Io Che Non Vivo (Oldies But Goodies Book 2)

by Tibbsian

Summary

Gibbs' single lapse in judgment, and Tony's response, lead the two men into a domino effect of irremediable consequences. When the dust settles, both men's lives are forever changed. Will Tony live as a closeted man for the sake of Gibbs? Can an old dog like Jethro learn new tricks and be happy? Perhaps...with the help of friends.

Cameo Appearances by Tobias Fornell and Dwayne Cassius Pride.

Notes

Each Oldies But Goodies story is a standalone and is not connected to each other. The only connection they have is that:
1) An Oldies song was the inspiration and, hence, is the story title
2) It's a first-time for Tony/Gibbs and will never feature an established relationship.
3) Will always have an HEA
4) Will involve a financial windfall

About this story:
If you know Italian, you'd know that Io Che Non Vivo Senza Te does NOT translate as 'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me'. As Tony tells Gibbs, the latter is the English version of the original Italian love song, recorded by Dusty Springfield in 1966 and made the melody world-famous.

This second story is not lighthearted and fluffy the way the first story was as I wanted a different mood altogether. As such, I have employed the alternate 1st Person POV with a bit of 3rd Person when I needed to draw back a little. I liked how this worked in Knight Maneuvers and felt it would fit here.
"Three times?" Tony sputtered, nearly spilling his beer. "He's been married three times? And you told the Chief to assign me to work with him? Gimme a break, Pete."

Though Pete O'Donnell was not partnered with Tony DiNozzo, he had become a good friend, and one of the few colleagues Tony trusted implicitly.

Older, wiser and senior, O'Donnell had taken Tony under his wing and polished the twenty-six year-old's natural skills. When NCIS Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs from D.C. asked for assistance with the department on a case that had crossed over to NCIS territory, Chief Wolenski had immediately assigned DiNozzo after O'Donnell had recommended him.

Tony, however, was clearly less than enthused.

"It's only for a few days, Tony," O'Donnell said. "Help the guy go over the reports. Give him your two cents. He might find something, he might not." He shrugged. "He's supposed to be some hotshot Navy cop and the chief wants to impress him."

"Why?"

O'Donnell drained his glass. "You know the chief. Believes one of these days, his brown-nosing's bound to pay off somewhere, somehow. And you know? He's right." O'Donnell's lips twisted in a parody of a smile.

"So this Navy cop. He's good, huh?" Tony asked.

"Supposed to be. Heard he's being promoted. Going to head up their Major Crimes unit."

Tony huffed. "Hope it's worth three marriages. Must be a right old bastard."

O'Donnell chuckled. "That's what the second 'b' stands for, apparently."

"You saying from personal experience?" Tony looked askance at his friend and colleague.

"From the horse's mouth, actually." Pete chuckled. "I met him a couple of times when I was working a case that was connected to one of his."

"If you're trying to persuade me to work with the guy - not that I have a choice -this is not the way to do it."

"Listen, Tony," Pete's voice turned serious. "You've got to watch your back with Wolenski."
"I know," Tony murmured. "I'm careful."

"Can't be careful enough. Just promise me," Pete said. "If things look like it could turn nasty, get the hell out. You're young, you're smart. You don't need to be a daily target for homophobes like Wolenski."

"I haven't given him any reason to target me," Tony said, and that was true. Wolenski had made no bones about his hatred of queers and Tony had been extra careful never to give the Chief any cause to even speculate about his sexual orientation.

Pete O'Donnell was the only guy in the precinct who knew Tony was gay. O'Donnell had invited Tony home the first weekend Tony joined the BPD and met his extended family - Nora, his dermatologist wife, three kids and an assortment of siblings and cousins who lived with them in the ten-bedroom house Nora had inherited from her wealthy grandparents. His eldest son, David, an eighteen year-old, had come out to his parents when he was fifteen and seeing Pete relate to his gay son as if nothing was amiss had prodded Tony into eventually coming out to his colleague.

As Tony had expected, not everyone at the BPD had been as accepting. The opposite, in fact. The usual homophobic slurs and jokes were commonplace, Tony having been at the receiving end enough times simply because he was 'a pretty-boy' with the body that was seen more on Calvin Klein underwear packaging than in a cop's uniform.

"No, but one of these days, you might slip up," Pete warned. "I just want to know you won't go all stubborn on me. Learn to pick your battles, DiNozzo. Some aren't worth fighting. I've only got a week left before retirement. We're packing up and moving West. I'm looking forward to it and I want to leave knowing I taught you to fight smart and sometimes that means walking away. From the job, if it comes to that."

"Pete -"

"Promise me, DiNozzo."

Tony sighed. "I'm sick of walking away. Of running away. I did that in Peoria. I thought I could stay in Philly but I ran again. I can't run a third time."

"Then you might want to reconsider being a cop because guys like Wolenski come with the territory. Look, just keep what I said in mind, okay? You'll know what to do when the time comes."

O'Donnell paid and they left the bar. The older detective would go home to his noisy family with the familiar smell of home-cooked dinners, dog hair (they had three retrievers) and the television turned up as if the family was hard of hearing.

The younger detective, however, would drag himself up the stairs to his one-bedroom apartment and eat his chicken chow mein in front of his TV, telling himself there had to be more to life than running and hiding.

It was Friday night and, as usual, he'd meet his friends at Down & Out. Tonight, he was particularly wound up after bringing in the guy suspected of masterminding a string of burglaries in an upscale neighborhood.

He raked his long fingers through his hair, making it stick up untidy bunches. What he needed tonight - and badly - was a fuck. Hard, rough, fast. Anonymous. Down & Out rarely disappointed but anonymous hookups were an exception. He far preferred sex with someone he knew and liked, not a stranger whose name, if he even bothered to ask, would be forgotten as soon as he'd shot his
"Where the hell's DiNozzo?" Chief Wolenski barked, poking his head out of his office.

"Men's room," O'Donnell replied.

"Tell him to get his pretty li'l ass in my office when he comes back." Wolenski's head slid back in his room like a tortoise and the door slammed shut on the sniggers that followed his words.

O'Donnell directed a frown at the chief's door. He'd heard some talk when he walked in early this morning. Apparently, some cops had let it be known that DiNozzo had been seen leaving a gay bar last Friday night. Not the front exit, but the back one. And with another guy. They were said to have driven off in DiNozzo's car. Looked like the report had reached the Chief, too. There was talk that same-sex marriage would be legal in the capital within ten years but as far as the Chief and some of the cops on the precinct were concerned, DADT should never be repealed.

"DiNozzo's probably jerking off in the john," Simpson said to the others.

"Yeah, to your photo!" another added.

"Fucking faggot!" Simpson, a veteran on the force, and DiNozzo's partner muttered. Simpson had applied to be assigned to another cop, a straight one, and had been denied because no one else would budge. Someone had tried to tell him to tone it down but the general consensus was that there was no place for fags in their precinct and the Chief himself shared that sentiment. That was followed by a comment that DiNozzo ought to put in for a transfer to the San Francisco PD instead.

"And someone tell DiNozzo when he goes to a crime scene, 'be sure to wear some flowers in his hair...'" Simpson added, singing the lyrics to the iconic 60s song. Naturally, the squadroom broke up in laughter.

"Cut it out, guys," O'Donnell said, disgusted that Simpson would be such a jerk. "Leave him alone. He's a good cop." In an undertone, he added, "And he's your partner."

"So says the man who's oh-so-tight with him. You fuckin' him, O'Donnell?" Simpson retorted loudly.

O'Donnell rose from his seat, ready to face down the resident-jerk but Tony walked in that moment. "DiNozzo, Chief wants to see you," O'Donnell said instead. Tony turned and headed for Wolenski's room. "Can it, Simpson," O'Donnell told the other officer. Simpson merely made a limp wrist gesture and sauntered off.

O'Donnell sighed. The more Tony stayed out of the way of the other cops, the better. It was why he'd rec'd Tony to assist Special Agent Gibbs. It was the least he could do for DiNozzo before he
retired from the force and packed off with his family to San Francisco. David's firm had relocated him to their LA office six months ago and Kathleen, the youngest, was starting SF's art college in the Fall.

Opening the door to Chief Wolenski's room, Tony entered and immediately noticed the man sitting in front of the Chief's desk.

"DiNozzo, this is Special Agent Gibbs." Chief Wolenski nodded towards the silver-haired man. "Special Agent Gibbs, Detective Tony DiNozzo. He's been assigned to help you with your investigation into your Marine's death."

The two men shook hands and Tony found his clasped by a warm, callused palm. The strength of the man came through the handshake. Not by a bone-crushing grip but through the steady gaze of the startling blue eyes accompanying the firm, confident grasp of his hand.

"Thank you for giving me your time, Detective DiNozzo," Special Agent Gibbs said. "I shouldn't take up too much of it. If you could pass me what you have on Lieutenant Wilson, I'll try to cover as much as I can and get out of your hair in a couple of days."

"No problem, Special Agent Gibbs."

"Just Gibbs will do."

Tony nodded. "Shall we get started, then?"

"Tell O'Donnell to come in, DiNozzo," Chief Wolenski said, as the two men headed for the door. "Special Agent Gibbs, hope your visit will be a fruitful one."

Gibbs gave a nod. "Thanks. I hope so, too."

Gibbs was impressed. DiNozzo's reports were clear and succinct, capturing important details and summarizing each investigative stage so that Gibbs was able to easily form a strategy for his case. Most times, he'd had to wade through piles of papers trying to decipher the long-winded and incoherent waffling. And failing that, he'd end up having to question those responsible for the piss-poor reports and type up his own.

With DiNozzo's accounts, both verbal and written, he would be able to wrap up his investigation and return to D.C. earlier than he expected. He had enough evidence to get a conviction for the guy they had in custody. He was also in a hurry to get back. Director Morrow had asked him when he'd be able to get his team together and while he'd shortlisted half a dozen or so, he hadn't made a decision yet.

The rest of the day was spent going through the files with DiNozzo and as each minute ticked by, Gibbs' respect for the young officer grew.

It was almost seven p.m. and he'd told DiNozzo they could call it a day.
"Hey, Gibbs," DiNozzo's head popped up from the next section in the squad room. "Want to grab a beer and a bite with O'Donnell and me?"

"Sure," Gibbs replied. "I'm done here."

"You heading back in the morning?" O'Donnell asked, getting up from his seat.

"Tonight, actually." Gibbs replied. "Thanks to DiNozzo."

It was one of the more enjoyable dinners as Gibbs' dinners tended to go. Usually, it was a Chinese takeaway, shoveled into his mouth as he worked on his reports. Once in a while he got adventurous and made himself a pasta. On occasions, he'd give himself a treat and stick a steak in the fireplace.

Tonight he was having a great time over a sloppy burger, steak fries and a cold beer. It enabled him to shove aside the depressing thoughts that threatened to overrun his senses every time he ventured there. Tonight, he would not. He would not think about his divorce - his third! And he certainly would not think about Stephanie finally realizing that the breakdown of their marriage wasn't her fault.

Both DiNozzo and O'Donnell were good dinner companions, their conversation ranging from sports to movies and trading stories about their cases.

He learnt that DiNozzo came from money and had a small trust fund from his mother. O'Donnell, on the other hand, came from a large, working-class Irish family. He had a wife who earned several more times as dermatologist with her own private practice and line of skincare products than O'Donnell could ever hope to earn as a cop. This exchange of personal data had Gibbs telling them how he'd been married three times and that he'd shoot himself than marry again.

DiNozzo was a little thin and Gibbs suspected he preferred spending his money on toiletries and clothes rather than food. His clothes fit him too well to be off the rack and his shoes looked like they cost three times more than what Gibbs was prepared to pay for. Then there was that expensive-smelling aftershave that he noticed every time DiNozzo walked by.

Noticed far too well.

They were just finishing their beers when a call came in for DiNozzo.

"That was Simpson. Sorry," DiNozzo said, getting up. "Gotta run." He took out some notes from his wallet and left them on the table, told Gibbs to stay in touch and ran out of the diner.

Gibbs and O'Donnell didn't stay on after Tony left.

"I'm going to catch the train," O'Donnell said, as they left the diner.

"What happened to your car?" Gibbs asked.
"Got banged up in a chase," O'Donnell said. "Getting it back in the morning. I came in with Tony."

"Give you a ride home."

"Nah, it's okay. I can get a cab then you can be on your way back to DC."

"I'll take you home," Gibbs repeated.

Shrugging, O'Donnell followed Gibbs to his car. "Not going to turn down a lift a second time. Thanks."

They were just going past an alley in one of the rougher neighborhoods when O'Donnell suddenly told Gibbs to stop.

"Back up! That was DiNozzo." The sound of gunshots could be heard.

Gibbs backed up, reaching the mouth of the alley in time to see DiNozzo hit the ground. Pete called it in and both men got out of their cars, weapons drawn. The men who had been chasing and shooting at DiNozzo had made a quick exit, vanishing like rats.

O'Donnell called for the paramedics as DiNozzo lay on the ground, bleeding from a wound in his arm.

"Where's Simpson?" O'Donnell asked but DiNozzo was losing consciousness.

"He must have hit his head when he fell," Gibbs said. "Don't see any other wounds on him. Just the arm."


The paramedics arrived some ten minutes later, followed by the black and whites and soon the alley was a jangle of sirens and radiophones squawking. Residents that had wisely stayed out of sight when the gunshots were heard, started appearing and O'Donnell headed off to question them.

Gibbs waited until DiNozzo was taken into the ambulance then looked for O'Donnell. "DiNozzo have any family that need to be notified?"

"He doesn't really have a family. He and his father haven't spoken in years but I'll try and reach him. He'll likely be somewhere in Europe with his latest girlfriend," Pete said, wryly.

"You going with him to the hospital?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes," O'Donnell replied. "You'd better get going, Gibbs. Nothing you can do here. I'll let you know how he is in a day or two."

Gibbs nodded. "Appreciate that, and thanks. Call me when you're in DC."

One Week Later.

NCIS, Washington DC
The phone rang just as Gibbs powered up his pc.

"Yeah. Gibbs."

"Gibbs. It's O'Donnell."

"Hey. How's it going? Gibbs asked. "How's DiNozzo?" O'Donnell had called him a couple of days ago to say that DiNozzo was recovering well. He'd fractured his skull when he fell and hit his head on the edge of the dumpster.

"He's got a mother of all headaches but otherwise he's alright. The arm's healing nicely and he's being discharged today but he won't be going back to work."

"Why not?" Gibbs asked.

O'Donnell hesitated. The guy didn't even know him and here he was, about to ask him a favor.

"Look, Gibbs. I need a favor. I know we've only met but it's for DiNozzo. Not me."

"Yeah?"

"I could tell you over the phone but I'd rather do it in person. If you can meet me today, I'll drive down."

"O-kay." Gibbs frowned, wondering what this was about. "If you can get here before noon today, it'll be good. I have interviews lined up all afternoon and need to hire someone by the end of the day."

"I'll be there in a couple of hours. Thanks."

After O'Donnell's call, Gibbs ran through the five shortlisted candidates again. He wasn't particularly excited about any of them but he'd promised the Director he'd have his team soon so he'd have to start with at least one.

He sat back in his chair, staring unseeing across the bullpen at the empty desks. Desks he expected to be filled in a week's time as he got down to his new position as head of the Major Case Response Team.

Gibbs handed O'Donnell the cup of coffee and sat down next to him on the bench.

"Thanks for meeting me, Gibbs," O'Donnell said. "What I'm about to tell you is in strict confidence. I've worked with you a couple of times - enough to know you're a decent man, a fair man and not a bigot. That last one's critical, you see." He sipped the coffee and sighed. A troubled man, Gibbs could see that. He let O'Donnell take his time. Whatever it was, it had to be important for the newly-retired cop to drive down and see him.

"My son, David. He's twenty now...came out to his mom and me when he was fifteen. We were surprised - or I was, anyway - I think mothers tend to know first, but whatever...we told David we
didn't love him any less or think any less of him. But, we did warn him that there were going to be people who would. That proved true, of course, and there were a few times he came home with a black eye and other bruises." O'Donnell paused. "I brought DiNozzo home for dinner one night soon after he joined the BPD and I saw the way he made friends with David. He came round almost every weekend after that and became an older brother to my son. DiNozzo didn't even bat an eye when I told him my son was gay.

"Is DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, belatedly wondering what made him ask that.

"Yeah. He is, and that's the reason why I'm here," O'Donnell replied. "DiNozzo came out to me some months after he joined the force." He paused to take another sip of coffee. "That shooting last week," he continued. "It was a trap. Engineered by our own." At Gibbs' stunned expression, O'Donnell nodded. "Yep. Our very own boys in blue arranged for DiNozzo to walk into that trap. That's why he needs to get out of the BPD. I warned him something like this could happen. His current investigation's going to bring the IA down on us and there are some of us that don't want what Tony's found out to get out."

"He been talking to IA?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes. He found out about some dirty deals and had been conducting his own investigation. I know they have a meeting set up next week and I warned DiNozzo he's in danger but he said they can't be allowed to get away."

"Can't fault him for that," Gibbs smiled. "That's what we're getting paid for."

O'Donnell sighed. "It's dangerous enough for DiNozzo to be gay, but to be involved in an IA investigation that's fingering his colleagues, I don't need to tell you if he goes to that meeting, he's not going to walk away alive. He wasn't meant to walk away from the one last week."

"How did you know it was a trap?"

"When I questioned DiNozzo at the hospital, he told me he'd gotten a call from Simpson, his partner, that the guy they'd been looking for was at that address. He met Simpson then they went to the address. Expecting their suspect to be there, he entered the premises but found he'd walked into a drug deal in progress. He told me Simpson was with him and they were only going to take their B & E suspect into custody. Both he and Simpson entered the building and up the stairs to the apartment. He said he was surprised the door wasn't locked so he let himself in. Simpson was behind him then, but when he realized they'd interrupted a drug deal happening in the kitchen, he backed out of the apartment quietly, expecting Simpson to be doing the same. That was when he realized Simpson wasn't there anymore. He assumed Simpson was checking the other rooms. Then one of the dealers' cell phone rang and all hell broke loose. The dealers started reaching for the weapons, spotted him and started shooting before DiNozzo could say anything. He ran, calling Simpson as he ran, telling him to get the hell out and to call for back up. He doesn't know why they started firing, how they even knew he was there, but they went after him and shot him just as he got out into the alley. It's a good thing we got to him when we did because they were still pursuing him. To finish him off, would be my guess."

"So where was Simpson?"

"DiNozzo said he reappeared after we arrived. I questioned Simpson when I got back to the squad room. He was getting ready to go home. I asked him if he was going to the hospital to check on DiNozzo and he said it was just a flesh wound, that DiNozzo was fine. Unless he was a pansy, he added. I asked him why he wasn't backing DiNozzo up. His version of what went down isn't the same as DiNozzo's. Simpson claims he had gone round the back of the building to check the
fire escape and told DiNozzo to watch the front and wait for him. He says DiNozzo wasn't supposed to go upstairs on his own but next thing he knew, DiNozzo was rushing down the stairs from the fire escape and the drug dealers were firing at him. Then he saw DiNozzo get hit and fall and then our car pulled up. The guys turned and started heading his way so he ran off and came back out from another direction, by which time backup had arrived and DiNozzo was on his way to the hospital."

"And you don't believe him," Gibbs said.

"No, because when DiNozzo called and told him to get out and call for back-up, Simpson ten-four'd it but when I called it in, the operator didn't say back up was already on its way or that it had already been called in by Simpson. Before I could ask him anything else, the Chief calls me and tells me I've got one week left before I retire and suggested I bring it forward a week, which would effectively make that my last day. Tells me not to go digging up stuff better left alone and that DiNozzo will realize a transfer is the best thing for him. I handed in my badge that night.

"And that's why I'm going to ask you for that favor. I know DiNozzo will be in a good place with you. I saw how you dealt with that young man, Steven Haskell, that was accused of killing his lover, the Marine captain." At Gibbs' raised brows, O'Donnell explained, "I got a copy of the taped interrogation because of the connection to one of our cases. I saw how you treated Haskell with respect even though he was a suspect. In case I forget, Haskell's in the clear. We arrested Captain Murphy's killer yesterday."

"That's good to hear."

O'Donnell nodded. "Well, what I want to say is that DiNozzo needs a mentor just as he was a mentor to my son when David needed one most. I'd be there for DiNozzo any time, but he needs to get out of Baltimore if he's going to stay alive."

"Baltimore's only an hour away," Gibbs said. "What's stopping whoever's trying to get DiNozzo there from coming over here to finish the job?"

O'Donnell looked at Gibbs. "You."
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

The present-day date can very well be May 2014. I chose 2013 only because it was easier to say Tony and Gibbs had worked together a dozen years.

Chapter 1

12 Years Later; May 2013

Monday Morning:

Scott Branson’s Apartment

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TONY’S POV

“Tony?” Scott nibbled on my earlobe.

“Mmm?”

“That loan I asked you about…I need it rather urgently, I’m afraid.” Scott scooted up onto his haunches next to me. I turned, my hair mussed by sleep and other activities.

“Again?” I sat up, carding my fingers through my hair. “I just lent you twenty grand last month. You’re gambling again, aren’t you?” I was pissed, disappointed, and regretting that I hadn’t ended things with Scott earlier. “Scott. You promised.” I sighed.

“I wasn’t gambling!” Scott leapt off the bed. “The market went into a tumble. I – I wasn’t expecting to be affected that badly…”

“How much this time?” I asked. I didn’t know much about the stock market, which was one reason why I stayed away from it. Scott, however, fancied himself some kind of expert on technical analysis which he considered an art. So far, in the eleven months of our relationship, I hadn’t seen Scott’s expert knowledge paying off.
“Two hundred,” Scott replied.

“Two hundred dollars? What’s the –”

“Grand,” Scott added.

“Two hundred thousand?” I shot up from the bed, shouting the last word.

“I know. I know.” Scott wiped his fingers across his lips. “I called it wrong. Happens. Bought long, sold short. Prices decided to go the other way.”

“This can’t go on, Scott.” I leapt off the bed. “I’m not giving money to you to pay your gambling debts. Not again.” I headed for the bathroom but my alarm sounded and I went back to silence it.

“I wasn’t gambling!” Scott retorted.

“I think we need to have a serious talk,” I said, dragging fingers through my hair. “We can’t go on like this.”

“No, sweetie, we can’t,” Scott agreed. “Look, I’ve got meetings all afternoon till late. How about we meet at the club after dinner? Christie’s back in town with a new modeling contract. We’re celebrating.”

“I don’t think I can,” I said. “Team’s got to wrap up a case so it’s likely I’ll be home late.”

“Story of your life, sweetheart,” Scott murmured as he picked out a shirt. “Story. Of. Your. Life. One would think this Hillbilly boss of yours means more to you than I do.”

“Stop calling him that,” I snapped.

“Oh, come on, Tony. ‘Jethro’? Who names their kids ‘Jethro’…and oh, don’t forget the ‘Leroy’. Scott gave an exaggerated shudder. “Your whole life’s wrapped up around that man and your job.”

I stalked to the bathroom. I hated it when Scott made fun of my colleagues and I regretted, for the umpteenth time, having told Scott about them.

It hadn’t been like this when we first met, of course. NCIS had been called to a home of some public relations executive, where a Marine had died during a party. I had met Scott Branson during the preliminary questioning. He’d been a guest at the party and his blond good looks had caught my eye, but I was working and the boss was watching so I ignored Scott’s subtle flirtation.

He called me the next day, inviting me out for a drink. That turned into dinner when Scott established my sexual orientation. I had known Scott was gay the minute we met. Not because I have a magic gaydar because I didn’t even believe such a thing existed. Scott wasn’t flaming, but he wasn’t hiding either and certainly not from me.

After three months dating on and off, we began alternating weekends at each other’s place. Scott had been hinting at moving in permanently together but I had put him off each time. I wasn’t ready to come out and while I knew it was an added bone of contention in our already shaky relationship, I wasn’t prepared for the consequences. Moving in together meant having to come out to the team - to Gibbs! – and I didn’t think I could handle stress. The boss wasn’t homophobic as far as I knew but I didn’t know whether that live-and-let-live attitude extended to a team member. DADT may be done away with but Gibbs was still very old school. Hell, the ex-Marine was a poster boy for old school!
Besides, I was already hiding something else from the team, not just my sexual orientation.

“Look, sweetie,” Scott came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my naked torso. “I’ve got to run. Major client coming in this morning. Do give my request some serious thought, darling. I know you do have that trust fund your mother set up for you. I promise I’ll pay you back. Just give me two or three months.” Scott ran his hands up and down my chest while I shaved. “Mmm,” Scott murmured as he pressed his mouth to my shoulder. “You have been seriously working out. All the guys – and girls – have noticed.” He looked at my reflection. “So, babe, how about that loan?”

I rinsed my shaver, looking back at him in the mirror. “Scott. I don’t have access to the kind of money you’re talking about. The trust only pays out enough to cover my rent and it’s automatically credited into my bank account each month. I’m allowed to request large amounts only in an emergency and I doubt the executor of the trust is going to consider your stock market debt my emergency.” I wasn’t telling a lie but I was also omitting a huge fact, one I had known would be a mistake to reveal to Scott.

“Well, when my lifeless body is found floating down the Potomac, it’ll be too late to consider it an emergency, wouldn’t it? Yours or mine! I thought I meant more to you. I can see how very wrong I’ve been.” Scott flounced out of the bathroom.

I sighed in annoyance and washed up quickly. By the time I came out of the bathroom, Scott was already downstairs. I could hear him banging around in his kitchen.

“Sure you won’t join us tonight?” Scott asked when I entered the spacious gourmet kitchen. “I just told you I’d likely be working late,” I said. I know I sounded testy but it was too late to take back the words. “I’ll give you a call. If it’s not too late, I’ll drop in for a while. It is a week day and I can’t stroll in the office at ten the next morning like you can.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Tony. This is no way to live your life.”

“I’m a Fed, Scott. A lowly government servant. It’s a very different world from the glamorous one you inhabit.”

‘Therein lies your problem! Quit that dead-end job, for God’s sake! You’ve got looks, you’ve the smarts and most of all, you’ve got me. Say the word and I could get you into any one of the top agencies.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“You make things difficult, Tony.” Scott put his cup of coffee down in the sink with a clatter. “You know, sometimes I ask myself why I bother. Why do I bother, Tony? You’re no spring chicken but you’re still content to live a lie so give me one good reason why I should bother.”

I didn’t know how we segued onto that subject but starting down that road wasn’t something I had time for. Not with Gibbs already at his desk, like he always is by the time I got in. “I’ll see you on Friday if I can’t make it tonight.” I looked at Scott’s mulish look and sighed. “And I’ll try to make it to dinner sometime during the week. Can you?”

“Well, honey. I’m still waiting for an answer. Should I bother?” With that, Scott grabbed his keys and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

The only thing that had changed in the last few months was that Scott was leaving for work the same time I was and we were having breakfast together. Other than that, it was the same old
sniping and sarcasm along with the morning brew.

It wasn’t that we didn’t try. Previously, I’d be hurrying to get out the door while Scott would be grabbing another couple of hours sleep. When things started going south because of my refusal to come out, I’d tried to make up for it by waking up earlier, fixing breakfast, and going to the clubs with him more often.

Scott tried, too. I have to give him that. Instead of burrowing back under the sheets after I got up, he’d follow a few minutes later, and we’d even fuck and take a shower together before going down for breakfast.

Unfortunately, that hadn’t lasted and it was obvious nothing could fix what was destined to be broken.

I suppose anyone would wonder why I stayed this long with Scott. The answer’s easy – Scott wouldn’t remember me the minute I walked out. Why did I even start a relationship with him – if you could call it that. Again, easy – regular sex. I’m a sexual person. I love sex. I need sex and I need it regularly. But trolling the gay bar scene has never been my thing so over the years, I’d formed fuck-buddy liaisons, mostly with closeted men like me.

I didn’t want relationships because those would, invariably, demand from me far more than what I was prepared to give.

So why did I end up with an out-and-proud guy like Scott? This one’s not so easy to answer. Perhaps I was fed up of hiding all these years and perhaps Scott had given me a taste of what life could be like if I came out. Perhaps, having tasted that freedom, I liked it and wanted to hang on to it. Or, at least, the illusion of it, because being in Scott’s world felt like stepping out of the circle of reality at times.

It wasn’t a world I was comfortable in but perhaps I had nothing else. I may love the simple, uncluttered life I saw my boss had but I was too unsettled inside to be able to live that way on my own. I envied the peace and quiet that surrounded Gibbs and that was one of the reasons why I could often be found in his basement just quietly reading while he worked on his boat, or whatever contraption. But to live my life like him? No way. I’d need to have Gibbs with me to live like that, even though the alternative was endless partying with Scott and his gaggle of friends and acquaintances whose company was as meaningless as their air kisses.

That huge secret I’d been keeping from Scott? Not just Scott but from everyone at work. I’m rich. Not just very rich but fucking filthy, mind-blowing rich. My uncle Clive had died last year but I didn’t make it to the funeral because of an airport strike. A week later, my cousin Crispian had called me to say he would be in DC and needed me to meet him at the lawyers’ DC office.

My uncle had made me one of his beneficiaries. Not just a minor one, like his other relatives, but a major one alongside his only son, Crispian.

I still recall that morning I stepped into the lawyer’s office…
FLASHBACK

Ten Months Ago

Higgins and Pepper International, LLP, shared offices with Sidney, Knight and Case, one of the top five law firms in the US.

Higgins and Pepper was the largest in the UK based on worldwide revenue following a merger with Plimpton, Rosenfeld and Gotshal in the previous century. Unlike their New York headquarters, Plimpton, Rosenfeld and Gotshal’s DC office was of a humbler size, but no less intimidating.

The receptionist informed me that Mr. Paddington and Mr. Rosenfeld were in the meeting room and would I follow her, please.

“Would you like some refreshments, Mr. DiNozzo?” the receptionist asked me. “Tea? Coffee? Hot chocolate, too, if you like.”

“With marshmallows?” I asked.

“Of course.” The receptionist smiled and opened the door to the meeting room.

“Good morning, Mr. DiNozzo,” Mr. Rosenfeld rose from his seat and came forward, hand extended. Next to him, my cousin grinned and waved when he saw me.

“Tony.” Crispian smiled widely, pulling me in for a hug when I went to him. Very un-English of him, I know, but Crispian had always been odd that way.

“Thank you for coming in at such short notice,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “This shouldn’t take long. As you know, your uncle’s will was read this morning in our London office where the rest of the beneficiaries are. Because of the size of the bequest, and because Mr. Paddington is in town, we requested your presence to let you know what the late Mr. Paddington has bequeathed you.”

“You free for dinner?” Crispian leaned towards me and asked quietly, uncaring that he was interrupting Rosenfeld.

“This is a copy of your uncle’s will,” Mr. Rosenfeld said, passing me the folder.

“I’ll have to let you know later,” I said to Crispian softly.

“You see here on page 2,” Rosenfeld continued, as if neither Crispian nor I had spoken. “The bequest he has made to his son and principal heir, Crispian Eldon Paddington.” he peered at Crispian over his bifocals. “And on page 3, to you. The rest are amounts distributed to his other relatives, friends and charitable organizations.” Rosenfeld paused when there was a knock on the door and the receptionist entered with a tray bearing my chocolate and several small open-face sandwiches laid out on Wedgwood plates on a three-tier display.

I looked over the sandwiches to see what I wanted. I hadn’t had anything to eat that morning and I was hungry.

“The roast beef,” Crispian suggested, in a low voice as Rosenfeld continued. I took Crispian’s recommendation and turned my attention back to the lawyer as my cousin helped himself to more tea and sandwiches.
“Uh, I’m not sure I’m reading what I’m reading,” I said as I chewed slowly. “Uncle Clive left me his shares in the family company?” I looked at my cousin, shock registering on my face.

“Um hmm.” Crispian nodded as he chewed on a sandwich.

“That’s right,” Mr. Rosenfeld confirmed.

“And his investment portfolio,” my cousin added.

I scanned down the list of bequests, my mind in a whirl.

“There’s a house in Malibu,” Rosenfeld said.

“And Italy,” Crispian added once more, popping another sandwich in his mouth.

“The one in Malibu is managed by a property maintenance company,” Rosenfeld informed me. “But the one in Italy – Positano, to be exact – is tenanted. Sort of.”

“What do you mean ‘sort of’?” I asked.

“Your uncle has had an arrangement with the tenant for as long as Mr. Paddington has owned the property – some thirty years ago. The Gambardella’s restaurant has occupied the ground floor from before your uncle purchased the property. In lieu of rent, your uncle and his guests ate free of charge at the restaurant. The arrangement is in writing and extends to the new owner – you, Mr. DiNozzo.” Rosenfeld leafed through his document folder and extracted it for Tony. “It isn’t binding on the new owner so you are at liberty to change the terms, if you so wish. Should you wish the Gambardellas to leave, you only need to give them three months’ notice.”

“They are aware of the new ownership and the terms?” I asked.

“Indeed, they are. They are somewhat concerned, as you might expect, but a locale with a similar view is next to impossible to obtain now. Almost all the establishments in Positano, and elsewhere along the Amalfi Coast are owner-occupied and run. Perhaps you could plan to pay them a visit.”

“I will, but unlikely to be any time soon. I’ll let you know when I can get away.”

“Very well, Mr. DiNozzo. Now, there’s also a house in Delaware. Your uncle purchased it two years ago and had it remodeled.

“Delaware?” I asked, totally perplexed and looked at Crispian. “Why would your father want with a house in Delaware?”

Crispian shrugged. “I am as baffled as you, but Father loved owning properties all over the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s an igloo somewhere.

“Your uncle has been investing in property for decades, Mr. DiNozzo,” Rosenfeld said. “He’d already sold off several the last five years – but if I’m not mistaken, the Delaware property is being looked after by an old friend who was his personal chef and chauffeur for several years.”

“You mean Jed?” Crispian asked. “So that’s where he went. He made an unforgettable peach cobbler and an even more delicious crab cake. I’ve got –”

My exclamation cut my cousin off mid-sentence, “You’re shittin’ me—!” I thrust the page I was reading at Rosenfeld’s face. “He left me shares in a movie company?” I asked with patent incredulity, the Delaware house and its occupant already forgotten.
Opposite me, Crispian laughed and slid down his seat, his long legs stretched out under the table.

“He did.” Mr. Rosenfeld’s lips twitched. “Let’s see...he wrote, “And when he finds his love for chasing down villains in the Navy has waned, I bequeath him a hundred per cent of my shares in Tradewinds Entertainment, which in turn, qualifies him for a seat on the board.”

“But Tradewinds is a joint-venture with a Bollywood company,” I said, totally confounded now.

“That and more, Cuz,” Crispian said. “It’s a joint-venture with a very large Indian diversified conglomerate and the Bollywood company is merely one of the many under the Tradewinds umbrella.” He smiled at me from his languid pose. “I rather thought you’d be thrilled. It’s huge fun, the movie business. And,” he paused for effect. “I know you love your movies. Why not start producing them?”

“You’re nuts,” I muttered, but the thought was as intriguing as hell. I glanced through the rest of the will, not quite absorbing what my uncle had done. I had to talk to Crispian. Find out why his father left me all that.

“How long are you in town for?” I asked my cousin.

“I fly out on Wednesday,” he replied. “Free for dinner tonight?”

“I don’t think I can tonight,” I said. “Tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Crispian replied.

“When does probate get settled?” I asked Rosenfeld.

“We envisage six to eight months’ time,” he replied. “You will be notified, of course. Mr. DiNozzo,” the lawyer paused to let his next words sink in. “I think you do not quite realize the size of your bequest.”

Tony chuckled. “Oh I’ve got a good idea. Uncle Clive’s house in Malibu is way above my pay grade. Even SecNav’s. I’ve never been there. Just seen photos of it.” As for the other properties, I didn’t even know they existed until today.

“I’m not referring to the house, though you are very right, of course, Mr. Rosenfeld said. “The Malibu property has been valued at nine million dollars, and it’s a relatively modest one, compared to the others in the community. I was actually speaking about the shares in the Paddington Group.”

“What about them?” I asked, checking the will again. “There’s no condition attached to them, is there? Like having to resign from my present company and work in the UK firm, or move to the UK, do I?”

“No, no. Nothing like that,” Mr. Rosenfeld chuckled.

“Hey, London’s not that bad,” Crispian interjected.

“Then why are you living in Monaco?” I shot back.

“That might just change,” Crispian said softly. I was about to ask what he meant then decided we could talk about that over dinner, too.

“I was referring to the total value of the shares,” Rosenfeld said. “Including Mr. Paddington’s investment portfolio as well as a one million two hundred pounds in cash. Your uncle left you a
total of two hundred and thirty-seven million pounds, to round off the figure, Mr. DiNozzo.”

I stared at the lawyer, dumbstruck. “What? There’s got to be a mistake.” I stared at Crispian for confirmation, for some reaction but he merely lifted a brow.

“Chump change to me, cousin.” He smirked.

“I understand your surprise,” Rosenfeld said. But there is no mistake.”

“Two hundred and thirty-seven million?” I repeated. Mr. Rosenfeld nodded. “Pounds sterling?”

The lawyer nodded again. “Yes, Mr. DiNozzo. That’s an after tax figure as well. And at the current exchange rate of one point five dollars to the pound, equivalent to three hundred and fifty-five million…” Mr. Rosenfeld mentally calculated. “And five hundred thousand US dollars.”

“Shi-it.” I breathed out, still stunned.

I met Crispian for dinner the next evening and he told me his father had always had a soft spot for me.

“On account of your mother being his twin, you know,” he said.

I never knew my mother was Uncle Clive’s twin. She’d died when I was eight and all I knew was that she was younger than Uncle Clive. I’d assumed it was by years rather than minutes.

“Besides, you were such a good boy,” he added. “A good person, my Dad used to say. Not that you didn’t get up to tricks and stuff whenever you came to stay for the summer – most of them instigated by me, I admit.”

“Most, not all,” I said, smiling at the memories of those days. “And you’d cover up for me, taking the blame, when we got caught, as we inevitably did. But you’d own up whenever you were the real culprit,” I pointed out. “You didn’t sit back and let me cop it.”

“I didn’t dare,” Crispian said. “Father would know. Anyway, it was your standing up for me, protecting me, that made Father respect and trust you. He wasn’t surprised to find out you’d joined a law enforcement agency but said he didn’t want you living in near poverty when you retired, or was forced to leave if you were seriously injured in the line of duty.”

“Excuse me,” I protested. “I am not 'living in near poverty'. Agreed, the pay’s nothing to boast about but you forget, Mother did set up a trust for me and it does a very fine job of keeping me sartorially decent.”

“Agreed, but Aunt Tory’s trust fund is a pittance compared to what my father left you. He earned his billions, Tony. He didn’t inherit them, and he made sure I earned mine, too. He loved your mum deeply and missed her when she moved to the US after she met your father. Leaving you what he did is, in no way, diminishing the value of what your mother left you. It’s his way of showing what Aunt Tory and you meant to him.”

“But…three hundred million-over dollars? Didn’t anyone object? Isn’t anyone contesting it?”

“No, and they have no grounds to do so. My father was still running the company – very
successfully, I might add – when he died of the massive stroke.” Crispian drained his glass of wine and said, “Don’t fret over it, Tony. Yes, you do have responsibilities but they are non-executive ones. You’ll have to attend a board meeting once a year and sign some documents. Of course, if you can spare the time, it would be lovely to see more of you, especially as we’re expanding into the US market next year. Your input would be welcome.”

“I’m not a businessman, Cris. I’m a Federal agent.”

“You’re a consumer. Besides, it isn’t just Paddington Holdings I want to talk to you about.”

“Oh, what else, then?”

“Movies, Cuz. I want to talk about movies. And Tradewinds Entertainment.”

We did talk about the Paddington Group’s movie division and how the British film industry used to be big back in the 60s. We caught up with what we were doing work-wise and some personal stuff. Not much as I didn’t have anything new to tell and there was nothing Crispian had to say about my love life that he hadn’t already.

“Dump him, Tony,” Crispian said when I told him of my uneasiness with Scott’s persistent requests for my coming out of the closet. “He’s a leech.”

I didn’t believe my cousin and defended Scott, ignoring the small niggle of uncertainty even though we’d just started dating.

“Trust me, he’s bad news. As for your Gibbs, you’re playing in dangerous waters;”

“What do you mean?” I asked, warily. Crispian was the only one in the world who knew about my crush on Gibbs, and who’d warned me to stay clear from the day I told him about my new boss at my new job in NCIS. Twelve years ago. But did I listen? Yes. And no. Yes, I was careful not to let my infatuation show. That wasn’t difficult seeing as I was in the closet. No, because there was nothing anyone could say, or do, to stop me feeling the way I did about Gibbs.

“You know my suspicions about Special Agent Gibbs,” Crispian said. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again – the man’s gay. Deeper in the closet than anyone could ever be. Why the hell do you think his three marriages didn’t work out? His wives finally realized it and bolted, I tell you.”


“Because,” Crispian leaned forward to fix his blue eyes on me. “His type? When they finally crack, all hell breaks out. You mark my words, cuz. One of these days, that crack’s going to appear and your Gibbs is going to turn your world upside down.”

I shook my head, smiling. “I’d say he’s done that already. My head’s been spinning the last twelve years.”

“Then, as you Americans say, ‘you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet.”

I burst out laughing because the phrase sounded comical spoken in Crispian’s upper-crust British
So here I am, ten months later.

Three hundred and fifty-five million dollars richer as of last week, when the funds were finally transferred to my bank account, and the three properties to my name, as were the shares to the Paddington Group and Tradewinds.

And I still felt my life was missing something vital.

It was a quiet Monday with no early morning call from Gibbs about a dead sailor so I took the opportunity during the drive to do some hard thinking about Scott.

What had started off as fun and even exhilarating, had become a pain in the butt, to put it mildly. Add to that, my own pathetic obsession with my boss made life more than uncomfortable these days. Scott was right - I was too wrapped-up with Gibbs and my job. The latter because of the former.

I wanted Crispian to be right, but was realistic enough to know it was a long shot. Crispian claimed his gaydar was never wrong but Crispian had never met Gibbs so I was giving his pronouncement a large pinch of salt.

I know I’m stupid beyond belief to hang on to the thread-thin hope and fantasy that Gibbs had feelings for me, his senior special agent. Not just regular feelings. *Feeling* feelings. The type of feelings that got me into trouble every night whenever I closed my eyes and pretended it was Gibbs, not Scott, kissing me; that whenever I turned on my bed, it was Gibbs next to me instead of Scott; the type that when I took myself in hand, it was Gibbs’ name that I gasped out as I spilled myself.

*That* type of feeling.

It was the hopelessness of it that made me look for any substitutes that could provide some momentary relief. I’d met my fair share of men since I accepted I was gay at the age of sixteen. Dad must have suspected it and shipped me off to the Rhodes military academy at the age of 17. While the military held no allure for me, it enabled me to understand and appreciate men like Gibbs. It was that, too, that led me to fantasize that the once-a-Marine-always-a-Marine Jethro Gibbs was a deeply-closeted gay.

I wouldn’t label myself a man-whore but my sex-drive meant I didn’t manage well when it was too long between drinks. Even McGee and Ziva would throw the *‘you need to get laid, Tony’* retort whenever my frustration with my personal life made me act up.
So I started to have something longer than a weekend hook-up. Most of them managed to last a few weeks to a few months. I even hoped one of them would have the potential of turning into something serious but none ever did. I’d wake up one morning and decide I wanted to move on.

Which is why it’s a surprise to me that it took me nearly a year before I decided to call it quits with Scott. I wished celibacy was an alternative but I’m too realistic to kid myself that would work.

I waved to the guard at the entrance to our building, wondering at the same time, who Gibbs was dating now. I’d seen a succession of women run through the boss’ fingers and I know there was one he found really hot – that was what McGee said, anyway, - but Holly Snow was the DC equivalent of a Hollywood madam and Gibbs, being the conservative he is, would never get involved with someone like that. Then again, the boss had balls, I have to say. And if he’d wanted Ms. Snow and she was prepared to give up her career, he wouldn’t care what anyone said.

That just made me envy Holly Snow and every woman Gibbs had ever shown an interest in.

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I rode up the elevator, still thinking of Gibbs and his women as I strolled into the bullpen.

It was empty. No one. Not even Gibbs.

It was half an hour later before McGee arrived, followed by Dorneget, who’d just joined our team. Had I left Scott’s home that early?

Assuming Gibbs was up at MTAC or with the Director, we got ourselves ready to start the work week and, of course, no week started without me baiting McGee. Or Ziva, except Ziva had upped and left suddenly, announcing that she was marrying Eytan, her Israeli boyfriend and returning to Israel with him. I knew she and Eytan, a cardiac surgeon, had been dating for over a year and living together the last three months. He had accepted a temp position in Israel and Ziva was accompanying him. I was happy for her, of course, as I was happy for McGee, who was doing fine with Delilah. Even Abby was seeing someone, which left me…about to break up again for the umpteenth time. I must have inherited this fear of commitment gene from Senior. I’ve lost track of the Flavor-of-the-Month where my father and his women are concerned, especially when they are young enough to be his daughter.

McGee waited a full ten minutes without a single nosy question from me about his weekend with Delilah before he decided something was wrong. Even Dorneget looked up expectantly every now and then and finally frowned at McGee, tilting his head towards me pointedly. I was fully aware of their reactions and ignored them. I don’t know why, though. Suddenly, I felt bored with being the Tony everyone expected.

McGee shrugged at Dorneget’s questioning gesture. “How was your weekend, Tony?” he asked me, unable to stand it any longer.

“Could be better,” I responded blandly, not even looking up from my monitor screen. “How was yours?”

“Promising.”

I nodded. “Good for you.”
McGee frowned. “Don’t you want to know the details?”

“Would you tell me?”

“No.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask.”

“Alright, Tony,” McGee asked, coming up to my desk. “What’s wrong?”


“Don’t –” McGee gave me an exasperated look but I stood and moved him aside, going up to Gibbs’ desk to place a folder on it.

“Where’s Gibbs?” Dorneget asked just as Director Vance entered the bullpen, asking the same thing.

“Uh, I think he’s gone for his haircut, Director,” McGee replied. “That’s right,” I smiled as I remembered. “It’s Haircut Day today. The bowl should be coming off just about nuh… Ow!” The sudden headslap sent me and the other two agents scrambling back to our desks.

“Morning, Gibbs.” Director Vance nodded at his MCRT head. “Your barber opens this early?”

“For me he does,” Gibbs replied.

Vance huffed, remembering the Dead Rose Slasher case Gibbs had handled, resulting his barber’s son being ruled out as a suspect. As an expression of his gratitude, Frank, Gibbs’ barber, told Gibbs he would get free haircuts for life, and at Gibbs’ convenience.

“My office, Gibbs,” Vance said.

Our eyes followed the two men up the stairs.

My cell phone sounded and I took it out, frowning at a number I didn’t recognize. I left the bullpen to talk in private, in case it was one of my ex-beards.

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My return to the bullpen elicited curious looks from McGee.

“Okay, I’ll take pity on you and put you out of your misery,” I said to him. “That was the ad agency about my photoshoot on Saturday. It’s fixed and I am to report to the studio at 7 o’clock in the morning. Sharp.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going to be a calendar model, Tony.” Dorneget said. “I mean, I can, since you’re so…um, hot, but that I’m actually working with a guy who’s going to be a calendar pinup.”

McGee rolled his eyes and stuck two fingers in his mouth behind his monitor, making gagging
gestures at me.

“Why not?” I asked, ignoring McGee. “It’s for a good cause and Callen from NCIS LA will be with me.”

“You two going to get cozy for the shoot?” McGee asked, sniggering.

“If they do, the calendar will outsell every other,” Dorneget said. “You will be getting advance prints, won’t you?”

“Ladies, don’t we have any cases to work? Let’s get cracking before the boss comes back.” I glanced upstairs then asked McGee, nodding at Gibbs’ desk, “He hasn’t come down yet?”

“No,” McGee replied. “Must be something brewing.”

“Going to see Abby if Gibbs looks for me,” I said.

END OF TONY’S POV

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3RD PERSON POV

“Does Tony have a girlfriend?” Dorneget asked McGee as soon as Tony was out of earshot.

“Tony always has at least one girlfriend,” McGee said, in response to Dorneget’s look. “Current flavor of the month is pinned up on his board. Christie.”

“No, come on. That’s a Victoria’s Secret calendar.” At McGee’s look, Dorneget’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously? That’s not just a pinup?”

“No,” McGee answered, not looking up from his keyboard. “Christie’s for real. Is that pinup on your corkboard for real?” McGee asked, looking pointedly at the male model in a beach pose behind Dorneget’s chair.

“Of course he’s real,” Dorneget replied indignantly. “Daniel Garofali is one the top male models!”

“Yeah, but are you dating him?” McGee asked, pointedly.

“No, but a boy can dream…” Dorneget’s voice trailed off dreamily as he stared into space. Bringing his eyes back to McGee, he added, “DiNozzo’s really dating a Victoria’s Secret model?”
“Yes, he is. Sorry, Dorneget.”

“DiNozzo’s kinda awesome, huh?”

McGee shook his head slowly. “You need to cut out that hero-worship, Dorneget. I know Tony after all these years. He’s always hiding something or other just so he can spring it on us at the designated time.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s just a big kid, that’s why. You wait. One of these days, when you least expect it, when he catches you drooling over his picture of Christie, he’ll reveal that she’s really a ‘he’.”

“Well, it won’t be me drooling over Christie,” Dorneget pointed out.

“That’s right, what am I saying?” McGee said. “You’re too busy drooling over Tony.”

“Don’t say that, McGee!” Dorneget looked around in alarm. “Gibbs might hear you and I’ll be thrown back over the divider. You know this position is important to me and I want Gibbs to keep me instead of bringing in someone new.”

“Then stop drooling at Tony. Gibbs will notice, if he hasn’t already.”

“Oh crap. You think he has? Is that why he gives me those piercing looks?”

McGee grinned. “Lighten up, Probie.”

“I’m not a probie,” Dorneget protested. “I’m a full-fledged special agent.”

“Not of this team, you’re not,” McGee told him. “Not yet, anyway. But just having Gibbs accept you in the team as a probie already says a lot.”

“That’s why I’m freaking out!” Dorneget said. “I don’t even know if Gibbs knows I’m gay. What if he just tolerates it then finds out I’ve – I’ve got this uber-crush on DiNozzo?”

“Dorney, if Gibbs has noticed, you’d know,” McGee said with an eye-roll. “And yes, Tony can be awesome. *When* he wants to be. Might take a while to realize that…but yeah, he makes a good friend.”

A phone call curtailed their conversation and the two agents got busy.

*TBC*
GIBBS' POV

“We're leaving for Naples next week. Anti-terrorist Taskforce Conference,” Vance told me as I took a seat in front of his desk. “DiNozzo applied for leave and I saw that you approved it.”

“I can always cancel it,” I replied.

“Can your team handle two men short? The team lead and the senior agent?”

“Won't be short. Dorneget's shaping up well and Muldoon's coming across this afternoon. McGee can hold his own any time, too.”

Vance nodded. “The Task Force meeting isn't why I called you in here.”

I cocked my newly-cropped head in inquiry.

“I've decided to bring my retirement forward,” Vance said. Seeing the look of concern on my face, he quickly added, “It's not Jackie. She's doing fine. Actually, it is about Jackie. We've decided on moving to the West Coast but that means juggling dates to coincide with the kids' school schedules and they want time to adjust before the term begins.”

“Why SoCal?” I asked. “Not that it's not a bad place to be. I'd rather live there any time.” *If Tony weren't here in DC.*

“Jackie and the girls want to live somewhere warm. We thought of Florida but decided on
California because Kayla and Jared both have friends who have moved to San Francisco."

“And your successor is okay with the change of date?"

“Well, that was one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you,” Vance replied. “And why it's good that you're accompanying me to Naples. I -”

“Oh no.” I put both hands up to stop Vance. “I'm not interested.”

“Gibbs -”

“No, Leon. We've been through this before. I don't want to sit in your chair. I'm also tired,” I sighed. “I'm thinking I need a break myself.”

“Something wrong?” Vance asked, shooting me a worried look. I had never had a sick day in all the years I'd been at NCIS so his concern was understandable. Injured, yes, but not ill. Not even a cold. “You gone for your physical?” he asked.

“I'm fine,” I assured him. “Not sick, I mean. Just feeling a little distracted.” Even as I denied I wasn't ill, I knew my odd mood was evident in my voice.

Vance sighed and I knew I hadn't fooled him. “You buried your father not too long ago. You’re driving yourself too hard. I'm surprised it's taken you this long to accept your body needs to rest up. It's a tough job, the one we have, so give yourself a break.”

“It's not the job. It's me.” I sighed as I made that admission. “Maybe it is the job, too. I just feel I've lost so much...and I'm going to lose more if I don't do something.”

Vance looked at me, his worry increasing. “You're not invincible, Gibbs. You're not young anymore, either. Go to one of those rejuvenation spas or something and get your equilibrium back.”

I snorted in derision and rolled my eyes.

“I'm serious. You'll make a mistake one of these days that'll cost you. I must sound like a broken record because I recall telling you the same thing at least once a year.”

“And have I made any mistakes?” Why the hell was I arguing? Didn't I already admit I felt burnt out? Worried?

“No, but it doesn't mean it won't happen this year,” Vance growled.

He was right, of course.

Vance and I go way back - to when I was still a wet-behind-the-ears probie with Dwayne Cassius Pride, or King as I call him, both of us knocking ourselves out to prove our abilities and earn our cred amongst the rest of the agents. Through the years, King and I had watched Leon work his way up, knock aside his obstacles and run the gauntlet. Whatever info gaps I had, Mike Franks had filled them for me, becoming not just a mentor but a friend when King - my only friend at the time - was transferred to different field offices while I stayed put in DC. Through all that, I'd seen Vance nurture a wife and family, almost lose a wife when Jackie was diagnosed with lung cancer even though both of them were non-smokers.

Vance had dropped by my basement one night to tell me. The news that Jackie had cancer had devastated him. I was just as upset because Jackie had welcomed me into her home when I lost
Shannon and Kelly. Together with her husband and Mike Franks, these people were my towers of strength and support at the lowest point of my life. King, too, would call me everyday until he felt I was in a better place. We still talk once a week.

After Mike died, I grew closer to Vance, even though at work we maintained our professional distance when he became Director. Losing Jackie would leave me bereft, too.

Last month, Vance dropped in again, but this time to tell me Jackie was fine; that the latest tests showed all traces of her cancer had disappeared. Even the doctors couldn't explain it but did say that they had seen it happen before.

Vance had chosen to believe he was being given a second chance to get his priorities right and to be content with having reached the Director's position. Jackie's health scare had galvanized him into making his family a priority.

Losing our lives came with the territory for people like Leon and me but it hurt worse when it took the lives of those we loved.

I had been doing my job as a Marine when Shannon and Kelly were killed. I was doing my job when I nearly lost my life - and my father's - to Paloma, the daughter of my family's killer. Whom I had killed. Executed.

Except this time, it wasn't losing someone that led to my decision to retire. I just chose to let Vance think it was. Guilt gnawed at me. I didn't want to lie to Vance about what was really worrying me but this...this part of me...it was too hard to talk about even to someone as close to me as Vance. Even Tobias. Only King knew, but King knew me well enough to leave my private life alone. Plus, King was 1,500 klicks away. Much too far for someone who was my closest friend.

Tobias became much closer because we could hang out together as much as we wanted. Like DiNozzo, he had a habit of dropping in unannounced, though DiNozzo hadn't been doing that the last few months. I missed his company but would never ever let him know that, of course.

“But it isn't just your physical health I'm concerned about. As your friend, it hurts to see you do this every anniversary of Shannon's death,” Vance said quietly. It didn't register at first, so lost was I in my own thoughts.

“It's been over twenty years, Gibbs,” Vance continued. “You have to move on.”

I shook myself mentally and brought my attention back to Vance. “Leon, if I didn't, I wouldn't be alive today.” My voice sounded bleak, a reflection of what was in me right now.

“I mean move on as in living your life as Shannon would have wanted you to instead of watching your life pass you by.”

I gave a derisive snort. “I married three more times. Moved on enough, dontcha think?”

“Not telling you to find another wife. Just advising you to live, not exist. Do you really think Shannon would be happy she knew you jump into this pit every year when the anniversary of her death nears? And don't tell me you don't do that because you sure as hell do. What's more, it's been getting worse the last couple of years. Just as you've been looking the worse for wear the last six months.”

I sighed heavily as people do when they don't want to hear what you're telling them.”Hey, I hear you. I heard you last year and the year before that. That's why I'm putting in for early retirement.”
“Retirement?” Vance straightened up. “I'm just talking about you taking a break, not leave completely. You're only fifty. Mandatory retirement's five years away.”

“That's why it's called 'early retirement'. I don't wanna be chasing after bad guys at my age. These knees aren't what they used to be. Not after that damned bullet last year.”

“Then go chase women instead. Or is your -” Vance nodded at my groin, “Not what it used to be?”

“My dick works just fine, thank you,” I growled.

“Then start taking time to enjoy it before it reaches its expiry date. You're healthier and fitter than most men half your age so it's not your physical health I'm talking about.” Vance glared at me then his expression softened. “Jethro, I'm talking to you as a friend, but I will, as your Director, send you to the department shrink if I have to.”

“I got it in hand, Leon. I just want out so that I can go live that life you tell me I'm allowing to pass me by!”

Vance chewed on that silently. Gibbs couldn't leave. Not yet. Not now. SecNav would hit the roof with two senior staff leaving within the same year, because while his successor had already been confirmed, there was no one geared to head up the MCRT. DiNozzo could, but not just yet. But if Gibbs was in as bad a state as he looked, he'd have to support his decision to retire early.

"Convince me I've got nothing to worry about,” Vance challenged, instead. “After the Taskforce conference, you take the rest of the week off. More, if you can. Better still, take your vacation in Italy. Otherwise you'd just come back and hide in your basement. Go tour the place. Pick up some hot Italian mama and work off that tension. Get yourself a new girlfriend. One that will give up her career for you. Not the other way round.”

I glared at Vance, daring him to go there. Her name lingered unspoken in the air between Vance and me. It was a long time ago. I'd put it down to a probie mistake even though I was way past being a probie. Still, my inner battle with That Side of Me had caused me to prove that I could feel passion for a woman.

Hell, I'd done such a good job, I'd convinced myself she was trading me for her career and had been appropriately indignant and hurt, but the truth (when I finally acknowledged it) was that I was bloody relieved to be off the hook!

Perceiving my silence as having taken offence at his insinuations, Vance shook his head and added, quietly, “You know what I mean. Hell, I look forward to retiring myself. I've been at this game way too long.”

“Then you know exactly how I feel and why I want out.”

Vance sighed. “I know how you feel. I just don't know if retirement, especially early retirement, is what you need.”

“And I suppose you're going to tell me what I need?” I growled back.

“Someone like Jackie.”

“Sorry, she's taken.”

“Just someone to live for, then.” Vance shoved his chair back and stood. “Do me a favor and let it rest awhile. We'll talk again in Naples.”
"Leon -" I paused. Vance paused in mid-step to look at me. I saw the flicker of concern pass his face. I wanted to tell him what was really bugging me but couldn't bring myself to. Too many years in the Navy had eaten into me too deeply. I'd seen the homophobic attitude that was prevalent in the armed forces and even with the repeal of DADT, I wasn't about to tell anyone I was gay. Or bi. Or whatever-the-fuck. I didn't care how neutral or supportive everyone was, my private life was just that. Private. Yet Vance was my friend. A close friend. I should tell him. “I know you care and I appreciate it.” I waited a beat but what little courage I had dissipated. Once again, I chickened out. Then I wondered if it would be any easier coming out to Tobias.

Probably not.

“But I'm handling it, Leon. I'm fine.” I decided there and then that I wouldn't tell my two friends I was gay until after I'd retired. Or maybe not at all. It wasn't as if I was in a committed relationship and wanted to get married. What's to stop me from going to the grave with my secret intact?

“How's DiNozzo doing?” Vance asked, suddenly changing direction.

“Fine, why?”

“You did mention a couple of months back that he was more than ready to lead his own team.”

“He is.”

“Then you can recommend that in writing before we leave for Naples.”

