harper despite knowing that Gibbs had been the one to get him to apply.

Gibbs thought back to the first time he’d met CWO-3 Dustin ‘Harp’ Harper and he smiled. It was during Desert Storm. Harp had been a part of the Naval Special Warfare Group 1 which landed on Qurah Island. They’d had a brief mission together when Gibbs’ team had provided support for the insertion of Harp’s SEAL team into Iraqi-held Kuwait. While they hadn’t shared much in the way of conversation that first time around, it wasn’t for a lack of effort on Harp’s part. Gibbs had decided then and there he’d never met anyone who talked more about nothing than Harp. It hadn’t taken him long, though, to figure out that the whole time the man’s mouth was flapping he was actually listening to and learning about everything around him, dark chocolate-brown eyes constantly moving and filing away any and all pertinent information for later use. Harp’s teammates took all his talking in stride and mentioned in passing that if Harp wasn’t busy harping about something, the man just wasn’t happy. Gibbs had never known anyone like Harp before then and not afterwards, either…until he met Tony. It was his experience with Harp that let Gibbs see the sharp intelligence beneath Tony’s mouthy exterior right off the bat and, like Harp, Gibbs worried most about Tony when he wasn’t talking. He had the fleeting thought about Tony’s current silence but he pushed that thought away. Instead Gibbs talked about how he and Harp had worked well together while in the sandbox.

“Do you owe him?”

“Did, got a chance to repay him back then. He was good, still is. You’ve got his complete record?”
“Yes, I know he was injured. Did you know him then?”

Gibbs nodded as he thought back to that time when Harp had been injured. He had just returned from his personal mission in Mexico and was busy drinking himself into a stupor when Harp appeared out of nowhere. Harp invited himself to sit down despite Gibbs obviously not being in the mood to talk. Unsurprisingly, it never bothered Harp who had carried the brunt of the conversation for the rest of the night. Gibbs still wondered why he didn’t leave or tell Harp to that night. He listened to the tall man for hours until he eventually confessed that he was trying to figure out what his future held. He wasn’t sure he wanted to remain in the Navy if he couldn’t be a SEAL. Their talk eventually turned to other careers and before the night was over Harp had decided to try his luck in law enforcement despite his shoulder. While his injury didn’t incapacitate it, it did limit his range of motion enough that he was unable to meet the intense physical requirements the SEALS demanded but not, fortunately, the police academy’s requirement. Gibbs, on the other hand, wondered the same thing but for very different reasons. He wondered what his future held should his recent activities ever come to light but he buried those thoughts deep down determined to deal with whatever happened when it happened. Naturally, he never mentioned his personal loss although he knew that Harp had somehow understood the deep, dark hole that inhabited his soul though he never commented on it. Gibbs knew he’d always be grateful for that.

Gibbs briefly told Vance of that injury and subsequent decision and how they parted that night never exchanging another word until sometime later when Gibbs was a probie under Mike Franks. Again, Gibbs gave the barest overview of meeting up with Harp again, this time in Los Angeles. Mentally, he recalled coming across his old friend during a case that had taken Gibbs and Franks out to California where they took over a case from the Los Angeles Police Department that intersected with one of theirs. Later, when the case was closed, both Franks and Gibbs went out for a drink with their liaison officer. Lo and behold, Gibbs saw the six-foot-four Texan quietly hunched over a drink in the corner of the bar. Gibbs decided to join his old comrade, now a decorated detective with the LAPD. They got to talking and before long Gibbs suggested the same career move that he’d just made. Harp hadn’t been too keen on the idea at first but finally admitted to missing the structure of the military, saying he was tired of dealing with ‘no-loyalty-havin’, unpatriotic, scumbag civilians’. They exchanged contact information and then, a few weeks later, Harp let Gibbs know that he’d applied for a position with NCIS.

Gibbs looked at the thick file on Vance’s desk. He’d learned that Harp had gone through a rather nasty divorce a year previously so, on the off-chance that his old friend might like a change of scenery, he’d contacted him. For once it seemed as though things were going in his favor. Harp was a damned fine Team Lead in San Diego with commendations out the wazoo and now, with his divorce behind him and his only son attending Northwestern University in Illinois on a sports scholarship, it didn’t take much to convince him to put in for Gibbs’ job.

Vance listened to Gibbs’ short recitation and understood that Gibbs liked and trusted Harper which was, in itself, a good recommendation. Gibbs did not give his trust easily. So it seemed to him that Harper was a cross between both Gibbs and DiNozzo although his saving grace, in Vance’s opinion, was that he was taking computer classes during his off-duty hours. In that moment he
decided that with what Gibbs had told him, coupled with the fact that Harper’s record showed he was an excellent senior agent, Harper was the ideal choice to take over Gibbs’ team.

“I’ll make the offer this afternoon,” Vance said once Gibbs was done.

Gibbs nodded, relieved that he could finally put in his retirement papers. Now it was just a question of getting his house sold…and getting Tony’s forgiveness.

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That same morning Tony’s confident stride and satisfied countenance garnered interested looks from several co-workers as he made his way from interrogation back to his office. He greeted two of the lovely legal aides he met along the way but was unaware of the longing looks they graced him with as he continued walking. He was in a good mood after having gotten a full confession from his suspect and it showed because that’s what he wanted the world to see. In reality, his mind was already on another topic, one that actually had him wound tight with tension despite having made his final plans. Now it was only a question of implementing those plans.

He got to his desk and pulled up the forms necessary to begin processing their suspect but his mind was still on his conversation with Alan from the night before. Again, he was grateful that there was some passage in the Therapist’s Handbook stipulating that it was forbidden to say ‘I Told You So’ because they’d been so very right about Derek. Right now, though, he was more concerned with Alan’s reaction to his plan.

“Tony, what will you do if he doesn’t show up?” Alan asked Tony after he finished summarizing his intentions.

“Then I’ll learn to get on with my life. One of the hardest things besides dealing with being…raped,” Tony said with only a slight cough, “…was regretting never having had a chance with Gibbs. Well, this is my chance and if it doesn’t pan out, at least I know I tried.”

Alan blew out a breath forcing Tony to ask what it was he was thinking.

“I know what a movie buff you are, Tony, but this is real life. If he doesn’t show up are you at least going to make sure he wasn’t hit by a taxi on his way to meet you?”
Sure, he got the idea for a definitive talk from a movie, but he honestly thought the premise was sound. Gibbs said that he was working on the details. He’d also said that he couldn’t make any promises. Well, now was the time to lay it out. If he hadn’t made some headway in that direction or figured out a plan by now then he could at least tell Tony to his face that he’d changed his mind. The plus would be that if he had actually worked some things out, then maybe they could spend the weekend together and Tony would have something more concrete to hold on to than a few kisses in a conference room.

“And what if his job, or even yours, gets in the way again?” Alan had asked last night. “A last-minute, nothing-you-can-do-about-it incident that stops one or both of you?”

“Then I will cut him some leeway, cut myself some, or do whatever I need to do. Alan, the one thing I know for a fact is that both Gibbs and I are the same when it comes to our work. I would never ask him to put me before a case and I’d never expect him to do that for me. If a case stopped him he’d tell me, and with something like this? He wouldn’t lie to me about it,” Tony stated. “No, I have to do this because I need to see him, even if he tells me the exact same things he’s been saying over the phone and in his emails. Being with him, seeing him, when he talks about this will make all the difference.”

“Well, just make sure he fully understands what he needs to do here, alright?”

“That’s the plan, Alan,” Tony said with a smile despite the tension that had taken up residence in his belly ever since he’d come up with this idea.

But despite all of his reassurances, Alan still had his doubts about Tony’s plan because he still felt that Tony and Jethro needed to talk things through without taking drastic steps and forcing a confrontation. He also felt that Tony wasn’t being completely honest with himself about how much this really meant to him. Tony chuckled to himself. Well, first of all, there really was no way for Alan to fully understand how impossible talking with Jethro would be because Alan truly didn’t know the man. He didn’t understand the way Jethro operated and he honestly had trouble believing the lengths Jethro went to actually avoid ‘talking’. That didn’t mean Jethro failed to communicate. It just meant that you needed to understand how he communicated. Unfortunately, it had taken this last verbal slap for Tony to remember that. He’d apparently gotten accustomed to dealing with people that actually spoke with words. Now, that wasn’t saying that remembering that little fact about Jethro had solved all of Tony’s problems. No, it just meant that Tony needed to take those ‘drastic steps’ so that he not only got what he needed now, but that Jethro would understand what it was he needed in order to get through this separation for however long it lasted.

Tony blew out a small anxious breath as a wave of doubt rolled over him. Yeah, it all looked good

Tony had to laugh. “Of course I will.”
on paper but was this really a good idea? Yes, he told himself firmly. It’ll all work out. He wasn’t trying to influence Jethro in any way just as he’d sworn he wouldn’t in the conference room so long ago. He just needed…more…he told himself as he mentally pushed the word ‘reassurance’ away. So, they’d talk, reiterate those things they…okay, things he needed to hear and, if they were lucky, they’d get a little nooky in the process and if not, then he’d just walk away knowing that he’d tried. And as for the second part of Alan’s concern? Of course it would hurt, but with time he’d get over it, right? After all, he was doing pretty well here and he had options…lots and lots of options, right? He nodded to himself and decided that the added tightness in his stomach was just anticipation, nothing else. The night would work out, he told himself, one way or the other.

Unfortunately, Tony’s team was on rotation that weekend so he couldn’t leave, otherwise he would have been on the first flight out. The best option apart from them both being off was for Jethro to have the weekend off. Their caseloads were different enough that even if Tony did catch a case, they’d have a better chance of being together than if Jethro’s team caught a case. Tony wished he knew the status of Jethro’s current case. If it was closed and if his team didn’t catch a case, they’d be golden and he’d be able to take the first step in his plan. He figured he’d have to call McGee to get an insider tip. He wished that he could call Abby, though. He really missed her.

Once again he wished he knew what was going on in Abby’s head because he really needed to talk to his friend and her absence, on top of missing Jethro, left a huge hole in his life. He knew that her silence had something to do with whatever Gibbs was up to but so far Tim hadn’t been able to elaborate on anything beyond that because she obviously wasn’t talking to him, either. Tony thought it was strange that Abby had been so silent yet again. She normally needed to talk when she was upset and if she wasn’t talking to him, or Tim or Gibbs, he wondered who she had on the sidelines. It suddenly occurred to him that she might still be seeing Todd. Tony almost laughed at that thought. That night he’d met Todd seemed so very long ago, so much had happened since then. Well, he hoped that Todd was there for her and that he’d eventually be able to help her get through whatever it was that was keeping her silent.

Tony’s team finally made it back to the office and Stan reported that their guy was being processed. Tony had them begin their reports and he got back to the interminable paperwork required to complete their arrest. His cell phone rang and he looked at the display and then his eyebrows climbed to his hairline. It just seemed so karmic that it would be Abby calling. He told Stan that he was going out for coffee and then quickly left the office so that he could take this call in private.

“Tonneeee!” Abby cried by way of a greeting making Tony laugh.

“Hello? Who is this?” he asked playfully.

“Tony, it’s meeee! I’m so sorry, so so so so so sorry, Tony. Can you ever forgive me?”
“Well that depends on why you fell off the end of the earth and failed to let anyone know what the problem was…” Tony asked quite seriously and winced when he heard a quiet sob. “But you know, Abby-girl, that I will anyway, so why not start at the beginning…”

Tony remained leaning against the wall of the building on the break room patio while he listened to Abby’s fear and anger and hurt and sorrow. He absorbed everything she said, offering small words of consolation and support all the while feeling his own tension ease because here was the first bit of tangible proof of Jethro’s actions. The fact that he’d told Abby that he was leaving to join Tony went a long way towards easing his own fears. It didn’t change the fact that he fully intended to go through with his plans, though. It still remained that he needed to have heard some of this from Jethro, not Abby. And, unfortunately, Abby couldn’t speak to what Jethro was up to having only just reconciled with him the night before. All she could say was that she had noted the changes Jethro had made to his house because she’d heard he was putting it on the market although she couldn’t confirm whether or not he’d actually done so.

Tony wasn’t sure how he felt about that. It meant that Jethro was closing the door on a huge part of his past and Tony’s immediate reaction was guilt. He’d thought about Jethro’s house but sort of figured he would rent or something. He never wanted Jethro to completely cut himself off from anything to do with Shannon or Kelly. As far as he was concerned, that part of Jethro was inviolate and he didn’t want to be the reason for Jethro being forced to make that decision. On the other hand, Jethro was an adult and fully capable of doing just that. Maybe it was something he’d intended to do all along but just put off until it was time for him to retire. So did that mean he wanted to sell before moving to Florida? That left a sinking feeling in Tony’s stomach because he knew what the current economic situation was. He did, after all, keep abreast of the news although he was only mildly acquainted with how it affected the housing market. Her next bit of information, however, made his heart sink yet again. Abby told him that Gibbs had been inadvertently outing by Vance.

Tony blew out a breath in shock and vaguely wondered if that had been going on when he’d spoken with him the day before and then he was sure of it when Abby confirmed the timing. Tony closed his eyes as he grimaced and then felt even worse for having rejected all of Gibbs’ attempts to reach him. Oh God! He’d fucked up so badly! But by the same token he was glad he hadn’t taken the calls. What if Gibbs, in his fury at having his personal business bandied about, decided that he really couldn’t handle being out? He remembered Jethro’s words in the conference room. He’d said that being gay didn’t fit in with his job or his image of himself. That’s when he told Tony that he needed time. What if being outed like this made him realize he couldn’t do this? Jethro was a man who needed control in his life and right now it sounded as though he’d had that taken from him and, from experience, Tony knew Jethro’s reaction would be one of anger and then he’d be hell-bent on regaining that control. It was then that every fear, every insecurity that he’d felt in that conference room came rushing back, more intensely than ever because he honestly didn’t know what Jethro would do.

He didn’t know how he made it through the rest of that conversation even though Abby picked up that something was wrong. He refused to voice any of his thoughts, though. Not now, not yet.
They continued their conversation for a while longer which helped the two friends reaffirm their friendship despite the ball of ice in Tony’s stomach. He must have done alright though, because Abby told him that Jethro had closed his last case before going on to tell Tony all about Todd. Tony found that he was really happy for her and he laughed along with her when she quite seriously asked him to be her Gentleman of Honor should she and Todd ever decide to get married. Naturally he agreed and the two hung up shortly after that.

Tony remained on the patio a bit longer until he calmed himself. After a bit he realized that this didn’t change things. If anything, it made a face-to-face talk all the more imperative and Tony was determined to make that talk happen this weekend now that he knew Jethro’s case was closed. With his heart hammering inside, Tony went back to his office to get the ball rolling.
Chapter 52

“Ohhhh, that’s so An Affair to Remember, Gibbs! You’ve got to go!” Abby said as soon as she finished reading the email Gibbs had just gotten from Tony.

“What?” was Gibbs only response. He’d been trying to understand where Tony was coming from ever since getting the email that afternoon. In it Tony had spelled out that he was feeling doubt on Gibbs’ part about their getting together and that he needed to see Gibbs for confirmation of whether or not their relationship was still possible. He said that if Gibbs really intended to be with Tony, he needed to show up at Cadenas on Saturday night at 8 pm. He also mentioned that he needed to show ID at the door. If Gibbs failed to show then Tony would take that to mean that Gibbs had changed his mind about them.

The email was a shock to Gibbs…and it pissed him off just as everything seemed to nowadays. It was already late Friday afternoon since Gibbs hadn’t bothered looking at his email until now. Their case was closed but they still had to finish up their reports. Leaving for Florida wasn’t outside of the realm of possibility, but Gibbs didn’t understand. Why was Tony asking for this? Had Barstow been telling the truth about him and Tony? And what the hell did Abby mean about remembering affairs?

“The movie, you know…Cary Grant and…and…oh…!” Abby cried as she tried to recall the actress’s name.

“Deborah Kerr, Abby,” Ducky said supplying the name. Gibbs had called him over to Abby’s lab so that he could get both of their inputs on the confusing email. “Lovely lass,” he continued seeming lost in memory. “I did so enjoy her performance in The King and I. Mother was really quite taken with Yul Brenner’s pectoral muscles…”

“Ducky!” Gibbs said in exasperation, stopping the older man from getting too side-tracked. He really didn’t give a damn about other movies; he wanted to know what this one was about. Abby finally jumped in and gave him a synopsis.

“So Tony needs me to fly to Florida just to tell him what I’ve been doing?”

“You told me yourself, Jethro, that you hadn’t given him any details at all. Of course he needs some confirmation of your actions.”
“He asked me if you put your house up for sale, Gibbs. I told him I didn’t know but that I thought you were going to. I also told him about what happened with Vance.”

Aw, hell, Gibbs thought as he ran a hand over his face. “Can’t sell it. I didn’t want him to worry about it.” He could only imagine what Tony thought about Vance’s actions but Tony had to know that he wouldn’t let something like that stop him from doing what he needed. Gibbs was also wondering why Tony had chosen such a public venue to meet with him. If he wanted to break things off, did he really think he needed the safety of other people around? Just what the hell was going through Tony’s mind?

“So you didn’t tell him about the house? Gibbs, what’s wrong with you? Uh, I mean…” Abby’s eyes widened as she quickly back-pedaled. “You need to tell him the important stuff, Gibbs. What else haven’t you told him?”

Gibbs could feel the color sliding up his neck and it added to his already mounting anger. He spared a glance at Ducky but the older man’s face was inscrutable although Gibbs really didn’t need to see his expression to know what it was he was thinking.

“Nothing’s working out. Thought I was keeping him from worrying about the details.”

“So, you cut him out of your affairs to the point where Tony doubts your intentions,” Ducky said sadly shaking his head. He blew out a breath for a moment and raised his chin. “I believe you should be grateful he’s giving you this chance at all, Jethro. Think about it for a moment. How often has your single-minded drive towards whatever goal you’ve established left not only your life partners, but on occasion even your team, floundering in your wake?” Ducky asked not unkindly but with a determination to make his point. “This propensity of yours towards setting the course for everyone around you must stop, Jethro, or should, at the very least, be communicated to those who need to know your plans, most principally, Tony.”

Abby listened with wide eyes as Ducky gave Gibbs his dressing down. She’d never heard Ducky talk like this before, certainly not to Gibbs, and it was kind of scary. But, honestly? She couldn’t imagine anyone other than Ducky saying these things to Gibbs.

Gibbs didn’t say a word. He knew Ducky was right and he glanced at Abby who stood there with wide eyes although his thoughts were on Tony. Tony hadn’t said the words, but he wouldn’t be the first person to accuse him of shutting them out. The thing was he knew Tony was insecure but, by the same token, Tony knew Gibbs better than anyone else ever had, he knew what Gibbs was like and always seemed to know what Gibbs was thinking. Gibbs had never before felt the need to explain what he was doing, Tony naturally just followed his lead and then, when he either didn’t agree with his actions or knew that Gibbs was holding something back, he called him on it. So why hadn’t Tony called him on this? Gibbs thought back to all of their conversations and to those
moments when he’d made a conscious decision not to tell Tony what he was doing, and then he tried to look at it from Tony’s point of view…and he could have head-slapped himself. Tony knew exactly where he’d stood with him when he was a Senior Field Agent. His role had been clear-cut back then. It wasn’t now because they hadn’t yet defined their roles. Hell, knowing Tony, he was probably steering clear of anything that smacked of influencing his decision on whether or not to move to Florida. Tony may even have assumed that he couldn’t push his dom for more than he was willing to say. Gibbs felt like an idiot. Tony had no way of knowing what Gibbs wanted from him as his submissive and the lack of defined parameters was completely at odds with how Gibbs operated as a dom. Ducky may not know the details but he’d still hit the nail on the head when he pointed out Gibbs’ failure. Gibbs needed to rectify this but in order to do so he had to talk to Tony.

