Second Law
by Kesterpan

Summary

This picks up just about a week after FIO ends, and references lots of events from that story, so I definitely recommend reading that one first. FIO was about Gibbs and Tony starting up a serious, romantic relationship, much to their own surprise, and Second Law is about them settling in and continuing to figure out how to balance the different aspects of their lives. This is therefore certainly a slash story!

This series goes AU right after the season 7 episode Obsession; the Mexico storyline never happened.

Notes

The second law of thermodynamics essentially states that the universe tends toward increasing disorder, chaos and randomness, otherwise known as entropy.

From chapter 35 of Figuring It Out:

This Certificate Entitles Jethro Gibbs and Tony DiNozzo to an All Expenses Paid Weekend Away at the Vacation Spot of Their Choice. From Abby, Ziva, McGee, Ducky and Jimmy.
Gibbs and Tony in the Morning

Tony’s eyes widened and he shut off his electric razor. He looked over at Jethro standing next to him, accomplishing the same task, though in a more low-tech fashion.

“Hawaii.”

Jethro snorted and rolled his eyes. “We’re not going to Hawaii for a weekend, Tony.”

Tony bounced a little on his feet. “Come on, Jeth… it would be amazing!”

Jethro turned on the sink and rinsed his razor. He glanced over at Tony’s hopeful puppy-dog eyes in the mirror. “We’re not asking the team to pay for a trip to Hawaii.”

Tony sighed heavily, then switched his razor back on. “We’ve got to come up with something, Jethro. It’s been over a week since the party, and Abby’s been bugging me every day about where we want to go. Hey, how about Bermuda? It’s a lot closer.”

Jethro put down his razor, rinsed his face, then loosened the towel at his waist and used it to dry off. “Still too much to ask, Tony.”

Tony’s eyes drifted down Jethro’s body and he hummed appreciatively. Jethro shot him a smirk in the mirror. “Not if you figure it per person. There’s five of them… it would only be a couple of nights.”

Jethro shook his head, then turned to walk out of the bathroom, slapping Tony on the rear with the towel. Tony grinned at Jethro’s departing reflection, finished shaving, then followed the other man into the bedroom. “You should suggest something, since you’ve shot down all my ideas. You know, I still think Vegas would be great… we could gamble and win and send them all on vacations as a thank you.”

Jethro chuckled lightly as he pulled on his boxers and reached for the slacks he’d draped on the bed. “Or we could lose and have to hitchhike back to DC.”

Tony tossed his own towel into the bathroom and walked to the dresser, bending over far more than necessary to open a drawer and getting a pinch on his right cheek as a reward. “Ow. No, we wouldn’t. They’d have already paid for the flight and the hotel.”

“Then we’d starve.”

Tony stood back up, boxers and socks in hand. “So, suggest something.”

Jethro watched Tony dress. “I was thinking….”

Tony waited while Jethro’s voice trailed off. “You know, it’s not like you to waffle.”

Jethro raised an eyebrow. “I’m not waffling.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m…” he shook his head and smiled ruefully. “You know, that never used to work on me before we started this.”
Tony grinned and executed a shallow bow. “I am the master.”

That earned him another, more sarcastic snort. Jethro picked up a t-shirt and pulled it on. “Was thinking we could maybe head up to Pennsylvania, stay near Stillwater. I could show you some of my old hangouts, we could visit my dad.”

Tony’s grin got a heck of a lot bigger. “Seriously? That would be even amazinger than Hawaii!”

“I don’t think that’s a word.”

“If hinky can be a word, amazinger can be a word. Would you limit the number of questions I could ask Jack, like you did last time?”

Jethro looked at Tony carefully. “No,” he replied, after a moment, dragging the word out a bit. “But I would reserve the right to veto any of them.”

Tony’s eyes seemed to sparkle. “Deal. I’ll make sure to save the really good ones for when you aren’t around.”

Jethro started to respond to that when he was interrupted by a tinny voice in a Brooklyn-ish accent repeatedly saying, “This means war!” Glancing around, he realized it was coming from his cell phone, sitting on the nightstand.

“What the hell…”?

Tony gave him an innocent look. “I might have changed some of the ringtones on your phone.”

Jethro glared at him.

“That would be dispatch,” Tony added helpfully.

Sighing, Jethro flipped the phone open. “Yeah, Gibbs.” He opened the nightstand drawer and removed a small pad of paper and a pen, making a few notes. Then he flipped the phone shut and looked at Tony. “Dead petty officer in Arlington. Call McGee and Ziva, have them meet us there.” He handed Tony the pad with the address, moved to grab his polo shirt, then turned around and shoved his cell into Tony’s hands. “And change it back.”

“No time, Boss. We’ve got a crime scene to get to.” Tony tossed the phone to him and gave Gibbs his most heartfelt look of complete innocence, then moved to finish getting ready.

Gibbs sighed and looked around for his shoes. “Next time we stay at my place.”

Crime Scene

The petty officer’s body was lying under some thick brush near a baseball field in a small park off route 66. The area had been cordoned off by the local police; Gibbs and Tony were the first to arrive and quickly took over the scene from the cops. Tony spoke with the LEOs to get everything they knew, while Gibbs approached the wide-eyed teenage boy whose dog had found the body. The kid was sitting on a nearby bench, holding his dog in his lap. The dog was growling at the cop standing nearby; as Gibbs approached, the dog’s attention shifted to him and he barked once. Gibbs glared at the small terrier mix, who immediately whined softly then went quiet.

Gibbs nodded to the officer. “I’ll take it from here.” The cop returned the nod and left.

Gibbs looked at the boy, whose glances kept wandering between the body’s hiding place, the cops,
and Gibbs himself. Gibbs gave the boy a small smile. “Mind if I sit?”

The kid shook his head. “Nope.”

Gibbs sat, pushing his cap back on his head a little. “Special Agent Gibbs, NCIS.” He held out his hand.

The boy looked a bit startled, but reached out and shook Gibbs’ hand. The terrier gave a disgruntled snort. “I’m Kevin. Kevin Whitten. This is Smokey,” he added, gesturing toward the dog. “What’s NCIS?”

One corner of Gibbs’ mouth twitched into a small smile. “Naval Criminal Investigative Service. The body you found is a naval petty officer, so the cops called us in. We have jurisdiction over cases involving Navy and Marine personnel.”

Kevin nodded. “You gonna get the guy who killed him?”

“We usually do.”

“Cool.”

“Can you tell me when you found him?”

Kevin nodded. “Smokey’s the one who found him. He likes to pee over there.”

“You come here every morning?”

“Yeah, it’s my job to walk Smokey before and after school. Had to promise that I’d take care of him if we kept him.”

Gibbs smiled. “Always good to meet a man who keeps his promises.”

Kevin smiled and sat up taller. “I made the honor roll at school too. Had to promise to do all my homework.”

“Good for you. So what time did Smokey find the body?”

Kevin’s face scrunched up a bit as he thought. “I think it was probably around six forty-five. I know I left the house at 6:30, and that’s about how long it takes to get here.”

“You come here after school yesterday?”

Kevin nodded. “Yeah. Smokey didn’t notice anything then, and I know my dad brought him here last night, and he didn’t say anything about a body or Smokey acting weird or anything like that.”

Gibbs watched out of the corner of his eye as McGee and Ziva approached the bushes, Ducky and Palmer not far behind. Tony greeted them all and said something Gibbs didn’t catch. McGee pulled out the portable fingerprint scanner and crawled into the bushes.

Gibbs turned his attention back to Kevin. “What time did your dad get back from walking Smokey?”

Kevin thought about that for a minute. “I was playing World of Warcraft with Brad online… Brad had told me he had to quit at 11:30 ‘cause of homework, and Smokey came running into my room just after Brad signed off, so I guess it was right around then.”

“Brad always on time?”
“Oh, yeah. He wants to join the military after high school, so he says he needs to practice.”

Gibbs grinned. “That’s a good move on his part. What do you want to do when you graduate?”

Kevin’s eyes lit up. “I want to go to college, major in computer programming, and design online games.”

“There a lot of money in that?”

Kevin stared at Gibbs. “Well, yeah.” His tone of voice clearly indicated that Gibbs should know that.

Gibbs ducked his head a bit to hide his smile. “You move the body at all?”

Kevin shook his head. “No way. I watch a lot of crime shows, and they always say not to do that.”

“Good job. You recognize him?”

Kevin shrugged. “I didn’t really see his face. He wasn’t moving even though Smokey was barking, so I just called 911.”

Gibbs watched as McGee crawled out of the bushes and reported his information to Tony.

“McGee!”

The junior agent’s head snapped around and he jogged over to them. “Morning, Boss.”

“Special Agent McGee, this is Kevin Whitten and Smokey. Smokey found the petty officer. You confirm the ID?”

McGee nodded to Kevin, then looked at Gibbs. “Petty Officer Second Class Terrence Drimel.”

Gibbs made a note on his pad, then gestured toward the scanner. “You got his picture on the screen?”

McGee nodded and handed the scanner to Gibbs, who glanced at it and then held it out to Kevin.

“He look familiar to you at all?”

Kevin looked carefully at the picture. “Nope. Never seen him before.”

Gibbs nodded, then handed the scanner back to McGee. “Cops took your address and phone number when they got here?”

Kevin nodded.

Gibbs took out his wallet and removed one of his cards, then held it out to the boy. “Hang on to this – you remember anything else, even if you don’t think it’s important, you call me, or email if you prefer.”

Kevin looked at the card carefully, then up at Gibbs. “Jethro’s kind of a funny name.”

McGee stifled a laugh. Gibbs ignored him and smiled at Kevin. “Just meant I was the only one in my classes at school. Didn’t have to share the name.”

Kevin grinned at him. “There were three Kevins in my sixth grade class.”

“See?” Gibbs held out his hand. “Thanks for your help.” He shook Kevin’s hand again, then glanced down at Smokey, who looked back at him suspiciously. “You going to be late for school?”
Kevin looked at his cell phone and grimaced. “Yeah. Mrs. Bradon’s gonna yell at me again.”

Gibbs looked at McGee. “Get the number for the school, call them and tell them why Kevin’s late.”

Kevin grinned. “Awesome! Thanks!”

Gibbs smiled at him, then got up and headed over toward the bushes where Ducky and Palmer were starting to move the body. He could hear Smokey growling at McGee as he walked away.

He moved past the bushes where Tony was sketching the scene and Ziva was photographing and collecting trace evidence, walking over to where Ducky and Palmer were securing the body on a gurney. “Time of death, Duck?”

Ducky glanced up at him and smiled. “Good morning, Jethro! It is too bad this young man didn’t live to see the sunrise. Did you happen to catch it? Beautiful colors.”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “Was otherwise occupied, Duck. Time of death?”

Ducky returned the smile while Palmer glanced quickly over at Tony, back at Gibbs, then focused intently on tightening the straps when he realized Gibbs was watching him.

“Time of death… ah, yes, between three and three-thirty a.m.”

“Cause?”

“Ah, that will take more doing, I’m afraid. There is no blood, no obvious signs of physical trauma, such as a gunshot or knife wound. So we shall have to wait to get him onto a table to ascertain that particular piece of information.” Ducky shrugged slightly at Gibbs, then turned to help Palmer move the gurney to the truck. “This reminds me… Mr. Palmer, have I ever told you about the time I helped to investigate a series of murders in which none of the victims had any noticeable signs of external trauma or internal poisoning?”

Gibbs smiled and turned away, heading back to where his team was working and forcing his mind away from thoughts of why he’d missed the sunrise that morning.

**Abby’s Oops**

Abby popped into Autopsy, moving quickly to the table where Ducky and Palmer were just starting to work on Petty Officer Terrence Drimel. Ducky glanced up and smiled.

“Good morning, Abigail! To what do we owe the honor of your presence?”

Abby came to a halt next to the table and looked down at the body. “Good morning to you, Ducky! And Jimmy! My babies are ready to go and I have absolutely no evidence to process yet, so after I made sure everything was spic and span, I decided to come here so I could take stuff back to my lab and get started.”

Ducky peered closely at something on the Petty Officer’s neck. “Ah, just a mole. Nothing of import.” He looked at Abby. “You shall be saving Mr. Palmer a trip to see you, then. Mr. Palmer?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

Ducky looked significantly at Palmer, who looked back with a smile and then suddenly stood up straighter.

“Oh! Right.” He turned away and moved to the table next to them, picking up several sealed
Abby smiled at him and took the bags, setting them back down on the table and signing them. She then gathered them up and turned to go, but hesitated.

Ducky glanced up again. “Did you need something else?”

Abby shifted her weight from one leg to the other, drew in a breath through her teeth, then spoke rapidly. “I was just wondering if Gibbs or Tony said anything to you about where they want to go on their weekend away.”

Ducky smiled. “You do appear to be very eager to have them take that little vacation we gave them. If I may ask – what is the rush? We only had the party last week, you know.”

Abby sighed. “I do know. Tony keeps telling me the same thing. It’s just… I really, really want them to stay together, ’cause I think they’re really happy. I’ve never seen Gibbs so open with the whole team at one time – actually, I’ve never seen Gibbs so open with anyone at any time. And Tony’s happy too. McGee says he thinks Tony won’t even need to glue him to stuff anymore.”

Palmer chimed in. “Tony does seem to be more settled. He’s less, I don’t know, less… uh…”

“Nutty?” Abby asked.

Ducky chuckled. “I would say impulsive. I do agree with you, my dear. Both of them seem happy in their new relationship. So why are you so concerned about their weekend away?”

Abby sighed. “It’s just that relationships take work, you know? If you don’t work at them, they fall apart, like an old barn that nobody maintains. It eventually just, you know, gets all saggy and dilapidated and at some point it collapses, ’cause that’s the way the universe works.” She started to pace around the table. “Tony’s only ever had one long term relationship since I’ve known him, and that wasn’t even real, ’cause he was undercover. And don’t get me started on all the ex-Mrs. Gibbses. The honeymoon phase will be over sooner or later and if they don’t keep working at it, they’ll be like that barn. And if that happens, what will happen to the team? I don’t want either of them to be unhappy anymore, or to end up leaving or anything like that.”

Abby sighed. “Mr. Palmer, would you begin at the feet, please?”

Palmer complied, and Abby took the ensuing silence as an opportunity to continue. “So Gibbs and Tony were under a lot of stress, you know? I mean, they had to work out what was going on between them, and that can’t be easy since they aren’t really gay, just into each other, and then Gibbs goes and gets kidnapped by the crazy Johnson, you know, the car guy, not the one Ziva’s been seeing, and then Tony leaves Gibbs in the hospital and takes off for parts unknown, and it’s just too much!”

Palmer looked up. “Tony went to a beach somewhere in the Carolinas.”

“Tony was so worried and stressed about everything, and then they were okay but Gibbs is only just barely healed up from what that evil guy did to him, and… Palmer, you’re a genius!”

“I am?”

“Absolutely! A beach is a perfect idea. They could go to Florida, with the five of us chipping in, we
can get them the plane tickets and the hotel room… they could be on the beach together. Wouldn’t that be great? Tony would love it, and I bet he could get Gibbs to love it too.” Her tone of voice turned slightly suggestive. “Can’t you just picture them together on a beach? That would be so hot!”

“What would be so hot about Gibbs and DiNozzo on a beach together, Ms. Sciuto?”

Abby whirled around and squeaked in alarm at the sight of Director Vance standing in the doorway to Autopsy. A quick glance at the others showed Palmer looking panicky and Ducky looking grave.

“Oh, um, Director Vance! We were talking about beach vacations and I was just saying that Gibbs and Tony, well, alone each one of them is, you know, really se – um, attractive, but if they were both on a beach, that could be sensory overload –“

Abby voice broke off abruptly when Ducky reached out and gently touched her arm. She bit her lips and looked at Vance, eyes wide. Vance stared back, eyes slightly narrowed.

“Any of you seen Gibbs?”

Abby and Palmer shook their heads, while Ducky spoke up. “I haven’t seen him since we left the crime scene with this poor fellow.”

Vance looked somewhat irritated. “You see him, tell him I need to talk to him.” He turned and left, the door closing behind him.

Ducky, Palmer and Abby stood frozen until they saw the elevator doors close, then Abby turned around and looked at the two men. “How long was he there?!”

Palmer shrugged and Ducky shook his head.

Abby groaned and dropped her head into her hands.
Wrapping Up at the Scene

Gibbs glanced down at his cell as another unfamiliar sound reached his ears just after he left Ducky, Palmer and the body. A moment later, he identified the music as “Hail to the Chief.” Sighing, he flipped the phone open, and sure enough, Vance’s name appeared. Gibbs hit the button to ignore the call, replaced the phone on his belt, and continued walking back to where Tony and McGee were standing over Ziva, who was crouched on the ground near the backstop on the ball field.

Tony glanced up as Gibbs approached. “Oh, hey, Boss. Watch where you step; I think Ziva’s about to mark her territory.”

Ziva glared up at him. “That joke is aging, Tony.”

McGee’s brow furrowed, then cleared quickly. “I think you mean ‘getting old,’ Ziva.”

Ziva sighed. “What difference does it make? It means the same thing. You Americans are too picky with your idioms.”

“Hey!” Tony spoke up indignantly. “You wanna be one of us, you’re going to have to get picky too.”

Gibbs moved to stand next to Tony. “What’ve you got?”

Tony shifted his weight, brushing the back of his hand against Gibbs’ for just a second. “Wanna explain, Zi-va?”

Ziva stood, moving a few steps forward, looking at the ground, then moving back toward the bushes where Drimel’s body had been hidden. “The marks in the ground… I think they are from something being dragged in this direction.” She gestured from the parking lot a little way off toward the bushes.

Gibbs moved closer, also crouching down. “Hard to say,” he said after checking from several different angles. “Could be, but…” his voice trailed off, and Ziva picked up the train of thought.

“It is as if someone tried to brush the marks away.”

“Can you trace them back?” Tony asked.

Eyes intent on the ground, Ziva started moving toward the parking lot. Gibbs watched for a moment then stood up, turning back toward the others only to find Tony standing right next to him, smiling. Gibbs shook his head. “Rule 12, DiNozzo.”

Tony’s smile faded and he stepped back, sighing. “Won’t happen again, Boss.” Then his voice dropped to a whisper. “Just tough after this morning, you know?”

Gibbs couldn’t help the smirk that tugged at his lips. “Yeah, I know.” He glanced at Tony. “My place tonight, if we make enough progress on the case.”

Tony grinned. Gibbs turned to McGee. “You find anything under those bushes?”

McGee shook his head. “No debris that seemed relevant to the crime, but I bagged it anyway and sent it back with Ducky. Found some broken branches where the body was dragged through.”
“Show me.”

Tony trailed along behind, glancing back at Ziva, who was moving through the grass toward the edge of the parking lot. McGee pointed out the broken branches, and they all turned to look back at Ziva. She was staring intently down at the ground, then straightened up and waved. “The trail ends here,” she called out.

Tony looked at the bushes, then back at Ziva as she started to jog back toward them. He added some notes to his sketch, then looked over at Gibbs. “Pretty close to a straight line, Boss.”

Ziva reached them. “I took some pictures,” she said. Then she looked back the way she’d come. “I probably would not have found the trail if the body had been dragged through the grass around the dirt, instead of directly through it.”

McGee frowned. “Why not take the long route instead of leave a trail, or leave evidence of wiping out a trail?”

“Straight line’s the shortest distance between two points,” Gibbs commented.

Tony turned to look at him. “Body was too heavy, Boss.”

Gibbs nodded. “Whoever it was didn’t want the extra distance.”


Gibbs shook his head. “No, he was telling the truth. May want to double check on his father… kid said his dad walked the dog here last night.”

McGee spoke up. “A woman?”

Ziva shot him a look. McGee shot one right back. “C’mon, Ziva… you have to admit, most women aren’t exactly like you.”

“Which is a relief,” Tony said, earning a smack to the back of his head. “Shutting up, Boss.”

Ziva inclined her head toward Gibbs. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Gibbs looked back down at the ground. “Any footprints?”

“I did not find any.”

Gibbs nodded. “We done here?”

The rest of the team exchanged glances, then nodded. Gibbs set off toward the parking lot, the rest following behind. “DiNozzo, you and McGee go check out Drimel’s place. Ziva, you’re with me. We’ll go talk to his CO.”

They all set off, the tires of Gibbs’ car squealing while Tony and McGee left at a more sedate pace.

**Doing Some Digging**

Drimel’s CO was a Commander Brian Marston. He welcomed Gibbs and Ziva easily enough, apologized for the mess his office was in, and made a comment about budget deadlines, eliciting an understanding grimace from Gibbs. Marston gestured for them both to sit down, which they did after clearing piles of files from the chairs. Once they were seated, Marston sat as his desk and looked at Gibbs seriously. “I take it this is about Petty Officer Drimel.”
Gibbs nodded. “Anything you can tell us would be helpful in tracking down his killer.”

Marston shook his head. “I don’t know all that much. Never had any trouble with him, really. Had to talk to him once about toning down the arrogance. He was a bit full of himself at times, but in a fun way, you know?”

Ziva snorted. “I think we are familiar with the type.”

Gibbs turned to look at her, raising an eyebrow. Her eyes widened and she turned a bit red, then looked down at Commander’s desk. Gibbs simply smiled and shook his head a bit. “She’s right, we do know the type.” Ziva glanced up at him, surprised.

Marston nodded. “Drimel was popular with the guys, flirted with the women… kept it professional, though, at least most of the time. No one ever complained about him. That time I spoke to him was because I happened to overhear him bragging about something he’d done in his job; I just told him it was nothing anyone else hadn’t accomplished, and he’d do well to remember he was part of a team.”

“What were his duties?” Ziva asked.

“He was one of our computer experts. Did a little bit of everything. I had him working on the budget requests the past few days; not his usual area, but I needed the extra manpower after the latest unanticipated cuts.”

Gibbs made a couple of notes on his pad. “You know who he tended to hang out with?”

Marston nodded again. “Jones, Hartwell and Rodriguez. Those four were practically inseparable off duty. I’ll have them report here; you can use my office.”

Marston left the room and Ziva turned to Gibbs. “Gibbs, I did not mean to put Tony down just now.”

Gibbs gave her a sidelong glance, then shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Just make sure to look beyond the surface occasionally.”

Ziva considered that. “Tony is a good man, Gibbs. I know that. Sometimes he is just so…”

“Mmm hmm.”

She watched his face for a moment; he just stared impassively back. Then she smiled. “But he must be more than what he appears if you and he are together.”

Gibbs smiled. “Knew I kept you on the team for a reason.”

She smiled back, then turned all business as the three Petty Officers were ushered into the room. The agents stood, introductions were quickly made, and Marston left them to it.

Rodriguez, a tall, thin man, met Gibbs’ eyes seriously. “We heard about Terry, sir. Anything we can do to help, we will.” The other two nodded, Jones seeming particularly upset.

“What can you tell us about –“ Gibbs broke off when his cell phone rang… ‘Hail to the Chief’ again. He quickly hit the ignore button. “What can you tell us about Drimel’s activities last night?”

Rodriguez glanced at his friends. “We hit the Outback Steakhouse for dinner… then Terry said he had a date. He headed out and the rest of us went to one of the dance clubs near the base.”

“Know anything about the girl he was seeing?”
They all looked at each other again. Hartwell spoke up for the first time. “With Terry, it was a different girl every week. He had the looks and the outgoing personality; the ladies were pretty into him.”

Jones cut in. “Yeah, but he’d been out with this one before, on and off. I think her name was Lauren?” He looked to his friends for confirmation.

Rodriguez shook his head. “Laura.”

“Last name?” Ziva asked.

They all shook their heads. “We didn’t tend to pay much attention,” Hartwell said. “It was always a different girl with him. There were a few he’d gone out with more than once. Laura was just the latest one.”

Gibbs watched them all carefully. “Can you think of any reason why someone would kill him?”

Jones dropped his gaze to the floor; the tension in his face was obvious. The other two shook their heads. “Doesn’t really make any sense,” Rodriguez said. “Terry was harmless. He was just out for a good time.”

Hartwell shrugged. “Maybe it was a mugging gone bad? Terry paid for all our dinners and drinks last night. Said he’d come into some luck. He was flashing a pretty big bankroll around.”

Ziva followed up on that. “Was he a gambler? Did he owe anyone money?”

Rodriguez shook his head, looking a little bewildered. “I don’t think so. He never seemed stressed about money. Always had enough. He never talked about gambling either, and we were always hanging out together off duty, unless he was on a date. I think if he was gambling, we’d have known about it.”

They asked a few more questions, but there was nothing else of interest. The three petty officers were on their way out when Gibbs suddenly called out for Jones to stay a moment. Jones turned to face him, while the other two hesitated for a moment before they left. Ziva moved to shut the door behind them.

Gibbs moved forward, standing close to Jones, using his advantage of several inches in height to stare down at the young man. “What aren’t you telling us, Petty Officer?”

Jones met Gibbs’ eyes for a moment, then dropped his own and shook his head. “Maybe it was the money, like Harty – uh, I mean Hartwell said. But I think it might have been something else.”

Gibbs waited, but when nothing else was said, he spoke quietly, with just a hint of menace. “Gonna make me guess?”

Jones glanced up, his eyes slightly moist. “Terry was a great guy. But sometimes he was a jerk, especially with the women. He was a player, and he was always bragging about how many women he slept with every week. He was our friend, and I don’t want to say bad things about him… but he didn’t really care how much he hurt those girls after he was done with them. He was big on the romance before he could notch the bedpost, but afterwards he just turned it off and moved on to the next one. He pissed off a lot of people.”

Gibbs nodded. “Anyone in particular recently?”

Jones shook his head. “Not really. Marston’s had us pulling long hours the past couple of weeks.
Last night was our first real night out in a while. I know Terry got out a couple of times, I think to see Laura… but we weren’t around for any of it.”

“Can you give us her description?”

Jones shook his head. “I don’t think so. He met her late one evening at a bar; we were all pretty drunk by then, so I don’t remember much.”

Gibbs nodded. “Alright, Petty Officer, you can go.”

They left Marston’s office and headed back to the car. Gibbs’ cell rang again, and again he hit the ignore button. Ziva looked at him curiously. “Vance,” he said. “I was supposed to meet with him this morning about budget issues.”

She nodded. “We need to find this Laura.”

Gibbs grunted in agreement. “Maybe DiNozzo’s got something at Drimel’s apartment.”

They reached the car and headed back to the bullpen.

**Suspicion**

Leon Vance sat at his desk in his office, chewing a toothpick to shreds. He flipped rapidly through one of the files sitting in front of him, then closed it, tossed it to one side, and sat back in his chair. One hand went to the top of his desk while the other moved to rub a finger agitatedly over his upper lip. He cursed quietly when his finger snagged on the end of the toothpick, and he tossed the offending sliver of wood into the trashcan. He drummed his fingers on the desktop for a minute, then stood and strode out of the office and onto the landing overlooking the bullpen.

He watched the agents moving around the floor as they went about their jobs. He had work to do, and he knew he needed to focus, but instead he remained where he was, his attention on the empty area next to the stairs.

Gibbs’ area. Gibbs, who was still the eternal thorn in his side, missing the budget meeting with the other team leaders this morning, then ignoring his calls. Gibbs, whose team had the highest solve rate in the agency. Gibbs, who insisted on playing only by his own set of rules, ignoring NCIS protocols when it suited him. Gibbs, who may or may not be involved in a completely inappropriate relationship with his second in command.

Vance shook his head, unable to truly buy in to that particular thought. It made no sense; the man had been married four times, and there was nothing in his history to suggest he’d ever even thought of having a relationship with another man. And thinking of the other man… DiNozzo was the last guy Vance could imagine as being interested in that sort of sexual experimentation. Not to mention he couldn’t see how Gibbs could possibly be interested in the guy as anything other than a member of his team.

Vance’s attention was caught by the ding of the elevator, and he watched while DiNozzo and McGee moved quickly to McGee’s desk, DiNozzo tossing his pack in the general direction of his own and setting a cup of coffee down on Gibbs’ desk first. McGee was carrying a couple of evidence bags, setting them down on his desk and already typing furiously into his computer. DiNozzo hovered over him, pulling out his cell phone and punching a button.

Vance listened and was able to hear DiNozzo’s side of the conversation; the pauses while Gibbs was apparently speaking were short.
“Hey, Boss.”

“Yeah, we just got back from Drimel’s apartment. No sign of anything out of the ordinary, unless you count the fact that the guy’s got some awfully expensive technology in there.”

“Already on it… McGeek’s checking his financials now. We brought back a stash of cash from underneath the bed – didn’t count it all but there has to be several thousand there. McGee found a handwritten ledger with the cash, and we’ve got Drimel’s laptop too.”

“Alright, Boss, we’ll be here.”

DiNozzo hung up and spoke to McGee. “They’ll be here in about ten. Gibbs said we’ll bring in some lunch after we figure out where this is headed.”

Vance watched as they settled into an easy give and take while they went through whatever files McGee was accessing, with McGee slapping DiNozzo’s hand away every time the senior agent moved it too close to the keyboard.

“There’s nothing here, Tony… nothing to explain the money we found.”

DiNozzo nodded. “Then we need a warrant to get into the safe deposit box listed in the ledger. Why keep a handwritten ledger, anyway?”

McGee paused as he thought it over, then answered DiNozzo with exactly what Vance was thinking. “He didn’t want to risk the information getting hacked. He was a computer guy, he knew how easy it could be.”

DiNozzo moved away from McGee and picked up an evidence bag which contained a slim black book. “We need to make copies. It’s gonna take a while to decipher the code. What was this guy doing, working in naval intelligence?”

Vance’s eyebrows went up at that.

McGee shook his head. “I don’t think so, Tony. There’s nothing in his service record to indicate he’s been anything but what he appears to be… standard computer geek.”

DiNozzo snorted and McGee shot him a look. “You know what I mean.”

“Takes one to know one, McGoo.”

Vance watched as DiNozzo headed for the back elevator with the ledger in hand and McGee moved to his desk and made a call. The senior agent then sat back in his chair and made some notes on a pad of paper. Vance’s eyes drifted back to the coffee on Gibbs’ desk. "That doesn’t mean anything. DiNozzo’s worked with Gibbs for years; probably just taking normal precautions.

The elevator dinged again and Vance watched as Gibbs and Ziva stepped off. His eyes went to
DiNozzo, but the agent’s attention was still focused on whatever he was writing. Ziva went to her desk and Gibbs swept past DiNozzo without a glance in his direction. He stashed his gun and badge in a drawer, then picked up the coffee and took a long swallow. DiNozzo glanced up at him.

“McGee’s scanning the ledger down in evidence; the thing’s in code. Warrant for the safe deposit box should be coming through anytime now.”

Gibbs nodded and raised the coffee in DiNozzo’s direction; the senior field agent nodded and went back to writing. Gibbs then looked up and met Vance’s eyes. Vance stared at him for a moment, then pulled his cell out of his pocket and hit a button. Gibbs picked up his own cell and flipped it open.

“*Director,*” he greeted, keeping his eyes on Vance.

“You missed the meeting. Ignored my calls.”

“*Working a hot case. Dr. Mallard cleared me for field work on Friday. My team’s back on regular rotation.*”

Vance glared down at the man.

“I need your input for the budget requests.”

“*After we get some direction on this case, Leon. Shouldn’t be too long.*”

Vance flipped his phone shut and stared down at Gibbs until Gibbs’ attention was claimed by McGee returning. The Director then headed back to his office, nodding to his secretary as he passed her, then closing the door behind him. He moved behind his desk and stared out the window, thinking.

*The whole idea is ridiculous. I should know better than to take Ms. Sciuto’s words at face value.*

Vance thought back to what he’d overheard. “… plane tickets and the hotel room… they could be on the beach together. Wouldn’t that be great? Tony would love it, and I bet he could get Gibbs to love it too.” Her tone of voice turned slightly suggestive. “Can’t you just picture them together on a beach? That would be so hot!”

Vance had to admit to himself that the words were certainly suspicious. *Gibbs and DiNozzo… Gibbs and DiNozzo? It’s crazy. But Gibbs certainly did get pissed when I wanted to transfer DiNozzo out west… and DiNozzo does worship the ground the bastard walks on. But still… there’s nothing to indicate there’s anything between them. Gibbs even has a rule against team members dating. Hell, that doesn’t mean much. He’d break just about any rule if it suited him.*

He went over the words again in his head. They could mean a number of things, be taken out of context very easily. He supposed he should just dismiss it… but he didn’t get to be the director by ignoring his own instincts, and those instincts were nagging at him. *Something’s off… but what?*

Then it hit him. It wasn’t so much what Abby Sciuto had said, it was more everyone else’s reaction to it. Palmer looking freaked out wasn’t unusual, but Dr. Mallard had been trying hard to hide what was obviously a very dismayed reaction when he realized Vance had heard at least some of what they were saying. And there would have been no reason to react that way if Ms. Sciuto had simply been talking about her co-workers’ attractive physical qualities. No… if Dr. Mallard was dismayed, that meant there was something to be dismayed about.

Leon Vance decided that for now he’d just keep his eyes and ears open. There was something going on, and eventually he’d figure out what it was.
Getting Direction

It was mid-afternoon; Tony, Ziva and Gibbs were sitting around Gibbs’ desk, eating pizza and discussing the case so far. McGee had emerged from Abby’s lab and collected several pieces to bring back down to where he and Abby were working on the code in the ledger. He’d also gotten the flash drives that Tony and Ziva had brought back from the safe deposit box in the bank.

“I still think it could be gambling,” Ziva was saying. “That could explain the ledger, the money, and Drimel’s comment about luck.”

Gibbs nodded and looked at Tony, who shrugged. “Gambling, drugs, blackmail… he could be a hitman on the side, be keeping track of his contacts.”

Gibbs nodded again. They were more or less at a standstill until McGee and Abby broke that code. Neither Drimel’s home phone nor his cell records had yielded anything of value.

“What about Jones?” Ziva asked. “He was the most emotional of the three we talked to.”

Gibbs shook his head. “My gut says he’s on to something with Drimel’s dating habits, but I don’t think he or his friends had anything to do with the murder.” He looked over at Tony. “What about Kevin Whitten’s father?”

Tony and Ziva had stopped off at the man’s office on the way to the bank and had verified his story with a few quick phone calls. “He checks out. There’s no apparent connection between him and Drimel, and his neighbors saw him going back home with the dog, talked to him briefly, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“So we need to find a woman named Laura,” Ziva said, disgruntled.

Tony looked at Gibbs. “Do we have a cause of death yet?”

Gibbs shook his head. “Ducky got called out to another crime scene, hasn’t had time to finish the autopsy. Said he’ll call as soon as he knows.”

Gibbs’ cell screamed. All three of them jumped. It screamed again. Gibbs looked at Tony, who grinned. “Jamie Lee Curtis in Halloween. It’s a classic.”

Gibbs growled as he pulled the phone off his belt. “You are fixing this later,” he said. “Yeah, Gibbs.”

Tony turned to Ziva. “It’s Abby.”

“How do you know?”

“I reset all Gibbs’ ringtones last night.”

Ziva suppressed a laugh. “What is mine?”

Tony grinned. “Theme song to the original Mission Impossible tv show.”

Gibbs shut his cell and stood. “They’ve cracked the code.”

Abby handed copies of a printout to each of them as they entered the lab. “He was good, but not good enough,” she stated. Then she waved toward where McGee was typing furiously into the computer. “Timmy’s working on decrypting the flash drives.”
The three agents scanned through the pages. “Looks like blackmail, Boss,” Tony said.

The left hand column was all names of women, with their contact information listed in the next column. Next to that was a man’s name, a relationship identifier such as boyfriend, fiancé or husband, and next to that a list of payment amounts and dates, going back two years.

“Gibbs,” Ziva said urgently, “the last name on the list – Laura Kendall.”

Just then McGee called out, “Got it!” Abby bounced over next to him, and the others gathered around. McGee moved the cursor over the screen, hovering around a list of files. “It’s all video files, Boss... each is labeled with a name and a date.” He double-clicked on one and after a moment it loaded to show a high definition black and white video.

“That’s Drimel’s apartment,” Tony said.

They watched for a moment while on screen Petty Officer Drimel talked and laughed with a woman – identified as Stephanie Cranston by the file name – then started making out with her on the couch.

“Shut it off, McGee.” Gibbs turned to the others. “Petty Officer Jones told us Drimel was a player.”

Tony nodded. “He was… he targeted women in relationships then blackmailed them so he wouldn’t reveal their indiscretions to their husbands or whoever.”

Gibbs turned to Abby and McGee. “You two watch the videos. See if there’s anything to indicate that one of these women might be the killer.”

Tony paged through the copies of the ledger. “Seventeen names on the list. Ziva and I will run them down, see who has alibis for last night.”

Gibbs nodded once. “I’ll go meet with Vance. Let’s narrow this down, maybe we can actually get out of here at a decent hour.” Tony and Ziva were already on their way out the door, and Gibbs was about to follow them when he noticed McGee whispering urgently to Abby and then giving her a little push toward him. He stopped. “Something you need to tell me, Abs?”

Abby glanced at him, nodded, then grabbed his arm and half-dragged him to her back office. She pulled him inside and shut the door. Shoulders hunched, she turned to face him. “Please don’t hate me, Gibbs.”

Gibbs shook his head and reached out to pull on one of her pigtails. “You’ve asked me not to hate you a few times, Abs. Never have, have I?”

She shook her head, keeping her eyes on the floor. “Well?”

She sighed and folder her arms over her chest. “I really screwed up, Gibbs.” She glanced up at him, looking up through her lashes while she kept her head down. He tilted his head a bit to look her in the eyes and waited. Abby exhaled noisily and straightened up. “I was in Autopsy with Ducky and Jimmy, and I was talking about the vacation we gave you guys. I was saying how cool it would be to send you and Tony to a nice hotel on a beach in Florida, and then Vance was like, right behind me.”

Gibbs’ eyebrows shot up. “I see.”

“Yeah. And I don’t know for sure what he heard, but I know he heard enough because he said –” she lowered her voice to imitate Vance – “what would be so hot about Gibbs and DiNozzo on a
beach together, Ms. Scuito?"

Gibbs was hard pressed not to laugh. It wasn’t funny, it really wasn’t, but he couldn’t help it. “Don’t worry, Abs. I’ll take care of it.”

“But, Gibbs! What if he transfers Tony after all? Or fires you for sleeping with a subordinate? It would be all my fault!”

Gibbs shook his head and drew her into a hug. “He doesn’t know anything for sure, Abby. If he did, he’d already be interrogating me in his office. And it wouldn’t be your fault… what was he doing in Autopsy?”

She sniffled slightly and pressed her face into his shoulder. “Looking for you,” she said in a muffled voice.

“If I’d answered his call instead of ignoring it back at the crime scene, he wouldn’t have been looking for me. So that’s my fault.” He took hold of her arms and gently pushed her back a step. “It’ll be okay, Abs.”

Abby shook her head. “Action and reaction, Gibbs! Everything’s linked together. It’s like the butterfly in the Amazon whose wingbeats cause a tornado in Africa, or something. I was so worried about you and Tony and that’s why I wanted you guys to get that weekend away, and now I may have given Vance a reason to turn your relationship into a long distance one! And that would just take more work, and that would make it more likely you guys would split up, and I don’t want you to split up.”

Gibbs blinked at her. “Abby, we’re not splitting up. Tony and I are fine. We both want this to work, so we’re going to put the time and energy into it, I promise.”

“Don’t turn into a dilapidated barn, Gibbs.”

He shot her a slightly confused look. “I promise you I won’t do that.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, then set off for the elevator.

While he was riding up to the top floor, he thought about his best strategy. He didn’t think Vance would confront him without something more solid than hearsay, so his best move might be to do nothing. He didn’t want to confess to anything without talking to Tony first, so marching in and telling Vance how things were wasn’t an option, at least not yet.

Decompressing

Gibbs walked into his house hours later, heading upstairs to change before starting on dinner. The rest of the afternoon had been relatively quiet. The meeting with Vance had gone smoothly; there’d been no mention of what Vance had heard in Autopsy. McGee and Abby had found nothing on the videos to make one woman more of a suspect than any of the others, and Tony and Ziva had narrowed down the list of suspects in the ledger from seventeen to three, including Laura Kendall, who was scheduled to come in for an interview the next morning. They hadn’t been able to reach the other two, a Patrice Holloway and a Sedona Mitchell. Gibbs had eventually decided to call it a day, as Ducky was involved with a higher priority case for Pearson’s team, one involving a murdered Admiral, and still didn’t have a cause of death for Drimel.

Gibbs threw on sweatpants and a t-shirt, then headed downstairs to start grilling the steaks. Tony should be arriving soon; he’d wanted to swing by his apartment to pick up a few things. Gibbs knew he needed to make a conscious effort to get his head out of work mode – not easy to do when he had
an open case. If he was going to give Tony a heads up about Vance, he needed to talk to Tony as his partner, not as his boss.

Gibbs brought the steaks out onto the deck and fired up the grill. Once the steaks were cooking, he grabbed his beer and walked over to the railing, staring out at the backyard. He smiled a bit as he remembered Tony helping him stain the deck just about a month ago, when they spent their first weekend together. An awful lot had happened since then. He turned as he heard a noise, and watched Tony walk out onto the deck, having changed into a t-shirt and jeans. Tony made eye contact and smiled, a warm, happy smile reaching up to his eyes.

“Hey, Jethro.”

“Tony.” Jethro held out a hand, and Tony moved forward, reaching out to clasp it. Jethro drew him in and kissed him lightly on the lips, then buried his face in Tony’s neck and inhaled deeply. Tony laughed.

“Like how I smell, do you?”

Jethro nodded, then nipped Tony’s neck and stepped back. He set his beer down on the railing and went to check the steaks, flipping them over. Tony walked up behind him and rested his chin on Jethro’s shoulder, reaching around his waist to loosely clasp his hands in front. “What’s up with Vance today? I caught him staring at me a couple of times this afternoon, and when I was leaving he asked if you’d already gone.”

Jethro sighed and laid his free hand over both of Tony’s while he shifted the steaks around on the grill. “Gotta tell you about that… but let’s eat first.”

Tony snuggled up against Jethro for a moment, then pressed a quick kiss to the back of his neck and let go of him. “Okay. I’m not going to like it, am I?”

Jethro glanced back at him, quirking an eyebrow. Tony sighed. “Definitely not going to like it.” He shifted over until he was standing at Jethro’s side, reaching out to touch him lightly. “How are you feeling, anyway? Okay after your first day back in the field?”

Jethro took hold of Tony’s hand and pressed it harder against the skin that now covered the area where Johnson’s knife had cut into him. “I’m fine, Tony.”

“Good.” Tony squeezed him gently, then moved over to the table and chairs sitting on the deck, lowering himself into one of them. A few minutes later, Jethro was handing him a plate with his steak on it. They both sat down and stared at the food for a second, then Tony pushed his chair back. “I’ll go get the silverware.” Jethro grinned.

Once they were done eating, they stared out into the yard, watching the darkness close in. Jethro glanced over at Tony. “Wanna go work on your cabinet?”

Tony sighed and shook his head. “Not right now. I’d rather hear about what’s going on at work… get it over with and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Jethro nodded, and then succinctly brought Tony up to speed on what Abby had told him.

Tony sat back, eyes wide, and ran his hand through his hair. “Crap. Crap, crap, crap and double crap.”

“That’s a lot of crap.”
“What are we gonna do, Jeth? Now that Vance knows, he’ll probably greet me at the elevator tomorrow with a one-way ticket to Seattle.”

Jethro shook his head. “I don’t think so. First off, he doesn’t actually know anything. Second, if he thought he knew, he’d have said something to me at our budget meeting. He didn’t, so he doesn’t. He’s not one to act without thinking it all through.”

Tony sprang to his feet and began pacing. “Yeah, but we know I’m not his favorite person. He wants McGee promoted to your senior field agent, and me across the country. This just gives him an excuse.”

“Tony.” Jethro got to his own feet and grabbed Tony’s arm. “You’re not going anywhere. If Vance tries to transfer you, we’ll fight it.”

“How? The buck stops with him, doesn’t it?”

Jethro shrugged. “SecNav owes me a favor.”

Tony stared at him. “You’d go to the Secretary of the Navy and tell him you’re in a committed relationship with your second in command, and that you’d appreciate it if he didn’t let the director of NCIS send him away so that you can keep screwing him.”

Jethro couldn’t help the laughter that escaped. “Well, no, Tony, I don’t think I’d put it in quite those terms.”

Tony nodded. “Okay. That’s good. We’ll be fine, then.”

Jethro grinned. “Tony, it’s going to be alright. I promise.” He pulled the younger man into a hug. “I’m not letting you go, so don’t worry about it.”

Tony remained stiff in Jethro’s arms for a minute, then suddenly relaxed, his own arms coming up to hug him back. “Crazy as it is, I actually believe you.”

“I should hope so.”

They stood that way for a while, just breathing in each other’s scent. Jethro sighed quietly, and Tony arms tightened around him a little. “Your smell always calms me down,” Jethro admitted.

Tony grinned. “Seriously?”

Jethro nodded. “Yeah.”

“If I can figure out how to use that at work, life will get so much easier.”

Jethro laughed. “That’ll keep Vance in the dark for sure.”

Tony smiled. “C’mon… let’s go see if there’s a decent game on tv.” He let go of Jethro, grabbed his empty beer bottle and his plate and silverware, and went inside. Jethro checked on the grill, then did the same and followed Tony into the kitchen. Tony did a quick clean up while Jethro went into the living room and turned on the tv, finding a Nationals game and settling down on the couch. Tony followed, bringing two more beers and handing one to Jethro as he sat down. They clinked the bottles together and drank a little before settling back to watch the game.

Half an inning later, Tony had scooted a little closer to Jethro and was running his fingers through Jethro’s hair. Jethro was absently running his own hand up and down Tony’s thigh. The Nationals
were batting, the score was tied, and suddenly there was a home run and the Nationals were up by two. Jethro and Tony high-fived, leaned forward to grab their beers, clinked bottles, drank, and put the beers back on the coffee table. Tony lay back with his head against the back of the couch and watched Jethro watch the game. After a moment, Jethro turned to him, an inquiring look on his face.

“Remember that first baseball game we watched together?”

Jethro smiled. “Our first kiss.”

Tony grinned. “Gonna get all sappy on me now?”

“You brought it up,” Jethro countered mildly.

Tony sighed and settled back to watch the game. Jethro eyed him for a moment, then smiled and got up. Tony watched him curiously as he walked into the kitchen and came back out with candles and a lighter. Moments later there were several candles flickering around the room, providing the only light along with the tv.

Tony grinned as Jethro came back and sat with his back against the arm of the couch. “Baseball by candle light. This is great.”

Jethro grinned and slid down until his head was resting on the arm of the couch, one leg was against the back, and the other foot was on the floor. Tony shifted over until he was lying on his stomach, his head on Jethro’s chest, his arms along Jethro’s sides. They watched the game like that, Jethro carding his fingers through Tony’s hair, until the seventh inning stretch, when Tony shifted up and stretched like a cat, before leaning down and kissing Jethro lightly on the lips. Jethro immediately moved one hand to the back of Tony’s neck, holding him in place while the other hand dropped to slip under Tony’s shirt and caress his side. Tony made a low noise in his throat and deepened the kiss, running his tongue along Jethro’s lips and teasing his way inside his mouth. Jethro’s hand slid from Tony’s side to his back, his fingers edging underneath Tony’s jeans and barely skimming along the upper edges of his ass.

Tony levered himself up, popping open the buttons on his jeans and lowering the zipper, then shoving his jeans down to his thighs. Jethro hummed appreciatively, sliding both his hands down to Tony’s ass, kneading and pulling Tony down against his own growing hardness. They continued kissing as Tony pulled and pushed at Jethro’s sweatpants, eventually getting them out of the way. Kisses were interspersed with gasps of pleasure and indrawn breath as their cocks pressed against each other. Jethro managed to get a hand in between them and spread precome over his palm, moving his hand around them both, and then slowly grasping and stroking and pulling, getting a low moan out of Tony in the process.

Tony pulled away from Jethro’s mouth, groaning and shaking a little with the effort of staying still and not thrusting in Jethro’s hand. He stared down at his lover, his eyes dark and hungry. He shifted his weight a little to one side, and reached to caress Jethro’s side where he’d pressed his hand earlier, out on the deck.

“Are you – are you okay?”

Jethro smiled. “I’m fine, Tony. What’d you have in mind?”

Tony whined a little, low in his chest, then pushed himself up off of Jethro, who kept his grip on Tony’s cock for a moment, forcing the younger man to gasp and stop moving. Jethro’s smile widened into a grin, and he let go. Tony stood, pulling his jeans up but leaving them unzipped, then reached for the remote and switched off the tv. “Upstairs,” he said. “Need more room.”
Jethro got up off the couch, pulling his sweats up and blowing out the candles before following Tony up the stairs. He got to the bedroom in time to see Tony stepping out of his jeans and pulling his shirt off. Jethro quickly followed suit, and they just stood there looking at each other for a minute. Then Tony moved forward and reached out to gently skim his fingers over Jethro’s side. “If you’re up to it,” he said softly, “I’d really love to ride you.”

Jethro drew in a quick breath and nodded. They’d been very careful over the past week since Jethro had gotten out of the hospital, limiting themselves mostly to hand jobs and blow jobs, with Tony doing most of the work to keep Jethro from reinjuring his side.

Tony reached up to lightly run the tips of his fingers over Jethro’s face. “Go lie down,” he whispered.

Jethro moved to the bed, lying on his back in the center, while Tony got the lube out of the drawer in the nightstand. He watched as Tony prepped himself, stretching and relaxing his own muscles so he could take Jethro inside. His own breathing sped up as his eyes traced every move Tony made, and his hand moved to his own cock and began to slowly and steadily jack himself off. Tony’s eyes moved to follow Jethro’s actions, and he swallowed hard. There was no sound in the room except for their heavy breathing.

Finally Tony moved forward, using a tissue to wipe off his fingers and getting a condom out of the drawer, opening the packet and shoving Jethro’s hand out of the way, rolling the condom over Jethro’s cock, then gently covering it with lube. After quickly wiping the excess lube off of his hands, Tony moved to straddle Jethro, leaning down to nip at his abdomen. Jethro’s muscles flexed, and Tony groaned at the sensation of them moving under his lips. Jethro reached down to grab Tony’s head, tugging at his hair to get him to shift up so Jethro could kiss him. Their mouths met, hot and open, tongues tangling together, both of them grunting and moaning with eagerness. Then Tony sat up suddenly, reaching down to tug at Jethro, moving him down the bed a bit. Jethro quickly scooted down, and as he lay back Tony grabbed his wrists and held them against the mattress, above Jethro’s head. Jethro gasped and tried to pull his arms away, but Tony wasn’t letting go. He leaned in and kissed Jethro again, then shifted his hands so that his left hand held both Jethro’s wrists while his right reached down behind him and grasped Jethro’s cock, bringing the tip up against his stretched anus.

Jethro got with the program quickly, leaving his arms where Tony wanted them, bringing his feet up against the mattress, angling his hips as Tony bore down slowly onto his cock. Both men cried out as Jethro’s cock moved smoothly into Tony’s ass; Tony’s hand gripped Jethro’s wrists convulsively as his other hand moved to Jethro’s rear, gripping and pulling him against Tony.

They stayed like that for a moment, then Jethro, his jaw clenched tightly, forced the word “move” between his lips. Tony let a quiet, half-groan half-sob escape his own mouth, and then he was moving, holding Jethro as still as he could while he rode him. Tony gasped for breath, his arms stretched above his head, twisting his hands as best he could to grab onto Tony’s fingers. Tony shifted his angle a bit and cried out as Jethro’s cock hit his prostate… then again… and again… and then Tony was moving faster and gasping for breath and letting go of Jethro’s wrists and crying out wordlessly as he clenched down around Jethro’s cock, unable to hold out any longer after waiting for what felt like forever to have Jethro inside him again, coming all over both his and Jethro’s chests and abs. The clenching of his muscles brought Jethro to his own climax, and he groaned and reached out to grab Tony’s arm and the back of his neck as he pumped into his lover.

They lay there, letting their breathing slow, until Tony finally shifted up and off, brushing a light kiss over Jethro’s lips. He got up and hit the bathroom, using a damp towel to clean them both off, removing the condom and tossing it in the trash, then checking that the alarm was set for the next
morning. Jethro moved under the covers and Tony joined him, each of them caressing the other and kissing whatever they could easily reach. As they drifted off to sleep, Tony nuzzled into Jethro’s neck and Jethro murmured quietly, “I am not letting you go.”
Narrowing It Down

Early Morning Conversation

Tony gradually worked his way to awareness, registering the feel of Jethro’s arm around his waist and Jethro’s legs entwined with his own and Jethro’s nose buried in his neck. He slowly blinked his eyes open and realized that it must be very early, as it was still pitch dark in the room. He closed his eyes and snuggled back into his lover, smiling as he heard and felt Jethro sigh in his sleep and pull him even closer.

Tony let his mind wander where it would, as he usually did when he woke up in the middle of the night and didn’t fall back to sleep right away. He drifted over memories of their love-making that evening, then thought about random facts from their current case, waiting to see if a connection suddenly popped into focus. Nothing new there. Then he remembered what Jethro had told him about Abby’s faux pas with Vance, and his eyes flew open while his gut went into free fall.

Tony’s entire body tensed while he ran all sorts of scenarios through his head. Of course none of them had a happy ending. Vance calling Jethro into his office and firing him for abusing his position as team leader… Vance sending Tony to Seattle, complete with Marine escort out of the building, while other Marines prevented Jethro from following… okay, so maybe that’s a little overly dramatic and movie of the week… Vance firing both of them and making sure they’d never work in law enforcement again…

Moving slowly so as not to disturb Jethro, Tony disentangled himself and eased out of the bed. He made his way to the bathroom and grabbed one of the robes hanging on the back of the door, than left the room and headed downstairs. He went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, looking for something to munch on. He almost reached for a beer and then shook his head. Beer at – he glanced at the digital clock on the microwave – god, 2:30 in the morning is really not a good idea. His eyes rested on the leftover pizza from three nights ago; he grabbed a slice and stuck it in the microwave, then brought it out to the living room. He sat on the couch and ate slowly, trying to think through the issue with Vance and what to do next.

“Hey.”

Tony looked up to see Jethro standing in the doorway, naked, hair a bit messy, gazing at him steadily. “Hey back.”

Jethro moved forward and sat on the couch, leaning back on the arm and watching Tony finish off the pizza. “Not sure how you can eat that so early in the morning.”

Tony smiled. “Better choice than beer.”

Jethro grimaced. “Yeah.” He watched Tony lean forward to put the plate on the coffee table, then met his eyes. “So what’s bothering you?”

Tony sighed. “Vance.”

Jethro nodded, then moved his arm to rest it against the back of the couch, propping his head on his left hand and resting his right on his own thigh. “Didn’t believe me when I said it’ll be okay?”

Tony looked down at Jethro’s hand, then reached out to take it in his own, linking their fingers together. “I believe that you believe that,” he said quietly. “But we both know that you’re not the
Jethro smirked at him. “No, that I’m not. Probably a good thing, too.”

Tony laughed quietly. “Oh, I know that’s a good thing. You’d shoot some politician within your first week. And I’m guessing it would be difficult for me to arrange conjugal visits to you in prison.”

Jethro grinned. “You’d just have to break me out instead.”

Tony smiled at that, then squeezed Jethro’s hand. “Seriously, though… what are we going to do if Vance figures it out and fires you or transfers me?”

Jethro shook his head. “SecNav really does owe me a favor, Tony.”

Tony kept his eyes on their hands. “And how do we explain it? You saying you don’t want me to leave your team will have him asking me what I want, and me saying I still have things to learn from you probably won’t cut it after all these years. It isn’t really normal for a team to stay together for this long, you know.” Tony looked up into Jethro’s eyes. “Besides which, if Vance tells him why he’s breaking up the team, none of that is likely to matter. This isn’t going to sound very manly, Jeth… but I’m scared of losing you.”

Jethro moved forward and pulled Tony into a hug. “Screw manly. You think I’m not just as worried?” He held on tight for a moment, then sat back, taking Tony gently by the chin to get him to look him in the face. “Tony… I certainly never expected this, us. But now that we’re here, like this – believe me, I meant it when I told you I couldn’t promise to put the team first. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me since I lost Shannon and Kelly. I couldn’t do anything to stop it then. I can do something now. And I will, if it comes to that.”

Tony shot Jethro a small smile. “If you make me cry I’m going to head smack you hard.”

Jethro laughed. “Well, how about we go back to sleep before I end up crying too.”

Tony gave him a disbelieving look. Jethro grinned. “I’m perfectly capable of it, you know.”

Tony smirked as he got to his feet and pulled Jethro up to his. “Do you have any idea how much money I could win off the team if I placed a bet with them that I could get you to cry?”

Jethro rolled his eyes. “Bed, Tony. To sleep,” he added, when Tony reached down to caress his bare buttocks.

Tony pouted a little, then sighed. “I guess that’s a good idea.” He hung back when they reached the stairs, motioning for Jethro to go first. Jethro raised an eyebrow and waited. Tony sighed and headed up. “Next time you should put on a robe, too,” he commented.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Tony put his robe back in the bathroom while Jethro got back into bed. Tony joined him and they lay next to each other for a moment before Tony reached over and tugged Jethro into his usual position of half lying on him, putting him in the role of overgrown teddy bear. He then reached up and started running his fingers through Jethro’s hair.

“So how come you want to go to Stillwater? Your dad okay?”

