Convulsion

by dragonwriter24cmf

Summary

Gibbs hides a lot, but when an explosion traps him and Tony in a building, the truth comes out. Finding out that Gibbs has a medical problem he hasn't revealed isn't a surprise. The real question is, will Gibbs let him help?

Notes

Disclaimer: Characters belong to NCIS franchise.

See the end of the work for more notes

Convulsion

Tony blinked his eyes. There was dust in them. That was his first thought. That, and the fact that he ached, and his ears were ringing. Then, slowly, memory and thought began to filter back.

They had been chasing a guy, a man suspected of being part of a terrorist cell. They knew he was an explosives expert, or had at least studied the field. They'd even caught him in his production facility. Then, of course, he'd run, and they'd chased him into an abandoned building. He and Gibbs had gone in after him, with Ziva and McGee splitting to circle the building, in case he ran out. They'd lost sight of him, ducking into the building, and had to slow down as they entered, checking for ambushes. They'd been clearing rooms when Gibbs had heard...something. He'd turned back, then spun, shouting a warning. And then...Tony shook his head. All he could remember was noise, deafening noise, and walls rushing at him.
“DiNozzo! DiNozzo, you okay?” Gibbs voice, calling out, a note of concern in it. Then he was beside him, his strong hands on his shoulder and his face, blue eyes looking at him with concern in the depths of that fierce gaze. “Tony, come on, talk to me.”

“I'm fine, Boss.” He spoke calmly, assessing his situation. He was covered in dust and plaster, and there was a board lying across his legs, but he had been lucky. He dimly remembered seeing the bomb, then he and Gibbs turning to run as the timer detonated. He also remembered that Gibbs had been closer to the bomb, almost directly between him and the blast. He looked up at his boss. “You hurt, Boss?” He saw a streak of already dried blood on his face, exiting his hairline, but it didn't look too serious. Still, a shiver of worry went through him. Of all the NCIS team, Gibbs was the most susceptible to damage when it came to blasts. After all the injuries he had taken from previous explosions, even Tony worried a little.

“Nothing serious.” Gibbs rose, shoved the board away from his legs, then straightened and extended a hand to help him to his feet. He grinned and accepted the help, and caught the almost-concealed flash of discomfort in his eyes. Of course, almost-concealed discomfort for Gibbs usually meant serious pain for anyone else. It was obvious however, that Gibbs didn't want to tell him.

Tony settled for tilting his head to better examine the half-hidden wound to Gibbs skull. “Hate to say this boss, but it looks like you're bleeding a little there. You sure you're okay?”

Gibbs made a soft, exasperated sound. “I don't have a concussion, if that's what you're asking.” He shook his concern away. “Come on. Bastard buried the doorway under god knows how many inches of rubble. We need to see if the back door's any better.”

Tony nodded, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off about the way Gibbs spoke, the way he moved. But he couldn't pin down the reason for the feeling, and it was frustrating. If he had known why he was concerned, he could have confronted Gibbs about it. As it was, all he could do was tread carefully behind him, watching his steps, and every doorway they passed, on the off chance that their bomber was still around and might choose to attack them.

It took them several minutes to reach the back door of the building. What they saw there made Gibbs curse, and Tony sigh. The back door was also blocked with rubble. Tony studied the pile for a moment, assessing the thickness and stability of debris, then sighed and turned to his superior. “Looks pretty deep to me Boss. Not sure we could dig our way out, even if we were sure something else wouldn't collapse on top of us.” He swallowed, his mind conjuring images of the rest of the ceiling dropping on their heads.

“Yeah. I was thinking the same thing.”

He looked around, thinking. There were two floors above this one. He could see the hole in the ceiling, from which the debris had fallen, and was willing to bet there was an identical hole near the other entrance. Of course, it was possible to leap out a second story window with minimal harm. It might also be possible to break a window on the first floor to escape. He glanced at the man beside him. “Do you think our perp is still inside?”

“Well, he'd be pretty stupid to trap himself in a building with us.” Gibbs snorted. There was a bite of acid in his voice that he hadn't heard minutes before.

“So, what should we do?” He took a step back, deferring to his boss. He usually didn't need to, given how long they'd been working together, but there was something in Gibbs' body language that set off all his warning bells. Something was putting Gibbs on edge, which meant he was much touchier than usual.
“I'll go back to the entrance, wait for someone. Try to contact Ziva and McGee. Then you scout around. See if he's still here, or how the hell he managed to get out.” Gibbs gestured, already pulling out his cell phone.

Tony swallowed. Normally, he had no problem going solo. But he was bothered by the persistent feeling something was wrong. “You sure that's wise, Boss? Splitting up, I mean.”

The glare that Gibbs shot him almost burned, but there was something underneath it, something too faint to identify, that raised warning bells in his mind. “You got a better idea?”

“Not particularly.” Tony shook his head quickly, then met the other man's gaze. “Just thinking that back-up would be good, if one of us runs into trouble.”

“Yeah, and if we're both caught in it? Who's gonna help out then?” Gibbs was still glaring at him.

That was true. Tony winced. “Hadn't thought of it like that, Boss.”

“Yeah, well, thinking of things like that is my job.” Gibbs gestured brusquely, already turning away towards the other end of the hall. “Keep me posted.”

“Sure thing Boss.” He stood, watching as the older man strode back down the hallway, studying the way he moved. His movements were smooth, quick, but they seemed...forced. As if he were struggling. Tony wanted to ask, but he couldn't. After all, it was quite likely that Gibbs had simply taken some bruises and a strained muscle or two in the explosion. And he knew his boss didn't want to be fussed over, especially if it was something minor.

He called Ziva. To his relief, she'd spotted their suspect exiting the fire escape just as the explosion went off. She'd been startled, and McGee had frozen in shock, but both of them had recovered enough to chase the man and bring him down. McGee had taken him to Headquarters, promising to return with back-up while she remained there in case they needed assistance. He agreed to tell Gibbs, and to be careful in case there were other bombs, then hung up and began his walk-thru of the premises.