“So I tell him what’s happening.”

“Gibbs,” Abby said quietly. “You know how good Tony is at reading people. I don’t think there’s anyone better at reading people, except maybe you, of course. But that’s what he does, he reads body language, the look in people’s eyes, he can read it all but he’s got to be with you to do that. I think that’s what he needs from you now, Gibbs.”

“I believe Abby is right, Jethro,” Ducky added. “Don’t leave Tony waiting for verbal communication of your actions, especially if your plans are slow to come to fruition. Go to him. Let him verify for himself the nature of your intentions and the depth of your feeling for him.”

Gibbs didn’t say anything but he did give them a brief nod before turning and leaving the lab. He ended up staying late that night to make sure everything was done on their case and then he’d booked himself on the next flight out which was at 0800. He went home and hit the rack for a couple of hours and then got up to pack his bag. He was just finishing up when his real estate agent called and asked to meet with him early that afternoon. He growled in annoyance because this was regarding an offer that had been made. It was so low Gibbs turned it down right off the bat. The agent had then come back with another more reasonable offer so Gibbs had counter-offered. He’d been waiting on word of that when the agent called and said she wanted to go over the particulars of the offer with him. He asked that she call back in a few minutes and she agreed. In his rush to get to Florida he hadn’t really considered what he’d do until 2000 when he was supposed to meet Tony. He didn’t want to go to Tony’s office or to his house. This meeting was Tony’s deal and he didn’t want to screw it up, too. If he met with the agent and took a later flight then maybe he’d also have more information to give Tony to prove his intentions. He decided that was the way to go so he called the airline and changed his flight to a later one. He wasn’t happy with the time but, being the weekend, most of the flights were already booked. This one would put him in Florida at 1915 hours. The airport was twenty minutes from downtown so, barring any major incidents, he should be at the club by 1950 at the latest. It was the best he could do so he called his agent and agreed to meet with her.

Unfortunately, now Gibbs was left with several hours to kill before his agent arrived. He walked through his house and, for what seemed like the first time since this had all started, he let himself finally see what it was he was doing, what it was he was losing. He stood in his living room and
looked around at the yellow-tan walls and muted brown wood paneling, memories filling his mind at every turn. Normally he really didn’t give a damn about his environment unless it was less than conducive to his continuing good health, but he had to wonder. When had his house turned so dark and dreary? He thought of Tony’s warm and inviting home as he noted just how empty this house was now. He recalled what it had been like when it had been filled with laughter and color, warm afternoon light streaming in through wide-open windows to shine over patterned furniture and a colorful braided rug littered with small toys and doll dresses. He remembered potted plants and flower-filled vases. The house had been so full then, alive in a way he’d never again experienced once Shannon and Kelly were gone despite the other women he’d brought to live here.

He looked at the front windows and noted the bare shades hanging there. He recalled that Shannon had hung flowered drapes over some other lacy things while he’d been away and she’d laughed when he’d finally commented on them some five weeks after his return. He and Diane had fought over replacing them until he realized that the drapes they were fighting over weren’t the floral patterned ones that Shannon had hung at all and he wondered why he hadn’t noticed when Ginger, the redhead after Shannon, had first replaced them. It seemed that short-lived marriage had been filled with nothing but fights over proposed changes followed by sex and then more fights until it all ran together in his mind. Had it been that fight or some other that had finally made Ginger realize there wasn’t enough room in Jethro’s life for her and his ghosts? It didn’t matter. The moment the realization had sunk in that the drapes he and Diane were fighting over weren’t Shannon’s drapes, he’d turned and walked away. Diane had counted it as a victory and hung her chosen drapes as part of her effort towards elegance as opposed to what she called backwoods country chic. Gibbs ignored it all. It was after a fight with Stephanie and a dodged bottle of red wine that the drapes had finally come down for good.

He continued to look around noting that with each succeeding wife various pieces of furniture had also disappeared, some with them and others that he’d gotten rid of as he pared down his existence to the essentials he deemed necessary. He had a coffee table and a couch and some chairs, a couple of lamps and a bookcase he’d built himself, all of which were replacements for furniture Stephanie had taken with her when she’d left but that somehow had more meaning to him than anything else since Shannon and Kelly had been there. He looked at the couch as memories again flooded his brain. He’d spent more than a few nights on that couch when he’d paused just long enough between the basement and his bedroom to fall asleep. Tony was the only other person to ever sleep there. The coffee table had seen many cowboy-style and pizza dinners, cartons of Chinese food and burgers, all shared with Tony, the occasional roaring fire, and the quiet night.

Gibbs stared at the empty and cleaned fireplace. He’d miss the fireplace but there was no need for one in Florida. There would be other things, other small traditions, to replace what he’d had here he told himself and resolutely turned away and walked through the small dining room to the kitchen with the cabinets he’d built shortly after buying the house. That had been another fight with his wives who’d wanted to up-grade and change everything around, not only to suit their tastes but to erase what had been before. He had agreed to painting and even wallpaper once, but he’d stood firm on not painting over the molding in the pantry doorway that still showed the faint pencil lines and dates marking another inch grown.

He almost walked to his basement but there was nothing down there with which to occupy the empty hours, everything having been packed away and cleaned to Marine standards. Instead he
walked to his back porch, but he didn’t see the newly refinished deck and freshly painted shed. He saw Kelly running and laughing, calling out to him to come and play. He saw Shannon picking apples from the tree and promising hot apple pie for dessert. He saw Kelly and Maddie giggling over something they were doing near the planter, brown hair and blonde meeting as their foreheads touched over a small metal box. He saw Shannon hanging wet laundry on the clothesline that used to hang between the corner of the house and the fence line, turning to him, calling out and laughing with her bright smile and the sunlight shining in her hair making it glow like a burning hot ember.

He saw all these things and mourned yet again for the loss of all those hopes and dreams and promises of forever. Gibbs found himself stepping backwards until he had his back up against the side of the house, gasping at the tightness in his chest and the sting in his eyes but he didn’t cry. All the tears that had been shed over the years had left him a dry and empty husk. The echo of the pain was still there, though, an aching reminder of what he’d once had and he cursed himself for even thinking of cutting the last tie to his lost family. Then he cursed himself again and called himself a fool and vaguely wondered at how often he’d cursed himself lately. He felt like he was screwing up an awful lot but selling this house wouldn’t be a part of that, he told himself firmly. He needed to move on because his future was with Tony and besides, he wouldn’t lose his memories of them by selling the house; it was only a thing, after all, and yet he still looked over his empty yard with eyes that only saw the past. The pain of a moment before was distant but he was left with a sense of melancholy. Everything had been so bright back then, so full of color and life and energy. He closed his eyes for a moment and then blindly turned to go back into his house.

He walked back in and stood in his kitchen, his mind still caught in memories he’d avoided for so long because of the pain they brought with them and then he snorted in annoyance. Avoided? He didn’t avoid them so much as try to re-create them in the form of other red-headed women. For so many years he’d chased the memory only to learn that nothing could ever come even remotely close and his continued failures seemed to suck the color out of everything until it all seemed to fade and his life became a bare-bones monotone existence. After that, color only existed in his memory, manifesting in sporadic flashes like the green of the grass around him as he placed brightly colored flowers on their graves. He remembered the bright red of the blood that coated the windshield of the truck after he pulled the trigger and the deep, midnight blue of the water when he sat at an unknown beach with a gun in one hand and the bottle in the other. His reality, however, melded into a continuous, sepia-toned stream. Until the one day color again made itself known in his life.

He remembered the flash of green eyes and a bright grin. It had only been a flash but it was enough to draw his attention. Over the coming years there were more flashes of color in his world, some good, others not. Blood remained just as red and his bourbon just as golden. He remembered the blue lights that darkened the already dark, oxygen-starved lips and nasal membranes and the red of the blood that covered Tony’s cheek after Kate had been shot. Through all his memories, though, the color green never faded. Sometimes it was bright in laughter and glee, especially after a successful prank, but sometimes it was muted in pain, both mental as well as physical, although he doubted anyone other than himself ever got to see the pain that was other than physical. With the exception of his time in Mexico when he prayed for an escape from the painfully colored shards of his memory, green never faded from his world, even when the green was on a ship at sea for four months.
At that moment Gibbs had the desperate desire to see Tony’s eyes and he wanted them to look like they did in that conference room. He felt his dick stir at the memory and almost laughed out loud at the very unusual course his thoughts had taken. He was glad that he’d be the only one to know just what Tony’s eyes did to him. He brought his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Yes, he’d sell this house if it worked out that way but regardless of that, tonight he’d see Tony’s eyes and he’d make him realize that nothing had changed for him. Then he was going to haul Tony’s ass out of that club and drag him home to prove it. Thinking of the club made Gibbs move over to his desk.

The first thing he did was look up the address on the map page. It showed the location as being on a street off of a main road. There was a beach across from the main road. He pulled up the satellite view which showed that the bar was connected to another building, possibly a restaurant, on the east side. There was a parking lot on the west side of the building. The parking lot was accessible from both the front and side streets. Comfortable with the layout of the outside of the building, he switched to a satellite view and then he pulled up the webcam. It seemed to be a relatively quiet street, the main street having a lot more clubs and restaurants. The entrance to the club was understated with a solid door that looked like wood. There was a brass plate mounted next to the door. The resolution wasn’t high enough to read the plate but he was sure it listed the name of the club which, in Spanish, meant ‘chains’.

Abby had given him the web address so he looked at that next. He hoped it would have pictures of the inside so that he could learn the layout. Tony said he’d be waiting at the north end of the bar closest to the stage. Gibbs clicked his way through the website but was disappointed to see that there were no pictures of the interior, just a statement that said it was a private club and that admittance was by invitation only. Gibbs thought about Tony’s playroom and guessed that it had something to do with the scene and then he wondered if this was some sort of test. Tony had to know he wouldn’t balk at going into a gay bar nor would he have any second thoughts about entering a BDSM club. So why choose this place to meet? Well, there was only one way to find out, Gibbs thought as he glared at the clock as though that would make it run faster. Since it didn’t, he pulled out one of his books hoping it would help pass the time.

Tony spread his sweat-soaked shirt across his hamper and told himself he’d throw it in the wash as soon as he finished showering. Looking at the clock for the hundredth time in the past hour only made him grimace at how slowly this day was progressing. At this rate he’d never get to see Jethro! He told himself that a long, leisurely shower would ease his tension but ten seemingly long minutes later he realized the futility of the attempt. With the damp towel wrapped low around his hips he again went to his closet to second-guess his clothing choices for the evening. He held up his first and second choices as he looked into the mirror and held first one and then the other outfit in front of himself. He heard someone open his door while simultaneously calling out a greeting. He smiled knowing his friends probably figured he was climbing the walls. They were pretty much right.
“Well, hello there, handsome!” laughed Steven who was accompanied by a smirking Alan when they saw what he was doing.

“Hi, guys,” replied Tony without turning away from the mirror.

“The green shirt with the black leather pants,” suggested Alan.

“No, no! It’s way too hot for leather…” said Steven as he looked over what Tony held in each hand.

“Yeah, like he’ll actually be wearing it for long…” mumbled Alan as he dug through Tony’s closet for more choices.

“That’s only if everything works out the way it’s supposed to,” replied Tony as he again turned to the mirror.

“Oh, it will, Tony, don’t you worry. Gibbs might be a jackass but he’s not a fool,” Steven said, still annoyed after that phone call.

Tony laughed but couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t making a huge mistake. He’d chosen Cadenas because it was one of his favorite clubs and he wanted to be up-front with what he thought their future relationship would entail. Through Alan and Steven, he’d become friends with both the owner, Rod, and the bartender, Jason. He also knew the bouncers, Sonny and Paul. They were a committed couple who were active in the scene on their nights off. The club had a great atmosphere but the most important thing was that Tony felt comfortable there…and safe, although he refused to acknowledge how important that aspect really was. I’ll be fine, he told himself firmly, no matter what the outcome. If things went well then he and Jethro could choose to leave or stay or whatever worked. If things went south and Jethro either didn’t show or told him things were off, then one of two things were bound to happen. Tony figured he’d either walk out of the club with his dignity intact or find someone to help him get over his disappointment. It was Saturday, he was sure there’d be plenty of doms there willing to give him a hand. And if not, Rod and Jason always kept an eye on him if he suddenly found himself well on the road to getting shit-faced, although it had been a very long time since that had happened. I’ll be fine, he told himself again, knowing that Rod would probably call Steven and Alan to come and get him, if necessary.

He switched out the leather for denim at Alan’s suggestion and held the outfit up. Unbidden came the thought that, no matter what, the very last thing he wanted was to be left alone in his home if Jethro either failed to show or worse, walked away from him.
With Steven and Alan’s help Tony ended up with the green shirt and the tight black jeans instead of the leather. There’d be plenty of time for leather later if things worked out. Once that was done Tony let himself be persuaded into going out for a late lunch which, knowing his two friends, would no doubt take them into early evening. It was just what Tony needed to help him get through the rest of the day so, gratefully, he followed his friends out.

Derek hung up the phone with a sigh. His plans were in place so now all he needed was to get himself ready for his ‘date’ with Tony. He smiled as he pulled out the black shirt and the fitted black pants he favored when he was feeling this powerful. Tonight Tony would find all his hopes falling in pieces around him and then he’d be there to make sure Tony knew who really cared for him. Tony would also finally learn who his true master was and never again would Tony speak the name of Jethro Gibbs.
Chapter 53

Jethro boarded his flight after the hassle of showing his badge and declaring his weapon and stowed his bag in the overhead compartment before settling into his seat. He scowled as he blindly looked out of the window. His agent didn’t exactly have good news when she showed up at his house earlier. What he thought would be a decent compromise on the sale of his house turned out to be an almost insulting list of ‘requests’ for changes before the buyers would complete their barely acceptable offer. Hell, the changes themselves would have cost Gibbs nearly the same amount of money that buyers had so generously agreed to add to their offer and would have, in both the agent’s and Gibbs’ opinion, have definitely increased the value of his home beyond what the buyers were offering. Gibbs had told the agent no in very polite terms while inside he was screaming obscenities at the absolute gall of the buyers. The end result was a wasted afternoon that left Gibbs rushing to make his flight but make it he did, although he was sure he’d terrorized a few other drivers more than he normally did. Now, though, all he needed was for this flight to take off so that he could get a shot of bourbon to pass the nearly four and a half hours until they got to Florida.

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“Are you sure, Tony? We could sit over by the bust of the Marquis de Sade…” Steven offered for the third time but Tony shook his head with a laugh. He was sure things would work out tonight, very sure, he told himself, and he didn’t want Jethro to catch sight of his friends. Jethro had to already be wondering over meeting Tony is a club, the last thing he wanted was for Jethro to think he needed his hand held. So, okay, maybe that was a little true which was why he chose Cadenas in the first place. He just didn’t want it to be so obvious right off the bat.

“I’ll be fine,” he said with a laugh and then picked up his car keys and headed for the door. They were at Steven’s house because Tony had been too antsy to hang around his own house. Both Steven and Alan walked him to the door where they both gave him a strong hug. Steven lingered a bit and placed one palm on Tony’s cheek as he placed a gentle kiss on the other.

“Everything will be fine,” he said bravely knowing that he’d be spending the night anxiously waiting by the phone just in case.

Tony smiled again because he knew it, too. With a final wave towards the two men who remained in the doorway, Alan’s arm draped over Steven’s shoulder, he walked to his car.

Tony got to the club a little early and saw Sonny at the door. He smiled in greeting to the hugely muscled man.
“Alone tonight, Tones?” Sonny said as he pulled open the heavy oak door.

“Waiting on a friend. He’s on the guest list tonight, Sonny, name is Gibbs,” Tony answered with a flutter in his belly. God, he really needed to settle down. A beer would probably help but not anything stronger. Not tonight, he thought, or at least…not yet.

“Yeah, I see him right here,” Sonny said as he pulled the list out of his jacket pocket. “I’ll be sure to let Paul know he’s a guest of yours. We’ll treat him right.”

Tony smiled and clapped Sonny on his beefy shoulder. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“No problemo, Tony. Have a good evening,” Sonny said with a smile and then Tony made his way into the club. He didn’t see Paul right away but that wasn’t an issue. It was pretty early although there were already a few couples scattered about, some sitting, others standing as they chatted, all with their subs kneeling nearby. He looked at the subs, noticing their body language. They were at ease, most leaning towards their masters but all touching in some subtle way.

Again Tony felt a little flutter in his stomach and he couldn’t help but imagine himself in a similar position, his hands poised in whatever position Jethro wanted, either held behind his back or laying quietly on his lap. His body would be lightly brushing against Jethro’s strong thigh. He imagined Jethro’s calloused hand lightly stroking through his hair or laying possessively across the nape of his neck while the other hand firmly held his leash. Tony recalled the feel of those strong hands stroking lightly through his hair and across his shoulders. Tony felt his breath catch in his throat at the deep longing he felt as a result of his memories. He was surprised when he heard someone call his name.

“Hey, Tony, you okay?” Jason asked for the second time after Tony had come in and sat himself down at the bar. Tony seemed distracted and he’d immediately become concerned when Tony hadn’t responded after his first query.

“Hi, Jason, yeah, I’m fine. Sorry about that,” Tony said slightly embarrassed to have been so lost in his little fantasy. He was sitting at the middle of the bar but he didn’t remember how he got there.

“Okay,” Jason said as he eyed his friend carefully. He seemed alright now. “What can I get you?”

“A dark beer,” Tony said with a reassuring smile.
“Sure thing,” Jason answered and quickly brought the drink. He told Tony that Rod was in early tonight, too, and that he was in his office doing paperwork. Tony wondered at that because it was unusually early for him and then it struck him that Steven had probably called him. He smiled in chagrin at the reappearance of Mama Steven but was touched at the same time. But it’s not going to be a problem, he was sure of it, damnit. He just needed to wait for a little while. He looked around the bar and at the back of his mind he noted that he was more wired now than he’d ever been for any undercover op but he consciously refused to consider why that was. His beer appeared before him so Tony thanked Jason and took a long drink of the cool, dark brew. He stood up with a quick nod to Jason and moved down the bar until he was sitting near the stage, right where he’d told Jethro he’d be waiting. He glanced at his watch. Ten till. Soon, he told himself and then took another sip of his beer as he watched the doorway.