Jethro nodded. “He’s fine. Lost enough time with him, that’s all.” He paused, and Tony continued to play with his hair. “How do you feel about telling him about us?”
Tony’s hand stilled. “Wow. You think he’d be okay with it?”

Jethro shrugged. “Don’t really know. He’s not any kind of prejudiced, never had any patience for small-minded people, as he called them.” He shifted a little, tightening his grip around Tony’s waist. “I know he likes you… he’d never have given you that sweater, otherwise.”

Tony sighed. “He’s your dad, Jeth. It’s up to you. Would be nice, if he didn’t mind…”

Jethro laughed lightly. “Careful what you wish for. He doted on Shannon and spoiled Kelly rotten. Once he gets used to the idea, he’ll probably try to give you the world.”

Tony snorted at that. “What would I do with a whole planet?” There was a pause, then he said seriously, “Do you think he’s got enough money for a Ferrari?”

The head smack was very light and more of a caress, really.

Tony was almost asleep when he heard Jethro speak softly. “Do you want to lay low for a while, stop spending most nights together? Until Vance is less of a threat?”

Tony turned his head and kissed Jethro’s where it rested on his chest. “When is Vance ever going to be less of a threat?”

Jethro sighed. “Good point.”

**Investigating**

Ducky looked up at the sound of the door opening and saw Gibbs stride in. “Good morning, Jethro! I do apologize for the delay.”

Gibbs tilted his head a bit. “Admiral trumps petty officer, Duck. You got something for me now?”

Ducky nodded. “Indeed. Do you remember, Jethro, that case years ago that gave you the opportunity to reconnect with Stan Burley? Wherever is he now, anyway?”

Gibbs moved closer to look down at Terrance Drimel’s body. “Leading his own team in Okinawa, last I heard. Doing a good job, too. Drimel die of a meth overdose?”

Ducky shook his head. “No, indeed. Look here.” He handed Gibbs a magnifier and pointed to the inside of Drimel’s left elbow.

Gibbs leaned in and looked closely. “Is that a needle mark, Duck?”

“Very good, Jethro. It certainly is. I refer not to the drugs from that case, but rather to that unfortunate young man who committed suicide.”

Gibbs thought for a moment. “He blew air into his IV and it stopped his heart.”

“Yes, that was it. It appears that someone injected our petty officer here, using a syringe full of air.”

Gibbs looked at Ducky. “We’re looking for someone with medical experience.”

Ducky nodded. “That’s likely. There’s only one mark on his arm, so whoever it was penetrated the vein on the first try.”

Gibbs nodded. “Thanks, Duck.” He turned to go, then hesitated.
“Was there something else, Jethro?”

Gibbs drew in a breath and then let it out slowly. He looked around Autopsy, but there was no sign of anyone else.

“Mr. Palmer is in class; he will arrive later today.”

Gibbs nodded, then met Ducky’s eyes. “Abby told me about Vance coming down here yesterday.”

Ducky grimaced. “Yes, it was an unpleasant moment. I’m afraid neither I nor Mr. Palmer did any sort of credible job of deflection.”

“Think he heard enough to be suspicious?”

Ducky shook his head and shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. I believe Abigail’s words could be taken to mean several things. I would certainly suggest that you and Anthony be on your guard around him.”

Gibbs nodded and turned to go. “Thanks, Duck.”

Ducky watched him leave, and then looked down at the body. “He’ll find your killer, my boy. I do hope he’ll keep his relationship intact at the same time.”

Gibbs arrived in the bullpen to find all three of his agents at their computers, working hard at backgrounding the current suspects. “Ducky says cause of death is air injected into the bloodstream. What have we got?”

Ziva was the first to stand and move toward the plasma. “I have been working on Laura Kendall; she is scheduled to arrive for her interview in forty five minutes.” She picked up the remote and hit a button. A woman’s driver’s license appeared on the screen. “She is 29, works as an administrative assistant at an advertising firm here in DC, lives in Georgetown. Engaged to a Lucas Brader, who is the heir to a large fortune; his family owns a sizable importing and exporting company. The wedding is to take place later this summer.”

Tony looked up from his computer. “There’s a motive… he tries to blackmail her, she’s afraid she’ll lose her opportunity to marry into money, so she kills him.”

Gibbs glanced at him then back at the screen. “How much did she pay him?”

Ziva shook her head. “There is no entry in the ledger for any financial transaction under her name.”

Tony chimed in again. “She could have killed him when he was supposed to collect the first payment.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Or she paid him and he was killed before he could include the entry.”

Ziva looked at him. “His friends said he had a lot of cash on him at dinner.”

Gibbs looked at McGee. “McGee! Any entry in the ledger in the past two days?”

Mc Gee quickly scanned through the pages. “None, Boss. Most recent entry is five days ago.”

Gibbs nodded once, then looked at Ziva. “Does she have any medical training?”

Ziva cocked her head, then used the remote to run through several pages of research. “None that I can find.”
McGee and Tony glanced at each other then set to work, each of them typing furiously.

Gibbs spoke to Ziva again. “See if you can find anything else that might be relevant. DiNozzo!”

Tony jumped up to his feet and took Ziva’s place at the plasma. “Patrice Holloway, 32, works as an accountant for a small firm in Arlington, lives in Falls Church.” He clicked the remote, and another driver’s license appeared on the screen. “Kinda hot, which is surprising since driver’s license pictures usually suck.” He let out a quiet yelp at the head slap. “Thank you, Boss! Married to one of the firm’s executives, spends a lot of time training for triathlons. Found some local newspaper articles about her. No medical training. According to Drimel’s ledger, she’s paid out close to four thousand dollars in eight installments to keep him quiet. Tried calling her at home and at work, no answer.”

“Keep trying, McGee!”

Tony tossed the remote to McGee, who juggled it for a moment before holding it steady and clicking to another picture. “Sedona Mitchell, 24… she’s a local artist, lives here in DC. Single, no record of any serious relationship. She doesn’t have any medical training either, Boss, and I can’t find any record of employment. She’s paid Drimel around two thousand, lots of small payments. I haven’t been able to get in touch with her either.”

Gibbs glanced at McGee. “Get all three pictures up on the screen.” McGee did so. “Anything extreme or different in any of the videos involving these three women?”

McGee shook his head. “The video with Laura Kendall was no more than a make-out session on the couch. It lasted about seventeen minutes, he said something to her, she got angry and appeared to be yelling at him, then she left. The date on the video is from four days ago.” McGee moved to his desk and stood over his computer, hitting some keys. “Both Patrice Holloway and Sedona Mitchell ended up in bed with Drimel… there was video from the bedroom too. Those were from between two and three months ago.”

“Clear enough to identify them?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Either of them leave angry?”

“There was nothing on the video.”

Gibbs nodded as he moved to his desk. “Ziva, get me a printout of everything on Laura Kendall. You’ll sit in on the interview. DiNozzo, McGee, track down those other two.”

“On it, Boss!” Tony said. McGee simply sat back down at his desk and focused on his monitor.

Laura Kendall arrived ten minutes early for her interview. Security escorted her to the conference room, and stood by until Gibbs and Ziva arrived. Introductions were made quickly; Gibbs sat directly opposite her, while Ziva sat on his left.

Laura was tall, around 5’9”, with long brown curly hair. She was dressed conservatively and appeared slightly uncomfortable.

Gibbs was silent, looking through his notes, while Ziva simply observed their suspect. Laura began fidgeting after only few seconds; it didn’t take long for her to start talking. Her voice didn’t really fit the rest of her; it was high-pitched and just a shade away from being whiny.

“You must have questions for me. You said this was about Terrence Drimel?”
Gibbs nodded. “Mm hmm.”

She glanced between him and Ziva. “Well, what about him? Whatever the jerk’s told you, I doubt it’s true.”

Gibbs’ lips twitched in a small smile. “Petty Officer Terrence Drimel is dead, Ms. Kendall.”


Ziva leaned forward a little. “That is why we asked you to come in. You may have been the last person to see him alive.”

Laura’s eyes widened, and she started at Ziva. “He was fine when I left him.”

“And where was that?”

“We met up at a little jazz club near the Arts Center.”

“In Arlington?”

“Yes.”

“What time was that?”

Laura blinked rapidly while she thought it over. “Had to be a little before ten.”

Gibbs spoke up. “What was Drimel’s state of mind like when you met up with him?”

Laura shrugged. “Fine, until I told him to go to hell.”

Gibbs met her eyes for a moment, then asked quietly, “And why did you do that?”

Laura looked down at the table for a moment; when she looked back up, her expression had changed from impatient to angry. “Your jerk of a petty officer was trying to blackmail me. We’d gone to his place once, and he tried to get me to go to bed with him, even though I’d told him I was just looking to hang out and have some fun. I got angry and left, and then he called two nights ago and said he needed to meet with me. Once we sat down in the club, he told me he knew about my engagement and if I didn’t want him to tell my fiancé about my indiscretions, I’d pay him four thousand dollars.”

Gibbs sat back and watched her closely while Ziva picked up the line of questioning. “What did you tell him when he demanded money?”

Laura laughed; it was a shrill and unpleasant sound, and Ziva couldn’t quite keep her discomfort from showing. “I told the bastard to go ahead. Lucas, my fiancé, and I have an understanding. We can flirt and play a little as much as we want, just no sleeping with anyone else.”

Gibbs’ eyebrows shot up at that. “And you’re comfortable with that arrangement?”

“Sure, why not? Once we’re married, we’ll stop. But he’s busy and can’t always find time for me, and I don’t see why I can’t go out and have a good time.”

“You never gave him any money?”

Laura snorted. “Of course not. I didn’t do anything wrong, so I certainly didn’t need to pay for it. I told Lucas all about it anyway. Are we done here?”
Ziva asked for the name of the club; Laura gave it to her, as well as the address. Gibbs asked for her fiancé’s contact information so that they could verify her story. Laura provided that with no hesitation as well. Ziva escorted her out and Gibbs went back to the bullpen.

Tony watched the two women get into the elevator, then turned to Gibbs. “I take it she’s not the killer.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Probably not.” He tossed the paper onto Tony’s desk. “Call her fiancé, see if he can verify her story that she told him about Drimel’s attempt to blackmail her.”

“Fun.”

Gibbs shot him a little smirk. “If she’s telling the truth, she had no reason to kill him. McGee, when Ziva gets back, you two go to the jazz bar where Ms. Kendall says she met up with Drimel; see if anyone remembers anything. Ziva has the address.”

McGee nodded. “Will do… I’ve located Sedona Mitchell, Boss. She’s at her parents’ house in Brookeville, Maryland.”

Tony whistled. “That’s a rich community.”

McGee nodded. “She said she’s driving home after lunch and will come here to talk to us.”

Gibbs thought that over. “Alright, McGee. Let’s not do anything to spook her. Got a trace on her cell phone?”

“Doing that right now… got it.”

The elevator dinged and Ziva came back to the bullpen. She looked a little frazzled. “I cannot believe that woman. She said we wasted her time and that we can expect to get her bill for travel expenses.”

Gibbs smiled. “She’ll have a long wait for payment.”

A few minutes later Ziva and McGee left for the jazz club, intending to show pictures of both Drimel and Laura Kendall in the surrounding area. McGee was also going to keep track of Sedona Mitchell’s whereabouts using an application he’d programmed for his phone.

Tony hung up the phone after talking with Lucas Brader, then got up and walked over to Gibbs’ desk. “Seems like her story checks out, Boss. He knew about Drimel, said he wasn’t worried about Laura, that she likes to go out and have a good time, but she won’t cheat on him.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Can’t say I understand modern relationships.”

Tony smirked at him. “That why you’ve been divorced three times, Boss?”

Gibbs shot him a glare. “Watch it, Tony, or you’ll be sleeping in the doghouse tonight,” he threatened quietly.

Tony laughed. “You don’t have a dog, Boss.”

“Think I can’t build a doghouse in one evening, DiNozzo?”

Tony looked vaguely worried about that. “Hey, Boss…”

“Mmm?”
“Do you have the names of Drimel’s friends that you talked to yesterday? I want to check on something.”

Gibbs looked up at Tony, then rummaged through the in box on his desk and handed him a file.
“Knock yourself out.”

Tony winked at Gibbs, then went back to his desk. A few minutes later, he called out, “May have something here, Boss.”

Gibbs got up and went behind Tony’s desk, leaning over him and looking at his computer monitor.
“What is it?”

Tony pointed to something on the screen. “Robert Jones had some medical training before being transferred to Marston’s command.”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed. “Makes him the only one so far who we can expect to have the knowledge to kill the way Drimel was killed.”

Tony turned to look at Gibbs; they stared at each other for a moment, faces close together. Finally, Tony cleared his throat. “Should we go pick him up, Boss?”

Gibbs considered that. “You have a line on Patrice Holloway yet?”

Tony nodded. “She and her husband left yesterday morning to meet with a client in Atlanta; they’re expected back late this afternoon.”

Gibbs put his hand on Tony’s shoulder and squeezed lightly, moving his hand back and forth, caressing Tony through his shirt. “Good job. Let’s hold off on Jones until we hear back from Ziva and McGee and talk to this Mitchell woman. We don’t have anything on him yet.”

Gibbs’ hand stayed on Tony’s shoulder longer than it should have. Tony leaned into Gibbs for a second before he cleared his throat again. “Rule 12, Boss.”

Gibbs sighed and stood up. “Right, DiNozzo.” He moved back to his desk. “Why don’t you go see if Abby’s gotten anything new for us.”

“On it, Boss.”

Observations

Leon Vance sat at his desk, punching at his computer’s keyboard, sorting through security video. He was scanning for interactions between Gibbs and DiNozzo, looking for anything unusual. He knew he was obsessing, just a little, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. He hadn’t planned to investigate this further right now, but he wanted to know if he’d been played when he’d agreed not to promote DiNozzo and give him that team lead out in Seattle.

So far he’d catalogued many of the same interactions over and over. He’d counted head slaps, and been rather impressed that DiNozzo’s IQ hadn’t dropped since he started working for Gibbs. Gibbs got in DiNozzo’s space a lot, but he did that to all his team members, so that didn’t mean anything. He did notice that Gibbs seemed to be smiling a lot in the past month and a half, and that there were a lot of smiles directed toward DiNozzo, but again, that didn’t mean much by itself.

He watched the bullpen footage from when Gibbs had been kidnapped by the serial killer, and saw DiNozzo fall asleep at his desk and wake up screaming. That didn’t mean anything either… Vance knew what it was like to lose a partner, and he’d had his share of nightmares.
He finally gave it up as a lost cause. He was probably being silly and a little paranoid, and he should know better than to take Abby Sciuto’s words too seriously. It wouldn’t surprise him if she were just indulging in a little fantasy and decided to overshare.

He clicked out of the video archives and back to the live feed, sticking a toothpick between his teeth. He enlarged the screen focused on Gibbs’ area of the bullpen and watched as Gibbs got up and walked to DiNozzo’s desk. He saw the two men talking about something on the screen, then turn to look at each other, their faces much closer together than he’d expect of two men who were only coworkers. He shifted to another angle, and watched Gibbs rest his hand close to DiNozzo’s neck, then move it back and forth along his second’s shoulder in a way that was anything but platonic. It was hard to tell from the quality of the video, but it looked as if DiNozzo leaned into Gibbs for a moment.

The toothpick fell out of Vance’s mouth and onto his lap.

“I’ll be damned.”
Ziva and McGee returned a few hours later, having verified that both Drimel and Laura Kendall had been seen at the bar when she’d said they’d been there. Security video had shown her leaving around 10:30 p.m. Drimel had stayed another half hour, then made a call and left. No one could say whether he’d met someone outside the bar, where he’d gone, or how.

Sedona Mitchell was petite, with large, frightened eyes and a voice barely above a whisper. Gibbs took one look at her and told McGee to take her into the conference room. As McGee escorted her out of the bullpen, Gibbs called Abby to direct the conference room video feed to one of the bullpen plasma screens. Gibbs, Tony and Ziva gathered around the screen to watch.

McGee was just beginning the interview when the video came up on the screen. Sedona was seated at the head of the long table, with McGee sitting two chairs away on one side. He’d given her a cup of coffee; she had her hands wrapped around it and was looking down, not meeting his eyes.

“She looks guilty,” Ziva commented.

“Or embarrassed,” Tony said.

Gibbs just stared intently at the screen.

“Ms. Mitchell,” McGee began, “I’d like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with Petty Officer Terrence Drimel.”

She nodded jerkily, glancing up at him quickly, than back down to her coffee. “Yes, I know. You said on the phone that you needed to talk to me about him.”

McGee cleared his throat and ducked his head slightly, trying to catch her eyes. “How long have you known him?”

She shrugged a bit. “Not long. I met him almost four months ago… at a bar in Dupont Circle.” She looked up at McGee and smiled a little. “He was nice.”

McGee sat back a little. “Uh, Ms. Mitchell –“

“Oh, call me Sedona, please. Everyone does.”

McGee nodded once. “Sedona. We believe he wasn’t really so nice… not to you or to a lot of other women.”

Sedona’s head moved forward, hiding her eyes even more. She said something in a very low voice, causing McGee to sit forward a little. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

Sedona looked up, brushing her hair back. “He was nice at first. I thought he liked me, you know, really liked me.” She looked back down at the table and took a deep breath. “But I guess he didn’t.”

McGee shook his head. “I think he did, Sedona. But I think he liked money more.”

She looked up at him. “Or maybe he was in some sort of trouble?”

McGee nodded. “Could be. Did he tell you why he needed the money?”
She shook her head. “No, I asked, but he wouldn’t tell me. He said he was sorry, but he would tell my parents about us if I didn’t pay him.”

“Your parents?”

Sedona nodded. “They didn’t want me to move to the city after I graduated. But I told them the art community is here, and if I’m going to break through, I need to be here.”

“You’re a sculptor, right?”

She gave him the first genuine smile they’d seen yet. “Yes, yes I am. Have you seen my work?”

McGee smiled back. “It’s standard for us to do background checks on everyone we need to talk to… so I saw some pictures of your work.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, I did, actually… particularly the birds. They looked like they could just fly away at any moment.”

Sedona sat up straighter. “Thank you. That’s what I try to do, to give the impression of motion in a static piece. I’m so glad you liked it.”

Ziva quirked an eyebrow in Gibbs’ direction. “McGee is getting a little off topic, yes?”

Gibbs glanced at her, but didn’t say anything. Tony tapped her on the shoulder, and she looked in his direction. “He’s getting her to relax and open up. That’s why Gibbs sent him in there and not any of us… we’d probably scare her off and she’d shut down and never talk to us.”

On screen, McGee was laughing at something Sedona had said. “Well, I think you did a great job. What does a piece like that run?”

Sedona’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t want to buy it, would you?”

“Why not? It’s good work. So… are your parents helping support your life here in the city?”

Sedona sighed and nodded. “Yes… they cover most of my bills and give me an allowance. I’ve started to sell a few pieces, and that’s helping. But they’re very strict, and they want me to meet the right people… they never expected to raise an artist. They’d have been much happier if I’d been interested in business, or even fashion. There’s more money in that.”

McGee sat back. “So if Petty Officer Drimel had told them about your affair with him…”

She took a sip of her coffee. “They’d have cut off the money and I’d have been forced to move back home.” She looked at him seriously. “I have friends, and they’d have helped if they could, but we’re all in the same boat, trying to make names for ourselves. I probably have more money than any of them, but it’s not much. And with Terry taking what he does, maybe it’s less.”

“How much does he take, and how often?”

Sedona’s voice quavered a bit. “Once a week. He drops by my apartment, and I give him as much as I can. He wanted more, but I told him I couldn’t do that without making my parents suspicious, and then I’d have to move back and he’d get nothing.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”
She looked off to the side for a moment. “I guess it was early last week, just before I left to visit my
parents. It was my father’s birthday over the weekend, so we had family coming in from all over.”

Gibbs spoke without looking away from the screen. “One of you verify that she was there at the time
Drimel was killed.” Tony and Ziva glanced at each other, then Ziva smiled and moved quickly to her
desk.

“He came by and said he needed me to give him more money. He was apologetic about it, but he
said it couldn’t be helped.”

“What happened then?”

Sedona shook her head. “I told him I couldn’t. I didn’t have anything else. I said I was giving him
everything I could without having to move back home. He wasn’t happy, but he didn’t argue with
me.” She fell silent for a moment, then looked seriously at McGee. “He’s in some sort of trouble,
isn’t he? That’s why you’re talking to me.” She ran her hand through her hair again. “You said there
were other women. Did someone call the police about the blackmail?”

McGee shook his head. “I’m sorry, Sedona. Terrence Drimel is dead. He was killed early yesterday
morning.”

Sedona’s gasp was audible over the feed. “I knew it! I knew he was in some sort of trouble! Poor
Terry… it’s all my fault.” Her hands came up and covered her mouth, and she stared wide-eyed at
McGee for a moment before tears started to run down her face.

McGee shook his head. “I don’t think it was your fault, Sedona. You said you’ve been visiting your
parents for almost a week.”

She nodded, sniffling.

“We’ll just verify that with your folks, and you’ll be in the clear.”

“But what if he was killed because he didn’t have the money? What if he owed someone, and they
killed him when he didn’t have enough?”

McGee shook his head. “Even if that were the case, it’s not your fault, Sedona. You didn’t kill him,
did you?”

She shook her head.

Ziva returned to the others. “Her cousin has verified that she was at her parents’ home when the petty
officer was killed. Sedona and a group of her cousins were up all night talking before most of them
left to go to the airport.”

Gibbs nodded, turning to Tony. “Go check on Patrice Holloway’s arrival time. Unless we learn
something else, Kendall and Mitchell are clear, so if it’s one of his victims, it’s her.”

Tony turned and moved to his desk. Gibbs looked back at the screen, where McGee was giving
Sedona a box of tissues.

“I’m sorry,” she was saying. “I just feel so bad for him. And I guess I’m a little relieved, too, now
that I won’t have to pay the money anymore.”

McGee nodded. “I understand.”
Gibbs shook his head, then turned to Ziva. “You can shut it off.” He moved to his desk. “So all we have is Patrice Holloway and Robert Jones.”

Tony joined them. “Bad news, Boss.” Gibbs looked up. “The Holloways changed their flight plans; they’re not coming back until late tomorrow morning.”

Gibbs sighed. “Let’s go get Jones.”

Ziva looked at him curiously. “Do we have a motive for him?”

Tony grimaced. “No motive, but maybe the means, with his medical training. And Holloway’s got motive but not the means.”

“This should be fun,” Ziva said.

“Grab your gear,” Gibbs called out, getting his gun and badge out of his desk drawer. “Tony, text McGee, tell him to dig further into Drimel’s background. Maybe there’s another angle.”

They were heading to the elevator when they heard a shout. “Agents Gibbs and DiNozzo! My office.”

They all turned to see Director Vance at the railing outside of MTAC. When no one moved, Vance called out “NOW.” He then turned and headed for his office.

Tony and Gibbs looked at each other, then Gibbs moved back toward his desk. He stowed his gun and badge, and shared another look with Tony before turning to Ziva. “Go upstairs, help McGee with Ms. Mitchell, then the two of you pick up Jones. Let him stew in interrogation if we’re still in with the director when you get back.”

Ziva nodded and hurried for the stairs. Tony and Gibbs looked at each other. “If it’s the worst case scenario, Boss… how do you want to play it?”

Gibbs’ eyes searched Tony’s for a moment. “Just follow my lead.” His voice dropped to almost a whisper. “Meant what I said last night, Tony. Not losing you.” He then turned and headed for the stairs.

Tony took a deep breath, then called out, “On your six, Boss!” and followed after him.

**Pros and Cons**

Leon Vance paced in his office, chewing furiously on a new toothpick. He’d just paused the video feed that had shown him Gibbs and DiNozzo acting more like a romantic couple than a couple of agents. He muttered angrily for a moment, then forced himself to sit back at his desk. He took out a piece of paper and a pencil and started to write, cursing when the pencil tip broke. He flung the pencil across the room and pulled out another one.

He drew a line down the paper, then wrote headings of **Pros** and **Cons**. Above that he wrote *Dissolve MCRT*.

He sat back, tapping the pencil against the desk surface, then leaned forward again and began a list under the **Pros** heading.

*Get Gibbs out of my hair.*

*DiNozzo as team lead in Seattle.*
No one plays me for a fool.

Promote Agent McGee.

Form new team with updated focus.

New team lead with political savvy.

Romantic involvement on the same team leads to shoddy work and agents getting hurt.

Vance tossed the pencil down on the desk, picked up the paper, and sat back, looking at his list so far. Getting Gibbs out of his hair… that would depend on how he decided to handle things. He had grounds to fire him for getting involved with a subordinate. Or he could transfer him elsewhere. He knew the man had no family ties in the area, so he might accept a lateral transfer.

Forcing the move to Seattle on DiNozzo would get him what he’d wanted originally. DiNozzo was a good agent, maybe even a great one. Vance could acknowledge that, having looked through the man’s file more carefully after his talk with Dr. Mallard. He did want a new perspective out there, and DiNozzo could shake things up in a good way.

No one plays me for a fool. Damn straight. He was beyond pissed that DiNozzo hadn’t given the promotion serious consideration, or that Gibbs had manipulated him into staying. Either way, he didn’t like being played the way Gibbs had done by getting him to make that agreement not to force the transfer, and he wasn’t about to let that slide.

Promoting McGee would put the computer skills front and center. As senior field agent, McGee would oversee the training of the agents under him, and Vance intended for computer skills to be required on the new MCRT. That was part of the updated focus… emphasize the cyber skills, minimize time spent on the streets and the likelihood of agents getting hurt. Insurance costs were skyrocketing.

And that tied in with the new team lead… McGee wasn’t ready to head a team, but there were many good candidates available, who wouldn’t make enemies of the politicians and other agencies Vance had to deal with every day.

The last line was why the rules against team members becoming involved were in place. It was just too dangerous, too risky, not only for the well-being of the agents involved but also for the others on the team. Agents with an emotional connection like that probably couldn’t help but make their other team members a lower priority in a life or death situation.

Vance set the paper back on the desk and picked up the pencil. He hesitated for a moment, then started on the cons.

Current MCRT has best record for closing cases.

Gibbs and DiNozzo make an excellent investigative team.

Either one may decide to quit rather than accept transfer.

Both valuable resources for the agency.

Promoting McGee.

Office morale.
Vance looked at this new list. There was no denying either of the first two statements; they were indisputable facts. Of course it remained to be seen if the two men could continue to be an excellent team if they were involved romantically.

The next pieces on the list were a related issue. Both men were important to the agency, and he really did want their expertise to remain part of NCIS. The combined years of investigative work represented a wealth of knowledge and experience that could be passed on to rookie agents. Not something Vance wanted to lose.

Promoting McGee… as much as Vance liked the man’s computer skills and wanted to see him get his shot at a senior field agent, he had to admit that McGee still needed work. He wasn’t the take charge type that DiNozzo was, although he was definitely improving in that area. And Vance wasn’t sure about McGee’s ability to put things together and see the big picture the way Gibbs and DiNozzo could. He also knew small things that could set off either Gibbs’ gut or DiNozzo’s instincts were sometimes lost on the younger agent.

Finally, the issue of office morale. Gibbs’ team was highly respected in the agency, and there’d been a lot of discomfort and tension when Vance had split them up the first time around. Doing so again might not be so bad if it was just a question of DiNozzo taking a promotion, but Vance had no guarantees on that score, especially if the rest of the team remained in place and were themselves unhappy with the change. He didn’t want SecNav breathing down his neck if solve rates went down in the DC office.

Vance set the paper aside and picked up some of the files in his inbox, trying to focus on something else for a while. An hour later he hadn’t gotten through more than two of them, and he’d probably have to go back through them to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. Shaking his head, and feeling angry with himself and with the two men causing this mess, he pushed himself up out of his chair and stormed out of the office, striding past his surprised secretary and out in front of MTAC, looking down at Gibbs’ area of the floor and seeing three of the agents headed toward the elevator.

“No way am I waiting any longer to deal with this.”

“Agents Gibbs and DiNozzo!” he shouted, “My office.” He followed up with “NOW” when they didn’t get moving right away. Then he turned and walked back in. “Send Gibbs and DiNozzo in as soon as they arrive,” he told his secretary. Then he seated himself at his desk, grabbing the mouse on his computer and clicking a few times.

Confrontation

Gibbs walked briskly past Vance’s secretary, going through the door before she had a chance to tell him to do so, Tony right behind him. Tony shut the door, and both men moved to stand in front of Vance’s desk. He stared at them for a moment, then reached up to take the toothpick out of his mouth.

“Look at the plasma.”

They turned and watched as the screen switched from ZNN to what was obviously security camera feed from the bullpen. No one said a word as the scene played out. Vance paused it with Gibbs’ hand still on Tony’s back and Tony leaning slightly into him.

Vance rose to his feet and moved around his desk, standing in front of the two agents who turned to face him. “Tell me what I’m looking at.”

“Seems to me you already have a good idea, Director,” Gibbs said mildly.
“I want to hear it from you.”

Tony remained silent, watching Gibbs, who stared back at Vance for a moment. Then Gibbs spoke, quietly but clearly.

“Tony and I have been involved in a romantic relationship for a month and a half.”

Vance looked startled; apparently he hadn’t been expecting Gibbs to admit it so easily. Tony paled and stared at Gibbs. “Gibbs…” he said uncertainly, his voice trailing off as he really wasn’t sure what to say.

Gibbs turned to Tony, smiling at him softly. “Not gonna deny the best thing to happen to me for a long time, Tony.” Then he turned back to Vance and stood, waiting.

Vance shook his head. “You do realize you’re violating the regulations about agents on the same team getting involved, not to mention the more serious issue of a team leader getting involved with a subordinate?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Tony’s been more of an equal partner on my team than a subordinate for years now.”

Tony stared at Gibbs, his eyes wide. “Seriously?”

Gibbs grinned at him. “Yeah. Guess I never mentioned it before.”

Tony shook his head, fighting off a smile. “No, you really didn’t. Does this mean I get to head slap you at work too?”

Gibbs sent him a mock growl. “Try it and see.”

“HEY!” Vance stared angrily at the two men. “I don’t appreciate you making light of this. I have to decide what to do about it.”

“We’re not making light of anything, Leon,” Gibbs stated. “It’s a fact; we’re together. You figured it out. Doesn’t mean you have to do anything about it. I think you’ll find our solve rate hasn’t changed since Tony and I got involved.”

“That’s not the point,” Vance growled out.

“That’s not the point,” Vance growled out.

“Isn’t it? We work together just as effectively as we used to.”

Vance shook his head. “I can’t just let this go. Not sure I want to.” He turned to Tony. “You’re involved with your immediate superior. Were you coerced in any way?”

Tony snorted. “Hell no. Sorry, hell no, sir. This is, and was, completely mutual and completely consensual. And if I weren’t happy about it, I’d have taken the Seattle job.”

Vance’s eyes narrowed. “So you turned down the promotion so you could stay with Gibbs.”

Tony shook his head. “That was a part of it, but not the whole reason.”

Vance didn’t say anything, just raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Tony met his eyes, not backing down at all. “I would have turned it down anyway. You may not believe this, but I did seriously consider the offer. I wasn’t lying when I said I want my shot at the MCRT here in DC someday. And maybe you don’t really get this, having a more traditional family,
but this team, along with Abby and Ducky, is my family. Has been for years, and Gibbs and I getting involved doesn’t change that. I don’t want to leave my family.” Tony swallowed hard and Gibbs reached out to gently touch his arm.

Vance let out a breath. “Well, you may not have a choice. I can’t have you and Gibbs staying on the same team. One of you will have to transfer, and there’s no room here in the DC office.”

Gibbs stepped forward, almost but not quite in front of Tony. “We had a deal, Director.”

Vance slammed his hand down on his desk. “An agreement I made only because you were withholding information! I consider that reason enough to put DiNozzo’s transfer through.”

Tony shook his head. “Then I’ll repeat what I told you when Gibbs was missing. I’ll have my resignation for you later today.”

Vance started to speak, but Gibbs turned to Tony. “Like hell you will, Tony. I’ve got enough time in to retire. You’re not going anywhere.”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not letting you do that for me, Jethro.”

“Tony…”

“No. I can talk to Fornell about a job with the FBI, stay in the DC area. You know you’re not ready to walk away from this.”

Gibbs shook his head angrily, but instead of saying anything further to Tony, he turned to Vance. “You have any reason to break up my team besides regulations?”

Vance started to speak, but hesitated.

“Or is it personal? Don’t appreciate me withholding information?”

Vance glared at him.

Gibbs gave him a slight smile with no humor in it whatsoever. “Look at our performance over the last seven weeks, Leon. See if there’s any reason to think things have changed here at work. If you’re worried about either coercion or favoritism, you don’t need to be.”

Tony nodded. “And if you think one of us is going to put the rest of the team at risk for the other, read over our reports from the mission up in New York.”

Vance stayed silent, looking at each of them.

Gibbs shifted impatiently. “Are we done here? We have a hot case to work on, and I’d like to get back to it.”

Vance’s eyes narrowed. “Go work on your case. But we aren’t done here. I’ll review your reports and case data... but only to help me decide who’s leaving.”

Gibbs gave Vance a curt nod and turned to go. Tony turned as well, glancing back at Vance once before following Gibbs out the door.

**Private Conversation**

Gibbs headed for the elevator on the far side of MTAC. Another agent got off just as they reached it, and both Gibbs and Tony walked in. Tony punched the button for the garage; as soon as the doors
closed and the elevator started moving, Gibbs hit the emergency stop.

The stared at each other for a moment, then Tony leaned back against the wall. “What now?”

Gibbs moved to lean next to him and ran his hand through his hair. “We decide what we want to do, regardless of what Vance does. Then we act on it.”

Tony laughed. “You make it sound so simple.”

Gibbs shot him a small smile. “It isn’t,” he admitted. “But I’ll say it as often as I need to. I’m not going to lose you, Tony.”

Tony nodded. “I feel the same. If Vance insists on the transfer, I’ll call Fornell.”

Gibbs shook his head. “No.”

Tony sighed and let his head fall back against the wall. “You’re not gonna let me resign, and I’m not gonna let you retire.”

Gibbs mimicked Tony’s position. “I can try calling in that favor from SecNav.”

Tony shook his head. “Don’t. All that’s going to do is put him in an awkward position, and most likely get the word out about us. I don’t mind the team knowing, but I don’t want it all over the Navy Yard. Could make our jobs more difficult.”

Gibbs had to admit Tony was right about that.

Tony reached down and grasped Gibbs’ hand where it rested by his side. He interlaced their fingers and pulled Gibbs toward him a bit. “We know what we want, and that’s to stay together. We just need to talk later about how we’re going to do that.”

Gibbs nodded and let himself lean on Tony for a moment. Then he pulled away and gently disengaged their hands. “We need to get more background on Jones and the rest of Drimel’s friends.”

Tony looked over at Gibbs, a faint smile on his face. “In a minute.”

Gibbs shot Tony a questioning look. Tony smiled. “No way Ziva and McGee are back with Jones yet.” He reached out and grabbed Gibbs’ hand again, pulling on him until Gibbs was right next to him.

“I see you aren’t resisting all that much.”

“No,” Gibbs said, “no, I guess I’m not.”

Tony looked at him seriously. “I’m not sure it was the smartest move… but I’m really glad that you didn’t lie about us.”

Gibbs shook his head slowly. “Couldnt. Wasn’t gonna do that to you or to us.”

Tony leaned in and brushed a light kiss over Gibbs’ lips. “Thank you.”

Gibbs followed as Tony pulled back, returning the favor. “Thank you for following my lead.”

“Always got your six, Boss,” Tony replied, letting go of Gibbs’ hand and restarting the elevator.
Dead Ends and Realizations

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to colorguard28 for the beta read on the Vance scene, helping me make sure my portrayal of a certain character passed muster.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another New Ringtone

Gibbs and Tony had just stepped off the elevator when strange noises came from Gibbs’ cell phone. Gibbs took his phone off his belt and stared at it in confusion. First it was women singing, then it was a man’s voice doing some version of a rap.

_Geek and gamer girls, we’re unbelievable_

_Comic books and manga in stock_

_Farscape, Sailor Moon_

_Hogwarts boys all make them swoon_

_Aragorn, Legolas, those are the boys they love the best*_

Gibbs turned to stare at Tony as the ringtone began to repeat. Tony grinned at him. “It’s McGeek, Boss.”

Gibbs transferred the stare back to his phone, then heaved a sigh and flipped it open. “Yeah, Gibbs.” He listened for a moment, then said, “Good job, McGee. Put him in interrogation when you get here, have Ziva sit on him.”

Gibbs clipped his cell back on his belt and glanced over at Tony. “What’s it gonna take for you to make that thing normal again?”

Tony gave him a mock pout. “Aw, c’mon, Boss! Don’t you like knowing who’s calling you?”

Gibbs countered the pout with a half-smile. “You think I want that ring going off when I’m interrogating a suspect? Or talking to Vance?”

Tony’s expression morphed into a neutral mask at the mention of Vance. Gibbs gave him a concerned look. “You okay, Tony?”

Tony shrugged. “Just not seeing an easy way out, B -… Jethro.”

Gibbs gave him a searching look, then nodded. He spoke again, quietly. “I’ll keep saying it as many times as I need to, Tony. Not losing you.”

Tony dropped his eyes and nodded slightly. Gibbs mentally cursed Vance, then moved toward his desk. “Focus on the case for now, DiNozzo. We’ll figure it out.”

Tony gave himself a small shake, then moved quickly to his own desk. “What’s their ETA, Boss?”
“Maybe ten minutes, probably less. You got anything else on Jones?”

Tony worked at his computer for a minute, then shook his head. “Nothing new. McGee’s background check was thorough.”

Gibbs nodded. “When are the Holloways returning?”


Gibbs picked up the file on Jones and began to skim through it. “Call their office, see if they’re expected back at work today. If so, you and I will head over there – otherwise we’ll catch her at home.”

Tony nodded and picked up the phone. He spoke quietly for a few minutes, then hung up and called over to Gibbs. “Receptionist says Patrice is supposed to come in to the office after their flight. Husband has a meeting across town.”

“Good. She won’t be trying to hide anything from him.”

Tony nodded, then looked over toward the elevator when it dinged. McGee walked out, followed by Ziva and Jones, who looked a little uncertain. “This way, Petty Officer,” Ziva said as she walked through the bullpen. Jones glanced at Gibbs, who didn’t look up, keeping his attention on the file in front of him. Once they were gone, Tony spoke up. “Hey, McGee! Call Gibbs’ cell.”

McGee gave Tony a confused look. “Why would I want to call Gibbs? He’s right here.”

Gibbs raised his head and sent Tony a glare. “I can always have McGee reboot it.”

McGee glanced at Gibbs, but didn’t say anything. Moments later, Gibbs stood, folder in hand. “Both of you, see if you can dig up anything else on the Holloways. Take a look at the husband too… maybe he found out and did something about it.”

Just then his cell phone screamed. He picked it up. “Hey Abby.”

“See?” Tony called out.

Gibbs rolled his eyes at him. “Be right there.” He hung up and started to walk toward the back elevator. “Abby has something from Drimel’s blood.” Both agents started to get to their feet, but Gibbs motioned them back down. “Stay. Research.” He disappeared around the corner.

Tony sighed but did as he was told. McGee looked over at him. “What was that all about?”

Tony grinned. “I gave Gibbs all new ringtones. He’s still getting used to it.”

“Oh yeah? What’s mine?”

Tony grinned wider, but didn’t say anything. McGee decided he was probably better off not knowing, and turned his focus to his computer. Moments later, Tony started singing quietly… “geek and gamer girls…”

McGee sat up. “Hey, you like that song too?”

**Interrogation**

Gibbs strode into Abby’s lab; the music was her usual style, though somewhat muted. “Hey, Abs.”
She turned from her computer to face him. “Gibbs!” Her face fell a bit. “Am I being punished?”

He gave her an inquiring look. She waved her hand at him. “No Caf-Pow.”

He tilted his head a bit. “No punishment. Got to get into interrogation. Next time. What’cha got for me?”

Abby turned back to the computer. “Major Mass Spec found traces of sedatives in his system. It’s a cocktail of drugs… none of them particularly strong or dangerous, but definitely enough to put him down for the count.”

Gibbs studied the computer screen, even though he didn’t really understand what it showed. “So he wouldn’t have been able to fight off an attacker?”

“No way.”

“Wouldn’t have felt a needle going into his arm?”

“Nuh uh. Or if he did, he wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it.”

Gibbs nodded, thinking. Then he motioned to her intercom device. “Get Ducky.”

She flashed him a smile, then hit the button. “Duckman!”

There was a brief pause, then Ducky appeared on the screen. “Abby, how good of you to call.”

“Actually, Gibbs wants you.” She moved over a bit and Gibbs got in front of the screen.

“Hey Duck, did Drimel have sex before he died?”

Ducky shook his head. “There was no evidence of sexual activity, Jethro. I would have to say no.”

Gibbs nodded. “Thanks, Duck.” He stepped back as Ducky nodded and switched off the intercom.

Abby looked at him. “You have an idea.”

“Starting to.” He pressed a quick kiss to her cheek, turned to leave, then turned back. “Send DiNozzo an email with a list of those drugs.”

Abby nodded. “Right away!”

Gibbs grabbed his cell and hit speed dial 1 as he headed for Interrogation. Tony answered right away. “Get a search authorization for Jones’ quarters. His friends too, just to be thorough. Take McGee… Abby’s sending you an email. See if you can find any of those drugs anywhere.”

He gave a slight smile at Tony’s reply, then stepped into the observation room to see what was going on. Ziva was standing against the wall, arms crossed over her chest, staring at Jones, who was sitting quietly, looking at his hands, which were folded together and resting on the table. Nodding to himself, Gibbs turned and left the room, joining Ziva a moment later. She nodded to acknowledge him and stayed where she was while Gibbs pulled out a chair and sat opposite Jones, tossing the folder down on the table.

Jones looked up at him; Gibbs stared back for a moment, then opened the folder and pulled out copies of Drimel’s ledger.

“Petty Officer Drimel was blackmailing women he dated.” He laid the pages down in front of Jones,
who looked them over, grimacing.

Gibbs tilted his head, watching closely. “You don’t seem surprised.”

Jones sighed, then looked up and met Gibbs’ eyes. “I’m not, not really. I knew something was up… I suspected he was doing something like this.”

“Why?” Ziva asked from across the room.

“The way he went from girl to girl… and sometimes he would go out and come back with more money than he had when he left.”

Ziva pushed off the wall and moved closer. “You did not think he was gambling?”

Jones shook his head and looked up at her. “My dad was a gambler, serious about it. Terry didn’t show any of the signs I’m familiar with, so yeah, I thought of it, but it didn’t fit.”

Gibbs gestured toward the pages. “Anyone here you know?”

Jones read through the pages carefully, then shook his head. “I recognize a few of the first names, from stuff Terry used to say, but I never met any of them. I probably saw him with a few in the clubs.”

Gibbs nodded. “Did Hartwell and Rodriguez suspect anything?”

Jones shook his head. “They looked up to him too much, didn’t want to see anything wrong in what he did. The few times I wondered where the money came from, they didn’t want to think about it, said we’re all having fun, so what’s the big deal?”

Gibbs gave a noncommittal grunt, then pulled out some other papers. He fished his glasses out of his jacket pocket, put them on, and started to read. After a few minutes he took them off and looked at Jones. “Says here you had some medical training before you transferred to Marston’s command.”

Jones nodded and shrugged. “Yeah… thought it would be a good career move, but I washed out. I wasn’t very good at it.”

Gibbs nodded and sat back, staring at Jones thoughtfully. “How would you describe your friendship with Petty Officer Drimel?”

Jones looked away than back at Gibbs. “Terry was a lot of fun. Great to hang out with. He wasn’t the best to talk to about personal stuff, but he was kind of the focus of our group. He could get a bit nasty if he had too much to drink, but that was really the only problem I had with him.”

Ziva motioned toward the ledger pages. “Except for that.”

Jones looked back at them. “Well, yeah. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know for sure.”

Gibbs nodded and gathered up the pages. “Sit tight, Petty Officer.” He walked to the door, motioning for Ziva to follow him. They went into the hallway and he closed the door behind him.

“You do not think he did it,” Ziva said.

Gibbs shook his head. “Unless Tony and McGee find the drugs Abby said were in Drimel’s system, no, I don’t think he did it.” He handed her the file. “Watch him for a while, from observation. And locate his supervisor from his medical training, see if he corroborates Jones’ claim that he washed out.”
Ziva nodded and moved into the observation room. Gibbs headed for the elevator and hit the button to go back up. The door opened to reveal Vance standing there, moving as if to get off. Gibbs stepped back out of his way, but Vance stopped when he saw him and backed up, motioning for Gibbs to come in. Keeping a tighter than usual rein on his emotions, Gibbs entered and hit the button for the bullpen floor. The doors closed and the elevator began to move, but it halted abruptly when Vance reached out and hit the emergency stop.

Gibbs turned to face him. Vance looked around the darkened car and nodded. “Convenient.” Then he looked seriously at Gibbs. “This thing with DiNozzo… it really worth risking your career?”

Gibbs just stared at him.

Vance nodded. “Not going to stop with him, are you.”

Gibbs just shook his head slowly.

Vance shifted around, wishing he had a toothpick left. “You’re really leaving me no choice, Gibbs.”

Gibbs looked at him a moment. “You have a choice. You could look for yourself and see that nothing’s changing at work.”

Vance snorted. “Video evidence says otherwise.”

Gibbs’ head fell back a little and he looked up at the ceiling, wishing for patience. “Come on, Leon. That was nothing. You’re making it a much bigger deal than it needs to be.”

Vance’s eyes narrowed, and he glared at Gibbs. “You’re involved in a romantic relationship with your senior field agent, and you think that’s not a big deal? You push me into keeping him here, make an agreement with me, and I find out you had ulterior motives? You think that’s not a big deal?”

Gibbs shook his head. “Wouldn’t have wanted DiNozzo transferred even if we weren’t involved, Leon. Fought to bring him back from the Seahawk, and we weren’t involved then.”

Vance shook his head. “I can’t just turn a blind eye to this, Gibbs.”

Gibbs remained impassive, staring back at Vance. “That’s your choice, Director.”

Vance nodded. “You’re right, it is.” He reached out and switched the elevator back on, and both men were silent. Moments later, Gibbs walked out and back to the bullpen, Vance remaining behind as the doors closed.

Not Holloway

The bullpen was empty, so Gibbs caught up on some paperwork while he waited to hear from Tony about the results of their search. Ziva called and told him Jones’ supervisor in medical training had called him hopeless, and without prompting said he was completely incompetent with a needle.

Gibbs was tempted to go to Autopsy and get Ducky’s take on the situation with Vance, but even the idea of discussing it without Tony there felt like betrayal, so he stayed put.

He kept an eye on the clock while he worked. It was after 3, and he realized he’d skipped lunch. He’d wait for Tony and they could pick something up on the way to Holloway’s office.

His cell phone rang, this time with something new…
Hey boy, where’d you get it from?
Hey boy where did you go?
I learned my passion in the good old
Fashioned school of loverboys.
Ooh, love,
Ooh, loverboy,
What’cha doin’ tonight, hey boy
Everything’s all right
Just hold on tight
That’s because I’m a good old fashioned loverboy!*

Gibbs couldn’t help but laugh, even as he was bombarded with memoires of 1976 and joining the
marines and meeting Shannon for the first time. The memories didn’t hurt as much as they used to, so
he flipped his phone open and answered with a lowered voice. “Tony.”

“Hey, Boss! Like the ringtone? Listen, we searched all their quarters, including going back to
Drimel’s – no sign of any of the drugs on Abby’s list. Should be back soon.”

“Call again when you get here, drop McGee off, tell him to continue looking for anything else that
might give us a lead. I’ll meet you in the lot, we’ll head out to talk to Holloway.”

“Gotcha, Boss.”

Gibbs shook his head and sighed. He was actually starting to like what Tony had done to his phone.

He kept working for a while, until Tony called again. Laurie Pearson was walking by and gave him
a startled look when the phone rang.

“I thought you didn’t know how to change those settings,” she said.


She grinned at him. “Of course.”

He flipped open the phone. At least it wasn’t Vance who heard that. “Yeah, Gibbs.”

“We’re back, Boss.”

“I’ll be right down.”

The drive to question Patrice Holloway wasn’t very long. They hit a drive-thru for lunch, and made
it to her office a little before 5, fully prepared to wait if her flight had been delayed. The receptionist
tried to put them off, saying Patrice had only just returned from the airport, but the sight of their
badges was enough for her to place a call and then wave them on.

Patrice Holloway was tall, almost 5’9”, with long blond hair and an athletic body. Gibbs glanced at
Tony and could see the appreciation in his eyes. Determined not to have a repeat of his bout of
insecurity following the meeting with Pearson’s probie weeks ago, Gibbs focused on the issue at hand. Introductions were made, and Patrice invited them to sit in the chairs facing her desk. She smiled as they settled in, her gaze lingering on both of them and making Gibbs feel as if she’d just taken measurements.

“How can I help you, officers?”

Tony gave her his most charming smile. “Special Agents, actually,” he said in a self-deprecating manner.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Although,” she continued with a little laugh, “I confess I don’t really understand the difference.”

Tony sighed dramatically. “We’re federal agents, not police officers. I was one, though, so I don’t mind.”

She smiled at him, giving him a quick once-over that had Gibbs growling a little internally. Then she turned to him. “How can I help you, Special Agent…?”

“Gibbs.”

She glanced back at Tony, who leaned forward and stretched out his hand. “DiNozzo. Tony DiNozzo.” He grinned at her.

“Is that anything like Bond, James Bond?” she asked, tossing her hair a bit as she shook his hand.

“I don’t have the cool car, but I am licensed to kill,” he said, and winked at her.

Gibbs turned and stared at him incredulously. Tony glanced at him and quickly sat back, clearing his throat. “Sorry, Boss.”

Gibbs shook his head and took over. “Mrs. Holloway—“

“Patrice, please.”

He nodded slightly. “Patrice. Are you familiar with a Petty Officer Terrence Drime?”

Her expression changed immediately; the smile vanished and her face turned pale. “Unfortunately, yes, I am.” She pressed a button on her phone. “Yes, Mrs. Holloway?”

“Hold my calls until I tell you, Sarah.” She released the button and looked at them seriously. “What is this about?”

Tony gave her a reassuring smile. “Can you just tell us where you were two nights ago?”

She looked puzzled. “Sunday night? That’s my spa night. I like to start the week off on the right foot, so I do an overnight at the Evergreen Salon and Spa. They offer overnights to a very select group of clients.” She looked at Tony and smiled. “I do enjoy the nude mudbath. It’s very rejuvenating.”

Tony swallowed and gave her his fratboy grin. Gibbs contemplated a head smack, but decided to save it for later.

“What does this have to do with Terrence?” she asked, turning to Gibbs.

“We know he was blackmailing you, along with many other women,” Gibbs stated.
She paled slightly again, then nodded slowly. “Yes, he was. I… made a mistake, and he’s been making me pay for it.”

Gibbs nodded and looked at his notes. “Just about four thousand dollars.”

She swallowed and nodded again. “You aren’t going to bring my husband into this, are you?”

Tony shook his head. “Not if we don’t have to.”

Patrice relaxed a little. “Thank you. He’d divorce me if he found out… and of course I signed a prenup.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” Gibbs asked.

She blinked. “It had to be the last time I gave him money. I haven’t heard from him since.”

Gibbs glanced down at his notes again. “That would be about a week ago?”

She pulled out her Blackberry and hit a few buttons. “Yes… a week ago yesterday. Last Monday.”

She set the device down and looked at him hopefully. “You said there were other women… did someone come forward and press charges? Are you looking to build a case?”

Gibbs met her eyes. “He was killed Sunday night.”

She stared at him, mouth slightly open, then glanced at Tony as if seeking confirmation. Tony nodded. “That’s why we had to ask where you were,” he said.

Patrice’s lower lip trembled slightly. “I… excuse me.” She got up and left the room.

Tony looked over at Gibbs. “What do you think, Boss?”

Gibbs kept his eyes on his notes. “Step outside, call the spa, verify that she was there.”

Tony’s brow furrowed and he looked at Gibbs questioningly. When Gibbs didn’t raise his head, Tony got up and left.

Patrice returned a few minutes later. “I’m sorry. I just… I didn’t know him that well, and it was a stupid thing to do. I’ve been so afraid that he’d start demanding more – I’ve been waiting for the ax to fall for a while now.” She sat back down at her desk, and moved a few items around, then looked up at Gibbs. “Is it wrong for me to be relieved that he’s dead?”

Gibbs was saved from having to answer that by Tony’s return. “I just got off the phone with the manager at the Evergreen,” he said as he sat back down. “He confirms that you were there Sunday night.”

Patrice gave them a slight smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Is that everything you needed to know?”

Gibbs nodded and stood. “Thank you for your time, Mrs. Holloway.” He moved to the door, then stopped and turned when she spoke again. She’d come around the side of her desk and had her hand on Tony’s arm.

“Tony… how did he die?”

Tony gave her a smile and squeezed her hand. “We’re still investigating, Patrice.”
She nodded and stepped back. Tony wished her a good evening, and the two agents headed out of the building and back to the car.

They walked in silence, and in a few moments were buckled into the car. Gibbs stared out the windshield for a moment. Tony watched him, then spoke up. “What do you think, Boss?”

Gibbs shook his head. “I think we’ve got nothing.” Suddenly he slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “Damnit!” They sat for a few more seconds, then Gibbs started the car and squealed out of the parking lot.

Nothing more was said until they arrived back at the bullpen. Gibbs stalked to his desk and called Ziva, telling her to cut Jones loose. He didn’t say anything else until she came back upstairs. Once all three of his agents were at their desks, he stood and stalked into the middle of the floor. “We’re starting over. Dig into Drimel’s past, go back further. Find what we missed. Same thing with all three of those women.”

“They are not all in the clear?” Ziva asked.

Gibbs shook his head. “My gut says someone’s not telling the truth. Find out who!”

“Ah, Boss,” Tony began, “It’s been a long day. Maybe we should start fresh tomorrow?”

Gibbs turned toward him. “Why, DiNozzo? Got something better to do tonight?”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Thought I did, yeah. Guess not, though.” He looked at Gibbs and Gibbs glared back until Tony finally turned to his computer.

Several hours later, they’d come up with nothing. Neither Abby nor Ducky could offer any new information. McGee dug further into Drimel’s background and also came up empty. Tony repeated the searches on the three women and found nothing new, earning a few sarcastic and uncalled for barbs from Gibbs. Ziva went back through the information concerning the other fourteen women in Drimel’s ledger and came up empty. Finally, Gibbs, disgusted by the lack of information but realizing his team wouldn’t get anywhere tonight, called it quits, telling them all to be back by 8 the next morning to start fresh.

McGee and Ziva took off quickly, neither one wanting to be caught in the middle of a possible confrontation. Tony picked up his backpack and walked over to Gibbs’ desk. “Dinner?” he asked quietly.

Gibbs shook his head. “Gonna stay here a while longer. Try to figure it out.”

Tony hesitated and Gibbs looked up at him, really seeing him for the first time since they’d returned from the interview with Patrice. “Go home, DiNozzo. You look exhausted.”

Tony glanced around quickly. “Which home?” he asked quietly. Gibbs responded with a shrug. Tony stared at him until Gibbs growled “DiNozzo!”

“Okay, Boss.” Then Tony was gone, and Gibbs slumped back in his chair, feeling very much like he needed a head slap.

Using Logic

Leon Vance stormed into the house, slamming the door shut behind him. As soon as he did so, he regretted it. Closing his eyes for a moment, he breathed deeply before opening them to see his two children looking at him from the entry leading to the dining room, worry and confusion clearly
visible on their faces. He sighed quietly, then shook his head and dropped carefully to his knees.
“Daddy had a bad day at work, guys. Come make me feel better?”

Jared smiled and ran forward; Kayla followed a bit more cautiously, but hugged him easily enough.

“I thought you were turning into a mean ol’ bear, daddy!” Jared exclaimed.

Vance chuckled. “Did you think so too, Kayla?”

Kayla smiled and shook her head, but didn’t say anything. She just looked at him carefully. She’s growing up too fast, he thought. He reached over and tickled her side, grinning when she erupted into shrieking laughter. Jared laughed along with her, and Vance felt something in him relax as his daughter looked at him, eyes sparkling.

Footsteps approached from the kitchen, and Vance mentally steeled himself. Jackie stopped in the same spot where the kids had stood a moment before, one arm up against the wall, the other hand on her hip. Vance met her gaze squarely. She nodded slightly, then shifted her attention to the kids.

“Kayla, Jared, you all go on upstairs, let me talk to your daddy for a bit.”

Jared nodded and let go of Vance, running off toward the stairs. Kayla leaned in for another hug.

“Love you, Daddy!” she whispered.

“Come on, Kayla!” Jared called from halfway up the stairs. Kayla let go of her father and took off after him.

Vance rose to his feet. “It’s great they get along so well,” he commented as his wife walked into the room.

Her only reply was a quiet “Mmm hmm,” as she stopped right in front of him and looked him over. She leaned in and brushed a light kiss over his lips, then backed up a step, pointing at the couch.

“Sit.”

Vance raised his eyebrows and gave her a small smile, but did as he was told, removing his jacket and draping it over the arm of the couch before sitting. Jackie followed, sitting down and turning to face him. She reached out to loosen his tie a little, then moved her hand up to his chin and turned his head to face her.