It took him over an hour, examining the premises. A quick check revealed the emergency door had also been blocked, but there the blockage was superficial, probably something they could get through if they worked at it. He found a set of inside stairs, and carefully explored the second and third levels, keeping well away from the gaping holes in the floor. There were plenty of windows, but none of them opened normally, and he wasn't sure about breaking them. Several of them were reinforced glass. He re-examined the emergency door, and thought he saw traces of a remote trigger device, but he wasn't expert enough to be sure, especially not with the debris. He sighed, and started back towards the first floor entry, resigning himself to the fact that his report to Gibbs was going to have almost nothing in it, except a 'They got him, but we're probably gonna have to wait till Probie digs us out' speech.

He was at the bottom of the stairs when a noise made him freeze, tensing where he stood. It was too faint for him to identify, but his gut immediately clenched, and all his instincts were screaming at him that something was wrong. He drew his gun, glanced carefully left and right, then stepped out of the stairwell, moving with quiet, easy steps back toward the front entry way.

He was halfway there when he heard it again, and this time much clearer. It was a strangled cry, pain or anger or both, he couldn't be sure. But he recognized the voice. His heart slammed into overdrive. “Gibbs.” He abandoned caution, and took off, as fast as he could move.

Gibbs wasn't in front of the rubble, where he'd expected the man to be. He strained his ears, but
there were no sounds of a scuffle, not even a muffled one. He twisted, then ducked to look into the room on the left. Empty. He turned, ran the five steps diagonally across the hall, and looked into the room on the right of the rubble pile. And froze.

Gibbs was inside, by the far wall. He was leaning against it, his hands clenched into fists above his head, his breathing harsh, shallow and strained. Tony didn't see any blood, couldn't see any overt signs of injury, couldn't see anything wrong. He was wondering if the older man's jacket was hiding something when Gibbs moved, shifting his position slightly.

It was apparently the wrong move. He saw the clenched hands clench tighter, white at the knuckles, his back arching backwards in reaction, muscles spasming. He couldn't see Gibbs face, but he didn't have to as another strangled noise erupted from the older man's throat. He looked as if he were having a seizure, but Tony couldn't remember anything in his boss's medical records that indicated he was prone to them.

The spasm, or fit, or whatever it was, stopped a few moments later, or at least eased. Gibbs' body seemed to fold in on itself, and then he turned, collapsing against the wall, hands dropping to his sides, though his fists were still clenched. His eyes were closed, his face oddly pale in the light. His jaw was still clenched, and Tony saw the lines of pain on his face, slashing across his expression.

Tony stood still in the doorway. He had a sudden, sinking feeling that he knew the real reason his boss had sent him on reconnaissance. Gibbs didn't want him to see this. Whatever was happening to the older man, it was something he hadn't wanted to reveal to his team. Not even his Senior Agent.

Gibbs shifted, and another spasm passed through his frame. His body twisted, his back arching against the wall, jaw clenching so tightly Tony was almost afraid he'd break it. The he collapsed against the wall, his breath coming in harsh, shallow gasps. The blue eyes opened, pain in them.

Tony flinched. He hadn't seen that look in Gibbs eyes for a long time. He'd almost never seen Gibbs in so much pain that he failed to notice the presence of another person in the room with him.

A third convulsion washed over the older man, and Tony couldn't take it any more. He moved forward, catching Gibbs as the older man slumped dangerously sideways against the wall, his face tightening with an expression that was closer to agony than simple pain. “Boss?”

“DiNozzo?” Gibbs looked up at him, and in the split second before his mask dropped into place, Tony saw shame written into the stern features. Then Gibbs straightened. “Thought I sent you to look around.”

“You did, Boss. Over an hour ago.” He wanted to ask what the hell was going on, but that wasn't the sort of question he was used to asking Gibbs.

Gibbs grimaced, a wince cracking through the stoic expression, though he attempted to conceal it behind a scowl. “Well, report then, DiNozzo. What you got?”

Tony swallowed. “Perp got out, Boss, but McGee and Ziva got him. McGee's taking him back to base. He'll return with back-up, unless we call and tell him otherwise. Windows are reinforced, hard to break. No safe exits on the second or third floors. Fire escape is blocked, but we could probably dig through it. If you're feeling up to it.”

Gibbs opened his eyes, meeting his with one of his famous glares. “You got something you want to say?”
Tony would have flinched at the tone, but another spasm of pain slashed across the angular face. Instead, he met the glare with his own steady gaze. “Just that you don't look so well.” He held Gibbs' glare. “Something you want to tell me, Boss?”

“No.” Gibbs looked away, straightening away from his support and the wall. Then he grimaced, and Tony saw his back spasm again, as if he were being electrocuted, though he knew it wasn't possible. It was less this time, but still looked painful.

Tony caught his shoulder. Gibbs didn't quite struggle in his grasp, but the look on his face made it clear that he would have pulled away, if he could have managed. Tony swallowed, then decided to bite the bullet. “Look, Boss, I don't know what's happening, and I know that you'd rather not talk about it, but if you're hurt and need medical care....”

“It's not that.” Gibbs bit the words out from between clenched teeth.

“Then what is it?” Tony waited a moment, but Gibbs didn't speak. “Look Boss...at least tell me what I can do to help.”

“You can go back out that door, and let me handle it.” Gibbs words were sharp as usual, but underneath the harshness was a note of...well, it was almost pleading. Though whether it was for Tony to obey him, or for Tony to disobey him, it was hard to say.

Tony swallowed. He knew Gibbs hated to be seen in pain, or showing weakness. He'd seen the man walk through the doors to the office with concussions, broken bones, all manner of injuries. It was a major concession to get him to go see Ducky, let alone any other doctor. The one time he had let McGee drive him, after he'd been injured, had been a matter of convenience, more than anything, and he'd made up for it by running the younger agent ragged. But still....