I cocked my head. “Any particular reason why it has to be before Naples?”

“No.” Vance didn't elaborate and I moved towards the door. “And speaking of DiNozzo -” Vance added, coming round from his desk. “I want you to drop in on the photo-shoot and make sure we get some good pics in.”

I looked horrified and annoyed at the same time. “Leon! I'm not hanging around a bunch of half-naked men having their photos taken! I can't even believe you approved this.”

“Not me. SecNav,” Vance replied. “DiNozzo and Callen had better make us look good. SecNav wants us to up our profile - budget time approaching - and all the other agencies are doing it. He wants NCIS to beat all of them.”

“At what?” I spat out. “Being calendar models or solving crimes?”

“Everyone knows sex sells and a calendar showing the sexy side of the Feds is something new. Well, almost. Didn't the firefighters do one already? Anyway, go check it out. It'll do you good to do something frivolous for a change. Be spontaneous, Jethro.” He grinned at me. “By the way, Jackie told me all the hot male models are gay.” he chuckled, as the we went to the door. “Which is good news for straight guys like us. Of course, they are known to like flirting with straight guys so be warned, okay? If one of those cute young Feds invites you out for a drink, it's going to lead to dinner. Next thing you know, you're waking up next to him.”

“Leon, sometimes you scare me.”

Vance chuckled. “Don't say I didn't warn you.”

“Gay men have hit on me before, Leon. I know how to handle them.” I opened the door but was still looking back at Vance. “Besides, I'd have to be shitfaced drunk to fuck a man.”
I stopped short as I ran smack into Tony.

“If! Hey Gibbs! Boss. Uh, Director,” Tony said. “The slides for your Naples meeting is ready. You want me to sit in?”

“Yes, DiNozzo, I do,” Vance replied.

The three of us headed next door to MTAC. As we took our seats in the small auditorium, Vance leaned in to me and said in an urgent whisper, “By the way, tell me you're not homophobic.”

I looked at Vance, puzzled. “Why you asking?”

“Because SecNav wants NCIS to project a gay-friendly face. DADT may be dead but he thinks we can do more and he wants NCIS to be at the forefront. Beat the rest of the alphabet soup in promoting a gay-friendly workplace.”

“What's he going to do? Give gay special agents an award for coming out?” I chuckled. “How did I miss that memo?”

“You wouldn't be too far out, thinking that,” Vance said.

I snorted. “Old habits die hard, Leon. Even if it worked, it'd still be only the young ones wearing pink and waving rainbow flags. I can't see a married man with three kids suddenly coming out, can you?”

“Been known to happen enough times not to shock me anymore,” Vance said. “Makes me wonder if NCIS has any married men in the closet.”

To my relief, McGee came over to tell Vance we could commence the presentation.

A case came in later in the afternoon and as the team worked seamlessly together, I couldn't help the sense of comfort I derived just watching them. I'd worked with DiNozzo and McGee for ten years; longer in Tony's case. I'd miss this if I left but I'd reached a point where I was convinced it was the best thing to do.

I know, in my heart, I'm a 'one' type of guy - one-woman, one job, one...man? If Shannon hadn't been killed, I'd still be married to her. If I hadn't lost Shannon, I would still be in the Marines.

But Shannon was gone, I'd left the Marines...and where was I now? Just sitting and waiting. For what, I'm not sure I know. Or maybe I do, but won't acknowledge it.

Did I know when Tony DiNozzo became more than just a co-worker? Not really. I know that in just the first few months of working with him, I'd started wishing I'd met him before I started going with Shannon; implausible as that may be since Stillwater, Pennsylvania, is not the kind of place you'd find a Tony DiNozzo. Still, I can't help wondering how different my life would have been if I'd come out at eighteen, if I hadn't joined the Navy.

But I rarely indulge in ‘what-ifs’. They are as pointless as they are endless. I know, for sure, that I
wanted Tony DiNozzo the moment I set eyes on him. I also know I've successfully kept that in check and not once did I ever allow it to show. Not in the dozen years Tony had been by my side as my faithful lieutenant.

As each anniversary of Shannon's and Kelly's death drew near, the cloud of depression always got heavier. I sensed that having Tony beside me every working day, had helped me survive. Despite my decision to retire, I knew if I couldn't enter the bullpen each day and see Tony there, humming some song from one movie or another, if I never again heard him call me 'boss' or annoy McGee just for the hell of it, my life would be so empty I wouldn't want it.

Overly-dramatic? I guess. I dunno. My mind's been in a jumble lately. I can't even explain how Tony got to become so indispensable. That I might be the same to him is beyond the realm of my imagination. Even if I were given the opportunity to tell Tony how I feel about him, I doubt I could. How do I tell another man who's so socially adept, who's eye candy to every woman who isn't blind, who's a dozen years younger, that I was having thoughts about him I had no business thinking.

No, those were destined to stay buried. Even if, by some fluke of fate, Tony and I did get together, we are too different. We have different outlooks on life, different likes and dislikes. While the difference worked to our advantage in our professional relationship, they could strain a personal one. I'd far rather have Tony see me as a mentor and friend than as a lover he has to eventually cut loose.

That, I couldn't handle.

The next few days went by as usual - a case being called in on Thursday afternoon and another on Friday morning. The team was kept busy but they were straightforward cases so when Friday evening arrived and everyone else had gone but Tony, I asked the inevitable question. “It's Friday, DiNozzo. Don't you have a hot date?”

“Leaving soon, boss,” Tony replied. “Most people meet up at the clubs after dinner. Way too early for the underground clubs...but you wouldn't know what those are,” he muttered. Then, in a bright voice, asked, “What about you?”

“I got my own underground club,” I smirked, and headed for the elevator. “Don't forget your photo-shoot in the morning.”

“I won't. What underground club?” Tony asked as the elevator doors started closing on me. “Ahh, so.” Tony grinned as the answer came to him.

My cell sounded as I rode down to the car park. “Yeah. Gibbs.”

It was Tobias. “Want to join Diane and me for dinner?” he asked. “There's this new Italian place she wants to try.” Diane? Tobias was having dinner with his ex? With our ex? I could hear Diane next to him, hissing, “Don't let him get away with 'no'!”

“Been a grueling week,” I replied, wanting to ask Tobias what the hell he was thinking. I knew he saw Diane often but only because of their daughter, Emily. This sounded more like a dinner date. If it was a date, why did they want me along? “Gonna grab something on the way home,” I added.
“Then I'm going to crash so don't call me over the weekend because I don't want to get out of bed till Monday.”

“You still need to eat,” Tobias said. “I'll drop something off after dinner.”

“No. I'm fine.” What was with all this fussing?

“You're not fine, Gibbs,” Tobias insisted. I heard a smack and guessed it was Diane attacking the poor sucker again. “No, he's not fine!” she whispered. “And don't tell him we're going over. He'll lock the door!” I heard Tobias grumble something under his breath. “C'mon, have a beer with me,” he whined. “I'll drop Diane home and come over.” I could imagine Diane glaring at him as she said, “Don't you dare!”

“I gotta go.” I disconnected and sat in my car for several minutes. Tobias and Diane meant well, like everyone else. Like everyone, they thought my problem was not being able to get over Shannon. Why would they think anything else?

In the early years, the emotional fallout of that loss would near paralyze me. It was my training and self-discipline that saved me from eating my Sig. Meeting DiNozzo had curtailed that urge to end it once and for all, but also replaced the old pain for a new, more terrifying one.

I turned the engine over and left the car park, stopping to buy a burger on the way home. ‘What about you?’, DiNozzo had asked me earlier. What about you, Leroy, I asked myself. Where are you going? Do you know? A sudden surge of longing filled me. One so acute, so palpable I felt as if my insides were being skewered.

Still, Vance was right. I did this every year. Getting married again definitely wasn't the answer. Besides, I couldn't begin to contemplate another woman in my life making me more miserable than I am right now. Their demands, their clinginess, their constant harping...why the hell would I want to live with that? Three marriages had cured my belief that a woman would set me straight, pun intended. Not that they ever suspected. Then again, who knew? Maybe in the end they did suspect but were too decent to throw it in my face. Yeah, because in those moments of clarity and honesty, I could acknowledge my part in the failure of my marriages; I could acknowledge that I was the bastard they'd accused me of being and they did, in fact, try to save the marriage; that I had done three good, decent women a grave injustice by getting involved with them then compounding my sin by marrying them.

There was no denying that it was I who, after signing that piece of paper, walked away emotionally, then sexually; till in the end all we had left was a shell of a marriage...till they did the smart thing and walked away completely.

A fucking bastard. That I sure was. As for Shannon, perhaps she was taken from me before she discovered what a liar I was, before I destroyed that one good thing in my life, too. Kelly, as well, for if I had made Shannon miserable, Kelly would not have remained unaffected.

Consequences. I'm big on them. I was mindful of the necessity for rules way before Shannon taught me the wisdom of following them. My Dad was a strict disciplinarian and working in his store after school had been tough. But it prepared me for the Marines and after I'd been one for a few years, I came to fully appreciate what my Dad had instilled in me.

What was missing, though, was the woman's touch. I had that during my childhood and grew up watching Mom help Dad out in the store. She'd chat with customers, sharing her experiences with a particular brand of product and giving out samples of her baking using the ingredients in the store.
Every Friday she had her cakes and cookies laid out on a table beside the cash counter. Being just a tiny town, Dad made enough from the store to provide the family with our basic needs and not much more. Small and inconsequential Stillwater was, my mother marketed and promoted the products as if our store was located in the state capital.

It was also my mom who introduced me to pistachios. There weren't any in Stillwater back in the 60s. Ducky, that walking font of information, told me pistachios were only commercially-produced in the US in 1976. Mom had been given a large bagful by a distant relative who lived out west in California and was visiting family still out here in the East. Mom had driven two and half hours to see her in Philly and come home with that huge bag of strange-looking nuts. I'd gone running to my her later, yelling that they'd gone off because they were green inside.

I can't eat pistachios today without being reminded of my mother; of her ready smile, her open generosity and love of people. My mom loved meeting people, loved getting to know them and loved trying new things. That was why Tony reminded me of her, too. They both have those same traits.

How could I even dare contemplate someone like Tony loving me? Tony, who was so full of life, who took each day as it came with all the cheerfulness and enthusiasm of a man who believed Life was made for him? What would a man like that want with a bitter old goat like me?

On my better days I would believe I had some of my mother's traits; that I could enjoy socializing (to a certain extent), that I could be warm and even ebullient at times. On these days, I wanted to be a better person, socially-speaking. I didn't want to remain in the internal prison I'd created for myself, unable to articulate my thoughts, able only to let them churn in my head like now.

I couldn't help the wave of hopelessness crashing over me. Maybe some music might be good for my dying old soul so I switched on the radio which was permanently on an oldies channel. The DJ was waffling on about something or other. I didn't hear, berating myself instead for giving in to my pity party.

Then I heard it.

A melody and words that made yesterday's memories intertwine with today's dreams - Dusty Springfield's 'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me' - one of the biggest hits of 1966. Shannon's song.

Like me, Shannon loved the oldies music and she'd always want to play those rather than the current hits which, for us, would have been music from the late 70s and early 80s. Released just a couple of years before Shannon was born, You Don't Have to Say You Love Me was one of her favorites and she would sing it as she cleaned the house, using an all-purpose cleaner spray as her microphone.

At her funeral, I'd played it at the end of the simple service and I hadn't cared that the minister thought “Nearer to Thee, my God” was more appropriate.

Tonight, though, in the light of everything, I thought the lyrics could be taking the words right out of my heart. But not for Shannon.

You don't have to say you love me,
Just be close at hand
You don't have to stay forever
I will understand
Believe me, believe me
I can't help but love you
But believe me
I'll never tie you down...

It was the first time I had been able to associate something linked to Shannon with someone else. It shocked me and turned the burger I'd been eating into soured pig slop. These days I try so damned hard not to think about Tony, especially once the work day was over. To think of him instead of Shannon, to associate the lyrics with him instead of my wife on the anniversary of her death, when her song was being played ought to feel sacrilegious.

But it didn't, and that itself sent me into an emotional spiral. The sense that my entire life was still missing a vital component, one I had difficulty acknowledging because I was so fucking scared, overwhelmed me.

The thoughts and desires that I had successfully kept at bay all these years were no longer willing to be confined. This anniversary, he was there in my thoughts more than Shannon and Kelly. This time I was confronted with the realization that the pain of loss had changed; no, not the pain itself but who it had become centered on.

It may be stupid but I felt the emptiness right now more than ever before - the loss of a love that had consumed my days and nights yet had never been mine in the first place.

Right now, I'd give anything in exchange to be with Tony if only for a while.

You don't have to say you love me, Tony, just be close at hand. You don't have to stay forever...

I pulled over. Killed the engine.

No one saw the tears that trickled down my cheeks. No one heard my quiet sobs. When the morning comes, I will forget them, too. The will is a powerful force, indeed.

END OF GIBBS’ POV

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TBC
TONY’S POV

Traffic was light as I headed home. I had to be at the photo studio by seven tomorrow morning so when Scott didn't answer my call, I left him a text, saying I couldn't meet him. I had reached home and was eating leftovers for dinner when his reply arrived.

*Was hoping u'd drop by but I know. Duty calls. Have u done anythg about my request? I do nd yr help, love.*

I didn't reply. Any discussion about money would end the same way - in a quarrel. I ate my dinner listlessly, not tasting what I swallowed. The TV was on but I didn't give a damn what was showing. It was just more noise in a world that was already filled with too much auditory and visual clutter. I took the plate to the sink and washed it.

Taking a beer from the fridge, I wondered what Gibbs was doing now. Sanding in his basement, his "underground club", no doubt. I smiled a little sadly. I hadn't been dropping by like I used to. It got too hard on the heart, pulling up at Gibbs' house, entering like I lived there, going down the basement steps and seeing the familiar silver head come into view.

I just can't do it anymore. Can't keep dropping in, bringing a six-pack or his favorite Chinese, happy just to be in his presence. I feel like I've reached a saturation point. Can't go on pretending anymore, cant be the happy-go-lucky guy doing funnies every day.

I'd reached that point in my life where I wanted to put down roots. I didn't mean where I lived but in terms of who and what I was. Yeah, existential shit.

My wealth meant I no longer needed to work to pay the bills but I also knew I worked to be around people, to build relationships even if they were with work colleagues. I had no one else apart from them. I would have moved to London because Crispin had asked me enough times before. I had declined because I like living in the US.

Lately, though, I have been giving relocating a lot of thought, especially now that I was on the board of Tradewinds. If I left NCIS to work full time in Tradewinds, it would be a move over to the West Coast, not just a brand new career.

As always, though, my obsession with Gibbs held me back. I was addicted to the guy even though he'd never given me the slightest hope that things could move in a new direction for us. Nope, Gibbs would be the same grouchy old bastard until he keeled over his desk.

Which means I need to get off my mental ass and move on. I had my vacation coming up and was planning to spend part of it with Crispin. I had no plans for the rest of it and would probably hop over to Paris for a few days. Or, I could head to Positano and check out the property Uncle Clive left me.
Taking the bottle of Corona Light and a coaster, I set the beer on my baby grand. I had so many songs for Gibbs. Songs whose lyrics reflected the fantasy conversations we had, songs that carried me away just with their melody and echoed the hopes and dreams I could not help nurturing, futile though they may be.

Yet, there had been so many occasions when I thought he was looking at me with That Look. You know, the one that speaks of interest beyond the usual? Beyond our case work? There have been times when he'd invited the team over to his house for a barbecue and I'd catch him looking at me speculatively. Yet just as quickly that look would vanish and I'd be left thinking it was a good thing I had the sense and control not to misinterpret it.

My relief and pats-on-the-back would morph into self-recriminations, though, and I'd end up a pathetic heap, crawling into bed knowing sleep would not come easy.

Next morning, I'd haul myself out of bed, go in to work, and do it all over again.

END OF TONY'S POV

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GIBBS' POV

The glass lay empty on the floor beside me. I'd slumped down against the table leg, too depressed and weary to get up and head upstairs to my bedroom.

*Tony.* The name had long become a litany in my head. God, I wanted that man way too much for my good. Or his. The foolishness of it embarrassed me - pining away for a man who'd never shown the slightest interest in me *that way.* I'll never roll my eyes at teenagers ever again.

Guess I'd better take that week off as Vance ordered but after that, I was clearing out. I had enough money saved up since all my exes had been professionals earning a good salary, we had no kids, so there were no alimonies to pay. Even Diane, who'd cleaned Tobias and me out when she left, had, believe it or not, returned half of what she took from us after winning a lottery. Both Tobias and I had been flabbergasted but she'd said she was happy, that Victor was the best thing that had ever happened to her and she could be magnanimous.

Which reminded me I wanted to ask Tobias what the hell was going on between him and Diane. Whatever it was, as long as I didn't get dragged into it, I couldn't care less.

It wasn't that I didn't like Diane. I did when I married her, I liked her even when she got Tobias to
marry her, and I still like her now. I just don't want her poking her nose in my business, which she has a tendency to do. We'd been divorced for years, for God's sake, and there was Tobias who'd somehow become a close friend. One I could put up my feet and kick back with and there was a familiarity between him and me that wasn't there with Vance.

My thoughts drifted to Mike Franks living contentedly in Mexico when he retired. King and I had talked quite a bit about retiring together. Somewhere warm, not necessarily Louisiana but definitely not Mexico. Too many bad associations there but somewhere there were no snowstorms to worry about, no shoveling snow. Winter, snow, crackling fires...they were for snuggling. Can't snuggle when you're alone.

I refilled my glass and allowed myself one more fantasy of nuzzling up to Tony on a cold winter's day.

Footsteps on the stairs had me looking up hopefully.

"You look like hell," Tobias said.


"And I'm going to catch hell when Diane finds out I've sneaked out to see you."

"I don't wanna know, Tobias," I said.

Tobias rooted around the counter for a cup, poured some bourbon for himself and dropped down beside me.

"Maybe, but I can't let you do this to yourself same time every year." I grunted in response. "Heard you're leaving for Naples with your boss. Be good to take some time off while you're there."

"Not you, too." I groaned.

"What? Gotta be right if everyone can see you need to stop this. I know you loved them. I'd be as devastated if I lost Emily, but it's not healthy, what you're doing," he pointed out. "And I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't tell you. Besides, Diane would kill me if I didn't keep an eye on you."

I looked askance at him. "Diane?"

"Topic for another day," Tobias said.

I glared at him, dread for my best friend building. "Diane?" I repeated.

Tobias held up his hand. "You're not gonna change the subject."

"Leave me alone. Both of you. I'm not Emily's kid brother! I don't need keeping an eye on."

"Can't do that, sorry." Tobias leaned against me and clinked his glass against mine. "Know something funny Diane said?" he asked.

"Didn't you just say Diane's a topic for another day?"

"This isn't about Diane. It's about you."

I snorted but ignored his statement otherwise.
"Don't you want to know?"

I closed my eyes. "No."

"I just want you to know I hope you meet someone who will be as good a lover to you as I am a friend."

"Forget it, Tobias. I'm not getting married again. Go. Home."

"Please. Oh, puh-lease try to control your appreciation and gratitude." Tobias held up a hand.

"You're insane, you know that?" I chuckled, despite my annoyance.

"Oh, I'd told myself that enough times...until Diane told me the reason why your marriage broke up. Then I realized you're crazier than I am."

"Don't you both have better things to do than talk about me?"

"We were having a fight! You know how Diane is. Everything comes out of her mouth when she's spitting mad - God, she's sexy when she's fuming -!"

"Hey! I don't wanna know! Why the hell are we talking about Diane, anyway? And why were you having dinner with her?"

"She's the mother of my child, Jethro." Tobias threw me a reproving look.

I repressed another snort.

"Alright. So we're seeing each other."

"'Seeing' as in 'dating'?" I asked, a look of horror on my face.

"Yeah."

"Tobias!"

"I know! So?" Tobias groaned. "Jethro, what the hell am I doing? I feel like I drove into a ditch, towed my car out and then drove right back in again."

I turned and looked at him, speechless.

Tobias cleared his throat, smirking and smiling. "But I left her tonight exhausted and satisfied -"

"Hey! Stop!"

"- which, is the reason why you entered the discussion," Tobias continued.

"You said it was a fight."

"It's with Diane," Tobias said, as if that explained everything. "Every discussion starts or ends as a fight. In your case, it started as a fight and ended with her saying the reason why your marriage couldn't work wasn't because she had to compete with Shannon's ghost but because your um, affections lay elsewhere."

"I was never unfaithful to her," I protested.

"No, she didn't say you were. What she was saying was that the failure of your marriage wasn't due
to your still being in love with Shannon but because you couldn't love her - Diane, that is - the way a man -" he broke off, then added with shake of his head, "Never mind."

"What?" I barked as Tobias rinsed his glass, set it back on the counter and headed for the stairs. "Hey! Don't stop now."

"Forget it," he said, not bothering to look back but went up the stairs. "It's crazy and I don't think you wanna know. Just - just do something, alright? I don't want you falling into a funk every year."

I expelled a breath of exasperation and shuffled to the armchair in the corner, not feeling like going up to bed. Tobias may be my best friend but he could be trying. And that business with Diane? I don't even have words for that.

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**Saturday Morning**

My cell phone buzzed and danced on the tabletop.

Groaning, I unfurled my aching body from the armchair and dragged it to the table. "Yeah. Gibbs."

"Gibbs! Where are you?" It was Abby. "You told me you would be here!"

"Where?" I stifled a yawn. God. What time was it? Damn. I'd fallen asleep in the basement again.

"The studio! With Tony. You forgot?"

I groaned softly.

"Gi-ibbs. C'mon! They're about to start and ohh Gi-ibbs, Tony looks hawt."

'Hot? On my way." I picked up my empty glass and near-empty bottle, putting them back on the counter before trudging up the stairs. I had to stop falling asleep in the basement. My shoulders hurt. My back hurt. My ass hurt. Everything hurt.

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The first thing that met my eyes when I was shown into the studio was the row of bare-bodied men, their oiled abs gleaming under the lights.

Twelve of them. One for each month.

There were also a lot of people milling around and one guy was yelling at just about everyone.

"Gibbs!Gibbs!Gibbs!" Abby came clomping over, tugging my arm to follow her. "Come look at Tony!" She leaned in and whispered, "His girlfriend's here, too. She's drop dead gorgeous."

**Girlfriend?** I inhaled sharply. I'd never met any of Tony's girlfriends. Not even Jeanne Benoit. Just seen photos of her; had heard about the rest of the DiNozzo harem but never been introduced to any. I didn't think I could feel worse than I already did.
I was wrong.

"'Mornin' boss!" Tony greeted me cheerfully. "Abby told me you were coming. But I'm surprised that you did. Not that I'm not happy to see you. Just not your thing, that's all...and yes, I'm babbling. Gibbs, this is Christie."

"Christie's a swimwear model," Abby chipped in. "For Victoria's Secret. Among other things."

"Christie, my boss, Special Agent Gibbs." Tony introduced.

Christie was as tall as me, her impossibly long legs shown off in a short white dress and strappy sandals.

"Pleasure to meet you, Special Agent Gibbs." Christie's smile rivalled Tony's and her voice was warm and friendly. She shook my hand. "I must say I've been curious about the man Tony admires so much."

"I should tell you not to do overdo it, sweetheart, but it's so hard." Tony drawled. "But please - continue."

"It's true." Christie insisted, looking at me. "You've been his hero ever since he joined NCIS so it is an honor to meet you finally."

Me? Tony's hero? What else has he told you? I had so many questions but didn't ask a single one because every one of them were stuck in my throat. Besides, this was his girlfriend.

It wasn’t that I didn’t know Christie had to be a fake girlfriend. A ‘Beard’, I think they call them. I have, after all, known Tony was gay since that I hired him back '01. It's just that coming face-to-face with someone who has even the semblance of an intimate relationship with Tony made my yearning for that even more acute, even more impossible.

An hour later, I knew, without a doubt, that it had been a mistake to come. Tony was a natural. They took shots of him in his office-wear but in poses that showed his sidearm, poses with his sleeves rolled up and Tony being Tony - a 007 pose. Every one of them showcasing his fit, muscular body. When the hell did he get so buff?

With Tony was Callen from our LA office. Callen was a little younger than Tony but just as buff. The camera clicked away as the two men posed together in a 'gym' scene, followed by a 'shower' scene. It was all done with props, of course, in the huge professional studio. I couldn't help the snort escaping.

"Aw, Gibbs," Abby said, grinning at the expression on my face. "It's for a good cause." I still couldn't prevent my eye roll.

Everyone was enjoying themselves except me. I needed to get out of there.

"Didn't I tell you Tony was hot?" Abby said to me, bouncing on her heels. "Those shots of him in the shower with Callen..." she fanned her face. I had to turn away.

The photographer called for a break while they reviewed the latest shots and Christie ran over to Tony, kissing him soundly on the lips.

"Don't you think she's beautiful?" Abby asked me, tugging at my arm to make me look at her. I didn't want to look at anyone or anything. I just wanted to get out of here. "She said they've been friends for years but it only turned romantic recently," Abby chattered on obliviously. "I hope this
one works out for Tony. He was really cut up over Jeanne."

I just looked at her numbly. Christie was gorgeous. And Tony was the most gorgeous of all the men there. He'd been working out to prepare himself for the triathlon and had honed his body to perfection, bringing out the best of his six-foot two-inch frame. I blew out a breath of self-recrimination. DiNozzo was my subordinate and while I may not be old enough to be his father, I felt like it sometimes. In my worst moments, I'd fear that was how he saw me - his daddy replacement.

"How's Aidan?" I asked. Abby had been seeing the veterinarian for a year or more and I liked the guy. He was steady and strong and had a quirky sense of humor. I was happy for Abby.

"He's going good, Gibbs," Abby smiled, going all shy suddenly. "Gibbs, would you give your blessing if I decided to marry him?"

"He's popped the question, has he?"

"Not yet, but I suspect he's planning to soon. He's been dropping hints and...he's asked if I like kids and stuff and whether I'd want kids if I married. And I said yes, and lots of dogs, too. And he said he wanted more dogs than kids and whether I liked cats, too, because he did and -"

"Yeah, that sounds like a marriage proposal to me," I interrupted her.

"And you like him?"

"Yes, I do, and yes, you have my blessing."

Abby hugged me. "Thanks, Dad. I mean, Boss. Gibbs." She kissed me on the cheek. "And it's okay with you if I leave NCIS?"

"Dr. Aidan Khan wants you to?" I asked, frowning. Not too pleased at the thought.

"Oh no, he wants me to do whatever keeps me happy. It's just that he's been offered to take over his sister's vet practice because she's giving birth soon and wants to take a few years off to raise her kid. She lives in LA."

"If you're fine with moving to LA then go for it," I told her. "Just remember to invite me to visit."

"Oh Gibbs." She hugged me again, tearing up. "I'm going to miss you so much...all of you...but I love him, you know?"

"If he loves you as much, or preferably more, then go, Abby. Have you told the others?"

"No. Just you. I'll tell them when he proposes," she replied. "And I accept."

I nodded, leaning to kiss her on her cheek. "I gotta run." Seeing Tony in those poses wearing nothing but a tiny Speedo was just plain bad for me.

"But Gibbs, they're going to do the naughty shots soon," Abby said, grinning mischievously.


"You know - the ones that make Tony look like he's naked. They're gonna make him cover up his "strategic spots" with his Sig or something. You gotta stay for that, Gibbs."
"Hell no, I don't," I muttered and turned to go.

"Hey, don't forget," Abby snagged my arm. "We're meeting for drinks after dinner. Usual place. No, wait. Join us for dinner. It'll be good. Eight o'clock at The Blue Inn."

END OF GIBBS' POV

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TBC
Saturday

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TONY'S POV

Scott had dropped by the photo shoot at lunch time but spent most of it chatting and flirting with the other men, especially Kevin, the photographer and Nigel, the art Director. When shooting resumed, he'd said goodbye to me, saying he'd catch me at the club tonight. Abby had left before lunch and Christie, shortly after, saying her flight to LA was leaving in a couple of hours. Gibbs had left long before this and I felt his absence more acutely than was good for me.

"You can do better than him, sweetheart," Christie had whispered in my ear as Scott waved goodbye to everyone. "Someone worth coming out for." Then she'd kissed me and left.

That night, I took a cab to Club C-40, Scott's favorite hangout. The club wasn't full as it was still early and I spotted Scott straightaway. As usual, he had his entourage along. He was one of those people who had to bring a group of friends to whichever place he went, using them as props, rather than friends whose company he enjoyed. I couldn't help contrasting him with Gibbs who was so comfortable with solitude. I could spend an evening with Scott and his party of friends and still feel lonely and depressed while Scott would be all pumped up and ready to party through to the next day. Maybe age was catching up with me but I couldn't help thinking how much happier I'd be just staying home with Gibbs - me watching a movie and he working on his latest project in the basement.

And since I'm fantasizing, we'd have a house that faced the ocean, including Gibbs' workshop, we'd love a couple of dogs, we'd have -- someone waved a packet in front of my face, pulling me out of my Gibbs fantasy.

Fuck! I shoved the hand away. "Scott, how many times have I told you I can't risk being caught with you and your friends popping pills and snorting shit."

"Well, then, loverboy," Scott slurred. "You shouldn't have come, should you?"

"Scott -" but Scott covered my mouth with his hand.

"Shh, Tony, C'mon. You know I won't get you into trouble. I'm careful. We're all friends here." Scott snuggled up to me, pulling me down for a kiss. I reluctantly allowed Scott to press his lips on mine. My head was still filled with the image of Gibbs standing at the back of the studio this morning watching me. I was sure I'd caught a look of sexual awareness in Gibbs' normally taciturn expression. At first I'd shrugged it off as my imagination but Christie had come up to me and said, "You never told me your boss was gay - and interested in you. Have you two ever -?"
I had been startled into shushing her and Christie had laughed and danced away. When she'd come
to say goodbye she'd added, "I'm right, you know. Your boss is hot for you."

"Tony!" Scott smacked me on the arm. "You're spacing out on me again."

"Sorry." I muttered, and picked up my drink, trying to dismiss Christie's words from my head.

"Have you looked into my request?" Scott asked.

"What request?" I'd forgotten. "Oh, that."

"I told you I'll pay it back so don't worry, 'k, Sweetie?"

"Scott, I told you I can't," I said, exasperated.

"Aw, c'mon." Scott tugged at my arm.

"No." My voice took on a firm edge. I was pissed already that Scott was still passing drugs around
and I didn't need him starting on the loan again.

"Hey." Scott said into my ear. "Who do you think pays for this lifestyle, huh? You?"

"Did I ask you to live this lifestyle?" I shot back, moving away. "Am I the one telling you to buy
your friends drinks every weekend? Supplying them with drugs?"

"I didn't choose this lifestyle, Mister Poster Boy for the En-Cee-Ai-My-Ass! It chose me. I was
born into this life and one does have to keep up, doesn't one?"

I sighed wearily. "Look, I've had a tiring day and I don't want to get into another fight, okay?"

"Whatever." Scott stalked off and I watched him sidle up to some guy with jet-black hair, the tips
dyed pink.

They headed for the restroom and I thought about going after him but decided against it. Scott in
this mood - when he wasn't getting his way - and me in this angry-with-myself mood wasn't going
to get us anywhere.

I stood and told the others, "Hey, guys. I'm leaving first. Tell Scott I'll see him back home."

I didn't feel like going back to Scott's house and laying there waiting for him to get home. Nor did I
feel like going back to my own apartment. I knew I couldn't put it off any longer - I was going to
have to break it off with Scott tonight.

I ended up driving to Gibbs' house instead only to find he wasn't home. Damn. Sitting alone in
Gibbs' house would be even more pathetic. What if Gibbs came home with a woman, Christie's
comments earlier today notwithstanding. She couldn't help wanting to hook me up "with a nice
guy" because, well, she loved me. We didn't get to see each other much but we were the kind of
friends that could pick up any time, anywhere, without complaints that we'd been neglected.

If Christie knew Gibbs, however, she'd know ‘nice guy' was the last thing Gibbs was. If she knew
Gibbs, she'd know what the second ‘b' stood for.

I looked at my watch as I drove away from Gibbs' house, wondering if the team was still at the bar
we hung out at every month. I called Abby who didn't pick up so I tried McGee, who did.
"Hey, Tony!" I could hear McGee's smile through the phone. "We're waiting for you."

"You are? I thought you'd all be leaving by now."

"No, we're just getting started, actually."

"It's almost midnight," I pointed out. "How can you be 'just starting out'?"

"Tony, you're not the only one who stays out late on a Friday night." McGee rolled his eyes. "We all had dinner together before coming over. Even Gibbs is here. And Ziva."

"Gibbs?" Of course my heart skipped a beat.

"Yeah. So, you joining us or not?"

"On my way." I drove home first then caught a cab to meet the others. This meant I'd be able to down a few, which I never did when with Scott as I was always the one who drove.

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Saturday Night;

The C-40 Club

Gibbs was just returning to his seat when I arrived. "Tony, nice to see you," Gibbs said. "Where's your girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?" I looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you mean Christie. She's flown off to LA for a modeling assignment." That was the downside to having a beard. Your friends and colleagues were always asking about her, even if they'd just met her once. But wasn't that the whole point? For them to expect me with a girl?

"Why didn't you join us earlier?" Gibbs asked.

"Why, boss? Missed me?"

"Yes."

I blinked. "I was just kidding."

"I know." Gibbs turned away to hail a waiter. "What do you want to drink?"

"Bourbon. Neat."

Gibbs lifted a brow. "Thought you were a vodka man."

"Time for a few changes, boss."

Gibbs gave me a curious look but didn't probe further.

Abby came behind me and hugged me tightly, startling me. "Tony! You came! We missed you!"

Gibbs grinned at me. "See."
"Where's your drop dead gorgeous girlfriend? And you gotta see these thumbnails and shots I got off the techie," Abby told me, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Tony, Abby wasn't exaggerating," Ziva said. "You are looking very hot in those photos."

"Where's Eytan?" I asked, surprised but happy to see Ziva. She still met up with Abby for drinks and dinner but I hadn't seen her since she left, except once, when she came to introduce her fiancé to us.

"He's with his friends at another bar, just down the road."

"I thought you were back in Israel already," I said.

"We leave day after tomorrow," Ziva replied.

"But she's coming back," Abby said.

"You are?" I asked. "To NCIS?"

"No," Ziva laughed. "Though I wouldn't rule that out completely. "We'll be in Israel for a year, after which Eytan will be joining Inova Fairfax, as a consultant surgeon."

"Yeah, I never knew you could look this good, Tony", McGee said. "I bet all the women are going to be hanging up the calendar turned to July throughout the year. I know Dorneget will." He laughed and I punched him playfully on the arm.

"As long as he keeps it out of the bullpen, I don't care!" Gibbs growled. "Half those pics aren't going to get approved for the final selection, anyway."

"How do you know?" Abby asked. "Who's got the final say?"

I shrugged and everyone looked at Gibbs.

"Not me," Gibbs replied. "If it was, I'd throw out three quarters of them."

"Why?" Abby asked. "Tony looks fantastic!" She showed the group the photos on her cell phone.

"Because he's a special agent, for cryin' out loud. Not one of those Chippendale guys. He's damn near naked in half of them. Look at this one." He pointed at the pic on Abby's phone. "Half his butt is showing."

"Yeah. Yum." Abby grinned.

Gibbs glared at her. "We're a federal agency. We don't do sexy calendars."

Abby hugged him, smiling up at him. "Things are a-changing, Bossman. See this one of Tony and Callen? This pic is going up on all the gay sites by next week. You wait and see." At Gibbs' expression, she laughed and explained. "Callen's gay, Gibbs. Like Dorneget. That shot and a few others, were done deliberately, to get the gay juices going, know what I mean?"

Gibbs continued glaring at her. My eyes were flipping from one to the other.

"All the feds have been told to project a non-homophobic stance so SecNav wanted NCIS to prove that we are not just non-homophobic, we're to show we're supportive of the LGBT community."

Gibbs snorted. "Abby," he began. "I'm not homophobic. I'm very much a to-each-his-own kinda
guy but that," he tilted his head towards her cell phone, "We might as well wave a rainbow flag in a suspect's face the next time we interrogate him instead of our badge."

"Aw, Gibbs. I know it's unprecedented and um, very very unFedlike -"

"You're telling me," Gibbs said.

"-but, it's still for the good of the federal agencies. The powers-that-be want to build up the public's perception," Abby argued.

"I know. I was told." Gibbs growled as he stared at the photos Abby showed him. "I just don't agree this will -" he halted and sighed. "Never mind. What you got there? Let me see."

"Now, this one I agree, won't make the cut," Abby said.

I wondered which one that was and was about to take the phone to have a look when Ziva reached for it.

"Let me see first, Tony," she said but Gibbs got to it first.

I craned my neck to see. Damn. It was That Shot - the near-nude one of me and Callen standing face-to-face with each other. Close enough to send off gay signals, I knew, yet without us touching. A single white bath towel blocked our lower bodies from view, from waist and thighs. My hand was gripping one end of the towel, as if to keep it from dropping while Callen's was gripping the other end.

It was a deliberately provocative shot - two tanned, buffed and naked men facing each other, looking into each other's eyes, and just a small white towel stretched between them covering their manly bits. We didn't need to touch. The pose was undeniably erotic. Undeniably gay.

No way was NCIS going public like that, and I heard Gibbs snort to himself.

We had several rounds after that and everyone was clearly getting sloshed. We rarely drank that much but we weren't on call this weekend and, lucky us, it was Memorial Weekend. The last few months had been particularly tough for all of us. Relaxing some of our tightly-held self-control was not just understandable but probably very necessary.

Still, it was odd to see Gibbs putting it away like that. I did wonder about it when Abby leaned in close and said into my ear, "Keep an eye on Gibbs, Tony. He's drinking a lot tonight." I gave a short nod to show I agreed but she leaned in again adding, "Don't let him pick up some bimbo and find himself married for the fifth time!" I had to guffaw at that, which, of course, had McGee and Ziva turning to us to ask what was so funny.

I stole a glance at Gibbs. He was just sitting there, drinking steadily, staring into his glass. His face was flushed, his eyes red-rimmed. Something major was on his mind, I could tell, but what? Something that was causing him to drink more than usual, to cause him to drop his guard with his subordinates. I wished I knew what it was.

The time on my cell showed 2.15 a.m. Last call soon. Gibbs emptied his glass in one swallow and said he was calling it a night. He reminded McGee he'd be in charge when I went off on my vacation and he and Vance were in Naples.

"I got it covered, boss," McGee replied, keeping his voice steady and trying to stay upright in his seat.
"Good," Gibbs said. "Then you can be p-point this weekend if a case comes in." He paused and blinked. "Call me only if you have to."

"Alright!" McGee grinned, happy to be in charge even if it meant an interrupted weekend. I didn't want to remind him that Morton's team was filling in for us this weekend. Why burst his happy bubble?

"Gibbs?" I looked at him. "I'll drop you off in my cab on the way home."

"If you l-ike," Gibbs breathed out. "You did look good in those pictures, DiNozzo."

"Uh, thanks, boss." I stood, none too steady myself but helluva lot more sober than Gibbs.

Abby was already about passed-out herself and draped all over Ziva who was on the phone assuring her boyfriend she wasn't drunk but would he be a sweetie and come pick her up, anyway.

"Come on, Gibbs." I put my arm around Gibbs. "Let's get you home. boss."

"And I do miss you when you-you not around...T-tony, god, I'm shitfaced." Gibbs frowned and shut up.

Abby and McGee shared a cab because Aidan, Abby's boyfriend, was out of town. Gibbs and I waited till Eytan picked Ziva up in his Jag, before getting a cab for ourselves.

"You okay?" I asked Gibbs. He mumbled something then followed it up with a soft groan. "You're not going to puke on my brand-new Prada Spazzolato's, are you?" No response. "Good thing I'm not shitfaced like the rest of you, huh? Whoa-aa." The cab turned a sharp corner and I grabbed Gibbs or he'd have slid to the floor. He fell back heavily against me and I decided it was safer to leave him as he was. I put my arm around him and he snuggled closer, plastering his body tightly to me.

Oh God...he felt so good. This was wrong, I knew. Gibbs is drunk and probably thinks I'm Holly Snow. I shouldn't allow myself to enjoy this, to pretend this was us going home after a real date. But I couldn't help pressing my cheek just a little closer to his lips, tightening my hold around him. It wasn't as if I was kissing him. Just keeping him steady, that's all.

When the cab pulled up outside his house, I told the driver to wait and opened the door to get out.


"Just want to make sure you make it up the stairs without tumbling back down, boss."

"I told ya, I'm fine. Go home!"

"You sound like your crotchety dad when you talk like that," I said, remembering too late that his father had passed not too long ago. My lips tightened in self censure.

The cab driver sniggered as I got out and went round to Gibbs' side, opening his door for him.
"Fuck you, DiNozzo," Gibbs muttered under his breath.

"If only you would, boss," I whispered.

Gibbs got out of the cab. Or stumbled out, rather. Would've hit the asphalt face first if I hadn't reached him in time.

"Be right back," I told the cab driver as I hauled Gibbs upright.

He was still grumbling when we entered his house. I switched the light on for him and was leading to the stairs when he said he'd sleep on the couch.

"Go on home, DiNozzo," he growled, staggering a little. "Switch off the light."

"I will," I said, deciphering the word. Or words. "As soon as you're on the couch." I helped him make his way, rather unsteadily, to his worn three-seater. He swore when he hit his knee against the corner of the coffee table.

"Get out, DiNozzo. Go home. I'm fine."

"Going. Goodnight, boss." I switched off the light as I opened the front door.

"DiNozzo."

I halted in my steps. "Yes, boss?"

"Thank you."


Scott's House

The house was dark when I let myself in. Scott was obviously not home yet though it was three in the morning. I was supposed to be staying over at his place this weekend but if it weren't for my decision to break things off tonight, I would have gone home to my apartment and not emerge till the Memorial Day weekend was over.

I switched on the hallway light for Scott as I knew he'd be in no condition to find his way in the dark, even in his own house. My thoughts were still fixated on Gibbs' odd behavior tonight. Could Christie be right? The thought freaked me out even as hope flared. Gibbs being gay and finding me sexually attractive would be hard enough to believe. A Gibbs who had to hide the fact, however, was something I did not want. If there was any hope of anything with Gibbs, it had to be something he wanted and not something he was ashamed of. Gibbs being ashamed of his feelings for me? I'd rather he didn't have any.

Suddenly I understood, all too clearly, how Scott felt about my refusal to come out publicly.

I toed my shoes off and padded up the stairs. When I reached Scott's bedroom, the distinctive sound of giggling - yes, giggling! Scott's! - and other male voices came through the door.

A sudden idea had me taking out my Sig.
I knew what I'd find yet the tableau that met my eyes still had the ability to affect me.

Scott shrieked. Kevin, the photographer leapt off Scott, and Nigel, the art director, let go of Scott's cock from his mouth.

"Give me one reason," I said. "Doesn't even have to be a good one, why I shouldn't pull this trigger."

"Hey, man," Kevin shot off the bed, grabbing his pants. "I think there's been some misunderstanding."

"Yeah, Scott told us you two do this on a regular basis," Nigel added, hurriedly getting dressed, too.

"Well, you were told wrong. But, I figure it's time I made it right. You want my lover, you can have him. My ex-lover, as of tonight. Can't guarantee I still won't pull this trigger and kill all of you - accidentally, of course - cos, see...I'm not quite sober enough to think rationally."

"Tony..." Scott scooted up to the headboard, drawing his knees up and pulling the bedcovers up to his chin. As if I hadn't seen it all...or want to ever again. "You don't want to shoot me. Or them."

"Why not?" I swayed a little. I wasn't that drunk but it hurt. It hurt so damned bad. "I've been good to you, Scott. I never fucked around on you. Why do you have to do this to me?"

"Because!" Scott retorted, alarm turning to anger.

I shook my head and lifted the Sig, glad to see my hand was steady enough even if my head felt like it was twirling on my shoulders. Belatedly, I thought I should have gone with the vodka but for some insane reason, tonight all my longing for Gibbs had come crashing down on me so that even drinking what he liked was good enough. Talk about going for crumbs.

"Tony, he's not worth it," Kevin said. "Not if this isn't what you want. Scott was obviously mistaken. We can walk out and forget him in a sec."

"Hey!" Scott protested.

"Kev's right," Nigel said. "Neither Kev nor I are in relationships and Scott told us both of you were in an open one, that you're free to go with whomever you wished."

"But that's clearly not the case," Kevin said, picking up from Nigel. "And it's not cool of you, Scott, to lead us on."

"So not cool," Nigel added.

"Oh, fuck off all of you!" Scott snapped, sitting up and throwing off the covers. "All this drama. Get out of my house. And that includes you, Tony. You have the gall to judge me? All this while fucking me but thinking of your damned boss? Oh yeah. You thought I didn't know? That shows you how much you know me, honey. So just get the fuck out and don't come back when you wake up to the fact that Lee-roy-Jethro-whatever will never be what you want him to be."

"Scott," Kevin shoved Scott back down on the bed. "Do exercise some sense of self-preservation and shut the fuck up."

I aimed my Sig at Scott's groin. "Then I should make sure you won't have anything for me to come
back to, either."

"Hey, no." Nigel intervened quickly. "He's not worth it, Tony. Let's get out of here."

I waited a beat then lowered my weapon. "You're right. He's not worth even the paperwork I'd have
to do for discharging my weapon."

I turned and left without another word, calling for a cab as I went down the stairs. It arrived within
five minutes.

_____END OF TONY'S POV_____

**Meanwhile, back at Casa Gibbs...**

________________________________

3rd PERSON POV

Gibbs stumbled to the toilet next to the kitchen after Tony left, his head feeling like it was caught
in a whirlpool. Vague thoughts wove in and out of his head. What time was it? He just got home,
didn't he?

Tony. Tony drove him home. Didn't he? Then who was holding him throughout the trip? Someone
was driving. Shit. He couldn't think straight.

No...it was Tony, Gibbs was sure of it. Who else could it have been? There were only the two of
them, plus the cab driver. The cab had taken a corner sharply, causing him to lurch into Tony.
Tony had caught him, preventing him from sliding off the seat onto the floor. He'd said something
about Prada Spazz-something. Who was that? One of Tony's friends? Was he the one holding
Gibbs and not Tony?

Fuck, he'd never been this drunk. Not since he came home after burying his wife and daughter.

He took a long piss, stumbled and sprayed urine everywhere except into the bowl. Damn...he'd
clean up tomorrow...if he got up at all. Staggering back to the couch, he fell against it. All he could
think of was those images of Tony, half-naked, clowning around with Callen. The latter had been
just as scantily-clad but Gibbs had had eyes for no one else but Tony.

His cock jerked and he grasped the hardening shaft. Trust it to be impervious to the effects of
heavy alcohol consumption. Bugger didn't know when to quit. Then again, it had been just him, his
right hand and visuals of Tony all these years. The calluses were more likely from jacking off to
Tony's image than from his woodworking. 'Working my wood', he could say.

"Tony," he whispered raggedly in the dark. *Want you, Tony. Want you so bad.*

He was drifting off on a Bourbon-laced cloud, erotic images of Tony floating past when he came to
with a jerk. He'd heard something. A gunshot? Reflections from the lights of a passing vehicle ran
along the wall. Just a car door slamming. Neighbors coming home pretty late.

He stiffened when he heard footsteps crunching along his front path. Getting up quickly, he stifled a groan when his head spun wildly. "Fuck!" he hissed. He managed to get to the foyer just as the front door opened.

TBC
TONY'S POV

I stumbled through the doorway into the darkened foyer and ran smack into a hard body. "Uhff!" I tripped over my own feet and would have fallen if not for the strong arms catching me. Strong arms connected to a not-quite-steady body either and for a few seconds, the two of us staggered around, clutching at each other for support.

"Tony?" Gibbs called out, trying to regain his balance. "Tony?" his voice was low and raspy with sleep. His hands roamed my face in the dark. "Tears?" he asked, puzzled. His bourbon breath fanned my cheeks and I wanted to press closer, to feel his lips on me but I wiped at my face instead, annoyed that I'd given in to my frazzled emotions on the way here.

"Why are you up?" I asked.

"Heard a noise," he replied groggily, holding on to me with difficulty. "Why are you crying?"

Not 'why are you here' but 'why are you crying'. Only Gibbs would be more concerned about the other person's state of mind than that his home was being invaded at three in the morning. "You need to lie down," I said.

"I may not be very sober -"

I had to laugh. "Not very sober? You're drunk, boss. I could strike a match and you'd combust."

"Dontchangersubject," he muttered, swaying slightly even as we continued clutching at each other. "Like I said...may not be totally sober but...know bullshit when I hear it. Why you crying? Grown men don't cry 'less there's a really -" he paused for breath. "- bad reason."


"Why are you back here?"

Stubborn as ever."Didn't want to be alone."

"Where's Christie?"

"In L.A." I paused then said, "We broke up."

"Why? You both looked happy this morning."

"She's going to be based in L.A. Neither of us want a long-distance relationship."

"Is that why you're cryin'?"
"No. It's...complicated." And suddenly, all my frustrations bubbled up. My anger at Scott for being right about my fear of coming out, my unrequited desire for the man I was grappling with right now in the dark - it was all too much.

Gibbs was still clutching at me and I was acutely aware that I didn't want to let him go either.

His eyes pinned me to the spot and we both stood there in the half-light propping each other up. I felt his heated gaze on me, warm breath ghosting my skin as his lips hovered over my face; as if he was trying to search out all my secrets and memorize every single one from every facial pore.

I could only stare at those lips that were nearing and swallowed heavily.

"Tony?" Gibbs whispered thickly.

My eyes flew back to his and for a fleeting moment I thought I saw in them everything I'd ever hoped for.

But it was all too surreal. Nevertheless, my eyes instinctively closed when Gibbs' lips moved to the corner of my mouth, not quite touching but close enough the heat from his breath dampened my skin. I swallowed convulsively, battling against every rational thought. All I needed to do was turn a little and our lips would touch.

I knew Gibbs was drunk and I wasn't, but I was tipsy enough to just about throw caution to the wind and take advantage of the situation to test Christie's conclusion, Scott's taunting earlier, my own yearning for this man, the impossibility of it all.

The feel of Gibbs' mouth moving to my ear made me shiver but I didn't pull away. Then those lips moved down my cheek...Oh God, don't do this to me, I pleaded silently, because I can't believe this is happening. But I don't have the strength to stop you. Or myself.

"Won't force you if this is not what you want. I know you're vulnerable - vulerble - VUL-NER-RER-BLE." he broke off, chuckling. "...just broken up with Christie and all but - you still staying?"

I didn't reply. Couldn't. I merely stared wordlessly at the shadowed face, a dozen questions in my green eyes. What if Gibbs couldn't remember this in the morning? What if he did and, knowing Gibbs, would turn his badge in?

I nodded.

"C'mon." Gibbs pushed me up the stairs, still unsteady on his own feet.

"Gibbs. You're drunk. You're never drunk," I said as we miraculously made it up to his bedroom. It wasn't even a real attempt to halt this because, I had to face it, I wanted this. I'd think about the consequences in the morning. And never touch a drop of bourbon again. Ever.

He pushed me into the bedroom and shut the door. He laid down on his bed, holding his hand out to me.

A shred of good sense hanging by a thin thread made me hesitate. "Gibbs -" I shook my head.

"You don't wanna?"

His face was shadowed in the dark, the room lit only by the light from the streetlamp through the windows. But I didn't need to see him to hear the anxiety in his voice. That Gibbs was afraid I didn't want him changed everything for me. I got into bed beside him.
That shred of good sense had clearly vanished.

Our clothes strewn on the floor, we were soon a tangle of limbs, muttered expletives and ragged pleas.

Gibbs, surprisingly strong for an inebriated man, pulled me to him. Or perhaps I went willingly. Stretched out over his naked body, my breath hitched when our lips met and I knew, without a doubt, the world could collapse around me and I would not pull away. Gibbs’ tongue lapped at my lips as his mouth closed over mine. Then my lips parted and he swept in, taking instant possession.

My head was reeling, my body helpless against Gibbs’ assault despite the fact that I was on top. My head was still trapped between Gibbs’ calloused hands as we devoured each other.

The thick hard ridge of his erection caused mine to jerk in response. Somehow, I managed to pause the kiss and gasped out, "Stop." The soft moan from Gibbs had me changing it to, "No, don't."

Gibbs didn't. He merely flipped me over and trapped me under him, his strong, hard legs forcing mine apart, though ‘force' would not be quite accurate. His hands grasped my wrists above my head, effectively imprisoning me.

"Want you," Gibbs rasped.

I struggled but it was more a struggle against my own desire and worry than wanting Gibbs to stop. "Pause, Gibbs. Just pause, okay?" One final attempt to stop this runaway train.

But Gibbs was still kissing me, kissing my nose, my eyes, my brows, temples, lips.

"Wanna know what you taste like."

I groaned. "Gibbs. You need to stop," I said. "We need to stop."

"You don't want this?" he asked again.

I groaned in helplessness. "I...I do." *But one of us has to think about the morning-after blues. Just never thought it'd be me.*

"Then shut up, Tony." Gibbs attacked my lips again, soft sounds of need coming out of his mouth.

"Oh fuck this!" I muttered in defeat and kissed him back with all the pent-up desire that had been kept in check all these years. *Tomorrow,* I reminded myself. I'd deal with it tomorrow. Of course it was already several hours into tomorrow and sunrise would be soon.

"Need you," Gibbs murmured as he bit and sucked my neck, moving down to my chest. His fingers were plucking and pinching my nipples and I was near incoherent with want. "Don't leave me." His plea sounding so tortured I couldn't help but reassure him.

"Al-always be here for you," I managed to gasp out. Was he talking about *me?*

He moved down to my chest then my belly.

I'm so going to regret this in the morning but I closed my eyes and gave myself over. I was thinking Gibbs sure knew how to suck cock for a straight guy when he reached for his bedside drawer and dug out lube and a condom. Somewhere at the back of my mind I wondered how come he had lube. A condom, yes, but lube? I never got the chance to verbalize the thought because Gibbs' thick, rough fingers were all over my hole, hastily stuffing lube into me.
When his huge, hard cock breached me, all conscious cognitive activity ceased.

As the dawn's gentle light spilled through the gap between the blinds, Gibbs was still snoring softly. I hadn't slept a wink.

A certain line had been crossed and there was no undoing it.

--------------------------------------------------

TBC
Sunday;
Casa Gibbs
________________________________

GIBBS' POV

I grumbled as the sunlight heated my face, waking me. I squinted against the light, groaning as fleeting images flitted past my hung-over mind.

Dragging myself to the bathroom, I pissed noisily into the toilet, groaning again. Even flushing the toilet took more strength than I had right this moment. I washed my hands from sheer habit but didn't bother to wash my face since I didn't plan on getting up just yet. I felt worse than stepped-on dog shit.

Not having the guts to look in the mirror, I hauled myself back to bed, fell face down and pulled a pillow over my head. I remained in that position until a persistent ringing caused me to stir. My cell phone. I ignored it.

The ringing returned after a brief respite. I let it ring on. We weren't on call this weekend and besides, McGee was in charge. Told him so last night.

Last night. Drinks. Yes, but something else. Shannon and Kelly. Anniversary. God, Vance and Ducky were right. I had to stop torturing myself. At least I went and did something I'd never done on the anniversary before. I went out with people. My team. Usually, I just drank alone in the basement till I passed out. But there was something else. What? What was it I did other than have drinks with the team? My head was too woolly to grab all the thoughts floating around. Something Tobias said...about?

Tony. That's right. No, that was the night before. Tobias had dropped in on Friday night. Last night was Abby. Abby saying Tony was hot in the photos. Yeah, he was. Tony so hot, and me so drunk I'd dreamt I was fucking his brains out.

Hell, I wanted Tony so badly my dreams were feeling way too real, I muttered to myself as Istepped into the kitchen. I spooned coffee into the machine. Drink, dreams and Tony was a bad combination.

Something happened last night, I was sure of it. I'd think about what that was later. Right now, I needed coffee. A whole jug of it.
I was on my third cup of coffee when I saw the note.

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**Sunday@Casa Fornell**

"Hi. What's up?" Tobias asked, sounding cheerful and relaxed when I called him.

"I fucked up, Tobias," I said.

"What?"

"I really screwed-up this time."

Tobias laughed. "What did you do? Run off and got married again?" Another bark of laughter.

"Worse than that," I said.

"Ohh, *nothing* could be worse," Tobias said, still chuckling,

"This is."

His laughter died off and I could virtually see the smile evaporating off my friend's face.


I exhaled heavily, scrubbing a hand down my face, rasping over stubble. "Give me half an hour to look human. I'll bring lunch."

Thirty-five minutes later, Tobias opened the door and snorted. "If it took you half an hour to look like crap, I can't imagine what you looked like when you called.

I handed him the bag containing our lunch and growled something unintelligible.

Tobias frowned at the deeply-troubled look on my face. "Can we eat first?" he asked. "I've a feeling the talk's going to take awhile and I'm hungry."

"Good idea cos you might not have an appetite later."

We ate at the kitchen counter in partial silence, Tobias telling me that he and Diane looked like making a go of it a second time but that Diane wanted to move cautiously for Emily's sake.

I nodded even though I couldn't care less about Diane. We'd almost finished our burgers when Tobias said, "Okay, hit me with it. What did you do?"

I told him.

"You what?" Tobias yelled, literally falling off the counter stool.

I tossed down the rest of my burger, surprised I'd eaten at all.
"No. No." Tobias shook his head. "Please tell me you're shittin' me."

"I wish," I muttered, not looking up from my half-eaten burger.

"Diane's gonna kill me," Tobias muttered. He ran a hand over his hair, what little he had left. "She's going to fucking kill me!"

That did get me looking at him. "What the hell has this got to do with Diane? You're not telling her!"

"Are you stupid on top of crazy?" Tobias asked. "You were insane to fuck DiNozzo - God, I can't believe! And you're stupid enough to think Diane won't find out?" Tobias started pacing the room. "That woman should be heading Gitmo. Fuck, Jethro. How the hell did this happen? Since when did you turn gay?"

"I didn't turn gay!" I snapped. "I've been gay all along."

Tobias's jaw dropped. "But...Shannon. Kelly --"

"Lots of gay men are married and have kids."

"How did I not know this?" Tobias was still looking at me stunned. "We've been friends for years. You're my best friend! You kept this from me all these years?"

I sighed. "I kept it from everyone, not just you." I didn't want to tell him Dwayne Pride knew.

"You been carrying this monster secret all your life?"

"Yes."

"And you suddenly decide the way to come out is to fuck your senior agent?"

"That's not -"

"- who doesn't know you're gay and runs out on you after the deed? You're insane. Certifiable." Tobias shook his head. "I can't believe this. Sorry, but this is not the Jethro I know. That Jethro would never do something like that. Even if he was gay."

"Which he isn't," he added. He went quiet after that, the revelation obviously too much for him. Finally, he asked, "Why the hell did you do a stupid thing like that, Jethro?"

I blinked, red-eyed, at him. "You think I haven't asked myself that a hundred times?" I threw up my hands and slid off the stool, going to the couch. "I was drunk," I said lamely.

Several minutes went by before Tobias spoke again. "That didn't just happen, did it? I mean, you didn't just happen to pick DiNozzo just because he was there, like the fucking proverbial mountain, did you?"

I didn't respond to that other than letting my head fall back on the couch and staring at the ceiling.

"I mean, you had to have had the hots for him already, didn't you?" Not waiting for a reply, he came over to join me on the couch and added, "Damn, Jethro. When you screw up, you really screw up."

I exhaled, eyes still on the ceiling.
"Please tell me it was consensual, at least," Tobias pleaded.

I turned to him, affronted.

"Hey, it's a fair question, considering," Tobias retorted.

"You think I lured him into my basement, chained him up and raped him?"

"Five minutes ago, I didn't know you were gay! Five minutes ago I would never even think you'd let yourself get so drunk you'd fuck a team member so don't give me that attitude." Tobias stood up again. "Where's DiNozzo now?"

"Home, I guess. Sleeping it off."

"Is DiNozzo gay?"

"If I knew it's still not for me to tell you."