“Tell me.”

Vance let out a sigh. “You know I don’t like to bring work home with me.”

Her own eyebrows shot up. “You already did. I thought Jared’s science project blew up, but no, it was just my husband.”

“Jared’s got a science project? What’s it on?”

Jackie laughed. “Oh, no. You’re not gonna distract me that easily. You come bursting into this house like somethin’s on fire, you need to explain yourself.”

Vance shook his head, giving in quickly. There’s really no other choice, he thought ruefully. “It’s personnel issues, that’s all. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Jackie gave him an indelicate snort. “All evidence to the contrary.” She reached out and poked a long, slender finger into his chest. “Fess up, Leon.”
Vance reached up to capture her hand, bringing it to his lips briefly. “Just an issue with Agent Gibbs and a member of his team. Don’t worry, I won’t forget myself again.”

Jackie turned her hand to grasp his own. “That nice man who came to dinner and helped when… she came to the house?”

Vance squeezed her hand turned a bit more to face her, reaching up to cup her face. “Yeah, him.” He looked at her searchingly, but her expression didn’t waver. He felt a rush of pride at her remembered courage, and then his head tilted a bit. “You think Gibbs is nice?”

She smiled. “He has good manners. And he keeps you on your toes, tells you when you’re wrong, even though you’re his boss. You need that or you get too big for your britches.” She reached up and took hold of the hand against her face, bringing it down. “So, you gonna tell me what he’s done that’s got you turning into a mean ol’ bear?”

Vance narrowed his eyes at her. “One of these days I’ll say no to you.”

“Not today you won’t. Spill.”

He sighed and let go of her hands, wishing he dared fish a toothpick out of his jacket pocket. “I found out today that he’s involved with a member of his team.”

Jackie looked a little surprised. “That’s a problem?”

Vance grunted. “It is when a team leader takes advantage of a subordinate.”

“Huh. I wouldn’t have pegged Ziva as someone who could be taken advantage of.”

Vance shifted a bit, looking around the room. Jackie watched him for a second, then sat back a bit, resting her elbow on the back of the couch. “It’s not her? Then who? I thought she was the only woman on the team.”

Vance turned his head and looked at her squarely. She blinked in surprise. “He’s gay? I thought he’d been married more than once.”

He nodded. “He was. I didn’t know he was interested in men too. But he informed me today that he and his second have been involved for over a month, and that it’s not going to stop.”

Jackie wrinkled her nose. “He’s forcing this man into a long-term relationship?” Doubt filled her voice.

Vance shook his head. “DiNozzo – that’s his second – says no.”

Jackie tilted her head a bit, looking at him straight on. “So what’s the problem? I know you’re not prejudiced.”

Vance grinned at her. “After being best man at Antwan and Tyrone’s wedding? Ha. That was one hell of a party.”

“Yes, it was, and you’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“You know what. Don’t make me get mad at you now.”

Vance reached out and took her hand from where it was resting on her thigh. “Being emotionally
involved and on the same team leads to problems in the field. Puts the other members of the team at risk, clouds judgment.”

“That been a problem so far?”

He frowned. “No, it hasn’t. But—”

“Got any evidence that they’re handling difficult situations okay?”

Vance thought back over all the reports from the New York operation to catch Vargas. He slowly nodded his head. “Yeah… Gibbs let DiNozzo go in to a dangerous situation to rescue another team member. And DiNozzo took the lead on the investigation when Gibbs was kidnapped, saved the man’s life.”

Jackie stared at him for a moment. “I don’t understand the problem.”

“It’s against regulations. I have to split up the team.”

She pulled her hand out of his and pushed off the back of the couch, sitting up and leaning forward with her elbows resting on her thighs. “Leon… what good does it do to be the director if you can’t change the rules?”

“It’s not that easy, Jackie.”

“Sure it is. Gibbs and his team doing a good job?”

Vance sighed. “Yeah. Best out of this office, probably one of the best if not the best in the whole agency.”

Jackie brought her hand up to her face, tapping her finger against her lips. “So is it good for the agency to split them up?”

Vance squirmed a bit in his seat. Jackie straightened up abruptly and pointed at him. “Ah ha!”

“What?” Vance asked, startled.

“You know it’s not the smartest move, but you’re going to do it anyway. Why?” She reached out when he turned his head away, gripping his chin a little harder than she had earlier, making him look at her. She stared into his eyes, then nodded. “It’s personal.” She let go of him and turned her head a bit, looking at him sideways and smirking. “You know it is.”

Vance dropped his head in defeat. “Should hire you on as an agent,” he muttered.

Jackie smiled. “After I raise those kids.”

Vance chuckled. “You’ll be too old,” he commented lightly.

Jackie narrowed her eyes and smiled, leaning forward until she was close enough to kiss him. He focused on her lips and started to close the gap between them when she said, “Wash your mouth out with soap.”

He laughed again and leaned back, resting his head on the back of the couch.

“Now you tell me what’s really going on,” Jackie demanded.

Vance closed his eyes for a moment, then sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “I wanted to transfer
DiNozzo to the Seattle office. He’s beyond ready to lead his own team, and it’s a good fit. Gibbs is getting closer to retirement; I want him training some new recruits, and to do that I need to open up a spot on his team. And one of his other agents deserves a shot at senior field agent, but there’s no place for him right now except for on that team with DiNozzo gone.”

Jackie rested her elbow on her leg and propped her chin on her fist. “He turned down the transfer.”

“Yeah. And then Gibbs came to see me and wanted to make sure I didn’t transfer him anyway.”

Jackie shook her head slowly. “Still not seeing the problem.”

Vance lifted his hands and rubbed his eyes. “Gibbs got me to make a deal with him so I wouldn’t force the transfer. DiNozzo told me he’s bucking to take Gibbs’ job someday. Then today I find out what’s really going on. You know how I feel about being manipulated.”

Jackie was silent for a moment, then she sat up and fixed her husband with an intense stare. “Leon James Vance, I’m surprised at you!”

Vance’s eyes widened and he stared back at her, confused.

“Since when does the world revolve around you?” Jackie threw up her hands and then started poking him in the arm, emphasizing her words. “How many times did you turn down reassignment because of me and the kids?” When Vance didn’t answer right away, she sat forward again. “How many?”

“Three times,” he mumbled.

“I can’t hear you.”

He huffed out a breath. “Three times,” he admitted in a normal tone of voice.

“Were you trying to put one over on the agency?”

He gave her a look. “Of course not.”

“So how is this any different? They want to stay together. You think they started something because they wanted to put one over on you?”

“Nooo…” he dragged out the word. Sometimes he hated it when she used logic on him.

Jackie shook her head at him. “Two team members fall in love.” Vance’s expression grew faintly alarmed. She smiled at him, then continued enumerating points, raising a finger at the end of each one. “They continue to work well together. They make up the best team in the agency. One of them turns down a promotion because he doesn’t want to leave his lover.” She reached out and smacked him lightly on the arm. “Couples make sacrifices and compromise every day to stay together, Leon.”

He smiled at her. “I know,” he said, putting a wealth of meaning into that simple phrase.

Her own smile was luminous, but she stuck to her point. “Gibbs makes a deal with you in order to keep his lover close. Knowing you, it’s something you mean to turn to your advantage.”

Vance just raised an eyebrow and continued to look at her.

She shook her head at him. “So you got at least some of what you wanted.” She reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “Fix it.” She let go of him and rose to her feet. “I’m going to go finish dinner. You go on upstairs and spend a few minutes with those kids. Show them you’re just a teddy bear.”
He watched her walk away, then moved to get up after she disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. A moment later her head poked back out around the corner.

“We should have them over for dinner.”

Balance

Gibbs sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes, then looked at his watch. *A little after 10:30. Huh, feels later.* It had been a little over two hours since the others had left, and Gibbs’ frustration with the case had gradually faded away. He shut down his computer and stood, grabbing his gun and badge out of his desk.

He spent the ride down to the parking lot trying to decide what to do. He got in the car and reached to turn the key in the ignition, but hesitated. Sitting back, he pulled out his phone and hit the speed dial.

“Hey, Boss.”

“Tony… it’s Jethro.”

“Hey, Jethro.”

Jethro chuckled. “Where are you?”

“Home.”

Jethro grimaced. *Yup, screwed up.* “Which home?”

“My place.”

Jethro paused, then asked, “Alright if I come over?”

There was a short silence, then Tony said, “Jeth, you don’t have to ask.”

“After today I do.”

“Come on over.”

Jethro hung up and started the car. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but Tony’s voice had sounded a bit warmer than before.

It took a little less time than usual to get over to Tony’s apartment. Jethro knocked on the door and Tony opened it quickly. They stared at each other for a moment, then Tony gave him a small smile and stepped aside so he could come in.

Tony spoke as he locked the door. “Put some clean sweats out for you in the bedroom.”

A few minutes later Jethro joined Tony on the couch, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. There was another baseball game on, and they watched in silence for a while, until Tony reached for the remote and turned the sound down a bit. He tossed the remote on the coffee table, then reached over and took hold of Jethro’s arm, tugging gently until Jethro smiled a little and shifted over so he was right next to Tony.

“Not like I haven’t ever seen you get obsessed during a case, Jethro. It’s okay.”

Jethro sighed. “If it was just the case, it would be. But it’s not.”
Tony shifted over until he was facing Jethro, his full attention on him. “Vance?”

Jethro nodded. “In part. Ran into him in the elevator. He wanted to know if being with you was worth risking my career, asked if I was going to stop. Told him yes then no.”

Tony waited for a moment, then when it was clear Jethro wasn’t going to say anything else, he spoke up. “Not like we didn’t know he was going to have a problem with us.”

Jethro nodded, then reached out to take Tony’s hand. “I think he has more of a problem with the fact that he made that agreement with me under what he considers false pretenses.”

Tony shrugged. “Either he’ll deal with it, or he won’t.” He looked at Jethro seriously. “We’ve already decided we’re not splitting up. So either I’ll find a new job in the area, or you’ll find a new job in Seattle.”

Jethro smiled. “That simple?”

“Yup.” Tony reached up and squeezed Jethro’s shoulder with his free hand, then continued. “So what’s the rest of it?”

Jethro sighed. “Tough to watch you flirt with Holloway.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Jeth, you know that’s just to get her to relax and underestimate me.”

Jethro shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah, I do know… but sometimes I forget.”

Tony laughed quietly. “Want me to prove to you that it’s you I want?”

Jethro shot him a quick grin. “Was thinking more along the lines of me making it up to you.”

Tony shook his head, suddenly serious. “Jeth… we’re not using sex as a way to make up for stuff that happens at work.”

Jethro tilted his head and looked at Tony curiously.

“I mean it. You wanna make up for being a bastard at work, make up for it at work. Keep our personal life separate from our work life. You wanna send some zingers my way when you’re pissed, go for it. But when the day’s done and I ask if we’re gonna be together that night, switch it off. Don’t carry it over.”

Jethro nodded. That issue was part of what broke up his last two marriages. “Abby was all over me today about needing to work at relationships… and something about not turning into a barn, which I really didn’t get.”

Tony laughed. “Abby’s very wise.”

“Thought that was Ducky’s role.”

“Ducky’s not going to offer advice unless we go to him or we screw up right in front of his face.”

“True.”

They were quiet for a while, watching the game, and then Jethro spoke up again. “You think we can do it?”

Tony bumped his knee against Jethro. “What, find some way to balance our lives in and out of
Jethro nodded. “Balance isn’t one of my strong suits, Tony.”

Tony laughed. “No, really?”

Jethro’s eyes narrowed and he reached out to give Tony a head smack. It was just a light one, but Tony retaliated immediately. Jethro smiled and shook his head. “I am sorry about today, Tony.”

“Yeah, I got that. I was a little ticked off at first, but I thought it was just the case, so I let it go and figured I’d give you some space.”

“So, you’d have been a lot ticked if you’d known how I felt about the flirting?”

Tony huffed out a breath. “Yeah, probably would have been. I know you trust me at work, Jethro… you trust me in this relationship?”

Jethro looked at him seriously and nodded. “I do, Tony.”

Tony sat up and stretched. “Okay. Wanna go have sex?”

Jethro feel back against the couch and laughed. “I thought you didn’t want to use sex as a way to make up for stuff at work.”

Tony snorted. “I don’t. Doesn’t mean I don’t want sex. I’m a guy, Jethro, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Jethro smiled. “I did notice, Tony.”

Tony grinned at him and stood up, leaning down to switch off the television. “So? What are you waiting for?”

Jethro shook his head but grinned back and followed Tony into the bedroom, where he was surprised to see a towel laid down on the bed, together with massage oil on the nightstand. He quirked an eyebrow at Tony, who gave him a slightly sheepish smile. “I might have thought about calling you up and offering a massage to get rid of some of that tension.”

Jethro nodded. “Good idea.”

Within a few minutes, they’d both stripped and Jethro lay face down on the fluffy towel. Tony had straddled his thighs and was working on his neck and shoulders. “Jethro, your neck is like a rock. You have got to learn to meditate or something.”

The only response Tony got was a snort of derision. Tony smiled wickedly, and said, “I could tell Abby how tense you are, and she could bug you to go to yoga with her. You know you’d give in eventually.”

Jethro’s voice was muffled by the pillows, but Tony was able to understand him. “Do that, and you’ll be doing McGee’s paperwork for a month.”

“Now, Jethro, what did we say about separating work and home?”

Jethro tried to give Tony a whack, but wasn’t able to reach effectively without turning over a bit, something he had no interest in doing.

Tony laughed. “That was not one of your better efforts, you know.”
Jethro thought about flipping him off, but decided not to. He settled for smacking Tony on the leg. Tony just chuckled and continued to work on Jethro’s shoulders.

Jethro lost track of time after a while. He just relaxed and let Tony take care of him, loosening up his back until he didn’t think he could move if he wanted to. He wasn’t tired, not really, just content to sort of float along and not think about much of anything. He vaguely registered Tony opening the drawer of the nightstand, but didn’t pay too much attention to it, until he felt something wrap around his wrist. It wasn’t until he felt something on the other wrist too that he roused himself enough to ask Tony what he was doing. His voice failed him when he saw and felt Tony tighten one of the leather cuffs; that got him to snap back into full awareness. “Tony…”

“Shh, Jethro. I’ll take them off if you want. But I think you could use this tonight. Wanna try? I bet it’ll feel great to just let go for a while.”

“Thought we already did that,” Jethro grumbled. He twisted around enough to look up at Tony, who was admiring the cuffs.

“Those look great on you, you know?”

Jethro looked at them, thinking they’d look a lot better on Tony. He glanced up at his lover, who was looking at him patiently. “What exactly are you proposing?”

Tony smiled gently. “Just that you lie there and do nothing. Let me do all the work. You need to just let go,” he repeated. “Look, I won’t even tie you down. Just pretend, and don’t move your arms at all.”

Jethro raised an eyebrow. “You think that’ll work?”

“Well, no, probably not. But if you’re not comfortable with it, we won’t do it.” Tony sat back and looked at him curiously. “You’ve really never played like this before?”

Jethro turned onto his back, resting his head on the pillow and lifting his arms to look at the cuffs. “Not really. Shannon and I… well, she liked to play around a little, with these silk scarves she had. Thought it was fun…”

His voice trailed off, and Tony reached out and started to unbuckle one of the cuffs. “I’m sorry, Jethro. I should have talked to you about it first.”

Jethro shook his head and reached out, putting his hand over Tony’s fingers to stop him. “No, leave it. I… we can try it. I trust you, Tony.”

Tony looked at Jethro seriously, then nodded. He got off the bed, gathering up some articles that looked like a D ring and leather straps and putting them back in the drawer. Then he walked over to his dresser, opening the top drawer and rummaging around for a moment before pulling out a silk scarf. He held it up, showing it to Jethro, who looked at it and nodded slowly.

Tony walked back to the bed and sat down next to him. “Front or back?”

Jethro thought about that. “How about I turn back over, you get that in place, and you go back to the massage for a while?”

Tony smiled and nodded. Jethro turned over onto his stomach, and watched as Tony threaded the scarf through the ring on one of the cuffs, tied it in place, then wound it through the slats on the head board. “Don’t pull to hard,” he warned, ”you might break the bed.”
Jethro looked up at him and smirked. “I can fix it.”

Tony grinned, then reached over to secure the scarf to the cuff on Jethro’s left wrist. He stopped, though, and reached down to run his fingers through Jethro’s hair. “You remember your safe word?”

It took Jethro a second, but he nodded. “Binary.” Tony ruffled his hair a little, then finished tying the scarf in place. Jethro remembered the first and only time Tony had been inside him, and how intense the emotions were, how he’d had to use his safe word, just to keep himself together. It had been a powerful moment, and he suddenly found himself wanting to experience it again.

He relaxed down into the bed as Tony started over with the massage. It didn’t take as long for Jethro to lose the tension in his body. He’d flex his arms every so often, feeling the resistance in the scarf and the pull on his wrists. He focused on the feel of the leather, in part to stay in the moment… Shannon was the only one he’d ever let do this to him before now, and he wanted to remain emotionally in the present with Tony. He could take the memories out later.

Jethro once again lost track of time. Tony’s massages were really that good. He stayed more aware than he had the last time, because of the cuffs on his wrists, so he knew the second the massage turned from functional to sensual. Tony lightened his touch and began skimming his fingers over Jethro’s skin, not so light as to tickle. Jethro shifted into the touch, sighing as Tony ran his fingers over Jethro’s buttocks and down the backs of his thighs, than back up to palm his ass and squeeze gently.

Jethro took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the arousal build. Tony leaned in and dropped a kiss on the back of Jethro’s neck, then slowly began kissing and licking his way along Jethro’s neck and shoulders, nipping every so often. Jethro felt his cock harden and pressed down into the towel a bit. It was soft, not scratchy, and it felt really good.

Tony worked his mouth down to Jethro’s rear, biting the muscles gently, getting gasps and quiet moans from his lover. Jethro was pulling on the scarf now, not too hard, feeling the resistance and letting it build his excitement.

Tony nudged Jethro’s legs apart, just a bit, and stroked his balls, making Jethro buck up and gasp out Tony’s name. He kept fondling them for a while, watching Jethro’s muscles flex and listening to the cadence of his breathing. When his breath started to hitch, Tony slowly moved his hand away, getting a murmur of protest. Smiling, he moved forward, leaning in to kiss Jethro on the lips. The older man grumbled when he tried to reach for Tony and couldn’t, making Tony laugh. Jethro gave him a mock glare, which got him a light smack on the ass in retaliation. They grinned at each other, and then Tony kissed him again and spoke softly.


“You in me… now.”

Tony sat up a bit and looked at him. “You sure?” He too remembered Jethro’s emotional reaction the first time, and didn’t want to do anything to make him uncomfortable again.

“I’m damn sure. Get moving.”

Tony laughed and gave him a mock salute. “On your six, Boss.” Then he laughed harder as he realized what he’d just said.

Jethro groaned. “I’ll never be able to hear you say that again without thinking of this.”

Tony grinned. “That could be embarrassing in any number of ways.” He reached down to play with
Jethro’s balls again; Jethro jerked on the scarf and growled.

Tony leaned down and bit Jethro’s right buttock, then leaned over to get a condom and lube, pressing his erection against Jethro’s ass as he did so. Jethro pressed back into him, causing Tony to gasp and then hum at the increased pressure.

Tony sat up a bit, making quick work of the condom and coating himself with lube while Jethro writhed enticingly beneath him, pulling on the cuffs and breathing hard as he rubbed his cock against the soft towel. Tony put a generous amount of lube on his fingers, then laid a hand on Jethro’s lower back, rubbing gently and asking him to lie still. Jethro complied after a moment, and Tony moved his fingers in between Jethro’s cheeks, spreading the lube around, especially over his anus. Jethro growled again as Tony rubbed over the ring of muscle and just pushed the tip of his finger in.

“Damn, Jethro, that’s sexy. Do it again.”

Tony carefully worked one finger in, accompanied by Jethro’s growls and occasional gasp as Tony loosened the muscles and reached further inside. He slowly added more lube and more fingers until Jethro had three fingers inside him and was moving his hips rhythmically, rubbing against the towel and moaning almost constantly. Tony finally withdrew his fingers and wiped them quickly on a tissue, then moved forward, pressing his knees against Jethro’s legs.

“Scoot up a little, Jethro… let me get my hand on your dick.”

Jethro did as Tony asked, and Tony let out a sound between a growl and a moan as Jethro’s ass rose up in the air a bit to rub against Tony cock. He used one hand to spread Jethro’s cheeks apart, the other on his cock, guiding the tip against his stretched opening. “Ready?” he asked in a shaky voice.

Jethro’s response was to push back, forcing Tony’s cockhead into his ass. Tony gave a surprised exclamation and moved his hands to grab Jethro’s hips. “Slowly! Or I can’t make this last.”

Jethro stilled, letting Tony set the pace. Tony reached around with his left hand to encircle Jethro’s cock, which was already well-lubricated with pre-come. He started squeezing and rubbing while he slowly pushed inside, listening carefully to the noises Jethro was making… gasps and moans and grunts, all in pleasure, with no safe word. After a few minutes, Tony was all the way in, pressed against his lover, and saying all sorts of things he wouldn’t be able to remember later.

He set up a rhythm that gradually grew faster and harder, careful to let Jethro adjust to the speed and the feel of him, moving his hand on Jethro’s cock in the same rhythm. Jethro was pulling hard against the restraints now, almost fighting them, and Tony managed to ask without losing rhythm, “Do you want them off?”

Jethro shook his head. “No!” he gasped out. “Want them, want to touch you too.”

Tony shifted his weight so he was more supported on his knees, then let go of Jethro with his right hand and reached forward, fumbling a bit until Jethro’s hand was in his, or maybe it was the other way around. He wasn’t sure. Jethro gripped him hard, and his whole body started to tense. Tony picked up the pace, still being careful not to cause pain, and dropped his forehead to rest against Jethro’s upper back.

“Jeth – ro… gonna – soon – can’t – hold on…” He shifted the angle a bit, hitting Jethro’s prostate and getting a cry of his name out of him. He managed it a few more times, then suddenly lost control, squeezing Jethro’s cock and pounding into him three or four times before crying out wordlessly as he came, vaguely registering his name on Jethro’s lips again as he felt his cock pulse in his hand.
Breathing heavily, both men collapsed on the bed, Tony just managing to let go of Jethro’s cock and catch his own weight so he didn’t crush the man beneath him. They lay there like that for a moment, gasping for breath, until Tony shakily and carefully pulled out and levered himself up and off of his lover. He disposed of the condom, then quickly reached forward to unbuckle the cuffs.

As soon as they were off, Jethro turned onto his back and reached out to grab Tony and pull him close. They lay like that, arms around each other, until Jethro muttered something about sweat and cooling off and perfectly good sheets. Tony let out a sound suspiciously like a giggle, but managed to pull away enough to sit up and grab the towel, cleaning them both off a bit before moving under the covers.

They lay entwined together, until Tony asked quietly, “Was it good?”

Jethro snorted. “You think you have to ask? It was great. Maybe you were right… maybe I did need that.”

Tony hummed happily and snuggled closer. “You can return the favor the next time I have a bad day.”

“Gladly.”

They lay quietly, Jethro stroking Tony’s arm, until he looked over and met Tony’s eyes. “Know what?”

Tony shook his head. “What?”

“I never had dinner.”

Tony’s laughter was infectious; soon they were both laughing and the intimacy of the moment was lost to a pillow fight.

Chapter End Notes

*McGee’s ringtone is taken from Team Unicorn’s song Geek and Gamer Girls… video is available on youtube. I did a search for ‘geek music’ to find something Tony would want to use to tweak McGee a little, and this seemed perfect. Tony’s ringtone is from Queen’s Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy, for obvious reasons. No copyright infringement of either one is intended!
Solving Puzzles

Relationships

Tony woke to the feel of fingers moving gently through his hair. He stretched, pressing back against his lover for a moment, then reached up, grasping the hand and pulling it down to place a kiss on the palm. He turned over to face Jethro, who was looking at him seriously.

“G’mornin’,” Tony said.

One side of Jethro’s mouth twitched up in a slight smile. His head was propped up on his left hand and his hair was a bit messy. His hair’s getting a little longer… I like it. Jethro reclaimed his hand and reached up, tracing Tony’s lips with his fingers. Tony was about to suggest some more vigorous activity, but the look in Jethro’s eyes stopped him. He watched the older man instead, seeing how Jethro’s eyes followed his fingers, then searched his face as if trying to discover the answer to a riddle. After a few moments, Jethro’s eyes met Tony’s and he smiled, shaking his head. Tony tilted his head a bit, the question clear in his eyes.

“I can’t figure it out,” Jethro said quietly, letting his hand fall to the bed.

“Not a mind reader here, Jeth… figure what out?”

“How you got to be so good at this.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Uh… you do realize that I have an extensive dating history, right? I mean, I wasn’t lying when I was telling all those stories. In fact, those aren’t even all my stories.”

Jethro laughed. “Oh, I’m very well aware that your sexual prowess is a legend in your own mind –“ Tony pouted at that and reached out to give Jethro a head smack, which was easily blocked – “and believe me, I’m grateful that for once fantasy matches reality.” The pout faded and Tony grinned happily. Jethro smiled back, then the thoughtful look returned. “What I can’t figure out is how you’re so good at the whole relationship thing.”

Tony’s expression grew puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Jethro shook his head. “All these years I’ve known you, and the only serious relationship I’ve seen you in was with Jeanne Benoit, and that wasn’t even real.”

Tony sat up abruptly, leaning back against the headboard and not meeting Jethro’s eyes. “I may have been undercover, but except for the fake name and the fake job, I was pretty much me. My feelings were real.”

Jethro shifted position, sitting up next to Tony and reaching out to take his hand, squeezing it gently. “I know they were, Tony.”

Tony’s gaze focused on their hands, and he moved his thumb, rubbing the back of Jethro’s hand. “So what’s this about?”

Jethro cocked his head to one side, then sighed quietly. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Tony. Just… I expected you to tell me off last night, refuse to see me after the way I was acting at work. Didn’t think you’d be so understanding. But I was wrong, and from where I sit, you’re damn good at relationships.”
Tony glanced over at him, then shrugged a bit. “Not sure about that… I just think I’m pretty good at reading you and I also get lucky now and then when I’m trying to give you what you need.” He relaxed back into the headboard a bit. “Don’t know if I’d be very good at it if I hadn’t been working with you for such a long time.”

Jethro grunted, thinking it over. “Maybe.”

Tony shifted a bit to face him. “Could be that even though I haven’t been in many, I’ve studied them. Relationships, I mean. People too… tried to learn what makes them tick. I’ve taken on a lot of undercover roles and been pretty convincing without ever having been in the role I was playing. Like when I was that small time weapons dealer. Never actually been one, you know? But I was convincing.”

Jethro nodded. Tony lifted his free hand and reached over to lay his palm against Jethro’s cheek. “But I’m not playing a role here, Jeth. This is as real as it gets. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Tony… I know. Think I’d be here with you if I didn’t think so?” He leaned into Tony’s hand as he spoke.

Tony shook his head. “Nah. You’d be in your basement, building another boat, drinking a lot of bourbon.” He grinned. “So isn’t it a good thing you’ve got me now?”

Jethro sighed. “I suppose.” He flashed a wicked smile at Tony’s immediate indignation.

Tony leaned forward, moving his hand from Jethro’s face to the back of his neck. “I won that pillow fight last night. You looking for round two?”

Jethro snorted indignantly. “You didn’t win. It was a tie.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. I knocked you off the bed. That means I won.”

Jethro’s eyes narrowed. “I kept my grip on my weapon. You’re the one who said we should stop.”

Tony’s jaw dropped slightly. “Out of concern for you! You landed on your ass, Jethro, and that couldn’t have felt good, given what we’d been doing before that!”

Jethro made a disparaging sound. “You just knew you couldn’t keep going. You were laughing so hard you couldn’t breathe, so you knew I’d get the upper hand!”

Tony’s eyes took on a dangerous glint. “Oh, yeah?” His hand dropped from Jethro’s neck and reached down to grasp a pillow.

Jethro had an answering fire in his own eyes. “Yeah.” He grabbed a pillow too, and they sat there for a moment, still hanging on to each other’s hands, waiting to see who would make the first move.

The shrill beep of the alarm cut through the air, making them both jump a little. Tony turned to look at it, then back at Jethro, who wasn’t quite able to hide the fact that he’d started to lift the pillow to get in a hit as soon as Tony looked away. Tony gazed meaningfully at the guilty hand, then looked Jethro in the eye.

“Truce? For now. Gotta get to work.”

Jethro’s lips twitched. “Saved by the bell, huh, Tony? Alright… truce. For now.”

They stared at each other, eyes narrowing, until they both lowered their weapons and released them.
Jethro tugged on Tony’s hand until the younger man leaned in close enough for Jethro to brush a light kiss over his lips. “Good morning, Tony.”

Tony grinned. “Shower?”

“Sure.”

Jethro watched while Tony bounced out of the bed and headed for the bathroom. He moved to follow, albeit a little more slowly, wincing as he stood up. *What on earth possessed me to let Tony… yeah. Like I don’t know.* Shaking his head and grinning at the memory, he followed his lover and second in command into the shower.

**The Case**

Gibbs sat at his desk, frowning at the computer screen. *Nothing. Not a damn thing. No more leads, no more evidence.* Trips to Ducky and Abby had yielded nothing new. Sending Tony and Ziva to re-canvas the neighborhood where Drimel’s body had been dumped had been a waste of time. Nothing new had turned up in Drimel’s history, or that of his coworkers, or that of their three suspects.

Gibbs sat back and let his gaze wander over his team. McGee was staring at his computer like a man possessed, typing frantically. Tony was alternating between his computer and his phone, calling local precincts to see if there was any history of anything, anything at all, involving Drimel and his buddies. Ziva was glaring at her computer, frustration clearly showing on her face. Gibbs was sure she was running out of ideas. They all were, and Gibbs was starting to think this could turn into their first case to go cold in years. *I’d handle it better if my gut wasn’t screaming at me.*

Gibbs’ gut nagged at him every time he went through what they knew about the three women. He yanked the file out from under some other papers, flipping it open with a low growl and looking through it again. He sensed movement, and looked up to see Tony standing next to his desk.

“Coffee run, Boss. Want anything special?” Tony gaze was even and direct, but Gibbs could see the hint of sympathy and understanding there. Gibbs sighed.

“Just the usual.”

Tony nodded, then shifted over to look at the pictures of the three women. “What’s your gut say?”

Gibbs shook his head. “Not enough. It’s one of them, but which one?”

Tony looked a little doubtful, but considered them all seriously. “If I had to pick one, I’d say Laura Kendall. She’s the only one who showed an aggressive personality. Maybe she and her fiancé did it together? Did we do enough of a background on him?”

Ziva, who’d been listening in, spoke up. “I checked him out. He has no medical training.”

Tony looked over at her. “Maybe we’re barking up the wrong tree? Maybe the medical training isn’t as important as we think?”

Gibbs growled again. “Ducky’s sure whoever stuck Drimel with that needle had a lot of practice.”

Tony tilted his head. “So maybe one of them paid someone, or knows someone with medical training who was willing to help them.”

Ziva rose to her feet and joined them. “The only one who could afford to pay for a hit would be
Patrice Holloway, unless Laura Kendall had access to her fiance’s money.”

Gibbs looked at her. “Have we checked for transactions that could pay for a hit in the last two weeks?”

Tony and Ziva looked at each other, then back at Gibbs. Tony appeared faintly apologetic. “There’s nothing, Boss. Even Holloway might have had trouble, though… her financial situation isn’t as flush as we thought at first.”

Gibbs straightened up. “So that might give her motive to kill.”

Ziva frowned. “No medical background.”

“Uh… Boss?”

They all turned toward McGee, who was half out of his seat, looking from his computer to something on his desk and back, then over to them. “I think I have something.”

Gibbs was out of his chair like a shot, and behind McGee’s desk in record time. Tony and Ziva crowded behind him.

“Patrice Holloway doesn’t have a medical background… but she does have training as a veterinary technician. She worked part time for a vet’s office until about a year and a half ago.”

Gibbs and Tony exchanged glances, and then Tony looked seriously at McGee. “Give me the number for the vet’s office where she worked, McCracker.” Ziva gave him a strange look. “What? He may have cracked the case!”

McGee wrote the number out on a piece of paper, and Tony headed over to his desk, picking up the phone and punching the number that would block caller ID before completing the call. Gibbs watched him for a second, then turned to McGee. “Why didn’t this come up in her employment history?”

McGee looked up at him. “She was working under her maiden name, even though she was married. Somehow it was overlooked, I guess.”

Gibbs clapped McGee on the shoulder. “Good job, Tim.” McGee smiled, and Gibbs moved over to Tony’s desk, with the others following him. Tony looked up and pointed to the phone, whispering “on hold.” He hit the speaker button on the phone, and they all got to listen to a classical version of I Shot the Sherriff. Tony rolled his eyes, and then the music clicked off and a voice came over the speaker.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! This is Dr. Travers. My receptionist said you’re checking a reference for employment?”

“No worries about the wait,” Tony said jovially. “I know how it is. Yeah, we have a Patrice Holloway, listed you as a reference. She applied for a part-time vet tech position with us.”

“Holloway? I don’t… oh, you mean Patrice Brewer. She’s looking to get back into it? That’s too bad… I was hoping if she ever changed her mind, she’d come back to us.”

“Oh, I think it’s all about location, Dr. Travers. We’re here in North Carolina, and she says on her application that she’s moving?”

“Ah, that explains it, Doctor…”
Tony grinned up at Gibbs. “Vance. Dr. Leon Vance.”

Ziva stifled a laugh.

“Dr. Vance. Nice to meet you, sort of. Patrice is great. You can’t go wrong with her. Extremely competent, good manner with the animals. Over half my clients would routinely request her for drawing blood; she never missed a vein.”

Gibbs bared his teeth in a victorious grin. “Got her!”

“What was that?”

“Oh,” Tony said, “just saying that I’m glad we’ve got her, if she’s that good. Good help is so hard to find, isn’t it?”

“You’ve got that right. Hey, give Patrice my best when you see her, will you?”

“I’ll be sure to do that. You’ve been a great help, Dr. Travers. Bye now!” Tony hung up and grinned at Gibbs.

Gibbs gave Tony a tight smile back, then turned to McGee and Ziva. “Start over on Holloway. Research everything… I want her phone records, credit cards, what she had for breakfast Monday morning. Now!”

They all scrambled to find everything they could, digging deeper than they had without anything substantial to tie Patrice Holloway to Drimel’s death. There was still nothing on her phone records to suggest contact with Drimel. Her credit cards were more revealing, however; there was a charge for car repair the evening after Drimel was killed.

Tony frowned. “If her car was in the shop,” he began.

Gibbs finished the thought. “How did she travel to the spa Sunday evening?”

It didn’t take long for them to find the rental car company Patrice used, picking up a car Saturday morning and paying cash. The manager confirmed that the car was on their lot, and he was happy to have it towed to the NCIS evidence garage when he was told it may have been used in a murder, assuring Tony that the car hadn’t left the lot since Mrs. Holloway returned it.

Gibbs sent Tony down to the evidence garage to help Abby with the car as soon as he got the call that it had arrived. Tony got there to see Abby using tweezers to carefully remove something from the inside of the lip of the car’s trunk. “Hey, Abs!”

Abby looked up and grinned at him. “Tony! I’d give you a hug, but I have evidence here. Imagine I’m hugging you.”

Tony flung his arms open and closed his eyes, then opened them and moved forward. “You give the best imaginary hugs.”

Abby smiled as she leaned over, peering into the trunk. “I started here, ‘cause I figured it’s such a cliché to put bodies in car trunks. And guess what I found!”

“What?”

Abby glanced up at him and pouted. “Come on, Tony, you have to guess! Gibbs never guesses.”

“Jimmy Hoffa?”
Abby grinned. “No, but wouldn’t that be cool?! I found a bit of human skin and some hair… I can try to match the hair to Drimel’s right away… the DNA will take longer.”

“That’s great, Abs. Let me print the trunk as soon as you’re done… if we can lift her prints off it, we’ll pretty much seal the deal.”

Abby bagged her sample and headed for the elevator and back to her lab. Tony got several prints off the trunk, from both outside and inside, and wasn’t too far behind her. He walked down the hall to the lab just in time to run into Gibbs coming down from the bullpen. “Abby got results, Boss?”

Gibbs nodded. “So she says.”

They walked into the lab together, and Tony set the fingerprint evidence down on the table. “Got prints for you.”

“You rock, Tony! Gibbs, if you don’t have a Caf-Pow for me, you can’t rock.” Abby whirled around from in front of her computer, pigtails flying.

Gibbs shot her a small smile and held up a Caf-Pow, but moved his arm back out of reach when she made a grab for it. “Evidence first, Abs.”

She heaved a sigh and shook her head. “So disappointing, Gibbs.” She turned back to the computer, fingers moving over the keys, and two samples of hair appeared on the screen. “Ducky took the one on the left from Drimel’s body; I got the one on the right from the trunk of the rental car.” She hit another key, and the computer started beeping. “One hundred percent match, Gibbs!”

Gibbs looked at the screen and held the Caf-Pow out to her. “That’s good work, Abs.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek, then turned to Tony. “Take Ziva, bring her in.”

Tony just stood there. Gibbs stared at him. “Do you need a kick start, DiNozzo?”

“Just thought maybe I could get a kiss too, Boss.”

Gibbs managed not to smile. “Later.”

Tony grinned and set off for the door. “Gonna hold you to that, Boss!” he called out as he jogged to the elevator.

Abby sighed and slurped at her Caf-Pow. Gibbs turned back to look at her. “What?”

She smiled at him. “You guys are so cute together.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes but couldn’t quite suppress the smile that time.

The Culprit

Tony drummed on the steering wheel as he drove to Holloway’s office. *We got her, we’ll get home at a decent hour, Jethro will be in a good mood...*

“What are you thinking?”

“Huh? About what?”

Ziva shot him an exasperated look. “That is what I am asking you, Tony. What are you thinking about? You seem very happy.”
“I am happy! We got the killer.”

“We have not gotten her yet. We have identified her; that is all.”

Tony glared at her. “Are you trying to burst my bubble, Ziva? Ripping off the rose-colored glasses?”

Ziva stared at him. “The thing with the bubble, I understand. What is it with the glasses? Your sunglasses are dark.”

Tony sighed mightily. “All foreigners should be required to study American idioms before they come here to the good old US of A.”

Ziva snorted. “It would not be nearly so much fun for you if you did not have the chance to correct my use of your language, Tony.”

Tony dipped his head. “True.” He pointed to the building ahead on the right. “We’re here.”

They parked the car and headed into the building, both of them surreptitiously checking their weapons. Tony flashed on a mental image of walking into the building armed with a pillow, and laughed quietly. Ziva glanced over at him.

“Ah.”

“Ah? What ah? What do you mean by ah?”

“I mean, ah. You giggled, so I presume you are thinking of Gibbs in a way that does not involve work, yes?”

Tony glared at her. “DiNozzo men do not giggle.”

Ziva smiled at him. “Oh, I think they do, Tony.”

“No, they don’t.”

Ziva walked faster, moving into the lead and pointing at the door to their right. “It is here, no?”

Tony shook his head at her. “Why do you say no when you mean yes?”

Ziva gave him a puzzled look, opened the door, and walked through, Tony right behind her. The receptionist looked up, and smiled at Tony. “Hello, Special Agents. I’ll just buzz Mrs. Holloway, but I’m sure she can see you right away.”

They waited for a moment, and then the receptionist waved them on. Tony walked in first, with Ziva close behind. Patrice was just coming around her desk. “Special Agent DiNozzo! It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Ziva gave her a tight smile. “You may not think so in a moment.”

Patrice gave her a puzzled glance, then looked back at Tony, who shrugged. “That’s Probationary Agent Ziva David… and I’m afraid she’s right.”

Patrice’s expression faded into a neutral mask. “Are you here to ask more questions about Terrence?”

Tony shook his head. “We’re here to escort you to NCIS. My boss, Special Agent Gibbs… he’d like to talk to you again.”
Patrice smiled. “Well, I’d appreciate it if he could come here. We’re very busy, trying to catch up after our trip south.”

Ziva moved forward. “That would not be appropriate. Suspects are interrogated at the Navy Yard.”

Patrice backed up a step. “Suspect? I’m sorry… do you think I had something to do with Terrence’s death?”

Tony nodded. “Our medical examiner tells us he was killed with an injection of air into a vein in his arm… and whoever did it was an expert with a needle.”

Patrice smiled again, but Tony saw a muscle in her jaw twitch. “Then shouldn’t you be looking for a doctor? Or a nurse?”

Tony grinned. “Or a veterinary technician.”

“Whose clients always requested her because she is so good with a needle,” Ziva added.

Tony nodded. “Dr. Travers says you never miss a vein.”

The smile disappeared from Patrice’s face. “I warn you, I have a black belt in karate.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and we have guns.” He pulled his jacket back to show her his gun.

Patrice shook her head and changed her stance. “You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed woman.”

Tony cocked his head to one side. “Probably true,” he admitted. “But I didn’t mention that Probationary Agent David here comes to us from Mossad. She can eat your black belt for breakfast.”

Patrice’s eyes shifted between the two agents, and then she grabbed a paperweight off her desk and flung it at Tony. He cursed and dodged. Ziva moved forward and made a grab for Patrice’s arm; the taller woman blocked it and within seconds the two were fighting. Tony danced back out of the way and yanked out his cell phone, hitting a couple of buttons and then holding it up in the air.

Patrice managed to get a hit or two on Ziva, but they were glancing blows. It was clear to Tony that while she might be a black belt in the gym, she had nowhere near Ziva’s fighting experience. A few more seconds, and it was over. Ziva had Patrice bent over her desk and was cuffing her and informing her of her rights. Patrice was yelling, screaming that she had the right to defend herself, that Terrence had been blackmailing her, that she wasn’t going to lose everything.

Tony put the cell phone away and took hold of Patrice’s right arm, while Ziva grabbed the left. Patrice tried to pull away from them, kicking out at Tony and hitting him in the lower leg. He glared at her. “Want us to add assaulting a federal agent to the charges?”

Patrice quieted until they reached the receptionist’s desk; the woman was on her feet and staring at them. “Call my lawyer,” Patrice said, through gritted teeth. “Tell him I’ll be at NCIS.”

Patrice didn’t say a word during the trip back to the Navy Yard. Tony and Ziva continued to argue about whether or not Tony had actually giggled, and Tony was grateful that Ziva was careful to keep the context of the conversation private.

Ziva got Patrice settled in an interrogation room while Tony reported back to Gibbs. He showed Gibbs and McGee the video he’d taken of her arrest, after which McGee commented, “You know, Tony, it seems like you let Ziva do the heavy lifting a lot.”
Tony drew himself up to his full height. “It’s called delegating, McCritical. It’s what senior field agents do.”

McGee just raised an eyebrow and went back to his desk. Gibbs ducked his head to hide a smile, then asked Tony if Patrice had said anything else. “Not a word since she told her receptionist to call a lawyer.”

Gibbs nodded. “Lawyer arrive yet?”

McGee shook his head, then grabbed his phone when it started to ring. “McGee… great, thanks. Send him up.” He hung up and looked at Gibbs. “Lawyer’s here, Boss.”

Several minutes later, Gibbs and the rest of his team stood waiting in the hallway outside interrogation while Patrice Holloway conferred with her lawyer. It didn’t take long before the lawyer knocked on the door and Gibbs and Tony walked in while McGee and Ziva headed into the observation room.

Gibbs sat at the table, while Tony leaned against the wall. Patrice stared straight ahead, letting her lawyer do the talking. “Special Agent Gibbs, I have instructed my client to say nothing at his time.”

Gibbs nodded. “I don’t mind doing the talking.” Gibbs glared at the small snort of amusement that Tony couldn’t quite contain. Shaking his head, Gibbs looked down at the file in front of him, then directly at Patrice. “Here’s what we know: Petty Officer Terrence Drimel was blackmailing you. You paid him four thousand dollars. Sometime late Sunday evening or early Monday morning he was drugged with sedatives and a bubble of air was injected into his arm, killing him when it reached his heart. Our medical examiner says whoever injected him was an expert and hit the vein on the first try. You used to work as a vet tech, and your employer, Dr. Travers, says you were amazing with a needle. You rented a car that weekend, paid cash. The car is in our evidence garage; we found a sample of Petty Officer Drimel’s hair in the trunk, along with a patch of skin that our forensic scientist is testing for a DNA match. We pulled fingerprints off the trunk that we are fairly certain will match yours.”

Patrice remained silent and her lawyer fidgeted uncomfortably next to her.

Gibbs watched her for a moment, then continued. “We also know that Petty Officer Drimel tried to get more money from one of his other blackmail victims. She had no more money to give him.” Gibbs leaned forward. “Here’s what I think: Drimel had called you some time the previous week, told you he needed more money. Your financial situation isn’t the best; you told him you needed time. You used that time to get the drugs, the syringe, and come up with the idea to get the car so it wouldn’t be likely to be traced back to you. Drimel called you, set up a meet for Sunday night. You sedated him, probably with a drink, got him into the car, and killed him with that injection. Or you injected him first and got him in the car afterwards; doesn’t really matter.”

Gibbs took a moment to just look at her again. She looked back, her eyes now glassy with tears, but still didn’t say anything. “My agents are getting a warrant to search your office and your home. I suspect we’ll find the drugs, the syringe, and come up with the idea to get the car so it wouldn’t be likely to be traced back to you. Drimel called you, set up a meet for Sunday night. You sedated him, probably with a drink, got him into the car, and killed him with that injection. Or you injected him first and got him in the car afterwards; doesn’t really matter.”

Gibbs stood, making a cutting motion to the mirror, glancing up to see the red recording light on the camera shut off. He left the room, Tony right behind him. Gibbs headed for the observation room and opened the door. “McGee, Ziva, get that warrant and go looking for the drugs, a phone, and
anything else that might give us more leverage.” They nodded and left.

Gibbs and Tony went back out in the hall and waited, leaning up against the wall. Gibbs turned to Tony. “My place tonight?”

Tony smiled. “Sure. Think it’s a good idea to get together every night?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Not like we need to hide it, now that Vance knows.” He glanced over at Tony. “Tired of me yet?”

“No way, Jethro.”

Gibbs smiled. “Good.”

There was a knock on the door again, and Gibbs went to open it. The lawyer was standing near the door; Patrice still sat at the table, crying quietly. “I’ve advised my client to deal.”

Gibbs nodded. “We’ll process the booking and notify the appropriate prosecuting office. You want to explain to her how things go from here?”

The lawyer nodded and went back into the room, shutting the door behind him. Tony looked at Gibbs. “So, that’s that.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Looks like.” He checked his watch. “Handle the booking, then come on upstairs and get your report done. Maybe we’ll get home at a decent hour tonight.”

Tony nodded and leaned back on the wall, waiting for the lawyer’s knock again. Gibbs started down the hall, but stopped when Tony’s cell phone rang. He turned back, figuring it was McGee or Ziva. Tony picked up the phone and looked at the screen, then grimaced slightly. “Vance,” he said quietly to Gibbs before answering. “DiNozzo.” There was a long pause. “Yes, sir. I’ll be there.” He hung up, then looked at Gibbs. “Vance wants to see me in his office tomorrow morning, at 9.”

Gibbs noted the tension in Tony’s shoulders, then realized his felt like Tony’s looked. “Cowboy steak tonight, then.”

Tony nodded, then nervously ran hand through his hair. “Gonna be a long night, Jethro.”

Gibbs couldn’t disagree with him.
Advice

Patrice Holloway had been squared away for the night and her lawyer seen out of the building. Tony and Gibbs were in the bullpen, typing up their reports and waiting to hear from McGee and Ziva, who were serving the warrants at Holloway’s residence and office.

Gibbs’ attention was divided between his report and his senior field agent. Tony’s tension was obvious, making it hard for Gibbs to concentrate. *Gotta figure out something to do for him tonight… something he won’t expect, take his mind off Vance’s next move.* Gibbs watched as Tony grimaced and reached up to rub at his neck. *Guess we’ll have to talk about our next move… screw Vance.*

Gibbs’ cell phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. The now-familiar strains of ‘Geek and Gamer Girls’ drifted through the air, making Tony smile. Absurd as it was, that was enough to make Gibbs determined to put up with the damn ring-things.

He flipped his phone open. “Yeah, Gibbs.”

“Hi Boss… we’re on the way back. Found the drugs and the burn phone in the basement, also a bag with a bunch of syringes and other veterinary materials.”

“That’s a good job, Tim.” Gibbs glanced up and met Tony’s eyes, giving him a slight smile. “Call again when you get here, I’ll meet you at the evidence locker. And call Abby; tell her to get ready.” Gibbs hung up without waiting for any response from McGee.

Tony spoke up from his desk. “They find the stuff?”

Gibbs nodded. “Drugs, phone, syringes. Should be open and shut.”

“Nice.”

Tony went back to typing. Both men were silent for a while, until Gibbs’ phone rang again. He answered it right away. “Be right down.” Hanging up, he stood and walked over to Tony’s desk.

Tony shot him a smile. “You’re starting to like the ringtones, aren’t you? You didn’t even look at the screen.”

Gibbs shrugged. “They’re okay.” He looked Tony over carefully. “How about you head on over to the house as soon as your report’s done? I’ll go over everything with McGee and Abby and meet you there.”

Tony hesitated, then let his shoulders slump slightly as he nodded. “Might as well. Don’t think I’m going to be able to focus on much else here.”

Gibbs reached out and squeezed Tony’s shoulder. “It’ll be alright, DiNozzo.”

Tony looked up and made an attempt at a smile. Gibbs shook his head. “Don’t let Vance get in your head, Tony. We’ll talk and be ready for him.”

Tony sighed. “I should draft up a resignation letter to give him.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Not until we’ve talked it over, Tony.” He reached out, gently taking hold of
Tony’s chin and raising his head so their eyes met. “I mean it.”

“Gotcha, Boss.”

Gibbs nodded and headed for the elevator to go downstairs.

Tony spent about ten more minutes typing his report, then ran the spell checker. Typos corrected, he stood, stretched, and got up to hit the bathroom before getting ready to leave. Motion caught the corner of his eye, and he saw Ziva walking to her desk.

“Tony,” she greeted him.

He gave her a small smile and made his way out of the bullpen and toward the men’s room.

Tony was washing his hands, having taken care of business, when the door opened and Ziva slipped in. He let his head fall to his chest for a moment, then looked up at her in the mirror. “All the bathrooms are coed in Israel, aren’t they?”

Ziva smirked at him. “No, they are not. But that has never stopped me.”

“Of course not.” Tony turned off the water and straightened up, grabbing a paper towel. He turned toward her, leaning back against the sink while he dried his hands. “What would Larry think if he knew you were following me in here again?”

Ziva crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall. “He would not think anything. He knows that there is no ‘Tiva.’ We discussed it – at length.”

Tony crumpled up the paper towel and aimed for the trash, sinking it easily. “And the crowd goes wild!”

Ziva managed to narrow her eyes and raise her eyebrows at the same time. Tony smirked at her. “You practice those in the mirror, don’t you?”

She sighed. “Are you going to tell me what is wrong?”

Tony just looked at her.

Ziva tilted her head. “You are tense. I could see that from across the room. Did something happen between you and Gibbs?”

Tony laughed. “Are you going to be my relationship counselor?”

“If I must, yes.” Ziva glared at him. “You are my friend, Tony. This is what friends do.”

“Do they have to do it in the bathroom?”

“You are more likely to talk honestly here where we cannot be overheard. If I ask you out there, you will make a joke and that will be the end of it.”

Tony had to admit that she was right. He looked at her seriously, consciously dropping the usual mask. Her surprise at his sudden capitulation was obvious.

“Vance found out about me and Gibbs. He’s already threatened to reassign one of us, and he called me a little while ago to set an appointment for tomorrow morning. I’m betting I’ll be packing up my desk and heading out to Seattle, unless I choose to resign instead.”
Ziva was silent, thinking things over. “What does Gibbs say?”

“Gibbs says he’ll retire so I can stay on here. I say I won’t let him. He says he won’t let me resign. Guess we’re gonna find out who has the bigger pair.”

Ziva shot him a smile. “You expect me to believe you have not compared? My money is on Gibbs.”


The smile disappeared off Ziva’s face, and she pushed off from the wall, stepping forward until she was directly in front of him. Tony stared down at her, then gave her a lopsided smile. “Forget Larry, what will Gibbs think? You may have to fight him for me. I bet I could sell tickets… who do you think would be the favorite?”

Ziva shook her head, clearly exasperated. “You do need a counselor. You are going about this the wrong way, as if the decision the two of you need to make is a competition.” She reached up with both hands, taking hold of his head and pulling him down slightly. “Listen to me. You will talk to Gibbs, and you will find a solution… one in which you both win.” Ziva stared into his eyes for a moment, then let go of him and took a step back. “If you assume Vance will win, then he already has. None of us want to see the team broken up again. Think outside the crate, find a solution. Do it together.”

Tony tilted his head. “Box.”

Ziva rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Tony stood and moved toward the door. “No, seriously. It’s a box, not a crate. Crates don’t have solid walls, boxes do. That’s the point… it wouldn’t be a challenge to think outside a crate.”

Ziva sighed mightily. Tony reached the door, then turned back to her as he opened it. “Hey, Zee-vah… thanks.”

She looked at him and smiled. “You are welcome, Tony.”

**Reassurance**

Gibbs walked into his house only forty-five minutes later than he’d hoped. He locked the door behind him, then glanced into the living room. Plates, silverware and paper towels were set out on the coffee table, but that was the only sign that Tony was around. The kitchen proved to be empty as well. Gibbs went upstairs to the bedroom, finding sweatpants and a t-shirt laid out for him on the bed, but no Tony. He changed quickly, then made his way down to the basement.

Tony was there, working on some of the rough edges on pieces of the cabinet. He didn’t look up as Gibbs came down the stairs, but Gibbs knew that Tony knew that he was there. He stood behind the younger man for a moment, just watching him sand the wood, then reached out and ran his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“How about I get dinner started?”

Tony leaned back into the caress for a moment. “Sounds good.”

Gibbs dropped his hand to Tony’s shoulder and squeezed, then turned to go back upstairs.

An hour later both men were sitting back on the couch, steaks eaten.
“Good stuff, Boss.”

Gibbs glanced over at Tony. “Not Boss here, Tony. You know that.”

Tony sighed and dropped his head to look up at the ceiling. “Yeah, I do, Jethro.”

Jethro watched him for a moment, then got up when Tony didn’t say or do anything else. He gathered up everything needing to be cleaned up or thrown out, and started toward the kitchen. Tony got up and followed him, grabbing a towel and drying after Jethro washed.

“Ziva followed me into the men’s room this evening.”

Jethro looked up at him. “What’s Larry going to do when he finds out?”

Tony smiled. “According to Ziva, he’s very clear on the fact that there’s no ‘Tiva.’”

Jethro smirked. “So what did she have to say?”

Tony thought about it. “She gave me some advice, actually.”

“Good advice?”

“Yeah. Told me to think outside the box.”

Jethro raised an eyebrow. “In so many words?”

“I’m paraphrasing slightly.”

“Which box are we talking about?”

Tony sighed and dried the last piece of silverware. Jethro shut off the water and turned to face him. Tony put the silverware away, shutting the drawer, and set the towel down over the edge of the sink. He turned to look at Jethro seriously. “The one where we end up pissed off at each other because we can’t agree on who’s resigning when Vance transfers me to Seattle.”

Jethro nodded. “What solution did she give you?”

Tony shook his head. “She didn’t, exactly. Just said we shouldn’t look on it as a competition… instead we should figure out how we both win.”

Jethro nodded. “Makes sense. Got any ideas how we do that?”

Tony shrugged and reached up to rub his neck again. “Sort of.”

Jethro looked at Tony critically. “You’re too tense, Tony. Come on.” He turned and led the way back to the couch. “Sit.”

Tony sat, and Jethro sat next to him, motioning for Tony to turn away from him, then reaching up and starting to massage his neck and shoulders. Tony groaned softly. “Need this,” he muttered.

“Ya think?” Jethro set to work on a particularly tight knot. “So what’s this ‘sort of’ that you’re talking about?”

Tony sighed, then reached up to grab onto one of Jethro’s hands, stopping the massage and turning to face him. “What’s our goal?” he asked.
Jethro considered him for a moment. “We stay together,” he said slowly.

Tony nodded. “Good enough.”

Jethro stared at him, waiting. When Tony made no move to explain, Jethro reached up and cuffed him lightly on the back of the head. “The rest of it,” he said.

Tony smiled and shrugged. “That’s it, actually.”

“Tony –“

“Hold on, Jeth, hear me out.” Tony shifted slightly, propping his elbow up on the back of the couch and leaning forward a bit. “If we try to make a serious plan, we’re only going to end up arguing. I doubt we’ll be able to agree on which of us is going to give up the job. We’ll fight, and we’ll get pissed off, and we won’t get much sleep… or at least I won’t. So rather than go through all that, instead of trying to have a plan, I’m thinking we wait to see what Vance has to say. I’ll tell him I need time to decide whether to accept the transfer or resign, and we decide together what to do after we know for sure what he’s planning.”

Jethro grimaced. “I prefer a more proactive approach.”

“You’d prefer sneaking over to his house tonight and doing some super stealthy Marine thing.”

Jethro smiled. “True. But I wouldn’t kill him… his wife and kids adore him. Couldn’t do that to them.”