He felt another spasm go through the older man. Saw his jaw clench. And as Gibbs' eyes came back to meet his, he shook his head. “Not sure that counts as helping, Boss.”

Gibbs leaned his head back, pain and exasperation warring in his expression. “DiNozzo...”

Tony shook his head. “Sorry, Boss. But you've always drilled us never to leave a team-mate behind. So I can't just leave you here like this.”

Gibbs' jaw tightened, not in pain but in anger, or frustration. “Dammit, DiNozzo, you think I...” He flinched, body flexing in a renewed spasm, shoulders arching back as if the muscles in his back had tightened. The words that emerged were ragged, painful. “...that I want you to see this?”

“No. Actually, to be perfectly honest, I'm pretty sure you'd rather I was somewhere else, or still unconscious. But I'm not, Boss.” He met the blue eyes. “What can I do?” Gibbs didn't answer. He tightened his grip, ever so slightly on the lean shoulder he was holding. “Can you at least tell me what's happening?” He frowned. “You're not an epileptic, are you, Boss?”

“No. You think I'd be in the field if I were?” The look that Gibbs gave him was thoroughly exasperated, but Tony was glad to see a little less pain in the expression.

“Just checking. So...this is...” He trailed off.

Gibbs shifted, leaning his head back again. He took a breath, winced in reaction. “Muscle spasm. It'll stop soon enough.”

“Okay.” Not for the first time, Tony wished he'd picked a different major in college than Phys Ed. But...he at least knew what a muscle spasm was, vaguely. “So...would it help if you were lying
“No.” It was a quick, short response, bitten off as another, though smaller, shudder passed through the older man's frame.

“Okay.” Tony bit his lip, trying to think of other options. The only thing to come to mind made him feel vaguely ridiculous, but he thought it might be worth a shot. “You know, I had this girlfriend, worked as a therapist. She taught me a few massage techniques and stuff…”

“There is not any chance in hell, DiNozzo, that I am going to lie down and let you massage my back, or anything else. Especially not in this half-blasted dump.” The words weren't encouraging, but the exasperated, 'try it and I beat you senseless' tone, was.

“Got it. Not touching you. Well, except for a little support, cause I think the wall might fall in if you lean on it too much.” He kept his tone light, bantering, sensing the relief it brought to the man beside him. If the only thing he could do for Gibbs was to act normal, then he'd do it.

He looked around the place. “You know, it really isn't so bad. Bit of a fixer-upper, I guess, and it's really not up to safety codes, what with all the blocked exits…but I bet a guy like you could have it shaped up in no time, Boss. There's even room for another boat or three...if you felt like it.”

Gibbs opened blue eyes to stare at him with a mix of incredulity, and exasperation. “DiNozzo…”

“Yeah, I know. Way off topic.” He swallowed. “So...about the emergency door. Still think it might be possible to get out that way. Whenever you're ready.” He glanced around. “Or we could just wait here, for McGee and Ziva. Shouldn't take more than a few hours, for them to find someone to dig through here. Could be a nice, relaxing break, time to take a nap or something.”

Gibbs hand swung out, connected with the back of his head. It was nowhere near the usual force, but it was attention getting. “Sorry Boss. Bad idea. What's next?”

Gibbs straightened. There was a tightness around the jaw, and the eyes that hinted that he was still in pain, but he'd managed to get himself under control again. “We're gonna go see if we can dig out that emergency door.” He gestured. “Lead the way, DiNozzo.”

“Got it, Boss.” Tony nodded, but didn't move immediately. “Just one thing. Thought I saw bomb fragments and maybe a trigger in the debris. Not sure there isn't another explosive.”

Gibbs glared at him. “And you're just now mentioning this?”

“Umm, yeah. Got distracted.” Tony swallowed.

Gibbs made an annoyed sound in his throat, then strode to the doorway. “Which way?”

“Turn right. You'll see the door on the left, when you get to it.” Tony fell into step behind his boss, watching the way Gibbs moved. There was a stiffness to his movements, and his shoulders looked tight, even under the jacket. Tony thought about asking, but he understood the necessity of keeping an image in place, especially on the job. He and Gibbs shared a close, almost father-son relationship outside of work, but this was different. They were still on the clock, and if Gibbs didn't want to let down his guard yet, that was fine.

Gibbs took his time examining the area around the door when they arrived. After a few minutes, he nodded. “We can get out this way. Call Ziva. Tell her where we are.”

“Sure thing Boss.” He flipped his cell phone open, speed dialed Ziva's number, then waited until
she answered. “Hey, Ziva. Boss wants you to know we'll be coming out the emergency side door, on the left of the building. Have to dig through some rubble, so it'll take a while.” He stopped, listening to her hurried question. “Yeah, sure, we're both fine. I wasn't that close, and Gibbs, well...it's Gibbs. You know how tough he is.”

He could hear the concern in her voice, and understood it. It matched his own. But he knew that telling her what he'd seen was a violation of Gibbs' privacy. “Trust me, we're both fine. Just a few bruises. Now, if you'll excuse me, I gotta go help the Boss, before he decides to deliver the next slap with a two-by-four or something.” He clicked the phone off.

“Good choice, DiNozzo.” Gibbs didn't look up from his examination of the wreckage. After a moment, he reached down, pulled a moderately sized piece of debris from the top of the pile and threw it out of the way. “Come on.”

“Are you sure that's wise, Boss?” Gibbs shot him a hard glare. He swallowed back his half formed question about Gibbs' back, and substituted another one. “I mean...the chances of another bomb or something...”

“I don't see anything, do you? Besides...why in hell would he bomb the same door twice? Why not just use something bigger?” Gibbs was frowning at him again.

“Good point, Boss.” Tony grimaced, then moved over and began hauling away pieces of debris, throwing it down the hallway as Gibbs was doing. He wondered if they should be bagging and tagging it for evidence, but they had pictures on their phones, at least he did. Nevertheless, he did stick some of what he thought were bomb fragments in to the side, and into his pockets.