Thankfully, Tobias let that go. "He had to be drunk, too, then."

"Yeah. I guess," I replied. "I wasn't sure, at first. I thought I'd dreamt it. Then I saw the note. He'd left it on the counter but I didn't see it till later."

"What did he write?"

I took it out of my wallet and gave it to Tobias.

Tobias read the note then passed it back to me. "Well, that's not so bad. I mean, it's bad but it could be worse."

"Are you kidding me?" I spat out.

"Based on what he wrote," Tobias said, "It sounds like DiNozzo doesn't remember a thing. ‘Hey, boss. Thanks for letting me crash on your couch last night. You were shitfaced but the rest of us weren't too far behind. Going home to sleep it off. See you on Monday’. He's not upset about it. So...you shouldn't be getting a sexual harassment charge thrown against you. Or rape." Tobias walked to the window. "That's about as good as it gets, my friend." He chuckled.

"Why are you laughing? This isn't funny."

"Sorry. I'm just fucking relieved I'm not you. Did you call him? Verify you're not going to be losing your job, your pension, your reputation...your hide, when Diane finds out?"

"Whoa. Whoa. Wait. Leave Diane out of this. I'm not married to her and I'm telling you this in confidence."

Tobias sighed. "Okay, okay. My lips are sealed. Just don't be surprised when you find her waiting for you in your house. And when that happens, you make sure you don't come looking for me because it won't be me who opened my big mouth. ‘Cause you're right. This is your private business and I really shouldn't even know about it! I don't wanna know about it. This falls under the witness protection program, believe me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked.

"Diane," Tobias replied. "She'll know. She just manages to find out about stuff you don't want her to know about."
"You're the only one who knows! She won't know unless you tell her."

"Just warning you, okay? She knows stuff about us we don't want anybody else to know and hell if I know how she gets her intel."

"Maybe she's got more friends in the Secret Service than we know of?"

This time Tobias glared at me.


"Did you leave a message?" Tobias asked, Diane forgotten for now.

"No. I was going to say I was sorry...but I didn't. Thought I should come talk to you first."

Tobias sighed, rubbing his fingers over his lips. "Look, I'm sorry I freaked out on you, okay? You gotta admit it - you should have told me you were gay way before this. And hey -" he paused. "Why did you marry all -" he shook his head. "Never mind. Tell me another day. Let's deal with our current dilemma."

He went to refrigerator and took out two bottles of water. "Right." He tossed me a bottle. "Give it to me from the start."

I looked at him, bewildered. "There's nothing else. Told you all there is."

"Look, you two didn't just get it on like that last night out of the blue. There had to be something simmering...bubbling...boiling...don't look at me like that. You know what I mean. How long have you been having the hots for your special agent?" When I didn't answer, Tobias said, exasperatedly, "You wanna talk this over or what? I mean, we can just sit here and not say anything but then what's the point of you coming over and ruining my weekend? The rest of my life! Do you think I'm going to forget about this after you leave? What am I going to tell Diane? I can't keep something like you being gay from her."

"Alright!" I snapped. "Okay," I added in a more subdued tone. "I've...felt this way for DiNozzo for a while."

"How long's 'a while'?"

"Ten...twelve years," Tobias's jaw hit the floor. "What?" Gibbs snapped. "You asked."

"Twelve years?" Tobias repeated. "And during these twelve years nobody, no one, suspected?" He waited a beat. "Hell, I didn't."

"Tobias, I'm not the kind of guy to let it all hang out. I don't wear my heart on my sleeve."

"No, you don't. If you did, you'd still be married. To Diane," Tobias said. "I can't believe no one even suspected!"

"Why would they? I told you - I don't show my feelings if it's not work-related."

"But this is work-related. Sort of."

"It's the 'sort of' that ensured I kept my feelings for DiNozzo out of sight."

"What about him? I mean he let you, didn't he?" Tobias asked. "Didn't he?" he repeated when I didn't immediately answer.

"Yes!" I snapped. "I didn't have to force him. Persuade him, yeah. But he did kiss me back. And he
did come. More than once."

Tobias gagged on his water. "That is a tad too much information BUT-" he held up a hand when I opened my mouth. "- Okay, so he reciprocated. Why do you think he's decided to play dumb?" Tobias asked.

I shrugged. "Probably thinks I fucked him just because I was drunk and wants to spare me the embarrassment the morning after."

"Possible. Except this is a guy we're talking about. A grown man. Someone who's looked up to you for years; who's a professional in his own right. Hell, Jethro. If DiNozzo ever wanted out of NCIS, I'd be offering him a place on my team before his resignation hits your table. No way is a guy like that going to just lie there and let you make a fool of yourself." Tobias shook his head. "Try another one."

I blew out a breath. "How about he suspects I do feel that way about him but it took me being shitfaced drunk to actually do something - wait! I did say that."

"Say what?"

"I was in Vance's office day before yesterday and he wanted me to drop by and check out the calendar shoot. The one that -"

"I know - the one that's going to make us the laughing stock of the entire world. Yeah, I know. Go on."

"Vance mentioned something about all the guys posing for the calendar being gay and was jokingly warning me to be careful. I told him I'd have to be shitfaced drunk to fuck a man. DiNozzo definitely heard me because I'd already opened the door when I said that, and when I turned around, he was standing there in the doorway."

"That's why he wrote that remark about you being shitfaced," Tobias concluded. "Shit. Not good."

"No," I agreed. "It's his veiled way of saying he knew why I did what I did."

"But he's wrong," Tobias said. "You didn't fuck him because you were shitfaced drunk. It was because you reached the point you couldn't hide it anymore. Being drunk didn't cause that act of stupidity. Not telling your best friend you're gay is the reason. Because if I'd known, you would have had someone to talk to. It wouldn't have built up inside like a volcano...then ka-boom!"

"Are you trying to help or what?"

"Hold on," Tobias's forehead furrowed in concentration. "It may be good, after all. Listen. Nobody just lets another guy stick his dick in his ass - and come, mind you - unless it's a prison thing," he declared. "Not rocket science, Jethro. DiNozzo obviously feels the same way about you. But - he daren't assume that's how you feel. There is that 'shitfaced drunk' remark, after all."

"Tell me again why that makes things better...coz I can't really see that right now."

"I'm saying knowing you both feel the same about each other makes all the difference."

I merely stared at Tobias.

"Because then, all you need to do is let him know how you feel."
"You say that like it's the easiest thing in the world to do," I muttered. "You know it isn't and don't ask me 'why not'."

"No, I'm not going to ask you that. I’m not going to minimize the awkwardness of the situation. I know there’s still the question of what DiNozzo wants out of this. He may very well feel the same way about you but the fact remains that he never did anything about it and you obviously had no idea. I mean, is he gay?"

“He's got a girlfriend," I said. "Met her. She's a model."

"So? You just said lots of gay men are married with kids."

"I guess," I mumbled.

“What do you remember about last night? Is he right that you were so shitfaced you probably didn’t know you were coming on to him?"

“Yes, and no. Like you said earlier, the booze didn’t put the desire there. Just made me stupid enough to throw caution to the wind."

"And that's not like you at all," Tobias said again, more to himself than to me. "Is there a reason why you would behave so uncharacteristically? Why you'd throw your Marine discipline out the window after all these years, the internal volcano notwithstanding?"

I drew in a deep breath. "Yesterday was the anniversary of Shannon's and Kelly's death."

"No shit." "It was also the anniversary of the day DiNozzo was infected with the Y Pestis. The pneumonic plague. I almost lost him, then, too." Gibbs scrubbed his face with both hands, turning bleary eyes at Tobias. "In the earlier years, I'd be thinking of Shannon and Kelly; going to visit their graves...then after Tony almost died, the date began to be about losing the people I love. Not just my wife and daughter."

The next few minutes were quiet as Tobias absorbed that. I could hear the neighborhood kids laughing and dogs barking some distance away.

Finally, Tobias sighed and sat back down next to me. "So what now? You going to have to sort this out with him, you know. You guys work together in a team. It's not like he's from another department."

"I put in for early retirement."

"You what?"

"You heard me. Anyway, Vance told me to think it over and decide after we get back from Naples."

"I second that. I don't want you retiring until you got your shit sorted out because I don't want you turning up on my doorstep again looking like death warmed-over."

I scrubbed at my face. "I never thought I'd see the day I'd ask you for relationship advice but...hell, Tobias, how do I fix this?"

Tobias just looked at me for a while, mulling over some thought that was obviously churning in his head. "Y'know what?" He asked. "If anyone can understand you; if anyone could be right for
you, it would be DiNozzo." Gibbs looked at him, uncomprehending. "I mean that," he reiterated. "I've seen how you both complement each other at work and I've seen how you interact with one another outside of work. DiNozzo puts on this act which injects some comic relief for the team and you know it's an act. You are impressed with what he's doing - making a tough job for the team just a little lighter to bear with a little cop humor now and then."

"It's not 'now and then'. It's every day," I muttered.

"Which is why you'd never be able to live without it if he weren't there."

"He said he'd always be there for me."

Tobias's head cocked at that. "Remember that, do you?"

I nodded. "Uhmhm. And a few other things."

"I don't want to hear the dirty stuff!" Tobias winced, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Actually, I don't remember much of that. Just know we did it."

"Then what do you remember?"

"He said he won't leave me."

"Then what the fuck is the problem? Geez. Go nail a few things down, decide where you guys want to go from here and voila! - you can resume your hot, monkey man-on-man sex. Just...just...don't tell me about it. I don't get this...gay thing but hey, whatever floats your boat."

"Maybe," I said, but clearly not convinced. "He may have been referring to his loyalty to the team. Not about me. Not something personal."

"Hey, you can't get anymore personal than sex," Tobias said. "Nobody says things like that during sex and refer to work."

"I dunno," I sighed. "My head's all messed up. I only remember I had sex with him; I remember he said some things, but I can't remember whether he said them before or after I fucked him. What if he said them before and it turns out I pressured him into sex?"

Tobias stood again. "You're right. You're in the shits."

"Thanks," I muttered.

"Can you call him and just test the waters like I said? At least prepare yourself for the fallout."

"I did call him, I told you. He didn't pick up. I need to resolve this before I leave for Naples and he goes on vacation."

"When's this?"

"Vance and I fly out on Sunday. Conference is Monday through to Wednesday. I think DiNozzo flies out on the weekend, too."

"Where's he going?"

"London. Heard him telling McGee and Abby he's going on vacation after that. Don't know where."
"And you? The meeting's only two days. I know because my boss will be there."

"Vance ordered me to take leave."

"Great. You and DiNozzo can spend it together, get your shit together and leave me to enjoy the rest of my life."

"Yeah. Right." I stood and stretched then blew out a heavy sigh. "I'm going."

"Sit back down," Tobias snapped. "Not every day you come to me for advice, like you said."

I ignored him and headed for the door. "You're so certain he wants me," I said, turning back to Tobias. "Why would he want a man a dozen years older even if he were gay?"

"Forget the 'is he gay?' bit," Tobias said. "If he weren't, you wouldn't have even gotten to first base without him punching out your lights. As for why he would want you, he's the one who should be answering you. Now, go home or go to his apartment and sort it out face to face. If you lose your job over this, I might be able to scrounge out a place for you on my team."

I didn't bother to respond but opened the door.

"Diane and I are giving ourselves a second chance," Tobias said. "Give yourself that, Jethro. I know DiNozzo. He would have confronted you today if it was bad. You're forgetting he knows you, too. Probably better than I do and I bet he deliberately wrote that note to make you think nothing happened. That's not what a man does if he's planning to report you. It's what he does when he wants to preserve something." Tobias drew in a breath before adding, "It may be just your working relationship or it could be your friendship. Either one, he's not out to hurt you. Me? I think the hots are mutual. You tell me when you find out."

I stopped by Tony's apartment after I left Tobias but despite ringing the doorbell for close to fifteen minutes, Tony hadn't opened the door. I thought of calling him but instead I took the easy way out - that it could wait till we got back to work on Tuesday. Unless we caught a case before that. I know my team well enough to know that they will always be reachable. Even Tony not picking up my calls means he knows I'd have McGee or one of the others to get hold of him if my call was case-related. It was out of respect for that tacit understanding that I've never abused it and would wait it out. Even if I felt like it was killing me.

I drove home, still debating in my mind whether I ought to play it Tony's way - pretend nothing had happened.

I had a bowl of cereal for dinner since the bread was stale and the few slices of ham I had left had gone slimy. Unable to sleep and feeling antsy, I decided to clear out the storeroom. I'd planned to sell the house when I retired and buy something out in the woods near water where I could fish and build stuff. Maybe even build myself a cabin. Throwing out the old, unneeded things I'd accumulated over the years would be a good start.

I dragged my large duffel out of the storeroom and found a bagful of old CDs. I remembered I'd been throwing out stuff last year and had come across them. Shannon's CDs. Some were cassette tapes. I picked up one of the tapes and smiled. A collection of romantic oldies from the 60s. One
title caught my eye. The one I'd heard on the radio - You Don't Have to Say You Love Me. It wasn't sung by Dusty Springfield, though, but by Matt Monro. I didn't even know Monro had recorded that song. I set the cassette tape aside and finished packing then headed down to the basement. I dug around in a drawer and fished out a cassette tape player, smiling as I thought what Tony would have said if he saw the antiquated contraption. Slotting in the tape, I depressed the play button and Matt Monro's silky voice filled the basement. I splashed two fingers of bourbon in the glass and sat on the floor, propped against the worktable, as Matt sang words that ripped through my heart.

When I said, I needed you  
You said you would always stay  
It wasn't me who changed, but you  
And now you've gone away

Don't you know that now you're gone  
And I'm left here on my own  
Now I have to follow you  
And beg you to come home

You don't have to say you love me  
Just be close at hand  
You don't have to stay forever  
I will understand  
Believe me, believe me  
I can't help but love you  
But believe me, I'll never tie you down

Left alone with just a memory  
Life seems dead and so unreal  
All that's left is loneliness  
There's nothing left to feel
That was exactly how I felt - unreal. Dead. Left myself with just one unforgettable memory.

With one single act, I'd chased Tony away. Nice work, Gunny. Real nice.

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A/N: I'll stop here with these 3 chapters. Give me a week plus to review before I post more. Thank you all for your encouraging comments and PMs both here and on WWOMB:)
Meanwhile.

Back@Casa Tony...

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TONY’S POV

I arrived home in the morning, after making my getaway from Casa Gibbs and collapsed on my bed. Getting up only once to empty my bladder, I had gone back to bed and slept until long past noon, not getting up until I felt life stirring once again in my aching body.

The throbbing in my asshole made it was impossible not to think about what had transpired last night even if I wanted to forget it - which I definitely did not. I needed to figure out what the hell happened but it was so mind-blowing I didn’t where to start. Calm down. Take it step by step.

I stripped off and entered the bathroom, turning on the shower full-blast. When the water was steaming, I stepped inside, hissing as the water hit my skin.

I soaped myself up. Start with...did Gibbs know what he was doing? Oh sure, he knew he was fucking someone. But did he really know it was me, Tony DiNozzo, he was fucking? Know, as in knowing there would be repercussions?

Next, was Gibbs gay and in the closet like me? I’d never guess Gibbs had a single bent bone in that body but then, none of the team members had ever joked about whether I was gay. They’d never thought to doubt my stories about my hot dates and besides, when a guy had someone like Christie on his arm, who was going to have any suspicions?

Okay, so it was possible Gibbs was as good at hiding as I was but Gibbs wasn’t the type of guy to hide what he was, was he? He’d never tried to cover up his technological deficiencies and never considered it a threat either. He simply made sure he had the right people - McGee - to fill the need. Nor did he hide the fact that he had been married three times with no intention of walking down the aisle again.

Ah, but he did hide the fact that he had been married four times, not three. I’d also long suspected Gibbs was behind the killing of Pedro Hernandez and this came to light when Paloma, Hernandez’s daughter, and her brother, Alejandro, reopened the case to exact their revenge on Gibbs. Oh yeah, our Gibbs had secrets, alright. But only because everyone had secrets of one kind or another. It didn’t mean he was gay and hiding that.

Besides, I’d never spotted Gibbs doing a single thing that could possibly be construed as gay whereas I, Tony DiNozzo, did dress well, did play the piano and did love Broadway show tunes; I did know every song Barbra Streisand recorded and I did love Hugh Jackman in The Boy from Oz.
Nah. Gibbs wasn’t gay. Gay men did not hide in the basement building boats. Then again, straight men who hid in basements building boats did not suddenly start fucking men either. Definitely not a man he’d worked with in close proximity for more than ten years.

In the end, I concluded Gibbs was bi. I lathered up my hair and moved on to the next question. Why now? Why me? That was two questions. Tackle the ‘why me’ first.

Did Gibbs pick me just because I was there? Would he have fucked McGee? Stan Burley? No, leave Burley out of this.

Did Gibbs treat me differently from, say, McGee? I couldn’t really say. I was emotionally-involved. As an investigator, I knew that colored things and my analysis and conclusion may not be accurate. Nonetheless, there were certain basics that couldn’t be denied. Such as, Gibbs did say he wanted me; did say he needed me; needed to be inside me. And needed to taste me.

My cock, already hard at the thought of Gibbs, jerked at the recollection of what Gibbs had said. And he had said A Lot. Too much, in fact. That was why I doubted the man knew exactly what he was doing and if he did know, he certainly wouldn’t understand why. That alone would have freaked him out.

After all, he had said it, loud and clear - he’d have to be shitfaced drunk to fuck a man.

Which had left me with the only logical conclusion - even if Gibbs wanted to fuck a man, be it me or someone else, he wasn’t going to admit it.

Which had, ultimately, left me with only one recourse - pretend last night never happened, hence the note I left him. If there was anything I’d learnt from my relationship with Scott was that if one had to walk away, do it with dignity. In this case, it wasn’t just mine but Gibbs’, too.

As far as Gibbs was concerned, let him believe I, Tony, had been as drunk as him and that I, too, didn’t remember what we did. I know Gibbs. I know he’d blame himself; take full responsibility, no matter what the reason. Obviously, it was a huge reason that caused him to do what he did, and with me, but I couldn’t let him shoulder all the blame. I could have stopped him. That was undeniable.

Ergo - nothing happened.

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I made a sandwich for lunch, tried watching a movie but was too restless so I went for a run. I showered again when I got home and promptly fell on my bed for a nap. It was nearly dark by the time I jerked awake.

There were several missed calls from Gibbs on my mobile. Five text messages, too, each one angrier than the last. I hadn’t heard the sound alerts because I’d silenced them and put on music while I ran. I erased all the messages after verifying that Gibbs hadn’t been trying to reach me because of a case. Despite my leaving that note, there was a part of me that needed to react, that resisted my decision to act as if nothing had happened; as if my boss hadn’t fucked me stupid and I had not only let him but took all I could get as if it would be the first and the last time.

It was this part of me that wouldn’t pick up Gibbs’ calls, even though Rule Number 3 was we had
to be reachable at all times. I had put my phone on silent mode but only because I knew if Gibbs had to reach me but couldn’t, he’d have called McGee to get hold of me. Of course, if McGee could reach me, then I was clearly avoiding Gibbs. Which meant I was lying in that note I left for him.

I blew out a sigh. The games lovers play...as the 1966 song went.

When dinner time came, I called out for Thai. Then I sat down to plan my course of action. That I needed to leave the job I loved was obvious. To get out of DC was expedient. For the first time since I learnt Uncle Clive had made me a freakin’ rich man, I was sincerely thankful. I now could make major life decisions without worrying about paying for basic necessities. I could pack up and leave at a moment’s notice. Go somewhere I could lick my wounds and try to heal from my broken heart.

Was I suffering from a bout of morning-after blues?

I don’t really want to answer that.

I’d looked around my apartment and realized I wouldn’t miss it. It had been functional and spartan with only my baby Grand and the few potted plants as evidence that someone lived there. If I had a choice, I’d have had a house with wide expanses of the ocean and endless sky. I didn’t, not at the time I joined NCIS, and had rented whatever apartment was most convenient and within my budget.

Now, of course, everything was different. Or, almost everything. Now, I had three houses overlooking three different bodies of water - one overlooking the Pacific in Malibu, the Delaware property overlooked the Atlantic, and one overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea.

I would have to think about what I was going to do with them, and the staggering amount of money that I now had. It would be naïve of me to think my life wouldn’t change. I knew a lot of things would and I wanted to be prepared for them.

I retreated into my bedroom after dinner, put on the Star Wars series and my earphones. I was asleep before the Clones attacked.

In my dreams, the doorbell was ringing but I felt paralyzed for some reason, and could not move to open it. I tried to speak to say ‘hold on, I’m coming’ but no sound came out of my mouth. I heard my phone ringing next but it was on the top of a very high wall. I couldn’t reach it and there was nothing nearby I could use as a ladder. It kept on ringing but I couldn’t get to it. I knew it was Gibbs and wanted to tell him to wait and not give up on me.

But I couldn’t. I was rooted to the spot, unable to move or speak.

The ringing finally stopped.

Mon o o o

Monday:
I woke up at six in the morning filled with panic-anxiety and a need to get away. Suddenly I felt trapped in my apartment.

It was back to work tomorrow but I still had a full day to get through. I got out of bed and as I washed up, I decided this was a good time as any to check out the Delaware property. Hopefully, it wasn’t too far away and not too difficult to locate. According to Rosenfeld, Mr Jedidiah Clayton had been given the job of property manager and was paid a salary. There was, however, no contract and either party could terminate the arrangement at any time.

I found the property easily enough. Rosenfeld had emailed me a list of the properties with their addresses and I’d received the keys once the deeds had been transferred to me.

It was a two and a half-hour drive from DC along Route 50. I’d never been that far west across the Delmarva and must have uttered, for the hundredth time, my puzzlement why Uncle Clive would buy a property out here. Why not the Hamptons further up north in NY? Or he probably already had one and it was now the vacation home of some other Paddington relative.

Two hours later, I was over the bridge across Silver Lake and my stomach growled loudly. All I had before leaving the apartment was a glass of cold milk. Not even cereal, thinking I’d grab breakfast at my destination. There was bound to be a diner somewhere. All I knew about the Delmarva coastal areas was that it was big on fishing. Sitting for hours in the same spot waiting for a slippery, scaly creature to bite an equally slippery, squirmy creature isn’t my idea of relaxation but I do love the ambience of fishing towns, the docks, the marinas with their fishing boats and cafes on the boardwalk.

It’s the sort of place I’d want to retire to, eventually. That, or a tropical island where I could sleep under the stars and snooze during the day in-between mai-tais or margaritas.

Then it struck me that I could have both.

Retirement was still several years away. Yet, if I had someone like Gibbs as my life partner and he retired, I can’t see myself waking up and going in to work, getting home after sundown, having my weekends interrupted or called out at three in the morning, leaving my other half at home.

That had been my life since I joined the force and then NCIS. It was hell on relationships, that I knew. If Gibbs were my partner - my life partner - he’d understand, sure. But...it’s still not how I’d want our lives to be.

Consulting my Google maps, I saw that Rehoboth Avenue wasn’t too far from the house and being a typical beach city, there would be several places I could find breakfast.

I ended up at a place called The Gallery Espresso where I ordered spinach-mushroom crepes and, instead of my usual hazelnut flavor, decided I’d be adventurous, so I asked my server, for his recommendation.

“Hi, I’m Casey, your server for today. I absolutely love the Café Parisian myself,” he said, his darkly-lashed blue eyes sliding over me. “It’s European Vanilla, Sweet Orange and Mexican Liqueur Cream. It’s to die for.”

“I’m sure it is,” I said, and ordered it.
Casey returned with my to-die-for coffee a few minutes later, despite the restaurant being nearly full with the breakfast crowd.

“Your crepes will be ready soon,” Casey said. “You here for a visit?”

“Yes. From DC,” I said.

“Ah, just a day-tripper, then.”

“That’s right. What about you? You’re local?”

“No, I’m from Louisiana originally. Moved up here three years ago.”

“So you know this place pretty well, then.”

“I’ve been working around here since I arrived. Not Rehoboth, though. Came here only six months ago. Oh, I’ll be back in a sec. Your order’s ready.”

Casey didn’t return until several minutes later. I saw him serving a few other tables before he headed my way.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. “here you are - two tender crepes bursting with juicy mushrooms and fresh spinach, and a cheese sauce that’s going to have you just begging for more.”

He gave me a look that said the begging wasn’t limited to food.

“Um...really?” I grinned. “You flirt like this with every customer?”

“But of course. This is a gay beach city, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

Casey gave me a wink and took off. I ate my breakfast, my mind still very much on Gibbs and how I was going to play it tomorrow when we got back to work.

I called for the bill fifteen minutes later and Casey brought it immediately.

“Was everything to your satisfaction, sir?” he asked, looking concerned.

“Very. Thank you,” I responded.

“Fast eater, huh?”

I smiled but didn’t reply.

“So where are you heading to now?”

I hesitated, not really in the mood to chat more. “I’m looking for this property on Chesapeake Drive,” I replied, nonetheless.

“Chesapeake Street, you mean? Off East Lake?”

I checked the address on my phone again. “Sorry, Chesapeake Street. Off East Lake.”

“Five minutes that way.” He pointed to his left. “It’s a huge lot that takes up the entire block right down to Dewey Beach. On the other side of Chesapeake street are several houses. What number are you looking for?”
I told him and his eyes widened. “That’s the big lot. The English billionaire’s property. I know it’s nosy of me but why are you looking for it?”

“It is nosy of you,” I said, smiling. “But I’m here to see Jed Clayton.”

“Oh, Jed. He’ll be out in the orchard now. Is he expecting you?”

“No. You obviously know him.”

“Yeah, I know him.”

“Which means the minute I step out of here, you’ll be calling him, won’t you?”

“Mmm… I guess.” Casey said. “You friend or foe?”

“I won’t know until I meet him.”

“Well, then, take it from me. Jed is a great guy. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, I wouldn’t be alive if not for him. So whatever your business is with Jed, I hope it’s good news for him. I heard the Brit owner died. What’s going to happen to the property now?”

I stood up. “Really nosy, aren’t you? Call him, then, and tell him I’ll be there in five.”

“And who shall I say will be calling on him?”

“The new owner of the property.” I left some notes on the table with a nice tip for Casey and left before he asked more questions.

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It took five minutes to get to the property. East Lake Drive, like almost all lakeside drives, was pretty and quiet. A few joggers were out with their dogs and the entire scene looked very “Gibbs” to me - quiet, suburban, ideal for retirees and bird-watchers.

Before I drove into the property, I checked out the half of Chesapeake Street that the property was on. As Casey had said, it stretched all the way to the beach. It was heavily wooded but there were some breaks where I could see through the trees and noted there were several buildings which would have been accessible via a small road - if it hadn’t been blocked up.

I had the impression the property was a house but the buildings at the beach end looked like cheap motel-type structures. Well, that was the first thing I’d ask Jed about once I introduced myself.

As I thought, Casey had called Jed and he was waiting for me when I drove up to the huge three-story house. It was hidden from the street by the thick woods but once I rounded the curve and it came into view. I saw, too, that it overlooked the lake. That, in itself, was very unusual, since the ocean was just at the other end of the lot.

“Mr. DiNozzo?” the man I assumed was Jed asked.

“Good morning,” I said, as I got out of my car.

“I’m Jed Clayton.” That he didn’t ask or add anything else told me he knew who I was.
“I’m Clive Paddington’s nephew. Tony DiNozzo.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. DiNozzo. Come on inside.” Jed led me into a high-ceilinged lounge that was all wood and filled with ivory-colored, fat sofas and armchairs. “This is my husband, Joe.”

“Hello, Mr. DiNozzo.” Joe held out his hand but his eyes were wary.

“Tony.” I shook Joe’s hand. Husband. That word made my chest ache. Scott had talked about getting married but the thought had just about shrivelled up my balls. Yet when I combined the word with Gibbs, I think there’s nothing I’d want more in this world.

“Have a seat, Tony,” Joe said. “I’ll go bring a jug of iced tea. Unless you prefer a coffee?”

“Iced tea’s good,” I replied.

“Peach flavored okay?”

“From your orchard?” I looked at Jed. I was just being facetious but Jed took me seriously.

“Well, it’s your orchard, but yes, we have a few peach trees that yield the best white peaches you’ll ever eat,” Jed said. “And apples, of course. We also grow grapes, berries, figs, just about anything that’ll thrive here. We grow our own vegetables, too.”

I thought of asking if they reared their own chickens and cows but decided not to. I would have, if McGee or Ziva had been with me. And if Abby was here, I’d be telling her they reared rabbits for food.

Which reminded me I had yet to tell my colleagues about my inheritance. Oh, they knew my uncle had left me something. Just not how much. I made a mental note to tell Abby before I left for my vacation.

“My condolences on the passing of your uncle, Tony,” Jed said. “Thomas, Mr. Paddington’s p.a., informed me of Mr. Paddington’s death last year. I flew to London for the funeral. I don’t recall seeing you there, but there were a lot of people, of course.”

“I wasn’t able to attend. I was recovering from an injury.”

“Oh, accident?”

“No, quite deliberate. I had the perp cornered. He pulled out a gun and shot me in the leg.”

“You got shot?” Joe said, returning with a tray of glasses and the jug of tea. “So was I. Shot down, that is.”

“Shot down?” I frowned.

“From our Blackhawk over Helmand Province. Afghanistan. Shattered both legs. Eight years ago now.”

I wanted to ask Joe more about that but Jed continued, “Everyone who was anyone was there at the funeral. Not being disrespectful or anything, but they were all decked out in their designer-wear as if they were attending some society party.”

“I’m sure it was one,” I murmured.

“I was informed by Thomas that I would be told whether my services would continue to be
required and that until then, Joe and I could continue to occupy the caretaker’s cottage. May I ask what your plans are, Tony?"

“Well, I haven’t decided what I want to do with the property yet but until then, it’ll be status quo for you. And Joe.”

“Thank you,” Jed said. “For letting Joe stay here.”

“We can rent a place somewhere else, if you prefer,” Joe offered. “I’m no help to Jed here, anyway.”

“Joe’s a writer,” Jed said. “You heard of Joseph James?”

“Web of Guilt? Bones of Contention?”

Joe smiled. “Yes. You’ve read my books?”

“And seen the movies!” I grinned. “‘Dancing On Graves’ is premiering next month. Wow! You’re that Joseph James. Wait till I tell McGee.”

“McGee?” Joe repeated.

“A friend. He writes under the pseudonym Thom E Gemcity.”

“Oh. My. Gawd.” Joe’s jaw dropped. “You know Thom E Gemcity? He’s a god. Well, an up and coming one. I love his books!”

“Believe me, he will be very impressed that I met Joseph James face-to-face.”

“Joe writes from after breakfast till lunchtime, then from three onwards till dinner,” Jed said. “Everyday, except weekends. Unless an idea strikes him.”

“Or a scene that just can’t wait,” Joe added. “Once the moment passes, it’s hard to recapture it...but Jed understands.”

“So, what do you do while Joe is writing bestsellers?”

“You probably know I was your uncle’s chauffeur for the last ten years. Outside the UK that is. I chauffeured Mr Paddington while he was in Monaco and was his personal bodyguard if he already had a chauffeur in that particular country. He had Simon in the UK, Jorge took care of Northern Europe and I drove him in Southern Europe and the rest of the world.”

“My uncle needed a bodyguard?”

“Most billionaires do,” Jed said. “You don’t notice us because we’re good at hiding in plain sight.” I looked at Jed’s shaved head, his muscle-bound six feet-four or five frame with its body art and my skepticism must have showed because he laughed and said, “Well, except for me. Mr, Paddington thought indulging in a bit of cliched fun would be...um, fun.

“So, yeah, about two years ago, I told Mr Paddington that I wanted to quit. I had met Joe and we wanted to settle down. I was born here, in Delaware; been all over the world and now I wanted to set some roots down. My sister and her husband manage a CNG farm up north which they took over from our parents. Mr Paddington had our produce airflown to him regularly, no matter where he was in the world.”

“CNG? That’s some kind of organic certification, isn’t it?”
“Certified Naturally Grown,” Jed said. “Yes, and no. We follow organic procedures rigorously - no herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics, hormones, or genetically modified organisms but we don’t keep the heavy paper work and administration that the National Organic Program requires. We’re small, family-run farms, not large commercial producers so we can’t afford the amount paperwork. We love what we’re doing. Just not the paperwork.”

“Oh.” I sighed. “A people after my very own heart.”

“So I grow some fruit and vegetables here because it’s a huge piece of land and when I haven’t got my fingers in the soil, I’m overseeing the maintenance of the property. Mr. Paddington came to stay once a year and has celebrated some Christmases here, too. Nothing big, just his immediate family and the grandchildren. During the rest of the year, we’d have his friends from all over the world so the house had to be ready to receive guests at a moment’s notice.”

“It must have been very quiet the past year or so,” I said.

“As a tomb. How long will you be staying in Rehoboth? It’s filling up already. Soon, you won’t find a space on the beach to squeeze in-between.”

“I’m afraid it’s back to work tomorrow,” I said.

“What is it you do?”

“I’m a special agent with NCIS. That’s -”

“Naval Criminal Investigative Service,” Joe said, before I could.

“Yup.” I stood. “I’m a Fed. Now, how about that tour?”

Spacing the entire day in East Delaware was certainly not my plan when I left my apartment this morning yet that was what I did.

Jed and Joe turned out to be a very easygoing couple, despite Joe’s initial wariness. I learnt, later, that they had met in a club in New York - well, a carpark behind the club, to be exact - when Joe was about to get the shirt beaten out of him. Jed had come to the rescue, the two became friends, then lovers. Joe’s first book had just become a No. 1 bestseller on the New York Times and Jed was back in the US for his annual vacation before returning to his job in the UK as Clive Paddington’s chauffeur-cum-bodyguard.

The part of the property along the lake was really pretty but the other half facing Dewey beach was an eyesore. Work had begun to demolish the existing structures but had been halted. As a result, that half had been boarded up from the street and much was overgrown with out-of-control shrubs, piles of debris and concrete slabs. What would have been a driveway to that half of the property had been locked with a rusty barrier.

According to Jed, Silver Lake was actually a freshwater pond and, along with the even smaller pond across the road, Lake Comegys, were the two bodies of freshwater that were closest to the ocean in the whole of the US. I don’t know how that piece of trivia is significant but it obviously was to Jed.
I was shown the small fruit orchard with its three peach trees - a yellow-fleshed variety, a white, and the donut peach. There were two apple trees, and a pergola facing the lake covered with grapevines which Jed told me were called ‘Delaware’, a cultivar derived from the *Vitis Labrusca*.

“There’re more over there,” he pointed in a general direction to his left. “You should come in September when I pick them to make the *Eiswein*.”

“You make your own wine?” I was impressed. I love the idea of owning a vineyard but the practical, realistic side of me - yes, I do have one - knows some things are best left to others.

“Just for our own consumption,” Jed replied. “Though my parents and siblings have a vineyard just seven miles north from here. It’s an award-winning winery. Mine here is just a personal hobby and experimenting with some cultivars.”

They persuaded me, rather easily, I have to admit, to stay for dinner and Jed turned out to be an excellent cook.

“You forget - I was Mr. Paddington’s personal chef, too.”

“A regular Jed-of-all-trades, aren’t you?” I suddenly felt very unskilled, but also couldn’t help thinking that Gibbs would feel right at home in this place, with these people. So would McGee, with Joe to bounce ideas off. “I suppose there’s a branch of your family that are fishermen, too.”

Jed brightened up. Joe gave a bark of laughter. I wondered what was so funny.

“My uncle and cousin own the largest commercial fisheries in the North-East. We supply hotels, restaurants and seafood outlets all over the US.”

“That must be convenient,” I said. “So this fish we’re eating is one of theirs?”

“Most of Rehoboth’s seafood, I’d say.” Jed smiled.

Dinner ended with a dessert of thin, tender crepes filled with Rainier cherries that had been soaked in vodka. The cherries were from a single tree in a corner of the property.

“Never expected it to fruit,” Jed said. “But it did and I have several bottles of them. Take a couple back with you.”

I thanked him then said, “Jed, I have a proposition for you to consider. Well, for me, too. This is just off the top of my head but I’d like you to think about it and tell me if it’s viable.

“If I keep this property, I’d like it to pay for itself. You know, the taxes and upkeep. So I’m thinking we could turn it into a guesthouse. You and Joe already have your own cottage so this main house could be leased out whole, or the rooms. I could complete the development of the vacant land next door into another vacation rental and, maybe, one for myself. You think you’d like to run it? Maybe operate a small, cozy restaurant, too. The food you cooked tonight was fantastic. Not that that’s a surprise, seeing as you’ve been cheffing for my uncle all these years.”

“Are you serious?” Jed asked.

“Yeah, but only if you’re interested. You’ll get paid a salary plus profit-share. Since it’s going to involve more work, you let me know what a fair salary would be and what percentage of the profits would be fair recompense. Later, we can talk about share ownership. Or you might even want to buy me out.
“You continue to oversee the property but we can hire people to handle the business side, of course.”

Jed looked overwhelmed. I would be, too, but then what did I know about running a guest house? And a restaurant?

“Is it viable?” I asked. “I mean, am I underestimating what it takes to run a guesthouse?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘guesthouse’. Bill and Randy have been running theirs for the last five years and they love what they do. If you’d mention this earlier, we could have dropped by their place and you could have had a chat with them.”

“Why don’t I leave that with you?” I suggested. “You do the research, talk to your folks. You know - supplying you with the seafood - you could run an oyster and wine bar and rent out rooms upstairs?”

“Hey, that’s a super idea!” Joe said. “I think that’s great. A beachfront oyster and wine bar. I like!”

And so I left Jed and Joe with that and told Jed to send me his thoughts and initial plans as soon as he could while I checked out the cost of developing the adjoining lot. I couldn’t help thinking leaving DC and moving to Rehoboth, Delaware, wasn’t ridiculous at all but I guess dreading tomorrow played a part in my desire to escape.

I’d left Rehoboth at eight and arrived home just before eleven. There had been no calls, no more text

END OF TONY’S POV

TBC

A/N: There is a cafe called Gallery Espresso in Rehoboth:
http://www.thegalleryespresso.com/index.html

There is a Bill and Randy in Rehoboth Beach who open their house to paying guests:
https://www.airbnb.com.sg/rooms/77683
Meanwhile, back in DC

3RD PERSON POV

“I told you, I need more time,” Scott said, his words coming out in a harsh, urgent whisper. “Just one more week.”

“You’re already overdue by two weeks. The boss ain’t extending it and that’s final.”

Scott shut his eyes for a moment. They were seated at an outdoor café in a park. It was noisy with families out with dogs and kids. Maybe if he kept his eyes shut for awhile, the man seated opposite him might disappear. Along with his debt.

Damn Tony for not coming through. For breaking up with him at the most inopportune time. He’d tried calling him but after one call, had been told by Tony that it was really over.

Scott opened his eyes. Nope. Not gone. Bugsy was still there, looking at him with those black eyes and yellowed incisors protruding past his repaired harelip, hence his nickname.

“Please.” If there was one thing Scott hated, it was begging. Asking was already bad enough. He expected people to know what he wanted without having to ask for it. To be reduced to begging this minion galled him. “Call your boss. Tell him I’ll do anything if he’ll just give me this extension.”

Bugsy sighed but took out his cell phone. He went a few feet away to talk. When he returned, he was smiling.

“Okay, Mr. Branson. Here’s the deal – and it’s a real sweet one. My boss has agreed to write off your debt. Yes, you heard right. Not an extension. No sirree. See, he’s in a generous mood so you caught him at the right time.”

“Write off my debt! You mean totally?”

“Like you never owed anything.”

Oh God. They want me to kill someone. “What do I have to do?”
“Good morning, boss.” McGee hurried into the bullpen even though he wasn’t late. Dorneget was just behind him but Tony wasn’t in yet.

“Morning, McGee,” Muldoon called out as she rushed past.

“Where you going?” McGee asked. Sara Muldoon was a senior agent on another team. When Ziva left, he and Tony were expecting Gibbs to find a replacement. They didn’t expect him to bring two agents on board – Muldoon and Dorneget.

“Gotta see Ducky,” Muldoon replied over her shoulder just as Tony came in. “Hi Tony. Enjoy your long weekend?” Tony mumbled something but Muldoon was already hurrying off.

“Hi Tony. Do anything over the long weekend?” Dorneget asked brightly.

Tony shoved his backpack in his bottom drawer. “Just caught up with my beauty sleep. Though I did go for a drive out to the country yesterday.”

Gibbs looked up when Tony. His phone rang just then and he picked it up. “Gibbs. Director? Okay.” He hung up without another word. “McGee. DiNozzo. Director’s office.”

Dorneget looked around at them enviously. “I’ll um, stay and man the store.”

“Your day will come, Probie,” McGee said, patting the agent on the shoulder as he walked past. “Maybe.”

Tony frowned at McGee. “Tim. It’s not nice to tease the young’uns.”

McGee sniggered. “How was the boss after you dropped him home?” he asked, quietly, his back to Dorneget so the agent couldn’t overhear. “Did you have to put him in bed? I’ve never seen him so smashed, have you?”

“Gibbs is fine,” Tony replied. “He was a little intoxicated but no more than you were, and no, I did not have to tuck him in bed.” He glanced up and saw Gibbs waiting for them at the door to the Director’s office. “Haul ass, McSpeedy. Boss is waiting.”

Tony had been hoping they’d catch a case today, and everyday, until he flew out on Saturday. The less time he spent around Gibbs, the easier it would be, the less tempting it would be to poke around and find out what Gibbs’ thoughts were about what happened on Saturday night. He knew he couldn’t avoid Gibbs totally and at some point, Gibbs would manage to corner him. The man was tenacious when he wanted answers.

That was Gibbs. The man on Saturday night wasn’t. The man who fucked his brains out that night was needy and hungry and wanted nothing and no one but Tony DiNozzo. He could live with that.

Pity they both had to wake up. And now, he wasn’t sure which Gibbs he had on his hands.
“This just came in from SecNav’s office,” Vance said, when the three agents entered his office. “Two high-ranking military officers have been blackmailed. One had already been blackmailed before and paid the ransom the first time. When the blackmailer came back asking for another payout, he knew what he had to do; what he ought to have done the first time.” He gave the file to Gibbs who opened it and scanned the document.

Gibbs’ brow lifted. “A three-star Admiral and a four-star General.”

Vance nodded. “Blackmailed within hours of each other yesterday. Vice-Admiral Jonas Hawkins and General Steven Palmer. This morning, John Citrone, a senior employee in the IRS got his ransom demand. In all three, the threat of sexually-explicit photographs being made public was issued if the ransom is not paid by the stipulated time.”

“Sextortion,” Tony muttered.

“Yes,” Vance said. “The FBI is on it but SecNav wants this wrapped up ASAP, as does his army counterpart. I don’t have to tell you that the last thing they want is sex photos of our Admirals and Generals going viral. Same goes for the United States Treasury. We’re working with the FBI but they’ve got dibs on this one.” Seeing Gibbs’ face, he added, “I know you don’t like it, Gibbs. Neither do I but –”

“Director –” Gibbs began then stopped.

“We don’t have time to argue about jurisdiction,” Vance cut Gibbs off. “Not with the victims coming from the Navy, the Army and the State Department. It was logical the FBI would lead.”

Gibbs nodded. Vance was right, of course. “What have we got?” He flipped through the documents. “Hawkins was blackmailed six months ago.”

“Yes,” Vance replied. “And he paid up. Kept quiet about it. When he got this second demand, he called SecNav – who happens to be Hawkins’ daughter’s godfather.”

Gibbs scanned through the rest of the file’s contents. The Admiral should have reported it the first time so those photos had to be pretty embarrassing, Gibbs thought.

There was a knock on the door and Vance’s secretary poked her head in. “Director, SecNav on line 1. Special Agent Gibbs, Fornell and Colonel Mann have arrived. Shall I put them in the conference room?”

“Yes, tell them we’ll join them shortly.” Gibbs turned to McGee and Tony, “Get whatever you can on the victims and meet us in the conference room.”

Vance’s face was grim as he hung up. “I don’t have to tell you if any of this gets out, there’ll be hell to pay. Rein in your horses, Gibbs, and take the cue from the FBI.”

“What are you doing here?” Gibbs asked when he and his team entered the conference room and he saw Diane seated at the table chatting away with Colonel Mann.

“Jethro. Good morning,” Diane said, coolly. “You’re looking well, if a little harried.”
“Colonel.” Gibbs nodded at his Army counterpart. “Tobias.” He followed the greeting with a pointed look. Mann’s phone rang and she went to a corner to take the call.

“It’s her case,” Tobias replied with a resigned tone, interpreting Gibbs’ what-the-fuck look accurately.

“What do you mean ‘her’ case?” Gibbs asked. Behind him, Tony made querying gestures to McGee, who looked like he’d rather be anywhere but in the room.

“One of the victims is – was – on my team,” Diane replied. “The IRS’ Special Crimes Investigative Unit.”

“What special crimes investigative unit?” Gibbs asked, throwing Fornell an accusing glare.

“Hey, I only found out this morning.” Fornell brought up his hands, palms out, in a defensive gesture.

“I thought you were an accountant,” Gibbs said to Diane.

“I am. A forensic accountant,” Diane said.

“Since when?”

“Since our divorce. I did move on, you know.”

“Moving in with him is moving on?” Gibbs nodded towards Fornell.

“Hey!” Fornell protested.

Diane’s mouth gaped open. She turned on Tobias, “Did you tell him?” She swung back to Gibbs. “I have not moved in with him. I wasn’t moving in with him. I have Emily to –”

“Excuse me, I hate to interrupt,” Colonel Mann said, “But I just had a call from General Palmer and he’s decided to go public with his homosexuality.”

“John Citrone was my senior investigative agent,” Diane said, as if Mann hadn’t spoken. “And since you obviously do not know,” she looked at Gibbs. “I was promoted to head of the unit last week. Anyway, Citrone was responsible for the primary investigation. He’d review information then seek approval for further investigation as he thought fit. Two days ago he submitted his resignation. Yesterday he came to me and told me he was being blackmailed. He’d already paid out $10,000 and this time the amount is $15,000. He’s to get it ready within 48 hours and wait for further instructions.”

“FBI’s already on this,” Fornell told Gibbs. “But NCIS and Army CID are being let in to conduct its own questioning – but, I’m sure your Directors have told you – you take instructions from us. We’re all going to co-operate and play nice this time so let’s get on with this briefing.”

“Okay, let’s move,” Gibbs replied with a curt nod.

At Gibbs’ gesture, McGee launched into his narrative. “Vice-Admiral Jonas Hawkins, Director of naval intelligence; age 51; married; two adult children,” he read out. “Received the first sextortion demand of a hundred thousand dollars a year ago just after Thanksgiving. Yesterday he received another demand for another hundred thousand. The second extortion bid was made on General Palmer. Colonel Mann –” McGee turned to the Colonel.
“Steven Wentworth Palmer, 4-star General,” Mann continued from McGee. “Age 50. Received his demand for a hundred thousand as well. The blackmailer threatened to make public photographs of him in flagrante delicto if the demands are not met within three days. If they don’t get the money within five, the pictures will be posted on the internet.”

“How was Admiral Hawkins’ first ransom paid?” Tony asked. “And how was the demand made?”

“The Admiral received instructions by phone two days after the extortion note and photographs were received,” McGee replied. “He left the bag of cash at the designated spot in an alley in Chinatown. There was another note there. This gave instructions to go to another location where he would find the envelope containing the photographs, provided the ransom payment was in order. And if he wasn’t being followed.”

“And the second demand?” Gibbs asked. “The one he got on Saturday?”

“Similar,” McGee replied. “He’s to get the cash ready then stand by for the phone call which will give him the drop location, day and time. This time, though,” McGee added. “The Admiral was sent a Facebook link which showed him the photos of him having sex. The note also said the photos were visible only to him at the moment, but if the money isn’t paid, the album would be set to public. And that it wouldn’t be just on Facebook.”

“No idea when payday will be?” Tony asked.

“The extortion note simply says – ‘Be ready within forty-eight hours with fifty thousand in cash. Fifty and hundred denominations, unmarked bills. Wait for further instructions.’”

“Exactly the same for General Palmer,” Mann said. “Cash ready. Forty-eight hours. Wait for drop-off instructions.”

“So Hawkins and Citrone both don’t know when the money is to be paid,” Tony said. “Just that they’re to have the cash ready. Makes it harder for us to track them.”

“Psychological intimidation, too,” Mann added. “The victims will be so stressed out, they’ll be ready to pay more by the time the blackmailers get in touch.” Mann’s phone rang again and she answered it.

“Both of Hawkins’ pick-ups were in Chinatown,” Gibbs said, mulling over the information they had.

“Triads?” Tony postulated.

“Or they want us to think so,” Gibbs replied.

“I’m sorry,” Colonel said. “I have to go. I’ll update you all as soon as I speak with the General.”

“Same here,” Fornell said, turning to Gibbs. “Citrone’s on his way in to give us more details. Diane and I were on our way in and stopped by to brief NCIS personally. I’ll keep you posted.”

“We’ll be questioning Admiral Hawkins and General Palmer first, Citrone after that,” Gibbs said.

“The reports on our meeting with them are in this folder.” Fornell handed it to Gibbs. “Update us if you learn anything new.”
“Um, what in flagrante delicto photos are involved?” Dorneget asked, after Mann left.

McGee looked at Gibbs, who was looking at Dorneget. “We don’t have any photos here but we can guess what they are,” McGee replied.

“I g-guess I don’t really need to see them,” Dorneget muttered. “But it would help to know what we’re up against…I guess…” he stole a nervous glance at Gibbs, whose eyes were still fixed on him.

“No need to guess,” Gibbs said. “DiNozzo, you and Muldoon take the Admiral. McGee, go see the General. I’ll clear it with Colonel Mann.

“What about Citrone?” Tony asked.

“After the FBI and IRS are done. Get the photos from both Hawkins and Palmer. Find out what they’re being blackmailed with. Report back by the end of the day. Find the connection. There’s got to be one.”

“What about me?” Dorneget asked.

“Watch and learn,” Gibbs replied, heading out of the conference room.

“I could drive DiNozzo and Muldoon,” Dorneget offered, hurrying after Gibbs. “I can learn listening to them.”


The latter rolled his eyes. “Don’t get in my way.”

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TBC
Shortly after lunch, Tony and the other two agents were back from interviewing Hawkins and Palmer.

"Photos of Hawkins are in here. I haven't looked at them yet." he handed a sealed envelope to Gibbs.

"And Palmer's." McGee passed his.

Gibbs opened the two sealed envelopes and took out the photos.

"The Admiral wanted assurance that these pictures will be kept secure," Tony said. "Said assurance was given."

"And I promised the Colonel Palmer's photos will be kept under lock and key."

"We can keep them until the case is over," Tony said, craning his neck to look at the photos in Gibbs' hands.

"Whoa." McGee blinked. "They're - they're pretty well - um..."

"Whooh." Dorneget breathed out as he looked from behind McGee's shoulder. "A three-star Admiral and four-star General? I'd give them both five stars! Look at how hung -" he caught Gibbs' glare at him and stopped short.

Muldoon rushed into the bullpen. "What did I miss?"

"Just started," Tony told her. Tony gave Dorneget a warning look before turning back to Gibbs. "As you can see from the photographs - Dorneget. Stop drooling on the photos and pass them to Muldoon. Our victims," he resumed. "Are being uh, attended to by young, hunky males. According to Admiral Hawkins, he met Kevin Granger ten months ago, two months after the first blackmail."

"So the man with the Admiral in the photo is not Granger," Gibbs concluded.

"Nope. But the one in the second set of photos, for this current blackmail bid - that's Granger. Three weeks ago they decided to make their relationship an exclusive one. Admiral Hawkins said there were no major problems in their relationship other than that Granger wanted him to leave the Navy and come out. The Admiral was balking but lately had been reconsidering."

"Could be a motive there," McGee said. "Granger could be trying to force the Admiral's hand."

"Then why ask for only fifty thousand?" Muldoon asked, "Why not something harder for the Admiral to cough up? Like a million, if it's not about the money. The Admiral would - or should - find that hard to come up with, leaving him no choice but to come out of the closet."

"Good point, Probette," Tony said. "Something the General has decided to do. Except, I doubt anyone would do that to make his partner come out. No use forcing something like that. It's got to be voluntary."
"I agree with DiNozzo," Dorneget said. "Say, Tony, you know us gays pretty well."

All four heads turned to look at Dorneget who promptly turned red.

"Besides, Granger is in hospital," Tony said, as if Dorneget hadn't spoken. "Been in a coma since last Wednesday. Victim of a gay bashing. The Admiral was on his way to visit him when I arrived at his house. It was because of Granger that the Admiral came clean with SecNav. He said he'd do anything if it could bring his partner out of the coma. Even leaving the Navy and joining Granger in his import-export business. They'd been talking about that and he was planning to tell Granger about his decision that night over dinner."

"Must love his partner to do that," Dorneget remarked.

Gibbs' eyes flicked over to Tony briefly, caught a returning glance before both looked away. The look the two men shared said they acknowledged what happened on Saturday night was something they needed to address now that the holiday was over, even though Tony was clearly not ready to confront it.

But they would. Right now, though, they had bad guys to catch.

"Who's the man in the first set of photos?" Gibbs asked.

"Uh, a paid companion," Tony replied.

"Where did Hawkins get him?" Gibbs asked.

"The bartender from the resort Hawkins was at introduced him. Guy's name is Julio."

"As for General Palmer," Muldoon said, picking up from Tony. "He said he was tired of living a lie, that he'd met someone who's made him realize he wants the life he'd denied himself for thirty-five years. The 'someone' is Jason Pitt, the Oscar-winning actor."

"No shit!" Dorneget exclaimed. "Pitt is gay? I knew -" Another glare from Gibbs shut Dorneget up.

"Pitt has a lot more money than the Admiral," Tony said. "And he has two new movies coming out so it's unlikely he wants this kind of publicity right now."

"Exactly," Muldoon confirmed. "And General Palmer and Pitt have been together - very discreetly, of course - for three years. Pitt maintains a suite in the Four Seasons Hotel and General Palmer stayed there whenever Pitt was in town."

"Okay, so we have two younger male lovers who are unlikely suspects," Gibbs said.

"Well, their partners aren't that young," McGee said. "Granger is forty-one and Pitt is thirty-seven this year."

"Where were those photos taken?" Gibbs asked. "Hawkins said it was a resort?"

"El Hedonista," Tony replied. "Admiral Hawkins believes both sets of photos were taken at the same resort but he's not certain. The photos are close-ups so all we're getting is the bed and the, um, activity. He and Granger travel whenever he can, or else they're in Granger's apartment. And Granger's bedroom is painted a different color. The one in the photograph has a white wall. I'd say it was taken in the resort."

"As for General Palmer," McGee said. "He knows it's not Pitt's hotel suite because they do not
have a bedspread in that color."

"But guess which resort the General was at before he received his blackmail demand," Dorneget said.

"I don't wanna guess. Tell me!" Gibbs barked, making Dorneget jump.

"Ah... um, the El Hedonista," Dorneget replied. "It's um...a gay adults-only resort."

"Where is it?" Gibbs asked. "Go check it out."

"El Hedonista is in Mexico," Tony answered. He knew because it was Scott's favorite resort though Tony had never been there himself. Scott had invited him a couple of months ago when his group of friends had gone for a long weekend. Tony hadn't been able to take the time off which, of course, had resulted in another argument.

Gibbs' phone rang again. It was Vance, informing Gibbs that the Vice-Admiral was about to make his announcement.

"Heads up!" Gibbs tilted his head towards the screen. "Hawkins is about to make a press statement concerning his affair with Kevin Granger."

Everyone gathered round the plasma. Even Vance had come down to the bullpen. On-screen, Hawkins, surrounded by other officials and a press room of reporters, looked tired and somber. The newscaster's voice, painfully chirpy by contrast, introduced their breaking news.

"Not one but two of our military's senior officers have announced they are gay. Vice-Admiral Jonas Hawkins, Director of naval intelligence, has stepped down from his post with immediate effect. Early this morning, Admiral Hawkins came out to his superiors, saying he is gay. The Admiral followed that announcement with the disclosure that he is involved in a long-term relationship with another man. Earlier this year, Hawkins' wife filed for divorce after twenty-five years of marriage citing irreconcilable differences."

The camera zoomed in on Hawkins who had begun addressing his audience:

"- and believe this is the right and honorable thing to do. My wife and I tried to make our marriage work. That it has not is in no way due to Catherine's lack of trying. Our divorce was granted two weeks ago and I wish Catherine all the best. As for me, after discussing my situation with my superior officers, I decided it was time for me to pull back and address my personal affairs. Therefore, I have tendered my resignation which takes effect immediately."

The newscaster came back on. "Hot on the heels of the Vice-Admiral's disclosure, four-star General Steven Wentworth Palmer came out to the public." The video of General Palmer making his announcement took over.

"After living fifty years as a straight man, twenty of them married, I told my wife, my children, my commanding officer...and now everyone, that I am gay. My wife and I have agreed to file for divorce and have also agreed to have joint custody of our two children. After discussing the situation with my commanding officer, I agreed that early retirement would be in order."

That was all the General appeared to want to say and the reporters clamored for answers to their questions, as they did with Vice-Admiral Hawkins.

"No mention of the blackmail," McGee said when the plasma was turned off.
"No," Gibbs said. "But the blackmailers are bound to call soon. McGee, you'll stay at the Admiral's home until the perps call. When they do, get a lock on the phone. Colonel Mann's people are doing the same thing with General Palmer. Our two teams are working this very closely together so keep each other updated."

They were all discussing the repercussions of the announcements when Vance's cell phone chimed. He walked away as he answered it. Gibbs' eyes followed the Director as he went up the stairs back to his office. Whatever it was, it wasn't good news if Vance's facial expression was anything to go by.

Gibbs was still watching Vance when the Director halted in his steps and looked down at Gibbs. "Gibbs! You and DiNozzo. My office. Now."

"For your ears only," Vance said when Gibbs and Tony joined him. "We got another victim. Where's McGee?"

"On his way to Admiral Hawkins' house," Gibbs replied. "Why?"

"You'd better sit down for this, Gibbs." Vance looked harassed. "Same sextortion bid. Same M.O. Another Admiral, this time. But the identity of our latest vic is not to be disclosed to the rest of the team, or anyone else. You and DiNozzo are handling this one. With kid gloves."

"Who's the victim?" Gibbs asked, with a feeling he wasn't going to like the answer.

"Admiral John McGee."

Tony sputtered. "M-McGee's dad?"

"Yes." Vance's voice was pained. "SecNav is hitting the roof, needless to say. Both of you - go see the Admiral now. He's expecting you. Call me when you're done and we'll decide on a plan of action."

"How long have the blackmailers given him?" Gibbs asked.

"Forty-eight hours to get the cash ready. He will be contacted after that with the drop-off location." Gibbs and Tony turned to do. "And Gibbs. Handle this one with kid gloves."

Like Gibbs needed to be told, Tony thought as they left Vance's office. McGee's dad! He couldn't believe it. Not only did he now have Gibbs to avoid, he had to keep this from McGee. Saturday and London couldn't come fast enough.

The Admiral's residence was a two-story Colonial in Alexandria and as Gibbs made his way up the front steps, he couldn't help muttering whether there was some kind of gay bug that was going around. And to think I, who've never caught a cold in my life, caught this one!
John McGee opened the door, his face drawn. "Gibbs."

"Good afternoon, sir. DiNozzo's parking the car."

"Come on in first."

McGee Snr led Gibbs to the sitting room. The house appeared empty except for the two men.

"My wife is on holiday with a close friend," McGee Snr said when the two men sat down. "Would you like a drink?" he asked, as an afterthought.

"No, thank you," Gibbs replied. "Admiral McGee."

"Call me John. Please."

"John. Tell me about the blackmail message."

"It was in a manila envelope left in my mailbox this morning," the Admiral said. He passed note to Gibbs. It was a plain white sheet, the message printed in black.

"We want $250,000 CASH. Unmarked bills in 50s and 100s. Half and half. Get it ready in 48 hours. You will be contacted again to be told where to deliver the money."

If we don't get the money, the whole world will see what you and your loverboy do in your dress whites. We've given you a few samples just so you know what we're talking about. Believe it - the best are being kept for the last.