Tony smiled, then grew serious again. “I figure I’ll just go in there, say as little as possible, hear him out, and then tell him I need a few days. Not gonna let him make me leave as quickly as he did last time.”

Jethro nodded, pushing away the memory of Jenny’s funeral, followed immediately by his team being torn apart, with him unable to react quickly enough to stop it. “You’re not going in alone.”

Tony laughed. “Don’t recall you getting an invitation to the party. I wouldn’t put it past Vance to post a Marine or two outside his office to keep you out.”

Jethro grinned. “It would take more than two.”

“Not if they had orders to shoot you.” Tony smiled and raised his hand to Jethro’s face, cupping his cheek. “I can handle this, Jeth.”

The older man sighed. “I know you can. Would rather you didn’t have to.”

Tony nodded. “I get that.” He stretched and grimaced. “I’m thinking you have more work to do on my shoulders.”

“Upstairs?”

Tony hesitated. “Um… this is going to sound completely unlike me… but would you mind if we didn’t just jump into bed tonight? I just – I just want to be for a while.”

Jethro looked at him seriously. “I can do that, Tony.”

“Thanks, Jeth.” Tony leaned forward and grabbed the remote, switching on the television and turning to a baseball game. “What are we gonna do when baseball season is over?”
“Football.” Jethro tapped Tony on the shoulder. “Scoot over a little bit so I can get back to work.”

Tony wriggled around and Jethro got back to work on those knots, trying to soothe the muscles and get his partner to relax.

Half an hour later Tony was still tense, but less so, and Jethro’s hands were hurting. He’d stopped the massage and had his arm hanging loosely around Tony’s shoulders, idly watching the game. Tony’s left hand was playing with the outer seam of Jethro’s jeans, picking and pulling at the material, while his right hand was drumming a complicated rhythm on his own leg. Jethro understood Tony’s concerns; they were facing the breakup of the team again, unless some miracle happened to change Vance’s mind. Breakup by reassignment or resignation... result’s the same. At least if I retire we can all still be in the same area. Jethro didn’t want to break up their unconventional family any more than Tony did.

He also understood Tony’s lack of interest in sex tonight, or at least he thought he did. We’ve always been completely in the moment together; not so sure we would be with this hanging over us. Jethro found himself missing that strong sense of connection, though. Despite Tony sitting right next to him, it felt as if he was in another world, and Jethro decided he wanted to do something about that.

Leaning forward, he placed a light kiss on Tony’s neck, smiling a little as Tony’s fingers stopped their motion just for a moment. Then the fingers started moving again, so Jethro ran his hand through Tony’s hair and kissed him again, a little higher up. Tony stilled again. Jethro paused, then kissed him a third time. Tony made a noise that could have been appreciation or protest; Jethro wasn’t sure. He moved his mouth to Tony’s ear and whispered, “Not looking for sex, I promise. Just want to feel closer to you right now.”

Tony turned his head just enough to look at Jethro from the corner of his eyes, and Jethro was happy to see a glint of humor in them. Then Tony shifted a little, turning back to the television, but tilting his head just enough to give Jethro easy access to his neck.

Jethro leaned in and inhaled Tony’s scent, making Tony laugh quietly. He nuzzled into Tony’s neck, and then kissed his way along Tony’s jawline. Tony hummed in appreciation and tilted his head back, tightening his grip on Jethro’s leg.

Jethro kissed the corner of Tony’s mouth, letting his lips linger for a few seconds before shifting over to slide his lips over Tony’s cheekbone, then back down to his neck, tugging lightly on Tony’s hair to get him to tilt his head over a little more. Tony let out a sound suspiciously like a giggle, which changed into a hum when Jethro shifted over to kiss Tony’s lips, just lightly brushing his tongue over them. Tony turned a little more toward Jethro, returning the kiss, caressing Jethro’s lips with his tongue.

Jethro pressed into Tony a bit more, and the younger man slowly turned his body into Jethro’s, sliding back until his head rested on the arm of the couch. A little maneuvering on both their parts had Jethro lying on Tony, his arms and legs taking some of his weight, his fingers tangled in Tony’s hair. Tony’s hands rested lightly on Jethro’s back, rubbing gently.

They stayed like that for a long time, kissing lightly, then with more pressure, tongues meeting and separating and caressing. Tony’s hand ran up Jethro’s back and neck and into his hair, tugging gently until he could move from Jethro’s mouth to his neck, and the air around them was filled with Jethro’s small sounds of appreciation. Eventually Tony shifted back to Jethro’s mouth, raising the intensity a bit, his hands holding Jethro’s head in place while Tony tried to put all his jumbled emotions into the kiss. Jethro responded in kind, and both men expressed their worry and their need for each other in kisses tinged with a bit of desperation.
Jethro was the first to back away a bit, gentling their interaction, opening his eyes to see Tony looking back at him, contentment tinged with resolve clearly visible in his gaze. Jethro returned the look, and Tony moved his hand from the back of Jethro’s hair to his cheek, caressing his lips with his thumb. Then he moved his arm again, pulling Jethro down into a fierce hug, burying his face in Jethro’s neck while Jethro did the same into Tony’s.

A short time later they pulled away from each other and sat up. Jethro reached for the remote and shut off the television, then stood and pulled Tony up to his feet. Hand in hand, the two men headed for the stairs, shutting off the lights on their way up.

It didn’t take long for them to get ready for bed; when they crawled in, they curled up into each other and were asleep within minutes.

An Offer

Armored in the most upscale designer suit he owned, Tony sat on a chair across from Vance’s assistant, watching the seconds go by on his digital watch, pretty sure Vance would wait until exactly 9 a.m. to call him in to the office. For what he was sure was the tenth time in the past five minutes, he shoved aside thoughts of the previous night with Jethro. Stay focused, DiNozzo.

The assistant’s phone rang at exactly 9, and she motioned for him to go in. Tony gave her a brief smile, wracking his brain for her name and coming up empty.

Tony was a little taken aback to find Vance standing in front of his desk; he’d been expecting Vance to be sitting behind it, handing over transfer orders without even looking at him. Instead, Vance smiled and said, “Special Agent DiNozzo,” and motioned Tony over to the comfortable leather chairs at the end of the room. Masking his confusion as best he could, Tony walked in front of Vance and sat in one of the armchairs. Vance followed suit in another.

Vance looked at him seriously for a moment, then spoke. “I’m guessing you know why you’re here.”

Tony found that for once he wasn’t in the mood for games. “You’re going to tell me you’re transferring me to Seattle.”

Vance straightened up a bit. “That had been my original intention. But no, that’s not exactly what I’m proposing.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re not going to force the transfer?”

Vance shook his head slowly. “You understand why I’m concerned? You’ve been the office Lothario for years, never any rumor that you might be gay, or even bisexual. So it’s a bit of a shock.”

Tony grinned. “Are you implying that there are rumors out there about Gibbs?”
Vance laughed abruptly. “Not a one. That’s just it… no one has a clue about his private life, except for his divorces.”

“Doesn’t that sort of beg the question about him too?”

“Let’s just say that your habits are so well known, and leave it at that.”

Vance didn’t say anything further, and Tony had no interest in divulging anything about their life outside of work, so he kept quiet. After a moment, Vance began talking again. “So you assert that you have entered into a physical relationship with Agent Gibbs of your own free will.”

“Yes.” Tony made a show of looking around the room. “Are we being recorded?”

Vance shook his head. “No, we’re not. I need to be sure, before I make any real decision about what to do about this.”

Tony met his eyes squarely. “You don’t need to do anything about it. Nothing changes here at work. Gibbs doesn’t play favorites; he never has. And we’re backing up our team mates, same as we always do.”

Vance nodded slowly. “I went back over the reports from the New York op. That was good work you did.”

“Thank you.”

Vance’s fingers started tapping rapidly on his leg. “I won’t lie to you… my first inclination was, and still is, to mandate a transfer for one of you.” Tony started to speak, and Vance held up a hand, cutting him off. “But I know if I do that one of you will resign, and frankly, I don’t think that’s the best move for this agency.”

Tony sat back, watching Vance warily. Vance looked him in the eye, then continued. “You both bring a lot to the table, and have complementary skill sets. There’s a wealth of experience between the two of you, and that’s experience that I want to see other members of this agency benefit from. So I’ve been trying to come up with a solution.”

Tony spoke up. “Wouldn’t it make sense to present this solution to both of us?”

A humorless smile appeared on Vance’s face. “Can you honestly tell me that Gibbs will listen objectively when he thinks I’m going to force a transfer? The man’s a pit bull when he thinks his team is being threatened. I think he’ll be more likely to listen to my proposal coming from you, and frankly that approach is better for my blood pressure.”

Tony stifled a smile. “So what is this solution?”

Vance sat forward abruptly. “Ultimately, your team stays together, but with some changes. You get promoted to Gibbs’ equal. That solves the issue of a team leader being involved with a subordinate. How you choose to relate to each other on a day to day basis in the field is up to you. I don’t give a damn if you choose to keep calling him ‘boss,’ but understand that he’ll no longer be in a position to order you around.”

Tony kept his eyes on Vance. “What’s the catch?”

Vance showed no sign of disappointment at Tony’s lack of reaction. “I want you both involved in training younger agents. I want to assign rookies to your team on a rotating, temporary basis. I also want you to start seriously training Agent McGee to take on a senior field agent position. And in a
Tony shook his head and started to stand. “Director –“

“Hear me out.” Vance motioned for Tony to sit, which, after a pause, he did. “I’m not transferring you permanently. There are two good candidates for the job, each with different strengths and weaknesses, both already posted to that office. I want you to work with them, evaluate them for the team lead. Both interview well, but it’s going to take time to really see what they’re made of. I want you to do that.”

“Why me?”

Vance looked at Tony thoughtfully. “Because you’ve worked with many different departments as a police officer, as well as working with the best here at NCIS. You’ve seen everything from the best to the worst. You’ve got good people skills, and you’ll tell it like it is. And after working with Gibbs for so many years, I’m guessing some of his approach has rubbed off on you and you’ll apply it as needed.”

Tony sat back and stared at nothing for a moment. Then his gaze sharpened and he looked at Vance. “How long?”

“I’m guessing two to four weeks.”

Tony drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “And if I say no?”

Vance looked at him, his face a neutral mask. “If you say no, I move on to do what I feel is best for the agency. That means a bigger shake up for your team, with one or both of you out.”

Tony’s expression grew hard. “You’d fire us?”

Vance shook his head. “Unlikely. I’d sign off on at least one transfer; whether you choose to stay with the agency at that point would be your call.”

Tony nodded; it wasn’t anything he hadn’t expected. “I’ll need time to make a decision.”

Vance inclined his head in assent. “I need an answer by Monday morning.”

Tony nodded and stood. “I’ll go talk to Gibbs.”

Vance stood as well. “I appreciate that.” He paused for a moment, then chuckled lightly. “Do you suppose I should lock the door behind you?”

Tony smiled. “This is uncharted territory, Director. I’m not sure if that will work.”

He walked out of the office, leaving Vance looking slightly perturbed as he returned to his desk.
Going for Coffee

Gibbs caught himself looking up in the direction of Vance’s office for the fifth time in the last four minutes. No sign of Tony. Again. He suppressed the urge to storm up there for the fifth time in the last two minutes, knowing Tony wouldn’t appreciate it. He’d offered, several times... when they got up that morning, when they left the house and went to their separate cars, when they rode up in the elevator together, when Tony left his desk to go upstairs. Each time he’d been gently but firmly rebuffed.

*I can handle it, Jethro. (followed by a kiss)*

*I’ve got this one… don’t worry, Vance isn’t going to push me into anything before you and I talk it over.*

*No offense, but I don’t think you being there is going to make Vance any nicer, Jethro.*

*I know you’ve got my six from here, Boss.*

Gibbs looked up again, glaring at an imaginary Vance. He heard a noise to his right, and looked over to see Ziva watching him, a mildly concerned look on her face.

“You know, Gibbs, sometimes when I have to wait to hear news, good or bad, I try visualization techniques. They can make the wait seem shorter, and I generally find them relaxing.”

Gibbs looked at Ziva for a moment, then looked back up toward Vance’s office. He visualized Vance walking down the stairs, a toothpick sticking out of his mouth. Then he visualized Vance tripping on the stairs, falling to the second landing, the toothpick impaling him in the back of the throat.

Gibbs tilted his head a bit, a hint of a smile showing on his face. “Thanks, Ziva. That helped.”

Ziva smiled. “I am glad to be of assistance.”

Gibbs inclined his head to her a bit, then tried to focus on his computer screen. Failing miserably, he looked back up at the stairs in time to see Tony start walking down. He watched him intently, looking for any sign, any reaction, but all he could see was a faintly puzzled expression on Tony’s face. When Tony disappeared at the bottom of the stairs, Gibbs glanced over at Ziva and saw her anxious expression.

Tony came around the corner of his desk and walked directly to Gibbs, who half rose out of his chair. Tony glanced down at Gibbs’ cup of coffee, then looked him in the eyes, giving nothing away.

“Wanna go for coffee, Boss?”

Gibbs nodded and turned to grab his weapon and badge, while Tony moved to his desk to do the same.

Ziva called out as they moved toward the elevator. “Where are you going?”

Tony looked over at her and smiled. “We’re going to go think outside the box.”
Ziva nodded and turned back to her computer. “Let me know if I can help.”

“You got it, Probette.”

The ride down in the elevator was silent, as was the walk to the coffee shop. Gibbs could see that Tony was thinking hard, so he didn’t push. They placed their orders, then sat down at a table away from the counter.

“So?” Gibbs asked.

Tony looked up at Gibbs. “Well… three things. Vance is promoting me to… co-team-leader, I guess. Says it gets rid of the issue of you being involved with a subordinate. He wants us to start training rookies, adding them to the team on a temporary basis. And he wants me to go to Seattle in a week –” Tony held up his hand as Gibbs moved to get up – “to evaluate the two candidates for the team lead out there. Not a permanent gig, I’d be gone for two weeks, maybe a little longer.”

Gibbs stared at him for a moment, then sat back, ducking his head and running his hand through his hair. “That’s… unexpected.”

“Yeah.” The slightly puzzled look was still on Tony’s face.

Gibbs leaned forward a bit, resting his forearms on the table. “Why isn’t he forcing a transfer?”

Tony shook his head. “Says he knows one of us will resign, and he actually doesn’t want that. Says it’s not the best move for the agency.”

Gibbs swallowed a third of his coffee. “What happens if we refuse?”

Tony smiled a bit at the ‘we.’ “He’ll sign the transfer order, make it a permanent move. Says he won’t fire either of us, but he’ll –” Tony’s hands came up and he made air quotes “do what’s best for the agency.”

Gibbs stared out the window of the coffee shop, eyes narrowed as he considered Vance’s offer.

“Why do you suppose he’s compromising?” Tony asked after a few minutes.

Gibbs shook his head. “Not sure he is. Could be he really is trying to do what he thinks is best for the agency.”

Tony shrugged. “Maybe he figures if I go out to Seattle, I’ll like it so much I’ll want to stay.”

“Maybe he’s trying to get me to quit,” Gibbs added. He looked at Tony seriously. “He’d have a hard time justifying firing me to SecNav if he isn’t going to pull the supervisor/subordinate card.”

Tony shifted uncomfortably. “About that… how do you feel about me getting promoted?”

Gibbs’ lips quirked up into a small smile. “It’s long overdue, Tony. You could have run your own team years ago.”

Tony smiled; praise from Gibbs never got old. He sat forward a bit. “But are you okay with me getting promoted and still being on your team?”

Gibbs tilted his head a bit and considered that. “You gonna start questioning or countermanding every order?”

Tony sat back, affronted. “Of course not!”
“Want things to change?”

Tony thought about that. “No, not really. Still gonna call you boss, Boss.”

Gibbs grinned. “I’m still gonna head slap you when you need it.”

Tony smiled back. “But now I could return the favor.”

Gibbs simply raised an eyebrow.

“Or not.”

They were both quiet for a moment, then Tony cleared his throat. “Remember when you came back from Mexico, and we butted heads a lot?”

“Yeah. Don’t think that will happen now, Tony.”

Tony looked down at the table and moved his coffee cup around.

“Hey.” Gibbs reached out and tapped Tony lightly on the side of his head. “I mean that. I think we understand each other a lot better now, don’t you?”

Tony smiled. “Yeah, we do. And I guess the situation is a lot different now too.”

“Ya think?” Gibbs downed the rest of his coffee, then launched the cup at a nearby trash can.

“Nice shot,” Tony said. He drank some of his own coffee, then looked at Gibbs curiously. “What do you think about the rest of it? Me going to Seattle, us training rookies?”

Gibbs scowled at that. “Think I’m gonna go talk to Vance.” He stood abruptly, and Tony scrambled to follow suit, walking fast to follow Gibbs out of the shop.

Gibbs and Vance

Gibbs breezed into Vance’s office, earning nothing more than a raised eyebrow from the man sitting behind the big desk.

“ Took you longer than I expected.”

Gibbs simply stared at the Director, who, after a moment of staring back, gestured toward the large table between the desk and the flat screen tv. He got up, walked to a chair, pulled it out and sat down, looking at Gibbs expectantly. With an impatient roll of his eyes, Gibbs yanked at a chair and sat down.

“Why the change of heart, Leon?”

Vance looked at Gibbs seriously. “Like I told DiNozzo… doing what’s right for the agency.”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. “Just the other day you were going to transfer one of us. What happened since then?”

Vance shifted a bit. “Heard a logical argument against that, looked for alternatives.”

Gibbs’ brow furrowed. “Who…?” He noted Vance’s refusal to look him in the eye. He wracked his brain for a moment, then suddenly realization hit, and he sat back in his chair and laughed quietly. “Thank your wife for me.”
Vance shot him a sour look. “It gets worse.” He grimaced at Gibbs’ questioning look. “She wants me to invite the two of you over for dinner.”

Gibbs grinned at him. “Name the day, Leon, we’ll be there.”

Vance glared at him, then proceeded to ignore the issue. “DiNozzo give you the full update?”

Gibbs shrugged. “I assume so.”

Vance nodded. “Can you handle no longer being the boss?”

Gibbs tilted his head a bit. “Promotion’s long overdue. Won’t be a problem.” He rested one elbow on the table and brought his hand to his face, rubbing his jaw. “What’s with the rookies?”

Vance sat forward a bit. “New project I’m starting up… doesn’t just involve your team. Happening all over the agency. Rookies are going to be rotated through experienced teams, learning from them before being permanently assigned.” Vance sat back, straightening his jacket. “This will also allow us to evaluate incoming agents more effectively, weed out the ones who can’t hack it more quickly.”

Gibbs met Vance’s eyes. “I’m not going to babysit. You assign someone to my team, they’re going to be in the thick of things, and they’ll be expected to measure up.”

“That’s exactly what I want, Gibbs.”

Gibbs nodded, then abruptly dropped his hand and sat forward. “Why send Tony to Seattle?”

Vance’s eyes narrowed. “DiNozzo’s going to evaluate two candidates for the team lead out there. He’ll work with both of them, help make the determination regarding who fills the slot.”

“Why don’t you just go yourself?”

Vance snorted. “I can’t take two weeks to play agent… in case you haven’t noticed, I’ve got this whole agency to run.”

Gibbs glared at him. “Why Tony? He’s got no experience making those kind of decisions.”

Vance shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. If anything, it’s an advantage. He’ll be open-minded.” He noted Gibbs’ obvious skepticism. “The team lead out there would be a perfect fit for him. Makes him the best judge of who should take it.”

Gibbs just stared at Vance.

“Look, Gibbs… both candidates have things going for them. Both also have some negatives. Given the latest terrorist threat assessments, I need the right person in place. If it’s not going to be DiNozzo, then at least he can help identify that person.”

“I don’t like it when directors mess with my team,” Gibbs growled.

Vance sighed and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a toothpick. “It’s not up to you to like or dislike it. We have an agreement, Gibbs… or would you prefer I make DiNozzo’s promotion contingent on him accepting the position himself?”

Gibbs stiffened in his seat, then suddenly relaxed. “No, I wouldn’t. You’ve got your deal, Leon.” He stood and moved toward the door, taking only a few steps before he turned back to face Vance. “Deal’s with me, not Tony. If he chooses not to go to Seattle, I’ll back him.”
Vance nodded once. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Gibbs met Vance’s eyes for a moment. “One thing… I want the team off rotation this weekend. Give us time to talk this over.”

Vance considered his request, then shrugged. “You’ll be on the next two weekends.”

Gibbs nodded in acknowledgment and was out the door.
Teamwork

Invitations

Ziva was the only one in the bullpen when Gibbs returned from his talk with Vance.

“Where’s McGee and DiNozzo?”

Ziva looked at him carefully. “McGee is helping Abby… something about the Major being on the fitz again.”

Gibbs’ lips twitched. “Fritz.”

“Who is Fritz?”

“Never mind. And DiNozzo?”

Ziva shrugged. “After he invited me over for dinner tonight, he went toward the back elevator… I assume he is extending the invitation to Ducky, Abby and McGee.”

Gibbs stared at her. “Dinner? Where?”

Ziva tilted her head and looked at him. “Tony said we were all having dinner at your house, to discuss changes the Director wants to make to the team.”

“Really.”

“I would not lie, Gibbs.”

Gibbs shook his head. “I know that, Ziva.” He sighed, then set off for the elevator.

He found Tony in Autopsy, talking to Ducky and Palmer, his back to the already open door. Gibbs walked in quietly, moving to stand several yards behind Tony. Palmer glanced at him but didn’t say anything. Ducky was smiling at Tony from across one of the metal tables while hovering over a body.

“My dear boy, I’d be delighted. What would you like me to bring?”

Tony shook his head. “No need to bring anything, Ducky. I’m going to order in… Ziva suggested Indian, but if you’d like something else –“

“No, no, that sounds very good. I shall look forward to it, having missed the first dinner you and Jethro hosted.”

Tony grinned at him. “This one should be less exciting.” He turned to Palmer. “How about it, Jimmy?”

Palmer grinned at him. “I wish I could… but Brina and I have Cirque tickets for tonight.”

Tony’s smile widened. “Looking forward to those tumblers, eh?”

Palmer raised his eyebrows. “Did I ever tell you about the last time I went to see them? I was able to get a backstage pass –“
Tony reached out and clapped the young man on the shoulder. “Hold that thought, Autopsy Gremlin. Gotta go invite Abby and McGee before Gibbs comes looking for me.”

Gibbs took his cue and moved right behind Tony. Ducky glanced at him, then back at Tony. “I take it Jethro doesn’t know about your plans yet?”

“Rule eighteen, Ducky. Besides which, what Gibbs doesn’t know can’t hurt me.”

Ducky gave Tony a warm smile. “That used to be one of Jenny’s favorite sayings.”

The smile faded from Tony’s face just a bit. “Yeah… she said it a lot when she was after Benoit.”

“And how is Jethro going to take having this soiree sprung on him, as it were?”

“Well… he might not be too thrilled, but he’ll get over it. I’ll make it up to him.” Tony grinned at Ducky and Palmer, then turned to leave, crashing into Gibbs as he did.

Both men staggered a bit, each reaching out to support the other. Tony straightened up and gave Gibbs a slightly apprehensive smile. “Oh, hey Boss. Fancy running into you here in Autopsy when we don’t have a hot case.”

Gibbs just stared at him, trying to keep his face expressionless; it wasn’t easy to do with Ducky smirking at him and Palmer grinning at them both. Tony, meanwhile, started doing what he usually did when Gibbs caught him doing something questionable.

“So, uh, you like Indian food, right, Boss? ‘Cause I was gonna order it, my treat of course. You can have whatever you like, well, of course you can, since we’re all gonna be at your place, and you don’t even know about that yet, do you? Well, I mean, you do now, ‘cause you did your super stealthy Marine thing again –”

Gibbs reached out and gave Tony a light head smack, then turned and walked back toward the elevator. Tony reached up to rub his head, then hurried after him.

Ducky’s voice followed them out of Autopsy. “I shall see you at 7:30 sharp, then!”

The elevator was still there and opened right away. Tony walked in after Gibbs and the doors barely closed before Gibbs hit the emergency button and turned to stare at Tony.

Tony grinned at him. “Elevator sex?”

Gibbs couldn’t help but laugh. “How is it I go almost two decades without having my whole team over for dinner and now I end up doing it twice in less than two months?”

Tony waggled his eyebrows. “‘Cause you know I’ll make it up to you.”

Gibbs shook his head. “You better.” He looked at Tony seriously. “Why?”

“Um… because I figured if I asked you about it first you’d say no.”

“Not why rule eighteen, Tony… although that one may have been a tactical error. Why the dinner?”

Tony leaned back against the elevator wall. “The changes Vance wants to make affect the whole team, not just us. I only have until Monday morning to make a decision, and that doesn’t leave a lot of time to think it over. It’s just easier to discuss it with everyone at the same time.”

Gibbs considered that. “ Didn’t think all that much was going to change with your promotion.”
Tony ducked his head for a moment. “It won’t. At least, I don’t want it to.” He raised his head to look at Gibbs, who was a bit surprised at the intensity he saw in Tony’s gaze. “When you went to Mexico… well, let’s just say that McGee and Ziva had a hard time accepting me as a leader. I don’t want a repeat of that.”

Gibbs mirrored Tony’s position and looked at him across the small compartment. “I’ll still be here. Won’t let that happen.”

Tony gave Gibbs a small smile. “Don’t want you fighting my battles for me all the time, Gibbs. If we’re going to be breaking in rookies, I’ll have to take on more of a leadership role. Don’t need Probie and Probette to undermine what I do.”

Gibbs’ brow furrowed a bit. “You really think that’ll happen now? I was under the impression your relationships had all improved.”

Tony nodded slowly. “Yeah, they have… but it’s not that difficult to trigger a backslide. And I forgot to tell you before… Vance wants me to start bringing McGee up to speed on senior field agent duties.”

Gibbs’ expression morphed into a scowl. “What the hell for, if you’re not transferring permanently?”

Tony sighed. “Gibbs… McGee’s going to want to get that promotion sooner or later. Why not start getting him ready for it? He’s going to have to fill in if I’m going to be away for a month in Seattle anyway.”

“A month?! What happened to two weeks?”

Tony gave Gibbs a half-smile. “Could be up to a month. Did I forget to mention that too?”

Gibbs looked down at the floor for a moment, then back up to Tony. “You want to do this.”

Tony bit his lip, then nodded slowly. “I do… Jethro. It’s a good opportunity, and it’s not permanent. And this way we keep our team together.” He pushed off the elevator wall and took the two steps to bring him right in front of Gibbs. “We both have lots of vacation time saved up… could get a couple of long weekends in.”

Gibbs searched Tony’s eyes for a moment, seeing the hesitation and the hope flickering through them. He sighed, then reached out and brushed his fingers against Tony’s. “Not gonna stand in your way, Tony. You’re right… it’s a good opportunity for you.” He reached out to hit the emergency stop again. “Invite Abby and McGee yet?”

Tony shook his head, still watching Gibbs carefully. “Next stop.”

Gibbs nodded and hit the button for Abby’s lab. “I’ll go with you.”

Tony smiled. “So you’re okay with this?”

Gibbs glanced at him. “Dinner or Seattle?”

“Both, I guess.”

Gibbs shrugged. “You’ll make it up to me for dinner. And Seattle. And I want to see the files on the people who are supposed to have your six out there.”

Tony grinned. “Of course you do.”
They stepped off the elevator and into Abby’s lab, where Abby was sucking Caff-Pow through a straw while hovering over McGee, who in turn was hovering over the mass spectrometer. Abby looked up as they walked in. “Gibbs! Major Mass Spec isn’t feeling well. McGee’s trying to help, but I might have to call in the repair guy again.”

Gibbs walked up to her and kissed her cheek. She smiled at him.

“What was that for? I don’t have any results for you… you don’t have a case right now.”

Gibbs raised his eyebrows a bit. “Do I have to have a reason?”

Abby smiled wider. “You’re trying to make Tony jealous!”

Tony snorted while Gibbs leaned in to kiss her again. “You caught me, Abs.”

Abby grinned at Tony. “You wanna arm wrestle now?”

Tony shook his head. “You wouldn’t have a prayer, Abby.”

Abby shrugged. “That’s okay. It could still be fun.”

Tony grinned at her, and then grinned wider as McGee started muttering in exasperation. “Having fun there, Probilicious?”

McGee shot him a small glare. “Not really.”

Abby frowned and reached out to smack McGee on the arm. “McGee! No negative vibes.”

Gibbs shook his head slightly, then glanced over at Tony, raising an eyebrow. Tony smirked at him, then cleared his throat. “Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo and Super Special Agent Gibbs request your presence at the residence of said Agent Gibbs at 7:30 this evening, for an all expenses paid Indian dinner, sponsored by yours truly.”

Both Abby and McGee turned to look at Tony, then at Gibbs. Abby’s eyes widened. “Something bad’s happened.”

Gibbs gave her a reassuring smile. “Nah, nothing bad. Just want to talk to everyone and it’s easier to do it there.”

Abby and McGee exchanged glances, then both looked back and forth between Gibbs and Tony. Suddenly Abby squealed and jumped into Gibbs’ arms, sending him staggering back a few steps. “You’re getting married!”

“What?!” The exclamation erupted from both Tony and McGee at the same time. “No!” Tony protested. Gibbs and Abby both turned to look at him. Tony looked at Gibbs, then started talking fast. “I mean, not that it isn’t a great idea, you know, sometime in the future, maybe, after we’ve, uh, been together for longer – it’s not like we’ve even lived together yet, and, um… no offense, but I don’t really want to be the fifth Mrs. Gibbs…” His voice trailed off as Gibbs stared at him. Tony looked from a startled McGee to a grinning Abby and back to Gibbs, whose lips were twitching suspiciously. “C’mon, help me out here, Boss!”

Gibbs shook his head, then turned to Abby. “Not getting married, Abs.”

Abby pouted a bit. “Ever?”

Gibbs shrugged, then changed the subject. “Need to talk to everyone about some changes –“
Abby’s hand shot up, her palm in front of Gibbs’ face. “Stop right there, mister. You know I don’t like change.”

Gibbs reached up and took Abby’s hand. “Vance knows about me and Tony, Abs.”

Abby’s eyes grew huge, and the color drained from her face. “Oh my god, Gibbs, I am SO sorry.”

Gibbs shook his head. “It’s okay. He’s actually being fairly reasonable about it. And it’s not your fault… he picked up on our body language.”

Tony nodded. “It’s not like he’s not the Director for a reason.”

Abby looked between the two of them. “He’s not breaking up the team?” she asked in a small voice.

Both Tony and Gibbs shook their heads. “No, but there will be some changes, and we want to talk about them with all of you.”

Abby closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “Okay. Dinner. 7:30. I’ll be there.” She opened her eyes and looked at McGee. “Tim?”

McGee nodded. “I’ll be there. Need me to bring anything?”

Tony shook his head. “Just you, Probie.”

McGee turned back to the mass spectrometer. Gibbs squeezed Abby’s hand. “It’s gonna be okay, Abs. Promise.”

Abby squeezed his hand back, hanging on when he moved toward the door, pulling him back toward her. “You’re sure.”

“Yup.”

“Pinky swear?”

Gibbs smiled at her. “Pinky swear.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed.

“Really,” Gibbs said. He leaned in and kissed her cheek again, then disentangled his fingers from hers and headed out of the lab.

Tony turned to follow, but Abby grabbed his arm. He turned to look at her. “It really is going to be fine, Abby.”

She shook her head. “Would Vance have picked up on your body language if I hadn’t opened my big mouth?”

Tony leaned in and rested his forehead on hers. “Who knows? Gibbs and I haven’t always been keeping it out of the office the way we meant to.” He straightened up and looked at her seriously. “Don’t worry, okay?”

Abby sighed. “Of course I’m going to worry.”

Tony grinned at her. “You can if it will make you feel better.”

“Tony! Of course it won’t make me feel better!”
“Abs –” Tony was interrupted by Gibbs’ shout of “DiNozzo!” coming from the hall. “Oops. Gotta go!” He ran from the room, leaving Abby looking after him while McGee swore at Major Mass Spec.

**Team Talk**

Tony rubbed his hands together as he looked over all the food containers sitting on the dining table. The rest of the team was moving around, getting plates and silverware together; Gibbs was in charge of the beer.

Ziva inhaled appreciatively as she took her seat. “You have chosen a nice variety, Tony.”

Tony grinned as he took a beer from Gibbs. “Oh, yeah. Got the spicy, got the not spicy… plenty to go around.”

Gibbs was looking suspiciously at the containers. “Anything I can eat in there?”

Tony turned to stare at Gibbs in surprise. “You’ve never had Indian food, Boss?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Long time ago.”

Ducky was poking through the containers. “I do believe the kabobs are mild, Jethro. And the shrimp dish looks quite good.” He pulled out a chair and motioned to Abby. “Would you do me the honor of gracing me with your company, Abigail?”

Abby gave him a warm smile and moved to sit. “You’re a true gentleman, Ducky!”

McGee came in from the kitchen with a stack of napkins, and he sat next to Ziva. “Don’t hog all the shrimp, Tony.”

Tony looked up from spooning shrimp onto his plate. “Stop McWhining. There’s plenty here for everyone. Try the chicken in peppercorn sauce.” He passed the shrimp to Gibbs, then poked through the rest of the containers, grabbing one and handing it off to Ziva. “Veggie and cheese dumplings in cashew and almond sauce.”

Ziva smiled and dug in. Abby made a grab for the naan, putting some pieces on Gibbs’ plate as well as her own. He in turn put some rice crepes on her plate, and handed her a container of stir fried mixed veggies, earning a frown from Ducky. “Do have some greens, Jethro.”

Gibbs looked up at him, raised an eyebrow, then motioned for Abby to give him the container. She handed it back to him; he reached in with his fork, placed a single piece of spinach on his plate, then gave the container back to her. Ducky rolled his eyes and muttered something in a thick Scottish brogue. Gibbs shook his head. “Should wash your mouth out with soap, Duck.”

Ducky sighed loudly and shot him a mild glare. “Don’t come running to me when you have impacted bowels due to a lack of fiber.”

McGee, Ziva and Tony all looked at Ducky with expressions of mild disgust. Abby grinned. “Maybe we shouldn’t discuss Gibbs’ innards at the dinner table, Ducky.”

McGee’s brow furrowed. “How about we don’t discuss anyone’s innards?”

Gibbs smirked and dug into his food. Tony scooped some coconut rice onto his and Gibbs’ plates, then passed the container on to Ziva. They all ate in silence for a little while, occasionally broken with a request to pass one dish or another. “The lamb is excellent, Anthony,” Ducky commented.
“I’m reminded of a lovely little restaurant in Paris… do you remember, Jethro?”

Gibbs looked up and gave Ducky a lopsided grin. “Yeah. Remember how we tricked Jenny into trying the red curry?”

Ducky smiled. “Indeed I do. She wouldn’t talk to either of us for the rest of the night.”

Ziva smiled as she glanced at Gibbs and then at Ducky. “She never did like her food to be very hot.”

Gibbs chuckled a bit. “No, she really didn’t. Drank a ton of water, which only spread the heat around.”

Ducky laughed. “Yes, we tried to tell her to eat some rice instead, but she didn’t trust either of us anymore.”

Abby raised her beer. “To Jenny Shepherd.”

“To Jenny” echoed around the table. Tony watched Gibbs carefully as he set down his beer, but Gibbs seemed completely at ease. He glanced over at Tony, meeting his eyes and smiling softly. “She made her choices, Tony,” Gibbs said quietly. Tony nodded.

The meal continued until most people were pushing their plates away and sitting back. Abby was the first to break the ensuing silence. “Okay, spill! I can’t stand the suspense anymore!”

Gibbs and Tony glanced at each other, and Gibbs gestured for Tony to go ahead. Leaning back in his chair and draping one arm over the back of it, Tony twirled his empty beer bottle on the table top. “In a nutshell… Vance found out about me and Gibbs, he’s promoting me to co-team-lead, McGee’s gonna learn my job, we’re going to train rookies, and I’m headed out to Seattle in a week to help choose a team lead out there.” He looked at Gibbs, who tilted his head to one side, then shrugged and nodded.

Abby’s jaw dropped, and she looked from one to the other. Ducky looked thoughtful, Ziva slightly confused, and McGee was sputtering. “Wait, what? Tony, you’re not transferring, are you?”

“Gibbs!” Abby reached over and punched Gibbs in the arm.

“Hey!”

“Gibbs!” she repeated. “You pinky swore!”

Gibbs reached out and took hold of her hand before she could punch him again. “Hey, DiNozzo… maybe a little explanation here?”

Tony grinned. “It really is okay, Abby. I going to be gone at most a month. I’m not transferring, but Vance wants me to work with the prospective team leads and help pick the right one for the job.” He turned to look at McGee. “You’re going to have to fill in with Gibbs for me, Probie.” Tony raised an eyebrow. “You don’t cover his six, you answer to me.”

McGee stared at Tony. “You’re going to teach me to be a senior field agent?”

Tony nodded. “Yup. Probably should have started a while ago, actually.”

McGee nodded absentely, then grinned. “All right.”

Ziva cocked her head as she considered the news. “We are going to train rookies? Vance is pulling us off cases?”
Gibbs shook his head. “Absolutely not. We’re going to work with baby agents on the job.”

Ducky’s eyebrows went up. “Baptism by fire.”

Gibbs inclined his head. “Vance tells me it’s not just us… new initiative throughout the agency. Rotate the rookies through different teams, assess strengths and weaknesses before making a permanent assignment.”

Ziva nodded thoughtfully. “That is actually a sound strategy.”

Abby sat back in her chair, her expression mutinous. “I don’t like it.”

They all turned to look at her. She waved toward McGee. “Don’t get me wrong, Tim, I think it’s great that Tony’s gonna teach you the ropes… but things are fine the way they are! I don’t want a bunch of agent wanna-bees messing up my lab! And Tony! Who’s going to watch your back when you’re in Seattle? That’s too far away.”

Tony gave her a warm smile. “Was farther when I was Afloat.”

Abby held up her hand. “We aren’t speaking of that.”

Ziva sat forward. “Abby, Tony is an excellent agent. He can take care of himself.”

Tony grinned at her. “Thanks, Ziva.”

Abby frowned. “Gibbs! What if something happens to Tony out there? You’ll be too far away to help him!”

Gibbs shifted a little in his chair, his eyes dropping for a second before he looked at Abby. “Ziva’s right, Abs… DiNozzo can take care of himself.” Tony smiled at that, but kept his eyes on Gibbs while the conversation continued.

Ducky reached out to pat Abby on the back. “My dear girl, this is a good opportunity for Tony. This sort of assignment shows that Director Vance has faith in Tony’s abilities.” Abby wrinkled her nose at him, but stayed quiet. Ducky looked over at Tony and Gibbs. “Co-teamleader? I assume this is Vance’s solution to the problem of supervisor and subordinate in a relationship. How will that work?”

Gibbs looked at Tony, who returned his gaze for a moment before looking seriously at the rest of the team. “Better than last time, I hope.”

Ducky sat back a bit and simply said, “Ah.”

McGee, Ziva and Abby all looked at each other and then at Gibbs, who just looked back at them impassively. Tony cleared his throat, getting everyone looking back at him. “I don’t want anything to change, not really. But if we’re going to be handling rookies, I’m going to have to take on more of an overt leadership role. And I don’t want to go through what I went through when Gibbs retired to Mexico.”

Abby looked down at the table, while McGee and Ziva shifted uncomfortably. Ziva started to speak, but Tony shook his head. “I’m not looking for apologies. Water under the bridge and all that. Just don’t want you guys questioning everything I say or do.”

McGee nodded and raised his beer. “Congratulations on the promotion… Boss.”
Tony grinned and picked up his beer, then put it back down when he realized it was empty. He reached in front of Gibbs, grabbing his beer, then raised it to clink against McGee’s bottle. They both drank, then Tony handed the beer back to Gibbs, who took it with a slightly bemused look.

Ducky looked at Ziva and Abby, who both seemed uncomfortable. He shifted his gaze to Tony. “I too congratulate you, my boy. A promotion long overdue, I think.” He looked over at Gibbs, who nodded and smiled reaching over to grip Tony’s shoulder.

Tony looked at Gibbs and smiled, reaching over to squeeze his leg. Then he looked around the table. “Wanna move this to the living room, stretch out a bit?”

Everyone got up, helping to clear the table. Ziva pulled Tony aside briefly and spoke quietly to him for a moment; she stepped back after he smiled at her, gave him a small smile in return, then picked up some of the containers and moved to the kitchen. Abby came out from the kitchen and ran over to Tony, pulling him into a bear hug. She whispered in his ear; Tony laughed, let go of her, and moved toward the kitchen. Abby moved to the table, only to have Gibbs put his arm around her shoulders and pull her over to one side of the room.

“Do me a favor, Abs?”

“Anything, Gibbs! You know none of us really meant to hurt Tony, right?”

Gibbs smiled at her, and held out a piece of paper. She looked at it, then up at him, confused. He reached out and tapped it. “Call and make reservations for me and Tony for tomorrow night through Sunday afternoon?”

“Yes!” Abby jumped into his arms, then ran for her cell phone. Gibbs grinned as he watched her for a moment, then went to join the rest of the team in the living room.
Tony walked McGee to the door; the others had already left, and Gibbs had disappeared into the kitchen. Tony reached for the doorknob, but McGee’s voice stopped him.

“So, uh… what are we supposed to call you, anyway? I mean, we can’t call you Boss, ‘cause Gibbs is already Boss.”

Tony straightened up and looked at McGee; it was obvious the man had something he wanted to say, and it wasn’t really to discuss names. Tony decided to play along.

“You could call me Boss and Gibbs could be Super Boss.”

McGee shot Tony a reproving look. Tony, however, was just getting warmed up. “How about Very Special Boss? Or Cool Boss… hey, Hot Boss!”

McGee stared at Tony. “I’m thinking Idiot Boss.”

Tony grinned at McGee, then yelled, “Hey, Boss, McGee just called you an idiot!”

McGee moved forward. “Tony!” he hissed. Both men stood silently, waiting for some response, but there wasn’t any. McGee exhaled and gave Tony a smug look. “Guess he’s not taking you too seriously, huh?”

Tony smirked and shook his head. “Nah, he just has better things to do.”

McGee raised an eyebrow. “Boss things?”

Tony sighed. “Yes, Probie, secret Boss things for our secret Boss society. Now why don’t you stop beating around the bush and just say whatever it is you really want to say?”

McGee looked at Tony for a moment, then nodded. “I’m sorry for how I treated you back when you were team leader.”

Tony shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now, Tim. Long time ago. And don’t apologize, it’s –“

“No, it’s not a sign of weakness,” McGee interrupted. “Not when it’s needed. I said some pretty awful things back then, especially when Gibbs came back, and I shouldn’t have. You didn’t deserve them; you were just trying to keep the team together.”

Tony shifted his weight uncomfortably. “We were all a little messed up when Gibbs left. I did what I needed to do so that the team would be intact if he ever came back.”

McGee nodded, looking at the floor. He glanced up at Tony. “I’ll be a better second this time, Tony.”

Tony smiled at him, a genuine smile. “And this time I’ll help you. We all got kinda thrown in to our new positions when Gibbs took off like that… I didn’t do a very good job of explaining all the details back then.”

McGee shrugged. “Director Shepherd made it tough for you when she sent you undercover. Didn’t exactly give you time to settle into being a team lead.”

Tony’s expression grew somber, the way it always did when he thought of Jeanne. “Yeah.”
McGee shifted and cleared his throat. “Well, that’s all over now. We can do it right this time. And things worked out for the best, didn’t they?”

Tony looked thoughtfully at McGee, who jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen. Tony’s lips twitched into a small smile. “Yeah, I guess they did.”

McGee grinned. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Tony.”

Tony reached out and opened the door. “That’s Boss to you, Probie.”


Tony shut and locked the door, then went back into the living room, checking to see that everything had been cleaned up. It had, so he went into the kitchen in search of Jethro. The room was empty, so Tony went to the next logical spot and poked his head through the door to the basement. It was empty too, so Tony headed for the stairs up the second floor. He paused when he passed by the living room entrance, suddenly feeling that something was off. He went back in; it took him a moment, but he saw that Shannon’s picture was missing from the wall.

Tony’s brow furrowed as he thought back over the evening. Jethro had gotten quiet after Abby’s comment that he’d be too far away to watch Tony’s back if Tony went to Seattle. Tony shook his head. Shoulda realized.

He jogged up the stairs, but was surprised to see that Jethro wasn’t up there either. Tony walked slowly back down, checked the driveway to see that both Jethro’s car and the truck were there, then headed to the back door.

Jethro was sitting on the steps leading from the deck into the backyard. He had Shannon’s picture in his hands, but was gazing off into the distance. Tony moved to sit next to him, not quite touching. A quick glance at Jethro’s face showed no tears, just a look of profound sadness.

Tony sat quietly, not moving much, just looking out into the darkness and waiting. After a while, Jethro reached out and took Tony’s hand in his, laying Shannon’s picture on his lap.

“What did McGee want?”

Tony shrugged. “He wanted to know what to call me, since you’re already Boss.” Jethro snorted quietly. Tony dipped his head slightly, and went on, “He also wanted to apologize for some of the things he said back when I was team lead the first time... that, and when you came back.”

Jethro nodded absently. “And?”

“We’re good.”

Jethro nodded. “What did Abby say to you earlier?”

“When?”

Jethro squeezed Tony’s hand. “When she whispered in your ear.”

Tony chuckled. “She wants to have my babies.”

“Uh huh. And Ziva?”

Tony grinned. “She wants me to have her babies.”
Jethro laughed. “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

“Okay.”

Both men sat there for a while longer. Jethro looked down at Shannon’s picture, tracing her face with the fingers of his left hand. Tony watched him for a few minutes, then spoke quietly.

“You were right, you know.”

Still looking at the picture, Jethro responded, “When?”

“When you told Abby I can take care of myself.”

Jethro glanced at Tony, the corner of his mouth barely lifting in a smile. “You read me too well.”

Tony chuckled. “Necessary survival skill.”

Jethro’s smile widened a bit, then faded. He shook his head. “Every so often something happens, or someone says something that reminds me, and I can’t stop wondering.”

Tony waited, but no explanation was forthcoming. He was pretty sure he knew what Jethro meant, though. “If you’d been here, could you have saved them?”

Jethro nodded.

Tony shook his head. “Maybe you could have. Maybe she wouldn’t have been there that day, seen what she did. Maybe she’d still have seen it, but they’d have let you be there to protect her. Maybe you’d have been driving, and you’d have been killed too.”

Tony gently removed his hand from Jethro’s, reaching up to lay his arm across Jethro’s shoulders. “You couldn’t save Pacci, Jethro. Or Kate, or Paula... or even Jenny.”

Jethro nodded, then turned his head and met Tony’s eyes. “But what if something happens and I can’t save you?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “We’re federal agents. We risk dying on the job every day. You worry about something happening to me every time we go out on a case?”

Jethro shook his head. “No, not exactly… it’s different.”

“Because we’re both here.”

“Uh huh.”

Tony waited.

Jethro laughed softly. “Seems sort of silly, doesn’t it?”

Tony smiled. “Illogical, maybe. Not sure about silly.” He looked at Jethro closely, gauging his mood. Smiling a little, he dropped his arm and stood up. “Besides, I think you’ll have other things to worry about.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Tony stretched, letting his shirt ride up a little and expose his abdomen. He relaxed and struck a bit of a pose. “The women out in Seattle have never experienced the DiNozzo charm.”
Jethro raised his eyebrows and stood, still holding Shannon’s picture. “Were you planning on giving them private tours?”

Tony tapped his lips thoughtfully. “Planning on it? I wouldn’t say I was planning on it… but they may not be able to control themselves, you know?”

Jethro looked at Tony in disbelief. “That’s a little egotistical, even for you.”

Tony grinned. “What can I say, if you’ve got it…”

Jethro rolled his eyes and turned to go back into the house. Tony followed him into the living room and watched while he put Shannon’s picture back up on the wall. Once Jethro turned away from it and looked back at Tony, Tony stripped off his shirt and flexed some muscles. “I mean, come on, Jeth… look at me.”

Jethro’s lips twitched in amusement, but he didn’t say anything. Tony grinned as Jethro left the living room and moved toward the stairs, shutting off lights as he went. Bounding up the stairs after him, Tony continued, “And think about it… now that I’ve broadened my horizons, there’s a whole ‘nother segment of the population that lies there, an untapped resource…”

Jethro paused a bit as he walked up the stairs, and Tony could have sworn he heard a soft growl. He followed Jethro into the bedroom, then sat on the bed while Jethro headed into the bathroom, grumbling a little. Tony didn’t say anything when Jethro came out, and he was still silent after he emerged a while later, wearing only boxers. Jethro was already in bed, sitting back against the headboard, watching Tony with a neutral expression.

Tony got into bed and lay down, making a show of fluffing his pillow and getting comfortable. He turned his head to look at Jethro, who was looking down at him. “I know what you’re doing,” Jethro said.

Tony cocked his head to one side. “Doing? I’m not doing anything. Just having a conversation. Trying to reassure you, you know, that you don’t have to worry about me getting hurt or dying or anything. More likely you’ll have to worry about what’ll happen once people realize why I’m there, at the Seattle office.”

“Really.”

“Yup.” Tony wiggled around again, shifting a little closer to the center of the bed. “Once they find out I’m Vance’s right hand man —” Jethro growled again, narrowing his eyes as he looked at Tony — “some of them will try to sleep their way to the top. I mean, I know you told me no casting couch that time, Boss…” Tony broke off with a yelp as Jethro flung back the sheets and rolled on top of him, grabbing his wrists and holding them down against the mattress.

Tony looked up into Jethro’s eyes; they had a bit of a feral look to them, and Tony wondered briefly if he’d pushed a bit too hard. Jethro grinned at him, baring his teeth a little. “You’re never Vance’s man, Tony… you’re mine.”

Jethro lowered his head and kissed Tony fiercely, his tongue invading Tony’s mouth, his hands holding Tony’s wrists and his body pressing Tony down into the bed. Tony relaxed into the kiss and submitted, not fighting Jethro at all; this was what he’d been aiming for, after all.

Jethro growled again, breaking away from Tony’s mouth and lowering his head to Tony’s neck, nipping sharply and getting a surprised gasp in response. “That what you want, Tony? You want me to prove that you’re mine?”
Eyes wide, lips pulled back into a smirk, Tony nodded. “Yeah, Jethro. Show me why I should plan on being celibate out in Seattle.”

Jethro pulled back for a moment, shocked by Tony’s words, then relaxed and grinned when Tony winked at him. He leaned in, putting his mouth next to Tony’s ear. “Not going slow tonight.”

Tony smiled. “Fine with me, Jeth… got myself ready when I was in the bathroom.”

Jethro pulled back again to meet Tony’s eyes, then shifted his weight onto his left side, pulling Tony’s left arm over until his hand could wrap around both wrists. Tony pulled against him for a second, just enough to cause Jethro to narrow his eyes and grind his groin down into Tony’s, making the younger man grunt as their hard cocks brushed against each other. It took a little maneuvering and some cooperation from Tony, but Jethro managed to keep a hold of Tony’s wrists while getting his boxers off. He tossed them onto the floor, then reached down and fingered Tony’s anus, feeling the slippery lube on his skin. Without much warning, he pushed at the ring of muscle with two fingers, and they slid in easily.

Tony threw his head back a bit on the pillow and groaned as Jethro’s fingers moved in him. “Oh, yeah, that’s good.” He pulled against Jethro’s hold, then smirked at his lover. “Too bad the cuffs are at my place.”

Jethro leaned down and bit Tony’s lower lip, then kissed him again, his mouth open and his tongue pushing into Tony’s mouth while his fingers rubbed Tony’s prostate as he pushed his cock hard against Tony’s. Tony made a sound between a squeal and a moan into Jethro’s mouth and jerked his hips up into Jethro’s. Jethro pulled back a bit, panting slightly, and stared at Tony. “Get a second pair to keep here.”

Tony nodded, then shuddered and gasped as Jethro inserted a third finger, twisting and rubbing and making Tony moan again. “God, Jeth… get in me, please. Wanna feel you.”

Another rub against Tony’s prostate, and Jethro pulled his fingers out, shifting over to reach for the nightstand. Tony shook his head and twisted his body to pull Jethro off balance and into him. “No, no condom… wanna feel you.”

Jethro stared at Tony. “You sure?”

Tony nodded. “You’re clean, I’m clean… you want to own me, you want to mark me, then do it – come in me, not a condom.”

Jethro held eye contact a moment longer, then nodded. He pressed Tony down into the mattress again, shifting over a bit so he could reach Tony’s cock, grabbing it roughly and setting a quick and steady pace, jacking Tony and giving him no time to adjust. Tony tried to thrust up into Jethro but couldn’t; Jethro was holding him down. He felt his climax coming on, then cried out when Jethro suddenly let go. “Jeth! No, please, so close!”

Jethro grinned at him, then shifted his legs underneath himself and Tony a bit more, moving his lover’s ass up a bit, then took hold of his own cock and positioned the head against Tony’s anus. “Mine,” he growled as the head of his cock breached Tony’s entrance and rested there. Jethro stared at Tony while Tony stared back and tried to move and force Jethro’s cock further in. He didn’t have the leverage to do so in that position; all he could do was move his hips enough to feel Jethro’s cock rub against the muscle. He tossed his head, needing more contact inside and out, but not getting it.

Jethro leaned down again, and whispered in Tony’s ear. “Ready?”
Tony nodded quickly. “Yes, yes, Jethro—“

Jethro moved, sliding his cock into Tony, wanting to take him quickly but holding back to a slower and steadier pace so he wouldn’t hurt him. He moved until he was in as far as he could go, and he felt Tony trembling beneath him. Jethro worked his hand between them, grasping Tony’s cock again, then rotated his hips, making Tony gasp sharply. He pulled back so his cockhead again rested just next to Tony’s opening, then thrust forward smoothly, moving his hand at the same time. Tony whined and threw his head back, his breath stuttering a bit in his throat.

“You’re mine, Tony. Mine. You’ll stay safe for me.” Jethro’s voice still growled, but it carried a pleading note as well. He moved back again as Tony nodded, panting, then pushed in, a little faster and harder, picking up the pace just a bit with each consecutive thrust. He kept his grip on Tony’s wrists and moved his hand on Tony’s cock to match the rhythm he set with his hips. Tony was crying out wordlessly with every thrust, and Jethro felt his own climax coming on.

“Come on, Tony, come on… with me, come on, now!” Jethro slammed his hips forward one last time, throwing his head back as he shot his come into Tony. “Mine!” he growled one last time through clenched teeth, and something inside him let go a bit when he heard Tony gasp “Yours!” as he felt him release all over his hand and abdomen.

Jethro relaxed onto Tony as his body let go of the tension. He released his lover’s wrists, caressing his arms clumsily for a moment. Tony moved after a few seconds, reaching for Jethro and holding him loosely, tilting his head into Jethro’s chest.

“Y’okay?” Jethro asked, a little worried that he might have hurt him.

Tony laughed weakly. “I,” he said, pausing for a second, “am fantastic. You are amazing. We should do this more often.”

Jethro grinned and shifted so that he could gently kiss Tony’s lips. He rolled over a bit, ignoring Tony’s protest, and grabbed some tissues off the nightstand, clumsily cleaning up a little, then tossing the tissues onto the floor.

They lay there for a while, waiting for their breathing to calm down. Jethro wrapped himself around Tony as much as he could. “You played me,” he muttered into Tony’s ear.

Tony’s left arm was only partially pinned by Jethro’s body; he reached up and ran his fingers through Jethro’s hair. “Seemed like you needed me to.”

Jethro chuckled. “You are observant.”

Tony smiled, then rubbed Jethro’s back. “Didn’t want you to lock down your emotions. You do that, and you end up exploding later. And pretty soon it’ll be up to McGee to handle that.”

Jethro cleared his throat. “Never used to like being handled,” he commented mildly.

Tony laughed softly. “I’ve been handling you for years, Jeth. Part of my job.” He moved his right arm to pull Jethro a little closer. “And I notice your use of past tense just now.”

Jethro chuckled. “You are observant.”

Tony smiled, then rubbed Jethro’s back. “Didn’t want you to lock down your emotions. You do that, and you end up exploding later. And pretty soon it’ll be up to McGee to handle that.”

Jethro’s arms tightened around Tony. “Not for long.”

Tony shook his head. “No,” he said quietly but forcefully. “Not for long at all.”

Jethro turned his head, burying his face in Tony’s neck and inhaling deeply. ‘Damn, you smell good.” He loosened his arms a bit, running his fingers along Tony’s side. “Got something to tell
you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“We’re off rotation this weekend. Abby made reservations for us at the Hyatt in the next town over from Stillwater. There’s a convention center there. Heading out tomorrow after work… if that’s okay.”

Tony rested his forehead against Jethro’s. “More than okay.” He paused, then asked quietly, “Does Jack know?”

Jethro shook his head a little. “Not yet. Figure I’ll call him tomorrow morning from work.” He dropped a kiss on Tony’s shoulder. “We’ll tell him about us after we get there.”

Tony nodded, tensing just a little. Jethro shifted up, brushing his lips against Tony’s. “It’ll be okay, Tony. Told you before, he’s not prejudiced. Hell, knowing him, we won’t even have to tell him… he’ll figure it out when he sees you with me and we don’t have a case.”

Tony took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I don’t want to ruin things between you two… you only just found each other again.”