Clearing the door took over an hour. Tony tried to make sure he picked up the biggest pieces, masking it behind a display of macho-ism. It annoyed Gibbs sometimes, he could tell, but it worked. Still, he kept an eye on the older man. Gibbs moved slower than normal, and once or twice he saw his companion flinch, just barely, his lips compressing into a thin slash. If he hadn't known what he was looking for, he might have passed it off as simple annoyance. But he knew Gibbs. And he knew that this was discomfort, rather than frustration. He thought about commenting on it, but he knew Gibbs wouldn't appreciate it.

Finally, the door was mostly unblocked. Tony stepped around before his boss could, taking the handle just before Gibbs did. “Got it Boss.” He twisted the knob and shoved, half expecting the door to be blocked from the outside, or damaged.

It swung open with startling ease, and he almost lost his balance as he stumbled through it. He was met by a dry chuckle. He spun around, to find Ziva leaning against the wall, grinning, with McGee standing beside her. “Very graceful, Tony.”

He flushed uncomfortably. “Yeah, well...it might have been stuck. You never know.”

“Yeah. But I do know that I have a suspect to interrogate, and it isn't getting done here. So why don't the three of you get your asses to the truck, and we can get out of here.” Gibbs strode past him, then turned to look at McGee. “You did get the suspect to interrogation, McGee?”

The younger agent nodded. “Yes Boss. I checked him in myself. He should be in interrogation room one when we get there. Three armed guards outside the door.”

The smallest of half-smiles cracked the stern facade. “Good work, McGee.” He turned and began striding towards their parked vehicle. “Let's go.”
“Right behind you, Boss.” Tony leapt after the retreating figure, Ziva and McGee right behind him.

45 minutes later, they were walking into the bullpen. Tony was brushing ineffectively at the dust that covered his clothes, but he stopped when he noticed who was waiting for them. Gibbs nodded as he passed, on his way to his desk. “Duck.”

“Jethro.” The ME’s eyes were full of concern. “Timothy told me you'd been in an explosion. You and Anthony.”

“On the edge of one. Wasn’t serious.” Gibbs was stowing his gun and badge in his desk drawer, gathering together his case notes.

“Nevertheless, you both should be examined. Particularly you, Jethro.” Ducky moved to stand in front of the desk. “After what you’ve survived....”

“Yeah. I know. You wanna check me. But it's gonna have to be later. I've got a suspect to interview.” He gestured. “Take DiNozzo. He was out like a light. Make sure he isn't concussed, or whatever.” Before either Ducky or Tony could protest, he disappeared in the direction of interrogation.

Ducky made a soft noise of irritation, then turned to Tony. “I trust you, Anthony, will not try to give me the run-around as well.”

Tony swallowed, started a token protest of how he was fine, and had only suffered a small crack on the head. Then he stopped.

Ducky probably knew what could cause the problems he'd witnessed Gibbs having. And if the ME already knew, it wasn't a breach of confidentiality. And if he didn't know, he should, and Ducky was certainly canny enough to avoid mentioning it. He would know how to best approach the problem. At the very least, he'd get reassurance that whatever had happened to the older man wasn't life-threatening, or some strange, permanent condition.

“Tony?” Ziva was frowning at him, and he was aware of sudden concern in everyone's eyes.

He coughed, and put a hand on his desk for dramatic effect. “Uh, yeah, Ducky, actually I was feeling a little dizzy, and maybe a little nauseous...plus, like Gibbs says, I was unconscious for a while. I mean, I'd hate to trouble you over something minor...”

“Concussions are never minor, my dear boy. Come along.” Ducky all but hauled him into the elevator. “Let's get you to where I can have a proper look at you.”

He nodded, and followed the ME down to Autopsy. He sat patiently while Ducky checked his heart rate and blood pressure, then flinched as the older man shone a light in his eyes. “Um...ouch, Ducky.”

“Yes, well, that's how you're supposed to react.” Ducky frowned. “Both pupils are responsive and appear evenly dilated, heart rate and blood pressure are fine.”

“Yeah. I know. I'm okay.”

Ducky frowned again. “But the nausea and the dizziness are concerning. Even if you present no other symptoms....”

“Duck...I'm fine.” Tony shook his head and leaned closer so he could whisper. “I sort of...well, I faked it. I wanted a chance to talk to you, without McGee and Ziva trying to listen in.”
“I see.” Ducky raised one eyebrow in a quizzical expression. “Something personal?”

“Yeah. Only, not for me. For Gibbs.” Tony swallowed. The logic for spilling his guts to Ducky had sounded great in the elevator, but on the cusp of actually doing it...that was different.

“Jethro? Might this have something to do with why he is trying to worm his way out of an examination?” Ducky fixed him with a look that managed to be both stern and questioning at the same time.

“Well, you know how Gibbs loves seeing the doctor....but yeah, this might have something to do with it.” Tony took a deep breath, and decided that there was no amount of stalling, dodging the question or semantics that was going to make this easier. “Did you know he has convulsions?”

“Convulsions?” Ducky frowned, his face going dark with worry.

“Well, he called them muscle spasms. Said they'd let up. But...that's not how it looked.”

The ME stepped back until he could lean against his desk, a few feet away. “Tell me everything.”

Tony nodded. “Woke up after the explosion, Gibbs was already up. Went to check the back door, it was blocked, but I noticed he was moving a little stiffer than normal. He sent me to do recon, and went back to the front door, in case a rescue team came. And when I got there....” He swallowed, then gave Ducky a detailed description of what he'd seen. He finished the account, then spoke softly. “He's been trying to act like he's fine, but I'm not sure I believe him.”

“No reason why you should.” Ducky shifted, his own expression somber. “Jethro is notorious for hiding things, particularly about his own condition. And you just told me he said he didn't want you to see his problem. Naturally, he would attempt to make you believe he had returned to normal as quickly as possible.”

Tony nodded. “That's what I thought.” He paused, swallowing against a dry throat. “So...know what's happening to him?”