The Admiral took out the ransom note from the large envelope on the table. "There are photographs included, if it's necessary to look at them."

"Sir, I know how difficult this must be for you," Gibbs began as he took the note from the Admiral. "But you knew it would be when you reported it to SecNav. You -" The doorbell chimed, cutting Gibbs off.

Seeing the Admiral's expression of discomfort, Gibbs added, "It was either DiNozzo or Tim, sir."

The Admiral held up a hand as he stood to go to the door. "I understand, Gibbs."

"DiNozzo," Gibbs said, when Tony entered. "Go talk to the neighbors." He passed the extortion note to Tony. Once the door closed after Tony, Gibbs picked up the envelope and took out the photographs. "Do you know where these were taken? When they were taken?"

"I can't be sure," the Admiral said. "But it could be the Hyatt on H Street. The photographs are too close up to show any identifiable décor."

Gibbs' poker face was in play as he looked at the eight by ten in his hand. It showed the Admiral laying down on a bed in his dress whites, pants around his thighs. A naked man crouched between the Admiral's legs, head buried in his groin.

The second photograph was similar to the first except this time the man was positioned on the Admiral's side, the Admiral's cock in his mouth. Both looked to have been taken in the same room.

"What about this one?" Gibbs asked, nodding at the third photograph in his hand. "Can you
"If I'm not wrong that's taken at our room in El Hedonista," the Admiral replied. "It's a gay resort on Isla de Mujeres. It's off Cancun...but I'm not sure. Those are my clothes and it's beachwear. The only time I went to a beach this year was with Mark two months ago, at the El Hedonista Resort."

Gibbs noted that down as the Admiral put the photographs back in the envelope.

"And they've got more. Worse ones." The Admiral pinched the bridge of his nose.

Yeah, Gibbs thought. He be worried, too, if it was him. That pic of the Admiral in his dress whites was pretty serious.

"I watched the news earlier," Admiral McGee said. "Hawkins is a good man. So is Palmer. I know them both but I did not know they were gay. Until I turned on the TV. I called SecNav after that and he told me about the extortion bids on them." McGee Snr leaned back on the sofa. "He asked if I was planning to do the same thing as Hawkins and Palmer. I told him I'd let him know later."

"Tell me about your partner. How you met, places you've been."

"I met Mark when I was at a friend's birthday party. My wife was not in town so I went alone. Mark is my friend's brother. We exchanged numbers and a few days after the party, I contacted him, asking if he wanted to have a drink. Two months ago, we flew to Isla de Mujeres to celebrate our one-year anniversary." The Admiral paused a moment. "Before this we'd already discussed coming out to our families. Mark is single, by the way."

"Who brought up the issue of coming out?"

"I did," the Admiral replied. "My wife and I have lived separate lives for the last ten years even though she has her own bedroom in this house. Divorce was never an option. Until I met Mark. I talked about it then, and Mark said if that was really what I was prepared to do, he'd be very happy."

"Have you told your wife?"

"We have discussed divorce, yes, but at the time there wasn't a need to go through with it."

"I meant about your being blackmailed," Gibbs clarified.

"Oh. No, I was going to wait till she came home. It isn't just the blackmail. My wife doesn't know I'm gay. If you talk about being in the closet, I've been in there so long I've forgotten it has a door for me to open, if I ever wanted to. Now, I am forced to."

"Were you involved in any other men besides Mark?"

"No." The monosyllable was so softly spoken Gibbs almost didn't hear it.

"How well would you say you know Mark?"

"Mark Fields has no reason to blackmail me, if that's what you're asking. He's not just a successful lawyer. He's a senior partner in one of our top legal firms and before we left for Mexico, he came out to his family and his partners."

"Did he ask you to do the same?"

"No." The Admiral's tone was emphatic. "That's not how our relationship worked. We respected
each other's differing views and decisions. It wasn't that we didn't discuss my coming out but he understood that I was married and Mark's the kind of person who lets the other make such decisions. He would never make me feel obligated to follow in his footsteps, even if he preferred that I did."

The doorbell chimed again.

"I'll get it," Gibbs said, getting up to let Tony back in.

"The neighbor opposite said he saw a car stop briefly outside this house sometime around four in the morning," Tony reported. "His bedroom faces the road and he was passing the window on his way back to bed after going to the bathroom. It was too dark for him to make out anything other than it was a dark sedan that stopped for just a few seconds."

"Enough time for him, or his accomplice, to drop the envelope in the mailbox and drive off," Gibbs said.

"None of the neighbors saw anyone coming to the house this morning, except you, Admiral. Mr. Crenshaw next door saw you going up the steps when he was in the garden."

"That would be when I went to get the morning papers and spotted the envelope sticking out from the mailbox. Admiral McGee studied some spot on the floor. "What are you going to do? I can't help you. I have no idea who could be behind this."

Gibbs stood, "Sir, the FBI is leading this but we'll get the bastards. We'll be in touch, Admiral, but expect a visit from the FBI soon."

"I can get my hands on the money," the Admiral said as if he hadn't heard Gibbs. "I just need to liquidate my portfolio. Mark insists on paying but I'm beginning to think I'll follow what Hawkins did and come out."

"Let's hope it doesn't have to come to that, Admiral." Gibbs said standing to leave. "Unless that's what you want to do."

"I'll be giving SecNav my resignation in the morning," Admiral McGee said. "It's the best way. I'm not paying that sonofabitch a cent. I hate having my hand forced but perhaps it's the only way I can be true to myself. I've lied to my wife for nearly twenty-five years. I can't lie for whatever more years I have left. It's not what I want for Mark."

"No," Gibbs agreed.

"Gibbs," the Admiral called out as the two special agents turned to go. "Tim..."

"Tim won't know about you, sir. Not from NCIS."

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TBC
This used to be my favorite resort, Scott muttered to himself. Not any fucking more. His instructions were to plant the surveillance camera in the suite Bugsy told him and remove it tomorrow. Without getting caught. What did they think he was? Harry Potter and his invisible clock? He'd balked when Bugsy told him what The Boss wanted in return for cancelling the debt but then the thought that the quarter million dollar noose would be removed from his neck had had him agreeing. Having both legs intact was also an added incentive.

"Give the boss what he wants and you'll never hear from me again. Capisce? You got to do it by Tuesday because Mr X and his boy toy check out Wednesday. Your only chance, Scotty-boy. You miss it, you'll be missing your legs, too.

"And guess what?" Bugsy added. "You got yourself a couple of days there to relax. We could only get you a flight back on Saturday so here's what you do - once Mr X checks out, retrieve the camera, download the vid to your laptop and send it to me. Don't open it, don't look at it." As if he wanted to, Scott had muttered to himself. He wouldn't even be agreeing to this if it weren't a matter of life and limb. Literally.

"Once I get what we want, you just sit back and relax. It's all paid for, anyway," Bugsy said.

And that was why Scott was on his way to the Summer Azure Suite which, according to the hand-painted plaque on the suite's door, was a blue butterfly. All the suites in the resort were named after butterflies, each one with its own hand-painted picture of the relevant Lepidoptera. Not that he gave a fuck, though he'd have used 'Mariposa' for the entire resort. A helluva lot more apt seeing as it was another word for ‘fag’ in Mexico.

Bearing a large basket of flowers, he stopped at the room and was relieved to see the door was open and the room being cleaned to get it ready for the usual three pm check-in. He hadn't even checked in yet. His plane landed at eleven and by the time he took the ferry from Cancun to Isla
Mujeres, it was already noon. Then he had to catch a cab to the resort, which took him another twenty minutes. He needed to get the surveillance camera in the room before the guests checked in this afternoon. Getting into an unoccupied room wouldn't be as difficult as an occupied one but he was resourceful enough to figure out how to do both.

"Hello-oo," he called out as he walked right in with the basket. If he waited for the cleaners to come to the door, they'd take the basket from him and he wouldn't get the chance to plant the camera. "Got a basket of flowers for the room." One cleaner was in the toilet and the other emptying bins and wiping the bedside table. Excellent. "I'll just leave it here on the table."

"Sure." The cleaner smiled at him but otherwise concentrated on her cleaning.

On his way out, he took out the small digital clock from among the flowers and placed it on the base of the flatscreen TV that faced the bed. It had an extra-strong double-sided tape on the bottom, the backing paper having been removed just before he entered the room. The clock sat firmly on the rectangular base, invisible against the black of the TV, if not for the red-lit numbers of the clock.

"There's a wide-angle lens built into it so just place it at the same level as the bed or higher and in the bedroom," Bugsy had told him. "It has extra-long recording capability - 72 hours, if it's left alone. No setting the zoom feature on timer or uploading. You're being given a back-up in case something happens to the other. Once you remove it from the room, transfer the contents to your laptop via the USB cable provided."

Phase One done, Scott said to himself and exited the room and went back to the lobby bar to wait for the check-in time. He didn't know who was occupying the room and he didn't want to know. All he cared about was that the tiny green light at the back of the "clock" came on, signaling the camera was working. He could have set it on timer to start recording from dinner time but was worried in case he did it wrong so he switched it on to start recording from the time he left it in the suite.

It had enough juice to keep it recording for 12 hours straight so that was good enough. It was a no-brainer what Bugsy's boss wanted from the camera - sex tapes. Blackmail. Oldest method in the world. All he had to do now was sit back and enjoy the amenities of the resort, grab the camera from the room tomorrow and be on the flight home. He had an idea how to get into the room tomorrow so, feeling pleased with himself, he headed down to the reception to check himself in.

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**Back in NCIS, Washington, DC:**
“I’m going to be wha-at?” I yelped.

“Gibbs’ boyfriend,” Vance repeated. “You and Gibbs are going to Mexico.”

Gibbs, as usual, kept silent and waited for the Director to elaborate.

“In all three cases,” Vance said, “our victims stayed at a gay resort. Admiral Hawkins and Citrone stayed at El Hedonista about the same time – two months ago – but General Palmer was at a resort in Lake Michigan during that period. He stayed at El Hedonista but it was more than six months ago.”

“So our perps could have been operating from either resort or both,” Gibbs said.

“And they can upload the photos from anywhere in the world,” I added.

“That’s right, but we suspect it’ll likely be from Isla Mujeres and/or Lake Michigan. One of the staff, presumably the one who had the photos taken, is in charge of publishing them if anything goes wrong. The computers here would be clean so that in the event of their being confiscated, there’s no evidence.”

“So we need to find the Isla Mujeres link.” Gibbs said.

“And the Lake Michigan link,” I added. “If that’s how they’re working – splitting up – it’s likely they’ll have back-up in the two locations ex-DC.”

“Which one did Citrone go to?” Gibbs asked.

“El Hedonista,” I replied.

“The FBI agrees with you, DiNozzo. That’s why Colonel Mann’s team is already on their way to the resort at Lake Michigan and will be met by the FBI agents who arrived an hour ago.” Vance said. “Fornell’s team is handling the ransom payout here in DC. The cash is being prepared and the FBI lab is inserting a tracking chip in the notes. I’m not sure how, exactly, it’s being done – you can ask McGee – but the chip is apparently smaller and thinner than your cell phone’s sim card. It’ll be inserted in-between the notes. We are all on standby. As soon as the perps call and tell our vic’s when to make the drop, the FBI will follow the money – literally – and apprehend the blackmailers. Ditto with Colonel Mann over at Lake Michigan. Mexico is a little more complicated, that’s why the both of you have to be there undercover. First, it’s a foreign country so the red tape’s a little longer. We have the search warrant for El Hedonista waiting to be signed but it won’t until we make an arrest here. The pressure’s on Mann here to bring her suspects in for interrogation. I will keep you posted all the way. Don't do anything without clearance from me or the FBI.

“The minute an arrest is made here, you’ll get your warrant,” Vance continued. “Once you get to Cancun, check in with the local LEOs. Ask for Senor Gonzales. He’s the second-in-command at
the Cancun PD. You will be handed the warrant once the arrest here is confirmed.”

“How much do they know?” Gibbs asked.

“Gonzales knows everything except the names of the vics,” Vance replied. “We can trust him. He's on of ours. The FBI will contact him as soon as an arrest is made. You contact him and take it from there. The FBI agents from the Miami office will already be on their way as your backup. You hand it across to them and fly back. Your flights have been booked. You fly out tomorrow morning and be back by Friday.”

“Okay, I gotta ask this –” I said, “Boyfriend? Seriously?” But as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I backtracked. “Ignore that question.” We were going undercover so as not to spook whoever the accomplice or accomplices were. Once the arrest was made here, we would have the search warrant and could not only search and confiscate the resort’s computers but also the staff’s. All I needed to do now was keep my eye on the ball and not think about having to spend one, or more nights with Gibbs. As his boyfriend. It took every bit of self-control not to groan out loud.

“Guests check in under assumed names,” Vance was saying, “But Piñera, the General Manager, will make available the records of the guestlist, including their real names. He’s expecting you and will do what he can to help, on condition you both do not cause any problems, meaning, be discreet with your questioning.”

“What’s our connection to Piñera?” I asked.

“Arturo Piñera keeps the State Department apprised of movements involving illegals entering the US via Isla Mujeres. Ditto with Gonzales.” Vance replied. “Isla Mujeres is the nearest point to Cuba and one of the main gateways for illegals to enter the US. From Cuba to Isla Mujeres then hop across to Cancun and overland to the US-Mexico border.”

“Arresting the perps isn’t going to stop the photos being made public,” I said. “It’s finding the accomplices who are tasked with posting them. They may not even be in Lake Michigan or Mexico.”

“But it’s all we got at the moment,” Gibbs said. “Once the arrest is made here, their computers will be confiscated and we’ll know who they’ve been contacting. Having our people on location is better than risking their having time to get rid of the evidence.”

“Acomplices could be sitting in an igloo in the North Pole,” I muttered.

“That is a possibility, of course,” Vance said. “Do you have a problem flying to Mexico, special agent DiNozzo?”

“What? No. Not at all, Director.”

“Then get your ass outta here and get it on that plane.”

“I’m already gone,” I said and hurried out of the Director’s office.

Gibbs was coming down the stairs as I was about to leave the bullpen. I said I’d see him at the airport in the morning and took off for the elevator.

I stopped to buy dinner and was just getting back in my car when my cell phone rang. I knew that ringtone.

“Yes, boss.”
“Blackmailers just called. They want the money on Friday. Drop off is at a car park off 9th Street. Time to be given on the day itself. Clock’s ticking, DiNozzo.”

“Okaay…I’ll see you at the airport check-in counter, say at 4.30am.” I winced at the thought. I hate early morning flights. If there’s one thing I won’t miss about this job – or any job – it’s not having to catch the red eye. Any flight before 9 a.m. is a red eye to me. Unrealistic, I know, but hey…I never even dreamed I’d earn enough to fly first class and now, if I really wanted to, I could charter my own private plane and fly at a decent hour of the day – which is between lunch and dinner.

I tried not to think about how to handle Gibbs the next three days. I was flying out to London on Saturday morning and it couldn’t come quickly enough. I tried to think of ways to avoid talking about Saturday night, though there was the possibility Gibbs himself might decide to take my cue and pretend nothing happened.

As I ate my dinner, I considered the two choices I had – one was to stay in NCIS, in which case I’d have to keep up the pretense of never having had sex with Leroy Jethro Gibbs; or two, I stopped pretending, stop avoiding the issue and confront it before I fly out on Saturday. The second one meant I’d also have to hand in my resignation on Friday when we returned from Mexico.

I went to bed thinking about neither option.

Instead I relived the feel of Gibbs inside me, how it felt when he entered me the first time; how it felt when he kissed me, his tongue searching out secrets in my mouth, the way he sucked at my lips, my tongue, the soft growls from him, his frantic gasps as he sped up his thrusts, how my hips snapped to meet each one.

By the time I dragged myself out of bed at 3.45am to get ready to head to the airport, I knew which option it would have to be.

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TBC
Chapter 11

10.05am; Wednesday

El Hedonista Resort;

Isla Mujeres, Mexico

For the second time since he arrived, Scott was back at the Summer Azure Suite. This time to retrieve the camera. Bugsy had told him the occupants were there for one night only, which was why it was imperative he planted the camera before they checked in yesterday.

He pressed the doorbell and waited. When it opened, a slim young man, wearing only his boxers, looked Scott up and down in irritation.

"Yes?"

Abrupt and definitely annoyed, Scott thought. "Good morning, sir," he said, smiling. "I'm Sandy from Guest Relations. I'm just checking to ensure everything is to your satisfaction."

"Um, yes, thank you," the twink said.

From the bathroom, a deep voice called out, "Who is it, Jamie?" Clearly the Dom, judging from the peremptorious tone. He didn't know their names and didn't want to.

"Just the guest relations guy," Jamie the twink replied. 'Just the guest relations guy'. Scott bristled but kept his smile in place.

"We're checking out this morning," Jamie the Twink said. "Could you have the bellhop come get our luggage at 12.30pm?"

"Yes, of course," Scott replied. "By the way, I need to take the digital clock back. It's being replaced by a new one."

"Get it after we check out." Jamie started to shut the door.

"Of course," Scot replied, not wanting to argue and end up with a complaint to the guest relations department who'd only tell Jamie the Twink there was no such officer named Sandy. "I'll tell the bellhop to pick up your luggage."

The door shut in his face without so much as a thank you. "You're very welcome, asslicking dickhead," Scott muttered as he sauntered off. Looked like he'd have to come up again and collect the damn clock later. He'd have to time it so that he came up at the same time as the bellhop, or he'd end up having to go through the same routine as yesterday and spend more money on another.
over-priced basket of flowers. The cost of this little exercise was being paid by Bugsy's boss but "incidentals", as Bugsy had termed, it was out of his own pocket.

Much as he hated to be where he was at today - Scott truly believed he wasn't a bad person. He was talented, successful and had a great life. Or would have, if not for his run of bad luck the last six months. Otherwise, he was doing okay. It wasn't as if he was addicted to cocaine. He just indulged a little more than he should but addicted? Heavens! No, he was too smart for that.

The gambling was a bit of a problem, he admitted, but once he got himself out of this latest problem, he'd sign himself up for rehab. This deal with Bugsy would leave him with a clean slate, if rather broke. He'd have to sell his house to pay for that exclusive rehab which he'd rather not. He'd rather not give up his BMW Sports either. Oh well, maybe something would turn up. Bugsy's offer did, didn't it? It could even be his luck had started to turn. And this time in a big way.

He went down to the front desk and asked for a bellhop to be sent to up to the Summer Azure Suite at 12.30pm then went to the lobby bar for a drink and flirted with the bartender, a blonde from a small town in Ohio.

He followed that up with a leisurely lunch by the poolside, chatted up a Brit on holiday with his boyfriend and by the time it was 12.15pm, he'd arranged to meet up with them again for drinks "and more" after dinner.

Satisfied with the way things were going, Scott made his way to the Summer Azure Suite. And had the shock of his life as he rounded the corner.

"Fuck!" Scott came to a screeching brake and stepped back out of sight. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I don't fucking believe this!" Tony was entering the Summer Azure Suite! The very suite he needed to get into. The suite where the camera was. The camera with the recording that he needed to retrieve and send to Bugsy. Today.

Scott peered round surreptitiously. The resort was one of those nature-themed ones so going for the lush jungle look, there were shrubs and potted plants everywhere. All the corridors leading to the suites were bordered by thick foliage and netted enclosures where different exotic-looking butterflies flitted around had been built into the faux jungle.

The setting enabled Scott to watch Tony and his companion, a silver-haired man, without being conspicuous. He didn't know for certain but guessed the silver fox was Tony's hick boss, Jethro Leroy-something.

How the hell he was going to get inside the suite now that it was already occupied? And how did Tony get checked in so early? Check in time was three in the afternoon.

Fucking hell. Trust Tony to be a pain in the ass. Again.

Returning to his room, he called Bugsy. "Hey, it's me. There's going to be a delay sending you the stuff. No, not a problem. I just can't get the camera out of the room just yet. I know. Not your problem. Listen, you will get the file. Just give me until Saturday, okay? C'mon. I don't want to rush it and get caught. I will get it out by Saturday before I fly out. Promise. Okay." Bugsy ended
the call, leaving Scott with a smile. Because, as he talked with Bugsy, an idea began to form.


1.45pm, Wednesday:

El Hedonista, Isla Mujeres,

Mexico

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GIBBS' POV

I could honestly say I've never felt this disgusted with myself ever. With all three of my divorces, I'd been pissed off then relieved, but never filled with self-recrimination. I'd even managed to stay on speaking terms with my ex-wives. But Tony...Tony was a whole different kettle of fish altogether. I wasn't even referring to the gay sex, though I know that did make it worse, never mind that same-sex marriage had been legal in DC since 2009.

Coming out of the closet had never crossed my mind. Not ever, and that's how it will stay. My sexual preferences or orientation - whatever the hell the correct term was - is nobody's business but mine. But, I had to concede this - being a Marine did play a large part in my keeping my sexuality a secret, and knowing what Tony himself went through in the force, keeping your sexuality safely locked in the closet was a damned smart idea.

It was difficult not being able to talk about what happened on Saturday but with this case right on top of us, I had to keep both our heads on the job. I'd already fucked up by screwing my subordinate, I couldn't compound the issue by allowing myself to be distracted by the repercussions, tempting as it was to do so now that I had Tony locked in. Literally.

So our flight here - which took about five hours including the transit and plane change in Houston - was devoid of any conversation except discussions pertaining to the case at hand. There was clearly a tacit agreement to leave the elephant in our mental living room alone until a more appropriate time. Tony had made it clear he wasn't ready to talk about Saturday night and I would respect that.

I called our contact in Cancun to let him know we'd arrived, as well as Vance, who confirmed that the FBI agents would be arriving at Isla Mujeres sometime tonight and would contact me once they did.

Our updates done, it was now gathering what paperwork we could before the raid went down.

"I'm going to see Piñera's secretary and get hold of the guestlist," I said to Tony as soon as we entered our suite.

"I'll wait for the luggage to arrive then go talk to the masseurs," Tony said.
I nodded and left the room.

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Piñera's secretary had left the information in a flash drive before hurrying off to attend to an urgent problem at home. I thanked the clerk who passed the drive to me and returned to our suite where I transferred the two files to the laptop.

One was a list of the assumed names the guests checked in under. The other list were the real names from the credit cards that were used to pay for the stay.

I scrolled down the list with the real names and saw Admiral McGee's name and the corresponding registered pseudonym. Ascertaining first that the other three vics were also listed, I emailed the files to Fornell and to Vance.

This bore out our suspicion that it was an inside job, or that one or more accomplices worked at the resort. It would also be someone with access to the guestlists, who had the opportunity to mingle and chat with them and knew what their professions were, though it was also possible the victims had been watched long before this.

"What you got?" I asked when Tony returned shortly after I emailed the guestlists to Fornell.

"Didn't get a chance to talk to any masseurs," Tony replied. "They were all booked solid until seven tonight so I went to the bar and had a drink, got friendly with the bartender. There are three bars on the resort. One in the lobby, another by the pool and the third one at the other end of the beach where the watersports center is. According to the bartender, the resort is popular with gay Navy personnel and, believe it or not - Marines and Navy SEALs. You might even run into one of your Marine buddies here, boss."

I looked at Tony but he had on his innocent expression. *Perhaps we ought to have that talk after all.*

"I did learn that most of the masseurs provide "extra" services," he continued. "And that for the right amount of money, you could have one for the night."

I chewed on that for a while. "You think for the right amount of money one of them could be persuaded to plant a surveillance camera?"

"Very possible. I asked the bartender if there were any vacancies for a masseur. He told me to talk to Felipe. He's the head masseur. Gets off his shift at six and will be at the poolside bar after that, helping with the drinks."

I filled him in about the two guestlists and our four vics' registered names as we left our room to do some reconnoitering. Since we couldn't go around flashing our badges and asking questions, there wasn't really anything we could do but act as if we were on holiday. Which, of course, was the problem. Which was why I split us up - so that I wouldn't be tempted to drag Tony off and talk about ‘it'.

Or worse, drag him off and do something else altogether.
7.05pm

El Hedonista Resort

We met up again at dinner time and as we waited for our food at the alfresco restaurant, I brought Tony up to speed.

"FBI has landed and are nearby the resort doing the final prep for the takedown."

"Any change in the payment date?" Tony asked.

"Nope, but we're expecting changes if it happens."

"Yeah, I gotta gut feel about that, too, boss." Tony smiled and I almost reached out to pull him in for a kiss. After all, several couples were already doing that as they ate. What I'd give to be at a resort like this with Tony. As a regular gay couple. But that's one of those day dreams that's destined to be stay nothing but that.

"You ever think of giving up law enforcement and doing something else?" Tony asked, surprising me with his conversational tone. "Like when you retire?" he asked, waiting for me to answer the first question.

"Not until recently," I replied. "I enjoy what I do. Always have. But yeah, I've thought about what I'll do as a retirement job." Tony waited, his interest apparent on his face. "I'm thinking of training other agents, or something. FLETC has a training facility in Maryland for the DC area."

"That does sound like a plan." Tony smiled even more brightly, his gray-green eyes crinkling. *That face, with that smile...it's one I want to wake up with the rest of my life. If I could.*

"What about you?" I asked, not giving a thing away about what I felt or the fact that I wanted to ask where the hell he was going with this. Was he ready to talk about Saturday night and was waiting for me to initiate it?

"Quite a few things I know I'd enjoy," Tony replied. "Rather than facing down bad guys. To be honest, I became a cop because at the time, it was about the only thing I could be. That, or the military and well, you know me - not exactly the most disciplined person in the world or one who'd thrive under the kind of structured environment."

"I wouldn't say being a cop is any less tough," I responded. "And FLETC isn't a holiday, either. As for discipline, I think you underate yourself. If you didn't have what it takes, you wouldn't be on my team. For twelve years."

"Yeah, but once you quit, you're through, unlike the military. You know the saying - 'you can take the man out of the military but you can't take the military...' I couldn't live that day in, day out. I couldn't carry that straightbacked discipline my whole life non-stop. Unlike you. I need some slouching time." He grinned, his facial expression open and cheerful, as if there was nothing that needed resolving between us.

"So what would you have liked to do instead of law enforcement?" I asked, deciding I'd play along.
This was nice, actually - having a non case-related conversation with Tony. It dawned on me I've never had one with him before and suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to get to know Tony DiNozzo, the man. Not the special agent; not the senior special agent of the MCRT - the one who's had my six for a dozen years.

I wanted Tony to be my man, not my team member; not my subordinate.

I wanted Tony and me to be like one of the couples here on this resort; to be able to hold hands just like how some were, their fingers entwined, eyes soft with love - or anticipation of other things to come. I cleared my throat. "So? Tell me. I wanna know what Tony DiNozzo could have been, other than a cop or a Fed."

"Something that would keep me in touch with people but in a positive way. Actually, anything that doesn't involve putting cuffs on them and hauling them off to jail."

"You stayed a long time in a career you didn't really want," I remarked.

"Yeah, well. Things happened. Some were surprises," Like falling for my boss. "But don't misunderstand me - it's been great working with the team from Day One. No regrets at all."

"You did a helluva job, DiNozzo," I said. "Just think how it'd be if you had gone and pursued what you really loved."

"Probably get my ass kicked to kingdom come."

"Why?"

"Nothing," he muttered.

"So no thoughts about leaving to pursue other pastures?" I asked.

"No firm plans though I am going to London to talk to my cousin about Tradewinds Entertainment. That's a company that produces movies and there's the sister division that produces TV shows like Hawaii Five-O or sitcoms like Everybody Loves Raymond. My uncle left me shares in the company and Crispin asked if I was interested in working there rather than being just a shareholder."

"But you don't know anything about running a movie company," I said, though that wasn't my real thought - Tony was thinking of leaving?

"You're right, I don't but I am already a non-executive director by virtue of my shareholdings which, believe it or not, is more than Crispin's. Apparently, my uncle had been holding them in trust for me, knowing I was interested in the movie business."

"Why didn't your uncle just give them to you? Why was he holding on to them?"

"Tradewinds is relatively new even though it's already got a few box office hits and its TV sitcoms are doing extremely well. Uncle Clive knew I wasn't ready to leave NCIS so he held on to the shares. According to Crispin, he was planning to meet up with me when he suffered his stroke."

There was a lull in the conversation after that as we ate and refilled our wine glasses. I wondered what the status was in DC. Fornell had been with Vance when they informed me of the FBI's arrival on the island so both men were obviously running the op closely together. I'd just have to wait for one of them, or the FBI, to call and update me
Tony must have guessed what was on my mind because he asked, "The guestlist. Won't McGee see his Dad's name? The real names are there along with the assumed ones."

"He's working with the FBI techies on the tracking the ransom notes. That'll keep him busy. Different teams, different tasks. Fornell will ensure the FBI lab handling the data analysis don't give it out to NCIS."

"How? The vics are Navy. McGee will be expecting it."

"Leave it to Fornell," I replied. "He'll make sure McGee's father is not on the list McGee and the analysts work on. Vance is on board with that."

"Two versions, then."

I nodded. "Only while the case is open. It will be revealed if necessary."

"Let's hope it won't."

Another lull as we both thought about the fallout if that were to happen and McGee discovered his father was also one of the victims.

"You'll stay on until retirement?" Tony asked when our dessert plates were cleared and our coffee served. "Which is still a few years away, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I'm not going anywhere. Not if I can help it, but a retirement job? Training, maybe some consultancy work, Vance is talking about being on the anti-terrorist taskforce panel. I'm seriously considering that. Then there's my carpentry. I'd like a place near the water so I can launch a boat without having to drive too far. It's just me so the whole house could be one huge workshop if I wanted. Like you, I'd like to move on to doing something that's positive. Creative. No blood and gore. Death and destruction." I sat back and looked up at the night sky, dotted with twinkling stars and breathed in the scent of the ocean carried along with the late evening breeze. "Yeah, being by the water's nice."

END OF GIBBS' POV

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TBC
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Joss80, for alerting me to the missing sex scene in Mexico. Said sex scene is now dedicated to you:)

Chapter 12

_________________________________

TONY’S POV

I wonder how many other office romances start because of work, end because of work or, as in Gibbs’ and my case, use work to pretend nothing happened, nothing will happen and nothing’s ever going to happen.

Dinner conversation with Gibbs had been a very enjoyable until I almost told him I was resigning. I’d stopped myself in time or we’d be spending the rest of the evening arguing about it. I know, without a doubt, that if I’d told him I was planning to resign – which I hadn’t decided on – he’d conclude it’s because of Saturday night. He’d be eaten up with a guilt that even handing in his own badge, making a confession to Vance and the rest of the team, would not assuage. Stubborn bastard that he is, he’d end his illustrious career believing it’s his fault I quit mine.

Which is so patently not true.

But this wasn’t the time to tell him how I felt about him either. Besides, I don’t even know if Gibbs is gay. Saturday night could have been a horrible abberation. I’ve known guys to get their dicks sucked by another man, fuck another man. Not once, not twice, but keep at it for months. Then one day it’s Deny. Deny. Deny.

What if that’s the reason why Gibbs got so worked up? What if he wanted to apologize, but at the same time D.E.N.Y.? I couldn’t – don’t want to – handle that. I want to think that Gibbs got smashed, lost his control over his desire for moi – Anthony DiNozzo Junior – and just had to have me; that that one fateful night on Memorial Weekend, 2013, Leroy Jethro Gibbs just had to fuck me even if that would be the first and last time; even though he’d be risking his job, his entire career, his reputation.

I wanted to matter that much to Gibbs.

Of course, knowing the first option - that he just wanted to apologize then walk away in denial - was the likely one, I know my decision to avoid him, avoid his calls, and now to keep up the
pretense that nothing happened, is the right one.

With no further news from DC, I decided I’d see if I could get something out of Felipe, who should be at the pool bar by now. Gibbs said he’d come with me and didn’t agree that it would be awkward for me to be asking for any vacancies as a masseur while I was on holiday with my boyfriend – who was only a few meters away.

“Tell him you’ve got to think about where your next meal ticket’s going to come from, that I’m just good for the week,” he said.

So, sucking in a deep breath, I went up to the bar, and ordered myself a Bradford.

“Ah, a James Bond fan, are you?” the bartender asked, as he commenced the making of my martini. “Shaken, not stirred.”

“That’s right,” I said.

When he placed my glass on the counter, I lifted it and asked, “Which direction would you say Italy is?”

The bartender thought for a while then pointed to his right. “Thataway. Why?”

“I may be a James Bond fan but I concur with Noel Coward and shall wave my martini in the direction of Italy before I drink it.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what dear old Noel’s reason was but mine is because I plan to go I-TAH-lia next. Or will, as soon as I replenish my bank account. Speaking of which, is Felipe around?”

“I’m Felipe.”

“Well, what luck.” I stuck out my hand. “Just the man I want to see. I’m Tony. Look, uh, I’m hoping to earn some bucks. I was told you do the hiring for masseurs here and I’m wondering if there’re any vacancies.”

“Right now? Sorry. I just brought on two guys. Come by in a couple of months. I might have something. You qualified?”

“Board certified,” I lied. “Swedish, energy techniques, accupressure…I’m thinking of taking up a TCM course.”

Felipe nodded. “We’re planning to provide that – TCM. Not till next year, though. Still in the planning stage. We’ll be hiring towards the end of the year.”

“I was…uh, thinking of something more immediate to…relieve my cashflow probs, y’know? How about something other than massage? I’m experienced in other kinds of touch therapy, too.”

Felip gave me a pointed look. “Give me a few minutes.” And he moved away to attend to the other orders. I wasn’t sure if he was coming back but fifteen minutes later he did.

“That your man?” he asked, jerking his chin in Gibbs’ direction. “The silver fox?”

“For tonight. And tomorrow. After that, who knows.” I shrugged.

“How long you been at this?”
“Long enough,” I replied. “Not all of them want twinks. I have my fans. I’m especially popular with the military.”

“But that discipline shit, do you?”

“Not all of them Admirals and Generals want to dish it out. I’ve had my share of chiefs who like being at the receiving end.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it.” Felipe grinned.

“You got anyone here who offers that?”

“Only my boys. The rest of the staff are strictly forbidden to engage in any form of paid intimacy with the guests.”

“Why are they your boys and why are they an exception?”

“Quality control, you could say. Our guests are often high-flyers and people of importance. They want their services rendered by skilled people who are not only excellent at their job but possess a high standard of hygiene.” Felipe’s expression was bland. “The massage and spa services are separate from the resort. I run the spa but I’m not a resort employee per se. Nor are my boys. The rules don’t apply.”

“And any guest can order this special service as opposed to just a regular massage?”

This time it was Felipe who bared his teeth. “It’s an off-menu item. You have to know the right people to ask or you will be told we do not have that particular dish or service.”

“And you are, obviously, ‘right people’.”

“You knew to ask for me,” he said. “Whoever told you would have sized you up already.” He paused. “So? You interested?”

“You have a client in mind?”

“I might. See that man on the deckchair? Second palm tree. White Speedos.”

I turned and even from across the pool, through my sunglasses, I could see the man clearly. See the bulge under his white Speedos, rather. “He’s already getting a lot of attention,” I said, as two young boys, who couldn’t be out of their teens, stopped to flirt.

“He’s never left alone. Been here a week already and everyday he’s got boys trying to score.”

“But?” I asked.

“But…he prefers his toys a little more mature, not skinny, likes some muscle.” Felipe gave me the once-over. “And very docile. You can act docile?”

“I can do docile.” I thought briefly what Gibbs would say to that. “I can be anything he wants. What is he, anyway? Looks military to me.”

Felipe’s brows lifted. “Good eye. Air Force, actually, but out and proud. Retired recently. When will you be available? I need you checked out first, though, so if you’re serious, come see me tomorrow morning at the spa. I’ll be in the office.”
10.15pm Wednesday

El Hedonista

GIBBS’ POV

Tony updated me on his chat with Felipe as we headed back to our suite.

“Then you’d better hope we get the call to go ahead with the search tomorrow,” I said. “Or you’ll find yourself servicing an Air Force colonel.” I was sure I growled but if so, Tony didn’t notice. The thought of Tony with another man made me want to hit something. Hard.


As if that made a difference. I glowered at him.

“And I don’t plan on seeing Felipe about a massage job in the morning,” he chuckled. “Just part of the undercover work, boss.”

I took a shower first, my anxiety increasing by leaps and bounds as I washed myself. I was going to be sharing that bed with Tony and we couldn’t even talk about Saturday night.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Tony took it over. I switched on the TV, flicking through channels but not seeing anything but that king-size bed with Tony on it. Naked.

And aroused.

For me? If only.
I smelt newly-showered Gibbs. The fresh, marine scent seduced my senses. I feigned sleep, of course, having left him watching TV. The suite didn’t have a separate sitting room. The TV’s flat screen sat on the sideboard that divided the extra-large room into two sections and could be swiveled around to face either way. One half of the room had a sofa set and coffee table and the other half was the kingsize bed.

I’d switched off all the lights except the bedside lamp on Gibbs’ side.

I’d expected him to continue watching TV for a couple of hours before coming to bed but he didn’t. I heard him moving about and then the bed dipping slightly. I heard the soft rustle as he slid in. Then stillness. Just that intoxicating scent.

Was he facing me? Or was his back to me? Naked? I had my boxers on but no tee shirt. Back home, I slept in the buff except in winter. I have no idea whether Gibbs sleeps with any clothes on but even if he didn’t, he would tonight. No way would Gibbs be naked with me again. Touch me again.

Which was why I almost jumped out of my skin when I heard the soft, “Tony?” and his warm breath on my ear. I shivered violently from the tickle and shock and sat up.

“What? What?” I was breathing hard and breaking out in a sweat.

“Just let me say one thing. Just one. We’ll talk when you’re ready.”

“Okay.” The monosyllable came out soft and raspy as I sucked in my breath in anticipation.

“What I did on Saturday is inexcusable,” he began. “And I’m sorry.”

Then I felt him turn and I let out my breath.

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This is one of those times that’s got a special name – ‘point of no return’, ‘Crossing the Rubicon’, ‘fait accompli’, or the more colorful ancient Chinese ‘Fighting a battle with one's back facing a river’, but in my case, I think ‘strategic inflection point’, a term coined by Intel’s CEO Andy Grove (according to McGee) is the most apt.

Why am I rambling on in my brain? Because I’m terrified. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for but…

His hot breath tickled the back of my neck. Fighting a losing battle with my back to a river that could drown me is definitely where I am right now. All I have to do is turn and the battle is lost.

I felt a roughened palm on my bare arm. “Tony…”

This may be the biggest mistake of my life. One that will not just affect me but the man I love as well but God help me, I could not not turn. Everything seems to have gathered together waiting for this moment. Unlike last Saturday night, I had no questions as to why he was doing this. I know I want this and right now it was all that mattered.

So I turn…and am swept up in a tornado of desire and passion unleashed. If anything, I will have
this night to hold on to the rest of my days.

Gibbs’ kiss is like fire to my insides, consuming me totally. I can’t help but surrender to him, opening up to his tongue’s assault. It is a surrender my body gives willingly, ignoring my conscience’s warning bells. His tongue didn’t just search out the recesses of my mouth, it invaded me, a precursor of what was to come. Soon.

Before my brain could squeak out a protest, Gibbs had removed my boxers and was between my spread legs.

“Tony –” the ragged whisper of my name had me jacking up my hips in that primal response. Then I tensed. Lube. We needed lube. And a rubber.

“Gibbs. Wait. Just a sec.” I reached for my wallet which I had, thankfully, left on the bedside table with my cell phone. Thank heavens for always being prepared.

Without a word, I lubed up my hole and, as if there had been no interruption, he was on me again but instead of laying down between my legs as before, Gibbs straddled my chest, his cock grasped in his hand and nudging my lips.

Once again, my mouth surrendered to the invasion. God, he smelled so good. The sounds of his lust for me combined with the clean, but unique scent of his cock as I took him down deep had my own cock achingly hard and jerking.

My palms covered his butt and I guided him in and out of my mouth. He was so big and stretched my lips but I sucked on until my jaw ached. The sounds of my greedy sucks and his urgent pants was driving me insane but just as I felt his cock harden even more, Gibbs pulled away.

Without a word, he positioned himself between my legs and they automatically curled around his waist, my hips lifting. I felt him feel around for the condom packet that I’d dropped somewhere on the bed. I found it, tore it with a quick rip and was going to sheath him but he grabbed it off my trembling fingers and did it himself.

And then he was in me. Sliding in swiftly and surely, as if he’d been fucking me for the last twelve years. All my ambivalence evaporated as his cock plundered me. Each thrust brought a gasp of pleasure, each drag as he withdrew had me moaning with unspeakable ecstasy.

I thought he’d been ready to come when he was in my mouth but looks like I was wrong because he was fucking me like he could last a week.

“Turn.”

_Huh?_ Did he say something?

“Turn around. Gonna fuck you hard.”

_Yes, boss._ I scrambled onto my hands and knees but grabbed the packet of lube first. _”Need more lube.”_

He squeezed out the remaining lube, tossed the packet onto the floor and, with one hand on my hip, guided his cock to my hole, sinking in till he was balls-deep. I sucked in oxygen and cried out into the pillow.

He rode me hard and fast, my cries muffled by the pillow I had my face buried in. I turned my face to gasp for more air.
“Gibbs! Unhhh…yeah, f-fuck me. Oh God, fuck me.” I was panting, gasping, unable to stop pleading for more. “Fuck me…yesss.”

There was a certain intentionality in his strokes tonight that hadn’t been there last Saturday. This was a sober Gibbs who knew what he was doing. That thought should have scared me, and it did, but it also had me coming with an orgasm that should have given me a heart attack.

The loud moan, the gasp, the tightening of his grip on my hips as his thrusts speeded up, told me Gibbs was finally coming. Even then, he was slamming into me and my own climax was dragging on deliciously. I had never come so hard in my life. Never have I had an orgasm so intense, my come spurting out of my cock with such force my ears were ringing.

Shit. Not my ears. The ring of his cellphone startled both of us. Gibbs pulled out my ass and hopped off the bed.

“Yeah, Gibbs. What’s up, Director?” He listened in silence for several minutes before hanging up.

“Get dressed.” He scrambled off the bed. “FBI’s on the way. The perps have been apprehended back in DC. This resort’s going to be in lockdown any minute now.”

I leapt off the bed and turned on the lights, hurriedly getting dressed. I rushed into the bathroom after Gibbs who was washing his face and asked, “When did they arrest the perps?”

“Five, ten minutes ago. There wasn’t any time to call us. Vance was there with the team. He just updated SecNav.”

“And the resort? The FBI?”

Gibbs’ phone rang again before he could answer me. “Yeah, Gibbs. Okay. We’re on our way.” He pocketed his phone. “Feebs are here. They’ve got the local LEOs. C’mon. We’re meeting them in the admin office.”

“Who’s letting them in?” I asked. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Piñera’s secretary. Feebs stopped by her house first. Produced the search warrants plus Piñera’s call to her had her co-operating fully. The FBI team is split up. We’ve got two here at the resort and the others are with the local LEOs searching and confiscating the computers of all staff, including their handphones. DC’s interrogating the perps right this moment and expect to get the names of their accomplices tonight. While we’re waiting for that, the FBI is securing all the communications going in and out of the resort.”

“How did they get the perps?” I asked, as we hurried to the administration office. The resort was still busy with several couples in the lobby, many more out by the poolside and the poolside bar looked busy. The suits were obvious to my eye but there weren’t any uniformed cops. It was clear, they were staying out of sight and letting the FBI take the lead. Piñera was obviously very serious about not upsetting the resort guests.

“We’ll get the details later but from what Vance said, it went down as planned.”

“You mean the tracking chips?"

“Yeah. It was clean and fast. No resistance from the perps either, though one was injured when he tried to make a run. Ran into the path of Fornell’s car. Broke his leg.”

“Vance is happy, then.”
“Not over yet. We still need to get hold of the files, make sure there aren’t any copies. That’s the cybercrime and tech departments’ job, though.”

“So we’re done here?” I asked, sounding as professional as I could and not the DiNozzo who’d just been fucked to kingdom come by Gibbs.

“As soon as the Feds are done,” Gibbs replied.

It was past three in the morning when Special Agent Daniel Decker, of the Miami FBI office confirmed that all the massage therapists, as they were called here, were rounded up for questioning and their hardware confiscated. All the local LEOs had returned to Cancun to commence their interrogation. The names of the massage therapist and a cleaner had been given to Special Agent Decker only half an hour ago by their DC office and Gibbs was brought up to speed by the Director a mere fifteen minutes ago.

“We are taking the seven a.m. flight back,” Gibbs said when he finished talking to Special Agent Decker and his team. Gibbs and I would be riding with the confiscated hardware to Cancun’s airport where we would accompany it back to DC and ensure its safe transfer to the FBI agents on the ground. Decker on his team would be returning to Miami.

We only had time to grab our bags and arrange with the hotel reception for a cab to the ferry terminal and nothing else, but Gibbs did manage to buy a large cup of coffee and a burrito for both of us as we waited to board the flight. Gibbs didn’t say a word about what had just gone down - not the raid, or the arrests. Not the sex. Okay, so that’s how it was going to be. I had no one to blame but myself this time.

My eyes were gritty and I’d kill for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

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TBC
Chapter 13

Thursday

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TONY'S POV

We arrived back in DC in the afternoon and what sleep I managed to catch on the plane was disrupted by the change of planes in Houston and hanging around till take-off two hours later.

Somewhere between Cancun and Houston the guy in front of me farted non-stop (Gibbs managed to sleep through the noxious fumes) and I decided I didn't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to stay up all night dealing with blackmailers, murderers, rapists or terrorists. Gibbs may enjoy it but I didn't. If I did, it was so long ago I can no longer recall the allure.

I only know for many years it had been about being close to Gibbs. I'd set aside what other plans I may have had for my career because being close to this man was more important than anything else.

Now, something had drastically changed and I needed to do some hard thinking. I would have asked to bring my leave forward if not for the blackmail case. Gibbs and I had set aside that personal issue to focus on the case, but now that we are home and the case is over, I am back to where I was - stumbling out of Gibbs' house on Sunday morning feeling both wonderful and devastated.

Now, as we buckled up for landing, I knew that subordinating my personal goals could no longer continue. A major change of direction was imperative. To do that, I needed to be away from Gibbs, at least for a few days, until I dredged up the courage to walk away forever.

By the time we got out of the airport, it was close to five p.m. and Gibbs said to call it a day. He'd spoken to Vance and we were all meeting up in the morning for the post-mortem.

I was out like a light the minute I fell on my bed.

END OF TONY'S POV

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"I'm sorry, Mr. DiNozzo checked out this morning," the clerk told Scott.

_Checked out_? He'd have to get to the room fast, before the next guest checked in. Here we go again, Scott muttered to himself. It had been a pain having to stay cooped-up in his room, not wanting to risk running into Tony so learning the pain-in-the-butt had checked out was a relief.

An hour later, he had retrieved the camera and was happily whistling away back to his room.

He downloaded the video, cut and copied out the footage of Tony then deleted it from the original before emailing the latter to Bugsy with the message: _It's all there. Have a good life. Let's not stay in touch._


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Friday Morning

**NCIS; Washington, DC**

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3RD PERSON POV

All the team members, including Colonel Mann, Fornell and Diane, were already gathered in the conference room by the time Tony dashed up the stairs and burst into the room, causing all heads to turn.

"Sorry, late," He blinked his eyes hard and forced them wide open. He knew he wasn't fooling anyone, least of all, Gibbs. He looked like shit, he knew. Felt like it, too. He couldn't help wondering how Gibbs felt.

Vance took them through last night's events beginning with the call from the blackmailers demanding the pay-off early. Fornell's teams were ready because the pay off for all three vics were set to take place at the same time, but at three different locations.

The co-ordination had to be spot-on because if one payoff location's take-down was not executed properly, the perps would have time to alert the others.

To the teams co-ordinating the three-way apprehension and arrest, it had gone down smoothly. Once that was done and the perps brought in for questioning, the task of obtaining their accomplices' names began. This was easier than expected and the rumor, according to Dorneget, was that Diane had brought in good friend from the CIA who possessed special interrogation skills. No details of what those skills were, nor the identity of the spook "But I was told he speaks with a British accent," Dorneget had told McGee, who told Tony, who looked as if he was falling asleep on his feet.
"Once we got the names of the accomplices," Director Vance continued. "One in Michigan and two in the El Hedonista resort, Colonel Mann's and Fornell's team moved in and locked down the Serenity Resort in Lake Michigan. At the same time, the FBI Miami Field Agents flew to Cancun where they met up with the local law enforcement officials and connected with NCIS." He nodded towards Gibbs and Tony.

"At precisely 3.46am this morning, our NCIS team," he nodded towards Gibbs and Tony. "Found the files containing photos of the Navy and Army victims on two of the El Hedonista staff's computers. Citrone's was found on the laptop belonging to an employee of the Serenity Resort at Lake Michigan. The tech departments are working to clean out the computers and retrieve every bit of data from the perps' computers and cloud accounts.

"The case is closed and now it's the fun part - get the report typed up by the end of the day and hand them over to Gibbs for dissemination. That's it for now. I'm off to meet SecNav. If you have a question you must ask or you won't be able to sleep tonight, ask them now. Or clear out." Vance stood and everyone started filing out. "DiNozzo," Vance called out as Tony swayed. "You don't look fit for fish food. If you don't need him, Gibbs, perhaps it's better to send him back home. Or to the doctor."

"You sick, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked him as they headed back to the bullpen.

"No. Just need more sleep," Tony mumbled.

"Didn't you sleep last night?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes I did." Tony replied, sitting down at his desk. "Just need more, I guess."

"Go on, then. Might as well start your vacation a day earlier. We're covered here."

"You and Vance flying out on Sunday, aren't you?"

"Tomorrow. Arriving Naples on Sunday. Conference starts at nine Monday morning. When are you back?"

"Monday or Tuesday the week after."

"Okay. Have a good break. Go home and rest up."

Their voices had been quiet. Soft, even, and Tony caught Dorneget giving them curious looks. "Thanks, I'll do that. And, um, I'll see you when I get back." He reached for his backpack, swung it over his shoulder and left the bullpen before he was tempted to ask if Gibbs wanted to him to come by tonight with dinner...and have that talk about Saturday night. And Mexico. But he didn't and punched the button for the elevator, refusing to turn and look back. What the hell just happened in Mexico? What the hell's happening now? He felt like he'd just hopped off a merry-go-round and unable to find his footing.

Gibbs watched Tony enter the elevator. He'd been hoping to get Tony alone sometime today but the younger man looked beat. So he was he, actually. He hadn't planned on having sex with Tony night before last. They were on a job, for God's sake! He'd never let his guard down like that but seeing Tony in bed, feeling the heat rising off his skin, smelling him...it had been too much. He shouldn't touch that bare arm. He'd known that. When he did, he knew he was lost.

Perhaps they could meet up in Naples after the conference. He wondered if Tony would be amenable to that.
 Perhaps Tony could come to want him for more than just a fuck.

END OF 3RD PERSON POV

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Saturday Morning

____________________________________________________

TONY’S POV

My alarm went off at five and I was out of bed and into the shower in under a minute. My flight was at nine-thirty but I wanted to get to the airport early. For some reason, I was antsy to get out of DC as fast as possible and even sitting and waiting in the airport was preferable to being cooped up at home. I had slept the rest of the day after I left Hq and by the time I got out of bed at eight in the evening, I was hungry and feeling less like the walking undead. After a Spanish omelet and some salad. I felt human again.

The flight from DC to London was comfortable seeing as I was flying first-class.

What wasn't comfortable at all was the eight hours on the plane thinking about how to proceed with Gibbs as well as my career. My life.

I am forty years old this year, as Scott had so ignominiously reminded me.

I became a cop at 23. Six years between Peoria, Philly and Baltimore. Twelve years with NCIS. Twelve years with Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

It was true what I told Gibbs about law enforcement not being my first choice. Heck, I wouldn't even be in this line of work if I thought I had a choice. This isn't something I've shared with anyone before. Not a single soul.

My relationship with my father had a lot to do with it; with my life choices as a teen and young adult. To this day I don't know what my father does for a living. Or where he is at any given time. Maybe I don't want to know. I don't want to look too closely. I spent my childhood both admiring him and hating him; needing him and rejecting him. Needing to love him but never feeling loved by him.

Nor was the Rhodes Academy my choice. It was Senior's. I don't think it was so much about instilling discipline in me as it was to get rid of me and not feel guilty - because the Academy was strict and discipline was enforced but it was also a safe place to leave a kid. I guess. I was not abused nor did I know of any kid who was.
But while most of my peers seemed to have clear-cut ideas about where they were going next, what they were going to major in, which branch of the military they were headed for, or which industry they would one day be the captain of, I felt like a boat that had been cut loose to drift in the ocean of life.

For many years I felt like I was the kid who answers, "A firefighter!" or "An astronaut!" when asked what he wants to be when he grows up because that's what kids say. I became a cop because I wanted to flash a badge and carry a gun. Some kids grow out of the childish fantasies but I did not. Fortunately, I did possess enough fortitude and pride to want to do a good job of whatever I ended up with.

I can't help feeling, however, that at forty years old, I need to make deliberate, conscious, informed life choices rather than where someone else is dragging me. Not that Gibbs is dragging me anywhere. I wish. No, he has no clue that everything I've done since I met him has revolved around him.

I'm not going to lie to myself, or anyone, that my being a very wealthy man now is going to affect my decision-making process. I may have toyed with the idea of leaving NCIS way before now, but not having the financial resources to go out there and test-drive jobs at my age, did have a dampening and sobering effect. No so now. Now, I had the whole world to choose from. And the options currently presented looked pretty good - I am excited about developing the Rehoboth property and being involved with Tradewinds Entertainment is becoming more irresistible each day.

If it had not been for my Rhodes Academy training and Gibbs' influence, I know my newly-acquired wealth would have derailed me. Instead, that discipline, not obvious if you don't know me well, rises to the surface when needed, and Gibbs' steadying influence has kept me balanced and down-to-earth for these many years.

Did Uncle Clive know this, when he decided to bequeath so much of his wealth to me? This, too, I wanted to talk to Crispian about.

No matter how I looked at it, pretending that nothing happened on Saturday (and in Mexico) was the best solution. It gave me a way out without feeling totally devastated. Finding Scott in bed with two guys was bad enough, even if it did give me that final shove to end the relationship, but to end my tenure at NCIS getting fucked by my boss - who's straight, as far as I know - was just a little more than I could bear.

I had never been one for casual sex. Falling into bed drunk with another equally-intoxicated man was definitely not my scene either. That the man in question would turn out to be Gibbs only drove home how disastrous my life had become.

I knew I was taking the cowardly way out when I refused to take Gibbs' calls though Gibbs had tried only twice. That, surely, was telling, wasn't it? If Gibbs had woken up and found me gone, he would have come to my apartment to look for me, but he hadn't. He'd sent several text messages but their tone hadn't inspired me to call him back. He'd sounded like he wanted to tear me apart than to talk.

Then what was Mexico about? This question was going to bounce around in my head for awhile, I know. Damn.
Saturday: 10pm

London

I arrived in London undecided about whether to tell Gibbs I was planning to resign. What I was certain of, as my plane taxied down the runway at Heathrow, was that I badly needed this time out. I needed to just chill, spend this week catching up with my cousin and Not. Think. About. Gibbs.

My cousin's life and mine have been worlds apart in more ways than just literally. And I don't mean the money either. I mean the way our lives turned out in terms of careers and marriage. Crispian is very focused once he's made up his mind. He's also never vacillating or undecided for longer than it takes to sum up a situation. He lives in a world of unimaginable wealth compared to most of us yet he's managed to remain easygoing and courteous. Even more impressive, he's been my best friend since we first met as five year-olds when my mother took me to England for the first time, then the next three summers and two Christmases. Mom didn't make it to the third Christmas and it was Crispian who hugged me and comforted me when my mother died shortly after Thanksgiving. Two motherless eight year-olds, for Crispian's mother had died when he was barely a year old.

He's domiciled in Monaco now, works mainly from London and vacations everywhere else. He maintains several properties around the world and, in London, resides in a penthouse at the Albion Riverside, an ultra-modern, high-end residential complex on the banks of the Thames.

He met me at the airport and welcomed me with a warmth that was more characteristic of the Mediterranean than the Brit that he is.

Since we'd both already had dinner, after he'd showed me to my room, we both settled down in his stylish living room overlooking the Embankment and caught up with each other over a bottle of wine.

Crispian may be a relative living half way round the other side of the planet but he's also a close friend. Still, close as Crispian and I have been all these years, I never told him I'm gay. Reason? Because we didn't get to see each other much even though we kept in touch regularly. Coming out to a family member is something one tends to do face to face and with the kind of work schedule I had, flying to Europe just to tell my cousin I was gay wasn't something I could do. The Paddingtons are also one of those upper-crust families where some things just aren't spoken about. I think it's okay to do them; just not to talk about them. So, yes, we are close but there were still parts of myself I kept locked away, neither seen nor heard, just as I expect he has private areas in his life I'm not privy to.

Time for a change, perhaps.

"How long are you on this side of the planet for?" Crispian asked. "Any specific plans or it a free-and-easy vacation?"

"I've only got a week. No fixed schedule. Just thought I'd drop in and check out the Positano property. You've seen it?"

"No. I didn't even know about it until Father passed away."

I told him about my visit to the Rehoboth property. "I'm going to complete the redevelopment of the plot. It's much bigger than I expected."
"What's there, exactly?" Crispian asked.

"A huge 3-level 12-bedroom house, a separate 3-bedroom self-contained housekeeper's quarters, a couple of two-bedroom self-contained guesthouses, all facing the lake. The guesthouses and the housekeeper's quarters are at the water's edge. Very pretty. But - your father also bought the piece of land between the existing lot and the beach. When I saw it last Monday, the buildings that were previously there had been demolished but work stopped there. I'm going to speak to Uncle Clive's former p.a., while I'm here and get the details of the project from him. Jed and Joe can take it over after that."

"I know Jed, but who's Joe?"

I told him.

"Not Joseph James, the writer," Crispian said, in that voice.

"Yes, that one." I laughed. "I hear the voice of an awestruck fan."

Crispian actually went slack-jawed. "Joseph James is currently the bestselling author of espionage and military-themed thrillers!"

"I know." I laughed. "I was as thrilled when I found out. I've read several of his books. As good as Clancy. His latest, Dancing on Graves, is better than anything Clancy's done."

We're about to make an offer for that and are sending a draft of the screenplay off to him next week. I hope it's a go."

"Schedule a visit to Rehoboth with me when I get back. You can make the offer in person."

By the time I finished telling my cousin about the plan I'd proposed to Jed, it was way past midnight and I needed to hit the sack.

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TBC
Chapter 14

Tony's view:

So here we were, looking out at the panoramic expanse of London, having breakfast when Crispin said, "My divorce became final last week."

I was taken aback. "I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know your marital problems were that serious."

"It may sound strange but we didn't really make much of an issue about it. We sat down one day and decided a divorce was in our best interests."

"But why? What led to that?"

Crispin took another swallow of his drink. "She found out I'm...gay."

"You're gay?" My brows shot up. "I didn't know that."

"How would you?" Crispin asked, a little testily. "I don't exactly advertise the fact." He paused, then gave me a wry smile. "I'm sorry. Been a difficult few weeks."

"But you got married," I said.

"Tony, you have no idea the number of CEOs, politicians and people who have to deal with the public - who are in the closet. That's our public face - the closet. It's a responsibility. An obligation. We can consider ourselves civilized and an enlightened lot but you'll find there're still pockets of people who can't, and won't, accept us as human. And decent ones, at that; who don't realize, or care, that they are dehumanizing me by assessing me simply on the gender I'm attracted to. But these are people I work for, who work for me and if staying in the closet and marrying a beard came with the territory, it was perfectly alright with me. I -" He broke off. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to ramble on."

"It's okay," I said, still absorbing what Crispin had just revealed. "How long have you been married? Ten years, at least, isn't it?"

"Fourteen. Clarissa couldn't have children and we were planning to adopt. All that's changed now."

"How did she find out you're gay after fourteen years?"

"Oh, she suspected it since we met in university but it wasn't something Clarissa would ever bring
up. Very private people, our families. We were always good friends and got along. Seemed like a good idea to get married - at the time. She said she wasn't planning to marry anyone but then decided marriage to me would work. Anyway, yes - how did she find out? I told her."