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Gibbs exited the busy airport glad again that he hadn’t checked any luggage but scowled when he found a line at the taxi stand. He glanced at his watch, nineteen thirty. He had half an hour and it was a twenty minute trip. He eyed the line ahead of him but it seemed to be moving at a good pace and he was glad that he wouldn’t have to pull his badge and claim official business although he would if it became necessary.

A short while later he was looking at road signs and felt relieved when he recognized some as being in the area of the club, at least until the cab took an unexpected turn.

“Where are you going?” he asked the driver.

“Gotta go through some back roads,” came the gruff answer. “They close some of those roads to cars at night, open just to pedestrians.”

Gibbs scowled because his first thought was that the driver was just jacking up the fare and he didn’t have time for that shit but then he again recognized a couple of street names and he relaxed slightly. The driver turned onto the road that Gibbs knew was the side street next to the parking lot. There was already a bit of traffic and a huge number of pedestrians which slowed them down. Gibbs looked at his watch, nineteen forty-eight. Looking through the windshield he saw that traffic had stopped ahead. They were nearly there but he decided he’d make better time walking.

“Let me out here,” Gibbs said and handed the driver some cash, enough for the fare and a good tip. The driver thanked him as he got out. He started walking towards the parking lot, moving around crowds of people that were out strolling around in the still-hot evening temperature. He felt someone brush against his shoulder and he turned slightly only to stop when he felt a gun being
shoved hard into his side.

“Keep quiet or you won’t make it to the corner,” a voice said quietly. “Come on,” the voice ordered and Gibbs found himself being pushed down a dark and quiet alley where a car and driver waited. There were three men total he noted as he was shoved against a wall but he knew that if he let them get him into that car he’d probably never see Tony…or anyone else…again.

“What do you want?” he asked as a pair of hands started to frisk him. He’d left his service revolver at home but the hands still found the backup strapped to his ankle.

“Just a little fun,” came the confusing answer and Gibbs learned that their idea of fun and his didn’t quite match as the gun butt came down across the back of his head. He wasn’t quite knocked out but he did stagger. He felt a hand pull at his shoulder but instead of turning he threw himself backwards and began fighting back in earnest.

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Tony got up and wove his way through the dancing crowd until he came to the entrance for the third time. Paul looked up from the podium that stood next to the door and slowly shook his head. Tony gave him a faint smile and then turned to go back into the main room. His stomach was tied in knots and he felt like he had a huge weight on his chest like when he’d the plague only without restricting his breathing. At this moment he almost wished he was fighting the plague instead of the growing belief that Jethro wasn’t going to show.

With practiced ease he wandered back to the bar but studiously ignored the couples and groups around him. The pair on stage going through a scene made no impression as he seated himself and signaled Jason.

“Scotch, neat,” he ordered quietly and then glanced back at the door and again at his watch. Eight fifteen. He thought about just calling Jethro but his pride wouldn’t let him do that just yet. He continued running through every possible scenario that would have delayed Jethro. He pulled out his cell with the cool new internet apps and touched a few squares. Nothing in the news about crashing airplanes or major traffic accidents so he made the call he’d hoped to avoid. Charley was on duty and he had promised to keep an ear on the police scanner for Tony tonight. For the favor Tony figured he’d get him a pair of tickets to the next Jacksonville Jaguars home game since he knew they were based near the town where Charley’s parents lived. He took a deep breath and dialed the number.

“Hey, Charley, it’s Tony,” he said into the phone. “Hear anything?” Tony closed his eyes but
honestly couldn’t say that he was glad to hear that the night had been unusually quiet. No John DoAs, no taxi accidents, no nothing. “Hey, thanks, man…yeah, looks like my lead was a bust. I owe you, have a good one,” he said and hung up. He reached for his drink and downed it quickly and then signaled Jason for another. This time he forced himself to take a slightly smaller sip and idly wondered why he couldn’t logically consider all the possible scenarios without the accompanying painful tension that gripped his entire body. Because this means more to you than you’ll admit, idiot!

“Hey, Tony,” came a voice from his left. Tony looked up, his eyes narrowing at the sight of Derek Barstow.

“Derek,” he said by way of a greeting. “What are you doing here?”

“I was lonely, Tony. I have been ever since you and I broke up. So, since you’ve moved on, I thought I needed to as well. I came here to see if I could find some company and I just happened to see you sitting here all alone. Are you waiting for someone?”

Was he waiting for someone? Hell yes, he was waiting! Tony sighed and looked down, his eyes inexorably drawn to his watch. It was twenty-five minutes passed eight and it looked like he had his answer. He felt a prickling at the back of his eyes. He blinked quickly to push away the tears but it did nothing to ease the pain in his chest. He put a hand over his eyes, determined that he was not about to give Derek any kind of an emotional display but it was damned hard. He dropped his hand to wrap it around his glass in a white-knuckled grasp. And all the time he was telling himself that it was over he was still considering reasons why Jethro hadn’t shown up because a part of him just couldn’t conceive of Jethro just leaving him hanging like this. Maybe work had stopped him but if it had, he was sure Jethro would have called. Maybe he never got on the plane. Should he call Harry and get him to check every manifest of every flight that came in today? He groaned quietly. Maybe he could if this was a real case and not just his whole life. No, if he’d never left DC he would have called. Maybe he never got on the plane. Should he call Harry and get him to check every manifest of every flight that came in today? He groaned quietly. Maybe he could if this was a real case and not just his whole life. No, if he’d never left DC he would have called. Okay, and then say he did fly in, could he have gotten mugged when he got to Florida? He could be out there right now, maybe lying in an alley, beaten, bleeding…maybe dead. Tony’s stomach twisted with worry and he considered getting up and searching outside. God, he was going crazy here! There were a million reasons why Jethro could have been prevented from showing up tonight. He ran a hand over his face. And, then again, maybe there was only one reason why he didn’t show. Maybe he should call Abby because she’d know why he was left sitting here alone and he could have at least some confirmation that Jethro didn’t want him. That’s what he needed but if he couldn’t get it from the man himself, he was almost desperate enough to take what he could. Almost.

Once again he considered calling Jethro but he couldn’t bring himself to do it even though he had to know, damnit. Was he really so worthless that Jethro couldn’t even be bothered to come and give him an answer? No! He wouldn’t believe that…he couldn’t. Anger boiled through him. He wasn’t worthless! He wasn’t going to end up in the gutter! God damn it all to hell! He wanted to yell at Jethro, beat the shit out of him for causing this horrible pain. He wanted to rain curses down on him, scream them in his face. The fucking coward! Did the big, bad Marine decide he
Tony couldn’t handle people around him knowing he liked guys? Was that it? Tony’s hands formed into fists and he fought to breathe against the tightness in his chest. Finally he won and he breathed deeply once, then twice, each breath calming him and bringing him back from the dark, angry hole he’d let himself fall into and he shook his head ruefully. The last thing anyone could ever accuse Jethro of was cowardice. And while he could almost hear Alan telling him that he had a right to be angry, he also knew the futility of it. Jethro had a right to make his own choices, so why be angry with him just because he had? After all, he was the one who had fucked up by asking that Jethro prove himself. Hell, it was probably that email that had made Jethro realize what it was he was letting himself in for so he probably decided, like any sane man would, to just walk away. Tony DiNozzo, whiny, needy, wretched loser. God, he felt like vomiting. It was probably best that Jethro hadn’t shown up. Did he really want to hear Jethro say the words that were the ultimate testament to the fact that he really was unlovable? Tony closed his eyes tightly in self-loathing, ignoring the hand that tightened over his nape. Tony let out a shaky breath, the see-sawing emotions leaving him feeling so very tired and bereft and still he asked himself…where was he?

Tony took another drink and had to force it passed the lump in his throat. Walking out with his dignity intact was so not going to happen. And all his other scenarios? Garbage, plain and simple. Well, except for the getting shit-faced one. That was looking pretty damn good right about now. God, his father was right, Mulroney was right. He was pathetic and desperate and he’d forced Gibbs’ hand and wound up losing. He should have known, right? No one had ever wanted him around once they found out he couldn’t be what they wanted, although he had really believed that he’d at least be given a chance this time. After all, Gibbs had taken a chance when he’d offered him a job all those long years ago and Tony liked to believe that he’d proven himself in that arena. It just seemed that his luck always ran dry in his personal life. So what had it been, he wondered, that had finally tipped the scales against him? He figured that he’d probably never really know just like he didn’t know why Derek claimed to want him. Thinking of Derek made him realize that Derek was still beside him, still talking, although he had no clue what it was he was saying. He tried to focus on the words.

“…Gibbs doesn’t love you, he doesn’t want you the way I do,” Derek said unknowingly echoing Tony’s thoughts and Tony noticed that he’d gotten a drink at some point and was now sitting next to him although his hand never left Tony’s nape. “I’ll take care of you. I won’t leave you sitting alone like this. I miss you Tony. It was good between us, right? It could be again. There’s no one else for me but you…”

Tony’s head dropped lower as Derek’s words began to register but it was bullshit, it was all bullshit and everything would go to hell like it always did. While he didn’t for a moment believe the lines Derek was spouting, he was at least there so maybe he could make use of him for the night and if that ended up screwing up the rest of his life, what did it really matter?
“So you don’t believe this is related to any cases you’re working, Special Agent Gibbs?”

Gibbs eyed the detective that had shown up once they’d learned that there’d been an attack on a federal officer.

“No cases. Can’t prove it, but I think it was personal,” Gibbs said as he watched the gurney being loaded into the ambulance. That one was the first asshole who had shoved the gun in his side. He’d gone along with him, of course. They walked a short distance until they came to a narrow alley, the man following closely behind. He saw a car moving slowly forward and then realized that there was also another man on foot. Three total, as far as he could tell. They had probably been covering the club from several sides, he realized, watching for him. He was thrown against a wall and frisked and his gun was taken.

No, it hadn’t been ‘fun’ at all. At least, not in the way that bastard had intended. Sure, Gibbs got a knock on the head but his first attacker had paid a higher price. He’d yet to regain consciousness. Gibbs re-played the events in his head. When he’d been hit Gibbs had staggered but he hadn’t been knocked out. When he felt a hand pull at his shoulder, instead of turning, he threw himself backwards, slamming down on the arm still holding the gun and then threw his head backwards. He heard a satisfying crunch and heard the fall of a body as well as the sound of running footsteps. The gun wasn’t immediately visible so he readied himself for a fight. Gibbs took a few good hits but, fortunately, neither the second man nor the driver matched him in skill. He’d just gotten in a good kick to one man’s stomach and was jumped from behind by the other when the alley was filled by flashing blue and red lights filling Gibbs with relief.

“Who had access to your itinerary?” asked the detective bringing Gibbs back to the present.

“Only two people on my end, I don’t know how many here,” Gibbs said although his mind zeroed in on Barstow in Tony’s office. Would Tony have told him of their plans? That line of thought led to some very uncomfortable speculation which he immediately stopped. The only way to know was to get to Tony and find out just what the hell was going on.

The detective just nodded. Gibbs had already told them that he’d be in to make a formal statement the next day. It was on them to find out who had paid the three to jump him. If Gibbs had had the time, he would have accompanied the officers to the nearest station so that he could interrogate these guys himself, but the fact was that he didn’t. He was late enough as it was so despite his suspicions about just who it had been that set these goons on him and the fact that he really, really wanted to beat the confirmation out them, he knew he couldn’t. The two that were still conscious had refused to answer any questions until their lawyer was present, so Gibbs figured they were well-versed in the legal aspects of their chosen profession. Still, if the LEOs did their jobs right, it
would all come to light and might end up in his court later.

“I’ll come in tomorrow and make a statement but right now I’ve got to go…” Gibbs said through gritted teeth but the detective in front of him wouldn’t back down and it had nothing to do with his statement.

“Special Agent Gibbs, I really think you should let the paramedics take a look at you, at least to bandage up that cut…”

Gibbs growled as he put a hand to his cheek. It was a small cut and had already stopped bleeding. He remembered one of those bastards having a ring. It didn’t matter, though. The only thing that mattered was that Tony was waiting on him and he was late. Gibbs had been deeply involved in the altercation when the cops had shown up after getting a 911 call that four men were fighting in an alley. Gibbs had already laid out two of the men and he was still grappling with the third by the time they had arrived on-scene. The cops broke them up and it had taken awhile for Gibbs to get them to understand that he was a federal agent and that the three men had jumped him. A bit later the paramedics had shown up to treat the unconscious man and now the detective in front of him was trying to persuade him to accept treatment as well but Gibbs wouldn’t have any of it. He signed off the form the paramedic waved at him and he looked around the alley until he found his bag. His cell phone had been stepped on at some point and he cursed. He could have at least called Tony but he was Speed Dial 1 and, right now, Gibbs honestly couldn’t remember the actual phone number. The detective finally finished asking his questions and told him he could go so Gibbs forced his way through the crowd of on-lookers and began to trot towards the club.

Gibbs walked up to the heavy wooden door but was stopped by the bouncer who gave him a visual once-over and simply raised an eyebrow at his appearance. Gibbs didn’t even bother looking down at himself because he knew what he looked like. He had dried blood on his face and it was already itching. There was more blood on his shirt from being sprayed by a broken nose. He was dirty and sweaty, his pants were torn and his knuckles were bloody but none of it mattered. Tony was still in there, he hoped, and he’d be damned if anybody else was going to get in his way.

“Gibbs,” he growled, “should be on the list.” Gibbs glared at the big, muscular guy but he was ready to go through him, if necessary.

“Any ID?” Sonny asked as he wondered just what the hell Tony was getting himself into with this guy. The man was obviously violent, which was not a good trait in anyone, but it was a tendency that became more dangerous in this lifestyle. Gibbs also wasn’t just any dom. Sonny could tell from the sheer force of his presence that he was as Alpha as they came. Well, since Tony was his friend he’d trust his decision but he’d be watching nonetheless. There was no way he’d let Tony get hurt if he could help it.
Gibbs reached into his wallet and pulled out both his ID and badge. He noted the bouncer showed no surprise that he was a federal officer. Gibbs figured that he probably knew about Tony’s job, too. After only a slight hesitation the bouncer decided to let him in, which Gibbs thought was a very good decision on his part, but Gibbs had a question for him first.

“Is Derek Barstow here tonight?”

“I’m afraid I can’t make any comments regarding club membership, Sir, nor can I comment on attendance. Club policy.”

“Fair enough,” Gibbs responded pleasantly. “But be advised that there may be an issue if he is inside.”

Sonny searched Gibbs’ face and saw fierce determination. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d had altercations between two dominants over a submissive and right off the bat he laid a mental bet on Gibbs and hoped, yet again, that Tony knew what he was doing with this guy.

“Understood, Sir, thanks for the warning,” Sonny said seriously and reached to open the door. As soon as Gibbs entered he used his radio to give Paul a heads-up and to call another worker to take over the door. He wanted to be at Paul’s side since if looked like things were about to get interesting.

Once Gibbs was inside he looked around and saw the entrance to the main room. With a quick nod to another behemoth that suddenly appeared, he walked in to see a crowded room with couples and groups around the various tables that lined the walls as well as a large number of people gyrating against one another on the dance floor. To his left was a stage surrounded by even more people avidly watching the action as a muscular woman wearing a half-mask and leather expertly utilized a riding crop on another woman who was firmly secured to a spanking horse. The sub’s cries of pain/pleasure were audible even over the din of the music and talk, each moan and sob met in counterpoint by the satisfied sigh of the crowd that watched. Gibbs saw the pride and pleasure on the face of the sub’s mistress which only served to deepen the dominant impulses already strumming through his body. He needed to find Tony…now.

Gibbs spotted the bar across the room and his vision focused on the north end where Tony said that he’d be waiting. He started to push his way through the throng but somehow awareness seemed to ripple through the crowd and individuals automatically pulled back, creating at first a space in front of him and then, moments later, a path that formed along the direction of his eyesight. At the end, Gibbs saw Tony hunched over at the bar. His face darkened when he realized that Barstow was there as well, leaning over him, hovering like a vulture over a wounded animal. With a closer look he realized just how true his analogy was. Tony…his Tony…looked completely devastated. And he’d been the one to put that look on his face. Guilt, pain, anger and jealousy all raged inside of
him but became focused with painful clarity directly on one spot…right where Barstow had his arm draped over Tony’s back, his hand on Tony’s neck, touching what was his. With a growl, he surged forward until he reached his goal. Dropping his bag at his feet he reached out and grabbed the offending hand and yanked it off of his sub.

Barstow whirled around with a surprised yelp, his eyes widening at the sight of a furious and bloodied Gibbs.

“What the fuck!” he gasped as the hand tightened around his wrist, the surprising strength threatening to crush every bone.

Tony, who’d been so lost in his painful thoughts, wasn’t at first aware of the moment when the hand and arm that had been draped over him moved away. All he knew was a cool draft of air across his neck and the sudden rush of goose bumps on his skin. He finally looked up at Derek’s shocked exclamation. Slowly, his eyes traveled from the wrist caught in a tight handhold and up a jacketed arm to furious blue eyes. Boss! Tony’s breath caught at sight before him and he felt elation begin to swell inside of him. He came! He’s actually here…and…uh, oh…he’s pissed!…

Tony’s thoughts stuttered to a halt at the realization of just what was happening. It suddenly came to him that Derek had had his hand on his neck and Jethro…well, apparently Jethro didn’t like it. A grin burst out across his face at what that meant but it was stopped when Derek apparently got his wits about him and made the mistake of attempting to throw a punch at Jethro.

“No…no…!” Gibbs heard Tony cry out, but it was too late. Gibbs blocked the punch with his right arm then he yanked down on Barstow’s wrist. In one fluid motion he pulled back and let fly with a punch that landed with a satisfying crunch on Barstow’s jaw. He was pulling back to hit him again when his arm was caught by Tony. Peripherally, he noted the two big bouncers charging their way.

“Let him go, Jethro,” Tony said intently as he held onto Jethro’s arm, but all he got in response was a growl. Hoping to avoid more trouble Tony quickly put up his hand towards Sonny and Paul. “It’s okay, guys…”

Gibbs’ eyes never left Barstow’s half-dazed eyes and, after another moment, he complied with Tony’s request. He let go and watched with a smirk as Barstow slid to the floor. He glanced over his shoulder to see that both bouncers had pulled back on their charge although they were still making their way over, alert and ready should things kick up again.

Derek, surprisingly, got himself up off the floor and turned to Sonny and Paul. “You saw it…it
was an unprovoked attack!” He cried as he backed away from Gibbs. He had some friends there who, despite uncertainty as to what was happening, had stepped forward to support him. He looked to them but Sonny and Paul blocked their path and he realized that the bouncers would stop any possibility of a full-blown brawl. At some point Rod had also appeared and was asking everyone to step back.

Derek ignored them as he tried to figure out how Gibbs had gotten away from the men he’d hired to get rid of him. By the look of things, Gibbs had come out on top and that infuriated him. It also meant that the men he’d hired were quite possibly dead (a plus for him) or in police custody, a possibility which had potentially serious consequences for him. With a growing sense of panic he wished that he had thought this through better. Who would have thought an old bastard like Gibbs could have taken on three guys? He looked at the people around him but saw that his hoped-for support had melted back into the crowd, so he was alone. He had to get out. Now.