“I do, actually. Though I am concerned. It hasn't been this bad in quite some time.” Ducky frowned.

“What hasn't?” Tony's concerns sharpened. “What's wrong with him?”

Ducky shifted. “It's a bit difficult to explain.” He frowned in thought for a moment, then spoke. “I trust you are aware, as both a Phys Ed major and an experienced agent, that when a person is under a great deal of stress, or suffers a sudden blow, particularly to the head, it causes one to tense up.” He hunched his shoulders in demonstration.

“Yeah. I get that every time Gibbs whacks me.” Tony nodded.

“Well, usually, after a certain amount of time, the tension, or the shock, wears off and the muscles relax.” Ducky dropped his shoulders. “However, in a small percentage of people, particularly those who have suffered multiple traumas, or chronic stress, that is sometimes not the case.”

Tony blinked. “So...it's like a cramp?”

“Oh, it's far worse. You've heard of a charlie-horse, I presume?” Ducky looked at him.

“Yeah. Had a couple when I was in college.” Tony winced, a grimace crossing his face as he remembered the searing pain shooting through his calf, the screaming ache that made him want to
curl up in a ball. The coach and doctor drenching his leg in cold water and applying pressure until it faded, and the numb, tingling ache that had persisted for hours after. “Not pleasant.”

“No. It isn't. The mild attacks of this condition usually feel something like that.”

Tony straightened. “The mild attacks?”

“Indeed. It feels like a severe muscle lock. The location depends on the type of stress, and the person involved. If you're lucky it stays like that.”

Tony frowned. “And if you aren't lucky?”

“It gets worse. Or, in some cases, a sort of chain reaction occurs, in which the cramping and locking effect spreads from the original point. And it will keep spreading until it is stopped. From what I've heard and observed, it can lock up over half the muscles in a person's body.”

“And every muscle feels like the monster of all cramps.” Tony felt sweat breaking over his spine just thinking about it.

“Essentially.” Ducky nodded. “A mild incident is painful, but a full chain reaction can be, and I suspect is, excruciating.”

“Someone going through that...would they even be able to move?” Tony frowned.

“Well, it depends on how stubborn they are. Very few people would try, but it could probably be done. However, with the body in such a state, there's no telling the damage it would do.”

Tony swallowed. “Damage?”

“Of course. If a muscle is locked in place and you force it to move, then you risk tearing it. Most tears aren't any worse than what you'd get while, say exercising, but untreated, it can get much more troublesome.” Ducky's eyes were dark with concern.

Tony rose slowly, pacing around the table. “Well, Gibbs is incredibly stubborn.” He met the ME's eyes. “That chain reaction you were talking about...I suppose it's too much to hope it wasn't Gibbs you were observing?”

“Unfortunately, it was.” Ducky sighed. “When his third marriage ended. She hit him over the head, and it caused a chain reaction.” The ME shrugged. “Well, with all the stress he was under to begin with...it wasn't really surprising. But yes. Jethro is one of the ones for whom it can get extremely bad.”

“How do you think he's doing now?” Tony didn't really need to ask. The image of Gibbs leaning against the wall, pale and shaking, was enough to answer the question. But he was desperately hoping Ducky would tell him he was wrong.

He could see the ME knew what he wanted. The older man's eyes were filled with a mixture of regret and concern. “Based on what you told me, I would guess he's had at least a partial chain reaction. How far the spasm went, I couldn't tell you, unfortunately.”

“I was afraid of that. So...what can we do?” Tony swallowed.

“Well, sometimes, it will go away with a careful application of alcohol.” Ducky caught Tony's surprised look, and a small smile tipped one corner of his mouth up. “There's more than one reason Jethro is so fond of bourbon and whiskey.” The smile faded. “It won't help for this case though.
Not with the amount of time that's passed, and the severity you described.” Ducky turned and opened a drawer in his desk. “I keep a prescription muscle relaxant for him, in case of situations like this. Unfortunately, the trick is getting him to take it. Especially since he seems to want to be stubborn this round.” The ME pulled a pill bottle from his desk drawer and set it down with a sigh. “Since I didn't see the actual incident, I can't confront him directly without letting him know how I found out. And I suspect that your charade in the bullpen was, in part, meant to prevent precisely that.”

“Yeah.” Tony swallowed. “Can a chain reaction happen more than once?”

Ducky nodded. “It can.”

Tony paused, thinking. “You know, he seemed to know it was coming.”

“He would. The tightness of the relevant muscles would tell him, long before the real problem began.” Ducky folded his arms and regarded him with a level stare. “You're up to something, aren't you?”

“Well, I was thinking...if I watch Gibbs, then I'll know how much trouble he's in. At least, generally. Maybe.” Tony shrugged the argument away. “More importantly, if he leaves suddenly, we'll know it's probably another...spasm, or whatever. And I can keep an eye on him.” He moved forward, picked up the pill bottle. “If you'll just let me take this, then when he leaves, I can follow him home, and make sure he takes his medicine.”

“A viable, if somewhat risky plan.” Ducky met his eyes. “You know very well Jethro may not appreciate your interference.”

“Yeah well, it's better than watching him through another incident like today.” Tony met Ducky's stare, setting his jaw in resolve. “So...can I have this?” He held up the bottle.

“By all means. I wish you the best of luck.” Ducky nodded, and reached up to pat him on the shoulder. “You know, Jethro is very lucky to have you as his friend and senior agent.”

“You think so?” Tony looked up. Then he met Ducky's gaze again. “He can outrun me, even on a bad day. And he's got way better hearing. He saw the bomb first. But he was between me and the blast when it went off.” He held the ME's eyes. “He was protecting me. And he still tried to hide this problem of his, so I wouldn't feel guilty. This is the least I can do.” He turned to the doors and made his exit before the ME could think of a response. As the doors started to close behind him, he waved the bottle. “Thanks, Ducky.” Then he was on the elevator. He took a deep breath, looking down at the bottle in his hand. “Well, I guess now we get to the hard part. Keeping track of Gibbs.”