"And?"

"And she took it rather well. No hysterics, no disappointed look or hurt brimming in her eyes. On the contrary, she was rather happy about it and said would I be a dear and pass her the mustard."

"Wasn't that odd to you?" I asked.

"No. Not if you knew Clarissa."

I didn't. I'd only met her once or twice, with hardly more than a dozen words between us.

"Clarissa and I have always lived our own lives so no huge upheaval. She's a photographer for National Geographic, as you know, and half the year she's off in some remote corner of the world. You and your Gibbs work together in the same team. Clarissa and I - it was a modern marriage of convenience. She's a very attractive woman but totally committed to her art. Marrying me meant she wouldn't need to keep fending off invitations and no, she's not a lesbian either."

"You never even gave a hint of all this in all our conversations through the years."

Crispin laughed. "No, I didn't. I wonder what we did talk about all those years."

"Why is that?" I mused out loud. "I mean, we've been friends for over three decades -"

"- and best friends, at that," Crispin interjected.

"Yeah, so it's strange we never told the other about being gay."

"I didn't mean to intentionally keep it from you -" Crispin paused. "Oh hell, I suppose I did, didn't I? Not because I didn't trust you, but because I'd been so used to keeping it to myself. It never occurred to me that it was a secret I shouldn't be having between best friends. I apologize if you feel slighted."

"Oh, um. No. No apologies needed," I responded. "So, why now? Why tell me now?"

It was a while before Crispin answered. When he did, it was with a wry smile. "Usual reason. I met someone."

"And this person is someone you're willing to come out of the closet for."

"Yes."

"What are the repercussions?"

"I would have to step down as CEO of the group. Depends on how the shareholders react. If it's negative then I suppose I'd be offered a position in one of the family companies. A US-based one, I hope, since Tyler's American. He was originally from Boston but he recently moved to Malibu, California."

My eyes widened in surprise. An eighteen year-old blond surfer boy immediately came to mind.

"How old is Tyler?" I asked.
"Thirty-one."

"Ah." I visibly relaxed and lifted the Wedgwood cup to my lips.

"He's a priest." Crispin added.

I spat coffee over his white damask tablecloth. "A wha-at?"

"He's an Episcopalian priest. His brother, Sam, is one of the executive producers of Tradewinds Entertainment, which is how I got to meet Tyler. It was Sam's birthday and he'd invited Tyler over to stay. Tradewinds will be shooting a new TV drama series based on NCIS, by the way."

"They are?"

"Yes, so if you're ever bored with the real thing and want a change, come on over and be our NCIS consultant."

"That'd be cool." I grinned. "Hope it's a success. Then there won't be anymore 'NCIS! Put your weapons down!' and they say 'NC who?' or 'What's NCIS?' Do you have any idea how embarrassing that is?"

Crispin laughed.

"Back to the priest." I put up my hand. "I'm not done with him. Seriously, Cris? How the hell did that even happen?"

"As I said, it was Sam's birthday and he was having a party at his house. Sam introduced me to his brother then took off to play host. Tyler and I got along immediately. He's very well-read. And well-traveled. Great sense of humor. Nothing like what I imagined a priest would be like. I always had the impression priests - Anglican ones, anyway - sat in their little village parishes growing roses and visiting old ladies. I mentioned I liked Sam's house and Tyler offered to show me around. I'd been drinking - we all were. It's a party, after all, but even if I'd been stone-cold sober, I'd have found Tyler attractive. One thing led to another - you know how it is - and we ended up in the room he was sleeping in and...well, we kissed. Don't ask me how that happened."

"I won't," I said. "I don't know how mine happened either."

"It just happened, you know."

I nodded. "I know."

"It didn't stop there," Crispin continued. "I gave him a blowjob and then I...I made a move for more. I asked him to fuck me. Begged him, Tony. I handed him a condom and a sachet of lube -"

"Ooh. Boy scout," I muttered. But then, so was I. *Did I put that condom and lube in my wallet before we left for Mexico, intentionally? Hopefully?*

"And he did," Crispin continued, lost in the memory of that evening as I was in mine. "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Afterwards he looked like he was going straight to hell and ran out. I couldn't find him after that. Next day I asked Sam about him and he said Tyler was already on his way back to Boston. Some urgent situation had arisen which required him to return to his parish."

"No wonder you sounded troubled when you asked me to come to London, though my problem is about as bad."
"What happened to you?"

I waved his question away. "Tell you later. Finish yours."

Crispin looked away. "I don't know if Tyler is gay."

"You don't know whether this guy - who is a priest and who you sucked off in the middle of a party - is gay but you're going to give up your career on a gamble that he is?"

"I know," Crispin muttered. "I know it's insane of me." He combed his fingers through his dark hair. "Look, Tony, I'm glad you're here. I was planning to fly over, you know."

"To see your priest?"

"No. Yes, but first to see you if you couldn't come to London. I thought you being American and a friend, not just a relative, you could help me think this through."

"I'm probably the last person who could give you advice, Cris." I gave a huff. "Not good advice, anyway. Okay - I took a deep breath. "Here's where I show you mine now that you've shown me yours. I'm gay, too."

Crispin stared at me then burst out laughing. "You sonofabitch."

"Sorry, but my reasons are not much different from yours," I said. "Or any other gay person's."

Cris shook his head. "I can't believe it. We kept this from each other all these years. How did we do it? I mean, we've in touch fairly regularly from the day we met. You're my best friend, and I yours since we were six bloody years old."

"I know. Terrible, isn't it, the secrets we can keep," I murmured. "Do your other close friends know you're gay?"

"No. You're the first one I've told. Only Clarissa knows at this point."

"There you are," I said. "Neither of us are publicly out. I'm not to my Dad even - not that I think he'd care."

"Did it bother you?" Crispin asked. "Being in the closet? I've thought of coming out to you before but...well, just kept putting it off."

"No, my being gay didn't bother me. Not in the sense of a sexual identity, that is. My being in the closet is purely work-related. Related to my good health, that is. It was dangerous being a gay cop. At least, it was still that way ten, fifteen years ago. I stayed in the closet when I joined NCIS because I didn't know what Gibbs' - my boss - I didn't know what his attitude towards gays was and I figured I ought to stay focused on the job, not on my sexual orientation, so I guess I never really thought about it either."

"And now?"

And now I filled my cousin in on my unrequited love for my boss.

Crispin shook his head in amazement. "God, we're a pair."

I smiled wryly in agreement.

"So, really? You bumped into him and he kissed you?" Crispin asked after a while.
"It wasn't quite as simple, or as sudden as that," I replied. "Or as one-sided. I've wanted him for a
dozen years and had it kept hidden pretty well. Believe me, if Gibbs knew how I felt, he'd have had
me transferred to another office. I can bet you my entire inheritance that he was kicking himself the
morning after and berating himself for his stupidity." I scrubbed my face with my hands. "Which is
why I chose to play it cool, didn't mention the mind-razing hot sex at all in the note I left him. That
way, he's got an out. Let him have the option of thinking I don't remember."

"And is that what you're going to do? Let him think you don't remember?"

I smiled, then, and winked. "Ah, nothing so easy. First of all, he knows I remember. He's not
obtuse. He knows I'm just acting like I don't, or that I want it to be that way and he's just playing
along."

"Ah. Denial is a river in Egypt as far as you both are concerned." Crispin chuckled.

“Exactly. Besides, I’m thinking a little ambiguity would be more effective. Keep him guessing a
little but throw in a little bit of romancing, a little bit of seduction…” I paused, then sighed loudly.
“And a whole lot of guts. Oh God, what was I thinking!” I looked away, knowing what my cousin
would say if I were to tell him about Mexico. I did, anyway, and his reaction was as I expected.

“He fucked you again?” Cris’ eyes were wide with surprise, then he burst out laughing. “So what’s
the fucking problem? Sounds like he was confirming things for you. Of course, there is the issue of
a manager bonking his subordinate…”

“Cris, I think the Mexico sex just made things worse, and I don’t mean the boss versus subordinate
thing.” At Cris’ lifted brows, I clarified. “Even if Gibbs is gay – and the jury’s still out on that – it’s
obvious he doesn’t want it known. You couple that with his losing his senses last Saturday because
he was drunk, then add a second fuck to the mix, if you know Gibbs at all – which you don’t –
you’re looking at a very mixed-up man.”

“How so?”

“He may be gay – and we don’t know that – but even if he is, he will stay in the closet till the door
falls open one day and we find his skeleton.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “God, Cris. What
do I do?”

“You go in with every bit of the DiNozzo charm you can muster, that’s what you do. You charm
the socks, no – the pants! – off that boss of yours. You make him want to be gay! Damn it!”

We broke into laughter at the absurdity of it and just like that, I felt better.

"Thanks, Cris," I said, when we settled down. "You're a good friend. A great friend. I'm pretty
close to my team members but we don't really get into the personal stuff. We meet up for drinks
once a month, we know who we're dating but not much more."

"I'm sorry I didn't make more time for our friendship," Crispin said. "I rather took it for granted -
knew you'd always be there for me and assumed you knew the same of me."

"Time to remedy that?" I asked.

"For sure." Crispin stood. "Come, let's stretch out for a while."

We adjourned to the deckchairs that were scattered around the spacious wraparound balcony,
bringing the jug of orange juice with us. Before I could lie down, Crispin pulled me into a bear
hug. "I'm glad you're here though I wish you'd come earlier, not when I'm about to fly off myself."
"Where are you off to?" I asked, surprisingly fortified by the uncharacteristic and unexpected PDA.

"I'm flying over to LA," Crispin replied. "See if the good father will at least meet me."

I peered into Crispin's blue eyes. "Hey, Cuz. Not knowing if the guy's gay is bad enough. Knowing he's a priest and still going after him - gee, well, I dunno. I thought I was crazy hoping Gibbs is gay and that I could seduce him. But you? You're taking on The Big Guy upstairs."

"Tony, there've been a lot of changes in the Episcopal Church and they are the most open-minded denominations where homosexuality's concerned. There are ordained gay ministers, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But still, Cris. You now have to tackle not just Tyler's sexual orientation, you have to tackle how he'll feel about being gay, because there's his vocation to consider. He may not want to be a gay priest."

"That's why we should find out before we get involved but there isn't the slightest chance of that happening unless I'm single. Tyler's got to see that I got divorced for myself, not for him. I don't think he even knew my wife and I had applied for a divorce, that we had been living apart for a year already."

I shook my head. "Still sounds hinky to me - falling for a priest! And flying halfway round the world to see him when you don't even know if he's gay. That's just plain nuts, cuz."

"And how different is that from your situation, may I ask? You're planning to seduce your boss so I'd say your career's going to be affected, wouldn't it?"

"Hey, I didn't say I was definitely going to seduce him. Besides, that ship's sailed," I said. "And sank off Mexico," I added under my breath. "It was just an idea I'm tossing around in my head." I said in a normal tone.

"Hey, even if that ship's sailed, as you say, you still have your work cut out for you. What you do now is chase after that ship, get on board and make him gay, like I said. It's what I'm going to do in LA, after all." Cris laughed, shaking his head then he sighed. "Maybe we're both insane, but hey, we are not going to sit on our arses and do nothing."

"Just one point, cuz. I could live with just hot monkey sex on weekends and back to our professional lives during the week whereas you and Tyler are looking at divine wrath coming upon your heads. Or ex-communication, at the very least."

"So you say," Crispin murmured.

"Besides, I'm going to be handing in my resignation when I get back."

Cris' brows lifted. "You are? Good news for Tradewinds, I hope?"

"That is in the cards, yes," I replied. "I haven't decided but after the last few days, I can't stay on, not after what happened in Mexico. Even if we hadn't ended up having sex, as we did, I'm pretty certain it's time for me to move on. I was going to avoid talking about That Saturday Night when we were undercover in Mexico because we had to be on red alert but it didn't turn out exactly as planned. We ended up having sex but before we could finish properly, the FBI take down commenced and it was coitus interruptus - and no, it wasn't funny so stop cackling like a demented hyena."

"So talk about it," Crispin said, laughter still on his voice. "That's what I'm off to LA to do."
"I will. I just need some time to think where I want to go with it. You forget, I'm also dealing with the changes your father's bequest has brought in my life. Thee hundred and fifty million isn't something anyone can be casual about."

"No, you're right, of course," Crispin said. "Well, take all the time you need. I was in the same rut as you where Tyler's concerned but I know now where I ought to be, ought to do."

"You're still not the type to make this kind of decision after a few drinks and one drunken kiss," Tony maintained. *Neither is Gibbs. And he wasn't drunk in Mexico.*

"Sometimes we don't know what we really are until we're faced with a crisis."

"Did you try calling him?" I asked.

"Yes, I got his cell phone number off Sam but he didn't answer. I must have tried a dozen times so he likely switched off his phone. I tried again in the morning and he still didn't pick up. That was two weeks ago."

"And you haven't heard from him since?"

"Yes, I did. He sent an email. Just a sec. Let me retrieve it. Here it is -

Dear Cris. I'm sorry for not returning your calls. I ought to have known better than to let myself get into such an inebriated state. It led me to do what I would never have done otherwise. May you find it in yourself to forgive me'. Signed, T.

"I replied, 'Dear Father Tyler, no forgiveness necessary. Besides, I, too, am guilty of letting my attraction to you lead you where you did not want to go.'" Then a few days later, he sent another. 'I may regret that evening, but I'm not sorry I met you. I wish we could have gotten to know each other. It will be awhile before I forget. If ever.'

"And you came out, possibly threw away your career on the basis of these two messages?" I asked incredulously.

"No, I did because Tyler made me realize I was in no position to reply any other way as long as I'm locked in as I am. If I had been single, I could have attempted to find out if there was something in that encounter. If I were out, I wouldn't be second-guessing Tyler, or anyone else I meet in the future."

"Are we still talking about you?" I asked.

"Whatever suits you at the moment, cuz." He grinned. "Hey," he said a few minutes later. "Fancy a bit of nostalgia?" At my inquiring look, he added, "Drive up Chanterelle Hall. We could spend the night there and drive back tomorrow. I already took the day off so let's make the most of it."

I perked up at that. "Let's hit the road, Jack." A Sunday drive through the English countryside sounded very good. Mainly because a drive with Crispin meant someone else would drive the Bentley while he and I sat in the back sipping Dom Perignon and snacking on Beluga.

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TBC
Chanterelle Hall

Shropshire, England

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TONY'S POV

Chanterelle Hall is the name of the thirty-room mansion that the Paddingtons acquired as the result of others' misfortunes. Sometime during the late eighteenth century, its owner was forced to sell their ancestral home to the rich-as-Croesus Ebelard Paddington, a merchant whose business eventually crossed the Channel further into Europe and the Far East, enriching the Paddington coffers beyond imagination.

The enormous house sits on a 1,455-acre landscaped park along the Severn River in Shropshire. Crispin and I used to play in the woods near the Hall, pretending we were Robin Hood and the Forty Thieves. The forty thieves was my idea - an injection of the exotic. Why? Because I told Crispin English food was tasteless and if they made more friends from foreign countries the way America did, they'd have better-tasting food.

Crispin allowed us to have that name when it was my turn to be Robin Hood but when it was his turn, he called us Robin Hood and his Band of Gay Men.

"Gay men?" My seven year-old Little John scoffed. "What's 'gay' mean?"

"Same as ‘merry’," the seven year-old Robin replied. "Because I heard Mother tell your mother that Giles is gay and when I asked her what that mean, she said it means Uncle Giles is a merry person like Robin Hood and His Merry Men."

We believed shit like that when we were kids. Perhaps that's why I was so happy those years before my mother died. Holidays meant family, lots of home-baked cookies - or biscuits as Crispin called them, and British puddings, the only Brit food I can say I like.

"Any chance I could have Dead Man's Leg pudding?" I asked. It was my favorite British cake - made of suet and spread with jam, it looks like a Swiss Roll and is a cousin to another favorite of mine, the Spotted Dick pudding.

"I'm sure Horace will have that arranged," Crispin said. "I'll call to let him know we're on our way. He's there, actually. His wife had an accident and he's gone to look in on her."

Horace was the butler. Yep. A real one. Wears the penguin suit and all and has been with the family from before Crispin was born. He wasn't the butler then, of course. Just one of the junior servants, or Lower Servants if you want to get formal about it.

Chanterelle Hall is mag, as Abby would say. I'd like to bring her to visit one day. She'll love the
ghost of Lady Godgifu, better known as Godiva. The good lady apparently walks the corridors of Paddington house's first floor before descending the stairs on her way out. Presumably to mount her horse.

After two and half hours, we arrived at the village closest to Chanterelle Hall and drove through narrow streets banked on both sides by medieval black and white Tudor houses. All the woodwork made me think about Gibbs. I'd only been away from him two days and I felt cut off from something vital. How was I going to handle a permanent separation? Because I know Gibbs - he won't be the one to pick up the phone and call just to chat, just to say he missed me. It's always the other party who takes the initiative. I know because I heard Diane throw that at him one day. I know because in the twelve years we've known each other, not once has he dropped by with dinner or a six-pack. Hell, if he came empty-handed, I'd happily supply the beer and food but no, it's always been me. I'm the one who drops in unannounced and hands him his bag of Chinese; I'm the one who suggests I bring over a couple of steaks and go over the case while we eat.

I don't think he goes over to Fornell's house either, because there had been a few occasions when I was there in his basement watching TV from the 19-inch black and white he'd salvaged from his father's junk and Fornell would drop by.

"What's with the pensive look?" Crispin asked.

"Tell you later," I replied.

An hour later, after I'd hugged and kissed Horace, the housekeeper and her assistant (one of the village girls) and found my childhood bedroom, Crispin and I took a walk into the woods - the one where so many of my happy memories had been birthed. We'd been given a picnic basket and iced lemonade, and for the next few hours, I talked with my cousin about my obsession with Gibbs, about my intention to resign, going over again Gibbs' uncharacteristic behavior last Saturday, about my ambivalence towards getting involved in any relationship where my s/o was in the closet, about how that may be the only way sometimes but could I compromise? Yeah, I'd been through it all yesterday already but I was suffering from the classic case of lovesickness: I'm in love and everyone has to listen to me go on incessantly. But hell, what are best friends for.

"If Scott could hear me now," I said, after the umpteenth time I said I would never date anyone in the closet. Not. Evah.

"Scott is an arsehole," Crispin stated, not for the first, second or even the third time. The only diff was that this time he is saying it to me face-to-face.

"Want my tuppence worth?" Crispin said.

"Go ahead."

"Come out to Gibbs. To everyone. Start being true to yourself, Tony. If Gibbs is not the one, someone else can be but you won't be fair either to yourself or that person if you're still hiding. And as long as you're in the closet yourself, it's rather silly of you to deny he's doing the same. What gives you the right or reason to be in the closet but not Gibbs? If you could hide all these years, so could he." He grabbed me by the neck and shook me. "Come OUT, damned spot."

I laughed but concluded he was right. "Omigod. I'm going to have to deal with Dorneget," I
"Who's that?"

"A colleague. He's out and proud. And has a crush on me."

"And are you attracted to him?"

"What? No! And let's get back on track. What should I do?"

"Send him a text to say you arrived and that you'll be Naples. Ask if there's anything he wants you to do. See what he says."

"Do? I'm on vacation. I don't want to do anything but chill."

"Even better," Crispin said. "Ask if he wants to meet up for a drink. Go on. Do it now while I go take a piss." He walked into the woods and disappeared behind a bush though I don't why that was necessary unless the birds were ornithic perverts.

When Crispin returned and I still hadn't sent the text, he naturally asked why.

"Because, it's more complicated than it seems," I replied. "You see, on my way over, I had seven and half hours to run through my life."

"And that's such a long time compared to the forty years you've lived."

"Snide remarks not permitted, if you please." My brows snapped together. Crispin made a zipping gesture across his lips. "As I was saying, I had ample time to think about things, even my relationship with Scott and what was coming between us most of the time." I paused and Crispin waited. "The biggest issue was my coming out. He hated having to hide, to be hidden, but I just couldn't...I refused to come out. But now, I suddenly understand how he feels...must have felt."

"Do share your Eureka moment," Cris said.

I drew in a deep breath. "Because if there ever could be something between Gibbs and me, I wouldn't want to hide either. Hell, Cris, even without Gibbs, I don't want to hide anymore. I didn't have much of a choice before - I had my job to consider. My trust fund wasn't enough to pay for rent and living expenses so I couldn't afford to just walk out if my being gay wasn't accepted. Yeah, yeah, I know things have changed but still, old habits die hard.

"Anyway, during my seven and a half hour flight, I got to thinking that I'm going to do that turnaround. No more Tony-in-the-closet. I'll give myself to the end of vacation and once I step on American soil, I'm taking steps to live 'My Best Life Now.' I let myself fall back flat on the grass, suddenly deflated. "Fuck. I sound like a dork. Forget it. Have we got anything to drink other than lemonade?"

Later, at afternoon tea, Crispin was looking at me intently over his cup of Lady Grey.

"What?" I asked, spreading clotted cream on my freshly-baked scones.
"You're really going to do it, aren't you?" Crispin asked.

"Do what?"

"Come out of the closet."

"Yes, I am, and that's why things between Gibbs and me could get complicated. See, if Gibbs is gay or bi - or tri! - he's been in the closet all these years. I mean, he's at least fifty or more and I can tell you he has no intention of outing himself. He's still very much in the previous generation where sex is concerned. Being gay is not something you talk about, never mind parade. If Gibbs is gay, he's in the closet and he'll die in the closet. But I don't want to live like that anymore. Whatever faults Scott has, on this issue he's right. If he is to be faulted then it's having pressured me. I won't do that to Gibbs, or to anyone I'm involved in ever again. Either we live openly together, or not at all."

"You're right. This does make things a tad more complex, because you know what? If you and Gibbs do get it on together, he's the last person you want to put pressure on."

"Believe me, that's very much at the forefront in my mind. Complicated, like I said. I'm not sure which I should do first - come out first then put out feelers on Gibbs, or grab the opportunity presented now and cross the coming out bridge after."

"Which are you proposing to do?" Crispin asked.

"I think I shall take Brutus' advice."

Crispin frowned. "Friend of yours?"

"No, not personally. Anyway, as he said to Cassius upon entering the final phase of the war against Octavius and Mark Anthony - (I paused to put on my best Connery voice) "There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."

"Huh. Shakespeare. Looks like it's Naples for you, then," Crispin said. "Better catch that tide in time."

"Wait. What if he doesn't want to see me?" I asked. "He let me off early yesterday. He thought I needed the sleep because I looked like shit. If he was worried, why didn't he call me?"

"You're forgetting you're the one who was avoiding his calls. He's likely apprehensive about trying again in case you take it the wrong way and accuse him of harassment."

That got me. "You're right. In which case, I had better take the initiative."

"Ah. At last. The light bulb comes on."

"So you think telling him I'm resigning is a good idea?" I asked.

"Let's see...if you don't resign, and he is gay and does have the hots for you, which, as you know, I'm certain of...he won't make a move. From what you've told me, he's not one to diddle with the staff. Though he already did. Twice."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you trying to help me or confuse me more than I already am?" It was a rhetorical question, really, so I added, "But if I resign, he'll assume I did so because of him, because
I can't carry on working with him anymore. He'll be consumed by guilt."

"Ah, but with you no longer being his subordinate, why Tony, your future with Special Agent Gibbs is only limited by your imagination." He paused to take another sip of tea. "And your guts, of course. So no whimpering off with your tail between your legs. You stride into Naples like Mark Antony - speaking of tails, cook is serving salted pig tails for dinner. You had your Dead Man's Leg pudding, which I find ghastly, so I thought I'd even it out."

"With those neon-pink pigtails? You talk about ghastly? Have you stopped to think what a bowl of soup looks like with a bright, magenta pink tail in it?"

7.55 a.m. Tuesday

Chanterelle Hall

"What time is it in Naples now?" I asked my cousin. "I'm going to send him a text."

"We're an hour behind," Crispin replied. "So...eight fifty-five in Naples."

Cris and I were having breakfast the next morning before driving back to London. We'd gone over the idea of me flying to Naples and meeting up with Gibbs and Cris had been trying to get me to send the text message but I was dragging my feet from sheer nerves. What if Saturday night was a mistake but Mexico was Just. A. Fuck.? Did I want to find out?

"Meeting's about to start. Better send it off quickly," Crispin urged me.

"What do I say?" I asked, in spite of my doubts.

"Just tell him you arrived safely, that you'll be in Naples on Wednesday and would he like to meet up for a drink," Crispin said, in a voice one used when one was dealing with a dolt and clearly exasperated.

"Okay, no need to sound so condescending. And not 'a drink'. A drink was what got me in this mess." After a few starts, erase and restarts, I settled for 'Hi, Gibbs. Arrd safely in Ldn last nite. Will be in Naples Wed aftn. How about we catch up for a meal or coffee?' I showed the message to Crispin.

"Excellent. Short and sweet. I like it." Crispin nodded. "Innocuous enough to not scare him off if I'm wrong." When he saw the alarm on my face, he hurriedly added, "And no, I'm confident I'm not wrong, just as I'm sure Tyler won't find my visit an unwelcome one."

"I wish I had your self-confidence," I muttered, and quickly sent the message before I chickened out.

END OF TONY'S POV
Meanwhile, in Naples

The Taskforce on Global Terrorism/AOR-Europe Conference

3RD PERSON POV

The conference was about to commence when Gibbs felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Then he saw who had sent the text and his breath hitched. Tony? Was it really?

He read it three times before sending a reply. His heart was in his throat as he responded to the text. He hadn't felt this level of apprehension and anticipation rolled into one since...hell, he'd never. There had never been any girl - or boy - who generated this kind of thrill in him before.

He sent off the reply just as the chairman of the meeting commenced his address. A minute later, Tony's response arrived.

Throughout the rest of the morning's meeting, Gibbs listened with a half-smile hovering on his lips. Vance noticed that, too, but didn't ask.

o o o o

Chanterelle Hall

TONY'S POV

My phone chimed and my stomach flipped over. "He's replied," I said. I read Gibbs' message out: Meeting ends Wed 1800hrs. Am staying at Millennium Gold Hotel. What the hell r u doing in Naples?

"Succinct, your Gibbs." Crispin smiled. "Go on. Reply while I talk to Lizzie about your travel arrangements."

Before I could tap out a reply, the next message arrived. 'Will meet u at the hotel lobby bar at 7pm Wed.'

"Looks like we'd better arrange for you to get to Naples by tomorrow afternoon. Would you give Horace a yell and let him know we'll be leaving shortly?"
I didn't have to because the butler materialized beside me before I could even get up. Must be some kind of butler magic they teach them in the Hogwarts Butler School.

"Right," Crispin said, as he put his cell phone into his pocket. "Your flight to Naples leaves at 12.45pm so my driver will take you to Heathrow after breakfast. What are you planning to do in Naples? Aside from seducing Gibbs, that is."

"Drive down to Positano, check out the building and the Gambardellas, then Capri for a couple of days. Wanna come?"

"Love to but I'm leaving tomorrow, too," Crispin replied. "If the mountain can't go to Muhammad and all that..."

"Does the mountain know Muhammad's on the way?"

"No. Element of surprise might be more revealing."

"Only if you're prepared for the revelation, however surprising it might be," I replied, thinking about my walking in on Scott. "What time's your flight?"

"Evening. Or after dinner, depends on how long my meetings run to." After a pause, he said, "You do know that the fact he's wanting to meet up sounds promising, don't you?"

"Not as promising as it looks," I said. "We're always meeting up back home. It doesn't have to be a pre-arranged thing. We're terribly casual, unlike you Brits. I used to just drop in on Gibbs any night just to hang out with him in his basement. We'd just eat, talk about a case and some weekend nights, I'd stay over."

"'Used to'?"

"Yeah, it started to get too hard. I was scared I'd lose it one night and touch him, or do something equally stupid. Like kiss him." I said, with a self-deprecating huff.

"The way he did you last weekend."

"Yes."

"And Mexico," Crispin added. "Or did you just fuck and dispensed with the foreplay?"

"Ye-ahh," I said in a tone as if some penny had just dropped. "Yeah...you really think that was what happened?"

"That you dispensed with the foreplay?"

"No. That he'd reached a point he couldn't help doing what he'd told himself he wouldn't do."

"At the risk of being repetitive, yes I do, bu-utt...I'd still like you to seriously consider my proposal to come on board Tradewinds. If you can swing it, fly across over a weekend and I'll introduce you to Sam - Tyler's brother - remember I told you he's one of the executive producers for the television division? He's asked me about meeting you, actually, so do try and make some time to meet him."

"I will," I promised, even though Tradewinds was the last thing on my mind at the moment. "Just let me get past this hurdle first."

"Think about it. That's all I'm asking. You already own a home in Malibu. It's just down the road from mine. Apply for a month of no-pay leave and join me in LA."
"Hey! You said a weekend. It's a month now?"

"I'll show you around, introduce you to the other executive producers, the writers...if at the end of it you decide you want to stay a Fed, nothing's lost. Besides, you did say you were going to leave NCIS."

"Cris, even if it does work out between Gibbs and me, I doubt I could stay. I just can't see Gibbs - or Vance - allowing us to carry on an intimate relationship while we're on the same team. That would be beyond unprofessional. If we did hook up, I would resign. Not Gibbs, though. He's got his pension and he's only five or six years from mandatory retirement. I wouldn't jeopardize that."

My phone sounded just then, curtailing our discussion. I looked to see who was calling. "It's my Director," I said with a frown to Crispin. "What would he want?" I asked in a stage whisper as I answered the call. "DiNozzo. Director Vance. What's up?"

"DiNozzo. I know you're on vacation but I have a favor to ask of you," Vance said, without preamble. "A personal one."

"O-kaay," I responded, puzzlement showing on my face, making Crispin look at me curiously.

"Gibbs just told me you'll be in Naples tomorrow," Vance said. "So you're vacationing in Italy?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Will you be alone? I mean, would you, by any chance, be vacationing on your own?"

I wondered if he realized how odd his question was. "Uh, I am, actually," I said. "Why?"

"You are?" Vance said, sounding surprised. Weirder and weirder. "Where are you planning to go on your vacation?"

"I'll be on the Amalfi Coast, Director. Why?" I was suddenly wary, thinking Vance was going to ask me to do a job while I was vacation. "What...do you want me to do, Director?"

I heard him expel a breath of relief. "I want you to take Gibbs with you."

"I beg your pardon, Director?"

"I said, I need you to do me a favor. And Gibbs. It's for him, too."

"It is?" I asked, stupidly.

"DiNozzo, he needs a break and I need you to ensure he takes one."

"Director -" I was truly puzzled now. "Is Gibbs agreeable to this? Because -"

"I've given him the time off and I'm counting on you to see that he gets the R&R he needs." Vance paused, thinking about the explanation he'd have to come up with for this strange request. "Do you have a problem taking Gibbs with you, DiNozzo?"

"N-no. Not at all," I replied. "I arrive in the afternoon and I'm booked into the same hotel. I'll be meeting Gibbs for dinner after the conference and the next morning I'll be driving down to Amalfi."

"Well, Gibbs and I have invited Stan Burley to dinner so you can join us and persuade him."
Burley. Of course. Everyone's blue-eyed special agent, "Uh, thank you, Director, but does Gibbs even know he's going on vacation? Does the team know? I mean, they are expecting him back at work."

"That's all taken care of, DiNozzo."

"I might as well drive a stake through my heart right now," I said as I got in the backseat with Crispin. "Oh Horace," I pretended to hail the butler in my best Bond voice. "A glass of poison on the rocks, please."

"What happened?" Crispin asked after telling the chauffeur he could drive off.

"The Director wants me to have dinner with him in Naples. With Gibbs."

"What's so bad about that?"

"He also wants me to babysit Gibbs," My voice was one that predicted doom.

"What do you mean 'babysit'?"

"Apparently, the Director is worried about Gibbs and has, I assumed, ordered him to go on leave. He knows Gibbs will try to circumvent the order somehow and turn up at work - he's done that before - so I've been tasked with enforcing Gibbs' vacation by taking him with me."

"Why is that not good news? You should be ecstatic."

"It isn't good news. It's terrible news. Gibbs hates going on leave! He lives to work. Taking away his work day is like taking away a pacifier from a baby's mouth and I'm going to have to lug a surly, ill-tempered bear with me for the next week!" I groaned and cradled my head in my hands.

"Then why are you flying to Naples to meet him?"

"I'm not flying to Naples to meet him," I said. "I'm going to Positano to check out the property Uncle Clive left me. Meeting Gibbs was just...a bonus." I sighed, then gave up the pretense. "Oh, alright. But I was planning on going nice and slow. Subtle, you know. And now Vance has turned me into a bull about to rampage through Gibbs' china shop."

"You weren't planning on spending your vacation with him?" Crispin asked, confused by my reaction to Vance's request. "You told me earlier you were going to romance him, seduce him -"

"I was planning on just having dinner with him, then drinks. Feel my way around, see if Mexico could be something he'd want to repeat. If he did then I was going to take him back my room. Or his. Then I take off the next day for Positano while he heads back to DC with Vance. If things went well the night before, we could hook up again back home then decide what the next step is."

"Or he could end it right there in Naples. Before you even get to invite him to your room."

I nodded. "He could."

"And you're prepared for that."

"Yes. No. I dunno. I'd been doing a good job avoiding him. Then Mexico happened and I decided
to get this over and done with. If he wants me, I want to know. If he doesn't then I want to know that, too. And tell him to stop diddling the staff. Part of my Big Change-over, you know. And since I was going to Italy, I thought might as well ‘take it at the flood’, so to speak. I just wasn't planning on having him with me for a whole week!"

"If he's agreed to go with you, it can't be bad. In fact, wouldn't it be better? You'll have a whole week to work on him," Crispin said. "If he's gay."

"And if he isn't, it'll be the vacation from hell for me."

"The way I understand it, Gibbs has a choice here and he's decided to take your Director's suggestion of a break. If he were really against it, he could have refused. All you have to do now is to win him over with a little romance. Your Director just handed you the opportunity of a lifetime. It's serendipitous."

Tony sat up. "Oh yeah? How so?"

"Gibbs may not know the Director's assigned you to be his vacation nanny but if he does, and still agrees to go, well..."

I must have looked skeptical because Crispin persisted. "All you have to do, then, is make him realize there's no one else he wants but you. Not just for a week. Forever." Crispin sat back on the sofa with a smile.

"Oh. Is that all," I said sarcastically.

"I think you're over-dramatizing things," Crispin said.

"You'd better be right, Cris," I muttered.

END OF TONY'S POV

_____________________________________________________

TBC
Chapter 16

A/N: Oldie but Goodie song inspiration for this chapter: Isn't Romantic, from the movie Love Me Tonight (1932). I like Rod Stewart's version.

Chapter 16

Wednesday, Naples

3RD PERSON POV

Despite his reservations and nerves, Tony landed at Naples’ Capodichino International Airport on schedule at 4pm, local time, Wednesday, and checked into the Millennium Gold Hotel.

He'd automatically gotten in line at the taxi queue but when the passengers in front of him told him the fare was twenty-five pounds even though the hotel was just five minutes' walk down the road, he decided to walk, trolley-bag and all, telling himself he may be rich but it didn't mean he was willing to pay forty dollars for a two-minute ride. Besides, if he ever did hook up with Gibbs, remote as that may be, Gibbs would never allow him to treat money that way. Telling Gibbs about the size of his inheritance was another thing he'd have to deal with, but that could wait. If Gibbs was going to be in his life, that was something they'd have to sit down and seriously discuss because Gibbs had very strong views about money management and spending it. He'd grown up with just enough to get by and though he now earned a good-enough salary, he was still very thrifty. Tony knew there would be adjustments to make if they ever got together - oh hell, what am I thinking! I'm not even at first base. Saturday night wasn't a first step. It was a trip-up in which he fell face first. And Mexico merely brought to mind a biblical aphorism he'd learnt in the Catholic high school he attended - 'As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly'. Yeah, that was him, alright.

Dogs and fools notwithstanding, he felt that tingle of joy at the thought of submitting to Gibbs even in his personal life. As far as he was concerned, Gibbs could be the boss both at work and at home. That had him wondering how things would play out if his idea to seduce Gibbs did take off on a promising start and did culminate in their getting together.

Okay, it was a long shot, he thought, as he showered, but what if Gibbs wasn't pissed off at what Vance had arranged? If Gibbs was merely using that as an opportunity to have That Talk, the one they'd agreed to leave until the blackmail case was over? Could he turn it around so that Gibbs would see how he really felt about it? Could he manage to persuade Gibbs to spend the next week exploring the Amalfi Coast with him?

Tony didn't have a clear, specific plan on how he was going to achieve that but was fairly sure he could improvise as he went.

He finished his shower, shaved, and dressed, sent off a text to Crispin then headed down to the
Vance and I were at the hotel lobby waiting for Tony when he emerged from the elevator and strode towards us. Tony had always been a sharp dresser but this evening, there was something different. Whatever it was, it made me stop breathing for a moment.

"Uh, boss?" Tony's voice was laced with concern. "You okay?"

I blinked. "Yeah!" I cleared my throat. "Long day."

"Let's go," Vance said. "Burley's meeting us at the restaurant."

When we arrived at the restaurant, Stan Burley hailed us over.

"Director." Burley held out his hand. "Welcome to Napoli. You, too, Special Agent Gibbs." Burley smiled widely at Gibbs. "You're looking even better each time I see you. New woman in your life?"

"Watch it, Burley," Gibbs growled. "You may be head of your own team but I can still kick your ass."

Burley laughed. "Hey, DiNozzo!" Burley clapped a hand on Tony's shoulder. "Still a cantankerous old bastard, is he?" he asked in a stage whisper.

I glared at both of them and Tony wisely refrained from replying.

The food was excellent, of course, and going by the way we conversed so easily, one would think we got together regularly. Every now and then I did cast surreptitious glances towards Tony wondering what the hell I was going to do with the leave the director had ordered me to take.

When I'd received Tony's text yesterday, I'd been surprised but relieved. After Mexico, I was certain I'd blown it. I'd been so disgusted with myself I thought it best to avoid him. So, much as I wanted to ask him to come over after work, or let me go to his apartment, I'd reverted to type and avoided him. How ironic. Nevertheless, I needed to resolve things with him and if that didn't go well, I was planning to tell Vance I was returning to DC with him. Then I'd hand in my retirement notice and start winding down my final days at the agency. After that I'd head down to New Orleans and chill with Dwayne, sound him out about buying over Cassius' bar in the French Quarter. He'd been serious about it when I last spoke to him. Apart from Tobias, Dwayne was as close as friend as I could have. It was only distance that separated us and unlike Tobias, Dwayne knew how I felt about Tony. Unlike Tobias, too, Dwayne would never pry into my private affairs. We were too much alike...could sit down by the bayou, beer in the cooler box, rod in hand, and stay there all day with not much more than a dozen words between us. A more atypical couple of gay men you couldn't find.
Well, that was what I was thinking about yesterday as I ate my lunch while the rest of the conference attendees around me were engrossed in their conversations.

I'd also had enough time on the plane to consider what Tobias had said last Sunday and I decided there was a lot there that bore taking note of, especially the fact that Tony hadn't stopped me when I kissed him, had gone up with me to my bedroom when he could have bolted right there and then.

And he'd let me fuck him. And had come, too. As for Mexico, that had blown my mind but it had also unnerved me. Going by his morning-after blues for Saturday night, Tony could very well do the same thing despite his response on Wednesday night.

But after that text message from him, my plan was no longer to just clear the air with Tony. I was going to find out if he was open to a relationship with me. Knowing he was gay was already half the battle, of course. The issue now was more our working relationship, but I'd tackle that when I came to that bridge.

I was also thinking I might not tell him I knew he was gay all these years. I want him to tell me himself. I want to see his responses - or reaction - when I become Leroy Jethro Gibbs, the nice guy. Oh, I can be one when the circumstances are right. I wasn't born an ornery bastard despite what most people think.

Burley took us to a restaurant he frequented and I was relieved to see it was a homely-looking one. No starched, white tablecloths and snooty maitre'ds. No tablecloths, in fact. Bare, worn, heavy wooden tables with the patina of age, and hardy stoneware crockery. A small ensemble was at one end of the restaurant playing old Italian favorites.

The food was delicious, as Burley had guaranteed, and I was enjoying myself as I hadn't in a long time. I felt happy and realized that having dinner with people I liked, socializing - meaning I joined in the conversation, not just listened and grunted - had a very uplifting effect on me. Not least, that the presence of Tony, who was chatting away easily with all three of us, made the whole difference. It was there, in that small cozy, candlelit restaurant, the redolence of home-grown herbs and the convivial atmosphere surrounding me, that I knew I could no longer deny myself; could no longer bear the distance between us - always those few feet separating us, whether it was between our two corners in the bullpen or the three feet of age-worn wood now. I needed Tony. I needed to touch him, hold him. I was going to have to close that gap.

Just then, the strains of a familiar song broke through my thoughts. "This isn't an Italian song," I said. The ensemble had been playing nothing but Italian songs so hearing ‘You Don't Have to Say You Love Me' struck me as odd.

"But it is Italian," Tony said. "The original version, that is."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "It is? Huh."

"Yes," Burley confirmed. "It's an old favorite, too. The full Italian title is Io Che Non Vivo Senza Te. Translated - ‘I can't live without you.'"

"So the lyrics are different in Italian?" I asked.

"Yup, they are," Burley replied. "but they retain essentially the same meaning - loving someone so much you can't live without him - or her.

"I only know the Dusty Springfield version. And the Matt Monro one," I said, making a mental note to check out what the Italian lyrics meant.
"Dusty heard the Italian version and the melody alone moved her to tears," Tony said. "Both English and Italian versions are among my favorite love songs of all time. Anyway, it was Dusty's friend, Vicky Wickham, who wrote the English lyrics with her friend. Springfield's recording of the English version shot to the top of the British charts and became a career record for her. The song was played at her funeral as a tribute to her -"

"You filling in for Ducky, DiNozzo?" I asked, referring to our elderly ME had a penchant for spouting bits of trivia on a vast range of subjects.

Tony laughed. "Nah, this is just me and my music. You're not the only one who enjoys the oldies."

"So, DiNozzo," Burley said. "Where are you off to for your vacation?"

"Just around the Amalfi Coast," Tony replied.

"Nice," Burley responded.

"Yeah, Gibbs," Tony said. "Director Vance mentioned you're on vacation too. Wanna join me? We can raise hell all the way down to Salerno and back. Come on. It'll be fun."

A whole week alone with Tony? Yeah, that could work. I know Tony's gay, I know he did respond to me sexually. And he's clearly not running away now. I figure I have enough to work with.

"Boss. You there?" Tony asked.

"Are you serious, DiNozzo?" I said, breaking out of my thoughts. "This is your vacation. And you want us to spend it together?"

"Well, yeah," Tony replied. "I'm on my own. No frat brothers. No friends. Just boring ol' me. It'll be like a family vacation. Or a bromance-cation."

"What the hell is a bromance cation?" I asked, saying the portmanteau as two separate words.

"Bro - brothers. Plus 'romance' and 'cation' - for vacation. A bromance-cation. Two men who have a special friendship and spend a lot of time together. In our case, going on vacation together."

"Sounds like a good idea to me. Gibbs," Vance slanted him a glance as he brought his wine to his lips.

"A bromance between Gibbs and DiNozzo?" Burley asked, chuckling and suddenly broke into Rodgers and Hart's 'Isn't it Romantic' but changing the lyrics to "Isn't it BRO-mantic."

Tony joined in and the two men sang the first stanza then the chorus acapella.

I've never met you, yet never doubt you
I can't forget you
I've thought you out, dear
I know your profile and I know the way you kiss
Just the thing I miss
On a night like this [Was Tony referring to that kiss?]

If dreams are made of imagination
I'm not afraid of my own creation
With all my heart my heart is here for you to take
Why should I quake
I'm not awake

Isn't it BROmantic? [Vance laughs out loud]

Music in the night, a dream that can be heard.
Isn't it BROmantic? Moving shadows write the oldest magic word. I hear the breezes playing in the
trees above While all the world is saying you were meant for love. Isn't it BROmantic?
Merely to be young on such a night as this?
Isn't it BROmantic?
Every note that's sung is like a lover's kiss.
Sweet symbols in the moonlight,
Do you mean that I will fall in love per chance?
Isn't it BROma-aance?

Vance was laughing so hard he nearly fell off his chair. I had never seen the director like this
before. And what the hell was Tony and Burley doing? Everyone was looking at us. The band
members, who had taken the usual fifteen minute break, returned just as Burley and Tony sang the
last line and the band finished off the song for them with a flourish of their own.

The whole restaurant burst out in applause.

I couldn't help but shake my head, smiling. "You two are nuts, you know that?" I asked.

Vance, wiping his eyes, said, "The whole place thinks the two of you are gay." He started laughing
again.

"Nah, not me," Burley said, but gave Tony a wink. He leaned in and whispered in Tony's ear, "So
that's how it is, huh? Good luck." He laughed softly as he settled back in his seat.

I glared at Vance. "I wouldn't be laughing so hard, Director. They probably think all four of us are
gay." That brought Vance's laughter to a halt.

me stay in his villa in Capri," he pronounced the island's name the Italian way - KAH-pree. "His
p.a.'s organized the use of a helicopter to fly me direct to the island and the use of his car and
driver. We'll go for leisurely drives along the Amalfi Coast. Stay a night or two in Positano..."

"Okay. Let's do it."

Surprise flashed across Tony's face then he grinned. "Cool!"

"Okay, bromancers," Vance said, standing up. "I'm off to bed."

"Come for a drink with Tony and me?" Burley asked me.

I shook my head. Best that I end the evening on a good note. "Thanks, but I'm hitting the sack,
too." I turned to Tony. "What time are you planning to leave?"

"Luigi, the driver, is picking me up at nine. I can meet you at the hotel restaurant at seven-thirty
for breakfast."

"Okay." I nodded then turned to Burley. "Good to see you, always, Stan." We shook hands and the
group split up after settling the bill which Vance generously covered.
______END OF GIBBS' POV______

TBC
Next morning, before I went down to meet Gibbs, I sent off a text to Crispin who was already in LA:

Me: *He's agreed to tag along to Capri. It's a BROMANCE, dude.*

Since it was only eleven-thirty pm in LA, early for La La Land, I wasn't surprised to get my cousin's reply less than a minute later.

Crispin: *Well done, Cuz! Let the games begin.*

*Games?* This wasn't a game, I muttered, as I headed down to the hotel restaurant.

I had called Crispin's p.a., Lizzie, last night after dinner to let her know that I would be bringing a friend with me and she told me she would inform the villa's housekeeper.

Now, as I rode the elevator down, I couldn't help the small flutter of apprehension as to what awaited me. To my relief, Gibbs greeted me with a smile when I spotted him in the hotel restaurant. I mean *greeted* me. ‘Good morning, Tony’, not ‘DiNozzo’ but ‘Tony’ and not ‘gear up, dead Marine!’ but an honest-to-goodness ‘Good Morning’. I wanted to keep this Gibbs.

“Morning, boss.” I pulled out my chair and told the waiter I wanted coffee and the American breakfast.

”You're looking very...refreshed,” Gibbs said, and I swear there was a softening of his eyes as he rested his gaze on me.

He was in his usual white Hanes t-shirt and worn jeans. A lightweight jacket was over the back of his chair and he looked good enough to eat. It may be his usual off-work attire but there was something different today. It wasn't just his facial expression - which was much more relaxed than normal - his entire body language was different. This was a relaxed Gibbs; a Gibbs-on-holiday I'd not encountered before.

“You sleep alright?” he asked.

“I slept,” I replied. “But not too comfortably. I could feel the mattress springs.”

“Couldn't be worse than me,” Gibbs said. “What does ‘fottimi’ mean?”

“Uh, um...why?”
“That's all I kept hearing being yelled from next door. Had to call the front desk to tell the occupants to turn their volume down. Well? What does it mean?”

“It's an earthy way of saying 'make love to me',” I replied.

Gibbs looked at me, slightly puzzled then his frown cleared. “Oh.” He paused then added, “You mean 'fuck me'.”

“O  o  o

“It'll be pretty quiet in Crispin's villa, boss,” I said, as the waiter poured me a cup of coffee. I was still slightly nervous that the cantankerous Gibbs I'm familiar with would return a little sooner than I was ready for. I sighed inwardly. What I'd give to have a relaxed, carefree Leroy Jethro Gibbs for the duration of our vacation.

“Good,” Gibbs responded, then asked. “So, what is a bromance? Really.”

“It's um, an intimate relationship,” I replied. “A special bond between two men. Two straight men. Purely platonic. George Clooney and Brad Pitt, for example. Or Chris Pine and Zachary Pinto, except Pinto's gay.”

“I don't even know who they are,” Gibbs said. “I know Clooney and Pitt but not the other two.”

“Chris Pine and Zachary Pinto star in the new Star Trek movies. You have watched the old tv series, haven't you?”

Gibbs nodded. “Some.”

I ate a slice of crispy bacon, talking as I chewed. “Pine plays Captain Kirk and Pinto's Mr Spock. Their on-screen relationship is a bromance on its own. Pine's and Pinto's real-life bromance developed during and after the filming of the movie.”

“And one of them is gay?”

“Yeah. Pinto.”

“And the other guy has a bromance with him?” Gibbs asked, perplexed. “Wouldn't that send the wrong signals?”

“Not if they made things clear at the start,” I replied, keeping my tone light, as if we were, indeed, discussing nothing more than a couple of Hollywood actors. “And provided Pine wasn't a homophobe. Which he obviously isn't. Hard to be that in the movie business because you never know when your next role's going to involve a gay scene these days.” I dug through my breakfast, eating quickly then called for a coffee refill.

“So what do guys having a bromance do?” Gibbs asked, switching back to the subject.

I cleared my throat. I can do this. Hell, Gibbs was doing it. For reasons I haven't figured out yet, Gibbs was not confronting the elephant in the room head-on, which was more his style. Instead, he was acting as if it never happened. “They, um, go on trips like we're about to do, and agree they are going to have a great time,” I replied.
“You think so?” Gibbs asked. “You think we could actually enjoy ourselves?”

“Well, I’ve worked under you for over a dozen years. Some parts haven’t been fun - for any of us - but I have liked working with you, boss. Yeah, boss. Let’s not forget that. We’ll go trolling the ristoranti and osterie. We’ll enjoy the sights, drink wine and hang out, share food. You want that piece of bacon?”

Gibbs gave it to me. “What’s the difference between that and what you do with your frat brothers?”

“Bromance is between two guys only. Like being engaged or married to each other.”

“But no sex?”

“If there is, the ‘b’ in bromance gets dropped and it’s a whole new ballgame.”

The waiter approached them. “Signor DiNozzo?”

“That’ll be me,” I said, pointing to myself.

“Ahh, for you, Signor DiNozzo.”

I took the business card from the waiter’s tray. “Grazie.” I looked at the name on the card.

“Driver’s here. We’re to call him when we’re ready to leave.”

“Let’s go, then.” Gibbs stood. “What room are you in?”

“322. I’ll meet you down in the lobby in...half an hour?” I rubbed my belly. “Need to unload some baggage.”

Gibbs smirked and walked ahead. “I’ll check out first and have the valet tell the driver we’ll leave about -” he checked his watch. “Nine, as planned. Give me the card.”

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When I came down twenty minutes later, my luggage was already in the boot and we left for the airport. Gibbs was quiet throughout the ride but he looked relaxed so my apprehension eased somewhat. It didn’t take long to get us on the helicopter which Lizzie had leased for us and soon we were skimming over the Bay of Naples.

“Nice of your cousin to arrange this helo trip,” Gibbs said a few minutes later - the only thing he did say from the time we left the hotel. Was I unrealistic to hope for a chattier Gibbs? Perhaps. “I’d have thought you’d prefer to drive down the coast,” he added.

“I was planning to,” I said, happy to have any conversation. “But the A3 from Naples is mostly inland and through two tunnels. The state of the motorway isn’t what we’re used to, either. It doesn’t get scenic until we’re almost in Sorrento, so Lizzie suggested we leave the driving till we reach Capri. Actually, not even on Capri because most of the places in town aren’t accessible to vehicular traffic. We’ll drive only when we’re touring the Amalfi Coast.”

Gibbs nodded. “Works for me.”

I gave Gibbs a sidelong smile. “Of course, the real reason is that I didn’t think we’d survive the trip
if you decided to drive. You plus Italian drivers...yikes.” I gave Gibbs a grin and was ecstatic to get one back.

Things were looking up.

END OF TONY’S POV

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Thursday, Day 1 of Bromancecation,

Villa de Scognamiglio,

Capri, Italy

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GIBBS' POV

I had been rather quiet after we left the hotel because I was planning the best way to handle the situation. In the end, I decided I'd do it Tony's way. That is, act as if nothing had happened last Saturday and Mexico never happened. I'd already gone and done what I'd promised myself I'd never do - not once but twice - so I figure it's only fair to let Tony take the lead from hereon. That he still wanted to be anywhere near me is already more than I expected after having refused my calls and ignored my text messages.

The helo flight took twenty minutes and it was a great way to approach the island. Not only could I see the well-known rocks in every travel poster of Capri, I got glimpses of the equally-famous towns nestled between the slopes of the hills along the Amalfi Coast.

On Capri, Crispin's villa sits on the slopes of Mount Solaro, overlooking the Marina Piccola. The helicopter had set us down on the villa’s helipad and someone was already there waiting for us in a six-seater golf buggy.

“Buongiorno!” The mustachioed man grinned as he came up to us. “Signor Gibbs and Signor DiNozzo. I am Gianni. Your chauffeur. You are Signor DiNozzo?” he asked Tony.

“Yes, I am” Tony responded.

“Welcome to Capri.” He extended his hand, and did likewise with me.

“I thought Luigi was going to be our driver,” I said, as I shook Gianni’s hand.
“No, no. Luigi belongs to Naples office,” Gianni corrected me. “I look after you here in Capri. Amalfi, too. You need to go anywhere, tell me.” Turning back to Tony, he said, “Signor Paddington uses the car only on the mainland. I drive the guests because most are not familiar with Italian roads and traffic, and here, on Capri - not advisable for non-residents to drive.”

We reached the villa after the short buggy ride and Gianni deposited us at the front porch where a woman stood smiling.

“My wife, Carmela,” Gianni said. “She is the housekeeper and cook. Best Italian food on the island. You will see.” He beamed at us.

He took out our luggage as Carmela greeted us.

“He-ey...” Tony drew out the word. “That's a Maserati Grancarbio.” he said, rushing over to the car he'd just spied. “Sweet.”

If there's one thing I love about Tony, it's his unabashed enthusiasm for anything he loves. I hope, one day, to see and experience that enthusiasm over me. Today, however, that childlike glee and excitement was all for the red sports convertible parked a few feet away.

Gianni explained that he would be at our disposal throughout our stay unless we chose to take public transport, something still possible as the high season wasn't really until July so the island was still relatively uncrowded.

“I drive you wherever you want to go,” Gianni said. “I will drop you and pick you up when you are ready. Here, I give you my card.” He handed one to Tony and one to me. “Signorina Lizzie already gave me your mobile number,” he added. “But this is extra phone with local sim card.” He passed it to Tony. “Use that for the local calls, or you just send me SMS - text message - on WhatsApp. I will reply. Carmela will cook for you if you do not wish to go out for meals because it is very expensive in Capri. Because of Harrison Ford, you know. And Naomi Campbell, Barbra Streisand, too, and in the old days, Onassis and Jackie Kennedy. Expensive and not as good as Carmela's cooking.”

That sounded like a good idea to us since Tony had told me that it was ridiculously expensive on the island and knew I would not pay those kind of prices.

The villa was amazing, of course. Four stories built over varying levels, each possessing its own magnificent view of the island. The lowest level was for partying, according Carmela, who led us through the main living areas. There were seven suites and three more guestrooms, she said. When Crispin was there - which was usually for two months of the year, Carmela would stay in the servants' quarters down the lane off the driveway.

“This is really nice, Tony,” I said, looking about me as we entered the suite's sitting room with its
balcony overlooking the gardens and the sea below.

“It is,” Tony agreed.

Carmela showed us the adjoining bedroom with its en-suite then left us to unpack and freshen up. There was only one bedroom. And one huge bed. Tony didn't remark on it and I decided I'd ignore it, too.

There was a knock on the door a few minutes later and I opened it.

“Limoncello.” Carmela announced cheerily. “Made from our own lemons. Also soda and ice because some of our guests want something to quench the thirst. Limoncello always lighten the mood. The heart.” Carmela beamed at them. “Good for amore.”

I looked at Tony who shrugged. Did she think we were lovers? When Carmela left, Tony picked up the tray. “C'mon. Let's drink this out on the balcony.”

The balcony was huge. More a semi-covered patio. Fat salmon-pink columns with their sheen of patina were covered with grapevines full of young clusters of new grapes. Give it a couple of months, I thought, and the vines would be heavy with ripened fruit.

“Hey, those are famous,” I said, looking at the rocky formation jutting out of the sea.

“The Faraglioni Rocks,” Tony said. “No photo gallery of Capri is complete without a pic of these rocks. Ditto the Blue Grotto.”

“Sit down with me, Tony.” I gestured to the chair beside me. I took a sniff at the Limoncello in the shot glass, sipped it and poured it into one of the two glasses of soda, adding some ice from the mini ice-bucket that accompanied the drinks. “Very nice but a little too strong for this time of the day.”

Tony did the same since it was how he liked his Limoncello, he said.

We talked about this and that, what sights we should see, which restaurants we should try.

Finally, impossible as it may be, Tony ran out of things to talk about. I, for once, had a lot I wanted to talk about.

“Tony -” I began, only to be cut off by Tony backing away from me, hands stretched wide, a huge smile splitting his face.

“Look at this, Gibbs! Isn't this just fabulous?” Tony whirled around to face the villa. “Do you know this villa was built based on one of the ancient villas belonging to a rich senator during the reign of Tiberius?”

I bowed my head, frustrated at Tony's avoidance of the issue. Then again, I did say I'd let him take the lead. Wasn't that what a relationship was - compromising now and then?

“Okay, Tony,” I said softly. “You got point on this one.”

And Tony, being Tony, reacted as Tony would.

“No, you're right. Let's get this out of the way. Coin toss?”

I gave my head a small shake. “Go ahead if you prefer.”
“No, you go first. I want to know what you were thinking when you - you, you know...” He stopped and sucked in a breath.

“Fucked you like a senseless brute?” I muttered, ashamed just thinking about it.

“Ye-eah.”

“Because I wasn’t thinking!” I snapped.

“That’s not answering the question.”

I expelled a breath. “I’m sorry, Tony. Before I say anything else, I need to say this again - I’m sorry for doing what I did. I’m not going to give excuses like I was drunk -”

“Not even shit-faced drunk?”

“About that.” I sighed again. “Yes, I was drunk. Shit-faced drunk, but being drunk didn't cause me to want to have sex with you...and that's what you want to know about, I guess.”

“You guess right.”

“Tony, I realize this is a career-ender, even though I'm eligible for early retirement now. I screwed up - literally and figuratively - and I'll bear the consequences. Whatever they are.”

Tony frowned, mulling over what I’d just said. “You're right about the drunk bit but as far as I know, getting shitfaced drunk doesn't turn you gay. So again, I ask - what was Saturday night about?”

I steeled myself and plunged ahead. “I'm gay, Tony. Always been. Nobody...nothing turned me gay.” From Tony's expression, it was easy to tell this was news to him. “I only knew after I married my first wife and we had Kelly. We were happy. Very. It never occurred to me to question our sex life. I was too focused on the Corps and staying alive to think much about the quality of my sex life with Shannon. Maybe you don't understand that but -”

“I know,” Tony said. “A lot of gay men stay married for decades and have grown-up children before they decide enough's enough.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And things are very different now than they were back when I was married.”

“Four times.”

“Yes, Tony. Four times.” I rolled my eyes at him, a spark of relief as I caught his half-smile. “I thought it was just natural curiosity...” I trailed off, my eyes on the Rocks in the distance, watching a speedboat carrying the tourists circling the structures. “I'd find myself looking at my Marine buddies' bodies and finding myself aroused. Tamped that down fast enough and sheer discipline kept me in line.”

“Three more after Shannon,” Tony prompted.