“Fine! The bitch is yours,” Derek said magnanimously thinking that he’d just walk away…until he turned to look at Tony who was standing next to Gibbs, eyeing him with the adoration that should have been his and then it really hit home that he’d never had a chance. Tony, the beautiful sub he’d bragged about to his friends, had never really been his. He’d always been Gibbs’ boy. Fury boiled through his belly but instead of being aimed at Gibbs, it was aimed at Tony, the sub who had always held back, who’d never given him a chance. With an inarticulate scream of fury he charged at Tony.

With Rod, Sonny and Paul taking charge of the crowd, Tony was busy taking stock of every cut and bruise on Gibbs’ face. He still didn’t know what had happened but he felt the tension flow out of his body because there had been a reason for Jethro’s delay, and a pretty damn good one, by the looks of it. And then there was Jethro’s response to Derek’s touch. That could only be a good thing as far as he was concerned. But who’d Jethro meet up with? Was it a mugging? No, he was probably jumped, but who would have known he was going to be here tonight…wait, Derek here tonight, Derek in his office…fuck! The email! His thoughts were interrupted by an animalistic sound behind him. He turned just as Gibbs stepped around him.

Gibbs knew Tony was busy cataloging his injuries but, peripherally, he was still keeping an eye on Barstow. When he came at Tony Gibbs simply stepped into his path and then Gibbs’ fist rocked Derek’s world. He heard the renewed shouts from the crowd and he turned back to Tony but he was already moving, having pulled out his badge and, with Sonny and Paul’s help, was working to make the crowd back away.

Gibbs took that moment to bend down to the fallen man. With one hand fisted in Derek’s shirt, he leaned in and very simply said, “He’s mine.” Derek closed his eyes in acknowledgment and Gibbs pushed him until he rolled over and cuffed him.

“Tony,” Rod said when they’d again gotten the crowd quieted down, “the police are on the way.
You know, when I talked to Steven he didn’t mention anything like this happening. Do you mind telling me just what the hell is going on?”

Tony laughed but it died away. It was his fault. He turned towards Gibbs who was now cuffing Derek. With a couple of words to Sonny, Gibbs left him and walked over to Tony. Tony looked at Gibbs, looked at the overall state of Gibbs’ clothes and the blood and mutely shook his head. Gibbs had shown up, battered and worse for wear, but he was here and it suddenly struck Tony that he still didn’t have his answer although he was pretty sure he knew what it was. Just because Jethro had trouble getting here, thanks to Derek, it didn’t automatically follow that what he had to say was good. Tony swallowed painfully.

Gibbs had heard what the unknown man had asked Tony, he saw Tony shake his head and then turn to him with a look he did not like. There was guilt, uncertainty and pain in those green eyes but he didn’t have time to address it since the police chose that moment to walk in and, wouldn’t you know it, neither of the officers were the same ones he’d dealt with earlier. So, with quick, concise words, Gibbs relayed everything that had happened since he stepped out of the taxi earlier. A radio call to the detective he’d spoken with confirmed his story and Derek was taken into custody. Gibbs didn’t know if the three had implicated Barstow or not but he made sure he would still be held for attacking a federal officer, only it would be listed as an attack on Tony this time.

Knowing it would take awhile for the police to take everyone’s statements, Gibbs pushed for Tony to give his first. Once that was done he turned to the officer in charge. “I need to speak with this man alone,” he said and gestured towards Tony who was being unusually quiet. He then turned to the man he now knew as Rod, the owner of the club, and told him what he needed. With an understanding nod, Rod glanced at Tony and then pointed towards a hallway, saying simply, “Room 3”.

Rod watched as the silver-haired Dom stalked towards his friend. He wasn’t worried, though. This was the man that Tony had been waiting so anxiously for and, really, who could blame him? Gibbs was one damned fine looking man regardless of the slight hostility Steven had for him (and he knew he’d have to get the full story on that later). Rod noted that along with being a serious piece of eye-candy, Gibbs was also an Alpha of the highest caliber. He was, in short, exactly what Rod knew Tony needed to help him explore his deepest desires and to release the desperate sub locked inside. He had a feeling that Gibbs might just be the right one to do that. So, with a smile of anticipation, he prepared to just kick back and wait for the result.
Once he had given his statement, Tony stood silently by, his arms ostensibly crossed over his chest in a casual pose when, in reality, it felt more like he was holding himself together as he watched Jethro give his statement. While there’d been things to do like help Sonny and Paul handle the crowd and, later, identify himself and give his statement to the police, Tony hadn’t had to think about what was happening. Now, as things settled down, he began to wonder what Jethro would say to him. It was his fault that Derek had been able to set up an ambush and, from what Tony had heard, Jethro had fought off three men…and without anyone on his six, a thought that made his stomach twist sickeningly. It was just another reason for Jethro to walk the hell away from him. He smiled grimly. He didn’t know what Jethro thought about that except maybe to question his judgment, again, like he had all those months ago. He knew he didn’t exactly have a stellar record as far as personal relationships went, but this situation seemed to take the cake. So here they were, after Jethro had flown in at his last-minute request and had gotten jumped because of his stupidity in leaving the email on his desk. He then goes on to successfully beat off three attackers only to find him with his psycho ex-boyfriend hanging all over him. To his mind, it seemed like a death knell to whatever relationship they’d hoped to have.

Tony noted Jethro speaking briefly with Rod but he ignored it in favor of finding the officer in charge so that he could find out if he could just leave. He found him a moment later and was given the okay to go, so he started for the doorway. He’d only made it a couple of steps towards the exit when a hand clamped around his wrist and a low voice growled at him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m out of here. You didn’t bargain on this shit. You don’t need it, so just let me go…”

“The hell I will…” Jethro growled again but then grunted when Tony yanked back.

“Jethro…!”” Tony grated out through clenched teeth and then grimaced when the hold on his wrist tightened. He considered trying to pull away but knew he’d look just as ineffectual as Derek had and he really didn’t want to look that ridiculous. So, when Jethro just started marching towards the hallway that led to the back rooms, he was forced to follow amidst catcalls and whistles and offers to follow Jethro anywhere if Tony didn’t want to…

By the time they’d left the main room and all of the lustful calls and laughter behind, Tony was completely red-faced. Jethro just smirked at that as he looked around until he found the right door. He pushed it open and then practically threw Tony in before him. Jethro looked around quickly, unsurprised at what he saw. He already knew what type of club this was based on the décor and the clientele he’d noted upon entering. The scene on stage when he’d arrived had cemented his belief. Now, he saw several pieces of bondage equipment and a cabinet that Jethro assumed held
the appropriate accoutrements for use by consenting adults. It could come in handy if he had to tie Tony down to talk to him. It remained to be seen.

Tony ran a hand through his hair. He was angry and humiliated and, God help him, turned on beyond belief. In a heartbeat he decided to go on the offensive. He figured that, if nothing else, he’d give himself some damn fine memories to keep in store for the lonely future he saw ahead.

Jethro gave the room a last look and then turned towards Tony only to find him charging. The next thing he knew was being thrown back against the door with a six-foot-one solid mass of muscle pinning him in place and kissing the hell out of him and, holy hell that sinful mouth was just as hot and as sweet as he remembered and he felt his dick get hard as Tony shoved his tongue into his mouth. Tony pushed and rubbed his body against him, the hard ridge of his cock pressing up against him but it was no bid for dominance, instead it seemed like Tony was trying to get under his skin and fuse their bodies together but while Jethro loved the fierce intensity, he didn’t like the edge of desperation he felt emanating from the man in his arms.

Tony dove into Jethro’s mouth and it was just as he remembered, coffee, mint and vanilla only it was over-shadowed by the faint coppery tang of blood and he again felt his stomach tighten in fear and anger over what Derek had done. The thought of Jethro dying because of him almost made him sob into the hot, wet mouth but instead he shoved his tongue in even deeper as he struggled to memorize every detail. Jethro just opened up his mouth wider and sucked his tongue in hard. Tony groaned deep in his throat and buried one hand into the silky soft strands of Jethro’s hair and just held on to Jethro’s jacket with the other. One of Jethro’s arms wrapped itself around his waist to pull him closer while the other ran over his back in soothing strokes but Tony didn’t want to be soothed. He felt guilty, angry and scared and relieved and he needed to fuck. He shoved his pelvis hard into Jethro’s and ground his cock against Jethro’s erection. He wanted him so badly, he needed this, never wanted to lose this, all the while knowing that he probably would. Tony felt his chest tighten so much he couldn’t breathe and he felt tears spill over his cheeks. Oh, god, no…he wanted to show Jethro what it was they could have had but instead he was losing it. Every emotion he’d tried to block while he was waiting suddenly came to fore as he continued to rain wet, desperate kisses across Jethro’s face. He tried to calm himself but the storm of intense emotions made him want to just fucking…explode. Torn between the avalanche of emotions and his struggle to maintain control, he felt himself start to shake and distantly he wondered if he was suffering from some sort of shock.

“Shh, Tony, it’s okay…shh…” Jethro said softly against the hard kisses as his face dampened from Tony’s tears. He tried to soothe the shaking man but it wasn’t working. Jethro understood the anger and the fear, he’d been damned late, and then Tony had learned of Barstow’s scheming, but it was more than that. It should be over now. He was here, damnit! Then what…? Shit!

“No, no…fuck me, Jethro!” Tony demanded as Jethro continued the calming caresses. “At least once before you go…”
“No…” Jethro moved his hands to Tony’s shoulders as he pushed Tony back just a bit so that he could talk to him but then he saw Tony’s face which reflected shock at the perceived rejection. “Damnit, listen to me! I’m not going anywhere, Tony…”

Tony stared at him with narrowed eyes although one eye twitched slightly and his breath came in harsh, hitched little pants through kiss-swollen lips that made Jethro want to kiss him again. He remained silent, though, and then his head sort of half-shook in negation, as though he wasn’t going to let himself believe what Jethro was saying.

“I was coming for you, Tony, I swear it. You are mine,” Jethro growled and tightened his hands on Tony’s shoulders.

Tony’s breath seemed to freeze in his chest and he blinked a couple of times. “I fucked up…” Tony said with a hissed breath through clenched teeth. “…left that email where Derek could find it…” Tony stared hard into the intense blue eyes and was shocked to see exactly what he’d hoped to see when he first thought up this preposterous idea. He clenched his jaw hard as relief threatened to send another torrent of tears down his face. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, Boss?” he asked falling back into old habits all the while hating himself for his insecurity.

Jethro’s only answer was a quick slap to the back of Tony’s head.

Of course he wouldn’t, Tony thought as he stared into the blue eyes. He read complete honesty, determination, and total loyalty. Jethro had his six, had always had his six…and he never lied to him. Tony just shook his head and then dropped his eyes in shame and sorrow. He hadn’t trusted Jethro the way he should have. Instead he’d let his insecurity and Derek’s insidious words work their way into his psyche to completely screw him up.

“Knock it off,” Jethro growled low when he saw Tony piling on the self-blame. “I’m the one who failed you… I was so hell-bent on getting everything lined up that I didn’t give you what you needed. As for Barstow, he’s a snake but I can’t blame him for trying to keep you. But at the end of the day, the fault’s mine for being so stubborn. I…” Jethro paused and took a deep breath, “…I thought I was protecting you, Tony, but instead I screwed it all up. If it wasn’t for Ducky, I’d have still had my head up my ass, sitting in my empty house trying to figure out how I was going to support myself…”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Tony looked up quickly and blinked a few times as he tried to process what Jethro had said. He was apologizing, taking the blame…for what? He could see the deep sorrow and regret and if he hadn’t already heard the apology, the out and out apology in Jethro’s eyes would have blown him away. As it was, it made his heart give a strong lurch. What the hell had Jethro been putting himself through trying to make this happen?
“Tony, I’m still waitin’ on my retirement to be approved,” Jethro said as he dropped his hands in resignation, “and I’m pretty much broke until that house sells which doesn’t look like it’s gonna be anytime soon. Most of my money is tied up in accounts I can’t touch for awhile. What I do have will go to Stephanie for three more years,” Jethro said and he looked away for a bit then turned back with a rueful expression. “Always thought I’d work until I dropped.”

Comprehension dawned in the moist green eyes. A small smile curved his lips. “Either a bullet or a heart attack?” Tony asked. He’d always figured that’d be how he went out, too.

“Pretty much.”

“Jethro…” Tony began but then shook his head. He didn’t need to say that it didn’t matter because they both knew it didn’t…but then, it did.

“We’ll make it work, Tony,” Jethro promised softly and Tony believed him. He took a quick breath. Things were better but he still had something on his mind. Maybe…

“Still want you to fuck me,” Tony said still with a note of desperation in his voice as he looked around the room. It just happened to be his favorite one, the one with the St. Andrew’s cross. He felt his heart rate pick up and his dick responded in interest. Tony wanted that so badly he could almost taste it. He felt raw and exposed and he wanted to go home but after the show they’d put on out there he didn’t relish crossing that room full of knowing, jeering looks and he felt himself cringe. Yes, he was sure he could talk Jethro into taking him here. He imagined Jethro behind him, those hands on his shoulders and the wooden scent of the cross in his nose. He was on edge and he felt vulnerable and a quick fuck would work that off even though that wasn’t how he’d envisioned their first time together.

“Yeah, but not here,” Jethro growled low as though he’d read Tony’s mind. “Your place, in your bed,” he said firmly and then Tony looked at him with such a look of longing it literally took Jethro’s breath away and all he could do was pull Tony to him and claim his mouth again. He could feel Tony melt against him, so needy but still hurting from what he’d done to him. Another wave of regret threatened to close Jethro’s throat and strangle him. He took a deep breath when the tightness in his throat eased up. “Home,” he choked out.

At the one choked word Tony completely revised his thinking. So, not here…you can do this, Tony told himself. He took a deep breath and gathered himself. Okay, Very Special Agent DiNozzo, get your game face on…
With the need to get his boy home foremost in his mind, Jethro again reached for Tony’s wrist but noticed the slight frown. “What?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing, let’s go,” Tony said, a wide grin replacing the frown as though it had never been there but Jethro knew better. He could see Tony slipping on the familiar mask. He remembered the hoots and laughter. He didn’t know what to expect when they walked back out, but no matter what it was, he didn’t want any more stress on Tony tonight and he didn’t want to have to work on stripping away added layers of self-protection when they weren’t necessary. Everything about this meeting tonight was to get to their real desires, to demonstrate true intent. You couldn’t do that by hiding yourself. He raised a hand to Tony’s nape and squeezed lightly. He felt the corners of his lips curl at the surprise on Tony’s face which was quickly followed by desire. Yes, this was what his boy needed.

“Tony, I want you to drop for me,” Jethro said without releasing his hold.

Tony gave a quick, almost panicked look around the room. He’d been preparing himself to face the people out there and now Jethro wanted him to do a one-eighty and strip it all away…right now? He was good, but even he needed a little prep time. He blew out a quick breath. He wanted this, needed it, but they hadn’t talked about anything yet and he knew it would be intense. Okay, if that’s what Jethro wanted then he needed to let Jethro know what his limits were because the last thing he wanted was to disappoint Jethro so early in their relationship.

“I have a problem with being tied up…” he blurted out, his slightly widened eyes boring holes into the ice blue eyes in front of him. “And blindfolds…not good, blindfolds…”

Jethro cocked his head. That made sense considering Tony’s history, but this wasn’t about playing. It was about getting Tony to relax but Jethro understood that Tony didn’t know that yet. “Not gonna tie you up, don’t need it to get you to that place in your head.”

Tony gave the tiniest shake of his head not really believing that anyone, even Jethro, could get him to drop completely without forcing him down. Sure, he’d dropped a bit that one night but he didn’t know what Jethro was expecting right now. He didn’t know if he should ask or what the rules would be. Still, the thought of being able to drop just because Jethro said to brought about a longing in him he couldn’t quite believe. But if anyone could do it, it would be Jethro.

“Right now you are going to do what I tell you to do just because I tell you, understand?” Jethro said and tightened his hold on Tony’s nape slightly. He could feel Tony tensing up; saw the slight panic in those beautiful green eyes. His boy was fraying at the edges and he needed to stop it…now. “Not gonna drop you completely. It’ll be just like that night, just enough to get us to your place…”
Tony frowned. He wanted to tell Jethro that it’d be easier to just put on the mask. He was good at that, playing a role was one of the things he did best. He could wear the mask and get through the crowd and they could go home and do anything Jethro wanted there. Yes, that was his plan. It was a good plan. “I can handle it, Jethro,” Tony said and then wondered why Jethro would suddenly doubt his skills.

“Not about that, Tony. I want all of your attention on me, not those people out there. I want relaxed, not undercover. There won’t be any hiding between us. But the main thing? My rules. Ya got that?”

Tony looked deeply into the ice blue eyes and almost laughed. Of course! How could he have forgotten that? Gibbs’ Rules…always. And with that thought the tension seemed to melt away. He didn’t need a plan, not here, not between them. He just needed to follow Jethro’s lead and everything would work out.

“On your six…Jethro,” Tony said with a slight smile and felt a puddle of warmth spread through his belly when Jethro patted his face and his lips curved into that tiny smile. But the best thing he saw? Oh, yeah, the best thing was that look in Jethro’s eyes…approval, pleasure and…anticipation. Tony’s smile got a bit wider.

“Ever gonna use some of this stuff?” he asked with a slight gesture to the equipment behind him and a waggle of his eyebrows.

Jethro laughed softly. His irrepressible Tony was back. “Later, when you’re ready, we’ll explore the full use of some of that equipment you got. Drew up some plans for more.”

Tony smiled broadly at that. Jethro had been making all kinds of plans. His smile broke slightly. He wished he had known that.

“My fault, Tony. You’re mine, now,” Jethro said utilizing that mind-reading trick again. “From now on, when we’re apart, you gotta tell me what you need,” he added and got a nod from Tony in confirmation. But it was enough talking for now.

Jethro again squeezed Tony’s nape gently and raised his other hand to stroke through Tony’s hair. He kept his eyes locked on Tony’s while he stroked through the soft hair and across the broad shoulders. It took a bit but eventually he felt the tension slipping away under his hands and he heard the soft sigh as Tony’s breathing deepened. Those beautiful green eyes darkened slightly,
just as they had that night, and he saw the lids slide down a bit. Again the tension lines across
Tony’s forehead smoothed out and he murmured a soft “good boy” to his sub and saw pleasure in
those eyes he loved. Jethro looked down and saw that Tony was still hard and he smiled because
he was, too. Having Tony drop for him like this, feeling him settling down under his hands, sent a
rush through him like none he’d ever experienced, not even that night. Back then he was taking
care of someone else’s sub, or so he’d thought. But now, Tony was his and he felt a jolt of intense
pleasure at Tony’s responsiveness, especially knowing there was so much more to explore. Jesus,
he needed to get Tony home. Now.