***C***

Several hours later, Tony parked outside Gibbs' house. He stared at the front door, the light on in the living room, then breathed a soft sigh of mixed tiredness and nervousness.

Gibbs had been as much trouble to keep track of as he'd feared. He'd lost the man twice. Once when he slipped down to Abby's lab, and once when he'd gone to report to Vance. And he hadn't realized Gibbs was gone for the day until nearly half an hour after the man had left. Once he'd figured it out, he'd scrambled, ignoring McGee and Ziva's questions.

Now he was sitting outside the house, a grocery sack that was his theoretical excuse for coming by sitting on the seat beside him, and the small bottle of medicine in his pocket.
Tony took another deep breath, then grabbed the sack, shoved his door open and got out of the car. A part of his mind was screaming excuses not to do this, but another part was fighting that, and in the meantime, his feet were on auto-pilot, taking him up the familiar walk to the door. He reached the door, knocked twice so Gibbs wouldn't shoot him out of instinct, and walked on inside.

Gibbs was seated in the living room, on the couch, a bottle on the table in front of him. He'd changed out of his work clothing into jeans and a T-shirt. But what Tony really noticed was that, in the privacy of his own home, the masks had dropped away, and the lines of pain and tension were visible on the strong countenance, cutting deep furrows across his expression.

There was silence between them for about thirty seconds, then Tony mustered up a grin and held up the bag. “Hey Boss. Brought you something.”

“Yeah?” Gibbs blinked at him, amusement, curiosity, and a spark of irritation in his gaze. “What's that, DiNozzo?”

“Dinner. I figured you might like someone else to do the cooking, after the day we've put in. And I figured pizza was always a hit, but this time I splurged and bought one of those specialty, 'bake-at-home', order any way you like pizzas. Says it only takes about 25 minutes.” He waved the box in Gibbs' general direction. “Up for a slice?”

“Always up for free food.” There was shake of the head, and a ghost of a smile on Gibbs' face, warring with the shadows of pain in his eyes.

“Great. I'll go put this in the oven, then.”

“Good idea. Then you can tell me why you're really here while it's cooking.”

Tony grimaced, though his back was turned to Gibbs. The man's perception really was uncanny. “Got it. Be right back.”

He knew Gibbs' oven inside and out, almost better than he knew his own. Still, he fiddled with the controls, trying to figure out what to say. Finally he sighed. The truth was best. Hopefully, Gibbs would remember not to be angry at Ducky for being coerced into telling him about the older man's condition. He set the pizza in the oven and returned to the living room.

Gibbs hadn't moved an inch, and his eyes were closed. But at Tony's entrance, he blinked and leveled a questioning stare at him. “Took you long enough. Wanna tell me what this is all about?”

Tony swallowed, then moved to settle in a chair. He leaned forward, elbows on knees. “I talked to Ducky.”

Gibbs blinked, and he saw the sudden comprehension dawn in the blue eyes. “About me.”

“Yeah. About what happened, in the building. I know it's none of my business, but I was concerned for you boss.” He met the blue eyes. “You can hit me if you want.”

“No. I don't think so.” Gibbs looked upset, and Tony didn't blame him. He would have been too, if someone like McGee had come up and told him that they'd been asking about his private concerns. Still, the older man didn't rise from the couch. “So? What'd Ducky say?”

“He told me that your condition was caused by uncontrollable muscle spasms, similar to cramps, only a lot worse. And that left alone it could lock up...well a lot of muscles. Could even cause serious damage.” He pulled the pill bottle from his pocket and set it on the table. “Said to give you a couple of these.”
Gibbs eyed the bottle with obvious distaste. “Don't want 'em.”

“I know.” Tony saw one eyebrow raise, and elaborated. “Figured if you did want them, you'd have gone to Ducky to get them. You didn't, so...obviously you didn't want the meds.” He shrugged, trying to convey a nonchalance he didn't feel. “But you know...if they help...”

“I can't think straight with that crap in my system.” Gibbs scowled at the bottle. “And it tends to knock me out.”

“Yeah, I understand. Had my fair share of those. But you know...it's not a bad excuse to catch up on your sleep. The whole 'well, my doctor drugged me and I slept through my alarm because of the meds' excuse. Actually pretty viable.” He grinned.

Gibbs' eyebrow rose again. “You use that often?”

“Well, here and there. But never with you, Boss.” He grimaced. “Always figured you'd catch me if I tried.”

“Damn straight.” Gibbs shifted, and winced, a grimace sliding briefly across his stern expression.

Tony's brief burst of humor disappeared. He sat forward on his chair. “Look, Boss...Gibbs. I know you don't like the meds, and I understand why, but seriously, you need to take them. Wanna know why I say that?” He looked his mentor in the eye.

“Why? Cause you think I'm having trouble?” Gibbs' eyes were challenging, daring him to say it.

“Partially. But it's more than that. Ducky said this condition can cause damage. Which, I'm betting, you'd try to ignore. But if you're going to lead the team, you have to be able to lead it well. That's something you taught me.” He held the hard stare Gibbs focused on him. “You weren't at the top of your game today after that incident. We need to get you back up there as soon as possible. It's all the same reasons you didn't want me coming back too soon after I got the plague. And why you kept such a close eye on me. I'm sure you remember how I felt about that.” He grinned again, though there wasn't much humor in his expression.

“Fought me every damn step of the way. I had to banish you to Abby's lab and make her sit on you, to get you to rest when you needed to.” Gibbs frowned, though there was the faintest trace of humor in his expression.

“Exactly. So...slap me for it all you want, fight me all you like, but I'm gonna do the same thing. Cause we don't need you crashing on us, Boss. Plus...” Tony grimaced. “I really get the feeling you don't want Probie or Ninja-Girl catching you like this.”

“Hell no. That's why I left early.” Gibbs frowned. Then he sighed, leaning his head back against the sofa. “All right, DiNozzo.”