“Yup. Three more mistakes. All my fault. Not theirs. They were good women, too. They suspected - after we divorced - that it really was a case of “it's-me-not-you” but they never outed me.”

“How did you know they even suspected?”

“I still talked to them once in a while. It came up in one of the conversations. With all of them except Diane. She's never brought it up, so maybe she never thought of that as the reason why our
marriage broke up.”

“And now? Where are you and your being gay?”

I turned and leaned back against the wrought-iron railing. “Now, I’ve finally committed the ultimate FUBAR. For a dozen years I’d held back from letting my attraction for you show. Did you suspect? At any time?”

Tony looked me square in the eye. “No, Gibbs. I didn't suspect. Hoped, yes, but nothing else.”

“Hoped,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“So...last Saturday...”

“Wasn’t just about you.”

“You wanted it?”

“Yes.”

“Then why...”

“I was messed-up myself, okay? On one hand I thought you fucked me only because you were too drunk to know what you were doing then I’d tell myself I know that's ridiculous. I just went round and round until, in the end, it was easier to pretend nothing happened.” He paused then muttered, “Shoulda known better.”

“So why am I here with you? On your vacation?” I asked. “Is it because Vance ordered you to invite me?”

Tony shook his head. “I want you here. Vance has nothing to do with it except to help things along unknowingly.”

“And Mexico? Are you okay with that?” I asked, finding it hard to breathe. “I hope so because if my actions have upended things for you, yours are no less confusing.”

Tony’s eyes held mine for several moments before he said, “Mexico’s no different from Saturday night. I wanted it as much in Mexico as I did in your bed.”

My breath hitched. My throat seized up. It was with difficulty that I spoke again. “So we got ourselves a bromance?”

“Umm...we could look at removing the ‘b’. If you want, that is.”

I swallowed. Hard.

“No.” Tony held up a hand before I could reply. “No, forget I said that. I know Rule 12 - ‘never date a co-worker’? ‘Fucking’ would be considerably worse than ‘dating’.”

“I could always put in for early retirement.” I said, not telling him I’d already done that and Vance had rejected it.

Tony’s eyes went wide and he laughed. “Leave NCIS? Just for a fuck?”
“You're not just a fuck, Tony.”

“Thanks, but still...”

“Let's see how this plays out first,” I suggested. “We have a week together. No interruptions. Let's see if we can do this bromance thing but...” I hesitated. “Without the ‘b’ if you like.”

I saw Tony suck in a breath. He looked at me for a moment then said, “Yeah, I'd like.”

I smiled. A big one, splitting my face and I know Tony was struck by the realization that it wasn't often I smiled like that. Not at him, anyway.

END OF GIBBS’ POV

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TONY’S POV

I was not just a fuck. He actually said that. I couldn't help the silly grin spreading on my face. I was in heaven. A person doesn't know what heaven feels like until he's had one of Gibbs' ‘happy smiles' directed at him. I've been told my smile lights up the whole room. Well, those people haven't caught one of Gibbs' rare ones. He has that way of smiling that makes my chest tighten, that makes me immediately think about how much I love him.

And now...I can hardly believe it, but I'm standing on the precipice of my life. I need to take the plunge but truth is, I'm scared. What's waiting for me when I land, is so, so huge I need a bit of time to get my senses ready.

But I will be ready. After I eat something.

Carmela had come looking for us to ask if we were going out or wanted her to prepare a light lunch.

“We'll go out, thanks,” I told Carmela and turned to Gibbs. “Feeling adventurous?” I asked him. “Most roads are impassable to cars so I'm thinking we ask Gianni to hire us a couple of scooters and we go find ourselves some chow.”

“Scooters?” Gibbs frowned.

“Yes. Scooters. Vespa-aaa! La Dolce Vita-ahh! Roman Holiday! The Italian Job. You know, the number of movies that feature these nifty, sexy machines...Hey! Gianni!”
“Sì, Signor DiNozzo.” Gianni came up to us, grinning happily. “What can I do for you?”

“Take us to a scooter rental and give us a road map,” I said. “Gibbs and I are going sightseeing.”

“Sì. Scooters we have. No need to rent. Come, follow me.”

Gianni led us to a garage where, inside, sat what must be two dozen scooters of all colors and models.

“Choose one you like,” Gianni said. “All in excellent condition. Signor Crispin brings many guests throughout the year. The scooters are used all the time and we replace regularly. I will also show you the ones used in the movies. You want to see?”


“Yes. In here.” Gianni led us down a passage and to an elevator where he entered a code to activate it before punching a second set of numbers inside the elevator.

“This leads down to the dungeons,” I told Gibbs.

“Yes, how did you know?” Gianni asked.

“Uh, I was kidding. You mean we are? Going to the dungeons? How about just a regular trattoria? I'm hungry.”

“You don't want to see the movie scooters?”

“Scooters, yes. Dungeons, not so much.”

“Ah. Not dungeons anymore. All converted to special garage for storing Signor Crispin's collection.”

The elevator let us out into a large, air-conditioned room where several vehicles were displayed. I was gobsmacked.


“Oh my Gawd...Gibbs!” I could hardly contain my excitement. “This is a 1951 Piaggio Vespa 125, the one on the Roman Holiday poster!” I whirled round to Gianni. “This is the actual one? The original?”

“Sì.”

I rushed to a raised dais where three little cars were displayed. “Gibbs! Gibbs! Gibbs!”

“Yeah, Abby.” Gibbs chuckled as he followed me. “I know these,” he said.

“You do?” I was surprised, to say the least.

“Sure,’ Gibbs replied. “From The Italian Job.”

“Wow. The Mk1 Austin Mini Cooper S.” I breathed out in awe. I swallowed, wanting to touch them but not sure if I was allowed to. “How did Cris get hold of them?”

“Nobody cared about them after the movie,” Gianni said. “Sixteen Coopers were used for filming, and after the movie was completed, the remaining six cars were locked up and shipped to the UK
by the movie company, Paramount, I think. They did not send anyone to collect. Even the production company did not take them back. Nobody really knows what happened to them but Signor Crispin, he bought these a few years ago. You ask him.”

“I definitely will,” I vowed. I strolled through the rooms, incredulous that this used to be a series of dungeons under the villa. And suddenly, there it was. I rushed towards it, pulling a bemused Gibbs along. “Oh-my-freakin-God! Look at this, Gibbs! Its- I can't believe - is it?” I ran to the front of the vehicle to check the number plate. “Look, Gibbs. This is gold. Pure gold.” I fingered the letters on the license plate - GOLDFINGER. “This is an Aston Martin DB5, Gibbs! It's in Goldfinger, the third Bond film.”

“You like KITT?” Gianni asked coming up to me.

“No-o. You don't.” I couldn't believe that. “KITT? The Knight Rider?”

“Si. The Knight Rider. David Hasselhoff. Come.”

“I'm going to wet myself, boss,” I said to Gibbs.

KITT was kept in a special glass enclosure which was revealed when Gianni pressed a button and the wall parted. I was dumbfounded.

“Is this the real KITT?” I asked, awed. “With all the computer gadgetry?”

“It is an original but specially outfitted with computer simulation. And KITT's voice.” Gianni said. “Very, very expensive. The glass enclosure preserves everything. The air is very dry. Four times a year, the technicians fly in to test the electronics. You can try it if you like, but not today. Tomorrow.”

“No shit. I can?” I was hopping with excitement.

“Yes. Tomorrow morning the technicians arrive. I will tell them you want to test KITT. I will let you know what time after I talk to them.”

To Gibbs' relief, I was ready to go after one more look at KITT.

END OF TONY'S POV

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TBC
Chapter 18

Chapter 18

GIBBS’ POV

There aren’t many roads on Capri accessible by cars. Most are narrow, winding streets and decidedly car-unfriendly. The high season was just starting and while Capri was not packed like sardines in a tin as it would be in July and August, it was still busy with most food and beverage establishments filled to capacity.

Armed with a road map, Tony and I negotiated the narrow streets of the island, looking for a restaurant that appealed to us.

We decided on a small, unpretentious place run by two brothers. Accessible only by scooters or walking, it was located near the foot of the cliffs, with a clear view of Il Faraglioni.

We negotiated our way around hairpin bends and other riders, waving to fellow tourists, stopping now and then to check our map.

When, at last, we arrived at our destination, we were warmly greeted by Mario, one of the two brothers. Luca, Mario said, was overseeing today’s special – roasted black pig served with vegetables from their organic farm.

Awhile later, over a bottle of Capri Bianco and overlooking the rocky mountain slopes that dropped steeply off into the blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea, Tony and I commenced a new journey.

“How was the Taskforce meeting?” Tony asked, as we drank the well-chilled white wine.

“Telling,” I replied. “The terrorists aren’t on vacation, that’s for sure. What about you? How was London?”

“London was hot,” Tony complained. “It was good catching up with my cousin. We’re close but work’s always prevented us from seeing each other more often. We would have met up two years ago at Uncle Clive’s funeral but I never made it because of the airport strike. By the time I got a rescheduled flight, I’d missed the service and the case involving E J Barrett had just come in.”

“I remember that,” I said. After a pause, I said, “I thought you were attracted to her.”

“I know,” Tony said. “I mean I knew that’s what you thought. You were wrong – as you are, sometimes.” He winked at me, slipping a small ball of mozzarella and a slice of ripe Roma tomato in his mouth. “Mmm…Insalata Caprese. My favorite.”

“You said you were here to check out the property your uncle left you.”

“Yeah, in Positano. Gianni ferried the car to Salerno early this morning and will meet us at the port
when we catch the ferry this evening.” We’d agreed that having Gianni chauffeur us would be
more practical as it would allow us to enjoy the scenery without worrying about driving over the
cliff. “What do you want to eat?” Tony asked, scanning the menu. How about the roasted black pig?”

“It’s meat. I’ll eat it.”

“You wouldn’t say that if we were in Hong Kong.”

I snorted. “I’m a Marine. I’ll eat anything.” I paused, then added, “If I have to…but a pig is a pig…
is pork. I’ll go with that.”

The pig arrived and conversation was diverted to the food, to the island, the people. The pig was
roasted to succulent perfection and redolent with the island herbs. Tony entertained me with
anecdotes about Capri’s history and its colorful residents and celebrity visitors from the emperor
Tiberius to Jessica Alba, an actress I’d vaguely heard of.

Finally, when dessert and coffee was served, I tackled the subject of Saturday’s consequences. I
knew I wouldn’t be able to bear it if Tony left because of what I did, even though I reminded
myself I was planning to turn in my own resignation. That was what love did to you – fucked up
logic and reason.

“Can we talk about Saturday now?” I asked, after our plates were cleared and our espressos were
served.

“I thought we already did that.”

“I’m not done,” I said. “I’m sure you have questions.”

“Okay. How about where do we go from here?”

“How about we give that some time?” I replied. “I’ve just come out to you. I never thought I’d do
that. With anyone.”

“Unlike me, huh? I’ve always wanted to come out. But those years as a cop? Hard to shake.”

“Believe me, it’s no cake walk in the Marines.”

“Think you could come out? At work?” Tony asked.

“No. I’m not ready for that.”

“Okay. I understand,” Tony said. “I’m not out either.”

“So Christie was just a smokescreen?” I asked.

“Yes. She’s a close friend whom I’ve known since Ohio State.”

“And Callen?”

Tony’s pause had me looking at him sharply. “Just a colleague across the other side of the
continent.”

“Maybe, but I’d say he’s hoping for more,” I said.

Tony looked surprised. “What makes you think so? It’s not like we meet up when we’re on
vacation.”

“I saw the way he looked at you at the calendar shoot. Saw the way he was touching you.”

“Callen’s a great guy,” Tony said. “I guess there could have been something there but I wasn’t ready to come out whereas Callen never hid the fact he was gay.”

“Tony,” My tone was quiet. “Just so you know, I don’t regret sex with you. I’ve wanted you since I first met you back in Baltimore but…it wasn’t something I could handle. You didn’t…don’t hate it, do you? What I did?”

“No, I didn’t hate it,” Tony said quickly. “If I did, Mexico wouldn’t have happened. I’m just trying to understand how it happened, that’s all.”

“Now you know,” I said. “There’s one more thing – I’ve known you were gay since I met you at the Baltimore PD.” And proceeded to recount to him how Pete O’Donnell was instrumental in Tony joining NCIS.

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“You’ve known all along,” Tony said, after I finished.

“Yes. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have given in to…my attraction, no matter how drunk, and I’m sure I would have been able to keep my hands off you in Mexico.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony said.

“Is that a challenge?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“Just kidding. That’s…really good to know.” Tony said. “I’d hate to have to deal with the alternative. So why ask me about Christie?”

“I wanted to hear it from you. All I had was what O’Donnell told me twelve years ago. Things change. People, too. You could have decided to live like a straight guy.” I shrugged.

“Like you?”

I nodded. “Yup. And failed. Rather spectacularly, as you know. If that was your choice, I didn’t want to disrespect it. Not knowingly.”

Tony fell silent after that. I let him be, knowing he needed time to absorb everything.

Finally, he asked, “What do you want now?”

I searched his face as I chose my words. “To know how you feel about sex. With me. Really feel. I want…” I faltered.

“What? Tell me.”

“I want to know if you would, could, do that again. With me.”

Tony’s green eyes pinned me down. When he didn’t immediately answer, I thought I’d called it
wrong. I was going home and then I was going to throttle Tobias.

“Yes, Gibbs. I would. I will, if that’s what you want, too.” The words were so softly spoken I wasn’t sure if I heard right or was delirious.

“You do?” I asked. “You want to – to –”

“Have sex with you?”

“Yeah,” my heart was thudding in my chest.

“No. I don’t want to “have sex” with you, Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs,” Tony said. My heart sank. I was going to barf up the pig any minute now. “I want to have hot, wild, monkey sex with you,” Tony continued. “I want you to fuck me till I need to be carried out of the bedroom the next morning. I want you to make up for the twelve years you’ve been hiding this from me. You up for it?”

I grinned and called for the bill.

How did I ever last this many years without this?” I wondered, as my eyes roamed over Tony’s naked body.

We’d had a shower to wash the dust off themselves, battling the urge to start fucking right there in the shower. It was Tony who stopped me from going any further, to my embarrassment.

“Hey, Marine!” he barked. Yes, barked at me. “Get that Marine discipline into full gear or it’ll be over before we even get out of the shower.”

I chuckled. “Yes sir!” We washed ourselves, deliberately not touching each other any more than necessary. “Did you know I used to bend over your shoulder when you were showing me something on your computer because I just wanted to smell you?” I asked, burying my nose in the curve of Tony’s neck and shoulder. The spray of water rained down on our bodies and I reveled in the feel of Tony’s hands over my ass. He, too, obviously couldn’t wait much longer.

“Let’s get in the bedroom and on the bed before I fuck you right here,” I said.

Tony, seeing no reason to procrastinate over a good thing, hurriedly dried himself off and, before exiting the bathroom, checked the cabinets and drawers. He lucked out because, to my surprise, the top drawer under the bathroom counter yielded unopened boxes of condoms – unexpired – and several types of lubrication. Just what kind of parties does his cousin have here in his Roman villa? Grabbing a box of condoms and a tube of lube, he sprinted to the bed, took one look at my erection and reversed back to come back out with a different box of condoms.

“XL this time,” he said, grinning, waving the box at me. “Gibbs. You’re blushing.”

END OF GIBBS’ POV
TONY’S POV

“Can’t believe I’m here with you,” I whispered. “In bed.”

“You’ll believe it after I’m done,” Gibbs smirked. “Lie back down.”

He moved in-between my legs and then all he did was look at me with those piercing blue eyes of his.

“Ohhh…Tony,” He murmured.

“What?” I whispered, wishing he’d touch me. I’d suffered through those penetrating gazes for a dozen years, each time wishing it was conveying what I fantasized it meant. Now, at last, it was for real and I didn’t want to wait anymore.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” Gibbs asked.

“You’re not half bad yourself, boss,” I responded, but thinking ‘of all times to get chatty, boss.’

Gibbs kissed me at last.

All those years of longing and fantasizing was worth it as soon as I felt the warm, soft press of his lips against mine, as they parted and slanted over my mouth. I opened to welcome him in and our tongues tangled in a frantic, lust-filled dance.

I could not get enough of him and the urgent, pleading sounds escaping from me only fueled Gibbs’ desire until he, unable to wait, broke off our kiss and rasped, “Lube.” He grabbed the tube off the nightstand, then the condom. I watched him sheath himself, my mouth dry.

Then, he was inside me. My slicked-up hole had swallowed him greedily and he plunged in deep until he was seated so deeply in me I felt his balls pressed against me. I clasped him so tightly that my legs were a vise around him.

Gibbs unleashed his long-suppressed desire for me and for those precious minutes, made me feel as if he existed just to fuck me, to fill me, to ruin me for anyone else.

Thrust after thrust, he plundered my body. Mexico had nothing on Naples. My groans and frenzied begging reverberated around our bedroom as Gibbs responded to my pleas to be fucked. The feel of his huge cock plunging in and out of my ass held me in a spellbound thrall. I didn’t want this to end. I felt I’d die if I didn’t have Gibbs in me again, if I couldn’t wake up each morning with him next to me.

“Tony!” Gibbs’ cry was urgent. “Now, Tony.”
“With you, Gibbs.”

Afterwards, Gibbs stayed inside me, unwilling to leave even though his cock had softened.

“Let me stay inside you awhile more, Tony.”

It was, by far, the best sex I’d had ever had, even if it was plain ol’ missionary. I know I’d trade all my more inventive and kinky experiences for this one session with Gibbs.

There might not have been many words between us as yet, and there may never be; I may not know what tomorrow will bring, or what will happen once we both returned to DC but right now, right here, with Gibbs inside me, those concerns were a galaxy away.

END OF TONY’S POV

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GIBBS’ POV

I may be fifty already and by right, it ought to take me another hour before I recovered enough to go another round but no, Tony sure gives Viagra a run for its money. I was ready to go again fifteen minutes later, to both our surprise. The man is an aphrodisiac on two legs.


“Did I hurt you?” I asked, suddenly concerned.

“Nah, I’m good. Thought you’d be out for the count till tomorrow, that’s all.”

I harrumphed. “I’m not young but I’m not dead. And I’m ready if you are.”

“Is this what we’re gonna do the next five days?” Tony asked.

“You got something better?”

“Uh, no. Not really. Ten days of near non-stop fucking is my idea of a vacation.”
“Is that how you’ve spent every vacation?” I growled, not liking the thought, and uncomfortable with the sudden jolt of jealousy.

“Gibbs, I’ve only had one – one! – vacation since I joined NCIS so if I say ‘yes’, it’s not quite what you’d be led to think.” He tightened his arms around me. “I’ve only ever wanted you, Jethro.”

The sound of my name warmed me. I laughed softly as I kissed his chest, licking his nipples. Just holding him; absorbing his nearness. “We’ll do what you came to do – check out that house, do some sight-seeing, try out restaurants…just make sure you leave enough time for us to do…this.” And I shifted down, taking his cock into my mouth, suckling his cockhead then swallowing him as far as I could go without gagging. I don’t have much experience in blowing a guy but I’m a fast-learner.

As if he could read my thoughts, Tony asked, “Have you had a lot of lovers? Males ones, I mean.”

I released Tony’s cock but gave it another long lick before answering him.”No. Four wives didn’t leave me much time.”

“So…it was, what? Anonymous hook-ups? Fuck-buddy somewhere?”

“A few rushed handjobs in the Corps, couple of secretive blows…”

“That’s it? That was eons ago. What about when you joined NCIS? You must have had…the works. Y’know, penetration…whether as a top or bottom.”

I stilled. Talking about my sex life was not something I did, but I guess this has to be an exception. We’d let twelve years go by, holding on to our secrets. It was time to be open with each other, even if what we have is our only for ten days.

“There was a guy. A cop from another state. Met him while I was attending a seminar some years ago. It was just a one-time thing. Over the course of the 3-day seminar. That was it. We didn’t exchange numbers. First names only. Not even our real ones. Never met him again.” Before Tony could ask, I added, “I fucked him. Topped, as the term goes.” I drew in as deep breath and lifted my head to look at him. “There’s a lot about sex with a man I don’t know about. I’m sure there’s a lot I’d like to do or have done to me but I never really went out of my way to find out. Some things, I felt, were safer left alone since I was never intending to live as an openly-gay man.”

“Oka-ay,” Tony drew out the word. “So no ex-husbands.” He glanced down at me. “Just kidding.”

“No. No ex-lovers, husbands. No current fuck buddies. What about you, Tony? Any significant other I should know about?”

“I was in a relationship but we’re not together anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because, unlike you and I, Scott didn’t – doesn’t – like monogamy.” Tony expelled a breath. “It got tiresome after awhile, worrying what I might pick up from him even though he swore he never has unsafe sex. I’m glad I don’t have to have tests every three months.” He turned his head to look at me. “I just got my test results last week. I’m clean, in case you’re wondering.”

“Did you love him?”

“Scott? No. It was fun at the start. Scott’s full of energy and it was infectious. I looked forward to every weekend because there’d be friends over, lots of great food, not-so-great music, though, and
his place was never empty and silent.” Like mine.

“Like mine,” I said, not knowing I was echoing Tony’s own thoughts. “My house and I must be boring by comparison.”

“No,” Tony replied. “Believe me, you’re not.”

“What does he do?”

“Creative director of an ad agency. He was at the photo-shoot on Saturday.”

“There were a lot of people there that Saturday.”

“I guess. That’s what Scott’s house is like most weekends.”

“Is that what you like?” I can’t give you that.

“It is, if I liked the people. I don’t. See – if it was your house and on weekends you had the team over, even Fornell and Diane –”

“How do you know about Fornell and Diane?”

“Because we’ve seen them together a few times.”

“We? Who’s ‘we’?” I growled.

“McGee, Abby, Ziva…everyone.”

I was flabbergasted. Everyone knew but me? How the hell did that happen? I’m the one who always knows something before anyone. And here’s my best friend dating my ex-wife – his ex-wife, too – and everyone but me knew?

“As I was saying, if it was them in your house every weekend and I was living with you, I wouldn’t mind at all.”

The silence that followed was to be expected. It was as if I could read the ticker tape of Tony’s mind: Us. Living together. The team congregating at Gibbs’ house. Not happening.

“Make love to me, Tony. Please.” My whispered plea pulled Tony out of the silence. “Let’s just take it one day at a time. I’m not expecting promises of forever from you.” You don’t have to say you love me. “Just be here with me for a while. For ten days, is all I’m asking.”


As if he loved me. I kissed him back lovingly. Because I did. Love him, that is. With all my heart. For over a decade. I’d never loved anyone like I love him and never will. I need him with a yearning that scares me to death and that’s what I am right now as we kiss. Scared shitless.

I’ve never had that full, complete, joyous love in my life. Shannon was not a lover in the fullest sense of the word, much as I loved her. She, and every other woman, had been substitutes for an elusive love I never thought I’d ever have. Could it be I now had a chance for that kind of love? Could I be so lucky? “You don’t have to love me, Tony,” I said softly.

“Do you?” Tony asked. “Love me? I mean, I know you love me in a big brother kinda way and you’ve had my back for twelve years now.”
I laughed. “Tony, there was nothing brotherly about what we were just doing.”

“No, not unless you’re into incest and no, I know you’re not. You’re a conservative, no-frills, no-kink kinda guy.”

“You never know. I might be kinkier than you think.” I snuggled up closer. “I like hearing you call me ‘Jethro’.”

“Then Jethro it is for the next five days.”

“And more, if we can,” I said.

“I’d like that,” Tony said. “I know you said we’ll take it one day at a time, but boss – once I decide I want to talk, I want to talk. I can’t hold it back. Gives me a tummy ache.”


Tony sat up, back against the wall and I propped myself up on an elbow, a hand caressing his chest.

“First off, I just broke off with Scott Saturday night. There are several reasons why our relationship wasn’t working but one of them was coming out. He was pressuring me to come out and I was stalling. To me, it was okay for him because he’s in a gay-friendly industry whereas I’m a Fed. Things have changed a lot and gays can now marry here in DC but long-held biases don’t disappear just because there’s a law against discrimination.

“But I’m thinking my refusal to come out isn’t so much about being in a traditionally conservative work environment as it is about what you’d think of me.” He looked down at me to see my reaction but I remained silent. “See, I was afraid of your reaction if you were to find out I was gay. I valued my working relationship with you, I needed our friendship. I didn’t want to lose you. I don’t care if someone tells me it can’t be a real friendship if I had to hide my homosexuality from you. I’ll take what little I can get.”

I waited for him to get to the point. I know there’s one somewhere.

“But now, now that I know you’re gay, it’s different. Now I can empathize with Scott because I…” he paused.

“You what, Tony?” I asked softly.

“I don’t want to hide anymore but I know you’re not on that page yet.”

I sat up. “No, Tony. Can’t say that I am. Not saying I won’t get there. Just that right now I’m not.”

“I know, Gibbs. Jethro.”

“It’ll be difficult. You’re part of my team. My subordinate. It would be unprofessional and detrimental to your career.”

“I know.”

“I wish I could promise you more, Tony, but I can’t.”
END OF GIBBS’ POV

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TBC
TONY'S POV

We didn't pursue the subject anymore after that but made love one more time before taking a short respite.

Afterwards, we had Gianni drive us to the Piazzale Roma where we got out on foot and strolled through the narrow streets around the piazza. When I saw a pharmacy, I stocked up on condoms and lube.

Dinner was at a small, unpretentious restaurant which we stumbled upon as we explored some stairways in-between buildings, wondering where they led to. There were only half a dozen tables in what looked like someone's living room, but it overlooked the town so the view, while not spectacular, was even more charming because of the simple surroundings around our small table.

The food was, again, simple and hearty. It didn't look like designer-Italian and I was thankful because I wanted this vacation to be as perfect as possible for Gibbs. That meant no pretentious menus with artfully-designed food, no wines that cost a month's salary and definitely no snooty waiters.

Which meant Il Piccolo Romanza was ideal. It was family-run, the Dad was the chef and Mamma oversaw everything. There was only one waiter to take care of the six tables but Fabrizio, a nephew who was the pasticere, helped out.

"He likes you," Gibbs said, as we drank the house wine. It was BYO but they did offer a house red and white which was supplied by a local winery. We decided on a bottle of red to go with our pasta.

"Who?" I asked, even though I didn't have to. Fabrizio wasn't coy about his attraction to me but...

"If you mean Fabrizio then I'd say the boy's hoping for a little three-way play. He told me they only open on weekends and Mondays so he's free from Wed to Friday afternoon. Offered to show us the sights."

"I bet I know just what sights he means," Gibbs gave a snort. "He can't be older than eighteen or nineteen. You see me doing someone that young?"

"But if he were older? Would you be up for a menage?"

"Hell, no!" Gibbs snapped. "Sorry to disappoint if that's what you like but I believe in undivided attention. And I'm not sharing you."

"Ditto, Jeth. It's just you and me."
"What we doing tomorrow?"

"Apart from the hot monkey sex?"

"Yes." Gibbs laughed.

"I thought we'd head over to Positano for the day. Check out the property and do some sightseeing."

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**Day 2 of Bromancecation.**

**Friday**

After consulting Gianni, we decided on making Salerno our first stop and would work our way back up to Positano before catching the ferry from Sorrento back to Capri. It would mean we'd be spending practically the rest of our vacation days on the Amalfi Coast before returning to Capri but that was the whole point of coming here so neither of us minded.

"We're taking the Maserati?" Tony grinned, excitement lighting up his face.

"Si," Gianni said. "But I drive here. You can drive from Salerno to Sorrento. Just be careful in the towns and better you leave it at the hotel and take public transport or walk. Use the car only to travel between towns."

"Got it, Signor...what's your surname?" Tony asked.

"Caggiano."

"Got it, Signor Caggiano. The Maserati is only for getting from town to town. No problema."

Since the ferry to Salerno left in the afternoon, we spent the day in the villa. For once, I was happy to just roam around the property, exploring its rooms and gardens and taking up Gianni's offer to try out KITT. Gibbs opted to read a book beside the pool, leaving me to indulge in my love of celebrity vehicles and all things associated with movies.

When it was approaching lunchtime and my stomach sounded the alarm, I thanked Gianni and told him I'd see later him when he took us to the ferry terminal. Finding Gibbs - he'd dozed off, book open on his chest - I woke him and we went in search of Carmela.

"The villa is very beautiful," Carmela said as we asked her for ideas where to go for lunch. "There is beautiful views from every place and you see the sea or the Marina Piccola. Lemon trees everywhere, they cover the walkways and wonderful aroma. So, I think why not I make you picnic basket and you eat in the gardens?"

I looked at Gibbs who smiled at Carmela, saying, "That is a great idea, Carmela. We'll do that."

A few minutes later, picnic basket in hand, the box of condoms and lube I had discreetly added to Carmela's culinary provisions, Gibbs and I followed one of the paths and found ourselves in what
must be the prettiest spot on Capri. I honestly didn't see the need to go anywhere else. Bougainvilleas spilled over the terrace walls like brilliantly-colored silk blooms and over several levels down to the sea that was a deep blue. Wooden benches and tables could be found in appropriate spots to rest and enjoy the vista so we picked one and settled down to lunch.

"You ever had sex outdoors?" I asked as I plucked a lemon off a branch to squeeze over our roast chicken.

"Nope," Gibbs replied, opening the bottle of wine. "Does a handjob count?"

"Yes." I grinned. "But not if it's in an alley at the back of a bar. It's got to be outside an urban area. Like a sunny beach on a tropical island paradise."

"Have you?" Gibbs asked. "Had outdoor sex that's not in a back alley?"

"Sunny," I started counting off my fingers. "One. Beach, that's two. Tropical, three, and island, four."

"I got the tropical," Gibbs said. "One out of four isn't bad - Panama. Closing days of Operation Just Cause."

"You were in Panama?"

"Yup. 1990. We were out somewhere in the jungle. There had been reports of firing so we were scouting the area. I'd finished my duty for the night. He was a year younger than me. We went out to take a piss and...next thing I knew, he was on his knees in front of my cock."

"You never hooked up after you got back?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Never occurred to me."

An hour later, having depleted the contents of the picnic basket, I suggested we go for a walk down to the path to the shore. The 'path' was more a winding series of steps that led from the villa to the edge of the slopes where the land fell sharply to the water. Going down looked strenuous enough, never mind having to climb back up. "On second thoughts how about we do the siesta thing," I asked. "Everyone else is. We can move to that covered walkway. I saw a couple of daybeds there."

"What time do have to leave for the ferry terminal?"

"Ferry leaves at four, so...three thirty? Enough time for a short nap."

"I wasn't thinking about napping," Gibbs said with what I swear was a twinkle in his eye.

"Nap? Siesta? What was I thinking. How could I even think of doing anything other than having you inside me?" I murmured sleepily, utterly sated after an hour of rather rigorous fucking. Gibbs' eyes had gone wide earlier when he saw what I took out from the picnic basket.

"Carmela packed condoms and lube?" he asked, the thought having just occurred to him.

I laughed. "No. I slipped them in when she wasn't looking." I waited a beat then asked, "Does it...is
I asked, needing the assurance so badly. My confidence had been shaken somewhat by Scott's need to go outside of our relationship for his sexual kicks. I wasn't secure enough in myself to live with our differences, to let him pursue his activities wherever and with whomever while I remained content with one lover.

I now had the man I'd wanted all my adult life but what if he got bored with me, too? What if sex with me has turned out to be an anti-climax after wondering about it all these years?

"Tony," Gibbs said my name as if in a prayer. "I'm not much of a talker but you make me wish I were one of those romantic poets."

"Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me," I quoted.

"What poem is that?"

"From the Bible. Song of Songs 6:5, believed to be written by King Solomon, the greatest lovers of all time. The dude had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines!"

Gibbs harrumphed and snuggled up closer to me. The day bed we were on was comfortable with throw cushions of various sizes. The afternoon breeze carried the fragrance of the lemon trees that formed an arbor over us. "Tony, just one of you keeps me busy and satisfied. Don't need any other, much less a thousand."

"Jethro, you can keep your blues on me all day, every day, for the rest of my life."

"Rest of your life, huh?"

"Yep."

Gibbs sighed heavily.

"Why the big sigh? You don't believe me?"

"Don't want to tie you down, more like it." Gibbs sat up. "I'm more than fifteen years older than you, Tony. I'm happy enough to have you now. Not asking for love or a lifetime commitment."

"I am just a quick fuck, then." I was joking, of course. Or, perhaps not.

Gibbs laughed. "I'd need a whole lifetime with you, Tony, and it still wouldn't be enough." He kissed me then raked my face over with that penetrating gaze of his. "I'm just saying I'm not making any demands of you. What you're giving me here. Now. It's more than I expected to have."

Gibbs may not be demanding as far as our new and uncertain relationship was concerned, but he sure as hell demanded a lot from my body. For a man in his fifties he's got a lot of stamina and a cock that stretches me to my limits, in every sense the phrase.

"If there was one thing I learnt today," I told Gibbs as we made our way back to the villa, "It's that every gay man has to experience sex in Amalfi amidst the lemon trees. There's something magical about the scent of lemons mixed with semen and cock. Don't leave Capri without sniffing a fresh lemon with fresh ass."

told him that.

He shook his head, still chuckling away. "And I thought I was the unromantic one. That wasn't exactly poetry, what you just said.

END OF TONY’S POV

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GIBBS’ POV

When we arrived in Salerno, Gianni was waiting at the port with the car as arranged. We were only staying the night and would drive over to Amalfi after breakfast so instead of checking into a hotel, we accepted Gianni's offer to stay at his nephew's house.

The room Nico, the nephew, led us to was spacious, with twin beds. It was actually his parents' room but they were away visiting relatives in Brindisi, on the eastern coast.

"There is a very good trattoria nearby. Walking distance," Gianni told us. "Makes good squid ink pasta."

"Squid ink?" I glanced at Tony. "Does it look like what I think it does?" I like Italian food but my experience of it had gone no further than lasagna, pizza and pasta - usually with sauce out of a bottle.

"Yes, it does," Tony grinned. "And you haven't lived until you've had linguine al nero di seppia. Trust me, Jethro. You'll love it."

"Okay." And that was that. I realized, with a bit of amusement mixed with a little apprehension, that I did trust Tony. Trusted him on non-critical matters to life-and-death issues throughout our twelve years together. I was now entrusting him not just with my stomach but with my heart.

I wondered if he knew how terrified I was under my usual taciturn exterior.

The restaurant was as excellent as Gianni had said it would be. We had a plate of antipasto, porcini soup for me and a beef carpaccio for Tony then shared a squid ink linguine (Tony insisted) and a Risotto ai Fruitti di Mare. The bottle of red wine was drinkable but undistinctive according to Tony but I was okay with it. You could have given me vinegar tonight and I'd be happy with it.
I could not get enough of him. My lover. A man. A man who'd worked under me for a dozen years or so. There was still so much of Tony I'd yet to discover and Tony, to my surprise, knew me far better than I thought he would.

Which, of course, made me wonder why he couldn't face me that morning after we'd had sex, but I didn't want to press him too much over that. I'd have to accept that it was a knee-jerk reaction. Once I told him how I felt about him, really felt, that is, Tony was happy to drop the subject and enjoy the vacation.

There was only thing that we didn't see eye to eye with - Tony wanted us to come out after we returned to DC. I didn't.

"We're already going out to dinner together," I said, referring to the times he and I had caught a bite after work. "And you come over for dinner. Lunch, too."

"That's what colleagues do," Tony said. "I'm talking more along the lines of a date. Of you and me going on vacations together. Like this. Attending events together. Like Christmas at the Director's house."

I looked at him and I knew the moment realization hit Tony that that wasn't going to happen. "Tony..."

He held up a hand. "It's okay. I shouldn't have brought it up. Too soon. We're just testing the waters after all."

"And that was a little too cold for you." I sighed. "I wish I could say I'll try. That I'd come out, but I don't know if I could go through with it. Not at this point, okay? Maybe after we've been together for awhile, after a few of our close friends know, I could consider it."

"Hey," Tony leaned forward. "Don't sweat over it. It's early days like I said. For all we know, this thing we have right now will fizzle out once we get back to DC." He picked up the bill from the holder. "You ready to head back?"

A rather heavy mood accompanied us on the walk back to the hotel. A part of me wanted to talk things out properly but another part told me to shut up and give it time. I thought back to the accusations my exes used to level at me - I'd want to confront issues head on when they thought letting things settle a little would be more beneficial. The last thing I wanted was for my new romance to die before it even got off the ground.

Then there was that part of me that said if ever I could, would, change for someone, that someone was Tony.

"I want to try, Tony," I said, my fingers finding his briefly before letting go. Only a few people were about, mostly tourists but I wasn't comfortable with PDAs just yet, and not in this country that is so obviously macho in its attitude. "But it'll take time. Would you wait?"

Tony halted. "Honestly? I don't know, Jethro. I want to, but I don't know how long I can wait so like you, I can't promise anything."
TBC
Day 3 of Bromancecation.

Saturday

The next morning Gianni brought the Maserati round and drove us to the point where we'd take over the driving.

"Just follow the coast road," Gianni told us. "Only forty minutes to Amalfi," he added, pointing out the town on the map he was holding out to Tony. "Follow the GPS and you won't get lost. Road is good but watch out for the buses and coaches. It is the weekend so quite a lot of day-trippers, too. Watch the road," he reiterated. "La vista è bellissima, I know, but keep your eyes on the road."

"Don't worry, Gianni," Tony reassured him. "I'm driving. Not Gibbs. We'll take our time. The hotel's confirmed our reservations?"

"Yes, I have booked you for one night only. You can extend it when you check in if that is what you wish to do. Or go on to Positano. The hotel owner is a friend of Signor Crispin. He has a room on standby for you. Information is all in this file." He handed a folder to Tony who promptly passed it to me.

"What about you?" Tony asked Gianni. "Are you returning to Capri?"

"No," Gianni replied. "I will meet you in Sorrento. Positano is too small so if you miss the ferry, you are stuck. Better that you drive to Sorrento to catch ferry when you are ready to return. Just text me and I will meet you at the Sorrento port."

"You don't have to," Tony told him. "We can find our own way back to Capri."

"No, no." Gianni protested. "You call me when you are ready to return. I will buy ferry tickets for us and the car. Driving on Capri is not easy. It is better I drive from the ferry terminal back to the villa."

"You don't trust me with the Maserati," Tony said.

"He's right, Tony," I said. "Do it his way." Gianni looked expectantly at Tony.

"Okay, okay. No argument from me," Tony muttered. "Let's go."

"Give me the keys," I said, holding out my palm to Gianni.

"Get real, Jethro." Tony huffed and got in the Maserati next to Gianni who had merely chuckled at me and climbed into the driver's seat.
The drive from Salerno to Amalfi along the Sorrentine Peninsula was everything Tony expected it to be. With a few reminders from me, he was able to keep his eyes on the road even as he took in the beauty of the coastal drive.

"This is what I've always wanted to do," Tony said. "Drive up the Amalfi Coast with someone special."

"You doing that now?" I asked.

Tony took his eyes off the road to meet mine. "No. This is with someone very special." He took my hand and lifted it to his lips.

When we had gotten into bed last night, we'd made love and our desire for each other had chased away every other concern. We had spooned up against each other, able, somehow, to believe that we'd work things out.

The GPS in the Maserati directed us onto the SS163 and soon we were on the main road to Amalfi. It was still early in the morning so there weren't many vehicles on the road yet.

Tony pressed a few buttons on the dashboard and soon Matt Monro's velvety voice was crooning out *On Days Like These*.

"Hah! One of my favorite heist capers - The Italian Job," Tony gave a bark of laughter. *I love* this song. *Questi giorni quando vieni il belle sole,* he sang along with Matt. "It's got that whole European holiday sixties feel to it, don't you think?

The wind blew through his hair and I thought he was just downright gorgeous - driving that red convertible, wearing his shades and flashing that happy smile. That visual was so Tony and my heart ached at the thought that I couldn't have this forever.

Amalfi came into view half an hour later and yeah, it was pretty. It was a world away from DC's concrete jungle and I relished the thought of spending a couple of days here just strolling through the narrow streets and trying out the trattorias as we had planned. Even with an aching heart.

END OF GIBBS’ POV

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TONY'S POV
Amalfi was everything I expected but it was also not much different from Salerno, or any other town on the Amalfi Coast. Just from Salerno, and now Amalfi, negotiating the streets to our hotel I realized they all were the same - picturesque and breathtakingly pretty when they finally come into view but upon second thoughts, they are the same type of buildings, same flagged-stone streets and alleys. Same little shops selling souvenirs, the and inviting trattorias offering the same dishes.

Of course, it could be that I was preoccupied by my thoughts about Gibbs' reaction to the whole coming out issue. We were clearly not on the same page here.

The hotel we were booked into was formerly a villa owned by a wealthy countess and now turned into a high-end boutique hotel. There are advantages driving up to a hotel in a luxury sports car and of course, I relished every moment, until I realized I had the means to do this for the rest of my life. That had me thinking again about how my newly-acquired wealth would affect my relationship with Gibbs.

We decided to stay only one night in Amalfi and did the usual tourist things as soon as we checked in. The assistant General Manager came to greet us personally as the GM, Crispin's contact, was away in Switzerland for an industry conference. He would personally ensure that our brief stay at the hotel would meet our standards and expectations. Since Gibbs' idea of a luxury hotel room merely extended to good water pressure and a clean, comfortable bed, I knew, as far as accommodations went, he'd be satisfied.

What I wasn't sure of was the moments where I'd catch a worried frown on his face, and when our eyes met in the busy reception of the hotel, he'd look away.

In spite of my vague misgivings, we had an enjoyable day, even if, by the time we finished dinner, Gibbs said he'd had enough of Italian and was dying for some Chinese. Or curry. That was something I learnt today - that Gibbs loved Indian curry.

"Just not from the Punjab Express," he said. "That's not real Indian. I bet they opened a non-brand can of stew and just added chili powder."

I promised him the first meal we have when we get home would be authentic Indian. "I'm taking you to Rasika. A bit on the pricey side," I said. "Then the weekend after, we'll do a takeaway from a neighborhood place that serves curries good enough to give Rasika a run for its money."

"Then why bother with Rasika in the first place?" Gibbs asked.

"Ambience, Jethro. Ambience."

"What's wrong with my house?"

I thought of the battered couch, the old black and white TV, an equally ancient ironing board perenially propped against the wall, the insufficient lighting. "Nothing," I replied. "Nothing at all."

And I wasn't lying. Inspite of the slightly shabby feel to Gibbs' home, everything worked. Even the old, worn couch was comfortable. If the black and white acted up, all he had to do was give it a couple of headslaps and it would be right as rain.

As for the dim atmosphere, well, it had featured in a few of my fantasies where my boss would pull me onto the couch in front of the fireplace on a cold, dark winter's evening and fuck me senseless by the firelight.

Our love-making that night was slow and exquisite. There was one thing - amongst others - that I could count on Gibbs for - total concentration on whatever task he was doing. At that moment, and
the rest of the night, nothing else seemed to exist for him except my body; my satiation. He wanted me mute with desire, and drove me to near comatose by the time he came, roaring his release with abandon.

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TBC
Chapter 21

Sunday;

Day 4 of Bromancecation;

Positano

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TONY'S POV

“So, this is it,” I said, as I stopped our car outside at the four-story building on Via Gugelmo. We’d checked into our hotel first, then asked our concierge for directions to the Ristorante Gambardella. From what I could see, the fourth story was built up halfway and I guessed the rest of it would be some sort of roof garden.

We parked a little further up the road and walked to the restaurant on the ground floor. The side facing the road was a plain cookie-colored wall rising from the ground up four storys, with green-framed windows spilling with brilliant potted blooms dotting the crusty, old walls.

"Old," Gibbs said. "But beautiful."

"Like someone I know," I murmured. "Not that half a century is old..." But he had walked away, used to my provocative asides. The smile on his face told me he liked what he saw very much.

We stepped through the main entrance into a rather dingy vestibule where a worn reception counter stood and a thin, mustachioed man was busy at the computer terminal.

He looked up with a smile as we approached. "Buonogiorno."

"Salve," I greeted back. "I'm Tony DiNozzo. May I speak to Mr. Gambardella? He's expecting me."

The man's mustache curled up as his face broke into a wide grin. "Signor DiNozzo! Sì! Sì! Come this way. I will call for the boss." He led us in a spacious dining area that was as bright as the foyer had been gloomy. Several tables were occupied, with more on the terrace. A quick glance told me the indoor diners looked local whereas the ones alfresco were tourists - sun hats, visors, sunglasses and taking photos with their cell phones giving them away. It being only nine in the morning, everyone was having breakfast and there were plates of sfogliatelle and cappuccinos on every table that I could see.

Mateo, the mustachioed receptionist, led us to a table on the terrace and if I had any doubt as to the
value of this old building, it evaporated as the picture postcard view hit me right between the eyes.

"Signor DiNozzo. Buongiorno." The greeting had me turning around expectantly. "Benvenuti a Positano. I am Silvio Gambardello."

Tony returned the greeting and introduced Gibbs.

"These are my four sons - Lucio, Nico, Franco and Sergio," Silvio said, introducing the four young men with him."

The social niceties out of the way, Silvio asked me what my plans were concerning the property - after he gave me the history of his restaurant and how his father had started it and how he carried on the family trattoria after his father's death.

"This trattoria is more than sixty years old and I am hoping to retire - a little bit - next year," Silvio said. "My sons already look after the day-to-day management and cooking. My second son, Nico, he has company that transports fresh meat and seafood all over Italy. My wife, she wants to travel and spend time with the grandchildren. If you want us to vacate, it is okay. We understand."

Gibbs had left me to talk with Silvio in private and was now standing at the edge of the terrace, his forearms propped on the stone railing. It was hard to figure out the wistful look on his face. "Signor Gambardella, I understand my uncle's agreement with your father is that the restaurant can operate here rent-free in exchange for meals."

"Si, si." Silvio grinned. "He like the food very much. I hope you will, too."

"My uncle had a very discerning palate so I have no doubt your food is excellent. I haven't viewed the rest of the building yet," I said. "But my lawyer informed me you have the keys to the upper floors. I'd like to take a look."

"Of course! I will get my keys," Silvio said, getting up.

"I will get them, Papa," Lucio said and stood.

"Signor DiNozzo," Nico said as Lucio left. "I apologize but I have to leave you. I have a meeting in Naples and need to be on my way but I hope we can work something out regarding our lease here. It means a lot to my father to be able to stay."

"The restaurant looks like it is doing well," I said. "Why didn't your family make my uncle an offer to buy the property?"

"We did," Nico replied. "Five years ago, but Signor Paddington refused to sell. A building like this, with this view, is no longer available. All bought up twenty, thirty years ago. We could not afford it then and now, we will have to see." He shook my hand then excused himself.

Lucio waved a key card at us and I called out to Gibbs, telling him we were going to view the rest of the building.

"We had this installed a few years ago," Silvio said as we entered the elevator. "It takes us to the three floors above. We use the floor above us for storage and a small office. The two upper floors were for Signore Paddington's private use. Only I have the key card for those floors. I keep it to open up for the cleaning service and to air the rooms regularly."

Silvio and Lucio showed us to the second story which, as he'd said, was used as storage space for the restaurant. He opened one of the doors at the end of the short hallway and I stepped into what
looked like any clerical office. Except it had a view like no admin office I'd ever seen since the entire back wall was a series of French windows that opened out to the town and the Tyrrhenian Sea below.

"This is my office," Lucio said. "I am the restaurant manager and this is Gia, my assistant."

Gia came forward to shake our hands and she was extremely beautiful with thick, black hair and deep blue eyes. She'd also just come from the beach or some holiday because there was still a light tan and blush on her cheeks and nose.

Nico entered the office in a hurry to say goodbye to his father and brother and that he hoped to be back the day after tomorrow. I saw the brief look he threw Gia and the smile she gave him but they didn't say anything to each other and then he was gone as fast as he appeared.

"Come. I show you the private quarters." Silvio turned and beckoned us to follow.

The elevator doors slid open to a foyer with three doors facing us.

"There are three bedrooms, each one with its own bathroom and toilet. When Signore Paddington bought the building, he upgraded all the facilities but left the exterior alone." Silvio threw open the double doors on the left and I had to blink.

Even though the furniture was wrapped in clear plastic, the hardwood floor was shiny and dustless. The king-sized bed was also wrapped in clear plastic and when Silvio threw open the floor to ceiling doors, the familiar aromas of Italian cooking wafted up from below. The balcony was long and had enough room for a table and chairs. Flowers spilled from terracotta urns along the parapet.

"Signor Paddington has not visited since two years ago," Silvio said. "But Signor Crispin, he has come a few times to eat in the restaurant with his friends. He does not sleep over and they only use the living room upstairs. We go up there later. I show you the other two bedrooms now."

"And if you like to fish," Silvio said, as we finished viewing the rooms and went back downstairs. "There are many places to go along the coast. But you need someone from here, a local, to take you. Many caletta...small bays with plenty of good eating fish. If you like, you go with one of my sons. They take fishing boat out overnight to catch squid, octopus and sometimes farther out the sea to catch bluefin tuna, barracuda and swordfish. You catch, I cook for you!" I guess Gibbs looked more like a fishing enthusiast than I do because Silvio addressed him rather me.

"Sit down. I bring coffee and cake," Silvio said and ambled off.

"I'll go explore the garden," Gibbs said when I told him I would formalize my offer to Silvio.

"No, stay," I replied. "I want you here." He didn't say anything but took a seat.

Silvio returned with Lucio who carried a tray with a pot of coffee and a plate of sugar-dusted Sfogliatelle. The elder Gambardella poured out the coffee for us and pushed the plate towards Gibbs who took one without hesitation.

"Mmm...good!" he said after one bite, his lips coated with icing sugar.

I put one on my plate but said to Silvio before I bit into the pastry, "Silvio, I'll have my lawyers draw up an agreement to continue the arrangement you had with Uncle Clive. I see no reason to change it since I don't plan on selling the property."

"Grazie, grazie." Silvio beamed. "I hope you and Signor Gibbs will return often. I will make sure
your private quarters are always kept ready. Unless you wish to rent out the rooms? It will be very popular and you can get a very good rate. I will contribute one meal a day for the guests, maximum two persons."

"That's great, but nah, I think I'll keep it private for now," I said.

We spent a few more minutes chatting with Silvio and when we were leaving, he presented us with a bottle of home-made limoncello.

"Made from lemons grown in our orchard," Silvio pronounced proudly.

"I saw that," Gibbs said. "Your orchard. It's really pretty down there," he added, turning to me. There are tables there for you to drink the limoncello and I saw some people eating ice cream."

"Ah, limoncello gelato! You must try, too." And Silvio scurried off after telling us to wait.

He came back a few minutes later with a paper bag bearing the restaurant logo. "Limoncello gelato inside container with dry ice," he grinned.

We said our goodbyes and promised to return. I knew I would, and hoped Gibbs would be with me when I did.

We returned to our hotel, left the gelato with the concierge who said he'd have it kept in the freezer for us, including the bottle of limoncello. Then Gibbs and I went sightseeing.

It was already six p.m. by the time we were done and had just about walked the whole of Positano.

"I'm hungry." Gibbs said. So was I because we didn't really have lunch, just bought a sandwich which we both shared and quaffed down overpriced bottles of water. Every time Gibbs entered a shop, it was to use their toilet and I would end up buying some trinket or other as an excuse to linger until he came out.

"Then let's eat here," I said, nodding at the dark rust-red building. "Le Sirenuse Hotel. It's got a fabulous champagne and oyster bar."

It was fabulous, indeed. Zegna-suited men escorted elegantly-dressed and shod ladies. The tinkle of champagne glasses could be heard amid the soft laughter and animated conversation. As was to be expected, the view from the alfresco restaurant was to die for, then I remembered I now owned a building and a restaurant that was as spectacular as this.

I craned my head up to check if I could see the Gambardella restaurant, which was on the opposite side of the valley. I caught a partial glimpse but enough to confirm its siting in relation to Le Sirenuse. After making a few choice remarks about the menu prices, Gibbs left me to decide what we'd have so I ordered a glass of Krug for each of us to start with and the seafood buffet for our dinner. There were several types of oysters on the shell and a mouth-watering display of other seafood.

"I thought you'd sell the building," Gibbs said, as we started on the oysters. "Surprised you're keeping it."

"It's a gorgeous building. I'd never get the chance to own something like it otherwise."

"It's worth a lot of money, I'm sure. That's why I thought you'd sell it and buy something in DC. You've complained enough times about your current apartment."
"I'll be looking for some place else when I get back."

Gibbs remained silent. Thoughtful. Then he nodded. I didn't know what else to say so we ate in relative silence.

When we were done, Gibbs said, "Anywhere we can go for a drink that's not going to cost an arm and a leg - even though you can afford it."

"Our hotel has a small bar on the rooftop. I saw the leaflet saying the group played old Italian songs and the concierge told me it's very popular with the older folks, both tourists and locals."

Gibbs smiled. "Guess I qualify for ‘older’ folk." He got up from the table. "Let's get out of here."

END OF TONY'S POV

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GIBBS' POV

We pulled up at our hotel and I didn’t feel like going up to our room just yet. There was a lot inside me I wanted to say but verbal communication about personal issues have never been my strong suit. Tony’s remark about our hotel having a bar that played Oldies but Goodies – Italian style – had given me an idea so we took the elevator up the rooftop garden.

Once again the scent of lemons permeate in the air. Several tables were already occupied and the bar was crowded with patrons either seated or standing, drinks in hand. Most of the customers were older, as expected, with several silver heads huddled in close conversation and some dancing on the terrace under the stars.

We were led to a small table close to the dais where a small band was playing and the singer was doing another old Italian classic, Non Dimenticar. I only knew the English lyrics. The female singer, who looked too young to be knowing that song, was singing it in Italian and it reminded me of Connie Francis, one of my mother’s favorite singers.

“You know this song?” I asked Tony.

“Of course,” Tony replied. “Originally titled T’ho Voluto Bene, written for the 1951 movie, Anna, and made famous by Nat King Cole in 1958 with the name change. I’d say I know just about every classic Italian love song. I am Italian by descent, after all. Can’t not know those old evergreens.”

“You’re half-Italian, half-English,” I smiled. “Do you know all the old English hits, too?”
“Jethro, I bet I could even sing you an old Bollywood hit if you asked. Nicely.”

I laughed. I bet he could, too. “I’ll remember that at our next Christmas party.”

Our drinks arrived and I settled down to enjoy the music. This is one pleasure that I share with Tony. On the rare occasions Tony invited the team to his apartment for dinner, I saw CDs of music from the 50s and 60s so I know he isn’t just humoring me by joining me here instead of the lobby lounge which plays jazz and bossanova.

“You have a request?” Tony asked.

“Um, yeah. ‘You Don’t Have To Say You Love Me’.”

“Aha! Of course.” Tony asked the waiter for a pen and paper and scribbled the request down.

The request was passed on to one of the musicians as they struck up the notes for another Connie Francis hit, Al Di La.

Tony sang along to this one, accompanied by exaggerated hand motions (one palm over his heart, the other sweeping out in a grand gesture) when it came to the “lalala-aaa-aas”.

That was so Tony and I had to grin.

When my request came up next, one of the male musicians took over the mic, to my surprise. I didn’t ask but assumed Tony had requested a male version.

I wanted to reach out and take Tony’s hand but didn’t, of course. I didn’t even know how to tell him this song was for him, that the words were what I wanted to say to him.

When the song ended and I clapped along with the audience, the singer said, “That famous song was the English version by Dusty Springfield and sung by many, many other famous American and British singers, BUT now I sing you the original Italian version.” He stressed the word ‘Italian’ as if to indicate it was the best version.

As he began to sing, giving it the slow, sultry beat, Tony did a simultaneous translation and I found myself focusing on what he was saying.

If I thought the English version took the words right out of my mouth, the literal translation ripped them out of my heart. I wanted to tell Tony, ‘yes! You’re changing while I’m staying the same.’ I wanted to say so much, to tell him I was afraid he’d leave me because I was asking too much of him.

“Tony,” I took his arm, as the song ended. “I will try. I will seriously work on the idea of coming out. I know it isn’t fair on you to move backwards because I can’t move forwards so –”

“Shh…” Tony put his finger on his lips. “None of that talk. Let things take their course, remember? We’re not going to rush anything. Not. A. Thing. No one needs to know about us, Jethro. This isn’t just about us. There’s the team to consider so…let’s take it one day at a time as we agreed.”

It was our last night here in Capri; in Italy. Tomorrow, we’d be catching the flight back to DC. But
tonight? We had all night and I was going to make the most of it.

Consequently, our lovemaking was slow and tender. Unlike our earlier ones where we tended to gobble each other up just to slake a little of the unbearable thirst, to ease off a bit of the hunger, tonight we gave each other’s bodies their due attention.

When, at last, I sank into ‘Tony’s’ heat, it was a place I did not want to ever leave. Yet there was a part of me that could not believe in forever. None of my marriages had lasted. My first had been wrenched painfully from me and the rest had been thrown back in my face.

Could I change enough to keep Tony forever? And while I’d never trade these few days with him for anything in the world, they have only given me more to miss when Tony eventually leaves me. As my wives have, in one way or another.

I can be friends with Diane and the others but I could never be “friends” with Tony. Not after this. I would not be able to visit Italy again without Tony.

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**Monday;**

**Naples, Italy**

Our flight out of Naples was in the afternoon. There was a one and a half hour transit in Frankfurt and United finally spat us out at Dulles at eight in the evening.

We shared a cab and Tony dropped me off before continuing on home. With a brief kiss on the lips and ‘see you in the morning’, he left me standing at my doorstep.

I didn’t even want to go in my house. Suddenly everything felt odd. But I opened the door and stepped into the darkened foyer, fumbling for the light switch. It was here. Right on the same spot, just barely over a week ago, that I kissed Tony. And he kissed me back.

I trudged up the stairs with my bag and even that felt lonely. Same house, same staircase, same bedroom. Yet I now felt so out of place, as if something was very wrong with the picture.

As I got ready for bed, I thought about how I’d proceed from here. I’d told Tony in the cab – when he asked – that nothing would change at work and that I wasn’t ready for the others to know yet. Not even Abby. Not even Ducky. He was fine with giving us some time to adjust to the change between us, saying he needed it, too.

With that comforting thought – I try to avoid upheavals in my life after three divorces – I fell asleep, believing whatever happened, we’d deal with it.

When I awoke the next morning, it was with a spring in my step, I swear, and I drove in to work, singing along with Shannon’s CD.
END OF GIBBS’ POV

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TBC
"Morning, McGee," Gibbs said, rounding the corner into the bullpen. "I'll be down at Abby's."

"Hi, Gibbs. Good morning." McGee frowned. Gibbs rarely greeted them. It wasn't because he was lacking in social graces - or maybe he was - which only made his entire demeanor this morning very odd.

Still frowning, he resumed his tasks. There were still reports on cold cases to be analyzed and copies on the blackmail case had just come in from Mann. He was still to receive the FBI's and would have to give Tobias a call later today.

Tony came dancing into the bullpen. "Morning, boss," he greeted Gibbs cheerily as he put a brown paper bag down on McGee's desk. "Fresh banana cake with crunchy peanut butter icing," he said. "Try it."

McGee opened the bag warily, as if expecting a jack-in-the-box to jump out. When all it yeilded was a large muffin, he frowned. "Really? You bought me a muffin?"

"Not a muffin. A large cupcake."

"Why? What's the occasion?"

"Nothing. Just a gesture of appreciation."

"Why? What did I do for you?" McGee asked, still suspicious. He sniffed at the cupcake.

"Nothing! You have to learn to receive, McGee. Receiving is harder to do than giving and you just proved my point." Tony sat down and powered up his PC.

He was concentrating on the reading the report for the last case when the mail clerk, a bubbly girl he'd never seen before, stopped at his desk.

"Hi, Mr. DiNozzo, haven't seen you all week! Nice tan. Been on vacation, then. Package for you."

She handed the slim package to Tony and vanished round the divider before Tony could tell her not
to call him Mister DiNozzo, and to ask how come she knew he wasn't around when he had no
recollec­tion of hav­ing met her be­fore.

He turned the manila en­velope over. No send­er's de­tails but it was stamped. Felt like a CD.