Jethro squirmed a bit, levering himself up on his elbows and looking down at Tony seriously. “You’re part of the family now, Tony. Jack will accept it. He already likes you.”

Tony smiled a bit. “He did give me a sweater.”

Jethro nodded. “See?”

Tony bit his lip. “And I repaid him by corrupting his only child.”

Jethro stared at Tony for a second, then let his head fall down onto Tony’s chest as he started laughing. Tony couldn’t help but grin, hearing Jethro laugh so hard. After a few seconds, Jethro calmed down enough to remark, “One, not a child. Two, I’d say we corrupted each other.”

“True,” Tony said. He lay quietly for a moment, and Jethro shifted back onto his side, wrapping himself around Tony again. “Should I leave early to pack before work?”

Jethro shook his head. “How about we work through lunch, then leave a little early, go to your place, head up north from there?”

Tony yawned and nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Good. Get some sleep, Tony.”

“Too bright,” Tony complained.

Jethro sighed and detached himself from Tony to reach other and switch off the bedside lamp. “Better?”

“Mmm hmm.”

Jethro smiled as he got back into his previous position. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep.
Two Bosses

Tony whistled as he waited for the elevator to bring him to the bullpen. He carried a cardboard tray with four cups; his first act as team co-leader was a coffee run. He figured he’d just about arrive on time, but Gibbs wouldn’t give him a difficult time about being almost late if he had the right Jamaican blend to soothe the savage beast. He smiled to himself, breaking off the whistle, as he thought about when the alarm had gone off that morning; Jethro had curled into Tony, wrapped his arms tighter around him, and refused to get up. It had taken Tony running through half his repertoire of impressions to irritate his lover into getting out of bed. *Hardly a savage beast… more like a five-year-old whose parents were trying to take away his favorite teddy bear.*

The smile faded a bit as Tony remembered that he hadn’t been able to get a reason for Jethro’s uncharacteristic behavior. He’d find out later, probably on the drive to Pennsylvania… but if he were to place a bet with himself, he’d guess that Jethro was still feeling protective and possessive.

The elevator doors slid open, and Tony sauntered out and over to his desk. A quick glance showed McGee sitting at his computer, glaring at the monitor. Ziva was nowhere to be seen, and Gibbs was reading through some files, glancing up at Tony over the rims of his glasses as Tony set the drinks down on his desk and shrugged his pack off his shoulder.

“Morning, Co-Boss!”


Gibbs made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a growl, and refocused on the papers in front of him. Mentally awarding himself a point, Tony picked up McGee’s coffee and brought it over to him. “Your face will freeze that way, you know.”

McGee gave Tony an irritated look. “Tony –“

“Ah, ah!” Tony raised his index finger and waved it from side to side, grinning at McGee, who closed his mouth and looked puzzled for a moment, then rolled his eyes.

“Fine, whatever. Tony-Boss.”

Tony executed a shallow bow. “You rang?”

“What -? No, you… you know what? Never mind.”

Tony leaned over to peer at the monitor, seeing nothing more than a bunch of lines of text scrolling up. “Working a cold case?”

McGee snorted. “Hardly. IT ran a network upgrade last night, and it messed with all my protocols. I have to go into the original programming and make corrections to bring the new formatting in line with my macros.”

Tony held up a hand. “Stop right there, McGee.”

McGee nodded absently, focusing in on a few lines of code and typing furiously. Tony resisted a sudden urge to pat McGee on the head, and turned back to his desk, grabbing two more coffees. He
placed Ziva’s on her desk with a flourish, then moved over to stand in front of Gibbs and hold his cup out to him.

“For you, Alpha Boss.”

Gibbs looked at the coffee, then reached up to take his glasses off and met Tony’s eyes. “Don’t have to try so hard, DiNozzo.”

Tony shot him a small smile. “Not sure how to do this, Boss,” he admitted quietly.

Gibbs looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then gave him a hint of a crooked smile. “Just take down the mask a bit, Tony.” His gaze shifted to the coffee and he picked it up, raising it in a small salute before taking a sip and turning back to his work.

Tony blinked a few times, then, brow furrowed, turned and walked back to his desk.

Ziva walked into the bullpen a few minutes later, carrying a folder and looking annoyed. Gibbs glanced up at her. “Any luck?”

She stopped in front of his desk and shook her head. “I went through the evidence lists with Abby three times… they still do not agree with the latest inventory of the evidence locker.”

Gibbs sat back, rubbing his chin. “Work with McGee… see if you can find any activity related to the missing items. Interview personnel here in the Yard if you have to.”

Ziva nodded, then moved to her desk and sat down, hesitating as she saw the coffee cup sitting next to her keyboard. “What is this?”

Tony looked up from the notes he was making on a five-year old cold case. “I know you often find our strange American habits confusing, Ziva… but I would have thought you’d know about coffee by now.”

Ziva narrowed her eyes as she looked at him. “Where is this coffee from?”

Tony tossed his pen down and leaned on his forearms. “Well, Zee-vah… the coffee bean is grown in many parts of the world, including Brazil and Columbia, but it’s going to be tough to say for sure where the beans that were used to brew that cup came from.” He stretched a bit. “You could ask Abby to do some forensics magic,” he added helpfully.

Ziva rolled her eyes and sat forward. “I know about coffee, Tony. What I do not know –“ She broke off when Tony raised his hand, palm out to her.

“Ziva, Ziva, Ziva… you’re breaking office protocol.”

“Excuse me?” She looked over at Gibbs, who was reading with a slight smirk on his face. Seeing no help there, she looked to McGee, who met her eyes and then glanced at Tony.

“Tony’s –“ Tony cleared his throat loudly, and McGee started over. “Tony-Boss is co-leader of the team now, remember? I think he wants us to genuflect every fifteen minutes.”

A sound suspiciously like a snort came from Gibbs’ desk. Ziva stared at McGee, her jaw dropped slightly. “You are calling him Tony-Boss?”

McGee shrugged. “He does share team lead with Gibbs now.”

Ziva sat back and crossed her arms, looking at Tony. “I will not call you Tony-Boss. It is silly.”
Tony grinned. “You can call me Very Special Agent DiNozzo if you want.”

Ziva huffed and didn’t answer. She stared at him a moment longer, then sat forward and hit a few keys on her keyboard. She scanned the screen, then looked up at Tony again. “There is no memo from the Director notifying us of your promotion. Is he aware of it?”

Gibbs spoke up, his tone conversational. “DiNozzo has until Monday to notify Vance of his decision to accept the position.”

Tony gave Gibbs a disgruntled look. “That’s just a formality, and you know it.”

Gibbs glanced up at Tony and shot him a wink. Tony sighed.

Ziva leaned forward again. “I do not have to call you ‘Boss’ until it is official. I will continue to call you Tony, Tony.”

Tony sighed and shook his head. “You have so much to learn, Probie.”

Slightly exasperated, Ziva looked at McGee. “Are you going along with this, McGee?”

McGee looked thoughtfully at Tony, who made a show of not looking back at him, flipping through his papers again. “Tony’s right, Ziva. It’s just a formality… but if Tony doesn’t take it, Vance will split up the team. So, if Tony wants me to call him Boss, I can handle it a day early.”

Tony looked over at McGee and gave him a genuine smile. McGee picked up his coffee cup and saluted him with it, then took a sip.

Ziva watched him, then looked at her own cup. She picked it up and looked at Tony. “This is from you?”

Tony nodded. Ziva narrowed her eyes at him again, then raised the lid and sniffed. “It smells alright.” She took a sip, then cocked her head and looked at Tony. “Thank you… Boss.”

Tony just inclined his head and looked back down at his work, smiling.

Gibbs looked up a few minutes later, glancing at each of his agents and seeing them all hard at work. Ziva’s radar for being watched must have gone off, because she looked up and met his eyes. He glanced at Tony, then back at her and nodded his thanks. Ziva smiled, and returned to her work.

Gibbs stood up and stretched. “Goin’ to see Abby,” he commented. “Stay on the cold cases, see if any more discrepancies come up with evidence inventory.” Various noises of acknowledgement followed him as he moved toward the back elevator, then he remembered something, stopped short and turned around. “DiNozzo and I are working through lunch so we can leave a little earlier than usual. You two can do the same if you want… we’ll order in.”

He disappeared around the cubicles, and McGee looked over at Tony. “You guys got special plans? We were supposed to be on rotation this weekend, but I saw the email from Vance’s assistant.”

Ziva looked up. “How did we get the weekend free?”

Tony sighed, pushed back from his desk, and scooted his chair over to McGee. “Campfire, boys and girls.”

Ziva’s eyebrows shot up, but she stood and moved her chair over to them readily enough.

Tony spoke quietly, keeping the conversation private. “I told Vance I wanted the weekend to think
things through. Gibbs asked to be off rotation so we could talk it over, and Vance agreed. We’re on call the following two weekends, though… actually, I guess you guys are on call – I’ll be in Seattle.”

Ziva nodded, and McGee looked thoughtful. “You’re going to have to give us some tips to handle Gibbs when you’re gone.”

Tony gave McGee a look. “You want to handle him the way I would, Probie?”

“Well, you are pretty good at keeping him from killing innocent people…” McGee’s voice trailed off as he caught Tony smirking at him. “But that’s not what you meant, is it, Tony?” McGee sighed while Ziva giggled and Tony waggled his eyebrows at him. “Tony, no offense, but I’m really not interested in Gibbs that way. But thanks for offering to share.”

Ziva’s eyes widened and she looked at McGee. “How do you think Gibbs will react when he finds out that Tony wants you to take his place, McGee?”

Tony leaned forward and gave them both light head slaps. “Ha, ha. Enough. No sharing.”

“Fine by me,” McGee said fervently.

“I have always found Gibbs to be a very attractive man,” Ziva began.

Tony glared at her, and McGee decided to change the subject before things got out of hand. “So what do you guys have planned that you need to leave early?”

Tony continued to glare at Ziva, who finally gave in and murmured, “Just kidding, Tony.” He bared his teeth at her, then looked at McGee. “We’re cashing in on the gift certificate you guys gave us… Gibbs had Abby make reservations for us at a hotel near Stillwater. We’re going to visit Jack.”

McGee leaned forward. “Does he know? About you guys, I mean?”

Tony shook his head. “Not yet.” He shifted in his chair a bit. “Jethro says he’ll be okay with it, that he’s not prejudiced.”

Ziva regarded him thoughtfully, picking up on Tony’s body language and his slip in how he referred to Gibbs. “You are nervous.”

Tony laughed a little. “Never did like meeting the parents.”

McGee nodded sympathetically. “Yeah, it’s not fun.” When Ziva looked at him curiously, he tried to explain. “Dads like to ask what your intentions are, and give you subtle threats that aren’t really subtle at all. It’s very awkward and embarrassing.”

Tony nodded. “It’s like being under a microscope.”

Ziva looked back and forth between the two of them. “It is not as if Gibbs is a teenage girl going on her first date. And you have met his father before.”

“Yeah,” McGee chimed in. “And you know Jackson likes you. He gave you a sweater.” His voice dropped to a mutter. “Didn’t give me a sweater.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I know. But… I was just Gibbs’ senior field agent then. Now I’m his male lover… and it’s not like the guy’s ever had one before. Doesn’t give Jack much of a chance to adjust his thinking, does it?”

Ziva reached out and patted Tony’s shoulder. “It will be okay, Tony.”
McGee nodded. “She’s right… Jack’s not going to do anything to jeopardize his relationship with Gibbs. And he must have seen something special in you before, if he gave you a sweater.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.” He sat up suddenly. “We better get back to work before Gibbs comes back and decides we aren’t busy enough.”

They scrambled back to their desks and dug into the cold cases.

**Reservations**

Gibbs strolled into Abby’s lab, Caf-Pow in hand, and found her typing away at her computer, Bert tucked under one arm.

“Hey, Abby,” he said, holding the Caf-Pow out to her.

“Gibbs!” Abby turned away from the computer and grabbed the drink, slurping noisily for a moment before putting it down and grabbing Bert out from under her arm. “Some of the evidence logs are really messed up, Gibbs, but Bert and I are on the case!”

Gibbs just looked at her. “I know, Abs. So are McGee and Ziva. You’ll get it figured out.”

Abby smiled at him. “How’s Gonzo?”

Gibbs glanced down at Bert. “Gonzo’s fine. You make that call for me yet?”

Abby reared back a bit, put Bert down on the shelf, and put her hands on her hips. “Gibbs! How could you doubt me?” She marched past him into her inner sanctum, rifling through some papers and then spun and marched back, handing him a print-out. “Here’s your confirmation. You check in anytime tonight, check out by noon on Sunday. I was going to get you the honeymoon suite, but decided to save that in case you guys ever tie the knot. I did get you a three-room suite; you’re going to love it! King size bed, large screen HD tv, Jacuzzi bath, full breakfast included.”

Gibbs leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Thanks, Abs.”

She grinned at him. “Just treat Tony right!”

He gave her a mock-glare. “What about him treating me right?”

She snorted. “Are you kidding me? Tony practically worships you. How could he not treat you right?”

Gibbs looked at her thoughtfully. “We’re equals, Abs. Both on and off the job, now.”

Abby shook her head. “Are you sure he believes that?”

“He will.”

She nodded and moved back to her computer, then paused and turned back to him. “Hey, does Jack know about the two of you yet?”

Gibbs shook his head. “He doesn’t even know we’re coming. Gonna call him this morning, tell him about us when we’re there.”

Abby cocked her head to one side, pony tails swinging. “Is he going to be okay with it?”

Gibbs sighed. “Guess we’ll find out tomorrow.”
“Gibbs!”

“Abby. It’s going to be fine.”

She pouted at him. “It better be. Things are precarious, Gibbs… you can’t add to the chaos. Tony leaving, rookies on the team – I don’t like this trend! We need stability!”

Gibbs raised his eyebrows at her. “That why you’re suddenly into the idea of us getting married?”

Abby shifted uncomfortably. “Well…”

Gibbs moved forward and pulled her into a hug. “Tony and I don’t have to get married to be committed to each other, Abs.”

She hugged him back. “I know! It’s just, well, it would be so cool if you did!”

Gibbs shook his head, kissed her cheek, and pulled away. “Find out what’s going on in the evidence locker. We’ll call you for lunch… ordering in today.”

Abby saluted badly, then whirled back to her computer. Gibbs headed for the elevator and hit the button for the top floor, stopping it partway and pulling out his cell phone. He hit speed dial 9 and waited.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Leroy!”

Gibbs smiled at the obvious happiness in his father’s voice. “You busy this weekend, Dad?”

“Nothing I can’t change or put off until next week. You comin’ up for a visit?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been fixin’ up some of the rooms, so the place is in a bit of a mess. But I can make some space.”

“That’s okay, Dad, don’t bother. I’m not coming alone – made reservations at the Hyatt over by the convention center.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Jack spoke up. “You got someone special, son?”

“Yeah, Dad, I do.”

“You go and get married again?”

Gibbs chuckled a bit at that one. “Have you been talking to Abby?”

“What?”

“Never mind. No, I didn’t get married again.”

“Well, what’s her name?”

“Listen, Dad, I’m at work, gotta go. We’ll be there late morning. Just… keep an open mind, alright?”
“You doin’ something you shouldn’t, Leroy?”

“No, Dad, believe me… I’m doing something right for a change.”

“You better not be robbing the cradle, boy. All those old men, steppin’ out with girls barely out of diapers. I can still put you over my knee if need be.”

Gibbs laughed. “If you’re calling me old, what does that make you? There’s no age issue here, Dad, I promise.”

“All right, Leroy. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Dad.”

“Hey, Leroy?”

“Yeah, still here.”

“I’m glad you’re comin’ for a visit, son.”

“Yeah, Dad… me too.” Gibbs flipped his cell shut, then leaned back against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. *I hope you’ll still be glad when you find out she’s a he*, he thought ruefully. *And I hope Tony isn’t going to get too worried when he finds out I gave Jack a heads up.*

He started the elevator back up and took a moment to get back in the right mindset before he stepped off and moved toward Vance’s office.

Vance’s assistant looked at him warily, but for once Gibbs didn’t just barge in. He looked back at her and waited; after a moment’s hesitation she picked up the phone.

“Agent Gibbs would like to see you, sir.” She nodded and then hung up. “You can go right in.”

Gibbs could feel her eyes on his back as he moved to the door and opened it. He went in and closed the door, then turned to see the Director sitting at his desk, looking at him with his eyebrows raised.

“You feeling okay, Gibbs?”

“Just trying to keep you on your toes, Leon.”

“It’s working.” Vance sat forward a bit. “What do you need?”

“Personnel files on the people DiNozzo would be working with in Seattle.”

“Why?”

Gibbs just stared at him. Vance shook his head and smiled tightly. “Nice try, Gibbs. If Agent DiNozzo decides to take me up on my offer, he can have those files on Monday.”

Gibbs moved forward a few steps. “Getting the information now might help him make the right decision.”

Vance snorted. “I didn’t waste time pouring over personnel files when I was offered this chair. I wanted the job, regardless of who I’d have to deal with.” He gave Gibbs a pointed look, and got a slight smirk in return. “If DiNozzo wants the promotion, he’ll deal with the agents in Seattle and he’ll deal with the rookies that get assigned to your team… as will you.”
Gibbs started to speak again, but Vance cut him off. “The Seattle agents aren’t your concern, Gibbs. They’re DiNozzo’s, should he choose to take the job.” Vance gave him a hard look, then shook his head. “You’ve got to let the fledgling out of the nest sometime. You really think it’s going to give him confidence, having you research the people he’s going to work with before he does?”

Gibbs was slightly taken aback by that; he’d been focused on protecting his own, not thinking about how it might look to the one he wanted to protect. Something must have shown on his face, because Vance moderated his voice a bit. “Take the weekend, talk it over. I’m sure DiNozzo will want your take on things; frankly, I’d be surprised if he didn’t call you from Seattle regularly for input. A word of advice, though… let him come to you.”

Gibbs shot Vance a surprised look. “You speaking as the Director or as a… friend?”

Vance sighed. “Bit of both, I think.” He sent a knowing look Gibbs’ way. “Relationships aren’t easy. Mixing work and home is even harder. I don’t understand it, but the two of you must have something good going on if you’re both so adamant about risking your careers.” Vance glanced over toward the liquor cabinet, then shook his head. “Much too early.” He looked back at Gibbs. “I’ve read the files… I know that DiNozzo was thrown into a team lead position without much preparation when you went to Mexico. He did a good job then. He’ll do a better one now, especially if you don’t get in his way.” Vance’s expression turned slightly sympathetic. “He’s a fully qualified federal agent, and a damn good one at that.”

“I know that,” Gibbs replied, testily.

“Then let him know you know. Let him take the lead on this.”

Gibbs stared at Vance for a moment, eyes narrowed, then nodded abruptly. He left the office and headed back to the bullpen, feeling more than a bit off-balance and uncertain.
To Stillwater

Car Ride

Tony shifted a bit in the passenger seat, tapping his fingers rhythmically on his leg and glancing repeatedly at Jethro. It had been a long and relatively slow day, and Tony had gotten progressively more and more keyed up about this trip.

“Funny thing, a klepto baggy bunny, huh, Jethro?”

Jethro grunted, never taking his eyes off the road. Tony sighed quietly, and decided to be persistent.

“I mean, we could’ve been looking for some sort of big conspiracy, or another mole, but it just turned out to be someone who liked shiny things and had itchy fingers.”

Jethro glanced at Tony. “Yeah.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You know, if you weren’t comfortable with the idea of letting Jack know about your latest fling, we could have found somewhere else to go.”

Jethro’s head whipped around, and he stared at Tony. “What are you talking about?”

“C’mon, Jeth. It’s pretty obvious you’re getting all worked up about telling him.”

Jethro shook his head. “Tony, you can be pretty clueless for such a talented senior field agent.” Tony started to speak, but Jethro raised his hand, reached over, and gave him a light smack on the head. “One,” he said, shooting a mild glare Tony’s way, “this is not a fling. Call it that again, and I’ll put you on cold cases for a month.”

Tony grinned. “Nice backhanded compliment, Jeth! And you can’t put me on cold cases, I’m your equal now, remember?”

Jethro huffed a small laugh. “Yeah, I remember. Gonna forget again, too.”

Tony reached over and punched Jethro lightly on the upper arm. “I know… I’m pretty sure I will too. And I know it’s not just a fling… I just wanted to get you talking.”

Jethro smiled and shook his head. Tony narrowed his eyes. “What’s two?”

“What?”

“You said ‘one, this is not a fling.’ Saying ‘one’ strongly implies there’s a two.”

Jethro grunted again. “Two, I’m perfectly comfortable telling Jack about us.”

“Then why are you so quiet?”

Jethro shrugged, not really wanting to get into Vance’s comments about needing to let go and allow Tony to build his confidence on the job.

Tony was quiet for a few miles, then spoke up again. “So, how do you want to do this? Do we need a plan? I think we need a plan.”

Jethro glanced at him. “Nah, no plan.”
Tony nodded. “So you want to ease into it. Play the part of just coworkers and friends, lull him into a false sense of security, then lower the boom.”

Jethro laughed softly. “Already told him I’m bringing someone special, Tony. Didn’t say who, just asked him to keep an open mind.”

Tony stopped tapping his fingers and gaped at Jethro, who had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at his horrified expression. “So as soon as he sees us together, he’ll know! What if he can’t handle it, and has a heart attack or something?!”

Jethro snorted. “That man is as healthy as a horse. He’ll probably live forever.”

Tony turned his head back and forth, trying to ease the tension that had suddenly appeared in his neck. “I was hoping to sort of ease into this gradually. Very, very gradually.”

Jethro reached out and took hold of Tony’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “It’ll be fine, Tony.”

Tony made a noncommittal noise and looked out the window for a few miles. “Think he already suspects something?”

Jethro shook his head. “Nope. He asked her name.”

“Well, whose name?”

“The name of my special someone. Why’d you think he suspects something?”

“He gave me a sweater.”

Jethro smiled. “Always wondered why he did that. Think he thinks of you like a grandson or something?”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “That just makes it all even more hinky.”

Jethro grinned. “So he can start thinking of you as a son.”

Tony grimaced. “That’s not much better. Son-in-law, maybe.”

“Not you too,” Jethro groaned.

“What? Oh, you mean Abby? No worries, Jethro. Like I said, not looking to be the fourth ex-Mrs. Gibbs.”

“Trust me, Tony, you’ll never be Mrs. anything.”

**Hotel**

Tony gave a low whistle as he followed Jethro into the hotel suite. “This is awe-some!”

Jethro looked over his shoulder and smiled at Tony. “Not bad, huh?”

Tony dropped his bag on the floor and moved into the center of the living area, looking at the large leather couch facing the huge flat screen tv. From there he stepped quickly through the door to the spacious bedroom, with its king size bed. He moved the comforter aside and ran his fingers over the sheets. “Nice!” Next he crossed the room and looked into the bathroom. “There’s a Jacuzzi! Aw, man!” He came back into the living room and stood in front of the tv, looking into Jethro’s amused face.
“Jethro, I take back everything I ever said that might have implied you were a cheapskate.”

Jethro laughed as he walked into the bedroom, carrying both of their bags. “Don’t look at me. I just asked Abby to make reservations. She chose the room.”

Tony grinned as he looked at the fancy vases decorating the side tables next to the couch. “I love Abby.”

Jethro came up behind him. “That’s good, as long as it’s a platonic love.” He slid his arms around Tony and rested his chin on his shoulder. “You’re mine, remember?”

Tony squirmed around and dropped a light kiss on Jethro’s lips. “I remember. So, what do you want to do for dinner?”

Jethro laughed. “Hotel restaurant or room service?”

Tony’s eyes lit up. “Room service and a movie!”

Jethro dropped his arms and walked back toward the door, picking up the menu that stood on the small table next to it. He tossed the menu to Tony, who caught it deftly and started to page through it. “Order something. I’m gonna hit the head.”

About fifteen minutes later, Jethro walked back into the living room, having changed into a t-shirt and sweats. Tony was sitting back on the couch, sinking into the cushions, flipping through the movie guide. He looked over at his partner and grinned like a little kid. Jethro shook his head and smiled, sitting down next to him and pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Gonna call Jack.”

Tony’s smile faded a bit and he cleared his throat, sitting up. “You telling him now?”

Gibbs tilted his head. “Only if I have to. Not lying to him, though.”

Tony nodded and tossed the remote onto the coffee table, watching as Jethro flipped his cell open, hit a few buttons, then sat forward, laying the phone on the table. Tony heard the ring, then the click as Jack picked up on his end.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad.”

“Leroy! Good to hear from you again so soon. You made it to the hotel all right?”

“Yeah, we’re all set.”

“Good! That’s good, son. So, do I get to say hello to your new lady friend?”

Jethro glanced at Tony, who grimaced and shrugged. Jethro raised his eyebrows and smirked a bit, then spoke again. “Well, Dad, that’s going to be a bit difficult… no lady friend. Tony’s here with me.”

“Tony?”

Tony leaned toward the phone. “Hey, Jack! Long time no see.”

“Likewise, Tony.” There was a pause, then Jack spoke again. “I’m sorry, son.”
Jethro’s brow furrowed and he frowned a bit at the phone. “Sorry… for what?”

“Well, for your friend standing you up, Leroy. Shame these girls don’t know a good thing when they have it. Good of Tony to keep you company, though. You’re a good friend to my boy, Tony.”

“Uh… thanks, Jack.” Tony looked at Jethro, his eyes wide.

“Glad you still came to visit, Leroy. You coming for breakfast?”

“More like lunch, Dad. I want to show Tony around a bit tomorrow morning.”

“That’s fine, son, fine. I’ll have a good lunch ready for you when you want it.”

“Thanks, Dad. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Leroy.”

Jethro hung up, then looked at Tony. He quirked an eyebrow. “Well?”

Tony stared at Jethro, then looked at the phone, then back at Jethro. His mouth dropped open, then closed back up. He gave a Jethro a slightly sick smile. “I don’t know if it’s good or bad that it didn’t occur to him that your lady friend is really your guy friend.”

Jethro scooted a little closer to Tony and reached out to tug a bit on his hair. “I let him make his assumptions, never indicated otherwise. No reason for him not to think you just came along as a friend.” He looked closely at Tony. “You wanted me to do it differently?”

Tony shook his head. “No, not really. Just… maybe it would have been easier if he’d jumped to the right conclusion instead of the wrong one.”

Jethro started to say something, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. He went to answer it, and stayed quiet while room service was delivered and set up on the coffee table. A few minutes later, he was back on the couch next to Tony, and they were both digging into dinner.

They ate in silence for a while, then Jethro glanced at Tony. “You do know nothing my father says is going to change anything between us, right?”

Tony looked back and nodded slowly. “Yeah, I know. Just don’t want to cause trouble, that’s all.”

Jethro put his fork down and reached up to lay the back of his hand against Tony’s forehead. “You feeling okay?”

“Ha, ha. I’m serious.”

Jethro smirked at him a bit. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, Tony.”

Tony sighed, and waved his fork at Jethro’s plate. “Eat.”

After picking up his own fork and getting a mouthful of steak, Jethro waved toward the tv. “We watchin’ a movie?”

Tony grabbed the remote and flicked through the options on the menu. “Oh, hey, check it out! Cary Grant in North by Northwest! Gotta watch that one.”

Tony got the movie started; they finished eating while they watched, and Jethro gathered up the plates and silverware to leave outside the door. Tony leaned against him when he sat back down, so
he shifted over until Tony could stretch out on the couch and lie with his head on Jethro’s lap. Jethro idly ran his fingers through Tony’s hair while they watched the movie. When it was over, he waited for Tony to start commenting on the film and to turn off the tv, but the only thing that Tony did was to snore softly.

Jethro stared down at him in surprise, then smiled ruefully. All that nervous energy wore him out. So here we are in this fancy hotel room and all we’re going to do is sleep. Laughing softly, Jethro managed to lean forward far enough to grab the remote. It only took him a few minutes to figure out how to shut off the tv, and then several more to get Tony awake enough to stumble into the bedroom and then into bed, helping him undress. Tony was sound asleep again by the time Jethro joined him under the covers. We’ll make up for it later.
Revelations

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains spoilers for Heartland. I don’t own anything associated with that wonderful episode.

Please note: important warning for use of a socially unacceptable term… not meant to accurately portray the state of mind or the true feelings of the person using it – it’s a generational thing. Its use fits the story and the age of the person who says it, and is not meant to offend anyone reading this chapter.

Making Up For It

Tony woke slowly, getting his bearings as he squinted to see in the low light. Hotel… movie – we were on the couch – how…? He had a vague memory of Jethro getting him into bed. Can’t believe I wasted a night! Then he frowned as he realized Jethro wasn’t draped over him like usual in the mornings.

Propping himself up on his left arm, he looked over to see Jethro on his back on the far side of the bed. He was lying fairly still, but his breathing seemed off and the hand resting on the bed next to him was twitching. Tony scooted closer and could see that Jethro was frowning in his sleep.

Liar, Tony thought fondly. You’re just as worried about Jack as I am. Tony considered his options for a minute, then grinned as he remembered the layout of their suite. He reached over and gently ran his fingers over Jethro’s face, calming the jumpy muscles. Jethro muttered something in his sleep and the frown turned into a slight smile as he turned a little in Tony’s direction and settled down. Tony watched him for a few minutes, waiting to see if he stayed quiet. When Jethro’s breathing evened out, Tony carefully got out of bed and walked into the large bathroom.

The Jacuzzi tub took center stage as Tony turned around after closing the door. He moved over to the faucet and started it filling, adjusting the water temperature to exactly what Jethro liked. He hunted through the bottles on the shelf behind the tub and found just what he wanted, adding a liberal amount to the water. He grabbed the complementary bath sponge and laid it on the side of the tub, then crossed the room to a door leading to a smaller room that held the toilet, another sink, and a shower stall. After taking care of business, he walked back out and kept an eye on the filling tub while he brushed his teeth. When it finally filled to his satisfaction – it was a very large tub – he shut it off and walked back into the bedroom, grinning to see Jethro still asleep with his arms wrapped around Tony’s pillow.

Tony crawled up on the bed and lay down next to his lover, leaning over him and speaking softly into his ear. “Hey, Jeth, wake up.”

There was no response; Jethro’s arms tightened around the pillow and he buried his head into it, inhaling deeply, but as far as Tony could tell he was still asleep.

“Jethhro…” Tony repeated the name, drawing the word out and punctuating it with a light kiss to Jethro’s neck. “Wakey wakey.”
Jethro grumbled and made vague shooing motions with his hand without letting go of the pillow.

Tony sat back and considered the older man. He wanted to let him sleep, but he didn’t want the water in the tub to get cold. He grinned suddenly and sat back. “Hey, Boss,” he called out in his best bullpen voice, “Director Vance is here and wants to discuss my permanent transfer to Seattle!”

Jethro’s eyes snapped open and he sat up quickly, nearly flinging the pillow off the bed. He looked wildly around the room, then narrowed his eyes and glared at Tony, who was grinning madly at him.

“Payback’s a bitch, huh?”

Jethro whapped Tony in the face with the pillow, then dropped it and slid out of the bed, making a beeline for the bathroom. Tony followed him, humming the opening theme to many Bond movies, grinning again when Jethro closed the door to the smaller room. He checked the water temperature, then shed his boxers and climbed in, sighing and relaxing into the hot water.

Jethro walked into the room a few minutes later, arching an eyebrow at him but not saying anything. He moved to the sink and brushed his teeth, leaning back against the counter and watching Tony, who returned his gaze with a smirk. Jethro rinsed and spit, then walked closer and looked down at the tub.

“Bubbles, DiNozzo?”

“Bubbles,” Tony agreed.

Jethro stared at the bubbles, then at Tony.

“C’mon, Jeth! You can’t tell me you never had a bubble bath!”

Jethro looked at him. “Yeah, when I was five.”

Tony smiled and raised his hand, forming a little mountain out of the bubbles on his palm. He blew them at the older man, who couldn’t quite stop his lips from curving into a smile.

“Get in, Jeth.” When Jethro didn’t move, Tony lowered his hand and looked at him seriously. “You took care of me last night; let me do the same for you.”

Jethro looked back at him, then nodded once, removing his own boxers before climbing into the tub. He sank down into the water, relaxing back to lean his head against the side and looking around.

“You could fit the whole team in here,” he commented.

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Thought you said no sharing.”

Jethro rolled his eyes and watched as Tony moved over to grab the bath sponge, dunking it in the water and soaking it, then picking up a bottle of liquid soap and putting on the sponge. He squeezed the sponge a few times to lather it up, then moved closer to Jethro, holding out his hand. “Arm,” he said authoritatively.

A bit bemused, Jethro lifted his arm out of the water and watched as Tony began gently scrubbing his arm and working on his hand, getting in between the fingers. After a moment, he closed his eyes and relaxed, enjoying the feel of the sponge on his skin and the knowledge that Tony was doing this for him.

Tony took a long time, going slowly and carefully, being sure every body part was clean without making his actions sexual. He shampooed Jethro’s hair, pausing to drain the tub a bit and add hotter
water. He gently maneuvered Jethro into dunking his head to rinse out the shampoo, then told him to relax while he did a much faster job bathing himself. He raised the water temperature again when he was done, then moved to relax against the back of the tub, reclining next to his partner.

Jethro stirred after a few minutes, reaching out to find and grasp Tony’s hand. “Bubbles,” he said, rather inarticulately.

Tony grinned. “Yup,” he agreed.

They lay there for a while, relaxing in the hot water, no sound except for the water sloshing against the sides of the tub whenever either of them moved. Then Tony shifted onto his side, reaching out and trailing his fingers over Jethro’s leg, moving to his groin. He leaned over and whispered into Jethro’s ear, “Phase two.”

Jethro’s eyes opened, then closed again as Tony ran his fingers over Jethro’s cock, grasping it lightly as it began to harden. Tony shifted to nuzzle Jethro’s neck, causing his lover to hum in appreciation and tilt his head to one side. He kept stroking and fondling Jethro’s cock and balls for several minutes, watching the older man gradually go from boneless to taut and quivering. When Jethro breathed in and out deeply, trying to force himself to relax, Tony pulled back and began to stroke Jethro in earnest, suddenly wanting to see the man lose control quickly rather than draw things out. He executed a sliding twist that had Jethro gasping in surprise, then began the rapid movements that he knew could bring his lover to the brink quickly.

Jethro’s breath caught in his throat. “Tony!” His left hand reached up to grab the side of the tub, while his right clutched at Tony’s arm. “Oh – yeah, so good…”

Tony watched Jethro’s jaw clench as he tried to keep control. He moved to straddle Jethro, trapping him against the side of the tub, shifting up until their cocks rubbed together, only then realizing how hard he’d gotten just from watching and touching his partner. He quickly got some soapy lather off the bath sponge, using it along with what both men were leaking to enhance the glide of his hand. Grasping both of them together and hanging onto Jethro’s shoulder with his free hand, he pumped them both in earnest, his own breath coming fast now as he watched pleasure spark across Jethro’s face.

“C’mon, Jeth… come with me… wanna see you lose it…”

Jethro’s response was an incoherent groan as he gripped Tony’s arm hard enough to bruise. Tony gasped as he felt the first shock of orgasm well up, and he repeated that sliding twist once, then twice more as he spasmed and folded over Jethro, some part of him gratified to hear and feel Jethro cry out as he finally lost control and released into the surrounding water.

Neither of them moved while they recovered, their breathing eventually slowing, Tony’s hand still around both of their softening cocks. Tony looked up as Jethro let go of his arm and moved his hand to the back of his neck, pulling him in for a kiss.

“Thanks, Tony.”

Tony smiled and returned the kiss, then gently let go and slid back into the cooling water. They looked at each other for a few seconds, then Tony smiled. “Shower, rinse, repeat?”

Jethro chuckled. “Not sure I could repeat for a while… rain check until tonight?”

Tony grinned. “Rinse off, get breakfast? I think I’m starving.”

Jethro’s lips quirked up into a small smile. “You’re always starving. But yeah… let’s eat, and then
we’ll drive to Stillwater and I’ll show you around a bit.”

Tony practically leapt out of the tub, almost tripping, and made for the shower. Jethro followed behind, shaking his head and laughing quietly.

**Stillwater**

Tony looked around eagerly, taking in everything he could see on Main Street in Stillwater, Pennsylvania. He hadn’t gotten the chance to really see the place last time around; he’d been more focused on Jack and on the case. But now he could look his fill and get a feel for the place that birthed Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

Jethro slowed the car and pointed to a side street. “We used to hang out down there, when I was in junior high.”

Tony strained to see more as the car slid past. “Hey! Slow down.” He shot Jethro a slightly amused yet irritated look. “You’re such a tease.”

Jethro chuckled as they passed his father’s store. “See the dress shop over there?” He pulled over and put the car in park, letting it idle.

Tony nodded, then glanced at Jethro when he made no move to continue on. “You gonna tell me you experimented with cross-dressing in high school?”

The smack to the back of his head was lighter than usual.

“Nope.” Jethro looked at the store for a few more seconds, then put the car in gear and moved back into the road. “First time I saw Shannon, she was working in that window, putting a dress on a model.”

Tony looked at him, then back at the window, trying to imagine a younger version of the woman in the pictures at Jethro’s house. “Did you stare like an idiot?”

“Pretty much.”

“You talk to her?”

Jethro shook his head. “Not then.”

They were silent for a while longer, then Jethro took a right turn, then a left, and pulled over next to a train station, cutting the engine and looking at the covered pavilion. Then he pulled the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car. Tony followed, curious, but waited for Jethro to say something.

There was no one on the platform. Jethro moved to stand in front of the benches, looking at them for a moment, and then sat on one of them, facing Tony, who stood uncertainly as Jethro turned and looked at the bench behind him. There was a faraway look in his eyes, and a strange expression that Tony couldn’t quite place, but suddenly he felt as if he just knew.

“This is where you talked to her the first time, isn’t it?”

Jethro started just a bit, then looked up at Tony and gave him a small smile. “Thought you’d figure it out.” He looked back at the bench. “I was leaving for the Marines… didn’t realize then I’d be gone for such a long time. Shannon was taking the train too… when I suggested we sit together, she asked if I was a lumberjack – no, not asked, exactly… she said it was one of her rules: never date a lumberjack.”
Tony swallowed a little thickly at the obviously bittersweet memory. “Then what happened?”

Jethro smiled. “She asked what my name was. I gave her my full name, and she said she was just gonna call me Gibbs.” His smile softened, and he looked up at Tony. “I told her she could call me anything she wanted.”

Tony smiled at that. “Good memories, huh?” he asked, a little hesitantly.

Jethro nodded. “Very good.” He looked around at the platform again, then stood abruptly. “Let’s go… I’ll show you where my friends and I used to hang out, and where I almost killed that son of a bitch Chuck and his sidekick Ed.” Jethro paused, then grinned. “Or maybe they’d have killed me, if my Dad hadn’t shown up with his shotgun.”

Tony’s eyes grew huge, and he followed Jethro as they made their way back to the car.

**The Reveal**

Jack was behind the counter, ringing up a sale when Jethro and Tony walked in.

“Leroy!”

Jethro nodded, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Hey, Dad.”

Jack grinned at him, then turned his gaze on Tony, who was looking around the shop as if there were secrets on every shelf. “Good to see you again, Tony.”

Tony gave Jack a warm smile, moving forward to shake his hand. “It’s a pleasure to see you, Jackson Gibbs.”

Jack gazed at him for a moment, making Tony shift nervously. Then he looked back at Jethro. “Let me help these customers, son, and then we’ll eat and you can catch me up on all the news.”

Jethro nodded, meeting Tony’s eyes for a moment before turning and moving toward a rack of comic books. Tony followed while Jack went to help the next customer; a quick glance showed there were only two other people in the store, and Tony suddenly found himself wishing there were ten times that many.

He reached Jethro’s side just as his partner pulled an issue of Superman off the rack and paged through it. “You were a comics guy, Jeth?”

Jethro gave Tony a little-boy grin. “Oh, yeah. Superman, Batman, Detective Comics… used to read ‘em all.”

Tony smiled, visualizing Jethro as a kid, surrounded by stacks of comics. All he could really picture, though, was Gibbs-in-miniature, complete with silvered hair. “That’s just so… normal.”

Jethro snorted. “What, you think I was running around with guns and arresting people when I was eight?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Why don’t you boys take a load off, have a seat until I’m done here,” Jack called out.

Jethro put the comic back on the rack, then moved to the table, sitting down and staring at Tony when he hesitated. Tony flinched and moved quickly to sit at the end, on Jethro’s right. He glanced at Jack, who was packing up the last customer’s purchases. “How are we going to do this, Jethro?”
Jethro shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. “We’ll just, you know…” His voice trailed off and Tony was surprised at how uncomfortable he looked.

“We don’t have to,” he said quietly.

Jethro shook his head. “Yeah, we do. Not gonna cheapen this by lying about it. Vance knows, and my dad doesn’t? No.”

Tony nodded, watching Jethro’s face as Jack came from around the counter, following the last person to the door and flipping the sign to ‘Closed.’ Jethro’s expression was turning stony, and Tony felt the urge to jump in the line of fire.

Jack walked slowly back around the counter, leaning over and grabbing a bag from a hidden shelf. “Went to this new deli down the street, they make some damn good sandwiches. Got us all a little something, and you boys can grab some chips and drinks from the stock.” He brought the bag over to the table, along with some napkins, setting it down and pulling out the chair across from Jethro’s.

Jethro had gotten up to get some drinks and chips, handing Tony a soda and a bag of ruffled potato chips. He was about to sit down when Jack spoke. “Get me a Pepsi, would you, Leroy?” Tony smirked while Jethro sighed quietly and went back to get another soda. He was halfway back with a can in his hand when Jack called out, “I like the bottles.”

Jethro stopped, dropping his head ever so slightly, and Tony felt he had a little bit of insight into his life growing up.

Drinks, chips and sandwiches all distributed, the three men dug into their lunch, not speaking much for the first few minutes, until Jack asked after the rest of the team, especially Abby and Ducky. Jethro answered and Tony expanded, and the conversation continued like that for a while until they were finished and Jack sat forward a bit, reaching out and patting Jethro on the arm.

“Sorry about your lady friend, Leroy. Wanna tell me what happened?”

Jethro stared at the table top for a moment, flashing back to high school and being quizzed by his father about all his friends and what he was doing every evening. He fought down the feeling of being sixteen again, and looked up at his father. “No lady friend, Dad.”

Jack glanced at Tony and nodded sagely. “I was afraid of that.”

Tony glanced between the two of them, a nervous smile on his face. “Afraid of what, exactly?”

Jack looked at Jethro and shook his head. “My boy’s never been able to hold a relationship for long, not after he lost those beautiful girls. Can’t say I blame him, though. Tough to find another one who’s as right as the right one was. I never did, not really, after I lost Leroy’s mom.”

Jethro tensed, but didn’t say anything. Jack gazed at his son for a moment. “Sorry about your break up, Leroy. Guess she figured it best not to meet your old man, eh?”

Jethro’s mouth opened, but he couldn’t find the right words, glancing at Tony with a confused look on his face, the fingers of his right hand resting on the table and picking at a napkin.

Jack turned to Tony. “You’re a good friend to my boy, Tony, coming all this way and keeping him company. I’m sure he appreciates that, though I bet he never says so.”

Tony looked at Jethro, and knew what he needed to do. He reached out with his left hand and laid it protectively over Jethro’s right, stilling his fingers and grasping gently. “Not just a friend, Jack,” he
said quietly.

Jethro stared at Tony, eyes a little wide, then suddenly he relaxed and smiled, turning his hand palm up and holding on with a firm grip.

Jack looked at their joined hands, then back and forth between the two men. “I don’t understand,” he said slowly, after a moment of silence.

Jethro looked up and met his father’s gaze. “There never was a woman, Dad, and I’m sorry I let you think there was. It’s been Tony all along. Wanted to tell you in person, not over the phone.”

Jack looked between the two of them again, then chuckled. “Who put you up to this? Was it Abby? Seems like one of her jokes. She’s got spirit, that one.”

Tony squeezed Jethro’s hand as he saw the anger start to build.

“No joke, Dad, and you can call Abby if you want to check. Tony and I are together.”

Jack’s brow furrowed and he looked at Jethro carefully, his mouth slightly open. “Together… the two of you? You’re fags?”

Jethro sat back as if he’d been slapped. Tony gripped his hand harder and jumped in, trying to salvage something. “Uh, Jack… that word’s not really accepted in polite company anymore.”

Jack waved his hand irritably. “Doesn’t matter what the word is – means the same thing, doesn’t it?”

Jethro growled low in his throat. “The only people who use that word now are bigots. It’s a hateful, despicable term, and you won’t use it again if you want to remain a part of my life.”

Jack bristled. “I’m no bigot, Leroy, and you know it! So what is it they call it now? Gay? Is that it? You’re trying to tell me you’re gay?”

Jethro pushed his chair back, slamming his hand on the table. “What I’m trying to tell you, Jack, is that I’ve found real happiness again! Does it matter if it’s with Tony? Or would you rather I fake it with another redhead? Go through a fourth divorce?”

Jack shook his head, looking bewildered. “Leroy… son, of course I want you to be happy. I’ve always wanted that, and I’ve wished you would be again ever since the funeral. I just didn’t expect…” His voice trailed off and he looked at Tony, obviously confused.

Tony’s emotions were all over the place. Biting his lip, he let go of Jethro’s hand and stood up. Both Gibses looked up at him, surprised. He ran his hand through his hair, looked Jethro in the eye, then turned to Jack. “I’m, uh… I’m gonna take a walk. You guys need to talk this out, and maybe it’s better if I’m not here.” He started to back away from the table, but Jethro quickly stood and grabbed Tony’s arm.

“Tony –“

“No, Jeth, hear me out. You guys need to talk, I mean really talk. And if I’m here, well, that just complicates things. You’re more likely to fly off the handle if you think I’m upset, and there might be things you won’t say in front of me. It’s better if I leave for a while.”

Jethro grimaced. “But…”

Tony smiled, and ignored Jack’s presence for a moment, reaching up to brush his fingers over
Jethro’s cheek. “It’s okay. You said it before… doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks or says, we’re together. I get that.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips lightly over Jethro’s. “I won’t go far.” He squeezed Jethro’s hand, then let go and walked quickly to the door.

Jethro followed, catching up to him at the door and pulling him into a hug. “Gonna do my damndest to make this right,” he whispered.

Tony wrapped his arms around him and returned the hug fiercely. “I know. It’ll be okay, Jethro.” He let go, and was out the door.

**Jack and Leroy**

Father and son stared at each other for a moment as the door shut behind Tony, and then Jack spoke softly. “Please, son… sit down.”

Jethro hesitated, then moved back to his seat, glaring angrily at his father.

Jack looked at him thoughtfully. “You really do love him, don’t you, Leroy?”

Jethro nodded, not really trusting himself to speak.

Jack shifted uncomfortably. “I’m trying to understand, son.” He sat in silence for a moment, visibly mulling it all over.

Jethro grew impatient, worrying about what Tony was thinking, and impatience made him snap. “You’re always so damn philosophical about everything else, Dad… why can’t you be that way now?”

Jack grimaced and sighed. “I’m not prejudiced, son – you should know that. I didn’t use that word to make you angry or to hurt either one of you.” He shifted in his chair again, grunting as his back protested. “That’s what we called it when I was growing up, that’s all. Didn’t mean anything particular by it. Even got some friends, they live near that fancy hotel where you boys are staying. They’re gay too, and we get together regular.”

Jethro looked steadily at his father. “Then why’d you get so upset?”

Jack waved his hand uncertainly. “Guess I always hoped you’d find the right woman, settle down and stay that way, have kids.” His voice caught a little. “I miss being Grandpa.”

Jethro’s eyes filled with tears, and he blinked them away. “I couldn’t have another child after Kelly,” he said quietly. “Couldn’t take the chance of losing another one. Not sure I could survive that.”

Jack nodded. “I can see that, son. It’s a terrible thing, a parent losing a child.” He shook his head. “Guess I sort of saw you as a father to your team, started to think of Tony and the others like grandkids.”

Jethro huffed a small laugh. “That why you gave Tony that sweater?”

Jack grinned. “He was cold. And I can’t coddle you, you won’t let me.”

Jethro nodded. “True.”

They both stared at the table, neither one knowing what to say. After a while, Jack looked up. “What did I miss?”

Jethro just looked at him, puzzled.
“I mean, why didn’t I see it, when you were growing up?”

Jethro’s brow furrowed, and he shook his head.

Jack frowned. “Why didn’t I know you were gay? I guess that’s why all those marriages didn’t work.”

Jethro sat back and laughed. “You’ve got it wrong, Dad. I’m not gay, at least not the way you mean.”

Jack shot him an irritated look. “Don’t mess with me, Leroy. You’re seeing that boy, so you’re gay.”

Jethro relaxed back into his chair. “It’s not that simple. If… if Shannon had lived, we’d still be together. I’ve never been interested in a man before Tony, and I doubt I’ll ever be interested in any man other than him. It’s not men… it’s just Tony.”

Jack looked at him thoughtfully. “So that’s not why those other marriages didn’t work?”

Jethro shook his head. “They didn’t work because I was a bastard.”

Jack laughed. “Truer words were never spoken.”

“It wasn’t necessarily entirely my fault,” Jethro grumbled.

Jack leaned forward, patting his son’s hand. “That’s okay, son. You’ve got gumption, and that’s helped keep you alive through all those scrapes you’ve been in. Lots of people, they can’t handle that.” He tilted his head a bit to one side. “Shannon, she could handle it. I’m guessing Tony can too.”

Jethro nodded, a soft smile appearing on his face. “Yeah, Tony can handle it.” He looked at his father. “It’s not just a question of gender… it’s the person, the soul. And Tony’s soul… well, it’s a lot like Shannon’s.”

Jack chuckled. “Didn’t know you were a poet, Leroy.”

Jethro snorted.

Jack shifted uncomfortably, and Jethro looked at him, concerned. “You alright?”

Jack shrugged. “Nothing death won’t cure.” He chuckled at Jethro’s annoyed expression. “Old age, son. It messes with us all. My back acts up when I sit too long.” He gripped the table and heaved himself up to his feet, then looked at Jethro. “We okay, son?”

Jethro looked back. “You alright with me and Tony?”

Jack shrugged. “Don’t have a problem with it… but don’t they have rules at your work about bosses dating their workers?”

Jethro grinned. “Tony’s not my subordinate anymore… he’s been promoted; we lead the team together now.”

Jack nodded. “That’s good, son.” He took a few steps away from the chair, trying to loosen up his muscles. “Why don’t you go find that boy, bring him back? Got a few things I want to say to him.”

Jethro looked at him warily, and Jack grinned. “I won’t bite!”

Shaking his head, Jethro made his way to the door.
And Tony Makes Three

Jethro opened the door and stepped outside, finding Tony sitting on the bench right outside the store. Tony looked up at him, then scooted over to make room for Jethro to sit. Jethro sat, staring out at the street, then looked over at Tony. “You didn’t get far.”

Tony shrugged and gave Jethro a sheepish smile. “Couldn’t. Needed to be on your six.”

Jethro nodded. “Appreciate it.” He looked around a bit. “Not much has changed,” he said quietly.

“Jack said there’s a new deli,” Tony offered.

Jethro laughed. “That place has been there for ten years. Found that out when I went in last time I was here for a visit.”

Tony grinned. “Small towns, huh?” The grin faded, and he looked curiously at Jethro. “Everything okay?”

Jethro returned his gaze and nodded. “Yeah. You were right… once you left, it got easier to talk to him.” He stretched his legs out in front of him. “Dad really isn’t prejudiced, Tony… he’s friends with a gay couple. He didn’t say what he said out of hate.”

Tony nodded. “Sign of his time, right?”

Jethro tilted his head. “That’s how he explained it.”

Tony smiled slightly. “We going back in?”

Jethro raised his eyebrows. “What do you think?”

Tony bounced to his feet. “We’ll brave the lion.”

Jethro laughed. “He’s not really that bad, Tony.”

Tony grinned. “I know that… just not sure you did.”

They walked back into the store, finding Jack leaning on the counter and watching them.

“Glad you’re willing to come back, Tony. Can you forgive an old man’s slip of the tongue?”

“Absolutely, Jack. Forgiven and forgotten.” He moved forward, intending to shake hands, and found himself pulled into a hug.

“Welcome to the family, son,” Jack said.

Tony pulled back, astonished, and looked over at Jethro, who smiled at him. He blinked, than looked back at Jack. “Thanks, Jack.”

Jack waved him off. “Call me Dad, if you want.” Then he looked sharply at Tony. “You love my boy?”


Jack sighed. “That’s good, Tony… real good.” He looked at Tony. “Is it the same for you as it is for Leroy? He’s got the right soul?”
Tony looked a little confused, glancing over at Jethro, who smirked back at him. Looking back at Jack, Tony shrugged and smiled. “Yeah, he does. I told him it probably wouldn’t matter if we were both women or one of us was… we’d still be together. We just fit, you know?”

Jack’s lips curved up into a warm, happy smile. “Good to know.” He looked between the two of them. “Can’t necessarily say I understand it entirely, but love is love, and it’s too precious to let it go to waste. I’m just glad you’re both happy, and I’m glad you can forgive an old man being a little slow to get it.” He watched the two younger men as they looked at each other, noting the warm, content look on his son’s face – something he hadn’t seen in many years.

“So, what do I call you boys? Boyfriends? There a word for it? Tony, you got a word you use?”

Tony looked helplessly at Jethro, who smiled softly. “Tony can call me anything he wants,” he said quietly.

Jack happened to be looking at Tony when Jethro spoke, and any doubts he might still have had vanished at the sight of the incandescent smile on his face.
Still in Stillwater

Chapter Notes

This chapter picks up exactly where the last one left off. It includes some more spoilers for Heartland, minor ones for Hung Out to Dry and Sandblast, as well as an OC and a piece of Gibbs’ past of my own creation.

Old Friends

Jack cleared his throat and moved to the door, reaching out to flip the sign to ‘Open.’ He turned back and looked at his guests, watching as his son reached out to gently cup Tony’s face with a soft smile the likes of which Jack hadn’t seen in over two decades. He walked back to the counter, glancing out the window as he did so and noticed a woman with two small children heading for the store. He turned to face the two younger men, coughing meaningfully. “Could use some help with the store, if you boys are up to it.”

Jethro dropped his hand and stepped away from Tony. “Sure, Dad,” he said as the door opened and two little boys ran in, making a beeline for the rack of comics. “What do you need?”

“Floor needs sweeping, and I’ve got canned goods in the back that need pricing and placing.” He stepped behind the counter and leaned against it. “Afternoon, Janice. Anything special I can get for you today?”

Jethro glanced at Tony and gave him a small smile as he moved toward the counter and grabbed the broom propped up against the wall. He held it up and looked at Tony, eyebrows raised. Tony responded with a wary look at the broom and a bit of a grimace. Jethro smirked at him and set the broom down. “This way… I’ll help you grab the cans and you can take care of those.”

Tony grinned as they moved toward the store room in the back. “McGoo told me about you sweeping the floors last time we were all here. I really wanted to see that.”

Jethro shook his head and delivered a light head slap. “Really not that interesting, Tony.”

“The great Leroy Jethro Gibbs, crime fighter extraordinaire, sweeping floors? Sorry, but that’s big.”

Jethro rolled his eyes and opened up the door to the store room, flicking on the light. He waved toward a stack of canned goods, all still packaged in the original cartons. “Grab a bunch of those, I’ll be right behind you.”

After putting all the cartons on the table, Jethro went back to the counter, reached over and under, grabbed the pricing gun, and tossed it to Tony. Tony caught it easily enough, then stood staring at it, his head tilting to one side, turning it over in his hands. He rotated one of the metal pieces, jerking his arm back when he scraped the skin on his finger. He glanced over to see both Jethro and Jack watching him, Jethro with a smirk on his face and Jack looking faintly puzzled.

Jethro picked up the broom, walked over to Tony, and held out the broom in one hand. Tony looked at the broom, then at the pricing gun, then handed the gun to Jethro while taking the broom from him. “Thanks, Jeth.”
Jethro shot him a grin, then moved in front of the cans, holding one up toward his father.

“Dollar fifty,” Jack said.

Jethro set the correct price and within seconds had all the cans in the carton labeled and on the shelf. Tony stood watching for two more cartons, before Jack called out across the store.

“Floor ain’t gonna sweep itself, Tony.”

Tony immediately began vigorously sweeping one of the aisles. Jethro and Jack glanced at each other, sharing a smirk before settling into a routine of Jack supervising and talking to customers, interrupting himself periodically with pricing instructions for his son.

A while later, cans all done, Jethro put the pricing gun back where it belonged and strode over to Tony, taking the broom from him.

“Uh, Jethro?”

Jethro began efficiently sweeping the area. “You scatter more than you collect, Tony. Just easier if I do it.”

Tony stepped back and watched. “Well, gotta say, didn’t do much sweeping training in college. And you definitely do it so much better.”

Jethro glanced up and smirked at Tony. “Product of my upbringing. Sweeping the floors at home or here was one of my regular chores.” He glanced at Jack, who was talking with another customer. “I learned to be very efficient.”

Jack broke off his conversation. “Yeah, you were good at the sweeping, Leroy, I’ll give you that. Not so much with the rest of it.”

A grin started on Tony’s face, and he turned toward Jethro to follow up on that, but the blank expression on Jethro’s face, together with the tense set of his shoulders, caused the grin to fade. Tony glanced back at Jack, who was watching them.