“Keys,” Jethro said softly and Tony pulled them from his pocket and dropped into Jethro open
palm. Then, grabbing Tony’s wrist again, he pulled him gently from the room.
Chapter 56

It hadn’t taken very long for the police to finish their reports and for the club to resume its normal level of activity. Rod stood at the bar with a glass of tonic and lime while he eyed the crowd around him. He’d been worried that the incident would disrupt the atmosphere for the club members but his worry had been for naught. If anything, the club was buzzing with excitement which Rod completely understood. He, too, was waiting for the return of Tony and his new Dom. He chuckled lightly to himself. Tony had a bit of a reputation as a tough sub to master. Rod thought of those that had tried, and failed, before now. He knew all of them having, along with Steven and Alan, vetted them prior to Tony’s involvement. They’d been good men but not the right men and tonight, his intuition was telling him that Tony had finally met his true master. He just hoped it wouldn’t be too long before he could call Steven back to tell him everything was alright.

Rod took another sip of his tonic and then realized that something was happening. He could feel a charge to the atmosphere and he looked towards the hallway. Slowly, a broad smile grew across his face because, once again, Special Agent Gibbs seemed to part the Red Sea using nothing more than the force of his personality and his steely blue glare. But what really caught his attention was Tony. God damn, what a beautiful sight! Gibbs led Tony by the wrist just as he had when they’d gone to the back room together but the difference between then and now was amazing. Tony was in his subspace, although not too deeply to Rod’s expert eyes, but the look of complete adoration directed towards Gibbs made it obvious to whom he belonged.

Rod itched to call Steven but he needed to verify that everything was as it should be first. He approached Gibbs who just glared at him for what, he assumed, Gibbs viewed as an unnecessary delay. That wasn’t Gibbs’ call to make, though. Tony was his friend and he was going to be damned sure that everything was as it should be.

“With your permission, I’d like to speak with your sub, Gibbs,” he said, properly addressing the dominant member of the pair first. He could see that Gibbs was deep into his top-space so he didn’t want to imply any type of challenge to his authority but he would speak with Tony…no matter what.

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed as he looked Rod over. He saw determined concern in the brown eyes but nothing that raised his hackles despite the fact that this man was also a dom and the owner of this club. Gibbs knew, though, that he was also Tony’s friend. For that reason alone he agreed to the request. He nodded towards Rod.

Rod gestured with his arm and then led them to his office where it was quiet and where they’d have privacy from the curious on-lookers. Gibbs followed him and once there, he pulled Tony forward and let go of Tony’s wrist so that he could wrap his arm around his waist instead.
Rod smiled at the possessive stance and then turned towards Tony. “Hi, Tony,” he said easily.

Tony’s eyes had been lowered as was appropriate. At Rod’s greeting he turned to his Dom to verify that he had permission to speak. Gibbs nodded his consent.

“Hi, Rod,” Tony answered with a dreamy smile on his kiss-swollen lips.

Rod returned the smile as he noted Tony’s relaxed stance. Tony leaned in towards Gibbs as though seeking as much bodily contact as possible, his left hand resting lightly on the hand circling his waist. Although red-rimmed from the emotional aftermath of the incident earlier, Tony’s eyes were clear and bright and were finally missing that shadow of old pain Rod had become accustomed to seeing there. He felt his earlier concern slip away.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was good with you. Steven would kill me if I let you leave here without making completely sure things had worked out for you and Gibbs.”

Tony smiled the most beautiful smile Rod thought he’d ever seen. It was a smile that said Tony had just been handed everything he’d ever wanted in life.

“I’m good, Rod. We’re good,” he said softly and turned towards Gibbs. Gibbs looked at Tony and Rod could see the small smile that curled one side of Gibb’s mouth but what truly convinced him was the look of fierce love, pride and pleasure in Gibbs’ eyes. At that moment Rod finally understood what Steven had meant when he said that Tony needed to see Gibbs tonight. This was what Steven had been talking about and Rod smiled. Tony really had found his true Dom.

“That’s great, Tony, Gibbs,” Rod said and then walked to the door. “I won’t keep you any longer.” Rod had noticed the impressive bulges in both men’s trousers and it made his mouth water. He watched them leave, saw Sonny smile as he opened the door for the two men as they made their way out into the night. Once the door closed Rod saw Sonny turn to Paul to give him a thumbs-up. With a small laugh he went back into his office to make that all-important phone call to Steven.

Jethro drove through the night with a calm and silent Tony beside him. Generally, a quiet DiNozzo was something to worry about but not now. Right now Tony leaned back in his seat with a small smile on his face and his hand on Jethro’s thigh. Jethro could see that he loved the sub-space he was in and he imagined how glorious it would be when he made his boy really fly. That thought sent him up another notch into his top-space and he growled deep in his throat. He
allowed himself another glance at his quiet boy and pressed the accelerator a bit harder. Tony just kept smiling quietly, speaking only to give directions when needed. Eventually, they got back to Tony’s house. By this time Jethro was beginning to feel the aches and pains of his earlier fight but he was damned if he was going to let that stop him from claiming what was his. They climbed out of the car and, peripherally, Jethro saw the curtains twitch on the house next door. He smiled slightly because he knew exactly who was watching their arrival. He was glad that Tony had some good friends here and he now included Rod and the two bouncers in that thought.

“Shower?” Tony asked as they entered the house. Jethro just nodded and Tony led the way. Jethro had used the guest shower the last time he’d been there but Tony led him to the master bedroom with its attached bathroom. Tony took his bag out of his hand and placed it on the bed. He looked inquiringly at Jethro and Jethro smiled.

“First things first,” Jethro said quietly. “I dropped you just enough to relax the last time I was here and at the club tonight. You trusted me not to take you any farther than that and I didn’t. I won’t. I will NEVER break that trust, understand?” Jethro asked and then waited for Tony’s response.

“I understand, Jethro. You’ve always had my six. I trust you and I knew you wouldn’t do anything I didn’t want,” Tony answered very seriously.

“That’s good, Tony, but things have changed now. We need to move forward and before we can do that I need to know your safe word,” Jethro said and then took a step towards Tony. “Later we’re going to be learning a lot about each other. I’m gonna take you to your limits, Tony. We’re going to get passed your issues with being tied up and with blindfolds, but we’re gonna do it together, got that?”

“Yes, Jethro,” Tony said almost breathlessly. His heart was pounding both with excitement and nervousness. Shit, the truth was he was kind of scared but there was absolutely no one else he could ever have done this with, no one else he’d ever want to do this with.

“Ya got a safe sign?”

Tony looked down, almost ashamed because he didn’t have one. He shook his head. He never let anyone gag him.

Jethro studied Tony for a moment. His boy was smart and careful. “You never let yourself get into a position where you needed one, did you?” he asked although he already knew the answer.
“No, Jethro, never before but especially not after Mulroney. Once I got here, well, they all came recommended…ah, Steven, Alan and Rod always said who…uh,” Tony paused and blushed. “They vetted all the guys I dated. I just never let anyone have that power; never trusted them enough.”

Jethro was quiet for a moment. He’d talk to them about Barstow later but he was glad to know that Tony hadn’t ventured into this world blindly, especially after what had happened with Mulroney.

“That’s good, Tony. So what’s your word?”

“Yellow for slow, red for stop.”

“Okay, that’ll do for now but I want you to come up with two-syllable words. I don’t want any mistakes when we’re in the middle of something.”

Again Tony nodded.

“Good. Now strip,” he ordered gently.

Tony smiled at the thought of showering with Jethro. He reached for the top buttons of his shirt but suddenly Jethro pulled Tony to him and kissed him hard and then moved to bite and suck his way to Tony’s throat as though he couldn’t get enough. Tony groaned and relaxed into the forceful kisses. He could feel his heart pounding in excitement because they were finally here, together, and he was Jethro’s boy, a term that had always pushed his buttons regardless of his age and he wondered if Jethro would ever call him Pet, another nickname from his fantasies. That thought made him moan again and he felt those strong hands tighten on him almost painfully, sending him even further into his submission.

After another bite to his shoulder, Jethro pushed him back and Tony knew to continue stripping. He removed each article of clothing gracefully, folding each neatly and laying them on the chair. When he was done he stood in front of Jethro, his cock at attention with a glistening drop of moisture at the tip and awaited his next order.

Jethro couldn’t believe the sheer beauty of the man standing before him. Tony stood straight and tall and he was, much to Jethro’s delight, blushing faintly. His beautiful cock was full; the dripping head purple with arousal. The scent of Tony’s musk was driving him crazy but he reined it in. With a small gesture of Jethro’s finger, Tony leapt forward to begin undressing him. He
unbuttoned Jethro’s torn and bloodied shirt and dropped it near the waste basket. It was followed by the equally damaged t-shirt. Jethro saw the frown on Tony’s face when he turned back towards him, making Jethro look down at his own chest. There was dried blood caking the thick mat of his chest hair from a cut on his shoulder. Vivid bruises were beginning to show across his ribcage and Jethro remembered being kicked there. It didn’t hurt much right now but Jethro knew he would be much sorer later. He raised a hand to Tony’s chin and lifted his face.

“Finish,” Jethro said quietly and then moved his hand from Tony’s chin to the back of his head and lightly stroked Tony’s hair. Tony closed his eyes with a sigh and then opened them a moment later with a small smile and then knelt to untie Jethro’s shoes. He pulled them off one by one and then removed Jethro’s socks. Standing, he brought his hands to Jethro’s belt and unbuckled it.

While Tony had been taking care of Gibb’s clothes, Jethro had been running his hands over his sub’s soft skin, marveling at the smooth texture of the beautifully tanned expanse. Jethro paused to run his fingers through the lightly furred chest when Tony stood to unfasten his pants. In moments the ruined pants joined Jethro’s other clothes by the basket. Jethro continued stroking and playing with the small nubs he found which made Tony moan softly and Jethro filed that away as he again leaned in to lick and nibble at Tony’s neck. Eventually, he lifted his head and took Tony’s wrist to lead him into the bathroom.

The shower was hot and helped immensely to ease the pain that was beginning to throb through Jethro’s body. Tony did his best to carefully wash his dom while making note of wounds that would need bandaging afterwards. They stepped from the shower and they dried themselves. Tony pulled some painkillers from the medicine cabinet and gave them to Jethro with a glass of water. While Jethro took the pills Tony quickly treated Jethro’s wounds. When they were done, Jethro again took Tony by the wrist and led him back into the bedroom and to the bed. He sat down, still holding Tony’s wrist. Ignoring the hard cock waving in front of him, Jethro ran his other hand lightly over Tony’s abdomen and up to his chest. He lightly pinched Tony’s nipples and then moved his hand to Tony’s nape and pulled him down for a long hard kiss.

Tony sighed into the kiss and opened his mouth when Jethro’s tongue brushed over his lips. He sucked lightly on Jethro’s tongue but Jethro shoved his tongue in deeper and began to forcefully explore Tony’s mouth. Tony opened his mouth wider, submitting easily to whatever Jethro wanted. After a bit Jethro let him go and pushed himself backwards on the bed until he was leaning against the headboard. He spread his legs invitingly and gestured towards his rock-hard cock. Tony smiled in anticipation and crawled up onto the bed to lie down in between Jethro’s legs. With an eager sigh Tony bent down to rub his nose into the thick patch of pubic hair. He breathed deeply, thoroughly enjoying the heavy scent of musk and soap. He felt a hand in his hair and he expected to be grabbed and directed to where Jethro wanted him. Instead he felt gentle strokes through his hair and he sighed blissfully. The controlled power Jethro effortlessly displayed had always brought about an instinctual response in Tony but now he felt as though he’d finally found his rightful place and he couldn’t be happier. His head was buzzing and he knew his dick was harder than it had ever been but the sense of his own desire was distant. He felt like he was floating, cradled safely and securely in the warmth of Jethro’s love and care. And while his mind was floating his thoughts were clear. His only responsibility from this point on was to ensure
the contentment of his master. The only thing that mattered to him here and now was the man before him, whose pleasure was paramount.

With that thought Tony dipped his head and, with almost dainty licks, he explored the hard length in front of him. He tasted the bittersweet drop glistening at the head and then swirled his lips around the rosy glans before taking the velvety smooth shaft into his mouth. Tony gloried in Jethro’s taste and scent as he licked and sucked greedily and he knew Jethro was pleased from the sounds he made. Jethro’s pleasure fueled his so he used his left hand to fondle the heavy sac while using the thumb and forefinger of his right hand to circle and stroke the base of Jethro’s cock since he couldn’t yet take him all. Tony could feel the need rising up in him to suck until Jethro came in his mouth; he wanted to drink in every bit of the man he’d dreamt of for so long so he began to suck harder and faster but the hands in his hair tightened and tugged so very gently, reminding Tony about who was really in charge and he sighed, chastising himself for getting carried away. But god…this was just so good...

“Easy, boy,” came the low growl and Tony paused, panting slightly as he held the large cock in his mouth until he was given leave to continue or stop, whatever his master desired. After another moment the hand in his hair loosened which Tony took to mean that he should continue. Determined that he would not get carried away again, Tony delicately rubbed the underside of the cock in his mouth with his tongue and felt pleasure run through him when he heard the approving moan from his master. He again began to suck lightly, shoving his own desire down and concentrating only on what would please his master. Once more Tony felt the hand tighten in his hair and he was pulled off of his master’s cock. He feared he’d gone too far but then his heart swelled when his head was guided to Jethro’s, his master again claiming his mouth in a hard kiss.

Jethro pulled back from the kiss and looked into Tony’s dreamy green eyes, now dark with emotion. He stared deeply, memorizing every bit of Tony’s face and he felt the answering emotions swell up in his chest. Love, friendship, loyalty, need, passion, protectiveness, everything welled within him with every color of the rainbow and he claimed that beautiful mouth once more but then quickly pulled back. He needed to claim his boy. Now.

“You ready for me, pretty boy?”

Tony’s breath hitched at the endearment and he felt himself blush again only to feel it deepen at Jethro’s low chuckle.

“I prepared myself before going to the club,” he answered and felt his heart thump against his rib cage at the thought of Jethro finally fucking him. And while he really wanted to have Jethro’s essence marking him inside, it had been several hours now and he wasn’t sure. “It was a while ago…”
“Okay, condoms tonight. Then, when we’re both ready, I’ll take you bare and fill you up. You good with that?”

“Yes, Jethro,” Tony answered with a happy sigh, glad to know Jethro wanted it, too. Plus, the man said condoms…plural! Jethro’s voice brought him back from that excited thought.

“Later,” Jethro said as he looked his boy over, “I’ll mark you…here,” he said as he flicked Tony’s nipples, one and then the other, “or here,” he said as he caressed Tony’s ass. “Regardless of where I mark you, you’re mine, Tony, now and forever. I’ll make sure you always know it.”

Tony’s only response was to groan which was accompanied by a twitch of his leaking cock. Again, Jethro chuckled. He’d read his boy right. He raised a hand to stroke the bare neck. That would be corrected soon as well and he took a deep breath. God, he wanted to roll Tony over, hold him down and cover him, bury himself deep inside of the glorious body but he wasn’t quite up for that right now. Later, though, he’d take his boy long and hard. For now, Tony would have to do the work.

“Get the lube, pretty boy. I want to watch you get yourself ready for me.”

Tony eagerly moved towards his nightstand. He grabbed the small bottle and poured a generous amount into his hand. While kneeling on the bed on one knee, he lifted his other leg so that his foot was flat and then he reached behind himself to apply the lube and to make sure he was still fully stretched from earlier. He was so he grabbed a condom and, after a nod from Jethro, rolled it on Jethro’s dick then he poured more lube and used it to prepare his Master.

“Good, now ride me,” Jethro commanded, lust darkening his eyes.

Tony moved to straddle him, his breath coming in harsh pants more from excitement than exertion. He had the sudden fear that he would come as soon as he felt Jethro’s cock inside of him so he paused; one hand holding Jethro’s leaking cock as he hovered momentarily, trying desperately to calm himself a bit.

“You’re doing good, boy,” Jethro said quietly and then stroked Tony’s heaving sides soothingly and Tony had to wonder just how in the hell Jethro could read his mind like that but then that thought slid away as Jethro’s hands closed around his hips and pulled him downwards. The head of Jethro’s cock breached Tony’s opening and he hissed at the sudden intrusion. Ever so slowly Tony followed the pressure on his hips until he had Jethro completely sheathed inside of him. He panted harshly until the burning passed and then his ass clenched automatically around the hard length spearing him and he threw his head back in pleasure making Jethro groan below him.
“Be still, boy,” Jethro ordered through clenched teeth. Jesus, Tony was exquisite, tight and hot, and if he fucking clenched like that again Jethro was going to come far sooner than he wanted. He concentrated on stroking Tony’s sweaty skin and hard, dripping cock. He let the scent of his boy fill his nostrils. Tony was trembling with the effort to hold still, to keep from fucking himself until he came and then Jethro made the mistake of looking at Tony’s face. His boy was shiny with sweat, his eyes closed tightly and his mouth open in a silent ‘oh!’ as he fought to follow his Master’s order and Jethro thought he was the most beautiful thing in the world. Suddenly it was too much and he began to grind up into that tight heat.

“Move, Tony,” he ordered and then threw his head back in pleasure when Tony lifted himself until just the head of his dick was still inside and then he slammed himself down and then he did it again. Jethro saw him bite down on his lips in an effort to keep silent but that wasn’t what Jethro wanted.

“Lemme hear ya, Tony,” Jethro gasped and was rewarded by a deep moan. Fuck, it was everything he’d fantasized about and Jethro tried to keep his eyes open so that he could watch his boy but the pleasure was too intense, too perfect, as Tony rode him hard, sliding up and down as he frantically fucked himself on Jethro’s dick. And the sounds Tony made! He wouldn’t have expected the high-pitched needy sounds to come from Tony, but Christ! That, together with the low guttural moans, was a major turn-on! Jethro thought he could come from the whimpers and mewls alone. He couldn’t keep from grabbing Tony’s hips to help lift him and then pulling him down to ram his cock as deeply as he could inside that fantastic body.

“Come for me, Tony,” Jethro grunted and desperately reached for Tony’s cock. He stroked the velvety steel and distantly heard Tony begin to scream as the cock in his hand swelled just before his hand and chest were covered with Tony’s hot, creamy cum and Tony’s ass clenched around him so hard all he saw were pinpricks of light as he rushed over the precipice as well. He was only dimly aware of a heavy body coming to rest more lightly than expected on his chest and he automatically wrapped the exhausted warmth in his arms before blackness claimed him.

Tony tried desperately not to let all of his weight fall on top of Jethro but it was the hardest struggle of his life. Somehow, though, he found the strength to pull away from the arms that held him so securely. Staggering, he made his way to the bathroom for a washcloth. Returning to the bed he carefully removed the condom and wiped Jethro clean. He then re-inspected Jethro’s bandages. He seemed none the worse for wear, fortunately, so Tony cleaned himself and tossed the washcloth towards the hamper. He turned back to look at Jethro, seemingly sound asleep in his bed, and found himself undecided. He didn’t know where Jethro wanted him to sleep. He’d been with a couple of doms that wanted him on a pallet in the corner or at the foot of the bed and while that hadn’t been too bad for the short duration those relationships had lasted, he was hoping for a more comfortable sleeping arrangement since it would last him for the rest of his life.

“Bed. Now,” Jethro mumbled sleepily and Tony looked up quickly. He hadn’t been aware that
Jethro had awakened.