He was about to open it when Gibbs stood. "Dead petty of­ﬁcer in Nor­folk. Let's go."

Tony stuffed the CD in his back­pack and hurried after Gibbs.

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It was an­other rou­tine case, same old pro­ce­dures, same old ques­tion­ing of like­ly sus­pects. By the
time Tony re­turned to the Hq, he seri­ously ques­tioned the wis­dom of stay­ing on in this job.

He'd drop by the Gibbs 'Under­ground Club' after work and let Gibbs know about his de­ci­sion to
quit. He wanted the oth­er man to know, with­out a dou­ble, that he wasn't quit­ting be­cause of him, of
their re­la­tion­ship, ev­en­tu­ally. That is, if their re­la­tion­ship be­came a long-ter­m one.

"Hey, Tony." McGee called out from his desk. "Lunch with Abby and me?"

"Not today, McGee," Tony re­plied. "Got some ema­ils to re­spond to. Oh wait - no, I will join you.
Some­thing I want to tell you."

"Can I come?" Dorneget asked, hope­ful­ly.

"Not today, Dornie, but McGee will buy you lunch to­mor­row."

"Hey." McGee frown­ed, then sighed. "Yeah, okay, I'll buy you a wel­come to MCRT lunch
to­mor­row. Mul­doon, too."

"Al­right!" Dorneget smiled hap­pily.

"Where's Gibbs?" Tony asked.

"I saw him head­ing up to MTAC with the Di­rec­tor," Dorneget re­plied.

"Okay. Let's go get Abby."

Over their sand­wiches, Tony told Abby and McGee about his in­her­i­tance.

"So, you're...like...rich now?" Abby asked. "Really, really, really rich?"

"And you in­her­i­t­ed a pro­p­erty on Rehoboth Beach?" McGee asked.

"Yes, Abby, I am really rich, and yes, McGee, my un­cle left me a pro­p­erty on Rehoboth Beach.
Well, Dewey Beach, to be ex­act. It's next to Re­hoboth Beach. I got an em­ail from the cou­ple who
live there - they take care of the pro­p­erty - and they've got a pro­posal and some ini­tial plans drawn
up to de­vel­op it into a guest­house. It's re­ally nice and I'd like to have you guys to stay some­time."

"Oh, Tony! We'd love to!" Abby hugged him. "Does Gibbs know?"
"Yes, I told him while we were in Italy."

"You were in Italy?" Abby asked, clearly surprised. "I thought you were going to London."

"With Gibbs?" McGee's face registered his shock. "What was that like?"

"Pretty good, you will be surprised to know," Tony replied. "I did go to London. Visited my cousin and oh, Abby - you gotta go to London one day, too. You'll love Chanterelle Hall. It's got the ghost of Lady Godiva."

"What's Chanterelle Hall?" Abby asked.

"A huge, old mansion somewhere in Shropshire, which is somewhere in the East of England and, if I'm not wrong, borders Wales. We must plan a trip the next time you've got some days off. Both of you."

"I'd love to," McGee said. "But I can't see both of us taking leave at the same time. Not with Gibbs retiring and all."

"Gibbs is retiring? Why did he not tell me? "Why did he not tell me?" "When was this announced and why do I not know until now?"

"You weren't here when he told us," Abby said. "Well, he didn't exactly tell us. He kinda mentioned it before he left for Naples. It was just in passing."

"Yeah, and I brought it up just now, when he and I were coming up the elevator. You were parking the car. I asked him if it was true he was retiring and he said, yes, he was putting in for early retirement. I asked him why and he said he wanted to do something other than catch bad guys. Said his knees aren't what they used to be."

Tony snorted. "Hah. Nothing wrong with his knees." Or any other part of him, Tony wanted to add, but didn't. Now would be the time to tell them he was leaving. Bracing himself for Abby's reaction, he said. "Uh, actually I'm leaving NCIS, too."

"You're not serious?" Abby asked, eyes huge with consternation. "You can't leave. It's bad enough that Gibbs is but that can't be helped. He's been working decades so it's understandable he wants to focus on his personal stuff...but what personal stuff could be that important he'd leave? And you! You're leaving just because you're rich and want to see the rest of the world...but I guess that's understandable, too. But -"

"Abby -"

"But can't you just take no-pay leave if you don't need the money? Why -"

"Abby -"

"This is terrible. We can't all leave."

"Abby. Shut up a moment and let Tony speak," McGee said. "Drink this and take a few breaths." He stuck her bottle of water under her nose. "It's just Gibbs and Tony, not the entire team."

"But I'm leaving, too," Abby said in a small voice, not looking at either man.

"You're leaving?" Both men asked, loud enough heads to turn their way.
"Okay, guys. Settle down." Abby paused, then said, "Aidan proposed last weekend and I said yes, and we're moving to LA."

"Why?" McGee asked.

"Because I love him, McGee!"

"No, I mean why are you moving to LA? Are you going to get a job with NCIS-LA? I think they send their stuff to the forensics lab in San Diego.

"I'm not. I'm starting my own forensics lab with an ex-colleague. He spent a dozen years with the Army CID's laboratory in Fort Gillem, Georgia. He's invited me, together with a couple other forensic scientists to join him. I haven't accepted officially but, unofficially, yes I have."

"Good for you, Abby," Tony said. "When are you leaving?"

"Most likely in three months' time. I haven't tendered my resignation yet but I will this weekend so that we have plenty of time to get a replacement."

"Well, I'm not going to be left out," McGee said. "I'm going to be writing full time."

"Really?" Tony said. "The books selling well, are they?"

"I just published a new series based on a private investigative service which takes on the cold cases for the Federal Agencies. Went straight to the NY Times Bestseller List. And believe it or not, my agent called to say I've got an offer to turn the book into a movie! Now is that cool or what. Pity you can't write or you could have become a scriptwriter, with your love of movies and all." He grinned at Tony.

Tony glowered back at him.

"Just kidding, Tony," McGee said. "Not about the movie offer for my book. That's real. I'm just kidding about you not being able to write. Gibbs loves your reports. But look, once I'm settled with the company, I'll try and get you a leg in. You might be able to get some work as a consultant. Then again, if your uncle's left you all that money, you don't need the work, do you?"

"Tony's going to be a property developer," Abby said.

"I am?" Tony asked.

"Sure," Abby said. "You're developing your property in Rehoboth, aren't you? Building a guesthouse and all. Is it nice? Has it got a beach view?"

"It's got fabulous views, Abby," Tony replied.

"'Fabulous'? That's such a gay word," McGee sniggered.

"Oh okay. McMacho. It's got the friggin' best views you could ask for. Happy?" Tony asked. "And have you got something against gays and gay vocabulary?"

"No! Of course not. It was Dorneget who told me it's a fav gay word. And it's even more so when you add "absolutely" to it. 'Absolutely FAB-bulous'. McGee snickered.

"You write best-selling books and you're taking vocabulary tips from Dorneget? The mind boggles." Tony gave any exaggerated shiver. "But, speaking of best-selling writers, you must have heard of Joseph James."
"Joseph James?" McGee repeated. "That's like asking if I've heard of Dan Brown or James Patterson. Of course! His books did better than mine last year but I'm expected to beat him this year, though he'll likely still win the No. 1 spot. Anyway, what about Joseph James?"

"He's living my Rehoboth house at the moment," Tony replied.

"You're kidding me!" McGee exclaimed. "Why? Is he renting it?"

"No. His husband, Jed, is the property manager and they have a cottage to themselves."

"But why would he live out there?" McGee asked. "In Delaware! And the Eastern Shore, too! I mean the guy has a New York loft that's worth fifteen million dollars according to Perez Hilton."

"Timothy McGee. I'm shocked!" Tony made a suitably shocked expression. "Perez Hilton?"

"I was reading an article he wrote about upcoming movies and the screenplays. Mine was mentioned and so was James'."

"Do your readers know you work in NCIS?" Abby asked.

"No, but I will be coming out soon," McGee replied.

"Coming out? Does that mean what it usually means?" Tony asked.

"No, Tony. I'm not gay. Just because you are," McGee retorted.

"What?" Tony's voice registered his shock. McGee knew?


"You were?" Tony's forehead scrunched up. He wanted to come out to his colleagues but he was afraid if he did, he might inadvertently spill about Gibbs and him. He had to respect Gibbs' wish to keep their relationship under wraps for now so it was best he said nothing. He guessed once Gibbs retired, he'd be okay with coming out. "Of course you were. Hey," he glanced at his watch. "Time to head back."

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Gibbs wasn't in the bullpen when they returned from lunch so Tony took the opportunity to check out the video.

"New CD?" McGee asked. "More oldies? You can buy them for two dollars in Chinatown, did you know that? Buy three and the guy'll throw one in free."

"I don't know what this is," Tony said. "It's got no cover. Just a piece of white paper." He opened the casing and took out the CD, sloting it into his PC.

"It's a video CD," McGee said, looking over Tony's shoulder.

"What's the movie?" Dorneget asked, joining them and peering in between Tony and McGee's heads.
The next few seconds were the stuff of nightmares. For the rest of his life, Tony would never forget them.

"Uh...um...oh shit, Tony." McGee breathed out the words.

"Hey, DiNozzo," Dorneget said. "That actor sure looks like you but um, you shouldn't be playing porn in the office. What if Gibbs catches - oh, holy shit!"

McGee punched the button on the CPU to release the CD as Tony sat, stunned. Quickly putting the CD back in its case, he asked Tony, "What was that, Tony? I mean how...who..."

Instead of replying, Tony stuffed the CD in his backpack. "I gotta go. Don't breathe a word about this until I figure out what it is."

Grabbing his laptop, he ran out.

"Where are you going? Tony!" McGee called after him.

"Nowhere. Somewhere I can check this out in private."

"What if Gibbs -"

"Tell him I had an emergency to tend to but didn't tell you what."

Back home in his apartment, Tony played the CD, watching Gibbs and himself having sex in the El Hedonista suite; he sucking Gibbs' cock, Gibbs fucking him…

When he came to the end of he video, the message said,

Hey, Tony.

We hope you have enjoyed this special edition of the Gibbs-DiNozzo Chronicles. If you did and would like to donate towards the privacy of our stars in this sensational video, please deposit the sum of one million dollars cash into our account.

You have three days to obtain the money and will be contacted again as to how to make your donation. Failure to do at the stipulated time will see your sexual tryst with NCIS Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs made public. You will both be instant internet celebrities.

Tony was sick to the stomach. What to do? Oh hell. He was going to have to tell Gibbs about this. No way could he keep this from him.

"Mcgee? It's me. Is Gibbs out yet?" he asked, as he left his apartment.

"Tony?" McGee sounded worried. He was. "Where are you? Yes, he's looking for you. He went to the restroom. Are you coming back? Tony?"

"On my way. Be there in five." Tony hung up and sped down M Street towards the Navy Yard.

McGee expelled a breath of relief, shutting his eyes tight.
"McGee?" Dorneget's voice was tentative.

"Where's DiNozzo?" Muldoon asked, freeing her hair from the ponytail then twisting it and clipping it back up. "I haven't seen him much today."

"McGee?" Dorneget called again.

"What!" McGee snapped.

Muldoon looked over, surprised at McGee's outburst.

"I don't know where Tony is, alright?" McGee snapped. "I'll be at Abby's if Gibbs asks for me."

"What's got into him?" Muldoon asked.

"Um, something must've happened," Dorneget mumbled and hid his face behind his monitor. The "something" was really something. He may be wrong, but that was DiNozzo and the boss on the video. It could be they were just doing it for the undercover assignment in Mexico...except they were really doing it, and surely that wasn't necessary, was it?

"Where's DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, entering the bullpen.


Gibbs turned. "Okay. Conference?"

"The real one, not the elevator."

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"When did you get this?" Gibbs asked, his face pale.

"This morning," Tony replied. "CD came by regular mail. The mail clerk passed it to me on her rounds. I played it when I got back from lunch."

"You played it here? Did anyone else see this?"

"McGee and Dorneget -;"

"Oh hell! You -"

"I thought it was a music CD or a movie one of my friends sent me. As soon as I saw what it was, I stopped it. Or McGee did, rather. You have to forward it to the end. The message is attached."

Gibbs cursed when he read the blackmail demand. "How? The perps are in lockup. The case is closed. Or is supposed to be!"

"They must have missed one out when they gave up the names of their accomplices. But the accomplice would know what went down...something's not adding up here." Tony frowned.

"No, it's not," Gibbs agreed. "But I still have to inform the Director. Meanwhile, you figure out what to say to McGee and Dorneget and make sure it doesn't get out. I may be retiring but not this
"No, I don't. either. I'd like to be there when you speak to Vance." When Gibbs looked like refusing, Tony added, "Please. I'm in the video, too. This affects both of us."

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TBC
"You and DiNozzo wha-at?" Vance roared when Gibbs told him what happened. "Put it on. Is it that bad?"

"Trust me," Gibbs said. "It is what I said it is. The blackmailer video'd Tony and me having sex at the resort and left a message at the end of the vid."

Vance pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes and wished he was already retired. "Two of my senior agents are being blackmailed, Gibbs," he said wearily. "I don't want to see the video but I have to. It's going to be a bitch as it is for me to keep this from SecNav. If we don't bust this perp and that video goes viral, all three of us are going to get tossed out on our asses. So give me the CD and you have twenty-four hours to find out who the perp is. Bust him or I'm going to have to go to SecNav." He saw the look on Gibbs' face and sighed heavily. "If this asshole's got stuff on both of you, what's stopping him from digging out the photos of the previous three victims? What if he's got videos of them and is just waiting to use them?" Vance cradled his head in his hands. "And after you find him," he added wearily. "You can explain why the two of you were having sex with each other."

3RD PERSON POV

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"Trust me," Gibbs said. "It is what I said it is. The blackmailer video'd Tony and me having sex at the resort and left a message at the end of the vid."

Back in the bullpen, Gibbs barked at McGee to give him every list compiled for the blackmail case. Not needing any explanation, McGee jumped to it. Tony pulled his chair up next to McGee and they selected the ones Gibbs would want.

"Give me a printout," Gibbs ordered.

"Hi guys. New case?" Muldoon asked, coming up them.

"Something I'm personally working on with DiNozzo," Gibbs said. "I'll let you know if I need you on it. You and Dornegget continue the investigation of Petty Officer Mayer's case. Go question his rack mates."

"Rack mates?" Muldoon asked, already on alert at Gibbs' terse tone.

"Bunk mates." Gibbs growled out, turning to McGee, "You got the lists?" he asked, dismissing Muldoon without another word or glance.
"Okay, I got it," Muldoon muttered. "A rack mate is also known as a bunk mate. I'm on my way."

"Take Dorneget!" Gibbs snapped. "Both of you handle that case. I need DiNozzo and McGee full time on my mine."

"Yes sir." Muldoon clicked her heels, hurried to her desk to grab her bag then ran to the elevator. Dorneget was already holding the doors open for her.

"Whew! Why is everyone so tense today?" Muldoon asked.

"Probably something urgent on their minds," Dorneget replied, not looking at her. "Anyway, we got the Petty Officer to distract us. Here's what I think happened..."

"Gibbs, lists are ready," McGee said. Tony was already looking at the rows of names on the plasma, scrolling down as he went.

"This is the list of employees that were searched during the FBI bust. Next column to their names indicate those that were brought in for a second questioning. These are the two staff members arrested." McGee took the remote from Tony and clicked.

"McGee," Gibbs' voice lowered. "You saw what was on the video, I was told."

"Boss, I didn't see much, and I stopped it as soon as I saw who was on it."

"I'm going to ask you to do this as a personal favor. Work on this case to identify the blackmailer and apprehend him before he posts that video online. After that I will give you a full explanation. Will you do that?"

"Of course, Gibbs. We'll get him."

"Vance has given us twenty-four hours before he informs SecNav," Gibbs added.

"And the blackmailer wants a million dollars," Tony said. "Cash."

"A million?" McGee squeaked. "That's a huge jump from the previous demands."

"That was what I thought, too," Gibbs said. "I've a feeling we're dealing with a completely different blackmailer altogether."

Both Tony and McGee stared at Gibbs.

"Another blackmailer?" McGee asked.

"Different person?" Tony added. "Same M.O., though. Three days for me to get the cash ready then standby for instructions when and where to make the drop."

"You given Abby the CD?" Gibbs asked Tony.

"Yes," Tony replied. "I told her not to play it, told her it's something she will not want to see and that you want to know the results asap. Told her it's unlikely there are any fingerprints but to examine it thoroughly. That last bit got me kicked out of the lab because Ms. Abigail Sciuto is
never not thorough in her work."

"Who knows about your inheritance, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, returning to his desk.

"You, McGee, Abby, my cousin, the lawyers, and the rest of the beneficiaries, I guess."

"You never told your friends?" Gibbs asked.

"No," Tony replied.

Gibbs thought that was odd but was something he'd have to ask Tony about another day. "Your father?" he asked.

"God, no. Last person I'd tell," Tony said. "Might as well announce it to the gossip columnists if I were to tell him."

"Hey," McGee said, brow furrowed in thought. "Your uncle's death was reported even here in the US because of his vast business interests worldwide, including here. Wouldn't it be possible his will was reported, too? Like in the society pages and gossip blogs? Who the beneficiaries are and what they received?"

"That's possible, yes," Tony conceded. "But no one's called me up to congratulate me so obviously anyone who knows me don't know about that."

"No 'close' friends that could have found out?" Gibbs asked, without saying Scott's name but the way he said 'close' left no doubt in Tony's mind who he was referring to.

"No," Tony's answer was firm, then it softened. "No friends except those whom I work with right here in NCIS."

"Well, then, back to the lists," Gibbs said. "Scrutinize them all, McGee. DiNozzo and I are going to question those perps again."

Two hours later, McGee saw the two men returning. From their expressions and body language, they hadn't gotten anything helpful from the interrogation at the FBI offices.

"Back to the drawing board, McGee." Tony said, sounding tired. His eyes bore the worry and anxiety that he had to be feeling in spades, McGee thought. All the questions he had would have to wait, even the shock of seeing Tony and Gibbs doing that. Abby hadn't called him - yet - but she would have seen the contents by now since she was analyzing it. Her silence was more worrying then anything else from her.

"Put up the lists again, McGee," Tony requested. "Not the staff list. The guest lists. I haven't gone through those yet."

For the next twenty minutes there was silence in the bullpen as the three men focused on the task.

Then Tony suddenly stiffened as he came to one name. Oh shit. No. No, it can't be. Quickly, he double-checked the dates, then drawing a deep breath, turned around. "Boss," Gibbs looked up, eyes tired and lined. "I think I got our perp." McGee and Gibbs shot up from their desks and went to stand beside Tony. He zoomed in on the name.

"Scott Branson? Who is he?" McGee asked.

Tony drew in another breath. "He was my partner."
"In the police force?"

"No. My partner is in a personal relationship," Tony replied. He took a quick glance at Gibbs who was now looking away, as if he wished he were anywhere but here. "We broke up last week."

"He was there at the resort the same time you and Gibbs were," McGee said, unnecessarily so, but Tony knew the poor man was trying to sort a number of things in his head.

"McGee, I'm gay. Gay, like Dorneget," Tony said. "I'd been in a relationship with Branson for a year. We broke up the weekend before I left for London."

"You think he's one of the perps?" McGee asked. "You think he's been using you all along? To get info on potential vics?"

"Don't think." Gibbs snapped. "Get me something that will let us bring him in for questioning. I don't care if it takes all night. I want Branson in Interrogation."

Tony made a move to get going but Gibbs' next words stopped him in his tracks.

"Not you, DiNozzo. I'm taking you off the case. Myself, included. I'm calling Muldoon back in. You've got point on this, McGee. What you do, DiNozzo, is assist McGee on gathering evidence that will tie Branson in. Give McGee a list of people who know Branson and can tell us more about him. We need something, anything, that will connect him or give him a motive."

"I can give you a motive," Tony said.

They were in the bullpen all night combing through Branson's financials, which revealed he had been making monthly payments to casinos over the last three years.

By six the next morning, after several calls to and from Fornell, McGee announced he was ready to bring Branson in and had enough to charge him with extortion and blackmail.

At seven forty-five, Gibbs and Tony went up to see the Director who had just arrived.

Vance's phone rang just as he'd ended his tirade with an angry glare at the two special agents in front of him.

"Yes," he answered tersely. "We're on our way." He replaced the receiver and looked up. "Scott Branson is in Interrogation. You'd better pray he's acting alone and that he hasn't sent out any other ransom demands because the thread I'm clinging to, that's keeping SecNav out of this, is getting thinner by the minute."

Without another glance or word, the Director strode out of his office.
"Scott Branson," McGee began. "Tell us what you were doing at El Hedonista last week between Tuesday and Thursday."

"I will if you tell me why I'm here," Scott retorted. "I came willingly, if you'll recall, despite the fact that you barged into my place of work and caused me untold embarrassment. I could sue you, you know."

"Mr. Branson, we said we wanted to ask you some questions and suggested that you come down to NCIS with us."

"Suggest!" Scott burst out. "You threatened to arrest me if I didn't go! I want my lawyer!"

"You are not under arrest and you can call your lawyer when, and if, you are. Right now, we just want answers to some questions," McGee said.

"Why me?"

"Because someone at the El Hedonista is blackmailing an NCIS special agent," Muldoon said. "And we're questioning a few people. Your name came up a few times."

"You think I'm blackmailing some agent at NCIS? Don't be ridiculous. Why the hell would I do that?"

"You tell us," McGee said.

"Tell us about your relationship with Special Agent Tony DiNozzo," Muldoon said.

Scott started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Muldoon asked.

"Oh, it's funny alright," Scott replied. "I'd been on his case for months to get him out of the closet but no, he was so darn scared of his colleagues finding out he's a fag. A. Fag. Like me. I have no problems with being gay. Homosexual. Queer. Shitstabber. Call us whatever you want. Doesn't bother me in the least. But Tony? Oh no, he cares. He cares so fucking much what his friends and workmates will think of him. Especially that boss of his - the one he's been in love with all these years. And now look - all of you know! Not just about him but about his boss! Who, I bet, is even deeper in the closet than Tony ever was." Scott guffawed. "This is rich! Absolutely hilarious."

McGee cleared his throat. "So you pressured Special Agent DiNozzo into coming out and when he refused, you got angry and came up with this scheme to force his hand."

"No, I did not," Scott replied.

"Mr Branson, you gambled heavily," Muldoon said. "Both on the stockmarket and the casinos in
"Vegas."

"What about it?"

"You owed considerable amounts of money to the casinos and you were paying them back by installments," McGee said. "You were also borrowing money from Special Agent DiNozzo to make the last few payments. Money you never repaid."

Scott snorted at that but said nothing.

"But there's one payment to a particular casino in Las Vegas that's under investigation for ties to organized crime throughout several states."

"What's that got to do with me?" Scott asked. "I don't need to be told, nor do you, that there are several casinos with mob ties. The Native American ones, the Asian ones - all linked to the Mob, or the Triads and Yakuza."

"Maybe, but the one you made a payment to, it appears you know one of their more prominent henchmen. Berto 'Bugsy Bagiotti. The mob boss' go-to man."

'I've never heard of him," Scott said. He blinked. His breathing suddenly tight as if his airway had closed in on itself.

"According to this you do," McGee said, as he tossed an eight by ten on the table.

Scott stared at the printout of a photograph showing him and Bugsy together in the café last Monday. "You were spying on me? Why? I hadn't done anything -" he stopped abruptly.

"Yet?" McGee said. "Was that what you were going to say? You hadn't done anything yet? You'd be right. You were with Bugsy hatching the plan to blackmail Special Agent DiNozzo."

"No! I wasn't."

"You flew into Isla Mujeres on Tuesday, did a job for Bugsy, then on Wednesday you saw an opportunity to get a bit more money - no, a lot more money for your trouble - when you spotted Special Agent DiNozzo checking in. Am I right, Mr Branson? Isn't that what happened?"

"No." The monosyllable was delivered flatly.

 '"Then why are you consorting with a known criminal, Mr Branson?' Muldoon asked.

"Bugsy and his boss have been under investigation by the FBI for some time now," McGee added. "Racketeering, prostitution, grand theft auto, blackmailing a politician...list goes on."

"Does the name Royston Carrington mean anything to you?" Muldoon interjected.

"No! What the hell is this?" Scott cried. "I'm outta here. I don't know anything about any of these people."

"Oh, well, we don't believe you," McGee said. "Because this man, Bert Bugsy Bagiotti, in this photograph, which came from the FBI, by the way, was found dead two days ago."

Scott's eyes flew up to McGee. "Dead? How?"

"Someone drilled a hole into his head," McGee replied. "While he was still alive. Drilled right into his forehead between the eyes. Marks found on his arms and wrists show he was restrained but
struggled as the drill bit sank into his skull."

"No. Oh God..." Scott's hands went up to his head, gripping his hair.

"Oh yes," Muldoon said. "And our guess is that they'll be coming after you next because you and Bugsy -" she tapped the photograph. "Obviously work together. So whatever Bugsy knew that got him killed, you must know, too."

"I don't know anything! I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"I bet that's not what whoever ordered Bugsy's hit thinks," McGee said. "So if I were you, I'd come clean about what you and Bugsy were hatching last Monday at that café."

"And tell us if blackmailing Special Agent DiNozzo was the plan."

"I told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You need more help?" Muldoon asked. "Here's more - your dead friend there - and his boss, Enzo Maniscalco, are being investigated - well, 'was' in Bugsy's case - for blackmailing Senator Royston Carrington over a bill that's about to be passed. But that's for the FBI to handle. NCIS? We're here...you're here because you blackmailed Special Agent DiNozzo. Was it on orders from Maniscalco?"

"No! I have no connections to the mob whatsoever!"

"But that's not what Maniscalco's men are saying. According to the FBI report we received just before we brought you in, Maniscalco's arrangement with you was that you plant the surveillance camera in Senator Carrington's hotel room and your debt would be written off," McGee said. He turned the chair around and brought up up close next to Scott. "You pulled it off and Maniscalco realized he'd gotten himself another useful tool. You. Except Bugsy and you got greedy and you both decided to blackmail an NCIS Special Agent, one who's recently come into money."

"No! You're talking shit!"

"Oh yes, and Maniscalco found out about your little scheme and now Bugsy's dead. Here's what I think is going to happen next, unless you tell us what really happened," McGee said, pulling himself even closer to Scott. He could smell the sweat from the other man; smell his heightened anxiety.

McGee gave the two-way mirror a brief glance before he resumed. "You can see for yourself what happens to people who try to cheat Maniscalco of his share. Right now, our take is that Maniscalco had Bugsy killed for reasons other than to shut him up about the blackmail of Carrington. We think Maniscalco has no idea that you and Bugsy decided to blackmail a Federal Agent. A Fed, Mr Branson. Maniscalco's not dumb. Blackmailing a politician fucking a twink behind his wife's back, no one's going to feel sorry for him, but targeting a Federal Agent? One who's got friends in high places? Whose partner is known as The Great White? Whose reputation for taking down bad, bad men is legendary? Mr. Branson, as they're fond of saying in the old Hong Kong wuxia flicks, "you must be tired of living." McGee shook his head. "So, if you're going to stick to your story - that you have nothing to do with the blackmail attempt on Special Agent DiNozzo, then, by all means, you are free to leave." McGee stepped to the door, hand on the knob. "Of course, then NCIS will have to step up oj our questioning the other suspects and even Mr. Maniscalco himself because -"

McGee whistled. "One million dollars is a lot of money and I'm sure Maniscalco will want to know who has that money. His money."
"Wait! You can't do that!" Scott leapt from his seat but Muldoon grabbed him.

"Sit back down, Mr. Branson," she ordered.

McGee returned to his seat. "I can and I will have to, unless you come clean...and you know? If you're real lucky, Special Agent DiNozzo may not even press charges. For old times' sake, y'know?"

Scott looked up at that.

In the observation room, Tony rushed towards the door. "Like hell I won't! Give me two minutes with -"

"Stand down, DiNozzo!" Gibbs ordered.

"Do I have to remind you that you've been benched, DiNozzo?" Vance asked. "Both of you?"

Tony quietened down and they turned their attention back to the interrogation.

"You promise he won't press charges?" Scott asked.

"I can't assure you of anything until you're prepared to give us a statement, and tell us where the video files are."

"Alright. Okay." Scott raked his fingers through his hair and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "The blackmail was my idea. It was exactly as you said - Bugsy got me to do a job for him in return for writing off my IOU. I planted the surveillance camera in the senator's room and was going to remove it the next day but before I could get inside, I saw Tony and his boss - entering the room. Yeah, I was surprised but then I thought why not make lemonade when I've got lemons? So I left the camera there. It's on auto-record and the battery lets it record for 72 hours straight if I don't use the other features. When Tony checked out the next morning, I snuck back into the room same way I got in - pretended I had a gift basket for the guest - grabbed the camera and left."

"You were just able to waltz in the room?" Muldoon asked, surprised at the lack of security.

"Well, if I went in empty-handed and walked out with the TV or a suitcase, I'm pretty sure the cleaners would have called security, or at least questioned me," Scott said smugly. "Of course, I waited until the cleaners started their rounds. As it was, I went in carrying a huge basket of fruit - it was flowers for the senator - and no one thought to question me. I slipped the camera into my pocket and walked right out."

"And where is the video now?" McGee asked.

"At home," Scott replied.


"Looks like you're going to have to search for it, don't you?" Scott said. "When you've gotten a search warrant."

"Mr. Branson," Muldoon said with an annoyed sigh. "The search warrant isn't necessary since you've already admitted to the crime. So why don't you stop wasting more time and just tell us where you've stored the video file, or else our guys can be a tad messy when they're searching a suspect's house." She moved to the corner, taking out her cell phone, and told Dorneget to get ready to head out.
"And you're no longer a suspect," McGee said, "You're The Accused. No reason to go easy on you."

"Hey, wait a fucking minute!" Scott said, his voice raised, his index finger almost poking McGee in the face. "I co-operated. I admitted to attempting to blackmail the jerk. And you know what? I'm fucking sorry I didn't get to do that. You think Tony DiNozzo deserves to have his privacy left alone? That he deserves some respect for his private life? Well, maybe - if I didn't spend one bloody year listening to him go on about his boss - the mighty Leroy Jethro Gibbs; if I hadn't had to keep making excuses to my friends as why I couldn't bring Tony to dinner or a party at their home; for one fucking year the only place we went to was an underground gay club where no one cared if you were fucking your dog!

"I loved him! Why else would I have put up with the shit he shovels into the closet? Did he love me? Did he even care that I was about to have my limbs broken over a measly two hundred thousand when he's inherited three hundred and fifty-five million dollars?

"Oh, I see you're shocked, Agent McGee," Scott said snidely. "But that's our Tony DiNozzo. You think you know him. You think he's your friend; that he confides in you; shares important tidbits about himself with you. How long have you known him, huh? How long has that Gibbs guy worked with him...fucking him? Years! And he never told him how much money he inherited? Poor old sucker. I guess I shouldn't complain seeing we were together only a year. I'd be right pissed if I'd been with him over a decade and found out he'd kept something like that from me. What does it say, huh? That he doesn't trust me, right? How did I find out? Through Christie's friend who's one of the top UK models who read it in the papers. The papers! The whole of UK knows how much Clive Paddington left his American nephew but the guy who'd been living with him for over a year? Did he tell me?

"So if you think I feel guilty about what I did, well, I'm not. I'm just sorry. Sorry I didn't get to plaster your - what did you call him - the Great White? - yeah, your Great White Gibbs fucking his subordinate every fucking which way on the internet! Sorry the whole world didn't -"

Scott never got to finish what he was about to say because the door flew open, slamming against the wall and a blur of motion leapt at Scott.

McGee and Muldoon leapt into the fracas and several other agents came rushing in. By the time McGee pulled Tony off Scott and Muldoon stepped in-between the two men, Scott's nose was bleeding profusely and his right eye was ballooning up.

"You fucking madman!" Scott screamed. "All I wanted was your help!"

"I'll see you in hell before I lift a finger to help you," Tony said.

"Exactly! All you can think of is yourself. Did you ever think about me? That I wasn't ashamed of who I was? That I was lowering my standards when I fucking you?"

Tony flexed his fingers not bothering to look at Scott. "Book him, McGee." Then he walked out, pushing past Vance who was standing to the side of the hallway looking decidedly pissed and miserable.

"Hey!" Scott yelled as McGee started reading him his rights. "You said Tony wouldn't press charges! This interrogation was recorded, right? It's on record that I admitted culpability on condition Tony did not press charges. You said so!"

"No, I did not," McGee said, putting the cuffs on an irate Branson. "I said ‘DiNozzo may not even
press charges' and that I couldn't assure you of anything until you were prepared to give a statement."

"Well, I did that so you -," Scott halted then smiled. "Huh, what am I saying? He won't press charges," he said smugly. "I know him. He'll cool off and realized no real harm was done. I'll destroy the files in front of him and we'll be even. Ask him, dammit!"

"Mr. Branson," Director Vance said, stepping into the room. "I don't care if Special Agent DiNozzo presses charges or not. NCIS is. You blackmailed a Federal Agent. This is not a crime against an individual. It's a crime against a United States federal agency." Vance turned to Muldoon, "Take him away. You can throw the key away as far I'm concerned." He turned to McGee. "McGee you lead the search and destroy in Scott's home. Take the hammer to his hardware, if need be, but I want every copy of that video destroyed and you are to ensure no one sees its contents. Take DiNozzo and Gibbs with you. They'll want to see it's properly disposed of."

"Yes sir," McGee said.

"And McGee."

"Yes sir?"

"Good job."

McGee nodded. "Thank you, sir."

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TBC
8.14am, Sunday:

Five Months Later

3RD PERSON POV

Gibbs put his sander down and turned up the heat. He was freezing. Getting off his stool, he went to the counter in the recess at the side of the basement and switched on the kettle.

He'd been practically living in the basement since he walked out of NCIS that day, emerging only to do the barest of necessities - groceries, laundry, shower, shit. No shave. His salt and pepper hair - more salt now, was way past his ears; his beard and mustache were scraggily and untrimmed.

He looked a sight. He knew it. He didn't care.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Gibbs stiffened. His door was no longer left unlocked so no one should be walking in like they used to.

"God Almighty! You're a sight not to behold." Special Agent Pride's voice was filled with concern. "If I didn't come up here and see for myself, I never would have believed Tobias. What the hell happened, Jethro?"

"What you doing here, King?" Gibbs growled, pouring water into the French press. "How did you get in?" Without waiting for a reply, he said, "Coffee?"

"Yeah, if it comes with a shot."

"No other way to drink coffee. Not since retirement."

"Yeah, how's that going? I thought you were gonna come down and check out that bar. Cassius is still looking for a buyer. Got some offers but he won't sell to them. I mean, how can he sell to anyone else? It's got my name on it."

"It wasn't named after you." Gibbs snorted. "Cassius was named after his granddad - whose name you happen to share. And why isn't he accepting any offers? Price not good enough?"

Pride shrugged. "Said something about the buyers wanting to tear the building down with the adjoining property to build a shopping mall."

Gibbs have a derisive huff. "So why aren't you buying it?"

"We were supposed to do it together. It's just an investment for me. A place I can hang out after work. In fact, I could move in upstairs with you. There's three bedrooms. Plenty of space." When Gibbs didn't respond, Pride prodded him. "Well, how about it? Fly back down with me tomorrow.
Stay a week. If everything works out and we get the bar you can come back to pack and move down permanently."

'If everything works out'.

Only it hadn't worked out at all.

Tony had left. Gibbs doubted he’d be coming back.

"Well?" Pride asked, taking his mug of hot coffee liberally laced with bourbon and hopped on a stool next to Gibbs.

More footsteps were heard and Gibbs moved out of the small recess to see who it was.

"Oh hell. You, too?" he growled.

"Who do you think would pick him up at the airport this time of the morning?" Fornell replied, coming down the stairs. "And finding a parking spot on this street is worse than -" he stopped short as he took in his friend's appearance.

"You're driving us to the airport tomorrow, by the way," Pride said to Fornell.

"Why?" Fornell asked, his worried glance still on Gibbs. "Where you going?"

"New Or-luhns," Pride said. "Didn't he tell you about the bar we're buying?"

"No. He hasn't told me a damned thing since he showed up at my doorstep six months ago. Didn't hear or see a thing about him since the last case we worked. Five months back?" Fornell blew out a breath. "What the hell happened, Jethro? You don't pick up my calls, you lock up your house, don't answer the doorbell...then one lousy text saying you gone on vacation. Indefinitely. What the hell?"

Gibbs remained staring into his coffee. He didn't even have the energy to respond. He was supposed to go to New Orleans to buy over Cassius' bar with King but these days he couldn't care enough to get out of his house much less to a new life in another state.

"Hey, brotha," Pride said softly, putting his arm around Gibbs. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to but at times like these, good friends can make the difference between going to bed looking forward to the next day and going to bed hoping you won't wake up."

"Jethro, you came to me for help once," Tobias said, coming beside Gibbs. "I'm still here if you wanna talk."

Gibbs sighed. "I'm selling my place. Did I tell you that? Either of you?"

"Nope." Tobias shook his head. Haven't told me shit, like I said. "Where you moving to?"

Pride didn't say anything but kept his eyes and arm on his friend.

"Guess it's New Or-luhns for now," Gibbs replied. "And yeah, guess I could do with some help. Real estate agent's been calling asking when she can start giving viewings but..." he blew out a breath and ran his hand over his straggly hair. "- just can't find the motivation to do anything."

"Well, Tobias and I have two weeks off -" all heads turned to the stairs where Diane was making her way down in her killer stilettos. "- and we'll come help you pack everything. I can coordinate the sale with your agent if you like."
Gibbs stared at her, thinking he must be really depressed if he couldn't even be bothered to tell Diane to butt out. Worse, he was actually considering her offer.

"That sounds like a plan," Pride said. "You and I fly off tomorrow - or the day after, if you prefer - and leave Diane to handle the real estate agent."

"How about this," Diane said. "You pack up your personal effects and Tobias and I will handle the rest, put it into storage until you want them. You go on to New Orleens and do your thing."

"Or-luhns, my dear." Pride corrected her pronunciation. "Or-luhns."

In the end, Gibbs did just that.

Except that packing up his personal stuff took more out of him than he feared. There was a time in his life when he thought he'd never be able to throw away anything belonging to Shannon and Kelly. He still couldn't.

But now, as he packed away Kelly's toys and Shannon's personal mementos, he felt a weight on him that was so heavy he felt as if he'd collapse under it.

It was only when Pride put on one of Shannon's CDs that he realized it wasn't Shannon who came to mind. The déjà vu caught him off guard and he went over to the CD player, shutting off the music.

"Don't like oldies?" Pride asked. "Got a lot of them here in that box. That one was my favorite -" and started singing the song Gibbs had just shut off. He couldn't bear to hear that song. Not anymore. Yet he'd been unable to throw out the CD.

"King..." Gibbs began.

Pride looked up and waited. At first he thought Gibbs was going to change his mind about whatever he was going to say and clam up again but to his relief and surprise, Gibbs emptied his mug with a long swallow and said, "I've told Tobias this...back six months ago. Telling you now."

Pride shrugged. "Better late than..."

Gibbs shook his head. "Nah. Should've told you earlier." He drew in a deep breath then said, "I'm in deep shit where DiNozzo's concerned." And proceeded to relate to Pride all that happened since that fateful Memorial Day weekend. He braced himself for Pride's reaction but when it came, it wasn't as reactive as Tobias' had been.

"So why are you here instead of starting over with DiNozzo?" The question was asked quietly.

Gibbs cocked his head again, that distinctive gesture that somehow Pride associated purely with Gibbs even though it wasn't an uncommon one. "After we arrested Tony's ex, we went to Branson's house. We found the video and some stills he'd made, destroyed them at the house then took all his hardware back to NCIS. Our techies and cybercrime division got into his email and that cloud storage thingy. Erased everything related to Tony and me and alerted the various online social media - Facebook?"
"Yeah." Pride nodded.

"And that one for...idiots? Forgot the name...twits?"


"Huh." Gibbs snorted. " Anyway, by the time we'd recovered everything and destroyed it all, both Tony and I weren't much in the mood to talk. We just wanted to go home. Alone. Both of us needed time to ourselves. Time to settle down inside and take stock of everything.

"So we did that. The next day, Tony called me. He'd gone in to work and learnt that I'd tendered my resignation with immediate effect. He said he was leaving, too, that he'd also handed in his resignation and that Vance had accepted it. Said he was going to Delaware and stay for a while."

"Delaware?" Pride repeated. "Who the hell goes to Delaware except those weird Civil War Re-enactment buffs?"

"His uncle left him property there. We kinda let the conversation die off after that. It was obvious neither of us were ready to re-open wounds or tackle certain subjects."

"I get the 'wound' bit," Pride said. "Not everyday your boss fucks you and it's nearly blasted all over the World Wide Net, but why couldn't you talk about the other stuff?"

"Like what?"

"Like how you're both dealing with being forced out of the closet?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Too raw? Too soon? Vance and McGee said they'd do their best to contain it but you know better. Stuff like that gets out. No way we could show our faces in NCIS again. I guess Tony felt the same...so we ended the call."

"What? Just like that?" Pride asked incredulously. "You didn't tell him he could come over and you'd both talk like the mature adults you're supposed to be?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"Jethro. I've got two questions for you. Just two."

"Go ahead."

"One, what's DiNozzo to you? Oh, I know you'd been hugging this secret attraction for him for over a decade but I mean now. Today."

Gibbs looked at Pride straight in the eye and said, "I love him so much I can't think straight."

"Second question - do you want him enough to take what comes with it?"

Gibbs was quiet for several minutes before he whispered, "Semper Fi. It means loyalty and dedication long after we've left the service. Once a Marine, always a Marine." Gibbs bowed his bead, shaking it slowly. "I'll love Tony long after he's forgotten my name and yeah, to answer your question, I love him enough to take what comes with it."

"Then New Orleans isn't where you're heading."

Gibbs' eyes flew up to meet Pride's.

"You're nuts," Gibbs said.

"Not if you mean what you just told me. Where's this place of his?"

"Rehoboth Beach."

Dwayne took out his cell phone and poked at it a few times. "Two and a half hour drive. Let's check the traffic conditions." He poked at the phone again then made a call asking about driving conditions for DC to East Delaware. "Right." He put his phone away. "Roads are clear. Weather's great - for winter - and if you get off your butt now, you should reach Rehoboth by -" he glanced at his watch. "Two-thirty. Three, at most."

Gibbs shook his head. "I don't know where he is as far as I'm concerned. He may be ready to move on. He's got hundreds of millions. He belongs to the high society crowd his English cousin moves in. Homes in Monte Carlo, Caribbean, Asia, South America. Not my kinda life, King."

"No, but how do you know it's DiNozzo's? No, I'm serious. He may just enjoy the luxuries and comforts money buys. Hell, I would! But have you known him to pursue the high society life people like you and I disdain?" Gibbs' expression and small shake of the head gave Pride the answer. "Even if I'm wrong, you still wanna find out. It's not like you to sit on your ass and vegetate in ignorance. I can hang around here for a couple of days - I took emergency leave - and help Tobias and Diane out with the house. You take off to Delaware and see if DiNozzo's worth the drive and the Semper Fi guts it takes to go find him. And if he isn't, then you can shut that chapter of your life and buy that ticket to New Orleans. Hell, I'll buy you that ticket."

"You got this all worked out, haven't you?"

Pride shrugged. "Hell, I just hope if I ever fall in love, you'll dig me out of the shithole, too, though seeing what you go through, I'd rather eat my Sig than give this hard, old ticker to anyone." He slid off the stool. "C'mon, you got a barber who'll get you looking decent again?"

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TBC
Monday, December, 2013;

Silver Lake/Rehoboth Beach,

Delaware

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TONY'S POV

Christmas was just a week away and Dean Martin was singing 'Let It Snow'. No, Dean. We don't need anymore snow. I'd spent the entire morning shoveling it off our front driveway as Silver Lake Lodge's first guests - two gay couples from Arizona, were due to arrive this afternoon. Our guesthouse opened for bookings last week and the two couples - who were friends - were being given a fifty per cent discount for being our first guests. We were fully-booked from New Year's Eve until February.

Jed had hired Casey from the The Gallery Espresso who, apart from being a friend of Jed's, had a marketing and hospitality degree from UL, Lafayette and had a few years under his belt working in a hotel in New Orleans. Naturally, I asked why he was working as a waiter up here and Jed told me it had nothing to do with Casey's competence or job skills.

"He's a good man," Jed had said. "Very efficient, good with people and reliable. I met him a few years ago. Without going into too much detail since it's very personal, he left Louisiana to get over a relationship, one that left him not just emotionally injured but physically as well. He'll be an asset to us, I know that or I wouldn't be hiring him, but he's already said it won't be permanent. He's only helping us get the place up and running, hire the staff and help me develop the system so that, with a good manager, the guesthouse will run itself while I focus on the food and beverage department."

Five months after Casey joined us, he had fulfilled everything he'd told Jed he could do. The guesthouse, through Casey's careful hiring, now had a small but dedicated staff, who ensured the guests had peace and quiet and felt as if they were staying in a private residence rather than an impersonal hotel.

The smooth operation enabled Jed to develop the oyster and wine bar, slated to open in the new year after the renovations to the beachside section of the property was completed.

I had to admit - the guesthouse was as pretty as a Christmas card and the winter scene around the lodge, at least from the lakeside view, was a typical Winter Wonderland. Giant potted reindeer topiaries, threaded through with hundreds of lights, had been positioned on the front lawn with an
assortment of gnomes, decorated christmas trees and Santa's sleigh. Jed now owned twenty-five per
cent of the Silver Lake Lodge which, when the development was completed, would have a Wine
and Oyster bar as well as a communal-dining restaurant. At the moment, though, the beachfront
half of the sprawling property was a bit of an eyesore. I estimated it would be another eight months
before it would be ready to open for business.

My arrangement with Jed was working out well and though the latter had been surprised to get a
call from me saying I'd be there over Christmas, it had been a welcome one. It meant, Jed had said,
that we'd be able to get the construction work for the beachfront lot completed faster since I would
be there to okay any changes that might be necessary.

o     o     o

I'd driven over the day after I last spoke with Gibbs. Six months ago, that was. I hadn't seen or
heard from him since. Not even a text but then, I hadn't contacted him either. I might need Gibbs
the way I'd never needed anyone before but even I knew we needed some time apart. So much had
been crammed into our lives within such a short span of time leaving none left to stabilize ourselves
following the aftermath of our last case.

I'd told myself it was good, that this separation was necessary; that it would give Gibbs space to
figure out if he could live openly as the other half of a gay couple. It would be good for me to ease
myself out of a career I'd known my entire adult life into a completely new one as a property
developer and learning the ropes of the movie production business. Yes, I had my next year's
schedule planned out and it was full. It ought to be fulfilling since I had no regrets about leaving
law enforcement but I knew no matter how much fun I could have, my life would never be
fulfilling without him.

There was so much we needed to talk through but circumstances had been such that before we
could, our inner fears and insecurities had swamped both of us. Our plan had been to take things
one step at a time; to take the time each needed to come to terms with having our private lives
turned inside out, with being forced to deal with the aftermath of being ripped out of the closet in
such an ignominious manner. More so for Gibbs than for me. I know I'm flexible enough to roll
with the punches but Gibbs - he's reached a point in his life where he wants to settle down, not deal
with this kind of shit.

I didn't blame Gibbs one bit when our phone conversation stalled that day, when Gibbs made no
move to ask me to come over. To talk, as he'd been trying to do with me since that fateful Saturday
night. I was torn between disappointment that he didn't ask to see me and relief, because I was too
frazzled myself over what Scott had done. The stuff he'd said about me - I was cringing inside as
Scott spewed his venom, knowing every word, every drop of poison was being absorbed by the
man next to me. Gibbs had stood there, his face a frozen, icy mask. When I couldn't stand another
word, I'd rushed out of the observation room, ignoring the Director's order to stop. I'd have done
some serious damage to Scott if Muldoon and McGee hadn't intervened.

Even though Vance had managed to avoid bring SecNav into the loop, by the time the case was
closed, all of NCIS knew about Gibbs and me. There was no way either of us could continue
working there. Both Gibbs and I had known it by the time Scott was brought in for questioning but
neither of us had been prepared for the reality of having our relationship displayed and dissected in
front of our colleagues.

Yes, it had stung that Gibbs had left - resigned and left without a word to me but it was
understandable. I had stormed out of NCIS myself after I attacked Scott, hadn't I? And I hadn't
contacted Gibbs afterwards but shut myself up in my apartment after emailing the Director my
resignation. McGee had tried reaching me but I'd turned my phone off. I felt humiliated by Scott's verbal attack in front of my Director and colleagues and knew it was best I make myself scarce before I did something worse. In the end, McGee had come to my apartment to take me to Scott's house for the search and retrieval. Gibbs and I did not say a word to each other during that exercise but directed all questions and comments to McGee.

I looked around the warm cozy living room of the guesthouse with its two-story high ceilings and the corridor of bedrooms overlooking the lounge. The heating would have been difficult if not for the fireplace with the pine logs crackling away. There were two smaller fireplaces at each end of the lounge to warm the corners occupied by a trio of armchairs and a coffee table. I thought it was a house Gibbs would be comfortable in despite its size but I know he'd love the cottage at the far end of the property. It wasn't large but it had that homey feel to it, all old wood and clean glass, fat armchairs and bookshelves filled with classics and vintage detective novels like Ellery Queen, Dashiell Hammet, Raymond Chandler, and what must be an entire series of early editions of Agatha Christie.

Yup. Gibbs would love it there.

God, I miss him.

I was initially planning to spend Christmas and New Year in Rehoboth with Jed and Joe but Crispin had called to invite me to his and Tyler's engagement party in LA. on New Year's Eve. Yup, things had worked out between my cousin and the priest.

I knew it would be torturous to attend Crispin's engagement party but there was no way I could - or would - refuse. Just because my heart was aching didn't mean I couldn't be happy for the people I loved and cared about.

In fact, everything was working out for everyone...else. Abby was moving to LA after the New Year. The offer from the private forensics laboratory had been finalized and she was now a partner in the firm. She'd found a replacement for her position at NCIS, had found a suitable home in Santa Monica and was finally relocating.

She and Dr. Aidan Khan were getting married in January.

And McGee? Timothy McGee was now a Hollywood celebrity, believe it or not. He'd invited me to his celebration party for the movie based on his book, starring Robert Downey Jr in the lead role. I hadn't decided yet whether I would attend the event, which was on the last weekend of December. What had been catastrophic for Gibbs and me had been, thankfully, overshadowed by the events in his own life, and before the ink had dried on his report, so to speak, he'd also resigned and jetted to LA to meet with his publicist and agent. I never had the chance to tell him I owned part of Tradewinds Entertainment which was producing the movies of his two latest novels.

I would have felt sorry for Vance having to replace almost the entire MCRT but Vance himself was preparing for his retirement and relocation to San Francisco so, in the end, it looked like the task of rebuilding the MCRT would be left to the new Director, a tall stunning woman with an already formidable reputation from another agency.

Everyone was having their little happily-ever-afters and here I was, richer than I could ever dream of being but more miserable than a flea without a dog.

Poor little rich boy. That I was.
I heard the doorbell chime. Our guests were here.

END OF TONY'S POV

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TBC
Chapter 26

GIBBS' POV

My heart was pounding as I made my way up the path to the main door. Neither Ari Haswari, Hernandez, nor Harper Dearing, had made me this terrified.

Drawing a deep breath, I pressed the bell and heard it chime through the house. It was huge - more than double the width of mine and three storys of it. The entire property had been done up to reflect the festive season, as were all the properties around Silver Lake.

The double doors opened and Tony was standing there, his smile collapsing when he saw who stood there at his doorstep.

"Gibbs." He swallowed, startled to see me.

"Hi, Tony," I said, my tension rising when Tony just stood there, not saying or doing anything else. Was he going to invite me in or what?

"Is it our guests, Tony?" a voice rang out and I saw a tall, rangy man coming up behind Tony.


"Gibbs!" the man came forward. "Come on in. The peach cobbler's just come out of the oven. I'm Jed, by the way."

Tony moved aside for Jed to usher me in.

"Hi Jed. Pleased to meet you. I came to talk to Tony," I said. "Not sure I'll be here long enough for cobbler." I stole a glance at Tony who was looking at me still stunned.

"You don't want to miss Jed's cobbler. Or his pecan pie," Tony said, a tentative smile twisting his lips.

A third man came up, smiling widely. "Hello, are our first guests here?"

"Uh, no. Joe, this is Jethro Gibbs. My boss. Ex-boss. Jethro, Joe's Jed's husband." Tony stumbled over the 'J's and we all laughed.

And suddenly the tension was broken.
"It's a surprise to see you, Gibbs," Tony said. He'd tucked his hands in his jeans pockets and pulled one out to close the door behind me. The only comfort I could get was that he wasn't putting distance between us but didn't seem to mind that he had brushed against me when he closed the door.

"Why don't you take Jethro over to my cottage?" Jed suggested.

"The Callahans and Ashfords are due any time now," Tony said.

"It's okay, Joe and I will take care of them," Jed said. "Go on. I'll bring the cobbler over."

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"This is very nice," I said, when we entered Jed's cottage, which was about three hundred feet away from the main house and at the lake's edge. Thick shrubbery gave it privacy from the main house and there were a couple of deck chairs on the wooden deck which stretched out over the water.

Tony smiled warmly at the look of appreciation on my face. "Then you'll love the one I stay in. Or will, as soon as the renovation to the bathroom is finished. We can go have a look later, if you like."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I'd like that."

He led me to the table beside the picture window. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please. Thank you." I sat down. "What?" I asked when Tony chuckled as he went to the open kitchen.

Tony shook his head. "Never seen you so polite, Gibbs. It's weird."

"You'd rather I be the rude, boorish bastard you know?" I retorted.

"To be honest," he said, spooning coffee into the coffee maker. "I miss it. It's lovely here but...yeah, I missed it. Even the headslaps."

I sucked in a breath and plunged in. "And I've missed you. Everything about you." Tony's eyes told me he was surprised by that admission.

"Why didn't you call?" he asked.

I took awhile before I answered, then said, "Had a lot to resolve first. It was about me, not you, so the right thing to do was to work through my shit before I saw you - even if it meant I could be too late." I waited a beat then asked, "Am I?"

"I do need to know a few things before I can say where we're headed."

"Ask away."

"Just a sec. Coffee first." He dug around the cabinet and came up with packets of sugar, got milk out of the fridge then brought it all over. "Okay. I'm ready," he said, pouring out two mugs of coffee.

"What do you need to know?"
"What did you resolve, to start with."

"My sexual orientation. To start with." I looked out the window. The lake scene was pretty. Snow covered just about everything, leaving only some trees standing bare and the blue sky reflecting off the still lake surface. "I'm gay...and while I won't be shouting it from the rooftops, I won't hide it either."

"Why? Are you coming out for me?"

"Partly. If it wasn't for you, I see no reason to. But if we're together, it would be for you and me. I needed to come to that place where I could accept the way I am - that I don't feel for women the way I feel for men."

"You mean sexually."

I nodded. "I suppose you want to know why I married three more times."

"No, I've met enough closeted men to know why." We drank our coffee for several minutes in silence. What was he waiting for? Or maybe he doesn't feel the same way. Suddenly I was afraid I was too late, or that it was one-sided. Because Tony, who always has something to say...is just sitting here in front me and his coffee is more interesting than I am. Come on, Gunny. Don't just sit there yourself. Straightening up, I said, "Remember that song - 'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me'?"

"Ye-aah," Tony replied, drawing out the monosyllable, clearly unsure where I was going with this.

"You said it was an Italian song and that the lyrics didn't mean the same as the English version that Springfield sang."

"Yeah."

I dug out my wallet and took out a piece of folded paper. "I got the lyrics. Wanna read it out to you."

"Yeah?" Tony said, sounding as if the coffee he'd been staring at just spoke.

"Is that all you're gonna say?"

He looked at me, then. "Uh...yeah. You're really going to read the lyrics to me?" In Italian?

"Well, you speak Italian, don't you? I thought it'd be more meaningful in its original language." I spread out the piece of paper, took out my glasses and began to read...

*Siamo qui noi soli*

come ogni sera
ma tu sei più triste
ed io lo so perché.
So che tu vuoi dirmi
che non sei felice
che io sto cambiando
e tu mi vuoi lasciar, ma ...

Io che non vivo
più di un'ora senza te
come posso stare una vita senza te
sei mia - sei mia
mai niente lo sai
separarci un giorno potrà

Vieni qui ascoltami
io ti voglio bene
te ne prego fermati
ancora insieme a me

Io che non vivo più di un'ora senza te
come posso stare una vita senza te sei mia - sei mia...

I looked up at Tony when I came to the end. "What's wrong?"

"Your Italian is horrendous!" Tony replied, laughing and wiping away the moisture from his eyes. Eyes that were filled with stuff of my dreams. "Thank God I speak Italian fluently or I wouldn't have a clue what I just sat through."

"Well?" I asked. "Is that all you have to say?"

"No, Jethro. I have a lot to say but why not I start with translating the lyrics back to you in English?"

"I looked it up," I said. "It's in my wallet. Hang on -" I started to dig for it but Tony stopped me.

"Let me translate it and say it back to you," he said. "One more time?"

"Play it again, Sam," I whispered.

Tony took the piece of paper from the table. "Here goes..."

"That's me saying that to you." I nodded at the paper in his hands.

"I know, Jethro. Relax."

We are alone here
Like every evening
But you are sadder
And I know why
Perhaps you want to tell me
That you are not happy
That I am changing
And you want to leave me

I cannot live
More than an hour without you
So how can I spend a lifetime
Without you
You're mine
You're mine
You know nothing will
Ever part us

*Come here, listen to me*
I love you
Please stop
Stay with me

"Then the chorus is repeated," Tony said, putting the paper down and looking at me. "Never thought there was a romantic hidden under that Marine."

I swallowed, unsure how to go on. I was gobsmacked. "Tony -" I started then stopped.

"Yeah?"

"I love you," I said. "You don't have to say it back -"

"Just be close at hand, huh?"

"Yeah." I swallowed and waited. "That Saturday night, when I said I need you, you said you'd always stay. But you left..."

"You left first."

"So I'm here to beg you to come home."

"You know this could get pretty corny, don't you?" he asked.

"I know, so -"

"So I am going to say I love you and yeah, I plan on sticking around if you want me that close."

"Want you *very* close," I replied. "Not just for a few days or weeks. Forever, Tony."

"You know I come with conditions and lifestyle changes, don't you?" he asked. "Like the Italian lyrics you mangled to death, yeah, I was sad. Sadder than I'd ever been in my life. Yeah, I wasn't happy and I *was* changing. When I was with Scott, and all the years before that, I was like you - deep in the closet. I hooked up with other closeted men like you during the nights and in the day I had female friends. Beards."

"Like Christie."

"Yes. She's not only a very good friend, she's been through a lot in her life. And she's a lesbian. She's not out either. Anyway, after Scott and I broke up... after that Saturday night... and by the time we were in Mexico, I began to see how Scott must have felt about having to hide our relationship. Of course, he had his own agenda -" Tony ignored the look of derision on my face. "- but I knew then, that the next relationship I was in, it would have to be one I didn't have to hide. I'd want a partner who wouldn't be afraid of being seen up close and personal with me.

"That's why I wanted to leave you. *Needed* to leave, hard as it was. I told myself if you're the one for me, you would come for me. Because I need someone strong, someone who will stand up for me.

"Because I would do the same for him," he added.

"That morning," I interrupted him. "In interrogation. I was going to kill that asshole. After you rushed out, I followed but Vance stopped me. Caught my arm and slammed me against the wall
then yelled for the other agents to restrain me and take me away. He knew I would have made sure Scott Branson didn't leave the building on his two legs."

"I would have killed him, too, if McGee and Muldoon hadn't stopped me," Tony said. "Whoever hurts you, hurts me, too."

"Your terms and conditions -" I began and paused. Tony's eyes were fixed so intensely on me that it took me aback momentarily. *He wants this as much as I do. Hallelujah.* "I believe I can manage them pretty well."

"You can?"