“Leroy preferred working on his projects over his schoolwork or the other chores,” Jack called out. The customer he’d been talking to, a middle-aged man in heavy duty work boots, was leaning back against the counter and grinning at Jethro, who looked up and shot him a glare. The smile disappeared and the man cleared his throat and looked away, re-engaging Jack in conversation.

Tony looked at Jethro, watching him carefully. Jethro glanced over at him, then shook his head and relaxed his shoulders a bit. “Couldn’t be bothered with a lot of that crap they wanted us to learn in high school.” He shrugged, a slight self-conscious smile flitting over his face. “What good were Greek myths when there was a car needing work?”

Tony smiled, leaning into his partner as Jethro moved past him with the broom. Jethro turned his head into Tony’s neck and inhaled deeply, then moved away and went back to sweeping.

“I won’t tell Ducky you said that,” Tony offered, wishing they were back at the hotel.

Jethro glanced at him, one corner of his mouth turning up.

The door opened again, and Tony looked up to see the work boot guy walking out, and the cop he remembered from his last visit to Stillwater coming in.
Jack nodded to him. “Ed.”

Ed returned the nod. “How you doin’, Jack?”

“Can’t complain, can’t complain.” He looked toward Tony. “Tony, you remember, Ed?”

Tony nodded and moved forward, holding out his hand with a polite smile. Ed reached out and they shook hands.

“Leroy,” Jack called out, “Ed’s here.”

Tony bit the inside of his cheek, watching as Jethro’s head slowly appeared from around the corner of the aisle and he gave his father an incredulous look. For a brief second, Tony visualized a little boy doing the exact same thing.

Jethro looked at Ed as the rest of him came around the corner. “Ed.”

Ed nodded to him. “You’re back again, eh, Leroy? Business or pleasure?”

“Just visiting family.”

Ed’s brow furrowed a bit as he looked at Tony. “Can’t say as I ever took any of my deputies with me on a vacation.”

Jethro just stared at him.

“Tony’s family, too, Ed,” Jack broke in. Tony looked at Jack, eyes wide, and Jethro tensed next to him.

“The boys have had a few rough cases lately,” Jack went on. “I guess bein’ a federal agent is a lot like being in the military; you get to be like brothers. So when Jethro called and said he needed some down time, I told him to bring along anyone else. Tony here’s the one who came.”

Ed looked at the two of them, then shrugged. “I trust if anything of a federal nature comes up, you’ll let me know, Leroy.”

Jethro inclined his head slightly. “You’ll be the first, Ed.”

Ed nodded, and looked at them thoughtfully. “Just try not to be running around makin’ people nervous. After what happened to the Winslows, people might get a little leery of you comin’ into their homes.”

Jethro didn’t comment, just raised an eyebrow. Tony cocked his head. “What happened after we closed that case?”

Ed looked at Tony, and Jack shifted around a little behind the counter. “Nick’s in jail, will be for some time. Not as long as those workers of his who actually did the deed, but long enough. Chuck’s alone in that house now; Emily moved out, took her little boy and got herself a new home with relatives a few towns over. She filed for divorce.”

Jethro tilted his head slightly. “None of that is our fault, Ed. Nick chose to go after Lacombe. Chuck chose to keep his son a secret. We did our job, which was to get justice for those Marines.”

Ed stared hard at Jethro for a moment, then dropped his gaze and nodded. “Yeah, I know it. Still a shame, that’s all.”
Jack walked around the counter. “Those boys killed a man, Ed, tried to kill another one. You’re a lawman, you can’t think Leroy’s responsible.”

Ed looked at Jack, then shook his head. “No more’n I am when I got to bust some damn teenager for stealin’ a car, or that time we had to shoot that bank robber.”

Jack nodded. “He had a wife and two young kids.”

Ed sighed. “People are just dumb sometimes, I guess.” He looked at Jethro, then extended his hand. “You enjoy your visit, Leroy.”

Jethro reached out with only the slightest hesitation and clasped Ed’s hand. “We will, Ed. You take care of yourself. Enjoy that grandkid of yours.”

Ed smiled. “Two, now.”

“Congratulations.”

Ed nodded to Tony, said “See ya, Jack,” and left the store.

Jack went back around the counter and busied himself with some paperwork while Jethro finished sweeping. Tony sat at the table, deep in thought.

Tony was startled out of his own head when Jethro nudged him in the arm. “Want to go for a walk?”

Tony looked up at him and nodded, then looked around the store. Jack was helping some customers about halfway down the closest aisle, and several other people were moving around, some casting curious glances their way.

“Told Jack we’d be back in time to go out to dinner with him,” Jethro added.

Tony nodded and they set off.

It was a nice day, not too hot, partly cloudy so Tony didn’t feel the need to grab his sunglasses out of the car. They set off down the street, passing the dress shop; Tony didn’t comment as Jethro paused and looked in the window, clearly seeing something that wasn’t there.

They continued on in a comfortable silence, eventually making their way to a small ball park where two high-school-age baseball teams were just starting to warm up. The bleachers were maybe half full of parents and other family members; Jethro led the way to the top corner furthest away from home plate, where they sat and watched as the game got started.

“You played?” Tony asked.

Jethro nodded. “Yeah, for a while, but I preferred working on the car, and then I got serious about the Marines… plus it meant being on a team with Chuck and Ed, and it just wasn’t worth it.”

Tony grunted and applauded along with most of the spectators when the shortstop made a diving catch and then got the ball to second, resulting in a double play. They sat in silence for a while, and then Tony said, “You ever think about the long-term consequences for families? When we make the arrest and close the case, I mean.”

Jethro turned to look at him. “Or when we have to shoot, maybe kill?”

Tony nodded. Jethro watched the game for a few minutes, then smiled a bit. “Billy Fuentes.”
Tony thought for a bit, brow furrowed. “That was way back when Kate had just joined us.”

Jethro nodded. “I still keep in touch with him and his mom. Not much anymore… she remarried, Billy’s got a great stepdad now. Not military, so whenever the kid’s got questions, his mom makes sure Billy and I talk.”

Tony relaxed and sat back a bit. “Josh Cooper.”

Jethro cocked his head and looked at Tony, who grinned at him. “C’mon, this one’s easier.”

Jethro narrowed his eyes a bit, then tilted his head back and looked up at the sky. “Cooper… the Marine Colonel Sharif killed on the golf course.”

Tony grinned. “Knew you’d get it.” Jethro just looked at him questioningly, so Tony continued. “Josh just graduated Princeton. Heading to grad school in the fall… been in touch on and off.”

Jethro smiled. “The ones we can connect with, the ones who want our help…”

“… they’re the ones we can help,” Tony finished. He sighed. “Guess Chuckie-boy isn’t likely to ask for your help, huh?”

Jethro chuckled and shook his head. “No, I don’t think he would.”

“Was your buddy Ed looking to pick a fight back at the store?”

Jethro shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. Think he got his eyes opened a bit last time.”

Tony sighed and settled back against the bleachers. They watched the game in companionable silence, and when it was over they descended the bleachers with the rest of the crowd. They were heading back toward Main Street when a woman’s voice followed them from the direction of the field.

“Leroy? Leroy Gibbs?”

They both turned to see an attractive woman with long brown hair, wearing jeans and a solid t-shirt under a light jacket, standing uncertainly on the sidewalk. Her son stood next to her, wearing his team uniform and looking at her impatiently. Tony looked from her to Jethro, watching as Jethro’s brow furrowed. Then his eyes widened and his face relaxed. “Emma,” he said.

She smiled and turned to her son. “Justin, head on back to Grandma’s. I’ll catch up to you soon.” She watched him run off for a moment, then approached them both, her whole countenance open and happy. It looked for a moment as if she was going to hug Jethro, but she stopped short and hesitated. “It’s so great to see you again.”

Jethro gave her a warm smile and opened his arms, pulling her into a hug. She gave a little sob and he held her, closing his eyes for a few seconds. Then he looked at Tony and gave him a reassuring smile while he loosened his arms and she stepped back, wiping her eyes. Jethro looked down at her and smiled again, motioning to Tony. “Emma Tremont, this is Tony DiNozzo, my second in command and a good friend. Tony, Emma was one of my best friends in high school.”

She smiled and shook Tony’s hand, then gave Jethro a look. “Not just high school,” she said. She turned to Tony. “We became friends when my family moved here; I was in the fourth grade, and Leroy tried to steal the cookies Mom packed in my lunch. And it’s Collier, now… I went back to my maiden name after the divorce.”
Tony smiled at her. “A friend of Jethro’s – I mean Leroy’s – is a friend of mine.” He gave her a puzzled look. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t dessert theft usually result in war, not love?”

Emma grinned at her. “He was bigger than me –“

“Still am,” Jethro cut in.

She flashed him a smile. “– so I used the instincts of females everywhere, batted my eyelashes and offered to share. We were friends from that point on.”

“You got me back,” Jethro protested. “You put earthworms in my milk, remember?”

Tony grinned. “I can see you two have important things to catch up on… I’ll head back to the store and hang out with Jack.”

Jethro nodded, shooting him a look filled with promise. Tony smiled at him, waved to Emma, and set off for the store.

Emma watched him go for a second, then turned to Jethro. “Since when do you go by Jethro?”

Jethro tilted his head a bit. “Shannon decided she preferred Jethro to Leroy.”

The smile faded from Emma’s face a bit. “I’m sorry about what happened to your family.”

He nodded. “Appreciate that.” He reached out and took her hand, threading her arm through his. “Where to?”

“Oh, let’s just walk and talk for a bit. There’s so much to say.”

Jethro nodded. “When did you get divorced?”

Emma sighed and flipped her straight hair back over her shoulder. “A couple of years ago… almost three, actually. Steve was a great provider, a decent husband and father, but… we just realized one day that we had nothing to say to each other anymore. We’d grown apart, that’s all. He was always away on business, didn’t even know his sons very well. So we decided to split up, and I moved back here with Justin. Michael, my oldest, was already finishing college, and Kevin was about to start, so they stayed with Steve in New York. We all see each other pretty regularly, and I think Steve and I actually get along better now that we’re just friends.”

Jethro nodded. “Steve did tend to get blinders on.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah. Drove me crazy sometimes. Anyway, my parents were happy to have us move in with them, and Justin’s really thriving living in a small town. He’s got good friends and he’s doing well in school.”

They walked past the store, and Jethro glanced in the window to see Tony and Jack sitting at the table, talking animatedly. Emma followed his gaze and smiled. “Your dad must be happy to see you.”

Jethro shrugged a bit. “Guess he is.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Must be a good sign that you’re here. People wouldn’t stop talking about you and Jack and the Winslows for weeks after you left.”

Jethro laughed. “Typical. Have to rehash everything a million times over, doesn’t matter that there’s nothing new to add.”
Emma laughed with him. “You always used to get so mad when people needed to say things more than once. I wasn’t surprised you left for the Marines.”

Jethro sighed. “I’m sorry we didn’t stay in touch.”

Emma shook her head and squeezed his arm. “Don’t be. You had Shannon and the Marines to keep you occupied, and I was engaged to Steve before we even graduated high school. No regrets, Lee… water under the bridge.”

Jethro nodded and they walked on a little further. “Did you ever remarry?” she asked. “After…”

Jethro sighed. “Three times.”

“What?!”

He narrowed his eyes and looked at her sideways. “Divorced three times too.”

She gaped at him for a moment, then smiled. “Always knew you were slow on the uptake. Now I have proof.”

“Hey!”

Emma grinned and punched him lightly in the arm, then pulled him to a stop and turned him to face her. “Seeing anyone special now?”

Jethro glanced back toward the store, then looked down at her. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.” He recognized the disappointment that flitted across her face, even though it was barely there. “Hey,” he said, bringing his hand up to rest on her arm. “Remember when we went on that date the summer before junior year?”

She stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Oh, god, that was awful!”

He grinned at her. “Everything went wrong from the first second.”

She nodded vehemently. “Your car wouldn’t start. Then the movie reel broke halfway through, so we went to get ice cream–”

“– but I had a hole in my pocket and all my money was gone,” he finished.

“So I had to pay for it, and girls weren’t supposed to do that back then,” she said, eyes shining.

“But the worst part…”

“… was that kiss!” Emma finished. They both laughed. She shook her head. “I still don’t understand how that shingle managed to fall off the roof and hit you on the shoulder just at that moment. My father was ready to kill you for that split lip you gave me!”

“Don’t remind me,” Jethro groaned.

She smiled. “I guess the universe was telling us it wasn’t meant to be.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, reaching out and tucking her hair behind her ear. “Yeah.”

Emma smiled. “Don’t worry, Lee… I’m fine. And obviously you are too. Come on, let’s walk back… I need to catch up with Justin. He worries about me.”
They passed the store again, and Jethro looked in the window. Tony and Jack were still talking. He felt a tug on his arm, and looked down to see Emma smiling at him. “Tony’s a lucky man,” she said.

“Um… what?”

She snorted. “Oh, please, Leroy. You know what.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Yeah, but how’d you know?”

“Would you believe woman’s intuition?” Jethro shook his head, and she punched his arm again.

“I should introduce you to Abby,” he muttered, rubbing the sore spot.

“I know I’m no federal agent, Lee… but since when do you bring a co-worker home for a weekend? And I saw the looks you gave him just now, both coming and going.”

Jethro sighed. “Ed bought it,” he grumbled.

Emma shook her head. “You better hope so. He’s not the most open-minded guy out there.”

He grunted in agreement. “You don’t mind?”

She looked up, narrowing her eyes a little in thought. “I admit I’m a little disappointed,” she replied. “Might have been nice to see if you kiss better these days.” She grinned at the indignant noise he made. “But no, I don’t mind. I went the conventional route, and it didn’t work out in the end. Who’s to say one way’s better than another?”

They walked on a bit, and then Jethro said, “Thanks.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome. Just… can we try to stay in touch? We were good friends once. I could use another friend.”

Jethro smiled as they reached the intersection and stopped walking. He reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet, removed a card and handed it to her. “Email me at work, and I’ll send you my home number,” he said.

Emma grinned. “Good.” She looked back down the street. “Jack doesn’t mind?”

He shook his head. “He just found out today, but he doesn’t seem to mind much. He met Tony before, and they got along great.”

She nodded. “He’s a lot more tolerant than quite a few people around here. I never noticed before, when we were growing up, but after living in New York City, you really see the difference.” She looked at her watch and grimaced. “I have to go, before Justin sends out the search dogs.”

Jethro pulled her into a hug. “It really was great to see you again, Emma. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Leroy. And I will be in touch.” She pulled back, stretched up a bit to give him a kiss on the cheek, then set off down the side street, looking back to wave. He watched her go, then headed back to the store.

**Jack and Tony**

Tony refused to look back in Jethro’s direction as he walked toward the store. He knew he had nothing to worry about, he really did. Jethro Gibbs’ sense of loyalty was legendary. But still…
He sighed as he walked into the store, seeing Jack seated at the table, looking through some catalogs.

“Hey, Jack.”

“Tony!” Jack waved him into the chair directly across the table. “What have you boys been up to?”

“Walked to the ball park, watched the game,” Tony commented, grabbing a catalog and flipping through it. “Jeth ran into an old friend… Emma Collier?”

Jack nodded. “Great gal, Emma. Moved back here after she and her husband split up. Great kids she’s got too. One boy’s all grown up, works in New York, and I think the other’s finishing college soon. Her youngest goes to high school here.” Jack shifted in his chair. “Leroy and Emma, they were tight for a lot of years growing up.” Jack pursed his lips as he thought back. “They went on one date, if I remember right. Never did find out exactly what happened, but I know it didn’t go well. They stayed friends, though, and then she and the Tremont boy got together, and they were married not long out of high school.”

Tony remembered the earthworm comment and made a mental note to get the details from Jethro later.

Jack leaned forward a bit. “Can you explain all this to me, Tony?”

“All what, exactly?”

“You and Leroy. I want to understand, and I know my boy… I ask him, he’ll close up tighter ‘n a clam. You’re like me, you like to talk.”

Tony grinned, looking to the window for a moment as he saw Jethro walk past with Emma. “Okay, Jack. You ask, I’ll answer.”

Jack nodded. “So how can you both be working with those beautiful women and end up together? Abby, and Ziva? Why aren’t either of you with them?”

Tony blinked. “Both at once?”

Jack stared at him, then laughed. “You’re no gentleman, having thoughts like that,” he commented. Tony raised his eyebrows and grinned. “I resemble that remark,” he said. Then he shrugged. “To answer your question… Jethro and I have worked together for a long time. We hit it off right away when we met… that was on the job, when I was a cop in Baltimore. We just understood each other, how we worked, how we thought. Jeth recruited me for his team, and over the years we became friends, I guess. Then, not that long ago… I was having a difficult time with this one case, and we were in Jethro’s basement… I was rambling, he was actually paying attention, and I let slip that he’s really important to me.”

“So,” Jack said, “you were sweet on him from the beginning?”

Tony laughed and shook his head. “No, it wasn’t like that! But Jethro started pushing for explanations, and somehow we ended up… well, where we are now.”

Jack smiled. “Well, when Leroy was little, you couldn’t get him to stop askin’ questions. What, where, when, why, how… it just never stopped! So I guess it’s no surprise that he’s still pushy.”

Jack sat there, trying to put all the pieces together. “Leroy says he wasn’t gay before you.”

Tony nodded. “I wasn’t before him either. But – we don’t really think of us being together as making us gay, exactly, if that makes any sense. It’s just him, for me, and I guess for him it’s just me.”
“The right souls,” Jack commented.

Tony looked up and nodded. “Yeah, I suppose that’s as good an explanation as any.”

Jack sighed. “Well, life sure is full of surprises. Your people at work know?”

“Yup,” Tony answered. “They’ve all been very supportive. Only the team knows, and the Director now, but that was an accident. He’s letting us keep working together though, as long as it doesn’t affect the job.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose at that. “You’re lucky.”

“Yeah. He’s going to use what he knows as leverage, get us to take on things we might not otherwise, but it’s worth it to stay together both at home and at work.” Tony went on to explain about Seattle and taking on rookies, and Jack asked questions that once again reinforced to Tony how astute Jethro’s father really was.

“Any of this likely to be dangerous?” Jack asked.

Tony shook his head, watching again as he saw Jethro and Emma walk by the other way. “No more than usual,” he said.

Jack shifted in his chair again, then abruptly changed the subject. “Tony… Leroy talks to you, doesn’t he?”

Tony tilted his head a bit, looking at him curiously. “Probably more than to just about anyone, I think.”

Jack tapped his fingers on the table for a moment. “Can you find out for me what I’m doing wrong? I’m not talkin’ about the past, I mean now. I know I’m sayin’ or doin’ something that doesn’t sit well with him, but I’m not sure what that is.”

Tony thought about what he’d seen earlier in the store. “Umm… well, Jack – maybe you could try not to be so critical of him.”

Jack sat back a bit in surprise. “Critical? Am I critical?”

Tony shifted around uncomfortably. “Umm… well, Jack – maybe you could try not to be so critical of him.”

Tony smiled. “Will do, Jack.”

Jack grinned, then held out his hand. “Shake on it, son.”

Tony was beaming as he shook Jack’s hand. Both men turned toward the door when it opened, and watched Jethro walk in.

“How’s Emma?” Jack asked.
Jethro smiled. “She’s good.”

“Glad to hear it. You boys gettin’ hungry? I thought we could try that new Italian place over on Spring Street.”

Tony shared a smile with Jethro, then turned to Jack. “How many years has it been there?”

Jack glanced back at him as he walked toward the counter. “Not quite four years yet. Brand spankin’ new. Food’s good,” he added.

“Fine with me,” Tony said, grinning.

**Alone At Last**

Tony relaxed back into the passenger seat as they drove back to the hotel. Dinner had been good… the food was great, not exactly authentic, but closer than he would have expected. There had been a few hairy moments between Jack and Jethro… Tony had almost panicked at one point when he realized that while they’d agreed that there would be a signal, they’d never established what the signal would actually be. But when Jack started veering into dangerous territory, questioning Jethro on things better left untouched, Tony had managed to stave off disaster. It helped that Jethro was in a good mood after reconnecting with Emma.

“Emma seems nice,” Tony commented.

Jethro nodded, reaching out to grasp Tony’s hand, absently playing with his fingers while he drove. “Yeah, she always was. Was a bit of a mischief-maker, though.”

“The earthworms.”

“That would be one example, yes.”

Tony grinned. “Jack said you two went on a date once, but it didn’t go well?”

Jethro groaned, but explained it all to Tony with a smile on his face. Tony laughed so hard as the story ended with the botched kiss that he thought he might lose control of his bladder. He managed not to, though, and before he knew it Jethro was parking the car at the hotel.

They headed up to their room, and after Tony made a quick trip into the bathroom, Jethro disappeared for a while, shutting the door behind him. Tony divided his attention between the bathroom and flipping channels on the tv until Jethro finally reappeared, dressed in a worn t-shirt and an old pair of cut off shorts that Tony had never seen before.

“Nice outfit.”

Jethro snorted a bit and flopped down on the couch.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You okay?”

Jethro looked over at him. “Yeah, why?”

“You flopped. You never flop. You’re always so precise and, you know… coordinated. Always thought it was a Marine thing.”

Jethro smiled slightly. “I flop sometimes.”

Tony remembered the time in his apartment when Jethro sat sideways on the recliner, with a leg
dangling over the one arm. “Yeah, I guess you do.”

Jethro watched the channels zoom by, then said quietly, “Just want to be for a little while. That okay?”

Tony looked over at him, considering. “Of course. Here.” He handed Jethro the remote. “Just press this button to change channels. Stop when you come to something you want to watch.” Tony ducked the head slap and went into the bedroom to grab a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. He watched Jethro switch channels for a moment, noticing how tired and tense his partner looked, then headed into the bathroom again.

Tony took his time, and when he finally emerged Jethro looked a little more relaxed. Tony joined him on the couch, sitting near but not next to him, and reached out a hand to massage Jethro’s shoulder. Jethro kept watching ZNN on the tv, but he did sigh and relax back into the couch.

Tony moved from rubbing Jethro’s shoulder to massaging his neck, scooting just a bit closer to make it easier. Jethro’s eyes closed to mere slits, and he leaned back into Tony’s hand. “s’good, Tony.”

Tony smiled softly. “Not easy to be confronted with so much of your past at once, is it?”

Jethro’s eyes opened and he glared at Tony, but it was half-hearted at best. He looked back at the television and sighed. “No, it’s not.”

“You ever wonder if you and Emma…?”

Jethro smiled and shook his head. “We really only went on that date because so many of our friends thought it was weird that we were so close and not dating. It just never felt right… not easy at that age to mix friendship and romance.”

Tony nodded, shifting a little closer. A small smirk appeared on Jethro’s face, so Tony knew that Jethro was aware of what he was doing. He brought both hands into play now, one on Jethro’s neck and one sliding down Jethro’s arm to his hand, where Tony began a delicate massage. “What’s up with Jack? He gets so critical of you, but doesn’t seem to know he’s doing it.”

Jethro looked over at Tony, then shrugged. “He’s always been that way. Growing up, I knew he loved me, but sometimes that made him push harder than I liked. My mother… my mother was a buffer between the two of us, and when she died… things got strained, fast.” Jethro turned his head to look at Tony. “I know what you were doing at dinner,” he said. Tony gave him his best innocent look, and Jethro shook his head. “You were trying to get him to stop with the put downs.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, I was. But it was his idea.”

Jethro sat up and stared at Tony. “Really.”

“Yup, really. While you were walking with Emma, Jack asked me what he was doing wrong, why things were so tense. I told him what I thought, and he asked me to give him a signal, so he’d have a heads-up that he was doing it.”

“So, what… he asked for a signal and then ignored it?”

Tony gave him a sheepish grin. “Well… we kinda forgot to arrange the actual signal.”

“You… wow. I think you must have broken a rule there, Tony.”

“At least one.”
Jethro shook his head. “I know he’s trying.”

Tony hesitated, then said, “More than trying, Jethro. He accepted us, and that couldn’t have been easy.”

Jethro sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

They both relaxed into the couch, Jethro putting one arm around Tony while Tony shifted down to recline enough to rest his head on Jethro’s chest. Jethro reached out with the remote and dangled it in front of Tony’s face. “Find a good movie or something,” he ordered.

Tony grinned and looked through the Pay-Per-View options. “What kind of movie?”

Jethro reached up and ruffled Tony’s hair. “Something I don’t have to think about.”

“Guns and things exploding okay?”

“Sure, why not?”

Tony went with the first Lethal Weapon movie after finding out that Jethro had never seen it. It didn’t take long for him to realize that the repetitive motion of Jethro’s hand through his hair was actually a substitute for sanding wood. Tony smiled at the thought and soon drifted off to sleep.
Leaving Stillwater

Getting Out of Head Space

Jethro let the motion of his hand through Tony’s hair quiet his thoughts. He rarely went so far into the past in his head, preferring to dwell on his life with Shannon and Kelly when he indulged in mental time travel. Seeing Emma again had been nice and comforting in a way he wouldn’t have expected. He felt more grounded in some ways, as if he were a little more sure of his place in the world, but at the same time it was as if someone had pulled the rug out from under him. It was a confusing mix of emotions, and it was messing with his plans for the evening.

He looked over at Tony, who was fast asleep with his head resting on the back of the couch, his face slightly turned away. He felt an astonishing wave of love, protectiveness, and even possessiveness as his eyes traced the lines of Tony’s face. Tony’s delight in the tour through Stillwater, and his obvious understanding of Jethro’s own emotions concerning his past touched the older man deeply, and he suddenly felt completely in the moment and focused on his partner.

Jethro leaned forward and picked up the remote, switching off the television, since neither of them were watching it anyway. He scooted closer to Tony, who shifted a bit in response to the lack of noise but didn’t wake. Dipping his head, he brushed a gentle kiss over Tony’s neck, then another when there was no reaction. A third, with a slight grazing of teeth, caused a change in Tony’s breathing. Jethro watched and waited for Tony’s eyes to open.

“Jeth?” he asked quietly, clearly not fully awake.

Jethro tangled his fingers in Tony’s hair and pulled his head back carefully, shifting over until he was straddling Tony’s lap. He bent down and began kissing and licking Tony’s neck, biting softly, holding his head in place while Tony’s arms came up to encircle Jethro’s waist.

“God, Jeth, that feels good…” Tony’s voice trailed off into a hum of appreciation as Jethro’s free hand slid under his shirt and began rubbing Tony’s abdomen. Tony’s hands trailed up Jethro’s back, gripping his shoulders for a moment as Jethro’s lips moved from Tony’s neck to his mouth. His kisses were demanding and possessive, taking control of Tony’s mouth, his tongue holding Tony’s own at bay. Jethro shifted forward and pressed his groin into Tony’s, thrusting his hips just enough to lightly rub their erections together. That got a grunt from Tony, who moved one hand from Jethro’s shoulder to his hip, gripping tightly and trying to pull his lover closer.

Jethro gave in for just a moment, then pulled back abruptly, releasing his hold on Tony’s hair and pulling his shirt up. Tony just looked at him for a second, then smiled and lifted his arms, sitting forward a bit and letting Jethro remove the shirt completely. Jethro tugged his own shirt off, dropping it next to the couch, and reached for Tony’s sweatpants, pulling on them until Tony pushed Jethro off his lap and raised his hips enough for Jethro to remove them. Tony made short work of Jethro’s cut-offs, unbuttoning them and pulling the zipper down quickly, then taking a moment to palm Jethro’s cock before pulling the shorts down.

Jethro closed his eyes briefly, enjoying the feel of Tony’s skin on his, but opened them quickly and moved back a step, his legs hitting the coffee table just as Tony was leaning forward, his intent to take Jethro’s cock into his mouth clear. Tony looked up at Jethro, who shook his head. “Don’t want that now.”

“Later?”
Jethro grinned. “Tomorrow morning… wake-up call.”

Tony returned the smile. “You got it. What do you want?”

Jethro’s grin faded slightly, and his eyes darkened. “You, right here, on your stomach. Okay?”

Tony nodded. “Absolutely. Lube’s in the nightstand, though.”

Jethro nodded and walked quickly into the bedroom, coming back to find Tony stretched out on the large couch, his head resting on his hands, watching him.

“This good?”

Jethro’s eyes traced Tony’s back and ass while he nodded. “Perfect. Don’t move.”

Tony nodded, watching as Jethro tossed the lube onto the coffee table and moved to kneel on the couch, taking a moment to run his fingers over Tony’s back. He reached down to take his own cock in his right hand, stroking himself slowly while he moved his left to Tony’s neck, gripping firmly, holding Tony in place.

Tony turned his head just enough to see what Jethro was doing. “Nice, Jeth.” His breathing sped up a bit while he watched Jethro’s motion, feeling his fingers on his neck.

Jethro moved his hand to Tony’s hip. “Can you reach the lube?”

Tony was able to grab the tube with a bit of a stretch, and he reached back to hand it to Jethro, who shook his head and held out his hand. “Give me some.”

Tony managed to get the cap off one-handed, and put a generous amount of lube of Jethro’s fingers. He tossed the tube back on the table, and shifted around enough to watch Jethro slick his cock and then bring his fingers to Tony’s anus. He looked up, meeting Jethro’s eyes while his lover’s fingers stretched him open quickly and efficiently.

Jethro eyes were wide, his pupils dilated as he looked down at Tony. “Rough and fast okay?”

Tony met his gaze squarely. “Whatever you need, Jeth.”

Jethro nodded, letting go of his cock and shifting back, using both hands to spread Tony’s cheeks apart, holding them in place as he moved to center his cockhead on the stretched ring of muscle. Tony flattened himself against the couch, separating his legs as best he could, moving his hands to rest on the cushion above his head, gasping as he felt Jethro slide inside.

Jethro moved slowly and steadily, not wanting to hurt Tony but needing to feel in control. As soon as his balls were resting against Tony’s ass, he leaned forward, covering Tony’s body with his own and reaching up to grasp Tony’s wrists in one hand while he got a hold of his hair with the other.

Tony groaned at the feeling of helplessness combined with the glide of Jethro’s cock in his ass. Jethro hadn’t left himself much leverage with the way he was holding on to Tony, so he shifted his legs up a bit until he was able to move with quick, shallow thrusts, keeping most of his cock in Tony’s ass as he moved. He buried his face in Tony’s neck, and then let loose with a string of words while he moved, faster and faster, the words punctuating the movement.

“God, Tone, so – good. So perfect – you letting – me – do – this! Need this – need you. You’ve got – no idea – how much…”
Tony eyes were shut as he focused on the words and the sensations Jethro was evoking in him. He wasn’t getting nearly enough stimulation on his cock to come, although the feeling was building, just too slowly. Jethro’s legs were holding his own down; he could have moved from Jethro’s hold if he’d wanted to, but he didn’t. He gradually realized that Jethro’s words had been swallowed up by a sort of continuous growled moan, and he felt teeth working against his neck as Jethro’s breath began to break up the moaning with gasps for air. He could tell his lover was close, and he timed the thrusts for a moment before he clenched down hard just as Jethro bottomed out inside him.

Jethro’s hips stuttered as Tony’s muscles gripped his cock, and he bit down on Tony’s neck as he groaned out his release. He lay there, catching his breath, his full weight on Tony, listening to Tony’s small grunts as he tried to shift his hips and get some friction to his cock.

Smiling, Jethro pressed down on Tony, stilling his movement, and began kissing his neck and shoulder.

Tony gave a startled laugh. “C’mon, Jethro! Not fair!”

Jethro pulled Tony’s head back with his grip on his hair, and kissed his forcefully. Tony grunted into the kiss and gave as good as he got, pulling against Jethro’s hold on his wrists. When Jethro released him, Tony grinned and said, “If you want that wake up call, you better make me happy right about… now.”

Jethro smiled and gave him another quick kiss on the lips, then let go of him and carefully pulled out of Tony’s ass. As soon as he sat up, Tony turned over, only to be pushed back on the couch while Jethro leaned over, licking and sucking on Tony’s cockhead. Tony gasped and reached out, grabbing onto Jethro shoulder and cupping one hand behind his neck as Jethro took as much of Tony’s cock into his mouth as he could, sliding his tongue along its length as he sucked and squeezed with his lips.

Tony gritted his teeth as he got closer to coming, then tossed his head back and groaned as Jethro moved one hand off Tony’s hip to play with his balls. Tony tried to hold back, to stay on that knife-edge of pleasure, but when Jethro started to hum while he rolled Tony’s balls in his hand, he lost the fight, his hips jerking upward as he came into Jethro’s mouth.

Both men lay on the couch, catching their breath, Tony running his fingers through Jethro’s hair. Once they’d calmed down a little, Jethro sat up and leaned forward to kiss Tony lightly on the lips. Tony opened his eyes and reached up, stroking Jethro’s cheek. They looked at each other for a moment, then Jethro spoke softly.

“Was that all right?”

Tony tilted his head. “Of course. It was fun. Why do you ask?”

Jethro shrugged uncomfortably. “I… got a bit pushy there for a while.”

“Pushy?” Tony laughed. “You were domineering, not pushy!” He looked at Jethro, smiling happily. “It was great. I loved it. And you needed it that way, didn’t you?”


Tony snorted. “You know why. Your past walked up and bit you on the ass today, and it’s probably gonna do it again tomorrow.” He sat up, wriggling out from under Jethro and taking his hand. “Come on… let’s get to bed.”

Jethro followed, his need to be in control satisfied for the moment. He turned off the light as they left.
the front room, moving to the bed and climbing in as Tony did the same. Tony lay on his side and
propped himself up on one hand, reaching out with the other to caress Jethro’s chest. “I get it, Jeth…
my dad made me feel like a little kid again when he showed up at work. Took me a few days to get
my equilibrium back.”

Jethro turned his head to look at him. “How’d you manage it?”

Tony shrugged. “Watched some of my favorite movies, went clubbing with Abby, did a few things
Dad considers a waste of time… you know, helped little old ladies cross the street, donated money to
a few charities.”

Jethro’s eyes narrowed. “Really?”

Tony grinned. “Yeah… but I may have indulged in a few one-night stands that week too.”

Jethro nodded. “That’s more like it.” He yawned, and Tony reached up to ruffle his hair.

“When do you want that wake-up call?”

Jethro chuckled as he settled back into the mattress. “Checkout’s at noon. I assume we’ll be up long
before then. We’ll head over to the store, have lunch with my dad, go home after. So whenever.”

Tony smiled. “You got it, Boss.”

A First

Jethro and Tony walked into the store late the next morning to find Jack talking amiably with a few
customers gathered at the counter. He looked up and smiled broadly. “Leroy! Tony! Good morning.”

Jethro nodded, and Tony smiled and shook Jack’s hand. “Morning, Gibbs Senior.”

“You boys look well-rested,” Jack commented with a small, playful smirk.

Tony grinned, seeing Jethro in that smile, while Jethro shot his father a narrow-eyed glare. “Hotel’s
nice enough,” he ground out.

One of the customers, an elderly woman who’d been staring at Jethro since they walked in, turned to
Jack. “Is this little Leroy?” she asked.

Tony bit the inside of his mouth, trying not to laugh. He leaned in to mutter in Jethro’s ear, “Don’t
worry. There’s nothing little about you.”

The glare transferred to him, but Tony could see the humor in Jethro’s eyes.

Jack, meanwhile, was nodding proudly. “Yes, ma’am. Leroy’s here for a weekend visit.”

She turned to face Jethro, then moved forward reaching out to grasp his hand. “I’m sure you don’t
remember me… I moved away when you boys graduated high school, but I’m back now. Never
should have left, I dare say, but that’s all in the past. You used to play with my son Tommy.”

Jethro cocked his head, thinking, then smiled broadly, covering her hand with his own. “Mrs. Walsh.
It’s good to see you again, pretty as ever. How is Tuba Tommy these days?”

Mrs. Walsh giggled, blushing slightly. “Oh, you are a flatterer, aren’t you? Lord, Tommy hasn’t
touched a tuba since he started playing football back in high school, and you should remember that,
silly boy!”
Jethro grinned. “Yeah, he could get rid of the instrument, but not the nickname.”

“He’s a stock broker in New York now, but he still plays football on the weekends. He’s got three children, all quite young… he got started late,” she leaned in, her tone confidential. Her expression changed suddenly, and her grasp on his hand tightened. “Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry. I’m afraid I’d almost forgotten about your own little girl.”

Jethro’s grin faded to a soft smile. “It’s alright, Mrs. Walsh.”

Visibly flustered, she awkwardly patted his hand. “Well, don’t you worry. She and her mother are with the angels now.”

Jethro nodded, suddenly at a loss for words. Tony stepped a little closer and smiled at Mrs. Walsh. “Hi, I’m a friend of Leroy’s… Tony DiNozzo, you can just call me Tony.” he said, flashing her one of his more attractive smiles.

She blinked up at him, then giggled as she let go of Jethro and took Tony’s outstretched hand. “Well, aren’t you a handsome one?” She giggled again. “I’d just love to take you home, young man.”

“Eleanor!” Jack exclaimed.

“Oh, you hush, Jackson Gibbs!” she said, glancing at him. “One of the advantages to growing older is you can say things like that without sounding like a hussy.”

Tony’s eyes widened and his grin got even bigger. “I’m sure we’d have lots of fun together, but I have to tell you that I’m taken.”

“Well, of course you are, a looker like you. You must have them lined up for you.” She pulled on his hand, tugging him closer. “You tell her she’s a very lucky girl.”

He impulsively kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to do that.”

She giggled again and playfully smacked his arm. “Oh, you are a charmer. A dangerous one, I’ll bet.” She squeezed his hand again, then let him go, turning back to Jethro, who had regained his composure and was looking at Tony speculatively. “It was a real pleasure to see you again, Leroy. I’ll be sure to let Tommy know that we connected today.”

Jethro smiled at her. “Tell him I asked about that tuba.”

She laughed. “I most surely will!” She turned back to the counter, readying her purse as Jack rang up the sale.

Tony and Jethro wandered off toward the back of the store, where Tony stopped and just looked at Jethro with a slightly manic grin. Jethro shook his head. “Don’t even start.”

“You’re a very lucky girl.” Tony’s smile grew even broader. “Little Leroy… we need something to go with Jethro. How about Junior Jethro? Or Jolly Jethro?” He didn’t try to dodge the head slap, figuring he deserved it. “Ow.”

Jethro snorted, then moved back toward the counter when Jack called out for him. Tony followed, trying to think of more words beginning with ‘J.’

The customers had left, and Jack was leaning on the counter. “Why don’t you boys head for the deli, get us some sandwiches.”
“Sure, Dad… what do you want?”

Jack waved his hand. “I’m in the mood for a surprise today. Got a big one yesterday, and that worked out okay.”

Jethro raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

A few minutes later, they were out on the sidewalk, crossing the street, and heading for the deli. The walk took a little more than five minutes and they were both quiet; Jethro thinking about his girls and Tony thinking up more silly names that he had no intention of sharing until a more opportune moment.

Sandwiches ordered and bagged, they had just set out to return to the store when a police car’s siren sounded briefly and Ed pulled up next to them. Both men stopped and turned to face him, Tony automatically assuming his standard position just behind and a little to the side.

The cop got out of the car, and Jethro tensed slightly seeing him place his nightstick through the loop at his belt. Ed walked up to them and stopped, looking seriously at Jethro and ignoring Tony after a single contemptuous glance. “Leroy,” he said after a moment.

“Ed,” Jethro returned impassively.

The stare-down continued for a few more seconds, until Ed’s gaze shifted to the bag in Jethro’s hands. “Lunch?”

“Yeah.”

Ed nodded, then looked at Tony briefly before meeting Jethro’s eyes once more. “Be good if you two would consider heading out after you eat.”

Jethro’s eyebrows shot up. “And why’s that.”

Ed glanced at Tony again, then back to Jethro. “Don’t really need your kind here in town.”

“What kind is that, Ed?” Jethro’s tone was quiet and menacing.

“Federal agents?” Tony cut in before Ed could reply. “Or maybe the menfolk around here are worried about two such insanely handsome men poaching in their territory?” He smiled dangerously at Ed. “Leroy here, he’s like the Pied Piper… with fewer rats.” He looked at Ed and tilted his head a bit. “Still a few rats around, though.”

Ed’s face turned slightly red and the skin around his eyes scrunched up a little as he glared at Tony. “You should keep your… boy… in line, Leroy.”

Jethro blinked and looked at Tony. “How old are you, Special Agent DiNozzo?”

Tony looked thoughtfully at Jethro. “Old enough, Special Agent Gibbs.”

Jethro nodded. “That’s what I thought. Probably old enough not be called a boy, wouldn’t you say?”

Tony tilted his head back, looking up at the sky. He tapped his chin theatrically, then looked a Jethro, a big smile on his face. “I can grow a beard, you know.”

Jethro nodded seriously. “Yeah. Almost gave me beard burn this morning.”

Tony grinned, startled, and Ed made a choking sound. After shooting a vicious look Ed’s way, Tony
stepped a little closer to Jethro’s side. “That was your fault, you know… you wanted me down there.”

Jethro raised an eyebrow at Tony while Ed took a step back. Both Tony and Jethro looked at him then took a step forward.

“You got a problem with what people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms, Ed?” Jethro asked in a mild tone.

Ed visibly steeled himself and held his ground. “Don’t need it here in Stillwater, that’s all.”

Jethro looked at Tony. “Did we have sex on the sidewalk and I didn’t notice?”

Tony noted the way Ed’s hand tightened on his nightstick, glancing at it and then at Jethro, who nodded once. “Nope. Pretty sure we’ve limited the fun stuff to the hotel.”

Jethro turned to Ed. “Hotel’s not in Stillwater, Ed.”

Ed’s expression was thunderous. “Don’t need or want your influence in this town.”

Tony took a step forward. “What law have we broken?”

Ed just stared at him.

“Seems to me, if we haven’t broken any laws, you’ve got no right telling us to leave.” Tony crossed his arms in front of his chest, staring at Ed.

Ed deliberately turned away from him and spoke to Jethro. “I’m sure the director of your fancy federal agency would love to hear about what you guys get up to.”

Jethro shrugged. “Go ahead and give him a call. He already knows all about it.”

Ed stared at him and shook his head. “Just… tell Jack he should consider visiting you rather than the other way around next time.” He turned and moved quickly back to his car, getting in and pulling away without looking back at them.

Once the car was out of sight, Tony turned to Jethro and clapped him on the back. “That wasn’t how I’d expected you to handle that situation, but it worked.”

Jethro shook his head. “Easy to handle bullies… just get back in their faces. No way he wouldn’t back down when we didn’t deny it. I know him too well.”

They continued on to the store. Despite their apparent win, though, Tony was worried. “He gonna cause problems for Jack?”

Jethro shook his head. “Dad’s got too much influence and popularity in this town. Won’t be a problem, especially if we give him a heads up and he can then talk to the right people.”

Tony nodded. “How do you think he figured it out? I didn’t think we’d done anything obvious…” His voice trailed off as he tried to think back over the past couple of days.

Jethro shook his head, but the expression on his face was troubled.

They walked on in silence for a while, then Tony spoke up. “I guess we’re staying a little later than we’d planned?”
The smirk on Jethro’s face was more a baring of teeth. “You bet.”

**Jack**

Jethro and Tony reached the store, stepping back to allow a customer to leave before walking in and turning the sign to ‘Closed.’ Jack moved from behind the counter and ambled over to the table, peering into the bag as Tony started to unpack it.

“How’d you boys do?”

Tony handed Jack his sandwich as Jethro walked to the table from one of the aisles, carrying sodas and chips. “Got sandwiches,” Jethro said.

Jack shot him a look. “Well, I see that.”

Jethro grinned at him. “They why’d you ask?”

Jack shook his head and sat down, sharing a smile with Tony.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Jethro looked at the windows along the storefront. “Windows are looking dirty… Tony and I’ll clean ‘em after we eat.”

Tony choked back a laugh, while Jack looked puzzled. “Thought you boys said last night you were leaving right after lunch.”

Jethro shrugged. “Work to be done.”

Jack looked carefully at his son, then shifted his gaze to Tony. Tony glanced at Jethro, who shrugged one shoulder and glanced at his father. Tony nodded and turned to Jack. “We ran into Ed... what’s his name, the cop.”

“Gantry,” Jethro added, with a slight growl.

Jack looked back and forth between the two. “And?”

Tony sighed. “And somehow he found out that Jethro and I are together... and he doesn’t like it. Warned us to leave town right after lunch.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “Well, Ed isn’t exactly known for bein’ liberal, that’s for sure. What’d you boys do to clue him in?”

Jethro’s expression turned troubled again. “Nothing, Dad. That’s just it... only way he’d know is if someone told him.”

“You can count me out,” Jack said.

Jethro nodded. “I know.”

“So who else knows about the two of you?”

“Our friends at work,” Tony offered. “And the Director... no way any of them called and told him.”

Jethro’s fingers tapped on the table top for a moment. “And Emma,” he said slowly.

Jack’s brow furrowed. “That girl was your best friend growin’ up. She wouldn’t do that, would she?”
Jethro shook his head. “She warned me that Ed would have a problem with it.” He looked up at Tony. “I can’t imagine her telling him. She always guarded secrets.”

Tony shook his head. “Maybe someone at the hotel saw or heard something, knew where we were going…” He shrugged. “I know, it’s a long shot.”

Jack pushed his chair back a little. “Don’t guess it really matters how he knows.”

Jethro shook his head. “So,” he said, moving to his feet and gathering up the remnants of their lunch, “windows?”

Jack smiled. “You always have to push, don’t you, Leroy?”

Jethro looked at him and grinned. “Where do you suppose I get that from?”

Tony smiled at the two Gibbses grinning at each other and wished he had time to take a picture. He watched as Jethro headed for the storeroom to get the supplies to clean the windows, then turned to Jack. “Is Ed going to make trouble for you because of us?”

Jack snorted. “Not a chance. I’ll handle him.”

Tony nodded, then moved to help Jethro. A few minutes later they were out on the sidewalk, washing windows and making a point of greeting passers by. Several people who’d known Jethro personally or had met him on his previous trips to Stillwater stopped to talk to him, and he made a point of introducing Tony to all of them – as a friend, of course.

The police car pulled up across the street after they’d been outside for about half an hour. Ed got out and leaned against the car, just watching them, with his arms folded over his chest. Tony looked over at Jethro and raised his eyebrows. Jethro looked back at him and tilted his head, then smirked, set his spray bottle and cloth down on the sidewalk, and straightened up, glaring back in Ed’s direction. Before he could make a move to cross the street, though, the store door opened and Jack stepped through.

Jack set off across the street without a word, staring at Ed and walking without his cane. He marched up to the cop and leaned on the car, talking quietly but seriously. Several people stopped to look while Jethro and Tony watched. They saw Ed step back suddenly, nod once, then get back in his car and drive off, while Jack stood in the street and watched him go.

Tony grinned and turned to Jethro. “It’s like seeing future you in action.”

Jethro snorted and shook his head, watching his father come back across the street. Jack smiled as he reached them and paused at the door. “All taken care of,” he said.

“What did you say to him?” Tony asked eagerly.

Jack smiled. “A friend of mine’s on the town council… he’s got a nephew who just married his boyfriend in Massachusetts, over near Boston. Thinks the world of that boy, got no kids of his own. He’s pretty active in campaigning for equal rights.” Jack sighed and shifted his legs a bit, leaning on the door jamb. “And he’s in charge of the police department budget here in town.”

Tony laughed and Jethro smiled. “Let me guess, Dad… you told Ed it would be a shame if you had to talk to your friend about his homophobia.”

Jack nodded. “Used almost those exact same words. Told Ed I thought it would be bad for Stillwater if we couldn’t get some of that fancy new equipment he’s been lobbyin’ for in the budget.”
Jethro gave Jack a warm, open smile, and Jack grinned back at him, reaching out to squeeze his son’s shoulder. He turned to look at the window, then gestured toward one corner. “You missed a spot.”

Jethro sighed, Tony laughed, and Jack grinned at them both before he went back into the store.
Early Morning Reflections

Jethro lay in bed with his head on Tony’s chest, listening to the rhythm of his lover’s heart. It was early, even by his own standards, but he was feeling too wired to sleep.

Tony stretched and shifted a little as he slept; once he stilled, Jethro adjusted to settle back to exactly where he’d been. If he tilted his head up a little, he could just see the planes of Tony’s face; the days were long and the room was beginning to lighten, just a bit. Jethro could hear a few birds outside the bedroom windows, something he considered to be one of the advantages to staying at his house. Tony’s apartment was deep in the city and the pigeons didn’t exactly sing.

Wonder if it’s too early to talk to Tony about moving in. Jethro thought about the idea, and decided it had merit. No more splitting time between two homes… no negotiating about where to stay. Not that it’s really been a problem. Jethro tried to imagine his living room with Tony’s large flat screen tv and that incredibly comfortable couch. Movie nights would be here. That thought wasn’t as daunting as Jethro would have expected; he realized that he liked the idea of his home being filled with people and laughter and energy. Energy that hadn’t been there since Shannon and Kelly were killed.

Jethro inhaled deeply through his nose as he thought of his family, exhaling quietly through his mouth in the calming techniques he’d learned for his job as a sniper. Images of Shannon flew through his head: her smile when they met for the first time at the train station, the light in her eyes when he surprised her by coming home from deployment earlier than she’d expected, her laughter in Jack’s store while listening to three-year old Kelly telling stories.

His eyes burned with tears as he thought of his daughter, remembering details like the shirt she’d been wearing that day – the one with the big yellow bird from that kids’ show on it. Jack had given it to her as a gift when they’d arrived, and she’d insisted on changing into it right away. Shannon hadn’t wanted to give in, but Jethro couldn’t say no to his little girl. Shannon had laughed at him and told him when Kelly was older and insisted on getting her own way when she wanted to go out with boys, he’d have no one to blame but himself. He remembered protesting that cartoon shirts and teenage boys were very different, at which point Kelly had turned to him, drawn herself up to her full height, and declared, “Bi’ Bird not ca’toon, Daddy!” with such outrage that Shannon had almost fallen to the floor from laughing so hard.

Jethro sniffed and blinked the tears from his eyes, moving to hold Tony a little closer. Tony stirred, reaching up to clumsily rub Jethro’s arm.

“y’kay, Jeth?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Jethro whispered. “Go back to sleep, Tony.”

Tony hummed and turned toward Jethro a bit, resting his chin on Jethro’s head before relaxing back into sleep.

Jethro smiled slightly, thinking about how a couple of months ago memories of Kelly would have sent him to the basement to seek solace in wood and bourbon. There were no such urges now. All the more reason to get Tony to move in here. He wondered if Tony would be open to the idea; his partner was such a curious mix of independence and insecurity that it was difficult to predict his reaction. Should probably wait… he’s got enough on his mind with this Seattle assignment coming up.

Jethro shifted involuntarily at the thought of Seattle and Tony leaving at the end of the week. To his
dismay, Tony stretched again and yawned, then scooted down in the bed a bit, turning on his side and framing Jethro’s face with his hands.

“Good morning,” he said quietly, before leaning in and delivering a gentle kiss to Jethro’s lips.

“Mmmm. Morning. Didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“s’okay, Jeth… I’ve been drifting in and out anyway.” Tony let go of Jethro’s face with one hand, bringing it to his own to rub at his eyes. ‘Gonna be an interesting week.” He looked at Jethro, smiling, then cocked his head to one side and reached out to run a finger along Jethro’s cheek. “You alright?”

Jethro shot him a confused look. “Yeah… why?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed a bit. “Cause you look a little sad.”

Jethro’s immediate impulse was to deny it… but looking into Tony’s eyes he remembered that he didn’t need to. “Was thinking about my girls.”

Tony nodded and pulled Jethro closer, enveloping him in a full body hug. Neither of them spoke for several minutes, until Tony pulled back a little. “This past weekend was awesome. I loved every second of it.”

Jethro burrowed his face into Tony’s neck. “Every second?” he asked, his voice muffled.

Tony chuckled. “Well, maybe not the seconds we wasted talking to that homophobic jackass.”

Jethro snorted. “Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They lay there a little longer, each thinking back over the previous day. They’d lingered over cleaning the store windows, then found a string of odd jobs that Jack had been planning to get to. The result was that they’d left Stillwater a good five hours later than they’d originally intended.

“Best part?” Jethro asked.

Tony swallowed hard. “When we left.”

Jethro nodded, nuzzling into Tony’s neck. “My dad.”

“Yeah.”

Jethro reached up to stroke Tony’s hair, thinking back to when they left Stillwater.

*Jack walked out with them to the car parked in front of the store. “You’re keeping her in good shape, son.”*

*Jethro turned to him and smiled. “Gotta treat a lady right.”*

*Jack reached out and pulled his son into a hug. “I’m so glad you boys came to visit. You take care of him, you hear me?”*

*Jethro closed his eyes and returned the hug. “Thanks, Dad… for everything.”*

*Jack let go of him and stepped back. “Long as you’re happy, son… that’s what really matters.”*
Jethro smiled and ducked his head. Jack looked over to where Tony stood by the trunk of the car. “Tony! Get over here and say goodbye to an old man.”

Tony grinned and walked forward. Jack grabbed the hand Tony extended and yanked him forward into a crushing bear hug, almost losing his footing in the process; Jethro had to quickly move into position to keep him from losing his balance.

Tony’s eyes widened in shock; he froze for a moment, but then he returned the hug fiercely. Jack held onto him for a long time, finally letting go and stepping back to cup Tony’s face in his hands. “You’re my son now, Tony. You make my boy happier than he’s been since we lost the girls… can’t thank you enough for that. You’re always welcome here, and I hope to see both you boys back here together for many years to come.”

It took Tony a moment to regain the power of speech… when he did, his voice was husky and his eyes were bright. “Thanks... Dad.”

Jack smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. Then he turned back to Jethro. “Now, what else are you boys waiting for? You’ve got work tomorrow, and you’re wastin’ daylight!”

Shaking his head and grinning, Jethro trotted to the driver’s side while Tony impulsively leaned forward to give Jack a kiss on the cheek before getting in the car.

Jack laughed. “Impertinent young whippersnapper!”

Tony grinned and waved, Jethro started up the car, and they left Stillwater behind.

Jethro smiled, remembering Tony’s astonishment at Jack’s emotional farewell. “You’ve got to learn to accept it when people say they love you.”

Tony sighed. “If you’d grown up with my father… well, I don’t really need to explain it, do I?”

“Nope.”

Tony stretched again, lifting a hand to stroke the back of Jethro’s head. “Birds are kinda loud around here,” he commented. Jethro just raised an eyebrow. “I think I like it,” Tony added.

Smiling, Jethro leaned in and gave Tony a kiss, then licked Tony’s lips before moving to get out of bed. Tony laughed. “What’s that smirk for, Jeth?”

Jethro turned around and gave him an innocent look. “What smirk?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “You know what smirk. The smirk you smirked when you were smirking.”

Jethro laughed. “You,” he said, pointing at Tony, “are a nut.”

Tony grinned at him. “Made you laugh! I am the master.”

Jethro shook his head. “Come on, let’s get ready for work. Vance is likely to kick our collective asses today.”

Tony sighed. “I still want to know why you were smirking.”

“I’ll tell you after you get back from Seattle.” Jethro punctuated that decree with a little nod and headed for the bathroom.

“Seattle?! That’s weeks from now, Jeth! Come on, don’t do that to me.” Tony’s voice turned
wheedling as he followed Jethro to the bathroom. “You know you owe me for us getting back so late and being tired and going to sleep without sex.”

“Me?! You were the one who could barely keep his eyes open.”

“Je-eth-ro! That is so not the point… hey, do you think since we’ll be at work early we can leave early and make up for last night?”

Tony grinned as he listened to Jethro’s laughter coming from the bathroom. *Mission accomplished.*
The bullpen was empty when Gibbs and Tony arrived, coffees in hand. They went to their desks, sat
down, and powered up their computers, almost moving in unison.

Tony grinned as he saw the email Abby had sent him over the weekend on the secure server McGee
had set up for the team a few years ago.

Tonybear!!

I know you’re in Stillwater right now (OMG, Stillwater!!) so I know you won’t be able to answer me
yet, but you HAVE to tell me how it’s going! Is Jack being totally awesome? I know he likes you,
’cause he gave you that sweater. And is the hotel amazing? I got to see pictures of the suite online
when I booked it for you… TELL me you used the Jacuzzi! Wow… you and Gibbs together in the
Jacuzzi… that is way too hot. Whenever I think about it I have to block my psychic connection with
Bert, ‘cause he’s still so young and innocent.

Come see me as soon as you can… I want DETAILS.

A

“Gibbs, DiNozzo!”

They both looked up to see Director Vance standing near the corner of Ziva’s desk. “My office, in
fifteen.” He watched as they both nodded, then headed for the stairs.

Gibbs looked over at Tony, smiling as their eyes met and Tony winked. Looking back down at his
computer screen, Gibbs reached for his coffee while he opened up the next email in his inbox.

Dear Leroy,

Hope you don’t mind me following through so quickly… I’m just so happy we reconnected this
weekend, and I don’t want to lose touch again.

I hope you had a good visit with Jack; he’s such a sweet man, and he tells such great stories. He’s
offered Justin a part time job at the store, but I don’t think the school’s sports schedule will allow it.

I heard about Ed giving you a hard time… I’m so sorry that happened. Are you guys both okay? It
must be hard, having to keep your relationship a secret. Remember when Jerry Smith and Lisa Kroft
were dating junior year? They had to sneak around to hide from his parents – Jerry’s dad hated
Lisa’s dad so much! No one knew why until you did some snooping around and found out that
Jerry’s dad and Lisa’s mom had dated until Lisa’s dad moved to town… good thing you never told
Jer and Lisa about that.