“With me, always,” Jethro said with a tired smirk and then he moved over so that Tony could join him in the bed. “We’ll work everything else out later,” he decreed with a tired yawn and then pulled a grinning Tony close until Tony had settled in with his head pillowed on Jethro’s uninjured shoulder. Jethro carted his fingers through the soft strands of Tony’s hair until Tony slipped into a sated slumber. Only then did Jethro allow himself to follow.
Tony woke up the next morning with Jethro spooning him from behind, Jethro’s breath warm on his nape. Jethro’s arm was around his waist but he had a firm hold on Tony’s wrist, holding Tony’s arm to his chest so that he was encircled in a secure, sleep-warm embrace. Tony had never before felt so deeply cherished and he knew, deep down inside of him, that he completely belonged to Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He smiled at that thought and then looked over his shoulder to see blue eyes watching him and Tony’s smile widened.

“‘s a good way to wake up,” he said sleepily.

“Mm, hmm,” Jethro agreed and then bent his head to nibble behind Tony’s ear.

Tony arched his neck and sighed deeply. “Good’s an understatement,” he moaned and then rolled over onto his back as Jethro continued to feast on his neck. He stretched his arms and wrapped them around his lover and rejoiced in the feel of Jethro’s weight on top of him. He ran a hand through Jethro’s hair and then brought Jethro’s face up to meet his. Tony lifted his head slightly and captured Jethro’s lips. Distantly he wondered if he was being too aggressive but Jethro didn’t seem to mind as he eagerly returned the kiss. Tony relaxed even more as Jethro then took control. He spread his legs to let Jethro’s fingers gently probe and explore and then reached over to the nightstand for the lube and condom that had been left out and handed them to Jethro who smiled at him and proceeded to get him ready.

When he was ready Jethro knelt up between his legs and then, with gentle pressure from his hands, had Tony lift his legs. Tony automatically placed his own hands near his knees to help hold his legs up, opening himself in a way he never had before. All his male lovers had always taken him from behind. Tony felt exposed and vulnerable but the pleasure in Jethro’s expression and his gentle touch eased his concern despite the fact that he was blushing as Jethro ran possessive eyes over his body. A short while later, when Jethro bent him nearly in half to claim his mouth while still being buried deeply inside of him, Tony decided that he really, really loved being face-to-face like this.

Later, when Jethro rested with his head pillowed on Tony’s chest while Tony played with his hair, Tony thought there was no way he could ever be happier than he was at that moment. He was figuring out that Jethro didn’t need him kneeling at his feet 24/7, but their relationship would always be one where Jethro took the lead. Jethro was his Dom in every sense of the word and that was perfect for Tony. Following Jethro came as naturally as breathing to him so he couldn’t envision a more perfect situation.

“I love you,” Tony sighed and then automatically stiffened because he hadn’t intended to actually say that out loud.
Jethro just smiled and leaned up to kiss Tony again. “Good. I love you, too, Tony,” he said very simply and then crawled off of Tony and stood by the bed with his hand out.

Tony found himself grinning like a fool as he took Jethro’s hand and was led into the bathroom for their morning shower. Later, the men inhabited the kitchen in a role-reversal of their last morning together. Now Jethro sat at the table with a steaming cup of strong black coffee while Tony went about making breakfast. Jethro had offered to help but Tony was too energetic, bouncing happily back and forth between the stove and counter, all the while chatting cheerfully about his ideas on melding Jethro’s home with his. Jethro smiled indulgently, letting Tony’s chatter roll over him in soothing waves.

“I’ve got something to show you after breakfast, Jeth,” Tony said and Jethro smirked at the new diminutive to his name. He didn’t mind it but he’d be damned if he’d let anyone other than Tony try to use it.

“I’ve got to go to see this guy,” Jethro said as he pulled the detective’s card out of his pocket and handed it to Tony.

Tony looked at the card and some of the energy seemed to drain from him. Jethro covered Tony’s hand with his own.

“It’s gonna be fine, Tony,” Jethro said quietly. “No one’s ever gonna get between us again. We’ve just got to see this through and then its clear sailing.”

Tony nodded, believing completely in Jethro’s words, and worked to finish his late morning breakfast. After a short while Tony bounced up to clean the dishes. This time Jethro wouldn’t listen to Tony’s request that he relax so, together, they made short work of the mess. Once they were done Tony grabbed Jethro’s hand and led him out to the backyard. The last time Jethro had been there it had been nighttime and then, the following morning, they’d left early to get to work. Now, Jethro had the time to really see what comprised Tony’s home, his future home. There was that building that Jethro had caught a glimpse of previously but other than that, there was nothing but grass. He noted the yard was fully fenced in with lush green plants planted around the perimeter. The lawn extended to a cement pad at the side of the attached garage which abutted the fence line and stopped at a walk-in gate built in next to a larger rolling gate. He assumed the gate and pad were for the previous owner’s RV.

“Heavy duty fence…what’re you trying to keep out? Alligators?” Jethro asked jokingly but then raised his eyebrows when Tony’s face tightened a bit. “You’re kidding,” he said in surprise.
“Not here, but I did come face-to-face with one while I was jogging one morning. .”

“What d’ya do?”

“Ran the other way…very, very fast,” Tony replied with a laugh and then added, “I go armed now.” That made Jethro laugh, too. “Come on,” Tony said, again grabbing Jethro’s hand.

Jethro smiled at Tony’s need for physical contact. Truth be told, it worked for him, too. Tony led him to the lone building which had a padlock on a set of large double doors which faced the cement pad. There were windows set into the doors but they were so filthy they prevented any glimpse of the interior. Tony produced a keyring from his pocket and unlocked the door. It swung open with a loud squeak and Jethro automatically put it on his mental to-do list along with the filthy windows.

The open door revealed a large empty work/storage shed with more windows on the opposite wall. On the left-hand wall was an old wooden workbench that ran the length of the building. There was a pegboard mounted over the workbench with some old rusty hooks still in place. The bench itself was gouged and had stains that spoke of old rusted cans and spilt oil but was still looked sturdy enough. Jethro continued to look around. There were some bolts sticking out of the cement in the corner. From the rectangular shape he guessed that a lathe or something similar had been mounted there at one time. The bolts on the other side of the room showed a square shape so he guessed that maybe a band-saw or grinding wheel had been there. There were industrial-style lights hung overhead and an electrical box mounted on the wall. It was a good size and Jethro figured the owner was probably pretty handy. The oil stains on the floor said that he probably also stored a vehicle or possibly a boat there, once, along with his tools. He nodded to himself. It was a comfortable space and he decided he liked it. He turned to look at Tony who was sporting a shy smile.

“Harry, the owner, was a machinist down on the docks. He used to do metal work a long time ago but then he sold everything. I thought that this might be a good place to build a boat or something.”

A wide grin broke out across Jethro’s face. “Yeah, I’d say you’re right, Tony,” he replied with a nod and then pulled Tony to him for a long, deep kiss. “Let’s get done what we need to because there are a few things I’d like to do before I fly out tonight.”

Jethro smiled as Tony pouted at the reminder that he was leaving on a red-eye that night. He kissed him softly which brought a small smile to that gorgeous mouth.
Tony knew Jethro had to get back so that he could finish what he needed for his retirement and subsequent move, he just wasn’t ready to let him go quite yet. However, Jethro’s statement broadened that smile into a bright grin. He pulled Jethro out of the work shed and then stopped to re-lock the door. Instead of returning the key to his pocket, he simply dropped the keyring into Jethro’s hand.

Jethro looked down. There were two keys on the ring and he looked back at Tony with a raised eyebrow.

“Your shed, our house.”

Jethro grinned and pulled Tony close to kiss him tenderly. Then Tony pulled back with a gleam in his eye.

“So…things, huh?” Tony said as he rubbed up against Jethro’s side. “Like what?”

“Your team is still on call so we can’t get too involved,” Jethro said with an amused smirk. “But I’ve got a couple ideas for your playroom.”

Tony’s eyes widened in excitement. “Oh, yeah!” he hooted. “Let’s go!” he shouted and then practically hauled a chuckling Jethro through the yard and back to the house so they could get the responsible stuff out of the way.

Once they got inside, however, Tony’s demeanor changed. He settled down as he put on his shoulder holster and grabbed his badge. By the time he slipped his jacket on, Jethro’s happy, energetic sub was gone. In his place stood the very professional Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo and while Jethro fully appreciated that aspect of him, he was anxious to be done with business. There was something very important that needed to be done that afternoon. So, grabbing his own jacket, he headed towards the door and then Special Agents Gibbs and DiNozzo left to go to the police station.

Despite the fact that it was Sunday, they knew they’d still be able to provide a statement since Gibbs had to be on a flight back to DC that night. As expected, the detective that had spoken with Gibbs the previous night was off-duty so another detective from the same office retrieved the partial statement and finished taking the rest from Gibbs. Gibbs had been prepared for some attitude from the officers and, much to his disgust, he wasn’t disappointed. He completely ignored the blatant smirks from the men around him as he finished his statement. Glancing at Tony he
noted that he, too, maintained a very stoic expression. Gibbs just hoped that this incident wouldn’t affect any future dealing Tony might have with this station. While he didn’t really give a damn who he pissed off, he knew that Tony preferred to keep a friendly working relationship with the local LEOs.

Finally, statement finished, he found out that the heavies had rolled over on Barstow. While he felt some satisfaction at that he caught the slight flash of sadness in Tony’s eyes and he wondered just how deep that sadness went. The thought angered him and he found he had to rein in the jealous and possessive feelings the thought of Barstow and Tony together engendered in him. It was over now, he reminded himself, and Barstow would be facing charges. The rational part of his mind, however, could appreciate Tony’s feelings on the matter. No one liked to see a relationship end so very badly and he had no doubt that Tony was harboring some guilt over the whole thing.

The detective handed Gibbs’ gun back to him after they’d verified both ownership and the fact that it hadn’t been fired during the incident. He then let Gibbs know that he’d be contacted later as the legal process required. Gibbs just nodded and, with a final glare at everyone around him, turned and left with Tony at his side. It was time now to take care of that other thing he wanted done.

Since they’d had such a late breakfast they weren’t interested in lunch so Jethro directed Tony to drive back towards Cadenas. Tony shot him a quizzical look but otherwise drove on playing tour guide along the way. He noted Jethro watching the street signs so when he gave directions, Tony found it amusing but not unexpected. He knew Jethro would never have shown up at meet without surveying the area first. It was just a question now of figuring out what it was he was looking for.

One of the things Jethro had in the past noted about coastal Florida besides the boats, of course, was the fact that the downtown areas rarely seemed to shut down. Therefore, when he found the spot he was looking for, he was not surprised to see that it was open for business. He told Tony to find parking and then he led him to the business he’d researched on the web before flying out to Florida. He just smirked when he saw Tony’s wide excited grin at their destination and pulled Tony to his side. Then, with his hand on the small of Tony’s back, Jethro escorted Tony into the parlor.

Several days later Gibbs took his team aside and formally notified them of his official retirement date as well as Harper’s reporting date. Naturally, Abby was very subdued during this exchange but she made Gibbs proud by handling it very professionally although her eyes still betrayed her sorrow at the news. Ziva took the formal notification quite stoically and offered her congratulations and well-wishes quite sincerely after which she leaned forward and kissed Gibbs on the cheek, her eyes relaying true happiness as she wished both he and Tony joy in their future together. Both Ducky and Palmer also accepted his notice with quiet equanimity although both sets of eyes were dancing in happiness which made Gibbs roll his eyes while he accepted their congratulations.
making both men laugh quite heartily and he had the errant thought that it was good to see that Palmer had gotten over whatever issue he’d had with him. Then it was McGee’s turn. He put his hand out and relayed his also very sincere congratulations but Gibbs could see that there was something bothering him. He resolved to pull the young man aside to discuss it later.

The rest of the agency took the news in varying degrees of shock, sadness, and relief which Gibbs found humorous, surprising and downright annoying in equal measure. He ignored the pointed looks and the rumors that said he’d been forced to retire after coming out of the closet but those few voices died down rather quickly when speculation over Gibbs’ replacement began to make the rounds. In the meantime, though, they still had cases to solve.

The current case involved a Marine who’d gone gunning for the gang member that had gotten the Marine’s little sister hooked. Lance Cpl Jesse Compton had come back from Afghanistan to find his sister, Dara, working the streets to pay for her habit. He then went off the grid, taking his Marine-issued weapon with him. As they investigated they came across leads that were confusing at best and often completely false. By the time they had the proper clues, their Marine had been killed in a shootout with the gang members he’d been after although he did manage to kill his target before he was shot and killed. While no one had actually said the words, they were all sure that things would have fallen into place much more quickly if DiNozzo had been with them. His cop instincts and street knowledge would no doubt have once again proven to be invaluable. Unfortunately, McGee was blaming himself for not being able to put two and two together in time to keep Compton from being killed. Gibbs could see the defeat in the blue eyes and the self-blame in the frown that creased the younger man’s forehead as he worked his report. Gibbs decided he had to do something about it. He stood up and started walking.

“With me, McGee.”

Tim looked up in surprise but jumped to follow Gibbs anyway. Gibbs walked into the elevator and Tim followed, taking up his now standard position behind Gibbs. As soon as the elevator began to move, Gibbs predictably hit the emergency stop and then turned to McGee. Tim looked back at Gibbs for a bit and then blew out a frustrated breath realizing that it was up to him to start talking. He just didn’t know where to start and besides, what was the point? He’d screwed up and Compton had paid the price for his ignorance. He was taken completely by surprise Gibbs was the first to speak.

“Not your fault. None of us knew what they were planning,” Gibbs stated matter-of-factly.

“But I should have at least had a clue!” Tim said in self-disgust.

“Why?”
Tim looked aghast at Gibbs’ question. “Well, b-because we knew of Compton’s previous connections with the gang…”

“Did we? Seems to me we didn’t learn about that until after Compton had left to set up the ambush.”

“I should have known, Boss! The clues were right there if I’d of just known what it was I was looking at,” Tim said in defeat.

“Then I’m to blame, too. I didn’t know what that symbol meant,” Gibbs said logically referring to the gang symbol they’d seen drawn in Compton’s personal journal.

Tim blew out a frustrated breath. “Tony would have known, Boss. He has the street experience and he’d have known what Compton was planning. I’m not ready for this yet, Boss. I’m just barely figuring out a lot of the stuff Tony tried to show me…I just didn’t get it at the time.” Didn’t really want to, Tim thought with a grimace at his MIT arrogance. “And now you’re going. Boss, there’s still a lot I need to learn…” he added with a forlorn note.

“And you will…just won’t be me teaching you. Harper’s a good man. You suck him dry for every bit of knowledge you can.”

But Tim wasn’t convinced. “How many people have to die before I learn to be a good agent?”

It was Gibbs’ turn to blow out a breath. He couldn’t help McGee here. This was something you learned to deal with in their line of work and everyone had to find their own way to do that.

“I’m not blaming you, McGee. If anyone’s responsible it’s me. My team, my ultimate failure. You’re a good agent, McGee, and you’re shaping up to be a damned fine Senior Field Agent. Ya gotta understand that no matter how much it stinks, you won’t ever know everything…and sometimes you’re gonna lose someone because of it. You do the best you can and that’s all you can do.”

Tim said nothing else but Gibbs had seen his shoulders straighten a bit when he said that he didn’t blame him. When it came time for McGee to lead his own team, there’d be other crap he could blame himself for if he wanted or needed to. Gibbs turned and slapped the button and the doors opened but McGee stopped him just before he exited.
“Gonna miss you, Boss,” he said sincerely.

Gibbs just looked at him and nodded. He felt the same way.
Abby absently twirled her umbrella in the light drizzle, deep in thought as she walked back from the bakery. Things had been so much better since she’d made up with Gibbs although she was still really sad that he was leaving. If it hadn’t been for Todd she didn’t think she’d be able to get through this at all. Thinking of Todd made her smile, which was her usual reaction, but especially now since he had asked her to move in with him. It was such a major step but the mere thought of it sent happy bubbles careening through her body…through her very soul! She was so happy at the thought that she just had to share it with everyone so she bought a selection of pastries she intended to share with Gibbs and everybody. She had a scone for Ducky, a maple bar for Jimmy, a chocolate cream-filled donut for Timmy, a bran muffin for Ziva and a mocha-almond biscotti for Gibbs…oh! She’d better check that because the clerk had almost picked up the pistachio biscotti and she wasn’t at all sure if Gibbs even liked pistachios. She stopped at the thought to verify just what she had in her bag not realizing that she’d stepped off the curb right in front of a speeding car.

The next thing she knew was a large arm wrapping itself around her waist and the angry honk of a car horn. She looked around in surprise as the car sped off and then she looked up at her savior.

“Ya’ll right there, missy?” came a most definite Texas drawl.

Wide-eyed, she looked up at her savior. He was an ebony-skinned giant, at least six-foot four, with what appeared to be muscle on muscle. She just looked around, shocked that she hadn’t seen the car coming. Her giant just reached down to pick up her umbrella that had gone flying when he’d swung her out of the way of the car.

“Folks really should slow down in this weather…and there never seems to be a traffic cop when you need one,” the man continued saying in a low growl that sounded an awful lot like Gibbs. “’m afraid your snack didn’t make it, miss,” he said as he handed her the umbrella and Abby had to look down to see her bag which had, unfortunately, landed in an oily puddle of water.

“Thank you!” Abby said, finally getting her wits about her. Her giant just smiled and tipped an imaginary hat which made her smile and then he sauntered away. Pastries forgotten and with a wide grin, Abby continued on her way back to work.

“Don’t want a ceremony, Leon!” Gibbs growled. He just wanted to be handed his retirement papers so that he could walk out and get back to Florida. It seemed, however, that Vance had other ideas.
Or, as Vance was still explaining, SecNav had other ideas.

“I’m afraid you’ll just have to suck it up, Gibbs,” Vance explained, yet again, glad that he’d gone ahead and made all the arrangements without notifying Gibbs. While he was of the mind that a man should be able to retire in whatever manner suited him, Gibbs’ contributions to the agency were such that SecNav himself wanted to present the retirement plaque (which Vance was quite sure would later be tossed into a closet somewhere unless DiNozzo rescued it).

Gibbs just growled in response and slammed his way out of Vance’s office. Vance just shook his head ruefully and called Cynthia in to finalize the retirement ceremony. He wondered then how DiNozzo would get a hold of the plaque since, unfortunately, he was unable to attend due to the case they were working. He huffed out an amused breath deciding that the rest of Gibbs’ team would conspire against Gibbs in this regard and make sure that DiNozzo somehow got the plaque. He glanced at his watch. He had just enough time to take care of the details before Special Agent Harper made his scheduled appearance. He wanted to personally introduce him to his new team since Gibbs would be out finalizing the details of his retirement and the shipment of his household goods. He realized he’d better get to work.

Gibbs re-packed his suitcase after pulling out his suit for the next day then stowed it in the closet. As per usual, he was pissed. The movers were coming for his furniture that afternoon and then he had planned on being on the road to Florida that night, right after a drink with Harp. Now, though, he had to suffer through a damned retirement ceremony he didn’t want. He called Tony to let him know of the delay and it pissed him off even more to learn that Tony had known of the ceremony because he’d been invited. To find out that Tony was unable to attend had shot down his immediate thought that Tony could take a couple days of leave to travel with him on the drive back to Florida. He growled quite loudly at that which made Tony laugh. The sound of Tony’s laughter went a long way towards dialing down his anger and leaving him with a sense of overall disgruntlement.