"Yes, Tony. I can and will. I've done my wrestling these past six months. I've come to terms with myself about a lot of things. I wasn't too happy with the conclusions I arrived at, but one thing stood out - whatever I was afraid of, I'm willing to overcome because of you. Well, that was what it began as. Later, it became for me as well. I had to overcome my mental obstacles for *my* sake, too, or I'd find myself regressing one day. One step at a time, like we'd agreed back in Mexico. Must be a slow learner to take six months."

"Better than six years."

I grunted in agreement. "Or twelve."

"So you think you could live openly as a gay man?" Tony asked."

"Yeah. Just don't expect me to be riding on a float dressed in pink sequins waving a rainbow flag."

"Aw...Gibbs. You're no fun." Tony chuckled. "I'm not going to ask you to do anything I wouldn't do." He sobered up and added, "No, I need to be sure you're ready to come out of the closet."

"Well, first of all, I didn't have a choice when Scott's blackmail scheme blew things sky high, but later I began to see it as a blessing in disguise. I began to be thankful and relieved I no longer needed to live a lie, but that got replaced with the thought that it cost me the only person I'd ever loved with my entire being. I couldn't bear the thought that I had lost you."

"Why didn't you call? Or send a text message?" Tony asked.

I glared at him, then. "The last time I had to do that, you wouldn't answer my calls or respond to my text messages. I couldn't bring myself to go through that again. Figured when the time came, I would say what I had to face-to-face."

"So this is for real?" Tony asked. "You're out?"

"Yes, I'm out. Everyone at NCIS knows. Vance and I had a good talk. It's fine between us. He and Jackie have invited me to visit them in San Francisco."

"I'm uhh, really happy about this," Tony said. "I'd been telling myself these past six months...that even if we got together it might not work because you'd hate what I do, the people I have to meet, and you'd end up resenting it. End up angry that your personal life is no longer private."

"Hey, it's not as if you're telling me to put out a full-page ad in the papers."

"Might as well," Tony said. "Because I'm working with the entertainment industry now. Yeah." He caught my look of surprise. "I'm flying over to LA after Christmas. My cousin, Crispin, is having his engagement party. He's marrying a priest - yeah, and you thought you had problems."
"A priest?"

"Well, ex-priest. Tyler's ministry is now with war veterans and he's started up a soup kitchen and building a homeless shelter. Anyway, what I'm warning you is that we're not going to be able to keep our relationship private. Some of the people I have to deal with, and meet, are pretty high-profile. Hollywood actors and producers, directors."

"Why are you involved with them?"

"Because I'm now one of those producers. Oh yeah, believe it or not."

"Oh, I believe it. So, you're in the movie business? That movie company you were telling me about?"

"That's the one. I'm now one of the producers of the new TV drama based on -" he imitated a drumroll. "Tadaaaa! N-C-I-S!"

"NCIS?"

"Yes! It's a new series starting next Fall. So yeah, if we're going to be a couple, we can't hide. It's going to be as good - or as bad - as taking out a full page ad. Our photos are going to be on magazine articles, maybe on TV cos you'll be attending red carpet premieres and other Hollywood functions with me."

"I will?" I must have sounded horrified because Tony quickly clarified, "I can always put a strict no-photos, no personal disclosures though we don't want to totally piss them off either."

"Who's 'them'?"

"The entertainment press," he replied. "Oh hell, forget it. We do it entirely our way no matter what the cost. If Tradewinds' board doesn't agree with the way I run my own life, they know where they can shove themselves."

"You sure?" I wasn't. "I don't want to be the cause of you losing something you enjoy."

"Why not? You're coming out of the closet for me so I can give up some stuff for you. It's called Compromise. Anyway, that's just one of the changes you'd have to adjust to. Another one is that I'm going to be travelling a fair bit. Not just around the US but other parts of the world. I'd like you to come with me but if you'd rather stay put, that'll be okay."

"It will?"

"Yes, Gibbs. It will. I don't have a boss over me anymore. Neither do you. We have enough money to do whatever we want. Or nothing, if that's what we prefer."

"So this is it?" I asked.

"What is 'it'?"

"Is this settled, then? What we have between us?"

"You mean have we declared undying love for each other and all that sentimental crap?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, but also coming out together as a couple. I need to know you really want this, too, and not because we were forced to."
"Hey, that's supposed to be my line but in case you're partially deaf -" Tony got up from the seat and came and knelt beside me. "I love you, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and I want to shout it from the rooftop. If I didn't know you'd kill me, I'd make a press statement for Tradewinds' publicity department. I want you in my life for as long as I live. I will go where you go and stay wherever you stay."

Then he took my hand and raised it to his lips. "That settled it?"

"Yeah," I said. "Coz I gotta call Dwayne. He's waiting to hear from me."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to be flying down to New Orleans with him tomorrow. He and I are going to buy over a bar in the French Quarter. I also put my house up for sale. Moving down to New Orleans."

"You still want to do that?"

"Yes...but -" I paused. "But now I'm not sure. I mean, you're here. In two weeks' time you're going to be in LA. I'm not sure what's next for me and how, exactly, I'm going to fit in with your plans. We've only talked in generalities...." I trailed off.

"And you've only been here an hour plus," Tony said wryly. "Give yourself a break, Jethro. Can I call you Jethro now? I can, right? But I kinda miss 'boss'."

"Jethro's fine. I don't mind 'boss' either. So what will it be? I go or stay?"

"Know what the great thing is about our lives now?"

"What?"

"We can do both. We spend Christmas in New Orleans and do whatever you have to do then fly to LA for Crispin and Tyler's engagement, and, oh yeah, attend McGee's celebration party for one of his books that Tradewinds is making a movie of. We can move into our Malibu house. Or sell it if you want. We can do anything. Go anywhere. And we're doing it toGETHer So go give Special Agent Dwayne Cassius Pride that call and tell him we're flying down to New Orleans tomorrow. And tell him to forget about booking the tickets. We're invading the Crescent City by Gulfstream."

I took out my phone, punched Dwayne's number. "Hey, it's me. DiNozzo wants to talk to you." And passed the phone to Tony.

-----------------------------------------------

TBC
Tony's pov

After Dwayne and I ended the call, I said to Gibbs, "Let's go over to our cottage. Like I said, bathroom's under renovation but we'll have privacy. What I want to do next with you, I don't want anyone walking in on."

A smile broke out on Gibbs face and honest to God, I felt like falling on my knees and weeping at the sight. "You'll stay the night and we go back to DC tomorrow?"

"Was hoping you'd suggest that," Gibbs said, getting up and pocketing his phone. "Let me get my bag from the car."

"I'll let Jed and Joe know we're leaving tomorrow while you do that."

We walked back to the main house, going by the lake entrance.

The new arrivals were there and Jed was with them. He saw us and waved. "I'll just go greet our new guests," I told Gibbs. "You go get your bag."

"I'll come with you." At my look of surprise and a flicker of uncertainty, he added, "I can say 'hi', too. Can't I?" and gave me that fake innocent look. "I promise not to growl." I must have looked unconvinced because he said, "What? You think I can't be nice?" He shook his head and walked ahead of me.

I hurried to catch up with him. Those were our very first paying customers. The venture means a lot to Jed and I know he's been excited about our opening. I crossed my mental fingers that Gibbs would - could - be nice. I mean, I've known the man to glare at SecNav and from what I can see, one of the four guests was totally flaming. Oh God...

"Hi," Gibbs smiled, hand extended in greeting. "Jethro. This is my partner, Tony. He owns this place." He slipped his arm around my waist and smiled at me like I hung the moon.

"Hi!" All four men smiled back widely, shaking both Gibbs' and my hand. "I'm Sam," one of them said. "This is my husband, Troy, and that's Neil and Paul Ashford. They just got hitched last month."

"Hello, Sweetcheeks," Neil, the flaming queen, smirked at Gibbs. "This isn't one of those swingers' establishments, is it?"

At Gibbs' uncomprehending look, Sam explained, "Troy and I play with regularly with Neil and Paul."
"And you're welcome to join us any time," Paul said. "You and Joe, too." He added to Jed.

"Play what?" Gibbs asked, but Jed stepped in and took over.

"But we don't share," Jed said. "You're welcome to make yourselves entirely at home - as long as you don't trash the place - and you're even welcome to invite 'friends' back to your room - again, if they don't trash the place. Right, Tony?"

"Tony?" Gibbs had to tap me on the shoulder to break me out of my daze.

"Huh?" I started and grinned like an idiot. "Oh yeah. No, Gibbs and I aren't into sharing either...but, please, you guys knock yourselves out."

Gibbs gave me grin and a squeeze. "Going to get my bag." He took off and left me there with our guests and Jed looking at me inquisitively. I hadn't told either him or Joe about what Gibbs was to me apart from the fact that he was my immediate boss but I think he's guessed.

"Jethro's staying over," I told Jed. "We're leaving in the morning after breakfast. Heading down to New Orleans for Christmas."

"Okay." Jed responded, still giving me knowing looks. I'd explain later, my corresponding look told him.

"Gentlemen, please excuse me," I said. "Have a pleasant stay with us and I do hope to see you return." I turned back to Jed. "What happened to the peach cobbler?"

"Joe took it over but came back with it saying you guys weren't interested in peach or any cobbler at the moment."

Bursts of laughter, a nudge and a wink followed Jed's deadpan reply.

I flushed and waved goodbye. "Have fun. See ya later."

o o o

"You're really here with me," I said softly, my face still buried in between Gibbs' neck and shoulder. I'd showed Gibbs the cottage and we'd spent several minutes just enjoying the scenery from our deck. As the day came to a close, we sat in the twilight watching the sun set over the lake's waters.

When Gibbs finally stood and held out his hand to me, I went to him and his arms enfolded me. He kissed me long and tenderly, then just stood there holding me and studying my face until I grew uncomfortable.

"What?" I asked, puzzlement and concern etched on my face.

"You," he whispered. "You're so beautiful...and you're mine. You are, aren't you?"

"Umhmm." I nodded.

"Sunset on your face...a golden child." He cupped my face and kissed me lightly. "I love you, Tony."
"Umm. Uh..." I closed my eyes. *Was this really happening?* 

"You sick or something?"

My eyes flew open. "What?"

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Why?"

"I'm trying to be romantic here and all I'm getting are unintelligible monosyllables. Where's my mouthy DiNozzo? I want him back."

I pulled him back in for another long, long kiss that left no doubt as to what I was feeling for him.

"Retired Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs," I began. "I love you more than I could ever find the words for. I love you far more deeply than all the world's love songs could convey so just let me shut up and absorb all of this just awhile more. After that, you can have your DiNozzo back."

Without another word, Gibbs led me back inside. Without another word, we stripped and got into bed. I made slow, tender love to him even though I was the one being filled, ravaged and deliciously fucked. Tonight it was about a union, not merely sexual fulfillment.

That evening as the last of the winter light faded and the thick, inky darkness enveloped us, I simply knew Gibbs' body all over again, feeling my way past every square inch, kissing each precious one as I moved over him.

If sex in Amalfi was one of first time wonder, sex here and tonight was about closure.

In silence, he let me turn him over and feel his entire back from head to the soles of his feet. In darkness and only the sounds of the insects (okay, so there was some traffic noise from the main road just outside), I familiarized myself with those parts of him that had only been objects of my fantasies.

This was a man who had given all for me. Coming out was a big deal to him. It was big for me when I was with Scott and I refused to budge but to a man like Gibbs, it's monumental. I will never underestimate what it meant when he went up the new arrivals and introduced himself as my partner knowing it would be understood as a personal, not a professional or commercial designation.

While I hated the months of separation, I'm glad we did that. I'm even more relieved it's over. Gibbs had come to me. *For me.* Of his own volition. I'm glad I gave him the time to come to terms with everything at his own pace and that it wasn't too late.

There we were, in Italy, agreeing to take things one step at a time, not to rush anything, and we came home to receive that volley Scott threw at us. It hit us from so many angles, leaving us with no chance to recover our equilibrium, but we survived.

I wasn't sure we'd survive what I needed to tell him next. I was nuzzling his ear when I said, "Did I mention that Diane and Fornell are flying down to New Orleans with us?"

The yell from Gibbs had birds flying out of their roosts.

"WHA-ATT? Tony!" Gibbs shot up from the bed. "Turn on the light! Fuck, Tony. What do you mean Diane's going with us?"
"Hold your horses," I muttered, as I scrambled for the bedside lamp.

"You spoke to Diane?" Gibbs demanded, grabbing his jeans and digging into it.

"No, don't call her," I said. "Dwayne told me earlier when we were talking. It seems Diane knows you're gay -"

"What? How -"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"I'm not talking to my ex about my sex life!" he snapped. "And she's not going anywhere with us. How did that happen, anyway?"

"Well, uhh Dwayne wanted to know if everything was good with us - you and me - and I told him everything was great. Then he said he only had one other question so I said, "shoot" and he asked if we were coming out as a couple voluntarily; said Fornell was asking him whether you'd told him, Dwayne, that is, about the Scott fiasco outing us."

"Shit. I didn't tell Tobias anything about Scott. I only told Dwayne yesterday."

"Fornell would have found out the same way as everyone else - during, or even after, the investigation. He was the one who passed McGee the info on Bugsy and Maniscalco and even if he hadn't known who were in the video, he would have heard eventually."

"Said he tried calling you but your voice message said you were on vacation and not to bother leaving a message. Uh, didn't think you knew how to leave a voice message."

"Got McGee to do it for me. Yeah, I was holed up somewhere in the woods. Needed the peace and quiet. Took Dwayne's calls, though. Didn't say anything to him so I was surprised to see him turn up in my basement."

"Fornell called him when he couldn't reach you. He thought you might have gone down to see him. When Dwayne said you weren't there, Fornell gave him the rundown and Dwayne took the next flight out."

"Diane. How did she get involved and I wanna know why she's invited herself."

"She was listening in on my conversation with Dwayne."

"So what's new?" Gibbs muttered. "Damned woman."

"But you know she was worried, don't you?"

"Don't give her the right to mess with my business. I'm not her husband anymore. What has Tobias got to say?"

"He's looking forward to flying private. Asked if my Gulfstream beats Air Force One. Told him it wasn't mine, that I was just borrowing it from my cousin."

"Shit." Gibbs shook his head. "I'm sorry, Tony. I'll call him now and tell him they're not going anywhere with us."

"I don't mind, you know. I think it's good if you have some of your friends around to help us get used to this...our being a couple. Besides, Diane says you owe her."
"What? Owe her what?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Ask her yourself. She did say something about letting her think you were still in love with your first wife when all along it was something else?"

"I still -" Gibbs' shoulders slumped and he gave a resigned sigh. "Okay. Might as well get it over with."

GIBBS' POV

"We need to talk to Abs and McGee about us," I said, as Tony drove the two of us back to DC the next morning.

"I know," Tony replied. "I was, too, but I didn't want to talk to anyone for a long while after I left NCIS."

"Neither did I," I said. "But Abby knows what happened, of course. She did call me just to ask if I was okay. She knows me well enough to know she's not going to get anywhere asking questions I don't want to answer."

"By the time I felt I could deal with that, McGee and Abby had left," Tony said. "I didn't want to see Vance so I just stayed on in Rehoboth Beach and oversaw the construction work for the Oyster Bar and the beachfront guestrooms."

"We can go see Ducky," I suggested. "He called me, too, and reminded me he would be there if I ever wanted to see him." I paused as I thought about what I was going to say. Then went for it, "Tony, we can go see Ducky for a different reason altogether."

"What different reason?"

"Get tested." When Tony regarded me with a look that spoke volumes, I added, "I haven't been with anyone for a long time. Over a year." Tony's brows shot up. "I know," I chuckled. "But it's true. And all of them were women. I've never had a man fuck me and I want that. I want you...inside me."

I looked at Tony who'd turned his eyes back on the road but I could see there was something he wanted to say. Or ask. I took a guess and said, "You're it, Tony. End of the line. I don't want anyone else. I don't think I ever did the moment I set eyes on you. If you think I'll be enough for you then I wanna dispense with the condoms. Don't ever want anything between us again."

"I got my test results that Saturday," Tony said. "Scott and I hadn't had sex for over a week by then and I've never had sex without protection. I've been getting tested regularly because I have had sex with men other than Scott. Not while I was with him, of course, so regular testing and suiting up
has been a habit of mine. Do I think you'll be enough for me? Jethro, what you are to me...it's way, way more than one lifetime can hold. So yeah, let's go see Ducky."

I took out my phone and a few minutes later, I said, "Told him we'd be there in an hour."

"Remember I told you about us going to LA?" Tony asked a while later.

"Yeah."

"We can try and meet up with McGee and Abby together there if they can squeeze us in their tight schedules."

I nodded. "Let's do that."

We didn't take long with Ducky, going in and out as fast we could before everyone returned from lunch. We'd get the results of the standard STD tests online within 2 days, the HIV in twenty minutes. We left autopsy, promising Ducky we'd keep in contact and while Tony was preparing his urine sample, told Ducky about Tony and me.

As we left, I told Tony that Burley had been recalled from Rota where he'd been Special Agent-in-Charge the last 5 years. "He's heading MCRT now and he's the logical choice to move up as Deputy Director of MTAC."

"I should go congratulate him," Tony said. "But not today, not here. I'll call him sometime. How's Vance?"

"Hanging in there. His last day's this Friday then the family's moves across to San Francisco in the new year."

Tony chuckled and said, "What's this? Some kind of migratory pattern of the NCIS bird species? All heading West?"

"Are we?" I asked.

"For awhile, yes." Tony glanced at me. "You're okay with that? If not, we can come back here, or settle in New Orleans since you're planning to invest in a bar, which, if I may say so, is like the last thing I expected you to."

I laughed. "There're a lot more things I can do, or want to do, that would surprise you."

"Oh yeah?" Tony waggled his eyebrows. "We can spend a few weeks in LA after our social and personal obligations are fulfilled and decide if we want to stay."

"Your new job requires you to be based in LA, doesn't it?"

"My new "job" is more a vocation," Tony replied. "And entirely voluntary. A commitment and 'labor of love'."

"Yeah, I know you love your movies...the whole movie industry. Makes me wonder why you never tried to get into it earlier."

"Okay, here's confession time. Again." Tony paused to make a left turn, then said. "When you called to offer me a job twelve years ago, heading for LA was at the top of my 'what-next' list. I even thought of going into acting but no, my fascination is with the process of movie-making, the sum of its parts." He stopped and I looked at him, waiting for him to continue. "But my priority list
changed after you hired me. You went to the top of the list. Today, the ‘job’, my job, my vocation, is taking care of you.” He paused for breath then said, "Leroy Jethro Gibbs - for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health; for as long as we shall both live...or however it goes."

I stared at him for a few interminably long seconds before asking, "Tony -" I paused, frowning. "Did you just propose to me on the Beltway?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether the answer's yes or no. If it's no, then we'll pretend I never asked.

We were approaching the turn-off to my street. "No more pretending, Tony. I told you, this is it. This is me now. My life. Here, with you."

"Know what?" he asked, grinning at me. "In the old days, the old Gibbs would have just said one word - yes or no. This new Gibbs...he's rather talkative."

I scowled at him. Several minutes later, just as we pulled up outside my house, I gave him my monosyllabic answer.


Dwayne was making himself comfortable watching my westerns on the old black and white when Tony and I entered the house.

Looking right past me, Dwayne said to Tony, "Hey, DiNozzo. If you two ever decide to get married, I'm buying you a 60-inch color TV." He shook his head in disgust. "How the hell you watch anything on that twenty-three inch antiquated piece of scrap metal I don't know. It belongs in the Smithsonian."

"You should see the one I have in the basement," I told him. "It's older than this one. I took it off my dad when he upgraded to a color TV - the first of its kind in Stillwater."

"Special Agent Pride, you can go shopping," Tony announced, and pulled me in for a brief but hard kiss.

Pride's eyes rounded. "Well, I'll be damned." And he gave us a hug with the congratulations.

We sat around and had a beer after that, talking about the bar Dwayne and I were planning to buy.

END OF GIBBS' POV


Fornell and Diane went over to Gibbs' house after Gibbs called to let them know he and Tony were back.

To give Gibbs and Diane some privacy, Tony suggested to Dwayne and Tobias, as Tony now called him, that they move Gibbs' stuff into the storage container he was using. He'd leased a huge one and moved his furnishings in when he moved to Rehoboth so there was more than enough space to store Gibbs' things.

They heard the yelling even before Tony pulled out of the driveway, earning an 'I-told-you-so' from Tobias.

When they got back, wondering whether Gibbs and Diane had resolved things, Diane told them if they had done what they just did, back when they were married, she believed their marriage would have worked.

"You mean all that yelling we heard?" Dwayne asked, skeptically. "I told your husband and Tony we ought to go back in there and pull you two apart before you killed each other." He hadn't agreed with Gibbs' wanting to clear the air with Diane but Tobias wasn't complaining so he'd left it. All he knew was that when he finally met someone he wanted to marry, a little less aggressiveness and whole lot more submission was what he'd be looking for.

"Yes, I mean all that yelling," Diane replied. "Throughout our marriage he did not raise his voice even once at me. Always so...placid. Controlled. All emotions in check. Now?" she looked at Tony. "I hope you're prepared for life with the new Leroy Jethro Gibbs." Then she'd sighed, gave both Gibbs and Tony a lopsided smile and hugged them both. "I'm happy for both of you. I told Tobias I suspected Gibbs was a closeted gay and that it wasn't my fault our sex life was what it was...of course Tobias thought I was crazy." She turned to Gibbs, "I'm glad you're living the life you should have years ago and I'm glad it's with Tony. So thank you for having us along but I figure you owe me for not telling me the truth all those years, and Tobias, you owe for doubting me. I know you had your heart set on Key West but...this is special. For me. I can now sleep knowing Jethro wasn't rejecting me because he couldn't let go of Shannon. Now I know it was because I didn't have the right plumbing! So thank you for inviting Tobias and me along to New Orleans. And Tony, I promise you won't even know I'm around."

Both Gibbs and Tobias snorted together. Diane left to pick Emily up from school and drop her at her mom's place then went shopping for vacation-wear. Tobias stayed on at Gibbs and had dinner with them.

The next day, Dwayne herded them all into the 8-seater people mover Tony had organized to take them to the airport. Diane had a good heart but, man, he was glad he lived several states away.

There had been discussions about Gibbs selling his house. Or not. Gibbs decided he did want to sell the house but Tony had expressed his concerns.

"New start," Gibbs said, when Tony asked him if he was ready to do that. "Never look back,
Tony."

"I just meant that you might like something familiar to retreat to if things get too much for you." Tony had been concerned the changes in their lifestyle would get to Gibbs eventually, and was certain Gibbs would need a hideaway.

"Oh, I know I will," Gibbs said. "I just meant that I'll go look for somewhere else once we've decided where we're going to settle down. But this house? It represents my old life; a phase I've left behind. There're too many memories here and most of them not good. I want to create new memories in a new house."

Tony kissed him. "New ones and good ones...I think I can help."

o o o

Friday, 20th December 2013

Bourbon Street;

New Orleans

The morning after they arrived, they had coffee and beignets at Café du Monde before walking to Cassius' Bar on Bourbon Street. The minute Tony entered the property, he said to Tobias and Diane, "It's got Gibbs written all over it."

The old, grimy three-story building stood on its own, unlike most of the buildings around it which were joined up. The ornate wrought-iron balcony on the second floor extended around three sides. The third floor had three individual balconies.

"Been in the family for over fifty years," Dwayne said. "When they fell on hard times, rather than sell, Cassius - the first Cassius, that is - turned it into a commercial enterprise instead. Been one since then."

One side of the building, where the balcony extended from one end to the other, had a small garden, sadly-overgrown and in dire need of maintenance, as was the building itself. The other side was an alley for loading/unloading and exited onto Royal Street which ran parallel to Bourbon. The exterior of the building was a dirty salmon-pink, old and decrepit, yet full of character and a bygone elegance that clung to it, nonetheless. Tony could see Gibbs' brain churning away, the looks he and Dwayne exchanged, the half-smile hovering on his lips.

"Ready?" Dwayne asked, as he stood on the threshold of the bar's front door. Four faces looked on expectantly. Dwayne unlocked the grilled gates, unlocked the wooden doors beyond and threw them open with a flourish. "Tadaa-aaa." Gesturing to them to enter, he locked up again after they all filed in.

Inside, despite the lights being switched on, it was dingy and musty, the furniture worn and the whole place badly in need of refurbishing. Tony thought the pest-control guys needed to be brought in as well when he was certain he heard something skittering behind the bar counter.
Despite its worn and tired look, as if everything was just the way it was when Grandpa Cassius commenced business in 1954, Tony could imagine what it was like when it was open and filled to the gills every night. And day, from noon onwards till six in the morning.

"The only difference," Dwayne said, as he led the group through the bar area, "is that while downstairs was the bar, upstairs was the brothel. In the 60s, when the DA started cleaning up Bourbon Street, the girls were removed and the rooms rented out. Cassius - the current one - was renting out the rooms up to last year when he decided to sell."

"Where is he?" Diane asked. "I thought he'd be here."

"He was readmitted to hospital yesterday," Dwayne replied. "Been ill for months."

"Who was managing the bar if he was sick?" Gibbs asked. "Bar's well-stocked. Glasses look clean enough."

"Lester. Been looking after the place with Cassius for twenty years. He's taken leave for a month to visit his mother and sister in Jamaica so the bar's closed until he gets back. He's indicated he'll continue co-manage the place if we want him."

"Cassius will sell to you and Gibbs?" Tony asked.

"Yes," Dwayne replied. "I spoke to him for a short while last night. Said I'd be showing Jethro the place today and if he's still keen then I'll have the papers drawn up. Come, I want you to see the back."

"Oh," Diane's monosyllable followed by her smile said it all. "This is gorgeous! Look, Tobias. A Koi pond. Yellow koi, too. I love yellow koi."

"What do you think?" Dwayne asked Gibbs. "We could tear down the back wall and open the bar out to the garden; put some tables out here."

It was a mini botanical garden, right in the middle of a busy, crowded and noisy neighborhood, a tranquil contrast to the main street whose buildings were tightly-packed from block to block near the Central Business District end. Aside from the koi pond, there was a fountain and a small pavilion. Here, in this lush sanctuary, the sights and sounds of the French Quarter felt miles away instead of just outside the front door.

They spent the next half hour viewing the top two floors and by the time they all descended, Diane said the first thing they had to do was to install an elevator. "Those stairs are steep! You'll trip and break your neck, Jethro."

Gibbs turned to Fornell, "Do me a favor and marry her quickly. Please."

"I agree with her," Fornell said. "It's going to cost ya, too, doing up this place."

"What's Cassius asking for it?" Diane asked.

"Two point one million," Dwayne replied before Gibbs could stop him.
"You have two million dollars?" Diane whirled round to Gibbs with accusing glare.

Gibbs heaved a heavy sigh. "No, Diane. I do not have two million dollars. I do not have one million dollars. All I have is what I can get for my house."

"Four hundred thousand, if you're lucky," Diane said. "Or if you have a good agent. I have a friend."

"Dwayne," Gibbs said, as he walked away, leaving Diane talking. "It's nice. Too nice. Too expensive. Look for something else."

Tony came out of the restroom to learn Gibbs had left the building.

Tony and Dwayne found him in the restaurant next door, having beignets (he loved them, he said) and coffee.

"Cassius is giving it away to us for one million," Dwayne said, sitting down at the table. "One million. We can get a loan, Jethro. It's manageable."

"That's half what he put it on the market for," Gibbs said. "Why would he sell it at half the price?"

"Because he's dying. Tumor in his brain is growing; His cancer's spread. Docs have given him six to nine months. He never married. No family here to speak of. They all moved out of state a long time ago. He's got enough to keep him comfortable until the time comes. He's got a few months left before he starts deteriorating more rapidly."

"Is he in a condition, mentally, to make such a decision?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, he already put it on the market two years ago and approached me asking if I was interested," Dwayne said. "He was only diagnosed in June this year. I didn't want to tell you about his condition or his offer to us until you saw the place yourself."

He could afford half a million, Gibbs thought. Dwayne would buy the other half and he guessed getting a loan for the renovations and refurbishment shouldn't be a problem. "What do you think, Tony?" he asked.

"I think it would be crazy to pass it up. If you don't want it, I do. We'd recover the money within a couple of years, if not less, once it's done up and operating at full speed."

"We've never managed a bar before. And one million dollars, even between the two of us...I dunno," Gibbs murmured, but Tony could see he was seriously considering the idea.

"I don't have experience making movies either, but I still went full steam ahead with Tradewinds. The spirit of adventure! Can't leave home without it, boss."

Gibbs smiled. "I guess if it doesn't work out, I can be your boy toy."

"Now, you're talking." Tony grinned.
In the end, Gibbs agreed to let Tony ask his financial advisers for advice. They came back and told him the bar, at its current annual revenue, would recoup the investment within two years.

They spent Christmas in New Orleans celebrating Gibbs' and Dwayne's new acquisition. It was Diane who persuaded Gibbs to let Tony's property investment company purchase the property then sell it to the two men.

"If it fails, I'm foreclosing on your ass," Tony told Gibbs.

Gibbs laughed, ate, drank (but never got drunk), and gave a New Orleans tee shirt to Tony which said 'Don't Eat Da Straight Ones' which had a drawing of a straight crawfish.

"It's a long-held belief that a straight-tailed crawfish was dead when it went into the pot," Dwayne told Fornell when he asked about the significance. "It's gotta be alive, brotha. Alive."

"That's a very...nice...tee shirt, boss," Tony said eyeing the shirt which he was holding up. Laughter from behind the tee shirt had him looking at the group. "What you laughing at?"

"Read the back of your tee shirt," Diane said.

Tony turned it around and read the message -

But I'm gay and you can eat me anytime.

"Gibbs. I am shocked," Tony said.

"I've seen that tee shirt," Dwayne said. "But never with that gay phrase on the other side. Where did you buy it from?"

"Some shop called Fleurty Girl, just round the corner from our bar, on St Peter Street," Gibbs said. "After I bought it, I saw this hole-in-the-wall shop that did instant printing for tee shirts. Went in and had it done."

"Talking about the bar, it's still listed under its current name," Tony said. "You thinking of a name change?"

Several names were proposed and over casual dinner and drinks that night at Fais Do-Do, the restaurant next door, Tony came up with one.

He borrowed a pen from Dwayne and wrote on the paper napkin, 'Cassius' Bbar'.

Diane read it and said, "It's the same name. Except you spelt 'bar' wrong. You've got two 'b's."

"I know," Tony said, ignoring the glare from Gibbs.

"What's the second 'b' for?" Diane asked.

"BASTARD!" Tony, Fornell and Dwayne shouted out together.
Diane stared at them then broke into a peal of laughter, snorting and slapping Tony then promptly choked, coughed and literally fell off her chair, still laughing.

When order was restored and the waitstaff was assured the crazy lady at table nine wasn't hurt, Gibbs said, "Let's go with that."

TBC

A/N: The tee shirt is from a real shop in the French Quarter called Fleurty Girl at 632 St Peter Street. $22 - without Gibbs' one-liner on the back, of course.
Friday, 27th December

Los Angeles

3RD PERSON POV

Gibbs and Tony left New Orleans for LA the day after Christmas. Fornell and Diane stayed on and the last Gibbs heard, Diane had taken over the refurbishing of the bar.

Crispin and Tyler picked them up at the airport and took them to his home in Malibu where they would be staying for the duration of their visit.

The house Tony's uncle had given him was currently leased out to an A-List actor who, yesterday, had offered to buy it over.

"Let's go see it," Tony suggested to Gibbs. "If we don't like it we'll sell it and look for something else."

"You haven't seen it?" Gibbs asked, as Crispin pulled up outside his home, an ultra-modern structure, accessed through a gated driveway off the Pacific Coast Highway.

"No," Tony replied. "Seen photos of it some years back, though."

A call to his property manager - "You have a property manager?" Gibbs asked - and a blond, sharp-suited woman appeared in fifteen minutes, keys in hand. Charyl, her name was, and Tony's property manager had sent her to attend to his request.

The 5,000 square feet, six-bedroom home was a few gates (rather than 'doors') away from Crispin's and, like Crispin's, had stairway down to the beach.

It was beautifully furnished, of course, with panoramic views of the Pacific.
"The tenants don't live here?" Gibbs asked as his gaze swept over the picture-perfect lounge and terrace outside where a large swimming pool fell off, infinity-style, into the horizon.

"Only a few weeks of the year," Charyl, the real estate agent replied. "Mr. DiNozzo," she turned to Tony. "Are you open to an offer from Mr. Downey? His p.a. called me again yesterday."

"I'll let you know as soon as I've discussed it with Jethro."

"Of course. Shall I call you back, say, in a few days?"

"That'll be fine."

Later, during dinner at home with Crispin and Tyler, Gibbs said, "It's beautiful, Tony, but it's -"

"A showhouse," Tony said.

"Yeah."


"So does this one we're in," Tony pointed out. Crispin's home was on 1.2 acres of land and six thousand square feet of living space.

"Tyler and I have another home in LA," Crispin said. "We just bought it last month. Once the paint fumes are gone and the decking's ready, we're moving in."

"Oh yeah?" Tony asked. "Why? This one not big enough?" he snickered.

"As you say, it's a showhouse. The other one is a small three-bedroom home. Operative word 'home'."

"I'm like Gibbs," Tyler said. "I don't care for the ultra-luxurious look but it comes with the territory with Cris so we compromised - we found a nice one just up the road. We'll move over there and keep this one for Cris' entertainment purposes and his guests."

"There are three bedroom homes along here?" Gibbs asked skeptically.

Tyler laughed. "Yes. Want go take a look? The same idea may work for the both of you."

As with New Orleans, Tony could tell immediately that Gibbs liked what he saw. Tyler and Cris' home was seven minutes further up north along the coastal highway, the last one on a row of beachfront homes.

As Tyler had said, this was a home to them. It was a far cry from the mansion we just came from but the two-story, three bedroom home was well-designed to make the most of the ocean views from its three thousand five hundred square feet of living space. The furnishing and amenities were aimed at functionality rather than to create envy.

The obligatory porch outside the lounge had a simple wooden table with six chairs and there was another verandah upstairs running the width of the house. Two deckchairs and a small table occupied it.
"The remaining two bedrooms are our home office, though I'm home a lot more than Cris," Tyler said.

"Tony told me you work with homeless people," Gibbs said.

"Not just homeless," Tyler replied. "Many are just in need of temporary shelter for some reason or another. Most are vets who come home from some hellhole or another to find the wife's sold the house and taken off with the kids, or she gets it with the divorce settlement and he's got nowhere and no job to go to. Drop in one of these days. Give me a hand. Once the new shelter's up, I'm going to need all the help I can get."

Gibbs nodded. "I'll do that."

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**Saturday, 27 December**

**Crispin's LA mansion**

McGee was a bundle of nerves. He thought the party was going to be at a hotel, not the company CEO's mansion. He hadn't even known the CEO was Crispin Paddington since all the marketing and promotion was handled by his agent, who dealt with one of the people in the relevant division.

Naturally, the minute he learnt where the venue would be he tried calling Tony but couldn't reach him. Still, he hoped Tony would show, though it was unlikely he'd even remember. He'd sent Tony an email a couple of weeks ago and the latter did confirm he would be attending.

At least there would be an old familiar face when Abby arrived. He'd called her this morning to remind her to be early. He needed to be at the CEO's house by six-thirty for the press interview and wanted Abby there with him because Delilah could only get in to LA on Monday.

Tonight, he'd be meeting several people for the first time - the star of the movie, Robert Downey Jr, and his co-star, an unknown Australian, Tyra Burnham. To have Downey play the lead role was something he never envisaged and when he'd learnt his agent had managed to organize a book tour to coincide with the actor's own promotional tour for the movie, he'd been speechless.

It was a far cry from his days as a special agent with NCIS. It had been only five months since left but he missed his colleagues. He missed Tony and even Abby, despite the fact that she lived only half an hour away from his place in Santa Monica. Both of them had been so busy settling in their new careers and homes that they hardly had time to talk to each other. Tonight would be the first time they would be meeting since they arrived in LA.

He heard voices and laughter and turned to see who had arrived.

"Hey, McHollywood. How you doin'?"

McGee broke into a huge smile. "Tony!" The two men hugged. "What a surprise. I called you on Christmas Eve but your phone was off."
"Christmas Eve..." Tony frowned. "Ah. I was in New Orleans. Sorry, don't know why the phone was off...but, I'm here."

More voices, a shriek and Abby's voice could be heard outside the front door.

"Gibbs! Gibbs! Gibbs! I can't believe you're here!"

McGee looked at Tony. "Gibbs is here?" Tony nodded. "With you?" Tony nodded again. McGee grinned. "That's great! I was afraid you guys weren't speaking to each other anymore or seeing each other, or -" he paused. "So you're both good?"

"Yes, Tim. Jethro and I are very good," Tony replied.

Abby came rushing in, pulling Gibbs into the house. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Tony, gave another ear-piercing shriek and flew into his arms.

"Feels like old times." Gibbs remarked as Tony extricated himself and straightened his tux.

"In many ways it is," McGee said. "It's not NCIS and we've all moved on and are doing different things but we're together. You, Tony, Abby, and me. Delilah flies in on Monday. Gibbs, she's resigned from the DoD. She's moving to LA."

"She is? You two getting married?" Gibbs asked.

"I'm going to ask her to when she gets here," McGee replied.

"Good luck," Gibbs wished him.

"Thanks. Oh, I gotta go," McGee said, as more people piled into the lounge. "TV crew's here. There's Crispin. Hey, Tony." Tony looked round to Tony. "You never told me your cousin was the CEO of Tradewinds."

"Well, now I don't have to."

"We'll talk more later," McGee said, moving away. "I have to meet the reporter and get ready to greet the guests. How long will you and Gibbs be in LA?"

"Awhile," Tony replied. "Go do your Hollywood thing, Tim. We'll have dinner next weekend if you're available."

"I am. I'll call you."

"Ah, our Timmy boy is all grown and famous." Tony smiled, pretending to wipe away a tear.

"So you and Gibbs will be in LA for awhile, you said." Abby looked at Tony hopefully.

"Yes, we are looking for a place to buy, actually, so yeah, Gibbs and I are settling down in LA - no, no more hugging. You'll get my suit wrinkled."

Abby grabbed his face and kissed him on both cheeks instead. "So you and Gibbs will be staying in LA?"

"At least for the foreseeable future, though we will be making frequent trips to New Orleans."

"Why New Orleans?"
Tony told her about Gibbs and Special Agent Pride's bar while Gibbs cornered McGee.

"With me, Tim," Gibbs said, leading McGee towards the staircase.

"Where are we going?" McGee asked.

"Somewhere private."

Gibbs led him to a lounge on the second floor. "Tony and me," he began. "I want you to know we only got together during the undercover assignment in Mexico, but I've liked Tony for a long time. Was that way since I hired him." He could see the question on McGee's lips. "Yes, I'm gay but I didn't come to terms with that until we were in Naples. Tony and I were going to see how it would go before we told the team. If it looked like we were going to continue seeing each other in a personal capacity, then we were going to tell you and Abby before I handed in my application for early retirement. I'd already given the Director my application but he asked me to wait until after the anti-terrorist taskforce conference in Naples. Then you know what happened - Tony and I ended up in Mexico then it blew up in our faces and we got prematurely outed." He paused, trying to gauge McGee's reaction so far. "I'm sorry you and Abby got to find out the way you did."

"Gibbs, it's okay," McGee said. "Abby and I were shocked, to put it mildly, but that soon became worry when both you and Tony left without a word. If there's anything to be angry about, it's that."

"I'm sorry -"

"And apology is accepted, seeing as how you're not in favor of them. I doubt I would have done any different if it was me." He paused. "So all these years and Tony --"

"Nothing, McGee. There was nothing but a professional relationship between Tony and me. Tony didn't even know I was gay until I told him in Naples. None of this was planned, certainly not with the intention of keeping it from you and Abby.

"It really is okay now, Gibbs. I'm really glad it's worked out for both of you, that it's a serious thing and not a fling. I would have been angry if...if the fallout had been over a one-night stand."

"It's not a fling. I love him, McGee."

McGee smiled, then. "That's good, boss. And there's something else - my dad. Now, that was an even bigger shock."

"How did you know?" Gibbs asked, reminding himself to tell McGee he was no longer his boss.

"He and my mother asked to meet up with me and they broke the news to me. I think I'm still trying to come to terms with that but knowing my mom is alright makes a lot of difference. I learnt this wasn't a surprise for her - my dad being gay, I mean - she said she knew but they never talked about it. That they did discuss divorce years ago but somehow they just fell back into the same comfortable routine. She had her own career and interests and he had his. It was only when Dad met Mark that things changed."

"He's still with Mark?"

"He and Mark are getting married once Dad's divorce is final and my mom is seeing someone else."

"That's good, then."
"Gibbs, he's five years younger than her!"

"Good for her." Gibbs smiled. "So you're really okay about Tony and me?"

McGee thought about that for a full three seconds. "I guess I could always squeeze him for a bigger fee for the next book's movie rights. They've already confirmed it, Gibbs! They're making a movie for the third book!"

"I heard. Congratulations."

"And yes, I'm really fine about you and Tony. If I was still stuck at NCIS, though, I might have been resentful. I dunno. I don't think I'm that magnanimous a person. If I found out Tony was a gazillionaire and you were bonking him then the two of you take off to live the good life leaving me behind with Dorneget and Vance...I just may not be so understanding. Especially with Abby leaving as well, but as it is, it's been a year of huge changes for all of us - Ziva leaving, getting married and returning to Israel, Abby getting married in two weeks and living right here in LA, then Vance himself up in San Francisco...now you and Tony here. It'll be like old times again, except without the headslaps for Tony and the snarls at the rest of us."

Gibbs laughed. "Well, the headslaps are still there, I reckon. They've just moved further down his anatomy."

McGee choked. "Gibbs!"

"Come on, I need to talk to Abby now."

Both he and Tony handled Abby because she refused to discuss it without both of them present. Abby, being Abby, was super happy for them and declared the only thing that would make her happier would be if they were getting married, too.

The squeal from her a few seconds later, had the entire roomful of guests turning to look in their direction.

"Awww...you two are going to make me cry," she said. "Who did the proposing?"

"Moi." Tony put up his hand.

"Aww..." Abby beamed at them. "I bet it was super romantic. Did you like take Gibbs out on a sunset cruise and propose? Put the engagement ring in a box of his favorite Chinese for him to discover?"

"No," Gibbs snorted. "He sort of asked in a roundabout manner on the Beltway. Good thing we didn't get pulled over by a cop."

"The ring!?" Tony smacked his cheek. "Damn. I forgot the ring."

"Here. Use this temporarily," Abby said, and handed Tony a calamari ring from the cold cuts counter.

Tony stared at it. "It is unique, I have to say. Gibbs -" but Gibbs had already walked off. Abby and Tony burst out laughing, Abby giving Tony a tight hug before letting him go.

They stayed to have more food and Gibbs chatted with Aidan and Tyler while Tony and McGee mingled. Just before midnight, Tony caught Gibbs' smile and made his excuses to the people he was talking to. He went up to Gibbs, kissed him full on the lips in front of everyone then said their
"Was it okay?" Tony asked Gibbs as they got out of the shower. "Party not too much for you?"

"Pig was delicious. Preferred it to the lamb."

Tony laughed. "What about the humans?"

Gibbs stretched out on the bed and pulled Tony down on top of him. "Depends. How many more parties?"

Tony chuckled and kissed him lightly. "Two. One this weekend, then Abby's wedding."

"The one this weekend's going to be big, isn't it?"

"Probably," Tony replied. "Then again, Tyler doesn't like that sort of thing so it could be under a hundred. Once Abby's wedding is over -"

"I'd like some peace and quiet," Gibbs said. "Just you and me. Can we have that? I know you have to work and entertain but if we could have a couple of months to ourselves..."

"I won't be taking the job," Tony said.

"Why?" Gibbs started to get up, pushing Tony off him but Tony pushed him back down.

"Oh no." Tony chuckled. "You're not moving except to turn around. I have things I want to do to that ass."

"Tony -"

"Unh-unh. No talking about work until I'm done with you. Do you know how I've been controlling my dick since we got our test results? I wanted to throw you down and fuck you stupid but you wouldn't let me."

"If you think I was going to give up my ass for the first time while Diane and Fornell were in the next room -"

"I told you they wouldn't hear a thing if I gagged you," Tony said but Gibbs merely glowered at him. "Well, you are pretty loud, you know." Tony chuckled. "I never figured you to be a noisy lover." He kissed Gibbs. "But I love it. I love you as you are." He kissed down Gibbs back, trailing his tongue down till he was at the top of Gibbs' crack. "Anyone kissed you here before?"

"No," came the muffled reply as Gibbs buried his face in the pillows.

"Well, I think you're going to love your first ass kiss." He settled himself between Gibbs' legs. "Ass up, Gunny, and spread those cheeks."

Gibbs' guttural moan had Tony's cock jerking but he was going to take his time tonight. He was going to drive Gibbs insane with want until he begged Tony to fuck him. Gibbs had been voicing his impatience to know what it would feel like to have Tony inside him.

While he was equally eager to have his cock buried deep in Gibbs' ass, the man was an ass-virgin
so he'd have to exercise some patience. Gibbs, too.

He stroked his tongue over Gibbs' hole and Gibbs gave a loud groan then a few choice cuss words. "Liked that?" Tony asked.

"Don't stop."

Tony laved the hole over and over then sucked at it while Gibbs writhed and was pretty vocal about his liking it. When Tony skewered his tongue into him, Gibbs nearly bucked off the bed but Tony's strong hands held his hips still. In and out, his tongue attacked Gibbs' ass, then inserting a finger carefully to get Gibbs used to the invasion. He coated his fingers with lube, squirted more lube into Gibbs and watched one, then two fingers disappearing into Gibbs.

Despite Gibbs' entreaties, which turned into threats, Tony refused to fuck him.

"You're very tight. Just a little bit more ass-play before you're ready to take me, okay? A little patience will reap you great rewards."

It wasn't until the next day, when the mansion was quiet again, that Tony made love to Gibbs. Completely. No coitus interruptus (because Tony had stuck a handwritten A4-size note on their bedroom door:

‘DO NOT KNOCK.
DO NOT REQUEST ENTRANCE.
DO NOT DISTURB
DELICATE PROCEDURE IN PROGRESS.’

o     o     o

GIBBS' POV

If I thought I couldn't live without Tony before today, I know, for a fact, that life began for me when Tony was finally inside me, all one fucking foot of him, for that's how long his cock felt like.

Did it hurt? Not as much I thought it would. He'd prepared me thoroughly and had made me wear a butt plug through the night.

"What the hell is that?" I'd asked him when he showed it to me. I gave him a 'No fucking way' look when he told me which made him laugh but adamant about sticking it where it belonged.

"It's called 'plug and play', Jethro."

I gave him a narrowed look but gave in, in the end. I admit the whole experience of submitting to
Tony's careful ministrations of my asshole had been a turn-on. Since I've not had another man touch my ass that way, I did not know what to expect but Tony turned it into a highly sensual experience, so that for the next twenty-four hours it wasn't difficult to imagine the thing in my ass was his cock.

That had made me so hard he had to suck me off three times today - after breakfast, lunch, and before dinner. When we said goodnight to Crispin and Tyler, my balls were aching and I told Tony so.

I told him I couldn't handle any foreplay.

"Just fuck me before my balls explode." I grabbed the tube of lube from him, pulled out the butt plug, giving a loud groan as it eased out of my stretched channel. I filled it with enough lube to slide the Titanic in, to Tony's amusement but when I braced myself and told him I was ready, he said, "On your back. I want to see your face when I enter you for the first time." I did as he said and just seeing him poised between my legs, his erect cock looking so huge and menacing, I sucked in my breath, nervousness lancing through my gut.

"I don't suppose you want to take a selfie?" Tony asked.

"A what?"

"Never mind. Over your dead body."

"What are you talking about?"

"A joke. Forget it."

"A joke?" I growled out. "You're joking? Now?"

"No. Sorry. Just nervous. My first time, you know...about to breach the impenetrable walls of the Great White."

I closed my eyes, exasperated and happy at the same time. This was DiNozzo. My Tony DiNozzo. I looked at him then, and realized he was really nervous. My exasperation gave way to protectiveness and all I wanted was to comfort, to reassure. "Tony, just shut up and fuck me."

Without another word, he was sliding in. He felt wonderful. I was overcome just by the sensation of his fat cockhead pressing against my hole, its insistence to get past the natural resistance of a virgin ass. When he finally pushed through, I know I stopped breathing and he had to tell me to. Slowly, he pressed into me until he was fully inserted and my ass felt like it was going to burst. I didn't know why anyone would want this! It hurt - not like getting shot or stabbed, but a different pain.

Then Tony withdrew slowly and slid back in and then I knew why men would risk getting arrested for sex in toilets and other public places because I thought I was going to pass out from sheer sexual ecstasy.

After that, I'm sure I did because the rest of the world faded away and it was just me, and Tony
thrusting in and out of me. I begged for the first time in my life. Begged loudly and unashamedly for this man to fuck me, to fuck me harder. Faster.

I gripped my leaking cock and with just a couple of strokes, I was coming - far too quickly, and too loudly. Tony had to shush me. Several times. Through the night.

The next morning, when we went down for breakfast, Tyler and Crispin were already at the breakfast table. It was a clear, bright day with a breeze blowing in from the ocean and I wanted to go for a swim in the pool later.

"Did you hurt your leg?" Crispin asked me. "You're limping."

"Tripped," I lied, and poured coffee for Tony and me.

"Did you guys hear the sealions last night?" Tyler asked. "They were pretty loud. It's mating season for the *zalophus californianus*." 

Tony gave a bark of laughter. "That weren't no California Sealions. That was us. Well, Jethro mostly."

The glare I gave him was enough to tell him what I thought of his response to Tyler. I mean, the guy's a priest! But Tyler roared with laughter, anyway, and invited me to go with him to view the progress of the new shelter. By the end of that, I knew what I'd be doing in LA while we were there.

END OF GIBBS' POV

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2350hours; New Year's Eve; 

*Off Malibu, LA*

"Why are we out here on a yacht when the party's up there?" Gibbs asked, gesturing to Crispin's mansion up ahead. The huge house was awash with lights and the garden glittering from the thousands of fairylights. Crispin's and Tyler's engagement party ended up a huge, celebrity-infested affair with TV crews and camera bulbs popping every few minutes.

But on a yacht anchored off the shore, there were only two men while the sky exploded in a blaze of fireworks as Los Angeles prepared to usher in 2014.

"Because what I have in mind, I want to do alone with you. It's fine. Cris and Tyler know."

"But Sean Connery is there." Gibbs nodded towards Crispin's mansion where the party was in full
"But I'm not in love with him," Tony said. He went inside the yacht, coming out a moment later.

Then the music played and Tony took the man he loved, and couldn't live without, in his arms.

"Dance with me, love," Tony murmured as Patrizio Buanne started to sing... _Siamo qui noi soli.... _"Leroy Jethro Gibbs, will you marry me?"

Gibbs swallowed the lump in his throat. He could only pull Tony tighter to him, embarrassed that he might start to cry.

And so, on the open deck of Crispin's multi-million dollar yacht, Tony checked his cell phone and began the countdown -

_Ten._

_Nine._

_Eight._

_Seven._

_Six._

_Five._

_Four._

_Three._

_Two... --!!!

The surrounding pleasure crafts blared their horns and more fireworks exploded in a grand finale as LA left 2013 behind and welcomed in 2014.

"Yes, Tony," Gibbs replied. "Yes, I'm marrying you."

As far as Tony was concerned, LA and the whole planet was celebrating Gibbs answer.

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**EPILOGUE COMING UP NEXT**

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_A/N: Crispin's house is, in real life, Ellen Degeneres', who bought it from Brad Pitt in 2011 and sold it in 2012. I don't know who bought it after that and don't care. I just needed a house in Malibu for the story:)"
**EPILOGUE**

*A/N: Crispin's house is, in real life, Ellen Degeneres', who bought it from Brad Pitt in 2011 and sold it in 2012. I don't know who bought it from here and don't care. I just needed a house in Malibu for the story:)

The house Tony bought Gibbs is located [here](#). I've exercised some artistic license and extended the size and perimeter of the house to the edge of the land and added a private boat slip for Gibbs. Use your own imagination how Tony's and Gibbs' marital home looks like.

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**Epilogue**

**December 2014: One Year Later**

**Channel Islands Harbor**

**Ventura County.**

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**GIBBS' POV**

I'm sitting out here on the porch of our modest beachfront home, watching Tony play beach volleyball with the neighbors. The sunset is casting a burnished glow over the boats sailing into the harbor entrance which is right next to our house. It is a quiet, peaceful end to another day that may be boring and uneventful compared to our lives when we were NCIS special agents, is just the way I want life to be, now that I have Tony.

I still wake up at dawn but instead of heading in to work, I go for a run on the beach with my neighbors, getting home in time to fix breakfast for Tony, before he leaves for work. Every Friday he wakes up to run with me then we take the boat and drive over to the neighborhood café by the water for breakfast with our new friends. Saturdays and Sundays, he's usually in bed until ten. I'm there with him, of course.

Just before Abby's wedding last year, Tony had taken me for a drive about forty minutes away from Crispin's house in Malibu. It was a straight drive along the coast until the Naval Base at Point Mugu where the highway turned inland until the West Channel Islands Boulevard.

"Hold your questions until we get to our destination," Tony said when I asked him, again, where he was taking me.

Destination was the end of Ocean Drive, a cul de sac near the harbor entrance.

Tony stopped the car outside the last house, took out a remote and opened the gates, driving straight into the garage wide enough for three vehicles. "We're here. Take a look at this and see if
you like it better than the last one we viewed."

The two-story house was built over the semi-underground garage with one side spanning the waterfront, complete with a private boat dock. It was actually three lots wide, though quite a bit is taken up by the outdoor area. The lot closest to the water was empty when we viewed it while the house itself stood across two lots so it was wider than the other homes.

"The uniqueness of this is its siting," Tony said, unlocking the door that led from the garage into the house. "It's the only one that has both a beachfront and a marina view with a private boat dock."

All it took was a quick tour and I was turning to Tony. "I feel like Goldilocks."

His smile, once again, lit up the room. "Then we take it? Or do we keep looking?"

"How much?"

"One point eight five because it's much larger than the rest of the lots here. I'm pretty sure I can bring it down to one point five seeing as I'm planning to get another property. Fancy a drive up to Lake Tahoe? I'm sure my property agent will do her best. She already made a bundle selling our Malibu place to Downey Jr. Remember when we were having dinner at El Hedonista you said you'd like a place close to the water so you could launch your boat without having to drive too far?" He paused then asked, "Will this do? You get your private boat dock and we can turn the entire first floor into your workroom and leave the top two for our living quarters. And I got the beach so we both get what we like." He looked at me hopefully.

"I like it, Tony," I said. When he looks at me like that, it's so hard to say 'no'. Besides, the house is modest compared to the others Tony's property agent had been showing us. It came to a point I had to tell her pointblank that I didn't want a six-bedroom mansion, didn't want to view anymore lots from her and would be looking for my house on my own.

This Channel Harbor house? Tony found it googling on Google Earth then called up his property manager who took it from there.

Tony left me the entire ground floor to use as my workroom and brought in builders to add an extension which he could use as his TV room so he could be near me when I was working on my wood projects. My workroom opened out to the harbor side and the boat slip. Ours was the only house at that end of the Channel Islands Harbor that had a private boat slip. The other waterfront homes with private boat docks were much further in on the other North side of the West Channel Islands Boulevard.

It didn't take a genius to know that this house Tony had his eye on was, indeed, unique. "But it's only two storys," I'd told him. "If I take a whole floor, that leaves only one for our living space. I can just use one of the rooms. Don't need a whole floor."

"Aha!" Tony had grinned in response. "All we do is build a rooftop garden slash entertainment area and it's a three-story house. The floor area is huge. One half can be our kitchen and the other half the living-dining. Kitchen has the marina view and the dining/living has the beach. Then one floor below is our Master bedroom, walk-in dressing room, ensuite bathrooms and one guestroom. We can include an elevator from your workroom to the rooftop lounge. Perfect!"

That's how we ended up here in Ventura County, away from the multi million-dollar mansions of Malibu. Our neighbors are a mix of retired and mature professionals, all married, some with kids. Ken and his husband, Gio, who live next door to us, have been together twenty years and legally-married for ten. Every second Saturday, Gio, being Italian, will bring a dish or two over to our
place and the four of us will have dinner. Every last Sunday of the month, the four of us take our boat and drive over to Hitoshi and Yannic's on the other side of the bridge.

Life is routine, quiet, and exactly how I like it. Every Monday to Thursday we drive into downtown L.A. Tony, to Tradewinds Entertainment’s office and I to Tyler's shelter where I work as a volunteer. Since last week, though, Tony only goes in to the office twice a week for meetings, otherwise he works from home since the management staff is fully connected to their corporate network and all meetings include video-conferencing for staff who are out of town.

"I will work on a project basis," Tony told me. "Or when Crispin offers me something, otherwise I don't want to have to get out of bed at six to make the hour and half drive downtown. Make that two and a half when you include rush hour traffic. Then driving home!"

So he spends most of his days with me and he's never bored, which surprises me. He always seems to find something to do or he's content to watch his movies on the sixty-inch LCD that Dwayne gave us as a pre-wedding present.

Our wedding. That event is scheduled for some time this year.

"People have Make-Up sex," Tony told me. "I had a Make-Up Proposal", referring to the one he made on board Crispin’s yacht to make up for the one on the Beltway.

Another major event, apart from Tony and me announcing our wedding, was the visit from Tyler's brother, Sam, and his team of people from Tradewinds Television City. Tony and I had met Sam briefly at Crispin's and Tyler's engagement party before Tony whisked me off to Marina del Rey to board the yacht.

A week after that, Sam and company, came knocking on our door, so to speak. We were still staying with Crispin and Tyler at the time so it was a pretty high-powered, albeit informal, meeting.

The short of it is that Sam, the executive producer and showrunner of Tradewinds' new drama series based on NCIS, offered me a job as the show's consultant. He also wanted to introduce Cassius' Bbar as a location for the series. Their lead character would live upstairs and he would hold his case debriefings in one of the bar's rooms downstairs.

I called Dwayne and sounded him out. He was all for it. Ratings for the show has been higher than expected and Cassius' Bbar is becoming very popular as a result of it being a TV star of sorts.

"It's like Cheers," Hitoshi said last night at dinner.

"Or that café in Friends," added Gio.

"Central Perk, yeah," Tony said.

So when shooting for season two begins this July, we are heading to the Crescent City, as we did last year, but this year, Tony and I have invited the show's writers to spend three weeks with us on board Crispin's megayacht. We will cruise from LA, down the Mexican Riviera and through the Panama Canal to New Orleans, arriving in time to get married there before Season 2 begins shooting.

We haven't decided on whether we need a honeymoon. To me, my whole life is a honeymoon now that Tony is mine and I am his. I'm thinking I'll surprise Tony and invite some friends to cruise the Caribbean with us. I know he'll love to have Jed and Joe, and Dwayne already said he could spare ten days but asked if he could bring someone.
Naturally, I was curious. "A date kind of ‘someone’?"

"His name's Casey. You wanna know more, ask Tony. He was the one who hooked us up."

The volleyball game is over and Tony is walking back to me. The sun dips below the horizon but Tony is smiling and waving to me.

I wave back and as the evening light fades, I realize I don't need the sun to brighten my world anymore.

***FINE***

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**Author's Note** ...If Tradewinds Entertainment made this into a TV movie, I’d have them end Oldies but Goodies Book 2 with Giovanni Marradi’s instrumental version of Io Che Non Vivo; chorus begins at 1.05mins into the song:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlbM0_hzAVs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlbM0_hzAVs)

I would close with Gibbs facing the sunset and watching Tony come up towards him from the beach (volleyball game is over). Tony smiles. Movie ends.

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Thank you for indulging me this saccharine moment. I'd said I don't plan to write anymore Oldies but Goodies stories but after I read this story (I only read my stories months after I finish writing them), I realized I can't say goodbye to Gibbs and Tony. So I've started on another Oldies but Goodies - Put Your Head on my Shoulder. I hope to upload it around April, 2015, barring RL interruptions.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!