Anyway, I’m off track… it’s just nice to remember the good times. Speaking of which… I have some
alone time coming up in a few weeks… Justin is going to visit his dad and his brothers in the city for
a week, and I thought maybe I could come to DC for a visit. He leaves a week from Thursday; Steve
is taking a few days off. Would have been nice if he’d done that sort of thing before the divorce, don’t
you think? That’s all in the past, though… so, if you think you’ll be around, send me some
recommendations for decent hotels and I’ll barge into your life… promise I won’t put any
earthworms in your drink.
I’d love to get to know your Tony better; we didn’t get a chance to talk. Well – I’ve rambled on enough, I’m sure you’re rolling your eyes by now. Let me know about that visit!

Emma

Gibbs looked up to see Tony standing in front of him, smiling. “Got an email from Abby too?”

Gibbs looked back at his inbox. “Nope.” He looked back at Tony. “Let me guess… she wants details.”

Tony’s smile widened to a grin. “We may have to give her some video for her birthday; that would make her year.”

Gibbs snorted. “Make her decade, is more like it.” He gestured toward the screen. “Got an email from Emma. She wants to visit in a couple of weeks.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s cool. Too bad I’ll be in Seattle… I’d love to get some of the dirt on you as a kid.”

Gibbs smirked. “She’s a good friend… won’t betray me.”

Tony smirked right back. “I dunno – she struck me more as the type who’d love to gang up on you. Bet I could convince her.”

Gibbs narrowed his eyes as he thought about it. “Maybe it’s a good thing you’ll be in Seattle.”

“Heh. Ready to brave the lion?”

“Yup. Let’s make Deerec-tor Vance happy.”

Meeting With Vance

Vance was seated at the conference table in his office and gestured for both men to sit opposite him. They did so, Tony directly across from the Director with Gibbs on his left. Vance met Tony’s eyes for a moment; Tony returned the look squarely.

“Well?” Vance asked.

“I’m accepting the promotion to lead the MCRT with Gibbs.”

Vance raised an eyebrow. “And Seattle?”

Tony nodded. “Seattle.”

A small, satisfied smile crossed Vance’s face. He turned to Gibbs. “Any problems with this?”

Gibbs shook his head. “None.”

Vance nodded. “The rest of your team going to handle the change?”

Gibbs simply nodded.

Vance looked at him for a moment, then adjusted his jacket and nodded. “Good.” He turned to Tony. “You fly out early Sunday morning.”

Tony sat forward a little, leaning on the table. “Why isn’t the special agent in charge at the field
Vance tilted his head slightly. “I’ll leave it up to Special Agent Franklin to explain when you get out there. What I’ll tell you now is that he requested the decision come from the Navy Yard.” He sat back, resting his elbow on the arm of the chair and leaning on it. “I’ll have files on the relevant personnel made available for you tomorrow, Agent DiNozzo.”

Tony sat back too. “Can we make that two sets, one for me and one for Gibbs?”

Vance’s eyebrows shot up. “Agent Gibbs isn’t going to Seattle.”

Tony laughed lightly. “Of course not. But he’s a valuable resource.”

Vance looked back and forth between the two of them. Tony shot him a wide grin. “Two for one?”

Vance shrugged a little. “Two sets.”

“Thank you.”

Vance kept his eyes on Tony as he reached over to grab two files, sliding them across the table. “Here’s the file on your new rookie.”

They each reached out, took a file, and flipped it open, paging through it as Vance spoke.

“Name’s Kevin Segel, twenty-seven, graduated top tier of his class at FLETC. Two years with the DC police before applying here. Bright, capable, has a lot of potential. Bit of a cross between Agent McGee and you, DiNozzo.” He looked at the two of them. “Work with him, evaluate him, train him. Your feedback will help determine where he fits into this agency – if he fits. He’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

He slid his chair back and stood. Gibbs and Tony glanced at each other, then closed their files, stood up, and headed for the door.

“Gentlemen.”

They both stopped and turned to face Vance.

“I don’t think I need to remind you that your private life stays out of the office if you want to keep working together.”

The corner of Gibbs’ mouth quirked up. “Think you just did, Leon.”

Vance nodded and watched as they left.

Tony turned to Gibbs as they headed for the stairs. “You don’t suppose –“

“I’m pretty sure his use of ‘office’ covers all aspects of and locations on the job, DiNozzo.”

Tony sighed. “Damn.”

**Prepping for the Probie**

Ziva and McGee were both at their desks when Gibbs and Tony returned to the bullpen. Tony tossed Segel’s file on his desk, then walked across the pen to check out the desk to McGee’s right. “McGee!”
“Yeah, Tony?”

“That’s Tony-Boss to you.”

Ziva looked up. “So, it is official?”

Gibbs nodded, keeping his eyes on his computer screen. “It’s official.” He looked up, his gaze sweeping from one agent to the other. “You’ll listen to Tony as if he’s me. Any conflicting orders, you let us know.”


Tony shot him a happy smile. “Thanks, Tim.” He glanced at Gibbs, who simply raised his eyebrows, and then looked back at McGee. “We’ve got a baby agent joining us starting tomorrow. He’ll take this desk… requisition all the tech he’ll need, get it set up by the end of today. You’ll give him the tour of the building, introduce him around. You’re getting your own probie, Probie.”

McGee’s eyes widened. “Me?”

Gibbs looked up, amused. “You. DiNozzo heads out to Seattle on Sunday.”

Ziva got up and walked over to McGee’s desk. “With whom are we working?”

While Tony brought them up to speed on the basics concerning their temporary team member, Gibbs called up his email and forwarded Emma’s message to his private account. He took a few minutes to type up a response.

Emma,

_I do remember Jerry and Lisa. Thought they got married after college._

Visit to DC is fine with me. I’ll be on call, so I can’t say how much time I’ll have, but we should be able to knock back a few beers and not have to worry about getting caught by our folks. Tony will be away… says he’s sorry you won’t be able to tell him about my sordid past.

Any of the big name hotels around here are fine. I’d offer to put you up at my place, but it’s not really fit for company and if I’m working you’re better off being in the city anyway. You driving or taking the train? If you’re driving, I’ll send you directions. If you’re coming by train, I’ll make sure someone’s there to pick you up if I can’t do it.

Keep me posted on the details… it was good to see you again.

Leroy

It was strange to sign his first name, but he felt like it would be stranger to hear her call him Jethro. He hit send, then signed out of his personal account and watched the rest of the team interact.

It was clear that Tim was excited about being in charge of the baby agent, and Gibbs was happy to see that Tony’s demeanor was already a little different; he was a damn good leader when he wanted to be. Ziva… Gibbs watched her carefully. Her history with Tony had its ups and downs, and Gibbs wasn’t entirely sure how she would react to Tony being in charge.

_No time like the present to start finding out._

Gibbs got to his feet and walked across the bullpen to the McGee’s desk, where the rest of the team
“Hey, Boss,” Tony said. “Think Vance’ll tell dispatch to keep us off the really tough stuff, what with me leaving and the ultra-probie coming in?”

Gibbs shrugged. “He wants to know what the rookies can do. We’ll have to wait and see. In the meantime, what do you think about pulling some cold cases and letting him have a crack at one?”

Tony grinned, while Ziva and McGee looked slightly surprised at Gibbs’ deferring to Tony. “Good idea, Super Boss!” He turned to Ziva. “Probette… while McGee is setting up the baby’s room, why don’t you pull some recent cold cases? Find something challenging for our newbie to sink his teeth into.”

Ziva hesitated just for a moment before she nodded and moved to the file cabinet. Tony turned to Gibbs, showing no sign that he’d noticed, although Gibbs knew that he had.

“I’m gonna head down to Abby, give her the news, and dodge most of her questions about our trip.”

Gibbs smiled. “You do that. I’ll go through the kid’s file in more detail.”

Tony returned the smile and headed toward the back elevator, while Gibbs set off for a refill first.

**Unwinding**

Jethro used his key to unlock Tony’s front door while juggling a couple of bags of take-out. He locked the door behind him, and then brought the food into the kitchen. He set it on the counter, opened the fridge to grab a beer, then headed for the living room, where Tony was sprawled on the couch with a beer in one hand and the tv remote in the other.

Jethro leaned over the back of the couch, dropped a kiss on Tony’s head and ruffled his hair, then set off for the bedroom, where he changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants. He got back into the living room in time to see Tony setting the food out on the coffee table, along with plates, silverware, and paper towels for napkins.

Tony looked up at him and smiled. “I think I love you.”

Jethro’s eyebrows shot up. “You think?”

Tony winked at him and looked back down at the containers. “You went to Mulligan’s. Their burgers are the best. And you got fries… and onion rings. I mean, fries with burgers, that’s a rule. But onion rings too? Don’t tell Ducky, he’ll kill you.”

“Hmm… which would defeat the purpose of trying to get us to eat healthy.” Jethro reached out and cupped his hand behind Tony’s neck, pulling him in for a quick kiss. “If Ducky somehow learns the truth, I’ll tell him it was a celebration.”

Tony looked up as he sat down, transferring fries, onion rings, and a large burger onto his plate. “What are we celebrating?”

Jethro reached out again and delivered a light head slap.

Tony laughed. “Kidding, Jeth. I kinda thought day one went well.”

Jethro sat down, drank some beer, then copied Tony’s actions in setting up his dinner. He popped a fry in his mouth and held out his beer until Tony tapped the bottle with his own. “Congratulations on
your promotion, Tony. You earned it.”

Tony gave him a bright smile. “Thanks, Jethro. For everything.”

Jethro grinned at him, and took a large bite out of his burger. They ate in silence until the burgers were gone, at which point Tony sat back with his plate, which was still piled with fries and rings. “So, what did Vance want?” Jethro had been about to leave with Tony at the end of a slow day of cold case files when Vance’s assistant had called him into the office.

Jethro sighed. “Wanted to know how people were reacting to the news of your promotion.”

“People?”

“Yeah… not just Ziva and Tim – other teams too.”

“Huh. And?”

“No one seems to have an issue with it. Pearson and Jones’ SFA… what’s his name, Ellis, were the only ones who asked why you aren’t being given your own team, far as I know.”

“Asked you, or Vance?”

“Laurie asked me. Told her it was because of our MCRT status, and the rookies… that’s when Ellis walked by and said he talked to Vance and Vance said you would most likely take over the team when I retire, so it made sense to start a transition.”

Tony sat up abruptly. “Seriously?!”

Jethro grinned at him. He’d been looking forward to giving Tony that little tidbit. “Yup.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “You aren’t retiring anytime soon, are you?”

Jethro shook his head. “Not planning on it.”

Tony stared at him intently for a moment, then relaxed back into the couch. “Cool.” He ate another ring, then looked at Jethro. “Tim seems good with it. Ziva was okay, too.”

Jethro nodded. “Watch her, though. Saw a few pauses before she followed through on what you asked.”

Tony nodded and sighed. “Yeah, well… that might be my fault. All that joking around… tough to take me seriously sometimes, right?”

Jethro set his plate down on the coffee table and reached out to grip Tony’s thigh. “Hey.” He waited until Tony met his eyes, then squeezed his leg a bit and continued. “She should know by now what you’re truly capable of. She can’t deal with it, that’s her lookout and her problem. You just be the leader I know you can be; she’ll come around.”

Tony laid his hand on Jethro’s. “Thanks.” He stared off into space for a minute, then roused himself and looked at Jethro’s plate, reaching out to steal a fry. Jethro immediately took one from Tony’s plate. “That all Vance wanted?” Tony asked.

“More or less. Said he can’t find any precedent for co-leaders on a team, not without a transfer or retirement as a contributing factor. So we’re an experiment. Also said he’s not telling the new guy about our relationship, and he suggests we keep it under wraps.”
Tony nodded. “That’s what I figured. Already told everyone in the know to keep it to themselves.”

“Good.” Jethro finished off the last of his fries and set the plate down, relaxing back into the couch, his hand still on Tony’s leg. “How was Abby?”

“Pissed that you didn’t go see her today. Asked a ton of questions… I deflected with a hugely embellished story about how Jack reacted to our little confession.”

“I saw her when she came upstairs for lunch. So… embellished?”

“Yup. Amazing declaration of love you made, to get him to see reason.”

“She didn’t buy that.”

Tony grinned. “Nope. But she still got all teary and went on about me saving you again.”

“You saved me again?”

“No, I mean she went on about it again.”

“Ah. Got any idea what she’s talking about?”

“Not really. Ducky probably does.”

“Mmm.”

Tony picked up the remote and flipped channels for a while. Jethro sipped at his beer and kept his hand on Tony’s leg, absently rubbing and massaging. Tony stopped flipping at an old black and white movie and tossed the remote onto the table, sighing loudly. Jethro turned to look at him, a small, crooked smile on his face. “What’s on your mind?”

Tony shook his head, looking down at his beer bottle and picking at the label. “You think this is going to work? Leading the team like this, I mean. Should we divide things up somehow? I mean, I know you said things are different and it’s not like when you came back from Mexico, but I don’t want us to end up stepping on each other’s toes again.”

Jethro gave the question the consideration it deserved, taking a moment to finish off his beer before answering. “I think we’ll be fine. I wasn’t a hundred percent back then, and we had to get past some things. We seem to be on the same page most of the time, so I don’t see that there will be a huge problem.”

Tony pursed his lips as he thought it over. “I’m gonna keep calling you Boss, you know.”

Jethro smiled. “And I’ll continue to give you orders, you know that. Habit. We’ll work it out. As long as we don’t start contradicting each other in front of the rest of the team, we’ll be fine.”

Tony looked over at Jethro, taking a deep breath and exhaling noisily. “Yeah… we’ll be fine.” He gave Jethro a small smile before squeezing his hand and then gathering up plates and silverware and taking them into the kitchen.

Jethro watched him as he walked out of the room, then picked up all the trash, tossed it into the take-out bag, grabbed the empty bottles, and followed Tony into the kitchen. The bag went into the garbage, the bottles onto the counter, and then Jethro went down the hall to hit the bathroom, coming back into the kitchen a few minutes later. Tony was finishing up, drying his hands, when Jethro came up behind him, putting his arms around Tony’s waist and resting his chin on his shoulder.
“Got any plans for the rest of the evening?” he asked, rubbing his hands over Tony’s abdomen.

Tony leaned back into him. “Not really… thinking brushing my teeth is a good idea, after those onion rings.”

Jethro smiled and nipped Tony’s neck. “We both ate them. So, no problem.” He lifted Tony’s t-shirt and slid his hands down to the waistband of Tony’s sweatpants, running the tips of his fingers along the edge.

Tony sucked in a breath and reached down to grip the countertop. Jethro smiled against his neck and slipped his hands inside Tony’s pants, humming in appreciation as his fingers went directly to Tony’s cock with no boxers to get in the way. One hand dipped lower to play with Tony’s balls while the other encircled his cock and slowly moved up and down along the shaft.

Tony groaned softly and let his head fall back onto Jethro’s shoulder, spreading his legs a little. “Jethro… ah, that’s so good.”

Jethro continued to massage Tony while he kissed and nipped his neck, burrowing his nose into Tony’s skin and inhaling deeply. He let go after a moment, getting a wordless indignant protest from his lover, and moved his hands up to grab Tony’s pants and pull them down to mid-thigh. He did the same with his own, and then grasped his own dick in one hand, jacking it and spreading pre-come all along its surface while the other hand returned to Tony’s and gave it the same treatment. Tony was breathing hard and shifting restlessly; Jethro shifted his legs until he could bring his slick cock between Tony’s thighs, letting go and tapping Tony’s leg to get him to change his own stance and trap him securely between them.

Jethro brought his free hand up under Tony’s t-shirt, splaying his fingers over Tony’s chest. He dropped his forehead to Tony’s shoulder and began thrusting between his legs while jacking Tony off in earnest. Tony grunted and gasped and picked up on Jethro’s rhythm, still hanging on to the counter. There were no words, just the sound of their breathing punctuated by moans escaping through gritted teeth, and gasps from Tony as Jethro’s hand threw in a twist or the sweep of a thumb over the head of his cock.

Jethro slid his hand down from Tony’s chest to encircle his waist, holding Tony tightly against him, his mouth falling open as his breathing sped up and his hips moved faster. He was so close already… he groaned and he tried to hold on, dimly aware of Tony making noise with every thrust, feeling him tense more and more – and then Tony cried out as he came, his rhythm faltering, and Jethro let go and came with him, growling out his release and holding on as tightly as he could.

They stayed like that while they each caught their breath, Jethro’s hand falling away from Tony’s softening cock and Tony shifting his legs apart. Then Tony turned around in Jethro’s arms, reaching up to gently take hold of his lover’s face, kissing him softly, running his tongue over Jethro’s lips and dipping it inside his mouth. Jethro’s hands moved to Tony’s hips, holding him loosely now, and they stayed there for several minutes, kissing and nibbling and nuzzling into each other.

Tony eventually pulled back a little, murmuring “love you,” reaching down to pull Jethro’s pants back up, and then his own. He gave Jethro a little push toward the hall. “Shower? I’ll clean up in here, be there in a minute.”

Jethro nodded and leaned in to brush a quick kiss over Tony’s lips, then headed for the bedroom, looking back to see Tony reaching for some paper towels with a smile on his face.
Finally, I really am terribly sorry for how long it’s taken me to get his chapter done. (Yeah, Gibbs, I’m breaking a rule, get over it.) Work prep, work stress, Tropical Storm Irene (no major damage, but tons of community disruption and a week’s delay in getting back to work), a car accident (I’m fine), and major writer’s block on this story all contributed to the delay. But I’m here, and I think I can keep it going now, although I’m not going to be foolish enough to promise any particular deadline for updating.

Many, many thanks for all the reviews and alerts and especially to those of you who have encouraged me and supported me over this past month. Special thanks to slashscribe for the beta read and helping me to get back on track and regain some of my confidence with this story. Also particular thanks to gosgirl for the thoughtful and encouraging reviews over the past couple of days, which gave me the final push to get this chapter done.

Enter the Rookie

Gibbs looked up from his computer, picking up his third coffee of the morning and surveying his team… those of it that were there, anyway. McGee was fine-tuning the new computer and other electronics now sitting on what would be Agent Segel’s desk, in the cubicle to McGee’s right. Ziva was on the phone with someone from Israel, judging by the Hebrew she was speaking. Gibbs glanced over at Tony’s chair; it was empty, had been since Abby had called Tony down to her lab a few minutes ago. Gibbs’ lips twitched in irritation as he considered the fact that soon that chair would be empty for much longer and Tony wouldn’t just be a couple of floors away.

“Special Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs looked up to see Vance standing at the corner of McGee’s desk. A young man stood next to him, wearing a jacket and tie, sporting a Mediterranean complexion, dark curly hair and glasses, with a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. Vance nodded at Gibbs and motioned toward the rookie with one hand.

“This is Agent Segel. He’ll be joining you for the foreseeable future. I expect you’ll extend him every courtesy and help him fit into your team.”

Gibbs got to his feet and moved around his desk, walking forward until he was facing Segel, who was about an inch shorter than he was. Segel met his gaze squarely, earning a nod of approval from the team leader, who turned toward his other agents, waving them forward. “Senior Field Agent McGee and Special Agent David,” he said. McGee glanced at Gibbs, smiling at his new title, then stood and extended his hand to Segel, who grasped it firmly.


Segel grinned at that. “Harvard Law, didn’t finish.”

“Too boring?” Ziva inquired. Segel looked at her, and for the first time appeared a bit uncertain. Ziva
extended her hand to him. “I am Ziva. You are Kevin, yes?”

Segel took her hand hesitantly. “Um, yeah. Hi.”

Ziva gave him a coquettish smile. “I am very happy to see you.” She turned to McGee. “Now I will not be the low person on the pole-dance!”

All four men stared at her. Ziva’s gaze shifted from one to the other. “Did I get that wrong?”

Gibbs ducked his head a bit and smiled, while McGee cleared his throat. “Uh, it’s a totem pole, Ziva. Not a pole-dance.”

“Are you sure, McGee?”

“Very.”

Vance cleared his throat. “I’ll leave you with your new team, then, Agent Segel. Good luck.”

With a slightly wide-eyed look at Ziva, Segel turned to Vance and nodded. “Thank you, Director.” He then turned back to Gibbs, waiting expectantly.

Gibbs glanced at Ziva, who was muttering to herself, her head tilted to one side as she worked on her idioms. Shaking his head, he looked at McGee. “Show him around, McGee. Bring DiNozzo back here while you’re at it.”

“You got it, Boss.”

Gibbs glanced at Segel again, giving him a brief nod, then returned to his desk. McGee waved at Segel’s desk, and the young man slung his bag off his shoulder and set it on the chair. “DiNozzo?” he asked.

McGee nodded. “Tony DiNozzo. He’s just been promoted to team co-leader, along with Gibbs. They lead the team, but I’ll be the one working with you directly, overseeing your training.”

Segel nodded, then glanced back at Ziva. “She really a field agent?” he asked quietly.

McGee looked over at Ziva and then back at Segel. “Uh, yeah, she’s an agent. She was a liaison officer with Israeli Mossad before that – been here about five years.” He raised his eyebrows at Segel. “Why do you ask?”

Segel was still looking at Ziva. “She so… small. And pretty.”

“Just wait until you see her in action,” McGee said, biting his lip to keep from laughing.

Segel shot him a clearly disbelieving look. “Whatever you say.”

McGee smiled and clapped Segel on the shoulder. “Come on, I’ll give you the tour, introduce you around. You familiar with the area?”

Gibbs listened as their voices faded away, making a mental note to schedule time in the gym for the next day.

Black Ops

Tony stopped short as he walked into Abby’s lab. The ceiling lights were off; the various computer screens were providing some illumination, along with a group of candles sitting on the evidence
table, which was otherwise empty except for what looked like a black manila folder.

“Abby?”

The door to the inner room slid open, and Abby peered around the corner. She was wearing a large black floppy hat, and a black mask that covered the top half of her face. “Tony!” She darted into the room, running toward him, with a black cape cascading from her shoulders.

Tony grunted as she careened into him, his arms coming up automatically to pull her into a hug. He regained his balance as she pulled back, and looked at the rest of her outfit: a black shirt with puffy sleeves, a black mini-skirt, and thigh-high black boots with platform heels.

Abby twirled in a circle. “What do you think?

Tony opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “Zorro film festival?”

Abby stopped and frowned at him. “No, silly!” She grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the table, motioning to the folder lying next to the candles, with the words ‘Black Ops’ written in calligraphy with a silver glitter pen.

She handed him the folder with a dramatic flourish. “This is your mission, Tony.”

“Um… okay.” Tony opened the folder and held it close to the candles so he could see the paper inside, then began reading out loud. “Black ops mission for Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo… gather baseline information for the newly reinstated GSS version 2.0… Abs? You’re starting up the Gibbs Smile Scale again?”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down!” Abby looked furtively from side to side. “You’re going to Seattle, Tony! You’re leaving Gibbs all alone, and we have to have his six and make sure he’s okay. Without you, he could fall into the Pit of Despair!”

Tony grinned. “Nice Princess Bride reference, Abs!”

She smiled back. “Thank you. McGee and Ducky are going to supply data once you’re gone, and we’re going to keep you updated with regular communications – encrypted, of course – so that you can respond appropriately.”

“Encrypted? You sure that’s necessary?”

“Tony! We’re fighting against the universe here! Things have gone so well, and now they’re descending into chaos again. You’ve been doing such a great job saving Gibbs, and now you’re being taken away from him, and he could revert back to Grumpy Gibbs, which in and of itself isn’t too bad, because he’s still always nice to me, even when he’s all growly, but that’s not the point!”

Tony blinked at her. “What was the point, again?”

Abby huffed at him. “We’ve got to make sure he doesn’t go off the deep end after you leave! You know how much he keeps his feelings hidden!” She began pacing around the room. “Although I guess he doesn’t keep them hidden from you much anymore. I mean, considering how well you guys are doing, he’s probably pretty open with you. Hey, do you think the Director is in league with the universe? He could have been recruited by entropy… of course, that assumes that we can personify entropy, which could actually be linked to mythology, when you consider Loki, or Coyote, or any of the tricksters…”

Tony felt a headache coming on. “Abby…”
The sound of a throat clearing came from the direction of the hallway. Tony and Abby both turned to see McGee standing there with a young man next to him. The unknown man’s eyes were like saucers as he stared at Abby.

“Hey hey!” Tony exclaimed as he moved toward them, hand extended. “You must be our new baby agent!”

Segel’s eyes narrowed slightly, and he shook Tony’s hand, gripping hard. Tony grinned. “Nice grip, Ultra-Probie!”

“You’re DiNozzo?” Segel asked, disbelief clear in his voice.

“The one and only.” Tony answered.

“Co-team leader,” Segel stated flatly.

Tony’s smile grew wider. “Yee-up.”

“Okay.” Segel let go of Tony’s hand and looked at McGee, who smiled back at him.

“Rule 8,” McGee said helpfully.

“What?”

The other three spoke in a chorus, “Never take anything for granted.”

McGee went on to introduce Segel to Abby, who gave him a perfunctory smile.

“Be nice, Abs,” Tony said in a stage whisper.

Abby made a face at him. “He’s just another sign of the increasing disorder that we’re faced with!” Her eyes narrowed and she turned to face Segel. “No offense, but the timing on this really sucks.”

Segel blinked and looked at McGee, who nodded toward Abby. “Abby is one of the foremost forensic scientists in the country.”

Abby smiled at McGee, then looked seriously at Segel. “I can kill you and leave no forensic evidence. So behave yourself.”

Segel looked over, eyes lingering on her costume. “This some sort of bizarre hazing thing?”

Abby glared at him, then looked at McGee. “Get him out of my lab, McGee!”

McGee winced, and glanced at Tony, who shrugged. He looked at Segel. “Uh, let’s go on down to Autopsy. You’ll meet Dr. Mallard and his assistant, Jimmy Palmer.”

Segel looked at Abby again, glanced at Tony, then turned away and followed McGee to the door. “Interesting team you’ve got here, McGee. Looks like you’re the only normal one in the bunch.”

“Keep your voice down!” McGee hissed at him. He glanced back at Abby and Tony and grimaced; even in the low light he could see the anger radiating out from Abby’s stiff posture, and the dangerous grin on Tony’s face. “Great,” he muttered, leading Segel out the door.

**Appearances and Attitude Adjustments**

Tony sighed as he flipped through one of the personnel files he’d brought home. He tilted his head to
one side, stretching his neck and grimacing a bit.

“You okay?”

He looked up, smiling a little at Jethro, who was stretched out next to him on the couch in Tony’s apartment, feet propped up on the coffee table.

“Yeah, I’m alright. Just tired, I guess.”

Jethro reached out to squeeze Tony’s shoulder. “Interesting day.”

Tony snorted at that and shook his head. “Rookie’s gonna be trouble.”

Jethro shot him a small grin. “Not for long.”

“Yeah, no kidding. When’s our gym time again?”

“Early in the morning. Figured we might as well get it done fast. Attitude adjustment can take a while.” Jethro looked meaningfully at Tony.

“Hey! I resemble that remark.”

Jethro’s eyes narrowed as he delivered a light smack to the back of Tony’s head. “You never made assumptions about people based on appearances. And you backed up the attitude with excellent on-the-job performance.”

Tony grinned at the compliment. “Aw, shucks.”

Jethro rolled his eyes, then grabbed Tony’s hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing the back lightly and rubbing his thumb over the skin before setting it back down on the couch and patting it gently. He refocused on the open folder on his lap, leaving Tony to his own thoughts.

The day had gone downhill from the time Segel had left Abby’s lab with McGee. The kid had potential, having found new leads on two cold case files that afternoon, but his inability to see beyond his first impressions of the team was likely to cause serious problems.

Tony had reacted to Segel’s obviously low opinion of him by acting even more like the truly obnoxious Tony of old. Gibbs had watched but hadn’t said anything, only raising an eyebrow occasionally. And Segel’s chivalry toward Ziva… at first she’d reveled in it, but when it became obvious that he thought of her as helpless, she’d started glaring and sharpening her knife.

The worst of it had been when Segel managed to offend the entire team at one time. Abby had come upstairs to have Gibbs sign off on a few reports; she’d changed back into normal Abby-wear, which had included heavy-duty black ankle boots with metal studs, rainbow-colored knee-high socks, the black mini-skirt, and a white t-shirt with black trim sporting a diagram of the Milky Way with an arrow and a sign saying ‘You are here’ along with a red studded dog collar.

Segel had snorted in amusement when she’d walked past his desk. She’d ignored him, but Gibbs had sat up and stared coldly at the rookie until he’d turned red and lowered his eyes. A low growling noise came from Tony’s direction, and the scrape of metal on metal sounded from Ziva’s desk. McGee whispered angrily at his probie while Abby and Gibbs went over her reports, a process that included Gibbs fighting with his computer. At one point Gibbs had smacked the monitor, and Segel, who’d been standing at McGee’s desk, had snorted again and in an undertone that was a shade too loud, commented, “How the hell has this guy lasted so long?”
The bullpen had gone quiet, and Segel and McGee had looked up to see everyone staring at Segel with varying degrees of annoyance. Abby and Ziva appeared positively murderous, Tony’s stare was cold and angry, and Gibbs himself simply sent an icy smirk in Segel’s direction. It surprised no one when McGee took the earliest opportunity to send his charge downstairs to spend some time with Ducky and Palmer.

Tony shook his head and sighed again, then tried to refocus on the file on his lap. Vance’s assistant had delivered two sets of files that afternoon, and this was the first chance they’d had to look them over. Besides the cold cases, Tony had also started introducing McGee to some of the more administrative aspects of being a senior field agent, and that was taking a while. For a guy who was such a wizard with computers, McGee had had a difficult time keeping all the various forms and other responsibilities straight. But Tony supposed that was to be expected, since McGee had only had a few hours as Senior Field Agent, and was obviously already stressed about Segel’s issues.

He felt a tap on the back of his head, and looked up to see Jethro smiling at him. “Focus, Tony.”

Tony wrinkled his nose at the other man and bared his teeth. “Don’t wanna.”

Jethro raised his eyebrows. “Why not?”

Tony glared down at the file on his lap. “Just feels like we should be doing something else… I know it’s only Tuesday, and I don’t leave until Sunday… but I feel like I’m wasting time.”

Jethro tossed his own file onto the coffee table, then reached forward to do the same with the one on Tony’s lap. He got up and moved over until he was straddling Tony, knees on the couch cushions, and reached up to place both hands on the sides of Tony’s head. He stared seriously into Tony’s eyes, then leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. Pulling away, he looked into Tony’s eyes again, then dropped his gaze on Tony’s mouth, tracing his fingers over Tony’s lips and then across his face and down onto his neck, following his fingers with his eyes until he brought them back up to Tony’s mouth and finally replaced them with his own.

Tony closed his eyes and sighed, bringing his hands up to Jethro’s back and hair. They kept the kisses light at first, lips meeting lips, all slide and touch and wet. Then Tony pulled Jethro a little closer, humming in the back of his throat as he tightened his grip on Jethro’s hair and brought his tongue out to play. Jethro matched him stroke for stroke, moving closer to Tony and pressing him back into the couch. Their tongues slid together, caressing, and Tony groaned a bit as Jethro leaned into him even more, one hand on the back of Tony’s head now, the other sliding down over Tony’s chest and abdomen, resting just above Tony’s belt for a moment before pulling his shirt out of his jeans, then sliding underneath to rub slow circles over Tony’s skin.

Then it was Jethro’s turn to make noise, growling deep in his throat as Tony moved his hand from Jethro’s back to his belt, opening it and making short work of the button and zipper. Tony’s left arm tightened around Jethro’s back as his right hand dipped into Jethro’s pants and closed around his erect cock. He squeezed just enough to make Jethro grunt and thrust forward, and then Jethro’s hands moved to Tony’s belt, returning the favor until Tony’s cock was freed, just as hard and eager as Jethro’s.

Jethro pushed Tony further back against the couch, shifting to center his weight over his knees and reaching up to put his left arm around Tony’s shoulders, leaning down to kiss and nip at Tony’s neck. Tony’s head went back and he gasped into Jethro’s ear. “Jeth – oh, man, so good… yeah, right there, don’t stop, don’t ever stop…”

Jethro smiled against Tony’s neck and bit lightly again, then took his hand from where he’d been stroking Tony’s cock, ignoring his lover’s protest to cover Tony’s hand with his own, the two of
them together pumping Jethro’s erection until Jethro made a noise between a growl and a moan, halting the movement of Tony’s hand, lifting it off his cock and shifting forward on his knees until both their dicks were pressed together. Jethro let go of Tony’s hand as soon as it encircled them both, then wrapped his hand around both cocks as well, guiding Tony into a slow rhythm that made both of them shudder.

Words failed Tony as Jethro thrust their cocks together, moving in time with their hands. Tony pulled Jethro as close as he could and just hung on as they moved faster with pre-come smoothing the way. Jethro’s mouth found Tony’s again, and their kisses turned more hungry and frantic as they got closer to climax. Tony whined low in his throat while Jethro’s growls got louder and deeper; their hands moved faster and faster until suddenly Jethro pulled back from Tony’s mouth, his head dropping to his lover’s shoulder and his hips stilling as he cried out wordlessly and came all over them both. Tony followed quickly, the sounds Jethro was making sending him over the edge as well.

They sat there, breathing heavily and making small, satisfied noises until Jethro sat up and pulled back, caressing Tony’s face and running his fingers over Tony’s lips again before leaning in to kiss the tip of his nose. He shifted off Tony’s lap, moving gingerly to keep from getting their combined semen everywhere, disappearing down the hall for a few minutes. Tony didn’t move, just lay there, looking up at the ceiling and breathing, a small smile on his face.

Jethro returned wearing a clean shirt and sweatpants, carrying a hand towel and a set of clothes for Tony. He cleaned Tony off, helped him stand up and change, then took the soiled clothes back down the hall while Tony just sat on the couch and watched.

Once he was done with clean up, Jethro returned to his former seat on the couch, reaching over to grab the files off the coffee table, holding one out to Tony while he settled back with the other one. Tony stared at the file and made a small whining noise in the back of his throat, but took it from Jethro and opened it back up. Smiling, Jethro reached out to take Tony’s hand while he opened up his own folder.

They read through the pages for a while, then switched folders and read those as well. Finally Tony closed the second file and looked up to see Jethro watching him, an expectant look on his face. Tony gestured toward the file on his lap. “Both seem like good candidates… I can see why it’s not an easy decision.”

Jethro nodded. Tony narrowed his eyes slightly as his partner’s refusal to give anything away, then tilted his head a bit. “You know the Special Agent in Charge... what’s his name… Morris Franklin?”

Jethro stretched a bit and nodded again. “Met him a couple of times when he was a field agent and then a team leader. Good man, solid agent. Can see him doing really well behind a desk; he understands politics.”

Tony considered that. “Any idea why he’s passing the buck on this decision?”

Jethro shook his head. “Could be for a number of reasons… anything from they’re evenly matched and he doesn’t want to just toss a coin to personal relationships with either or both of these agents, or even just office politics.” Jethro shrugged and scratched his head. “He’ll be straight with you, at least in private, as long as he doesn’t feel he’s going to cause any bias.”

“Ethical guy,” Tony commented.

“Yeah.”

Tony looked down at the folder on his lap, then picked it up and tossed it up on the coffee table. Jethro
did the same with his and leaned back, yawning as he did. Tony rested his head against the back of
the couch, looking at Jethro and smiling. “Tired, huh?”

Jethro nodded, reaching over to take Tony’s hand and thread their fingers together. “Annoying day.”
He looked over at Tony and smiled gently. “Except for that last part.”

Tony grinned and squeezed Jethro’s hand. “I’m looking forward to seeing Ziva in the ring with
Segel,” Tony commented, with a smirk on his face.

“Oh, yeah.”

Tony grinned at him. “You notice that Segel kinda looks like Palmer?”

Jethro snorted. “They hit it off pretty well. Were talkin’ and laughin’ like a couple of school girls
when I went to see Ducky.”

“Figures. Knew we shouldn’t have let the gremlin get wet.”

Jethro laughed at that, then yawned again.

“That’s it,” Tony said. “Bedtime for bosses.”

Jethro snorted but let Tony pull him up to his feet. They left the folders where they lay, and Tony
went to the front door to check that it was locked before following Jethro into the bedroom. Several
minutes later they were both under the covers, and Jethro yawned yet again before he shifted over to
take up his usual position of using Tony like an overgrown teddy bear. Tony smiled and ran his
fingers through Jethro’s hair. “Guess our little session on the couch was too much for you.”

“Stupid rookie attitude, stupid Vance, stupid Seattle…” Jethro muttered. He placed a kiss on Tony’s
chest and snuggled closer.

“You know,” Tony said in a soft voice, “if anyone had told me you were a cuddler, I’d have tested
their blood alcohol level.”

Jethro huffed out a laugh, and Tony smiled, stroking his fingers through Jethro’s hair, waiting to feel
his lover relax into sleep before closing his own eyes.
Rule Eight

Working Out

Tim McGee sat on the bench in the locker room, leaning over to tie his sneakers and tilting his head slightly to watch his probie getting ready. Kevin Segel simply oozed confidence, and McGee shook his head slightly, huffing in annoyance as he remembered his own probie days. He’d never said anything to Tony, but he knew he owed the older man a lot for getting him to toughen up and build his self-confidence. McGee chuckled quietly, thinking that just the day before he’d been trying to remember everything Tony had done to help him along… and now it turned out that if anything, Segel needed an anti-Tony. Building up the kid’s ego was definitely not the way to go.

Sighing quietly, McGee sat up and watched Segel smoothing his hair in the mirror. Tony doing it before a workout was a harmless quirk; Segel doing the same thing was an irritation. McGee tilted his head as he watched Segel pose a few times and wondered if it would be a serious breach of his new senior field agent status to record Segel’s actions on his phone and share with the rest of the team.

“Where’s everyone else?”

McGee blinked at the question, then looked around the locker room. It was empty of course… he’d gotten Tony’s text earlier that morning, telling him to bring Segel to the gym at 8:30. He figured the others were already warmed up and ready to put on a show for the rookie’s benefit.

“Already working out. Don’t worry, we’re not late.”

Segel shrugged. “I’m not worried. Figure they’ll need the extra warm up since I’m so much younger than they are.”

McGee barely restrained his startled laugh. “Uh, Kevin… you might want to rethink that approach.”

“What? Gibbs has to be close to retirement, and DiNozzo doesn’t seem like much of a challenge.”

“You left out Ziva.”

“Oh, well, you know… I mean, I’ll go easy on her, right?”

McGee blinked and stared at Segel for a moment. The young man positively oozed with sincerity.

“Done a lot of hand-to-hand?”

“Top of my classes at FLETC,” Segel announced proudly.

McGee nodded thoughtfully, then gestured toward the door and began walking. “That’s good… just remember, Gibbs is a Marine, and he taught Tony most of what he knows. And Ziva’s training is Mossad, so they’re all going to have moves you’re not familiar with.”

“Was.”

“Excuse me?”

“Gibbs was a Marine, right? I mean, he hasn’t been one in years.”

McGee laughed quietly as they walked into the gym. “Once a Marine, always a Marine, Kev.”
Whatever reply Segel was going to make died as they walked into the gym and saw the gathered crowd. It looked like every agent who could be there was there, along with quite a few of the other staff members. McGee even spotted Vance’s assistant off to one side, chatting with one of the secretaries from Human Resources. *Guess everyone’s heard about Segel’s attitude,* McGee thought. He looked over at Ziva, who was warming up with some sort of combination of tae kwon do and… well, something he didn’t recognize but which was obviously lethal.

Turning his attention to the ring, McGee saw Tony and Gibbs circling each other warily, each looking for an opening. They’d been at it a while already, if Tony’s mussed hair and the bruise on Gibbs’ arm was any indication. Both of their t-shirts were wet with sweat, and they were barefoot. It was a serious contest then, something which McGee hadn’t seen recently. But he figured they must have been practicing, given the move he saw Tony make: a quick feint left, then a sudden duck and spin to the right, just managing to clip Gibbs on the leg before the older man danced out of the way. *No way Tony would have gotten even that hit in a few years ago.* The proud grin on Gibbs’ face, fleeting though it was, told McGee everything he needed to know about who’d been coaching Tony.

They watched in silence for several minutes; McGee noticed Segel pale slightly as Gibbs managed a move that took Tony down hard onto the mat. Then Gibbs was up on his feet, extending a hand to Tony, who grinned ruefully. “Never can manage to see that one coming, Boss.”

Gibbs grinned, showing teeth. “Should send you to boot camp with the Marines, DiNozzo. You’d learn then. Self-preservation.”

Tony grinned back, and they resumed circling.

Ziva walked over to stand next to McGee. “I believe I am next in with Gibbs,” she commented. Segel’s eyes flicked over to her and then back to the two men in the ring. For once, words seemed to have failed him.

“What’s with the crowd?” McGee asked Ziva quietly.

She glanced around and smiled. “I think invitations were issued.”

“Really? Who -?”

“Gibbs.”

“No way.”

Ziva glanced at him. “I believe the proper response is ‘way,’ yes?”

McGee turned to stare into the ring. “He must have been really pissed.”

Ziva shrugged. “Your rookie insulted Abby,” she said quietly.

McGee glanced at Segel, but he didn’t seem to have heard; he was fixated on the ring, where Tony and Gibbs were now both down on the mat, grappling fiercely. They seemed to be doing more street fighting than anything else, and Segel paled even further. McGee leaned in and whispered, “The bad guys don’t follow any rules, Kevin.”

Ziva snorted in agreement, and they all watched as Gibbs finally got the upper hand on Tony, pinning the younger man by straddling his waist and gripping him at the wrists. Tony made a half-hearted attempt to get up, then let his head fall down to the mat. Breathing rapidly, he grinned up at his partner. “Ya got me, Boss. Good to see you haven’t lost your touch!”
Gibbs smirked and glanced down the length of Tony’s body; Tony responded by wiggling his eyebrows. Gibbs rolled his eyes and let go, getting to his feet and giving Tony a hand up again. McGee looked over at Ziva, who had that speculative look on her face again. “I should have gotten a picture to send to Abby,” she murmured.

Gibbs looked over the crowd; McGee expected a sarcastic comment that would send their audience fleeing out the door, but there was nothing, just a crook of his finger in Ziva’s direction. She smiled happily and moved to the ring, saying something in passing to Tony as he slipped through the ropes and jumped down. Whatever it was must have been quite suggestive, since Tony actually blushed.

Tony grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink, then headed over to where Segel and McGee were watching the show. He grinned at McGee, then moved to stand next to Segel, slapping him on the back. “Hey, Probie! Ready to show us some moves?”

Segel gave him a wan smile. “Um… will I be in the ring with Agent Gibbs?”

Tony shook his head. “Nah, we’re starting you off with Ziva. She’s got some good moves she wants to try out.”

McGee winced.

Segel breathed out a sigh of relief. “So, uh… any advice on how not to hurt her?”

Tony laughed. “I’d be more worried about yourself, Probie.” He saluted Segel with his water bottle, took another long drink, then turned to him. “Got all your next-of-kin paperwork filed with HR?” he asked seriously.

Segel stared at him, then turned to McGee, who raised his eyebrows and nodded to the ring, where Ziva was going through a series of kicks and punches, with Gibbs blocking and moving back slowly. McGee recognized these moves as warm ups; after a few minutes they switched roles, with Gibbs pressing Ziva harder but never landing a punch.

After a moment or two of Gibbs-watching, Tony turned to Segel. “Let’s get you warmed up before you go in the ring. You too, McGee.” He led both of them to a mat off to the side, and coached them through some moves. McGee quickly realized that while Segel wasn’t bad, he was no match at all for Ziva, and he began to worry a bit about his probie. He pushed it aside, though, figuring Segel had made his bed and would have to lie in it, and focused on earning some praise from Tony as he avoided a hold and then followed through by dumping Segel on his rear.

They were just breaking a light sweat when a loud whistle from the ring caught their attention; Gibbs motioned for Segel to join them. Segel straightened up and jogged quickly to the ropes, jumping up and slipping through fluidly. Ziva adjusted her ponytail and kept her eyes on Gibbs, who gave the rookie a once-over. “Training?” he asked.

Segel spoke quietly, but his voice carried easily over the now hushed audience. “Classes at the police academy and FLETC.”

Gibbs looked at him thoughtfully. “Any street experience?”

Segel shook his head. “Not much fighting. Didn’t work many cases that called for it.”

Gibbs nodded, then looked over at Ziva. “Keep it simple. Don’t kill him.” He turned and left the ring, accepting a water bottle from Tony, ignoring the confused and slightly affronted look Segel sent his way.
McGee had followed Tony ringside, and stood with him and Gibbs as Ziva and Segel began circling
each other. It was clear that Segel was more concerned about Ziva’s size and gender than her skill,
and that had Gibbs grimacing in disapproval. “Kid better learn to look past the surface,” he muttered.

“Already quoted rule eight to him, Boss,” Tony said, shaking his head as Ziva let Segel get a light hit
in on her arm, after which he immediately dropped his guard and moved toward her, clearly asking if
she was alright. Even Gibbs cringed a little as Ziva delivered a roundhouse kick that caught Segel on
the side of the head, dropping him like a stone. Tony gave a low whistle and patted McGee
sympathetically on the shoulder. “He was so young,” the new co-leader sighed.

McGee rolled his eyes. “She pulled most of it, Tony.”

“Well, yeah. Gibbs did say not to kill him.”

They watched intently as Segel got to his feet, shaking his head a bit and reaching up to touch his
forehead, his fingers coming away bloody. “What the hell was that?” he exclaimed indignantly.

Ziva narrowed her eyes. “Are you planning to stop in the middle of a fight with a terrorist to ask if he
is alright?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why do it in training?” She shot him a look filled with contempt; it had the desired effect and
Segel dropped into a crouch, moving to fight in earnest now. Ziva again lured him in and dropped
him, danced back to let him up, then moved in quickly, never giving him a chance to get himself set,
landing a few blows before using her legs to trip him up onto his back on the mat. She was over him
before he could even register what was going on, and halted a lethal chop to the neck mere inches
from his skin. She glared down at him as he stared up at her, eyes wide. “My training is Mossad;
before I came to NCIS I was a spy and an assassin. I have already killed more people than you ever
will in your lifetime, and most were not with a gun. You would do well to remember that being small
and female does not make me any less lethal than Gibbs.”

She stood and moved deliberately away from him, not bothering to give him a hand up. She looked
down at Gibbs with a small smile; he nodded to her and motioned toward the locker rooms with a tilt
of his head. Ziva slipped through the ropes, jumped down, and whispered something to Gibbs. Tony
stared after her, then looked at Gibbs. “I blushed when she said that to me. How can you not blush at
that?!” Gibbs just raised an eyebrow at Tony, then looked at Segel struggling to his feet in the ring.
“McGee,” he said quietly.

McGee hurried into the ring and helped Segel, who was swaying a little on his feet. The cut on his
forehead was bleeding profusely now, and McGee was willing to bet he had at least one bruised rib.
He heard Gibbs call out, “Show’s over, people!” and then Tony was there, helping to steady Segel
and look him over.

“Better get him to Ducky.”

McGee nodded, then paused and looked at Tony. “What did Ziva say to you?”

The tips of Tony’s ears turned red, but he grinned. “I think it gets lost in translation if you’re not a
girl, McCurious.”

McGee snorted and helped Segel get through the ropes, watching as Tony jumped down and headed
for the locker room with Gibbs, the two of them moving in step, their arms brushing against each
other.
Advice

Segel sat on an autopsy table – as if that wasn’t weird enough – only half-listening to Dr. Mallard telling some story about someone he’d known fifty years ago. Something to do with boxing… Segel shook his head, eliciting an annoyed sound from the doctor as he stopped mid-sentence and chastised the young man for failing to hold still.

“You may need a stitch or two here, young man. I don’t know what Ziva was thinking.”

“I thought Agent Gibbs was kidding when he told her not to kill me,” Segel muttered. “Guess I was wrong.”

“What did you do to earn the wrath of our lovely assassin, my dear boy? Mr. Palmer, if you would be so kind as to hand me the topical anesthetic from my bag… yes, side pocket.”

“I don’t know, Dr. Mallard… I don’t think she likes me very much. Actually, I don’t think anyone on the team likes me very much, although Tim’s nice enough.”

“Hmmm. And you don’t have any idea why or how you have earned the wrath of team Gibbs?”

Segel shifted uncomfortably. Somehow Dr. Mallard made it all seem worse the way he said the word ‘wrath’ with rolling the ‘r’ like that. “I’m uh… not really sure.”

Jimmy Palmer rolled his eyes at the rookie agent. “Yeah, you are,” he commented bluntly. Dr. Mallard looked at him curiously, but kept quiet.

Segel shook his head, getting a sharp tut from the doctor, who was applying the numbing agent with a cotton swab. “Needle and thread, please, Mr. Palmer.”

The rookie sighed but held still, then looked back at Jimmy. “Alright, tell me what I did.”

Jimmy shot him a annoyed look. “You were a cop for a couple of years, right? And now you’re a federal agent… I’m just the autopsy gremlin, but even I know better than to make assumptions about people the way you have so far.”

“Mister Palmer!” Ducky exclaimed. “You may accept that ridiculous moniker from Anthony, but I would be much happier if you would avoid using it yourself! You are well on your way to being a skilled medical examiner, as Anthony is surely aware. There is no need to put yourself down in such a crude fashion.”

Jimmy looked over at Ducky and smiled happily. “Thank you, Dr. Mallard!”

“Hmm, yes, well, do go on. I’m sure Mr. Segel here is looking forward to your assessment of this morning’s events… as am I.”

“Yes, Doctor, right away.” Jimmy looked seriously at Segel. “Abby told me all about some of the things you said about the team, and your own comments when you came down to Autopsy pretty much backed her up.”

Segel looked at Jimmy but didn’t say anything. Dr. Mallard made an encouraging noise, and Jimmy continued. “You talk about Agent Gibbs as if he’s past his expiration date.”

A loud snort sounded from the good doctor, who then looked at Jimmy. “So sorry, dear boy, please, do go on.”
“Agent Gibbs may have gray hair, but he’s the best investigator in the agency. His team’s closure rate is second to none, and I’m not just talking about here in DC, I’m talking about the entire agency. He’s the most dedicated man I’ve ever met, and that’s saying a lot. You don’t have to be a technological wizard like McGee to be good at your job. And he really cares about his team and the people around him, although he won’t show it much. He’s put his life on the line more times than I can count to help people, and to solve crimes and stop terrorists. He’s a good man.”

Segel cleared his throat. “I may have jumped to conclusions,” he admitted.

Jimmy snorted. “May have? C’mon, Kevin, you did more than just jump. You assumed Tony was incompetent, Abby too, because you expected a certain attitude or fashion sense. You also assumed that because Ziva’s pretty, she must be in need of protection.”

Dr. Mallard put the finishing touches on the stitches and stepped back, picking up another cotton ball and gently patting the area around the cut. “Is all this true, my boy?”

Segel sighed. “Well, yeah… but, I mean, Abby was dressed like some female version of I don’t even know what –“

“Zorro,” Jimmy put in helpfully.

“Whatever. And DiNozzo acts like some sort of overgrown frat boy!”

“So what?” Jimmy asked. “Tony’s almost as good as Gibbs… and the two of them make a great team. There’s no way Gibbs would put up with Tony’s antics if that’s all he had to offer.”

Dr. Mallard cleared his throat meaningfully, looking seriously at Jimmy.

“Oh, yeah. Anyway, Abby really is one of the best forensic scientists you’ll ever meet. She’s always getting offers from the FBI and other agencies, as well as from private corporations. Everyone loves her, and insulting her is one reason why you got your ass handed to you just now.”

“And I suppose,” Dr. Mallard cut in, “that Ziva has made it clear that she is far more than just a pretty girl.”

“Yeah.” Segel nodded, then looked from the M.E. to his assistant and back. “Has she really killed that many people?”

Dr. Mallard chuckled. “And far more that we don’t even know about, I’m sure.” He finished bandaging the cut on Segel’s forehead and stepped back. “That should do it. The bruising over your ribs is actually quite minor and will go away quickly. I think the most damage is to your pride, my boy.” Segel started to speak, but Dr. Mallard held up a hand to quiet him. “I do believe I must put in my two cents, as it were.” He looked at Segel thoughtfully, then said, “Did you know that Mr. Palmer here was instrumental in stopping a murderer from fleeing the country? And that I myself have been undercover to help stop an international arms dealer?”

Segel stared at the two of them. “But you’re not even agents!”

“No, my boy, but we do have talents and abilities that Gibbs and his team recognize and call upon as needed.” He looked at Segel thoughtfully. “You have heard of rule eight, I believe?”

“Uh, yeah… something about not taking things for granted?”

“Indeed. Don’t make assumptions, my boy. You’ll never make it as an agent if you can’t see beyond the surface. Avoid taking people at face value, and recognize that you have a lot to learn, as do we
all, even Gibbs. People will constantly surprise you in this profession. You must be open-minded, or I guarantee you’ll be off this team and possibly out of the agency as well. Intelligence will get you nowhere if you don’t have the brains to use it properly.”

Segel glanced over at Jimmy, who was nodding seriously. He sighed. “I’ll try. Will they give me a chance, do you think?”

Jimmy looked to Dr. Mallard, who smiled at him. “You’re still here, my boy. If Gibbs thought you were completely lacking in potential, he’d have sent you packing already. This morning’s exercise was a lesson and a warning. Heed it carefully so you don’t squander the opportunity.”

Segel nodded and slid off the table.

“Now off with you, young man. Avoid getting that bandage wet for a few days. I’ll call up to Gibbs and let him know that you will be joining them shortly.” Dr. Mallard smiled at him, then shooed him away, watching as he left autopsy, making for the elevator.

Jimmy Palmer looked at him. “What do you think, Doctor? Will he be okay with the team?”

The M.E. sighed. “It will all depend on whether he can open his mind enough to get past his preconceptions, Mr. Palmer. And I’m afraid Agent Gibbs will be more short-tempered than usual once Anthony leaves for Seattle.”

Jimmy grimaced. “Yeah… Abby’s starting up the GSS again, isn’t she?”

“Indeed she is, Mr. Palmer. Indeed she is. We shall hope that it will have the desired effect of helping Anthony to manage Jethro’s moods from so far away.”

Jimmy nodded thoughtfully and moved to help clean up the mess left behind from suturing Segel’s war wound.
A Case and A Concern

20: A Case and A Concern

Confusion

Tony whistled as he sauntered into Abby’s lab later that day, tapping out a rhythm on the case file he was carrying.

“Tony!” Abby whirled around from where she stood at her computer and looked at him eagerly. “Tell me all about it!”

Breaking off the whistle, Tony smiled and tossed the file onto the table. “It was great, Abs! All fast moves, totally took him by surprise.”

Abby’s eyes lit up and she pumped a fist in the air. “Yes!”

Tony grinned, tilting his head sideways. “I don’t get why you weren’t there, though. I thought you’d have wanted to see it.”

Abby’s jaw dropped, and she stared at him, eyes wide. “Seriously?! Like, I mean, really? You guys wanted me there?”

“Well, yeah… not Ziva, though. She was pretty cool about the whole thing.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed. “Ziva was there?”

Tony stared at her. “Abs, half the agency was there. Gibbs practically issued invitations.”

“Where…? In the gym, of course.”

“The gym? That seems kind of sweaty… but I guess that makes sense. I bet you guys built up a pretty good sweat, huh?”

“Well, yeah… not Ziva, though. She was pretty cool about the whole thing.”

Tony looked up at her, brow furrowed. “He sent… Tony, what are you talking about?”

Tony leaned back against the table. “You’re kidding.” She tilted her head to one side. “And Vance was okay with this.”

Shrugging, Tony flipped open the case file, trying to locate the data he’d needed to ask her about. “I guess so. I mean, he sent his secretary, assistant, whatever you call her.”

“‘He sent… Tony, what are you talking about?’”

Tony looked up at her, brow furrowed. “What do you mean, what am I talking about? What are you talking about?”
“I’m talking about you and Gibbs having sex in the building!”

“Me and – what?”

“Well, yeah… isn’t that why you’re whistling? You always whistle after really great sex.”

“I… uh… you thought I just had sex with Gibbs here at the Navy Yard?!”

“You didn’t?” Abby pouted.

“No! We didn’t, never have, never will… you thought Gibbs gave out invitations?”

“That part did seem a little hinky.”

“The idea that we were inviting you to join us didn’t?”

“Wishful thinking?”

Tony started laughing. “I’m really sorry to disappoint you… but I was talking about Ziva thrashing Segel in the gym during training this morning.”

Abby pushed off from the table, bobbing her head in time with her music and staring at the far wall, then looked at Tony and smiled. “Actually, that’s good too. But Tony, you really shouldn’t give such mixed messages to people… no whistling unless you want them to think you just had sex!”

“Who just had sex?” Gibbs walked in, carrying a Caf-Pow and handing it to Abby, who grabbed it eagerly.

“You and Tony,” she said before she began sucking the brightly colored drink through the straw.

Gibbs blinked and turned to look at Tony, who opened his mouth to speak, then just shrugged and gave Gibbs a brilliant smile.

Shaking his head, Gibbs turned back to Abby. “You have time to run through evidence protocol with Segel this afternoon?”

Abby’s expression turned slightly sour. “Don’t they teach them anything at FLETC?”

“Test him,” Gibbs suggested.

“Hmm. I kinda like that.”