“It’s only one more day, Jeth, and then you’ll be on the road. And, assuming my awesome investigative skills pay off, we’ll have closed this case and I’ll be off this weekend so we’ll have plenty of time to get you settled,” Tony said soothingly. He smiled at the general grumbling still coming over the phone and he absentmindedly rubbed at the still healing tattoo on the front of his right hip. He was actually going to miss the achy soreness when it finally healed because right now every little twinge reminded him of Jethro’s mark on his skin. When it finally healed he figured he would probably be running to the bathroom just to look at it and be reminded that this was all real and not a dream, just as Jethro intended when he decided to have it placed where it was easily visible to Tony. He loved having Jethro’s mark on his skin and knew there would be more. Tony had never guessed that it would be such a turn-on to be marked like this. He wished there was some way that he could mark Jethro as his, too.
“So, did you get a good price for your truck?” Tony asked to keep Jethro talking.

“Yes,” Jethro answered as he, too, handled his reminder of their future. He kept the keys Tony gave him in his coat pocket and often found himself fingering them as his thoughts traveled to his lover. “Wish I could sell the house that easy. Carla said I should just rent it out,” Jethro said relaying his agent’s opinion based on the housing market.

“I know you don’t like that idea but maybe it’d be for the best for now,” Tony said. He didn’t bother reiterating the fact that Jethro really didn’t need too much money because he’d be living with him. It was a given although it understandably bothered his dominant partner.

“Yes,” Jethro sighed and then Tony heard a doorbell ring in the background. “Gotta go. See you soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Tony said and then heard a grunt which he took for agreement just before Jethro hung up. While not a loving goodbye, it was better than before. He knew Jethro was trying. So, with a smile, he closed his cell phone and turned his attention to the case in front of him.

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“Special Agents McGee and David, this is Supervisory Special Agent Dustin Harper, your new Team Lead,” Vance said as he introduced Tim and Ziva to Harp. “Special Agent McGee is your Senior Field Agent,” Vance said concluding the introductions.

“Good to meet ya,” Harp said as he shook both their hands. He’d read their files, of course, as he expected they’d read his and he figured they’d get along just fine…especially if they were used to working with Gibbs.

“We’ll head down to Autopsy next to meet with Dr. Mallard and his assistant after which we’ll go…” Vance was saying until he was interrupted by someone calling loudly. They all turned to see Abby approaching at as high a rate of speed as she could in five-inch platform boots.

“Timmy, Timmy, TIMMY!” Abby called as she rushed into the bullpen. She came to a complete stop when she saw Harper. “You!”

“Well, hello again, miss,” Harp said with a smile and then put two and two together.
“I take it you’ve met our Forensic Specialist, Miss Abigail Sciuto…” Vance began in surprise.

“YES! He’s my guardian giant…my giant angel…I mean my guardian angel…” Abby exclaimed while waving her hands excitedly.

“First time anyone’s ever called me an angel, Miss Sciuto, but giant has come up…”

“Oh! I’m sorry but I came to tell Timmy about you…you saved my life and then I couldn’t find Timmy and…oh!” Abby said again and came forward to give Harp a hug.

“Whoa, Abby, what do you mean he saved your life?” McGee asked finally coming to life himself.

“Miss Sciuto…” Harp began.

“Abby…” she corrected.

“Miss Abby,” Harp said with a smile, “was almost hit by a speeding car. I’m glad I was there to help out.”

“Are you alright, Abby?” Ziva asked in surprise.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine…thanks to Special Agent Harper…whose here now…but why? I-I mean…do you work here now?” Abby asked in confusion.

“Miss Sciuto,” Vance said finally grateful to get things cleared up. “Special Agent Harper is the new MCRT Team Lead.”

“Oh…you’re the new Gibbs…” Abby said looking disappointed and with a slight flash of betrayal in her eyes.

“Actually, Miss Abby, I can’t be the new Gibbs,” Harp said. “I already know I can’t fill his shoes.
All I can do is work this job to the best of my abilities. You see, Gibbs and I go back a ways and when he decided to retire he recommended me for this job. But he did give me some very strict instructions. He said I was to take very special care of a very special person. I figure I got a head-start on that earlier today.”

“Gibbs really said that? About me?” Abby asked, the hopeful note in her voice almost painful to hear and immediately Harp understood what it was about Abby that had so endeared her to Gibbs.

“That’s right, Miss Abby. Gibbs said I was to always make sure you were safe or I’d answer to him but, knowing Gibbs, I kinda figure that applies to all of you,” Harp said with a laugh. “But I’ll tell you all this right now…I’ve never left a man…or woman…behind and I’ve never let a partner down. Don’t intend to start now.”

“So you were in the Marines with Gibbs?” asked Ziva. They’d only read Harper’s NCIS biography and, while impressive, she preferred to make her own determination of Harper’s capability and she would never consider him the new Gibbs. No one could replace Gibbs in her estimation. Like Abby, she saw Gibbs as a father-figure, finding in him the trust and loyalty she had never received from her own father and which she could not offer in return. No, this man would never replace Gibbs who had truly earned her loyalty and more but, as change is an inevitable part of life, she would give this new man a chance. Plus, she knew that change was a good thing. It kept you from becoming complacent and opened new possibilities. She noted Harper’s smile at her question while she contemplated possibilities… When she had said good-bye to Damon before his latest operation she hadn’t anticipated what that small change would bring. She looked at Dustin Harper but did not see the tall dark man before her. No, instead she saw the new man that had entered her life. Ray was proving to be a very interesting individual who truly represented many new possibilities…

“I was a SEAL when I met Gibbs,” Harp said answering Ziva’s question. “Desert Storm. Met him again when I was a detective for the LAPD. Gibbs was the one to convince me to apply to NCIS.”

“Wait…you were a police officer?” Tim asked as he remembered Tony’s words back in Florida and where once that might have concerned him, the last case made him realize that there was quite a bit he could still learn…especially from a cop. He hoped, though, that that was where the similarity to Tony ended.

“Yup and have I got some stories to tell ya…” Harp said with a laugh when McGee just closed his eyes and groaned.
Chapter 59

After that damned ceremony was over Vance gave the team the rest of the day off. They decided to go out for a good-bye dinner with both Vance and Harper joining in. Fortunately for Gibbs it didn’t last long and after all of the hugs, handshakes and teary kisses, Gibbs climbed into his car. He took a long look at his team. No, he chided himself…they were his family…and he couldn’t help but think of that moment when Tony had driven away from him. He’d honestly felt as though a huge hole had opened up inside of him. That hole had now been healed along with a few others that had been with him for so very long. It was all thanks to those people lining the sidewalk in front of the restaurant they’d just left but most importantly, he could thank that one person he was now on his way to join and he could feel the anticipation and desire to hit the road burning in his belly. He got into his car and started her up and gunned the powerful engine a few times. With a final wave and a broad smile, Gibbs hit the gas and with tires squealing, he was on his way.

Driving to Florida took just over seventeen hours, unless you were Leroy Jethro Gibbs and you were on your way to see the lover you desperately missed, and then it only took just over fourteen hours. When he pulled into Tony’s driveway just after 10 the next morning, he expected to just pull out his house key and let himself in for a long shower and an even longer nap until Tony got off work. Somehow, though, he wasn’t surprised to see his lover sitting on the front step awaiting his arrival.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” Jethro said as he got out of the car and stretched cramped muscles.

Tony just grinned and stood up from his place on the concrete front steps. He mimicked Jethro’s movements and stretched, his numb ass telling him it was about time he stood up.

“Had more important things to do today, so I took the day off,” Tony answered easily as he came up to Jethro.

Jethro just nodded and looked at Tony for a moment before pulling Tony to him, unconcerned with a public display to which he would normally have been adverse. He buried his nose into Tony’s neck to breathe in the scent of his lover and he felt all of the fatigue fall away. He pulled back to look at Tony and placed a gentle hand on Tony’s face, almost not believing that he was finally here. He could feel his heart thumping double-time in his chest and all he could do was drink in the sight of his beautiful lover.

“Tony,” he said but it came out as a croak through the emotions tightening his throat.

Tony smiled, happiness shining from his eyes as he looked at Jethro. “Welcome home, Jeth,” he said softly and then leaned in to give Jethro a gentle kiss. He didn’t know that his words echoed in
Jethro’s head, a counterpoint to that last message Tony had left on Jethro’s answering machine when he left DC all those months ago, the message that ended with ‘good-bye, Jeth’. All he knew was the heartfelt response from Jethro as his arms tightened around him. After a bit he pulled away and turned, slipping an arm around Jethro’s waist. Together, the men entered their home.

First things first, Jethro had said to Tony that the last time he’d been there and it still held true. Once he’d showered and had a bite to eat (accompanied by copious amounts of coffee), Jethro went to his bag in the bedroom. Tony was outside unloading his car so he quickly opened the outside pocket of his bag. He was just putting the item in his pocket when Tony began carrying things into the bedroom. He had a huge smile on his face as he hung Jethro’s clothes in the closet. With a smirk, Jethro pitched in and together they finished putting the rest of his things away. Once they were done Jethro took Tony’s wrist and led him out to the living room and had him sit down. He’d been thinking of this during the entire drive down (when he wasn’t fantasizing about claiming Tony again) and now it was time.

Through discussions with Tony Jethro knew that he had, up to this point, seen the lifestyle more from a position of being on the outside looking in. Intellectually, Tony understood how it worked, the dynamics and nuances of power exchange and what it meant to those who’ve given themselves over to it, but he’d never experienced his own true submission. What they’d done so far had barely scratched the surface of what all of this actually meant, what it would mean to both of them. Jethro huffed out a breath. Barstow had seen what Tony was capable of and he’d wanted it for himself but Tony was the one who’d stopped him, he’d stopped all of the doms who’d tried before because of his inability to submit. Well, that was about to end so, as concisely as possible, Jethro spelled out exactly what he expected of Tony and of their relationship together. He then sat back and listened while Tony did the same thing. What Jethro found, much to his pleasure and satisfaction, was that what they each wanted was very similar. It was, for the most part, an extension of the relationship they already had only now it extended to every aspect of their life together. They were almost done talking and Jethro could feel his need to fully claim Tony roiling in his belly. He held out his hand to Tony who took it and knelt at his feet. Jethro smiled and ran his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“Do you want a written contract, Tony?” Jethro asked his sub. In his book there were only a few rules that his sub needed to follow but he wanted to know exactly how formal a relationship Tony wanted.

“Do you mean a Master/slave contract?”

Jethro nodded, his eyes sharp and probing.

While some might need the formality of written stipulations on how to handle their relationship, Tony felt no need for it. For him, it was Follow Gibbs’ Rules. Always. He had many years of being on Jethro’s six, following him and trusting implicitly in him. He knew he could speak up if
necessary and that Jethro, by trusting him in return, would take his concerns seriously. It was so easy, really, to completely submit to Jethro because he’d done it for so long already. He also saw their relationship as a living, fluid thing that might change as they, themselves, changed over the years (and didn’t that thought give him a warm, fuzzy feeling) but in the end, he would go wherever Jethro led. So no, he didn’t need a cold and emotionless contractual agreement. “No, I don’t want a contract,” he answered easily.

“Alright, Tony,” Jethro answered as he rubbed the back of his fingers over Tony’s cheek. “So this is how it’ll be. You belong to me. You are my willing submissive but you may still voice your opinion in how we live our lives when given permission to do so but, since you’ve given me ultimate control over you, I’ll always have the final word. You’ve given me your trust, Tony, to take care of you, to ensure your safety and well-being. I won’t ever break that trust, even when I’m punishing you. You have my word on that. If you ever have any questions, you ask. We’ll work it out, got that?”

“Yes, Jethro,” Tony said but there was one more thing he needed to get out into the open before they could move forward. “But there is something I want to talk about before we continue…”

Jethro just nodded.

“Punishment for what Derek did…that was my fault. I left that email on my desk. It’s my fault he knew where to jump you! But that’s not all. I led him on, Jethro. I kept seeing him after we broke up, just to go out…have some company. Steven and Alan warned me about him but I didn’t listen.”

“So, why’d you do it?” Jethro asked taking Tony’s words very seriously.

Tony swallowed hard. “I…was lonely…” he said, disgust curling his lips. “…and when I didn’t have anyone around to hold my hand, I…damn, Jeth…” Tony closed his eyes and dropped his forehead to rest against Jethro’s knee. He let out a shuddering breath when he felt Jethro’s hand caress the back of his head. “You need to punish me, Jeth,” Tony concluded.

“Told you before, you weren’t getting what you needed from me, you didn’t even know what my rules for you were gonna be. I’m not saying that excuses you…you’re mine. No one touches you. Ever,” Jethro growled at the memory of Barstow’s hand on Tony’s neck and his hand tightened momentarily in Tony’s hair and then relaxed and he continued stroking. “But Barstow had his own agenda and while you might have let him think he had a chance, his actions are his responsibility so no punishment,” he said and then again tightened his hand in Tony’s hair when Tony lifted his head as though to argue. “My decision, boy,” he growled and then Tony nodded. “Now if you want to talk punishment, there’s only one thing that I intend to punish you for,” he said and Tony’s eyes widened. Jethro could see him desperately trying to figure out what else he’d done to deserve punishment.
“I won’t punish you today, it’ll be at a time of my choosing, but you need to know this because it’s about the rules. Months ago, back in your apartment, when I thought you’d been hurt by a woman. You should have told me the truth then, Tony. You lied to me.”

Tony shook his head as he looked into the icy blue eyes of his dom. “I…it wasn’t a lie, Jeth! I just didn’t correct…you…” Tony said and then his voice trailed off. It had been a lie…a lie of omission. He dropped his eyes and then nodded. If he had just told Jethro everything back then, he might never have moved out here…but then, they may never have had this chance together, either. Regardless, he had lied and he deserved punishment.

“You will never lie to me again, Tony.”

Tony nodded. “I’ll never lie to you again, Jethro. But just so I don’t screw up anymore, what are the rest of your rules?” Tony asked.

Jethro smirked. “You’ll learn ‘em as we go along.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Great. I should have asked for the contract…” he moaned and then chuckled when the expected head slap landed.

“So, anything else?” Jethro asked and then smiled when Tony shook his head. “Then I’m gonna ask you one more time, is this what you want? Because if you say yes I’m never letting you go. You’re gonna have to be the one to call it quits.”

Tony gave Jethro a beautiful smile. “Yes, this is what I want, Jethro. It’s a forever thing for me.”

“For me, too, Tony,” Jethro said quietly and then, in a stronger voice, said “Strip.”

Tony jumped up at the command and quickly removed his clothing, laying everything neatly on the couch. When he was done he again knelt in front of Jethro. While Tony had been removing his clothes Jethro reached into his pocket. When he pulled it out he held a coiled strip of finely tooled leather in the palm of his hand. It was a collar.

Tony sucked in a breath and he felt a prickling at the back of his eyes. “Please,” he whispered
reverently and then bowed his head. Jethro leaned forward and placed the collar around Tony’s neck. He buckled it and then checked to make sure it was neither too loose nor too tight. He turned it slightly so that the D-ring was perfectly centered on Tony’s throat. Then Jethro leaned back and gazed at his beautiful, collared sub.

“Perfect,” he said in a low, intense voice. “You’ll wear this whenever we’re at home,” he ordered and then stood, forcing Tony to lean back slightly as he looked up at his Dom with shining eyes. “Come on, Tony. I wanna make you fly,” Jethro said in a deep growl that made Tony’s stomach flutter and he put out his hand because he knew his proximity would make it tough for Tony to stand on his own. With a grin Tony placed his wrist in the strong hand of his Dom. Jethro chuckled and then led Tony to the playroom.

Once there he positioned Tony in front of the St. Andrew’s cross. Tony automatically reached out to hold the eyebolts just as he had with every other dom who’d used this piece of equipment but Jethro stopped him.

“If we do this, we do it right, boy,” Jethro said in a firm voice as he moved to the cabinet that held Tony’s toys. He’d checked this room out thoroughly before so he knew exactly where everything was kept. The presence of good quality leather cuffs were expected but Jethro had wondered about it later when Tony admitted to having a problem with bondage. It was the first thing Jethro intended to help him get over.

“What’s your safe word, Tony,” Jethro asked as he fastened the leather cuffs over Tony’s wrists.

“Yellow for slow, Magnum for stop,” Tony answered and grinned shakily at Jethro’s raised eyebrow. “Magnum’s Ferrari is red…” he said faintly trying not to let his nervousness show.

“Good, Tony,” Jethro said and lifted a hand to Tony’s nape. He could see that this was difficult for his boy but he also knew he’d do his best. “I’m not gonna blindfold or gag you this time, but I wanna see your safe sign.”

Tony’s fingers spread easily into the symbol that Jethro remembered from an old scifi television show he remembered watching as a kid.

“Alright, boy, turn around,” Jethro said and was pleased at Tony’s lack of hesitation although he could hear the slightly elevated respiratory rate as he secured Tony’s wrists to the cross. He ran his hand through Tony’s hair and over his shoulder. “You will use your safe words if necessary,” Jethro ordered quietly as he continued to stroke the tense shoulders.
“Yes, Jethro,” Tony said while Jethro continued the stroking. Unfortunately, Tony found that it wasn’t working like before, the thought of being bound bringing back too many flashes of unwanted memories.

“It’ll be alright, boy,” Jethro murmured. “Gonna warm you up now. You may turn around at any time to look at me. What are your words?”

“Yellow, Magnum,” Tony said easily and then he turned to look at Jethro over his shoulder. His eyes were full of love and trust but he nervously swallowed once.

Jethro leaned in and gave him a hard kiss and then stepped back. He toed off his shoes and rolled up his shirt sleeves and got into position. He’d chosen a knotted flogger made of soft suede to start so he picked it up and tested its weight and then nodded in satisfaction. He drew his arm back and brought it down across Tony’s shoulders. Tony jerked slightly at the first stroke and Jethro heard a soft sigh but otherwise Tony remained still and quiet. Jethro relaxed into an even rhythm as he continued raining hard, thudding strokes across Tony’s back and buttocks until the broad expanse was red and warm but instead of seeing the shoulders open up, Jethro knew that he was still tense. Tony was fighting.

“Drop for me, Tony,” Jethro ordered as he continued to drop blows across Tony’s back but instead Tony pulled at his cuffs and then dropped his head.

“I’m trying…” Tony said in a tight voice but he turned and looked at Jethro with sorrow in his eyes.

“You will do as I say, Tony,” Jethro said as he set the flogger down. He stepped closer and ran his hand from Tony’s shoulder down to his ass and while he knew the stroke of his hand had to hurt, Tony gave no evidence of it. “But you gotta trust me, boy, trust yourself,” Jethro said and then grabbed Tony’s face and kissed him again.

Again Jethro stepped back and picked up the flogger. He would not move onto the next item until he knew that Tony was beginning to respond more fully. He continued with the flogger but now began to talk to Tony.