“You'll take the meds?”

“Yeah.” Gibbs nodded. His face tensed, then he leaned forward to snag the bottle, only to flinch and freeze halfway there.

Tony jumped up and grabbed the bottle to hand to him, then stopped, frowning at the label. “Says you need to take them with food.”

“I know that.” Exasperation tinged the older man's tone. “I've done this before.” he sighed. “So...why don't you give me the damn bottle and you go check the pizza, before it burns.”
Tony flinched, he'd almost forgotten about the pizza. “Right.” he dropped the pill bottle into Gibbs' outstretched hand, and raced back into the kitchen.

The pizza hadn't burned, but it was a close call. Fortunately, they both liked it a little crispier on the crust, and the cheese had melted to perfection.

He pulled it out, set it to one side, then pulled a couple drinks from the fridge. Not alcohol, not with Gibbs taking medication, but bottled water. He loaded two plates with three slices apiece, then shoved the water in his pockets and carried the plates back to the living room.

Gibbs accepted his plate silently and dug in without a word. Tony thought about trying to start a conversation, but the slow way Gibbs chewed and the thoughtful look in his eyes prevented it. He didn't know what was on the other man's mind, but he had already done his fair share of prying into Gibbs' private affairs today. So he finished his dinner in silence and watched while Gibbs finished his. As soon as the last bite of pizza cleared the plate, he took the unopened bottle, twisted the top off, and offered Gibbs two of the small white pills.

Gibbs' mouth twisted in a grimace of distaste, but he reached forward obediently and took the capsules, tossing them back with a wince as the movement jarred still-tightened muscles. Tony waited until he'd washed them down with a swallow of water before he spoke. “So...how long till they take effect?”


That sounded like far too long to Tony, but he couldn't do much. He watched Gibbs shift, obviously in pain, then rose. “Okay. Well, I'm gonna go clean up, get the rest of the pizza stowed away so you can eat it later. So why don't you just lean back and relax? You can shout at me if you need anything. Okay, Boss?” He tried to crack a grin for effect, but it felt forced and half-hearted.

Gibbs let his head drop back against the couch cushions. The mask he'd been struggling to keep in place all day disappeared, leaving him with that exhausted, drawn expression written on his countenance again. “Yeah.”

Tony picked up the plates, and his own nearly empty water bottle, and carried everything into the kitchen. He finished the water, chucked the bottle into the recycling bin it was meant for, rinsed the plates, then stuffed the remaining pizza into bags and stored it neatly in the fridge for Gibbs. The box he broke down and stuffed into the garbage. Then he stopped, washed his hands, and looked around the kitchen, thinking.

He could just leave. Gibbs would probably barely notice. And even if he did, he suspect the older man would be grateful for his absence. He didn't like to be seen vulnerable, or in pain. That Tony had seen him earlier had probably embarrassed him, and his visit tonight almost certainly had. And yet, his feet were already turning back toward the living room, drawn by the nagging feeling in his gut that there was something more to do, some other way he could help.

He returned to the living room to find Gibbs sprawled on the couch, lying on his side with his hands stretched partially above his head. The posture looked less comfortable than it did desperate. Tony grimaced, hating to see how obviously Gibbs was still suffering. His face was partially obscured, but he didn't move when Tony came over. The young man frowned, wondering if the older man was unconscious already. In that case...he reached for the blanket, so he could make his mentor and boss more comfortable. As he reached across the still form, his hand brushed the shoulder, and he paused.

The muscle he'd touched felt hard. He knew the upper shoulder muscles were contracted from
Gibbs' position on the couch, but...he had a feeling it was more than that. He stopped, his body awkwardly hovering over the other man, wondering what to do.

Memory struck, of the offer he'd made at the site earlier. He hadn't been lying. He had dated a massage therapist for a while. And she had taught him some basic techniques, partially to help him relax from rough cases, and also as part of their lovemaking. The last thought made him blush. Still, he thought the knowledge might come in handy.

Gibbs still hadn't stirred. And he still couldn't tell if the man was awake or not. Carefully, he reached down to lay a hand on the back of the nearer shoulder. He frowned, feeling the tension of the knots in Gibbs' back, even through his shirt. Gibbs didn't react. Carefully, he dug in just the slightest bit, rubbing his fingers in a very small, circular pattern.

“I thought I said there was no way in hell I was gonna let you do that, DiNozzo.” The muffled words made him jump, biting back a curse as he narrowly missed the table. Then Gibbs dropped one arm, and he bit back a second, stronger expletive.

The mask of indifference had completely been stripped away. The expression Gibbs wore was one of pain, and utter exhaustion. He looked almost worse than he had after the explosion that had temporarily wiped his memory, years before. He was clearly feeling the effects of his charade earlier in the day, and at the Navy Yard.

Tony swallowed back his first response, which was something along the lines of 'you look like crap, Boss.' He sought words to say, and finally settled on, “Just checking, Boss. Thought the meds might have kicked in.”

Gibbs sighed, turning his face partially into his sleeve. “Not yet.”

Tony slid to his knees, so he was almost eye level with the older man. “It's worse, isn't it?”

“Than over dinner, or this afternoon?”

“Either.” Tony swallowed.

Gibbs made a soft noise. “Worse than this afternoon. Not much worse than before you came, though.”

He remembered Gibbs shuddering in his arms, and fought back a shudder of his own. “Look, Boss, I know it's kind of embarrassing, but I can help with that.”

“DiNozzo...” There was exasperation, maybe even a hint of anger in Gibbs tone, but the way that his name trailed off into pained exhaustion said more than any words ever could.

“Promise Boss, I won't tell a soul.” He cracked a brief grin, trying to lighten the mood. “Besides, who'd believe a guy like me would even know how to massage someone?”

“You'd know. I'd know.” Gibbs shifted, and his hand clenched briefly.

“Is it really such a bad thing, to know I've got your back?” Tony winced at the unplanned pun, and saw Gibbs flinch as well. “Look at it like this, Boss. You can always assume I'm just taking advantage of your condition to whack you, for all the times you've hit me. Or, you can assume I'm repaying the favor I owe you, since you saved my ass back there today.”

“That wasn't a favor, and I don't need to be repaid.” Gibbs' voice was rough.
“I know. But I'd feel better if I could do something for you.” Tony swallowed. “It'll just be till the meds kick in. Then you can throw me out and threaten to beat me senseless, okay?” A thought crossed his mind, and he leaned back, letting the smallest of wicked grins cross his mouth. “Of course, if you'd prefer, I can call Ducky or Abby, ask them to come take care of you. I mean, Ducky's used to patching you up, and Abby...I'll bet she does excellent massage...”

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs actually mustered the energy to raise his head, and the tone was almost his usual commanding bark.

Tony met his eyes without flinching. “Look, just let me help you, okay. Do something for you, for all the times you've had my back. Deal?”

Gibbs held his gaze for a long moment. Then he spoke softly through nearly clenched teeth. “This doesn't leave this house.”

“Not a chance. You can shoot me if anyone finds out.” Tony held up one hand in a mock swearing-in gesture. “I promise.”

Gibbs continued to stare at him. “I'm not taking off my shirt.”

“Not a problem. I'll just dig in a little deeper. Probably for the best anyway.”

Gibbs watched him for a moment longer, then nodded slowly. Carefully, the older man shifted on the couch until he was sprawled across it like a bed. One arm pillowed his face, turned towards Tony, the other dangled over the edge.

Tony studied him for a moment, then shifted closer. Now that he'd actually gotten Gibbs to agree, he was feeling a bit nervous himself. He didn't want to hurt the other man any further. He took a deep breath, reminding himself forcefully that it certainly wasn't as bad as the time he'd been forced to give Gibbs CPR. Then he laid his hands gently on the broad shoulders, and began working, probing for the tight spots.

What he felt made him wince in sympathy with Gibbs. He'd hoped Ducky was exaggerating the extent to which a muscle spasm could overtake the other man, but every muscle he touched was wound tighter than a drum. It was a wonder Gibbs could move in that condition. He paused a moment, then decided to start with the neck and shoulders, and work his way down the spine.

He pressed his thumbs close to the nerve at the shoulder junction, and dug in, moving his hands in tight little circles, trying to coax the muscle to relax. He was rewarded with a grunt and a gasp, and the sight of Gibbs clenching his fists.

He almost stopped. But then he remembered when he'd had some really tight muscles. It always hurt worse at first. He applied a little more pressure.

Gibbs swore under his breath and flinched. “Thought you were gonna help. Not make it worse.”

“I know, Boss. First few seconds are always the worst.” Tony spoke softly, trying desperately to get the stubborn muscles to give. “Trust me, okay?”

“I...do.” Gibbs' voice was strained.

“I know, Boss.” Tony swallowed, then went back to his work.

The muscle he was working on finally gave, reluctantly relaxing under his steady pressure and coaxing. He felt it let go, and heard the almost inaudible sigh of relief from Gibbs as the man

Gibbs didn't reply, but he rolled his head in an awkward shaking motion, and Tony felt a faint shiver pass through the frame, as if the man was laughing softly at him.

Tony grinned, and continued to firmly apply to pressure the tight muscles of back and shoulder to force them to relax. It went faster now that he'd gotten the first one, and a general sense of how much pressure was required for best results. And, as potentially embarrassing as the scene was, it was gratifying to feel Gibbs relaxing, to see the tight fists unclenching, and hear the pained breathing even out.

He was halfway down the back when he realized his task was becoming easier. Instead of encountering muscled wound tight and hard as rocks, he found partly strained muscles. There were still knots in Gibbs back, but they were looser, yielding more readily to his pressure.

He suddenly became aware that Gibbs was now lying loosely across the couch, his hands fully unclenched, his body almost completely relaxed. His breathing was slow, even, and quiet. Tony slowed, then stopped. He half expected Gibbs to say something, but the older man didn't stir, didn't say a word. He blinked, then shifted back to look at Gibbs' face.

The blue eyes were closed, the pain lines mostly vanished from his expression. His mouth was open just the tiniest amount, head twisted into a position of maximum comfort on the supporting arm. Tony cocked an ear, and realized Gibbs was almost, almost but not quite, snoring.

Tony grinned, realizing his boss had fallen asleep. Whether it was the pills, the stress catching up with him, or the massage, it didn't matter. He smiled to himself, then reached out. Gently, he ran his hands soothingly over the man's back, rubbing out the last of the stiffness. Then he rose from his knees, and reached for the blanket. It was the work of moments to spread it over the sleeping man. A quick look revealed a pillow on the far side of the couch. He didn't quite dare to try and put it under Gibbs' head, but he perched it on the arm, so that the edge of it was brushing his hand. If Gibbs woke, he'd find it there.

Gibbs didn't stir. Tony frowned, then remembered what Gibbs had said about the medication knocking him out. The younger agent shrugged, then leaned forward and adjusted the blanket, so that the sleeping man was covered from shoulders to toes.

It felt odd, putting Gibbs to bed, but he couldn't say that he minded. He was aware of the trust Gibbs had shown him, letting him see him in his vulnerable state. Never mind actually falling asleep while Tony was touching him. And despite his admission that he'd gone to Ducky, Gibbs had never questioned his ability to keep the whole thing between them. It made him feel proud, honored and touched that Gibbs would trust him with something so devastating to him.

Tony smiled once more, then quietly moved to the doorway. He laid a hand on the light switch, then turned to regard the sleeping form once more. “Night, Boss.” Then he turned out the light, and left the house, leaving Gibbs to his rest.

End Notes

A little Gibbs and Tony bonding.
The symptoms Gibbs experiences, and the cause of them, are unfortunately real, and taken
from personal experience. Which is, coincidentally, how I came to write this story. I needed a distraction, I was watching NCIS...and then I was inspired.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!