“Let it go, Tony, don’t think. Just feel this, feel the heat spreading across your body. Let it sink into you. Just relax…go with it…that’s my good boy,” he intoned while keeping up a steady rhythm and was rewarded by the sound of Tony’s gasps and an eventual opening of the broad
shoulders as Tony finally began to submit.

Tony listened to the sound of Jethro’s voice and tried desperately to follow his orders. Each stroke brought a sharp sting of pain but it was short-lived. What followed was an immediate warmth that spread across his back and butt and he thought about that heat, the heat that Jethro was making him feel and he let himself sink into it, let Jethro’s words roll over and through him and he began to float in the warmth, not thinking, just feeling and trusting in his Dom. All semblance of pain slipped away but he was still fully aware of everything happening around him. Tony realized that he was feeling really good.

Jethro decided it was time to move onto the next implement. Again he set down the flogger and moved up to his sub. “Beautiful,” Jethro murmured and Tony, a slight sheen of sweat across his brow, turned and gave him a sweet smile that made Jethro’s already hard cock twitch in his pants. He could see that Tony was already getting lost in his own head and that was exactly the response he was looking for.

Jethro stepped back and picked up his whip and gave a quick snap with it so that Tony would know what was coming next. He wasn’t looking to surprise Tony; he needed him to relax into what was happening. He brought his arm back and laid a single mark across Tony’s shoulder which made Tony gasp and raise up on his toes. He pulled back and laid a second stripe across Tony’s back and then continued talking to Tony as he marked his sub.

Tony didn’t know exactly when it happened, when exactly the sharp burning pain across his back went from actual pain to a deep tingly pleasure that spread through him and separated his head from his body. He was aware of where his Dom stood behind him and of the rivulets of sweat dripping down his body. Distantly, he even knew he was screaming but inside he felt like he was flying.

Gibbs’ dick was so hard it felt like he could cut diamonds and he could feel the pleasure race through his body as he felt himself spread more fully into his top-space. He laid stripes across Tony’s back in an even pattern and then he was done. He paused for a moment to just stare at his beautiful sub and then he was moving forward.

“You’re mine, Tony, my beautiful boy,” he murmured as he gently explored the raised welts across Tony’s back and butt. At no point had he broken the skin. He grabbed Tony’s hair with one hand and turned his head to see Tony’s eyes. Despite being half-closed he could see that Tony had completely dropped and it was the most fucking beautiful thing he’d ever witnessed. He kissed him hard on his moist, bite-swollen lips and then shoved his tongue in as deeply as he could and heard an appreciative moan from his boy. Tony was breathing deeply but evenly, his body covered in sweat and Jethro felt a deep sense of awe and gratitude that Tony had given himself to him so completely. He reached around and stroked Tony’s leaking purple cock.
Without wasting any more time he unfastened his pants, dropped them and kicked them away. He parted Tony’s ass with his hands and then used his thumbs to rub across Tony’s entrance. He was loose and slick already but Jethro grabbed the lube and added more, not only to Tony’s hole but to his own dick, too. He worked his thumbs inside of Tony to stretch him even more. When he felt Tony was loose enough, he positioned himself and pushed into Tony’s heat. He groaned low and deep as soon as the head of his dick breached Tony’s hole and, after a moment, he slowly pushed his way in.

“Fuck, Tony! So tight…so goddamn hot,” Jethro gasped as soon as he was in balls deep. He had to still for a moment just to savor how good his boy felt. His boy was burning up, the heat from his back against Jethro’s chest warmed him through, but the heat surrounding Jethro’s cock was like molten lava. And, Jesus, he was making those noises again, just as he did every time Jethro’s cock was buried inside of him.

“You’re mine, Tony. Forever, got that?” Jethro said as he began to thrust hard and fast into the tight hole.

Having lost the capability of speech, Tony’s only response was another deep moan.

Jethro pounded away, his hips flexing and his thighs bunching as he changed his angle to stroke across his pliant sub’s prostate. He could feel his pleasure building at an incredible speed and he grasped Tony’s hip with one hand and reached around to Tony’s leaking cock, stroking it as his orgasm rushed over him and he leaned forward and bit down fiercely on Tony’s shoulder. He came so hard inside of his sub that the world blacked out for a moment.

When next he was aware, Jethro looked down at his sub’s shoulder. He saw the bite mark and felt a savage satisfaction. He stroked Tony’s now softened dick a few more times, massaging in the remnants of Tony’s orgasm into the soft skin.

“Mine,” Jethro declared yet again.

“Yours,” came the soft response and Jethro smiled. With quick movements Jethro released Tony’s bonds and then carefully walked his sub out of the playroom and to their bedroom. Gently laying down his boy Jethro again checked for damage. Finding none, he grabbed a washcloth and lotion from the bathroom and cleaned Tony up first and then himself. Tossing the cloth aside he carefully smoothed lotion across Tony’s back and butt and only then did he finally crawl into bed with his boy. He hauled his now sleeping sub over so that he was lying on his chest, his marked back open to the air of the room, and then, with a deep sigh of intense satisfaction and pure happiness, Jethro closed his eyes and slept.
Chapter 60

Jethro twisted his hand a bit in the hot, tight channel and received a deep guttural moan in response. Tony had long since been relieved of his ability to actually speak coherent words. Jethro loved Tony like this. He ran his hand over the quivering, sweaty and still very red ass cheek.

“Easy, Pet… I’ve got you,” he said keeping up the verbal litany to remind his boy who it was that had blindfolded and secured him to the spanking bench. Tony moaned and Jethro knew that it was as much from the pleasure of his Dom’s hand as from the use of that particular endearment. It had taken them awhile to get to the point where Jethro could do this but that long and often difficult journey had resulted in Tony’s ultimate ability to drop as deeply as Jethro desired whenever Jethro desired. And it was necessary. Jethro was still working to ease the demons that had a hold of Tony’s soul, demons brought about first from his father and then from all of those assholes he’d worked with before, followed by Mulroney and then, unfortunately, a few that Jethro had bred, as well.

Jethro continued his ministrations, loving every sight and sound from his sub as he thought about his sub’s request. He’d known that Tony had something on his mind for awhile but it wasn’t until they were having dinner that Tony felt ready to talk. So, once they’d settled in the living room with Jethro on the recliner he’d designated at his and with Tony at his feet, he gave Tony permission to begin.

Tony smiled as he once again rubbed at the tattoo of an NCIS badge with Jethro’s initials on his hip. He would have tugged on his nipple rings, too, but that wasn’t allowed. Only Jethro could touch those sensitive little ornaments. Jethro’s marks were foremost on his mind but still he remained curiously silent. He wasn’t quite sure if Jethro would even go for any of the ideas in his head but he needed something and he needed to tell Jethro. Then it would up to his Dom to make the decision.

“What is it?” Jethro asked gently.

“How do you feel about tattoos?” Tony blurted out quickly in answer to Jeth’s prodding. Being as possessive about Jethro as Jethro was about him, he’d been thinking of finding some way to mark Jethro as belonging to him. His first thought had been for Jethro to get a matching tattoo but he wasn’t sure what his Dom would think of that idea. He had another thought but, considering Jethro’s past history, he wasn’t sure if Jeth would go for it. One of the things they had given up when Jethro came to Florida was the option to get married. DC recognized same-sex unions but Florida did not. So then maybe a commitment ceremony, he thought, where they could exchange rings.

Jethro raised an eyebrow at the question. He would have thought it was obvious that he liked them
Tony blushed slightly and then laughed. “I meant on you.”

“You wanna mark me, boy?” Jethro asked with a sardonic twist to his lips.

Tony drooped slightly at the no way in Jethro’s reply. “I guess not,” he said with a slight pout.

Jethro looked at his sub and while he could understand Tony’s need for some symbol of their commitment to one another he, personally, didn’t want a tattoo.

“What’s your second suggestion?” Jethro asked knowing that Tony would have more than one idea bouncing around in his head.

“Okay, if Florida does ever recognize same-sex marriage, would you marry me?” Tony asked wondering if Jethro would consider another legal commitment.

“Is that a proposal?” Jethro asked with a chuckle and then wondered at that. Married? For the fifth time?

Tony grinned as a blush worked its way up his cheeks. “I guess I am in the right position for that…” he said gesturing to his place on the floor at Jethro’s knee.

Jethro looked at the hopeful look in Tony’s eyes and realized with some surprise that yes, legal or not, he’d marry his boy in a heartbeat regardless of how strangely that thought had first struck him. So, in answer to Tony’s question, Jethro leaned forward and tenderly framed Tony’s face with his hands. “Yes, Tony,” he answered seriously. “If and when we can marry, I will marry you, have a commitment ceremony, or anything else you want. Until then, I vow that I will love, honor and cherish you until death do us part…”

Tony closed his eyes in joy. When he opened them again they were a moist, deep mossy green. He sucked in a shaky breath. “To love, honor and obey…until death…” he choked out not quite believing how those words made his chest feel so tight or that they’d make his eyes burn like this. But then, he’d never said them to anyone before. He never believed he’d mean them the way he did right now. But it was important. It was a vow that should be spoken fully. He tried to finish it but his words were stopped by the presence of Jethro’s lips on his and then a tongue skillfully
opened his mouth. Jeth’s kiss was forceful and dominant and Tony gave himself completely over to it knowing that regardless of whether or not he’d spoken the words, Jethro accepted his vow and the emotions behind it. When Jethro pulled back Tony sighed and half-opened his eyes to see the love shining out of the blue eyes he’d loved for the last ten years and felt complete.

“So, a commitment ceremony?” Tony asked with a sigh. “With rings and everything?”

Jethro smiled again. “Whatever you want, Tony, no matter what,” he promised and then brought his sub to the couch for some quality make-out time.

That had happened earlier in the evening and now they were here, in the playroom, with Tony strapped to Tony’s old spanking bench. Jethro had lovingly warmed up his sub’s ass with a paddle and now he was making sure his boy was as loose as he could get him short of fisting him and even though he knew that they would try that one day, too, it wouldn’t be today. Right now Tony was making those noises he loved and he was desperate to fuck his boy, so he did and then later, as he lay over his boy’s back, he again made his promise. “Whatever you want, Tony, no matter what.”

Epilogue

Weeks turned into months and both Tony and Jethro were very happy…for the most part. There were still occasions where Jethro inadvertently tried to tell Tony how to work his cases rather than just listen or make suggestions. It wasn’t that he had any doubt about Tony’s capabilities about doing his job. It was just that, as he’d feared, the boredom of being on his own, sometimes for days at a time when Tony had a heavy caseload, grew to be too much. And, quite frankly, he missed the job itself, the excitement and complete mental involvement. Fortunately, Tony understood what was happening and kept control of his temper…usually.

Gibbs was getting a refill on his coffee when he heard the doorbell ring. Frowning because he knew that both Alan and Steven were at work as was Tony and he didn’t know anyone else, he contemplated not answering at all so that he could get back out to his work. He wanted to get the last of the padding secured on the new spanking horse before his boy got home that night. It would be his way of apologizing…again. Gibbs sighed. He knew that coming out here, being dependent on Tony and just plain being bored without his boy during the day would get to him. The fight they had the night before was his fault, if you could call what had happened a fight. Jethro sighed. He’d been the one snarling and growling out terse orders and biting comments about what they should have done even though he didn’t know every detail and Tony had just knelt there, eyes to the floor, with his hands tightened into fists as he took every bitter word he’d dished out…up until he’d questioned the capabilities of Tony’s team. It was at that point that Tony had looked him square in the eye and told him that while he had the right to say what he wanted about
Tony, Jethro did not have the right to denigrate his team’s work. Tony’s quiet words had stopped him cold.

Jethro took a sip of coffee that tasted bitter but he knew it wasn’t the coffee. It was his own self-recrimination. Tony had been right to call a halt to his tirade. He’d crossed the line. In truth, he’d actually crossed the line sometime before that point but, as usual, Tony had cut him slack he didn’t deserve. He’d apologized, something he was unfortunately getting better at with practice, and things had settled down for the most part. Damnit! Of all people, he knew Tony was an excellent agent, a great leader, and that he had an excellent team. Tony sure as hell didn’t need him telling him how to solve the cases. All he needed was a different perspective sometimes, not a list of orders about what his next step should be. If he wasn’t careful, Tony would end up just clamming up about his job and that was the last thing Gibbs wanted. Tony both wanted and needed to talk about his day. It wasn’t Tony’s job to make sure Gibbs didn’t get bored and Tony sure as hell shouldn’t have to get punished because of it. He felt guilt crawl through his belly at the memory of Tony kneeling beside him with his face turned slightly away. It wasn’t enough to be labeled as disrespect but it was enough to let Gibbs know that Tony was unhappy and that was something that Gibbs had sworn he’d never let happen. He needed his sub to be happy with his life and to never regret his decision to turn himself over to Gibbs. The only problem was that Gibbs was regretting his decision to ask Tony to be his sub, not for any failure on Tony’s part, but for his own failure to be a good Dom. Tony deserved better.

The doorbell rang again and Gibbs spit out a curse. He felt about ready to rip someone a new asshole and he figured that whichever salesman or religious freak was at the door would do just fine. He stalked over to the front door and ripped it open. Any words he was about to spit out died in his throat when he saw Fornell standing there.

“So you going to let me in or should I just leave you to wither away in your retirement in peace?”

In answer Gibbs just stood aside and let Fornell into the house. Fornell took his time looking around as he walked in, noting and approving of the overall décor. The house looked extremely comfortable. He saw the large TV and smirked chalking it up to DiNotso’s influence, but the finely crafted wooden DVD racks and coffee table bespoke of Gibbs’ influence as well.

“Since when did you start locking your front door?” were the first words out of Fornell’s mouth after he’d taken his fill of the front room.

“Since I started caring about someone just walking in. What are you doin’ here, Tobias?” Gibbs said as he closed the door and motioned Fornell to take a seat. He gestured to his cup in offer.

Fornell waved the offer away and smiled at the picture Gibbs made. He was wearing some old stain-spattered jeans and a worn t-shirt. The ubiquitous cup of coffee more than anything showed
that retirement hadn’t changed Jethro at all. He sat down and relaxed back into a sinfully soft leather couch. He spread out his arms and crossed his legs, making himself at home. Definitely DiNotso’s couch, he figured.

“Just stopped by to see how bored you were.”

Gibbs, as usual, said nothing. He merely waited for Fornell to elaborate as he, too, made himself comfortable.

“So, what are you working on, Jethro?” Fornell asked, gesturing to Gibbs’ pants.

Gibbs just rolled his eyes. “Tobias…” he said in a questioning/threatening tone.

“Fine, fine. Never were one for small talk were you, and its obvious retirement hasn’t mellowed you out at all,” Fornell said and then leaned forward completely losing his relaxed posture. “I really do want to know how bored you are. I got a call from your Director…”

“Not my Director…”

“Not anymore, but he could be again, although truthfully, you’d also have to answer to the Bureau as well as Homeland Security…”

“What…?”

“It’s a job, Jethro. In the very few months you’ve been gone someone, and God only knows who, missed you…or at least they missed your work. I’d doubt anyone other than DiNotso would actually miss you…”

“Damnit, Tobias…get to the point!”

“It’s a new multi-agency task force specifically targeting terrorist activities…”

“I’m not leaving Florida.”
“Well, maybe you ought to ask DiNozzo first since his name’s been brought up, too.”

Gibbs stared at Fornell for a bit. “Details…”

Fornell sighed. Nope, Jethro hadn’t changed at all. “You already know that the raid on bin Laden’s compound resulted in information that implicated several individuals with ties to the Pakistani Taliban. Well, there’s more and it’s been decided that we need to establish a team to deal with this threat. Yours and DiNozzo’s names came up.”

“Who…?”

“SecNav…at Vance’s suggestion, and before you get all worked up about who reports to whom, you and DiNozzo would work as partners, not subordinate/supervisor. This is a promotion for him, it gets you and your experience back in the game and it doesn’t separate you two. A win-win as far as I can see. All players report to a lead whose name is currently classified so there won’t be any pissing contests.”

“Who are the other players?”

“Now don’t go and get yourself all excited, but I’m going to be a part of this as well as Alfred Cerrault and Sarah Montegna from Homeland Security. They’re good.”

“Sacs?”

“No, that’d be a disaster in the making. It’ll be Charley Morelli, an exceptional agent about as good at undercover work as DiNotso.”

“He’d have to prove that.”

Fornell just nodded with a smile. “Anyway, the downside for you and DiNozzo is that you’ll have to travel a bit, leave behind all this sunshine and fair weather. DiNozzo up for that health-wise?”
Gibbs looked at his old friend who knew the main reason for Tony leaving DC in the first place hadn’t been for his health. And while Gibbs already knew what his answer would be, he’d wait until he and Tony got a chance to discuss it and, despite what he’d told Tony about having the final decision, this one would be up to Tony.

“You ask him at dinner tonight,” Gibbs said and then smiled.

The next morning Jethro opened his eyes to see Tony curled up next to him, still sleeping soundly despite the bright light of the new day shining in through the window. He smiled softly as the small, telltale signs of Tony’s awakening made themselves known. Jethro’s smile broadened as a little pout curved the beautiful lips and Tony snuggled in closer to Jethro in an effort to avoid waking up but Jethro would have none of that. He gently ran a finger across Tony’s cheek and was rewarded first by a small smile and then by the fluttered opening of the delicate eyelids. The smile widened.

“You woke up in a good mood.”

Jethro just smiled and cupped Tony’s face with one hand. He knew he couldn’t explain the significance of seeing the green of Tony’s eyes on this new day but by the same token, he knew he didn’t have to. Tony understood. Instead he leaned forward to capture Tony’s lips which opened easily under his. He stroked the inside of Tony’s mouth with his tongue and heard Tony’s low groan. He rolled over until he lay mostly on top of Tony and he felt a strong hand slide up his back while another slid down to cup his ass. He smiled into the kiss and then leaned back to look into Tony’s face.

“Gonna be a good day,” he murmured thinking of Fornell’s offer, Tony’s immediate excitement at the offer followed by a hopeful look in his eyes as he turned to his Dom and, after a ridiculously short private conversation, their acceptance. He smiled at that memory as well as the memory of how they’d celebrated after Fornell had left and then he focused on Tony’s face as Tony nodded in agreement. Jethro’s smile curled up a bit more at the corner before asking, “You?”

Tony thought about that for a moment. “I feel…young,” he said in slightly stunned and embarrassed tone. Jethro responded with a questioning lift of his eyebrows. Tony’s smile grew wider and he nodded, more to himself than to Jethro. “Got our whole lives ahead of us, Jeth, and we’ll be working together again. And, since we’ll be back in DC a lot, we can get married,” he said with a grin and earning himself a chuckle from Jethro. Tony had been so busy they hadn’t gotten around to that commitment ceremony he’d talked about but hell yeah, they could get married regardless of what Florida thought about it.

“New day, huh?” Jethro answered in complete understanding.
“Yup, brand new,” Tony said and, after a bit of fumbling under the pillow, he handed Gibbs the lube they’d used the night before. “So let’s start it right,” Tony said with a bright grin.

The End

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