Gibbs gave her a small smile. “That’s my girl.” He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Fantasizing about me and Tony is off limits,” he commented as he walked back out the door.

“You’re no fun, Gibbs!”

Tony stared in the direction Gibbs had just gone, then looked back at Abby. “I feel like I just walked into the Twilight Zone.”

“Original series or remake?”

“Oh, please. You have to ask?”

“Oh! Do your William Shatner impersonation… you know, when he’s on the plane!”

Tony opened his mouth to speak, but he turned quickly as McGee and Ziva walked into the room.
“Damn. All roads lead to Abby?”

McGee shot him a confused look, and Ziva wrinkled her nose at him. “We are here to ask some questions about our cold cases.”

“Well, as senior field agent and the guy who was here first, I get to ask before you do.”

McGee stepped forward into Tony’s space. “You’re not senior field agent any more, remember? I’m senior field agent now.”


Ziva rolled her eyes at their staring contest and walked up to Abby. “Why were you not at the gym to see me put Segel in his place?”

Abby smiled and gave Ziva a hug. “I know you guys had something planned, but violence isn’t really my thing. You taught him a lesson, though, right?” She pulled back and looked into Ziva’s eyes.

“I did.”

“She made Tony blush, too,” McGee added. “What did you say, anyway? Tony doesn’t usually blush that easily.”

Ziva glanced at Tony and smirked, then looked back at Abby. “Gibbs and Tony were sparring, and Gibbs took Tony down onto the mat. He was straddling him in a very... suggestive position. I should have taken a picture for you.”

Abby nodded vigorously. “Yes, you really should have!” She shot Tony a wicked smirk. “So? Spill! What did you say to make Tony get all cute and embarrassed?”

Ziva gave Tony a sultry smile. “I simply mentioned that all the women and most of the men wanted to see them follow through on that... position.”

Tony turned red again. “Ziva, that’s... all the women? Really?”

Abby and McGee shared an amused glance while Ziva rolled her eyes. Any further commentary was forestalled by the sound of a throat clearing from the doorway. Everyone turned to see Kevin Segel standing there, looking uncomfortable. “Um... Agent Gibbs sent me down to tell you that we have a case.”

Tony moved forward. “Details.”

Segel’s gaze shifted between him and the others, then settled on some point in-between. “Someone called from Bethesda... a female petty officer was brought in about an hour ago, appears to have been raped. She’s not very coherent, but she did tell the doctors that she could give a description of her attacker.” He looked at Tony. “Agent Gibbs said it’s your call.”

Tony suppressed a small smile, then looked at McGee. “Take Ziva and Segel, find out what you can from the doctors and from the victim.” He turned back to Segel. “You have her name?”

Segel nodded. “Petty Officer Second Class Rachelle Lockwood... out of Norfolk, TAD to the Navy Yard for the past two weeks. Her current CO is Lieutenant Commander Angela Braydon.”
Tony inclined his head, committing the information to memory. “You guys go ahead, do the interviews, follow up with the CO, canvass if you can get enough information. See if she’ll give permission for us to check out her living quarters. Keep me updated.”

“What are you going to do?” Ziva asked.

“Get background information, contact family members that aren’t at the hospital. The usual.” He met Ziva’s gaze steadily. She looked back at him for a moment, glanced at Segel, then nodded and followed McGee out of the room, Segel following her in turn.

Abby waited until they heard the ding of the elevator door, then looked at Tony. “What’s with Ziva?”

Tony shrugged. “She’s not quite sure how to deal with me as a team leader with Gibbs still here.”

“She needs to get over that,” Abby said, slurping up some Caf-Pow.

Late Night

Gibbs stretched a bit, tilting his head to get rid of some stiffness in his neck. He glanced across the bullpen and watched Tony for a moment. His partner was intent on his computer screen, typing and cross-checking with something in the folder lying open in front of him.

Smiling slightly, Gibbs rested his head on his hand and savored his feelings of pride and accomplishment. Tony was taking well to his new role of being in charge, and Gibbs had to remind himself that the younger man had done it once before. It shouldn’t be a surprise, but Gibbs hadn’t been there then, and it was sometimes easier to forget that difficult time.

Tony had delegated tasks with ease, sending Ziva and McGee out to handle the initial investigation, and making sure that Segel was along for the ride. The learning curve would be pretty steep for the rookie at this rate; the jury was a long way from coming in, but Gibbs had a feeling the kid might be able to pull himself together, drop the bravado, and maybe even end up a decent agent. In any case, the team in the field had come up with multiple leads, all plausible based on the sketchy information they got from the victim as well as conflicting stories from several witnesses or others who knew the victim and tried to account for her actions earlier in the day. They’d all done a lot of running around, with Tony shuffling them into different groups to cover as much as possible. Finally, with several major issues still unresolved, he’d sent the rest of the team home, opting to stay late to try to make sense of all the information. Gibbs had decided to stay with him, and they’d bounced ideas back and forth while eating take out. It felt like old times, before Ziva, before McGee, even before Kate.

A quiet beep from his computer notified him of incoming email, and Gibbs reached out to hit a few keys and call it up. It was in his personal account, from Emma, the first reply he’d gotten to his request for more information about her visit.

Dear Leroy,

I’m thrilled that you don’t mind a visit! I’ve been looking forward to the opportunity to get you back for the jalapenos you put in my milkshake after graduation – just giving you a heads up to be fair.

Justin has given me a mission to bring him a ‘cool’ souvenir from DC… you’ll have to give me some advice on that score. Probably anything sports related would work out well… that, or something having to do with space travel. There must be a good museum gift shop somewhere, right? I’ll drag you to the Smithsonian – I’ve always wanted to go. I bet the exhibits are fantastic.

I’ll be driving… I prefer to work on my own schedule rather than have to worry about when the
trains are running. There’s still a week to go, so you have plenty of time to send directions… or I’ll use Mapquest. And I’ll look up the hotels online – I know you’re busy. I’m planning to leave Thursday after Justin goes, so I should be in town by late afternoon or early evening. Send me your cell number and I’ll call you when I get in!

I’m so looking forward to this… we’re going to have so much fun! And don’t worry if you get called in to work… in case you didn’t notice in Stillwater, I’m a big girl now and I can take care of myself.

Emma

“Something fun?”

Gibbs looked up to see Tony watching him with a small smile on his face. “Close enough. Email from Emma about her visit. Gonna need you to help me plan for jalapeno revenge.”

“Say what?”

Gibbs motioned him to come over, pushing his chair to the side so Tony could read Emma’s message. Tony leaned in a little closer to Gibbs than was absolutely necessary, and Gibbs closed his eyes briefly as he breathed in Tony’s scent.

“Can I read the rest of the conversation?”

Puzzled by the request, Gibbs shrugged and watched Tony’s face as he scrolled up through the messages. After a few minutes Tony smirked and glanced over at Gibbs. “She’s making a play for you, Jeth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s not just coming to play tourist. She’s hoping for a little romance.”

Gibbs snorted. “Not a chance, Tony. I told you, we were never more than friends.”

“Oh, I know that… but she wants to rewrite the rules.”

Gibbs stared at Tony, his expression skeptical. “Evidence?”

“One big thing,” Tony pointed to the screen. “She says she’s looking forward to getting to know me.” His hand went to the mouse, and he scrolled down a bit. “Here you tell her I’ll be away.” Another few clicks of the mouse, and the screen was back on the latest email. “No mention of me at all. No regret that I won’t be around, no expression of concern that you might be missing me… nothing. She ignores the issue entirely. Check out the punctuation; there’s more exclamation points. She’s happy, excited, and she’s also trying to take charge of the visit. Not only that, but at the end she points out that she’s a big girl now… what do you wanna bet she’s hoping you start thinking about? I’ll give you a hint… she’s gonna look for an excuse to dress up.”

Gibbs shook his head. “You’re crazy. Emma’s not interested in me, never has been. And she knows damn well I’m taken.”

Tony straightened up and smiled at him. “Things change, people change, situations change. She doesn’t care that you’re taken – I’ll be out of the way and she’s going to try to take advantage of that.”

Gibbs shook his head again. “Way off base, Tony.”
Tony’s smile widened to a grin, and he reached over to pat Gibbs on the head. “That’s okay, Jethro… I’ll teach you all about women.”

Gibbs mock growled at him and reached out to give Tony a head slap, which he ducked. Moving out of range, Tony laughed a bit. “C’mon, what do you want to bet?”

Gibbs narrowed his eyes and smiled. “She doesn’t make a play for me, which she won’t, you have to fly home for your first free weekend. If you’re right, I fly out to you.”

The look in Tony’s eyes made Gibbs wish they hadn’t decided to work late. “No-lose situation. I like it. You’re a smart man, Jethro Gibbs.”

Gibbs waved a hand toward Tony’s desk. “Go back over there and finish your work. Sooner we get it done, sooner we get out of here.”

Tony moved so fast, Gibbs thought he could hear a tiny sonic boom.
Thursday

Mid-morning

Everyone was frustrated with the state of their current case. The rape victim, Petty Officer Rachelle Lockwood, couldn’t remember enough about her attacker to be very helpful, despite having told the nurses at the hospital that she could give a description. Male, white, ski-mask, maybe average height… no particular identifying marks that she could recall. The one thing she’d been able to offer was that his voice sounded familiar, and that had the team focusing on her co-workers and anyone else she came in contact with on a regular basis since being assigned to the Navy Yard.

As Tony had pointed out, at least they didn’t have to travel far.

Tony had just come upstairs from going over the physical evidence with Abby, and he and Gibbs were standing in front of the plasma screen near Gibbs’ desk, reviewing all the conflicting statements they’d accumulated since the case began. They stopped and watched when McGee, Ziva and Segel all walked into the bullpen, stowing their gear and continuing what was obviously an ongoing discussion.

“I think we should focus on that petty officer, the one with the shifty eyes,” Ziva was saying as she closed a desk drawer on her gun and badge.

“Travers?” McGee asked. At her nod, he shook his head. “His alibi is sound. Lots of witnesses to that poker game.”

“What if they were accomplices, and there was no poker game?”

Segel looked up at that. “Lockwood said there was only one attacker.”

Ziva nodded. “Yes, but there could have been more she did not see. And the rapist ran off when those witnesses saw the attack and shouted. There could have been others waiting.”

“Maybe,” McGee said, “but we’ve got nothing to support that.” He glanced over at Tony for confirmation; the team’s new co-leader shook his head.

Gibbs sighed. “Do we have anything other than speculation?”

They were all quiet, and then Segel hesitantly raised his hand. Gibbs’ eyebrows shot up, and he pointed at the probie. “Well? Speak.”

Segel looked at the floor, then cleared his throat. “I think Lockwood’s CO is hiding something.”

Gibbs and Tony glanced at the others, who looked surprised. “What do you mean?” Tony asked.

Segel wet his lips and took a deep breath. “I don’t have anything concrete, but I just didn’t believe her when she said she had no idea who could have done this. She seemed more concerned with denying any of her people could be involved than she was about Lockwood. It just seemed – I don’t know, off, somehow.”

Gibbs stared at the rookie, making him fidget a bit. “Be helpful if you had something more specific to offer.”
“I know,” Segel responded, flushing slightly. “It’s just that she didn’t react the way I’d expect a commanding officer to react when one of her people’s been hurt.”

Gibbs and Tony exchanged glances. “I’ll go talk to her again,” Tony offered.

Gibbs moved back to his desk and flipped through some of the papers scattered on its surface. “Let’s hold off. I’d like to have something more definite to confront her with.”

“No problem,” Tony said easily. He turned to Segel. “Go back through your notes, see if you can pin down what’s giving you that impression.” Segel nodded and turned to his desk. “McGee, Ziva… recheck all those alibis. Try some new angles.”

Ziva frowned. “We have already –“

“Wasn’t a suggestion, my former Mossad darling.”

Shaking her head, but smiling slightly, Ziva shrugged and turned back to her desk.

Tony looked at Gibbs. “I’ll go through the CO’s file, see what pops up.”

Gibbs nodded, and watched for a moment while all his people were hard at work. “Goin’ for coffee,” he announced and headed for the elevator.

Early afternoon

Segel rolled his chair backwards so he was next to McGee; they’d removed the partition between their desks for easier communication. “I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“A couple of things. First, how can Gibbs drink so much coffee and only hit the bathroom twice?”

McGee looked up at that. “You’re counting how many times Gibbs goes to the bathroom?”

“Well, no, not really. It’s just… if I drank that much coffee, I’d have to move my desk into the men’s room.”

“I think it’s a Marine thing. What else don’t you get?”

“Why do we have two team leaders? Far as I can tell, this is the only team set up like that. Shouldn’t DiNozzo take over his own team or something?”

McGee looked to his left, where Gibbs was standing behind Tony, who was seated at his desk and pointing at something on his computer screen. Gibbs’ hand was resting on Tony’s shoulder, and McGee could see him absently squeezing and rubbing that shoulder. He winced slightly, then redirected his attention back to his probie. “I heard something about Tony being groomed to take over once Gibbs retires.”

Segel grunted a bit. “They seem pretty tight.”

“They’ve worked together a long time. Hey, did you go back through Travers’ financials yet?”

About fifteen minutes later, with Segel embroiled in trying to decipher many pages of information, McGee got up and approached Gibbs’ desk. “Uh, Boss… can I talk to you for a minute?”

Gibbs looked up. “What’s on your mind, McGee?”
“Not here,” McGee said, glancing in the direction of the elevator.

Gibbs considered him for a moment, then nodded, pushed back his chair, stood and set off for his private office with McGee following.

They stood quietly until the elevator arrived. Once inside, Gibbs hit the button for the next floor down, then hit the emergency stop as soon as the compartment started moving. He turned and looked at McGee, who cleared his throat and looked seriously at his boss.

“Segel’s noticing how close you and Tony are. He mentioned it to me when he asked why we’re the only team with co-leaders. I told him Tony’s being groomed to replace you when you retire.”

Gibbs tilted his head. “There’s more, isn’t there.”

McGee nodded. “A few minutes ago, when you were standing behind Tony at his desk… well, you were, um… touching him in a way that, uh, could be easily interpreted as being more than coworkers. More than friends, even.”

“I was?” Gibbs looked confused, his brow furrowing as he tried to remember.

“It was subtle, Boss, and I don’t know if most people would have noticed… but Segel’s paying attention to you, and he might have if he’d been watching.”

“What exactly was I doing?”

McGee shifted his feet a bit, and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Uh, you had your hand on Tony’s shoulder, and you were kinda rubbing it…”

Gibbs nodded abruptly and reached out to start up the elevator. “Won’t happen again.”

McGee sighed. “It wouldn’t matter, Boss, if Segel wasn’t here. We all support you guys. Ziva and I… we talked after Tony rescued you from Johnson. We’ve got your back.”

Gibbs turned to look at McGee as the elevator doors opened. “Thanks. That’s good work, Tim.” He smiled at his new senior field agent, then walked out of the elevator.

*Late afternoon*

Ziva tossed a pen on her desk and looked challengingly at Tony. “The alibis have all been checked and they are fine. Now what?”

Tony shot her an irritated look, but McGee spoke up before he could say anything. “Uh, not so fast, Ziva… Boss, Tony-Boss… I think I have something.”

Everyone moved over to McGee’s desk, crowding behind it; Segel just turned around in his chair and watched. “Kevin and I have been going over all the alibis and cross-checking with all the data generated during that time period… we set up an algorithm that pulls from a variety of databases –“

“McGee.”

“Right. Anyway, Petty Officer Cameron Pritchard… he claims he was working late and was in the office at the time of Lockwood’s attack, but his bank records show a transaction at a store only about a block and a half from where she was raped.”

Tony leaned forward. “Why didn’t that show up earlier?”
McGee shrugged. “Could have been a server glitch… transactions don’t always post right away.”

Gibbs straightened up. “What’s this Pritchard’s assignment?”

Ziva moved quickly to her desk. “Petty Officer Cameron Pritchard… assigned to the same department as the victim.”

“Same CO,” Segel muttered. McGee glanced at him and nodded.

“Anyone confirm Pritchard’s alibi?” Gibbs asked.

Ziva stepped forward with her notes. “Lieutenant Commander Angela Braydon.”

Gibbs and Tony shared a look, and then Tony looked over at Segel. “Your gut may be on to something, Ultra-Probie.”

Segel smiled.

Gibbs looked at Tony. “Anything in her file?”

Tony thought about that for a moment. “Fairly rapid rise through the ranks, but nothing amazingly stellar in her file. She’s got a pattern of moving from post to post relatively quickly, or at least that’s the impression I got.” He grinned at Segel. “I agree that there’s something hinky about her, just not sure exactly what.”

Gibbs looked at McGee. “You three track down some of the people she’s served with in the past; talk to her last CO. Tony… grab her file and let’s go talk to Ducky.”

*Late evening – Gibbs’ house*

Tony stretched in his position on the couch, watching for a moment as Jethro gathered the plates and silverware from their dinners. He moved to get up, but Jethro shook his head. “I got it. You relax.”

Tony smiled and settled back, taking a sip of his beer. He thought over the day, then called out to Jethro, who was in the kitchen. “Segel did good today, don’t ya think?”

Jethro walked back into the living room, leaning on the wall. “He may have stumbled on the right direction, but he needs to be able to back up his gut.”

“You always have a concrete reason for your gut?”

Jethro snorted. “You comparing me to a rookie who’s so new he squeaks?”

“Nah. Just sayin’.”

Rolling his eyes, Jethro moved forward and sat down next to Tony. “I think my years of experience entitle me to trust my gut.” He plucked Tony’s beer out of his hand, took a sip, then gave it back to him. “Besides, he’s still relying on preconceptions. That’ll only get him so far.”

Tony looked at his beer, frowning. Jethro laughed. “You object to sharing a beer? We’ve shared much more than that.”

“It’s different.” Tony leaned forward to set the beer down on the coffee table, then scooted back and to the side, leaning against Jethro, who put his arm around his partner’s shoulders and pulled him close.
“Mmm, nice.”

They sat in silence for a while, then Jethro sighed and picked up Tony’s hand, which had been resting on Jethro’s thigh. He intertwined their fingers, then spoke quietly. “I messed up again.”

“What do you mean?”

“McGee clued me in. I was touching you inappropriately.”

“You were?! How’d I miss that?”

Jethro chuckled. “Apparently I was rubbing your shoulder in an intimate fashion.”

Tony raised his eyebrows and squeezed Jethro’s hand. “Huh. No complaints from me.”

“I should hope not. But McGee said Segel’s been asking a few questions. Need to be more careful.”

“No way Segel’s got us figured out.”

“No, I don’t think he does… but McGee says he’s paying attention, so we need to be a bit more careful.”

“What is this we of which you speak? You mess up way more than me. It might be my fault, though… Segel asked me for advice, and I told him to work on observing people more closely, gather intel, figure out what he can without making assumptions.”

“Damn. Stop doing your job, will ya?”

“Jethro! I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jethro turned his head and dropped a kiss on Tony’s hair. “You’re a bad influence.”

“Maybe, but you love it.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Jeth.”

They stayed on the couch for a while longer, talking over the case and whatever else crossed their minds, until Tony started yawning, at which point Jethro dragged him upstairs to sleep.

**Friday**

**Early morning**

Gibbs’ phone rang just as he and Tony arrived in the bullpen, the first ones there. “Yeah, Gibbs.”

Tony looked up from McGee’s desk, where he was placing a coffee cup containing McGee’s favorite brew, with a smiley face and a ‘thanks’ drawn on it in black sharpie.

Gibbs stood up and motioned for Tony to join him. “Be right there, Duck.” Flipping the phone shut, he walked toward the back elevator. “Ducky got a chance to look over Braydon’s file last night, wants to talk to us.”

Ducky was standing near one of the autopsy tables, flipping through the pages in a file when the two agents came through the door.
“Ah, gentlemen! Good morning to you both. I trust you are both well-rested?”

Tony grinned at him. “Fishing, Ducky?”

Ducky glanced up at him. “I was an enthusiastic participant in the sport in my youth, Anthony. There was a newspaper columnist in New York, many years ago… we shared a name in fact, Donald… anyway, he once wrote that ‘fishing is a delusion surrounded by liars in old clothes.’ Marquis was his surname. That line alone led me to believe he was very wise.” Ducky looked over the papers spread out in front of him. “Of course, I am well aware that you were referring to ‘fishing’ in the investigative sense. But no, I have no need to delve into your private life… it is easy enough to see that you are both thriving in your new relationship.”

Tony glanced at Gibbs, whose lips were twitching slightly. “You wanted to see us, Duck?”

“Indeed. You asked me yesterday to give you my psychological analysis of our victim’s commanding officer.” Ducky flipped through the pages again, then looked up at Gibbs. “I assume you are aware that without seeing her personal effects or how she lives, I am limited in making my diagnosis; you must take my deductions with a grain of salt, as it were.”

Gibbs inclined his head略微. “Got faith in you, Duck.”

Ducky smiled. “I shall endeavor not to disappoint, then.” He gestured toward the file. “We are looking at a woman for whom professional ambition is the first priority. Closely linked to this is a fanatical attention to image. She is protective of her professional standing, almost to a fault. All of her evaluations say much the same thing: her loyalty to the Navy and her work to uphold its principles are admirable and that has been the underlying force in her relatively rapid rise. Closer examination of her history in the Navy shows an analytical mind that has focused its efforts on targeting like-minded individuals.”

Tony spoke up. “Targeting as in…”

“As in getting herself noticed, my boy. She found kindred spirits higher up in the chain, found ways to bring herself to their attention. Many of her transfers are linked to such efforts.”

“Bottom line, Duck?”

Ducky sighed and looked up from the pages. “Bottom line, Jethro, is that we are looking at a borderline narcissistic personality, who will ultimately be more concerned with how her subordinates’ actions reflect on her than she will be about them as people.”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed slightly and he looked thoughtfully at the file on the table. Tony reached up and scratched at his own chin, then asked, “Would she go so far as to cover for a rapist?”

Ducky looked at him seriously. “I believe she is capable of such an action.”

Tony and Gibbs looked at each other for a moment. “Bringing in the CO, Boss!” Tony said, and they both moved toward the door.

“Gentlemen,” Ducky called out, causing them both to turn back. “There is a proverb that may well fit in this instance. Irish, I believe, but that is of no matter. ‘May the holes in your net be no larger than the fish in it.’ I do hope you catch those responsible for the attack on that poor girl.”

Late morning

It hadn’t taken long for Gibbs to break Braydon’s assertion that Petty Officer Pritchard had been
working with her at the time of the attack on Lockwood. Braydon’s attitude disgusted him; she was resentful of Lockwood for having had an argumentative working relationship with Pritchard, acting as if it was the victim’s fault that she was raped. Ducky had been right; her main concern was for her own image, and how the actions of those under her command reflected back on her.

Braydon’s immediate superior had been in the observation room, and took over from Gibbs, giving Braydon a dressing down that all of the agents would have liked to hear… but they were off to arrest Pritchard. They were able to hear him telling Braydon that she’d be lucky if she wasn’t given a dishonorable discharge… and she could forget ever being in a position of authority again.

The team left in two cars, heading for Pritchard’s assignment in the Navy Yard. Gibbs rode with Tony in one, while McGee, Ziva and Segel took the other. They were quick to reach the offices where Pritchard was working on distributing materials to naval bases throughout the country. A helpful petty officer directed them from the offices to one of the warehouses close to the docks, telling them that Pritchard was involved in handling a final check on inventory being loaded for shipping.

They parked outside the warehouse, each of them taking a quick look at Pritchard’s picture on McGee’s cell before heading inside. They spotted him quickly, arguing with another petty officer and gesturing angrily at a clipboard.

“Petty Officer Cameron Pritchard?” Gibbs called out.

Pritchard turned to look at them as they approached, fanning out just slightly. His eyes widened, and he flung the clipboard down to the ground and ran.

The entire team took off after him, Tony quickly outdistancing the rest, although Segel stayed close behind. Pritchard grabbed a crowbar as he ran, then turned toward his pursuers. Tony put on the brakes, but Segel crashed into him, sending him half running, half tripping toward Pritchard, who swung the crowbar like a bat.

Tony grunted as the metal hit his chest, dropping to the ground immediately, only vaguely registering the sound of Gibbs yelling his name.

McGee and Ziva had Pritchard at gun point; he was staring at Tony, the crowbar hanging loose in his hand.

“Drop the weapon!” Ziva yelled, while McGee called out, “Put it down!”

Segel was quiet, staring at Tony, who was trying to shift up to his feet while reaching for his gun.

“DiNozzo! Stay down!” Gibbs’ voice was hard, angry.

Pritchard looked in Gibbs’ direction, then let the crowbar fall to the ground. Ziva and McGee moved forward, Ziva keeping her Sig trained on his face while McGee holstered his weapon and grabbed his cuffs. Gibbs ran past Segel, shoving him out of the way and dropping to his knees next to Tony. “You all right?”

Tony looked over at him, one hand pressing against the left side of his chest. His face was tight, and his voice sounded strained. “Your knees are gonna be pissed at you, Boss.”

“How are you alright, Tony?” Gibbs repeated the question, his voice softer. One hand moved toward Tony’s face, but he stopped it almost immediately, dropping it back to his side.

“Yeah, I think so. I avoided most of it; at least I think I did.” He moved his hand away, and saw red.
Both men looked at the area, and saw blood seeping slowly through Tony’s shirt.

Gibbs clenched his jaw, breathing out slowly through his nose. “McGee.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“You and Ziva take Pritchard back, stick him in interrogation. I’m taking Tony to see Ducky.” Gibbs stood, helping Tony up as well. He watched to see that Tony was steady on his feet, then he looked at Segel, who paled and stepped back.

Gibbs moved forward until he was inches away from Segel’s face. The rookie swallowed nervously, but met Gibbs’ stare head on. They stood like that for several seconds, with everyone else silent and motionless, even Pritchard. Gibbs’ voice was a soft growl when he spoke. “You will be more careful.”

Segel nodded quickly.

“You always watch where you are. You know where your teammates are and what they are doing – always!” Another inch forward. “Do you hear me?” His voice was just above a whisper.

Segel nodded again. He was trembling a little, and sweat broke out on his forehead.

Gibbs stared at him a moment longer, then focused on McGee. “Go. Take him with you.”

They left, their prisoner flanked by the experienced agents, with the rookie trailing behind.

Gibbs turned back to Tony, reaching out to grab his arm. “You okay to walk back to the car?”

Tony snorted. “What would you do, carry me?”

Gibbs’ lips twitched. “If I wanted to kill my back.”

“Hey! I’m not that heavy.”

They started back to the car, moving slowly. “Think you broke a rib?” Gibbs asked.

Tony shook his head. “Doesn’t hurt to breathe. Think maybe I’m gonna have one hell of a bruise. Edge of the crowbar must’ve cut me.”

Gibbs reached out, grasping Tony’s arm and squeezing tight. “You could have been killed.”

“Yeah.” Tony looked over at Gibbs. “It was an accident, Jeth.”

Gibbs grumbled something that Tony couldn’t quite hear. “It was. He’s a rookie, Boss.”

“Two years as a cop should have taught him how to chase a suspect.”

“Don’t get the impression that he has all that much street experience.” They reached the car, and Gibbs helped Tony ease into the front seat. He closed the door gently, then went around the front and got in behind the wheel. He sat there for a moment, then took a deep breath and reached out for Tony’s hand. They sat there for a moment, then Tony squeezed Gibbs’ hand. “I’m okay, Jethro.”

Gibbs stared out the windshield. “You could have been killed.”

“I wasn’t.”
Another deep breath, and then Gibbs looked over at Tony. “Let’s get you to Ducky.”

*Early evening - Tony’s apartment*

Tony sat on his couch in front of the television, watching sports talk shows on ESPN2 and checking his watch every few minutes.

Ducky had checked him over thoroughly, given him a few stitches, and warned him he would likely experience some severe bruising and be very sore the next day. That said, he’d pronounced Tony extremely lucky, cleared him to go back to work as long as he stayed at his desk, and told Gibbs not to be foolish when the team leader had suggested Tony might not be able to go to Seattle in two days.

Tony had, of course, disregarded doctor’s orders to watch Pritchard’s interrogation. Gibbs had still been radiating an only slightly subdued menace, and Pritchard had folded quickly. He was shaken by his attack on Tony, asking Gibbs to tell Tony he was sorry, that he’d panicked. Gibbs reply – “So you’re sorry you almost killed my agent, but you’re not sorry you raped a co-worker and fellow Naval officer?” – had Pritchard stuttering and trying to explain that he’d had a huge argument with Lockwood, who’d made some very disparaging remarks, but hadn’t planned to hurt her. He’d gone out to do a little shopping, saw her, was still angry, and acted on impulse. The fact that he had a ski mask with him in early summer in DC had raised some doubts, which Gibbs was quick to express.

The rest of the afternoon had been paperwork and lunch brought in for everyone by Segel, who was almost painfully solicitous in trying to make things right with Tony. Once Gibbs returned from meeting with Vance to explain why Tony had been injured, Segel had gotten up and moved to stand in front of Gibbs’ desk. He’d quietly offered to request reassignment if Gibbs and Tony no longer wanted to work with him. Gibbs had looked at him for a long moment, during which Segel met his gaze without flinching. Then Gibbs looked at Tony, who simply tilted his head and looked back.

“You gonna make that mistake again?”

“No, sir.”

“You comfortable continuing to work with us?”

Segel shifted, obviously not expecting that question. “Yes, sir. I’d like to stay. I admit that I came here with a lot of attitude, but you have all proved me wrong. I’ve got a lot to learn, and I’d like to keep learning from the best.”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed a bit, then he nodded sharply once. “You’re still welcome here, Segel.”

Segel’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank you, sir.”

Gibbs tilted his head slightly. “You get any of my team injured again, you’ll be explaining yourself in the gym… in the ring with me.”

Segel made an unidentifiable noise. “Got it, sir.” He turned and practically ran back to his desk, brought up short by Gibbs calling out, “Hey!”

“Sir?”

“Don’t call me sir.”

A little while later, after Tony dropped his report on Gibbs’ desk, he’d gotten an email: *Go home, your place, see you soon.*
So Tony was sitting in his apartment, waiting on Gibbs, and thinking he should start packing for Seattle. He was leaving late afternoon Sunday, and they were on call, so there was no telling how much time he’d have to get organized. He heard the sound of a key in the lock, and turned to see Jethro walk in, carrying a bag of take out from a nice little pub not far from the apartment.

“Hey, Jeth.”

Jethro set the bag down on the coffee table, shrugged off his jacket and laid it on the back of the couch. He sat down next to Tony and gathered him into a hug, being careful of Tony’s injured side but hanging on tightly where he could.

Tony hugged back, resting his forehead on Jethro’s shoulder. Jethro nuzzled into Tony’s neck, breathing deeply, relaxing as Tony’s scent and warmth reassured him that his partner was in fact alive and mostly well.

Tony raised a hand to the back of Jethro’s head and tapped lightly.

“What was that for?” Jethro mumbled the question into Tony’s neck. “You trying to get Ducky to make me ineligible to go to Seattle.”

“Huh.” Jethro sighed, then sat up and laid his palm against Tony’s cheek. “Was worth a try.”

Tony smiled and shook his head. “You know what Vance’ll do if I don’t go.” Jethro sighed and dropped his hand, turning toward the food. Tony grinned suddenly. “And we wouldn’t want to disappoint your friend Emma.”

Jethro almost choked on the French fry he’d popped into his mouth. He coughed a bit and shot Tony a mild glare. “Told you, you’re wrong about her.”

Tony shook his head, leaning forward to look into the bag. “I’m not. But it’ll be nice to have you show up on my doorstep out west on your first free weekend.”

Jethro snorted. “If you’re so right, how come you’re not worried?”

Tony sat up a bit, surprised. “You’re kidding, right?”

Jethro looked at him, puzzled. “No.”

Tony reached out, cupping his hand behind Jethro’s neck, pulling him in for a gentle kiss. “I know you. I trust you. What we have… you’re not going to risk it for a lonely and confused woman you used to know.”

Jethro nodded, then leaned in to return the favor. “You’re right,” he said quietly, looking at Tony seriously.

Tony gave him a warm smile, then let go of him and reached for the food. “Besides,” he added, “I’d kick your ass.”

Jethro laughed and reached up to give Tony a head smack, which Tony didn’t even try to dodge.

A little while later, burgers and fries eaten, Tony stretched his legs and put his feet up on the coffee table. “So… plans for the weekend?”

“You gotta pack. I’ll help.”
“Thanks. What about tonight?” Tony raised an eyebrow and gave Jethro a suggestive look.

“Tonight, you’re going to take some pain killers and get into bed. I’m going to clean up, and then I’ll join you.”

Tony grinned, until Jethro added, “We’re sleeping.”

“Well, yeah… after.”

“Nope. We’re sleeping, and if you’re feeling better tomorrow night, we can do more than just sleep.”

“Aw, c’mon, Jeth! That’s two nights in a row! You can’t do that.”

Jethro reached over and poked Tony lightly in the side. Tony flinched and hissed a bit. Jethro leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Tony’s forehead. “It’s not that I don’t want to, Tony. Not gonna hurt you.”

Tony sighed. “Okay, fine. But I’m calling the shots tomorrow night.”

“Deal.”
The Day Before Departure

Saturday Morning

“Ow. Ow, ow, ow.”

Tony winced as he tried to turn over in bed. His chest was sore, especially where the crowbar had cut into his skin. “Aw, man.”

He felt a tap on his shoulder, and blinked his eyes open to see Jethro sitting up in bed, brandishing a bottle of ibuprofen. Tony just looked at him for a moment. Jethro looked back, then raised an eyebrow slightly and shook the bottle.

“Don’t like painkillers,” Tony mumbled.

Jethro looked at the bottle, then back at his partner. “Grunt candy isn’t going to make you loopy, Tony.”

Tony grumbled and turned away, hissing a bit as he moved. Jethro looked at the back of the younger man’s head and smirked a bit, then tossed the bottle up in the air, catching it and shaking it again. “Thought you wanted to call the shots later. But hey, if you’re in too much pain…”

Tony raised his hand and held it out, palm up. Jethro grinned and shook three pills out of the bottle, dropping them into Tony’s hand. The hand and the pills disappeared in the general direction of Tony’s mouth. Jethro leaned away from Tony, putting the pills on the nightstand and grabbing a bottle of water. He rolled back to Tony, draping his arm over Tony’s side so the bottle dangled in front of his face. Tony took the bottle, raised himself up a bit to drink, then moved forward a bit to put it on his own nightstand. He relaxed back onto the bed, sighing a bit as Jethro ran his hand through his hair.

“Wha’ ya wanna to today?”

Jethro sighed. “What I want to do is stay here with you.” Tony made a growling noise, reaching back to squeeze Jethro’s leg through the sheet. “But what I have to do is go into work for a while.”

Tony turned over, grunting a bit as his rib muscles protested. “No call on my cell?”

Jethro shook his head. “Vance’s assistant called me a little while ago, said Vance needs to see me about some cold case… something I worked on with the FBI a while back.” He paused and brushed Tony’s hair away from his eyes. “You were sleeping pretty soundly.”

“I’ll come with you.” Tony moved to get up, but Jethro’s hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“You stay. Rest, or do what you need to do before you leave tomorrow. Shouldn’t be too long.”

Tony looked at him. Jethro was relaxed, looking at him with a small smile on his face. Tony smiled back. “Okay… if you’re sure.”

Jethro leaned in close, kissing him lightly on the lips. “I’m sure.” He started to pull away, but Tony gripped his arm and pulled him back.

“You gotta go now?”
Jethro looked at him thoughtfully. “I’ve got a little time. You have something in mind?”

Tony smiled, sinking back into the mattress and pulling Jethro along with him. “Yeah.” He tugged on his lover until Jethro’s head was resting on Tony’s shoulder, and they were tangled together under the sheet.

Jethro waited, but Tony didn’t do or say anything else. “So… what?”

Tony closed his eyes and snuggled into Jethro a bit. “Just this.”

Jethro gently stroked Tony’s injured chest and smiled. “I can do that.”

They lay there silently for over an hour, simply enjoying each other’s company.

**Abby’s Ultimatum**

Gibbs walked into the lab, idly shaking a Caf-Pow and feeling a mild satisfaction about his meeting with Vance. Someone, not Fornell for a change, had complained to Vance about the paperwork on a cold case. Apparently Gibbs’ written report hadn’t made some bigwig in the FBI’s chain of command very happy, and Vance had to play politics and follow up. Gibbs had thoroughly enjoyed setting Vance straight and laying the blame for the botched investigation squarely on the FBI’s shoulders, where it belonged. Vance had smiled, clearly looking forward to calling the FBI back with the upper hand. Then, as Gibbs had gotten up to leave, Vance had made a comment about one of the other team leaders, Bryson, who was looking to switch off a call weekend for his daughter’s wedding the following month… and that he’d see Gibbs and the rest of his team on Monday.

“Gibbs!” Abby came running forward, grabbing the Caf-Pow out of his hand and taking a long pull through the straw before exhaling loudly and relaxing her shoulders. “What brings you here?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Needed to set Vance straight on something.”

“Does that mean Tony’s not leaving?”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “Wishful thinking, Abs. What are you doing here, anyway?”

Abby pouted at him, then spun away to her computer. “I’m processing evidence for Pearson’s team. No big plans until tonight anyway. And how did you know to bring me a Caf-Pow if you didn’t know why I’m here?”

Gibbs reached out and batted one of her pigtails. “Vance’s assistant told me. Never can remember her name. And what’s tonight?”

Abby glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Tony’s going-away party.”

Gibbs stiffened. “Abby… no party. Tonight’s for me and Tony, alone.”

Abby turned to face him. “We’re his friends too, Gibbs! And we’re gonna miss him.”

Gibbs sighed, putting his hands in his jeans pockets. “He’ll only be gone a few weeks.”

Abby shook her head. “A few *days* is too long. We need him here. You need him.” She looked at Gibbs, who just looked back. “Fine. But if we’re not having a party tonight, you need to get him and the others here this afternoon so we can say goodbye properly.”

“No party tonight.”
Abby nodded emphatically. “Party this afternoon, no party tonight.” She shot him a wicked smile. “You and Tony can get it on in privacy, safe from all of us.”

Gibbs cleared his throat. “All right, Abs. I’ll go get him.”

“You’re the best! I’ll call the others in. Tony’s gonna be so happy, you’ll see.”

Gibbs leaned forward, brushing a kiss on her cheek. “Yeah, he will.” He turned to leave, hearing her muttering something about free energy and disorder when she couldn’t find her phone.

He hit the button for the elevator and waited for it to arrive. Moments later it dinged, the door slid open, and Kevin Segel almost crashed into Gibbs as he hurried out. Gibbs dodged to one side; Segel flinched and stepped back, his face turning red.

Both men were silent for a moment. Segel cleared his throat, and asked, “How’s Agent DiNozzo?”

Gibbs stared at him, expressionless. Segel fidgeted a bit, then dropped his eyes. “Would, ah… would you tell him I hope he’s okay?”

Gibbs tilted his head a bit, then nodded slightly, turning to hit the button again to re-open the elevator door. He walked in, turned around, hit the button to go up, and stared at the panel as the door closed.

Segel watched it shut, then sighed quietly as he bent over to pick up the folder he’d dropped. Somehow, coming in to work to distract himself from his depressing thoughts about the past few days on Gibbs’ team suddenly seemed like a bad idea. He straightened up and walked into the lab to see Abby.

She was talking animatedly on the phone as he walked in. “No gifts, just bring some food. I’ll get the decorations. It’ll be fun! He’ll love it, you know he will.” A pause. “That was the easy part. I threatened to bring the party to them tonight.” She laughed. “See you soon, Duckman!”

She hung up and turned around to see Segel standing there. Her expression changed, to a mix of suspicion and compassion. “You ran into Gibbs, huh?”

Segel smiled wryly. “Yeah. How could you tell? The scorch marks on my face?”

Abby smiled at that. “No way. If he’d really given you the Gibbs glare, you wouldn’t be walking right now.” She reached for the folder he held out for her and opened it. She read for a moment, then looked up at him, surprised. “You transferred to Pearson’s team?”

Segel shook his head, his eyes fixed on the folder in her hands. “No. I didn’t want to sit at home and run everything through my head for the millionth time, so I came in and volunteered to help them out.”

Abby lowered the folder and looked at him seriously. “We all know you didn’t mean to get Tony hurt.”

Segel snorted. “Gibbs doesn’t. He wouldn’t speak to me just now.”

Abby bit her lip. “Gibbs does know. He does. He’s just… he’s very protective of his people.”

“I wouldn’t have thought DiNozzo needed so much protection.”

Abby’s eyes shifted away from him, then back. “I don’t think Gibbs really cares about whether anyone needs his protection. They’re going to have it anyway. Semper fi, you know?”
Segel chuckled a bit. “McGee told me there’s no such thing as a former Marine.”

“Exactly. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Segel raised his eyes to her. “So why are you being nice to me? I wasn’t exactly cordial to you at the beginning.”

Abby tilted her head, looking at him seriously. “It’s kind of like being mad at a puppy ‘cause it growled at you. When it starts wagging its tail instead, you can’t help but pet it.”

Segel blinked. “I’m really not sure how to take that.”

She shrugged and smiled a bit. “Tim says you’re trying, and Jimmy told me about your conversation with him and Ducky. Everyone deserves a second chance, you know?”

“Thanks. And I’m sorry about the stuff I said when I first started here.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed a bit. “Just don’t do it again. I’m not talking about me so much, I’m talking about Gibbs and Tony. You disrespect them again, and I’ll kill you and –”

He cut her off. “- leave no forensic evidence. I know, I’ve been warned.”

Abby straightened up with a little hop. “So, are you going to stay for Tony’s party?”

“What party?”

“He’s leaving for Seattle tomorrow. Gibbs – I mean, we’re all going to miss him so much, even though he’s only going to be away for a little while… unless the universe starts messing with us again. Which is really possible when you consider that we’re almost overdue for some craziness. Everything’s been going so well, and Gibbs has really been happy – oh, but you don’t know about the GSS, so just forget I said anything.” She gave a little nod. “So, party. You staying?”

Segel’s eyes were a bit wide. “Um… I don’t think so. I have plans, meeting up with some friends from the force.” He smiled a bit. “They want to give me a hard time about becoming a fed.”

Abby nodded. “Okay, but you should make a contribution, ‘cause you are part of the team, even if it’s not permanent.”

Segel nodded. “I can do that.” He gestured to the file Abby was still holding. “So, Pearson asked me to double check with you on the trajectory calculations…”

**Abby’s Party**

Tony sighed as he buckled his seat belt. Gibbs glanced over at him. “Don’t want to go?”

“That’s not it.” Tony watched Gibbs’ hands as he started the car. “It’s just, well, with our luck, we’ll get a case, work through the night, and I’m going head off to the airport alone while you guys are out chasing leads.”

Gibbs shook his head as he eased out onto the main road. “We won’t get a case.”

“How do you know that? Your gut?”

“Vance.”

“Vance’s gut?”
Gibbs grinned at that one. “Bryson’s daughter’s getting married late next month.” His smile faded as a thought occurred to him. “She’d be about Kelly’s age,” he said softly.

Tony reached over and laid his hand on Gibbs’ leg, squeezing gently. Gibbs let go of the wheel, grasping Tony’s hand briefly before clearing his throat and continuing. “Rotation has his team on call for that weekend; he went to Vance and requested a switch, Vance gave it him.”

“Even though we’re already on call?”

“Yup.”

“Huh. He really runs hot and cold with you, doesn’t he?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Don’t much care, as long as he runs hot at the right time.” He looked at Tony. “Tonight’s just for us.”

Tony gave him a warm smile. “Good. I’m feeling better already.” He glanced out the windshield. “Watch the road, Jethro!”

They made it to the Navy Yard by mid-afternoon. Gibbs led the way to the lab, with Tony just behind and to the side, in their customary positions. Abby, Ziva, Tim, Jimmy and Ducky were all there, and Abby had decorated the lab. There were banners saying Bon Voyage, Come Back Soon, and Safe Journey. Colorful streamers were everywhere, and the evidence table was covered with food and drinks.

“Tony!” Abby came running, enveloping him in a strong hug before grabbing his hand and leading him over to the table. Gibbs followed along behind, clapping Ducky on the shoulder and settling in to watch Tony soak up all the attention.

The party lasted for a few hours; Gibbs showed tremendous patience. At some point or other, Tony was pulled aside for a private chat with just about everyone.

Ziva handed Tony a glass of punch and a piece of cake. “You will do a good job, Tony.”

“You think so, huh?”

“I do.” She nodded seriously. “You read people well. You will make the right choice, and you will come back to us.” She glanced over to where Gibbs was listening to Jimmy Palmer telling a story, a slight smile on his face. “And to him.”

Tony raised his glass. “Thanks, Ziva.”

She smiled, raised her glass in return, and then made way for Abby, who hugged him again. “I’ll send you daily updates from the GSS. And I think Ducky has plans to keep Gibbs occupied at least some evenings.” She looked up at him seriously. “Hurry back, okay? He needs you.”

A short time later, Ducky came up next to him while he was investigating the remaining desserts. “How are you feeling, Anthony?”

Tony smiled at him. “Not too bad, actually. Still sore, but a lot better than this morning.”

“You were lucky, you know. You could have been most seriously injured. I do hope you’ll be careful while you’re on this special assignment.”

“I will, Ducky. I’m guessing it’ll be a lot of time spent behind a desk and talking to people.”
“Hmm, yes, well, even the best laid plans, and all that. We’ll all be looking forward to your safe return.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Ducky patted his arm, and they talked for a little while about other things. Jimmy wandered over, holding a small plate of cookies. “You’ve got to try these, Tony. They’re really good.”

Ducky moved off to see Ziva, and Tony popped one of the cookies into his mouth. His eyes widened, and he looked more closely at the plate. “Whoa, those are fantastic! What are they?” He grabbed a few more.

“I’m not sure. Abby said Kevin brought them over a little while before the party started.”

“Yeah? Well, the ultra-probie’s a cookie genius.”

Jimmy shifted a bit, and gave Tony a serious look. “He feels really bad about what happened.”

Tony chewed and swallowed. “I’m okay, Palmer.”

“Yeah, I know… and I’m really glad about that. I just… thought you should know that he’s trying really hard to make up for his attitude at the beginning.”

“You guys are hanging out?”

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah, a bit. Some evenings, we grab a drink. He wants to make up for it all.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to do, if he just drops the attitude and doesn’t get anyone else hurt.” Tony eyed the cookies again. “You find out why he came in with such a chip on his shoulder?”

Jimmy looked off to the side. “Not exactly… he’s said a few things in passing, so I could probably make a guess.”

Tony looked at him thoughtfully. “I’ll come talk to you about those guesses if he’s still being a pain when I get back.”

“Alright.”

Tony reached out to punch him lightly on the arm, making Jimmy smile. McGee drifted over to them, looking at the plate in Jimmy’s hand. “Those are the best cookies ever. You’re not going to eat them all, are you?”

Jimmy looked down at the plate. “Well…”

Tony reached out and grabbed two more. “Run for it, Gremlin!” Jimmy grinned at him, grabbed a cookie, and moved off quickly. McGee started to follow, but Tony grabbed his arm. “Hey, Tim. Got a favor to ask you.”

McGee raised an eyebrow. “Give me one of those cookies.”

Tony shook his head, but held out a cookie. “Watch his back, will you? Don’t let him do any of the stupid stuff he does when he gets too focused on a case.”

“You know I will, Tony.”

“Yeah… I just worry.”
“I can understand that… self-preservation isn’t exactly his strong point sometimes.”

“So – you’ll watch out for him?”

McGee shot him an exasperated look. “I care about him too, Tony.”

Tony ran one hand through his hair. “Sorry, man… I know you do. It’s just…” He waved the hand aimlessly.

McGee sighed. “I get it. I do.” He eyed the cookie in Tony’s other hand. “You gonna eat that?”

Tony backed up a step. “Mine. Get your own.”

McGee rolled his eyes and walked over to the table. There weren’t many left, but there were enough for him to load up a small plate without taking the last few. He moved back over to Tony, who was chewing on his cookie and watching Gibbs.

“So,” McGee said, “you don’t mind if I message you occasionally about this senior field agent thing, right?”

Tony glanced at him, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “My little probie is all grown up.”

McGee shook his head, but couldn’t help smiling. “You’re never gonna change, are you?”

“Can’t improve on perfection.”

“Oh, please.”

“Just ask Jethro,” Tony said.

“I’ll pass.”

They stood there in companionable silence, until McGee spoke again. “You watch your own back out there, okay?”

“Pfft. I’ll be behind a desk. What could go wrong with that?”

“Idiot,” McGee said, “You just jinxed it.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

They lapsed back into silence, with McGee periodically moving the plate away from Tony’s questing hand.

**Calling the Shots**

Jethro followed Tony into the apartment, turning to watch as Tony locked the door behind them. “Have fun?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. It’s always nice to feel wanted, you know?”

Jethro stepped forward, reaching out to pull Tony into a hug. “You are wanted,” he said quietly into Tony’s ear. “You’ve got to know that.”

Tony’s arms tightened around him. “I do, Jeth.” They stood there for a moment, and then Tony
pulled away, motioning for Jethro to move into the living room. They sat on the couch, and Tony rested his head on the back. “I was looking forward to this, saw it as a good thing… prove myself a bit, keep the team together, nice little bullet point on my resume. Now that it’s almost time to leave, though… seems like a bad idea.”

Jethro reached out and took Tony’s hand. “It is.”

Tony laughed and turned to look at him. “Gotta stop sugar-coating things, Jethro.”

Jethro snorted. “It is a bad idea… you belong here. I can’t be on your six with you there and me here.”

Tony squeezed Jethro’s hand. “Won’t be for too long.”

“You said it could be up to a month.”

“Yeah, that I might be out there.” Tony pulled Jethro’s hand onto his lap, and started tracing patterns on the back of it with a finger. “You’ll be visiting weekend after next.”

Jethro rolled his eyes. “You’re on that again?” He watched Tony shrug, keeping his eyes on their hands. “Hey.” Tony glanced up as Jethro shifted up, moving his free hand to run fingers through Tony’s hair. “Thought you knew I’m not interested in Emma.”

“I do… doesn’t mean I have to like knowing that she’s going to come onto you while I’m gone.”

Jethro tilted his head. “Didn’t think it bothered you so much.”

“It didn’t… but I wasn’t about to leave then. It was sort of funny at the time, and I felt a little sorry for her. Now – it’s different. More real.”

“You really don’t think you could be wrong about her?”

Tony shook his head. “Nope.” He looked seriously at his lover. “I’ve been over that visit to Stillwater many times… she’s the only way the sheriff could have known about us.”

Jethro grimaced. “I know that’s what it seems like, but the Emma I know would never betray a friend.”

“Lots of years under the bridge, Jeth. You’re both different people.”

Jethro caressed Tony cheek with his fingertips. “I’ll send her an email, cancel the visit.”

Tony shook his head. “I appreciate the thought, but I don’t want you to do that. I know I talk a good game, but I could be wrong… maybe we touched, or stood too close to each other, or something at the wrong time, and he picked up on it. Maybe Jack said something he didn’t realize. Whatever it was… she’s your friend, and you were happy to see her. Don’t want you to give up on that.”

“Okay, Tony. As long as you know –“

“I do, Jeth. Really. It’s just… this reminds me of when I went Afloat. Not as bad, but still.”

Jethro could see the remembered pain on Tony’s face, and he leaned in, determined to erase that look. His lips brushed gently over Tony’s, and he felt a little thrill at the contact. Tony’s mouth opened under his, and he deepened the kiss, moving one hand behind Tony’s head while he freed the other and slid it up his lover’s arm. Their mouths moved together, Tony’s tongue pushing forward to tangle with Jethro’s. They both moved closer to each other, so they were touching
intermittently down the length of their bodies.

Jethro pulled back a little, dropping his face to Tony’s neck, nipping gently, following up with a lick and a kiss, making Tony inhale sharply. More nips and kisses followed, covering Tony’s neck, progressing lower to his shoulder and collarbone when Jethro moved his hands to undo the top buttons on Tony’s shirt. Tony’s head dropped back and to the side, giving Jethro free access, humming in pleasure when Jethro’s hands left the shirt and moved down to slide under it, caressing Tony’s stomach, fingertips skimming under his waistband.

Jethro lifted his head to find Tony’s mouth again, running his tongue over Tony’s lips before invading his mouth, kissing him with increased passion while his hands moved to Tony’s back and pulled him forward. Tony’s hands, which had been quiet, clenching occasionally into fists while they lay on the couch, finally moved into action, one gripping Jethro’s thigh while the other moved up to his hair, taking hold and pressing him closer before pulling back, forcing them to separate.

Jethro was breathing heavily, and he gazed at Tony, questioning. Tony smiled. “I’m supposed to be calling the shots, remember?”

Jethro grinned and nodded, satisfied to see that all traces of sadness had vanished from Tony’s face. “Our night, your call.”

Tony grinned. “Couch is great, but I’m thinking bed is more appropriate.”

“Bed it is.”

Jethro entered the room first and turned to see Tony head for the bathroom, rubbing his chest. “Just getting some of that grunt candy of yours. Why don’t you strip while I do that?”

Jethro complied with Tony’s suggestion, removing his clothes, folding them, and laying them on top of the dresser before Tony came back. He sat on the end of the bed, not sure what Tony would want, but ready for anything; he’d meant it when he agreed that Tony would be in control tonight.

Tony was talking longer than Jethro expected, which gave him a pretty good idea what his partner was doing in there. Sure enough, when Tony finally came back into the bedroom, the younger man was naked, his cock hard and erect and certainly more than ready for action.

“You were prepping for me, weren’t you?”

Tony grinned. “Got a problem with that?”

Jethro shook his head. “Not a chance.”

Tony sat next to Jethro and leaned in to kiss him softly on the lips. He tilted his head toward the pillows. “Lie down, on your back.”

Jethro did, and he watched as Tony let his gaze wander over Jethro’s body, soon followed by his hands. Tony’s hands were everywhere, touching everything, from Jethro’s toes, along his legs to his groin, fondling his balls, stroking his cock, then moving up over his hips to his abdomen, his chest, down his arms, then back, repeating the motions, in a sort of sensual massage that took Jethro’s breath away. He lay back, closed his eyes, and focused on how Tony made him feel, something Jethro couldn’t have put into words if his life depended on it.

He opened his eyes when he felt the bed shift, and Tony moved to straddle him, sitting so his balls rested lightly on Jethro’s cock, making Jethro take a deep breath while he kept his hips from thrusting up. He looked up into Tony’s eyes, which were intent on his own. Tony reached down to take
Jethro’s hand, lifting it up to his lips and gently kissing Jethro’s fingers. Jethro smiled at the romantic gesture, and reached up to run the pad of his thumb over Tony’s lips, levering himself up enough to slide his hand around Tony’s neck and pull him in for a kiss. One kiss turned into two, then many, and both men were groaning at the feel of their groins pushing together when they moved. Finally Tony pulled back, and Jethro asked, “What do you want?”

Tony looked down at him, breathing heavily, then shifted away from his lover to reach the nightstand drawer, open it, and pull out the lube. Surprised, Jethro said, “I thought…“

Tony grinned, opened the tube, and put some lube on his fingers. “I did. I wanna try something.” He sat up a bit, moving forward and reaching behind himself to gently take hold of Jethro’s cock. He wriggled his hips until the head of Jethro’s cock was up against his anus, then moved just enough to help him penetrate inside, just past the tight ring of muscle. Jethro groaned at the feeling of Tony surrounding him, one hand clenching on Tony’s leg while the other grabbed the sheets. Tony’s head was flung back, and he was panting, gritting his teeth a bit as he slid down a little further. “Dunno if this is gonna work,” he said. “Wanna come so bad… Jeth, god… what I want, I want you in me, wanna feel you come, but first I want you to take it slow, wanna open you up while you take me.”

Jethro’s breath hitched at that idea, and he stared at Tony’s face.

“That – ah, yeah, that’s it – then, once you come, I wanna get in you, and make love to you as slowly as I can stand it, while you’re all relaxed and floating in that haze… then I wanna come in you, make you feel as good as you make me feel.”

“God, Tony, that sounds, ah – sounds incredible. Think – mmm, yesss – think you can hold out?”

“Dunno… maybe? Gonna try.”

Tony lowered himself a little more onto Jethro’s cock, groaning again as he felt himself stretch around him. He reached behind and forward with the lube on his fingers. It was awkward, but he could do it, brushing against Jethro’s entrance, pushing his finger inside easily while he sank down a little further. Jethro made a sound that was half moan, half cry, then grabbed a hold of Tony’s hips and helped him to set a rhythm. It was slow and shallow at first, and Tony was able to match the movement of his hand between Jethro’s ass cheeks to the rhythm of Jethro’s cock moving in and out. Jethro was gritting his teeth, gasping and grunting a bit when Tony added a second and then a third finger.

Jethro’s cock was all the way in, and Tony bit his lip trying not to give in to the waves of pleasure coursing through his body. He wanted this so much, wanted to reciprocate everything tonight, not wait until morning. Jethro moved Tony up and almost entirely off his cock, then urged him to sink back down, all the way again, and Tony cried out, gripping the base of his own cock tightly, staving off his impending orgasm and almost losing his balance in the process. Jethro let out a surprised laugh as he kept Tony upright, and then Tony was giggling, his fingers up Jethro’s ass and his own full of Jethro’s cock, and suddenly he felt as if he could hold out for hours if he had to. He leaned down, managing to land a quick kiss of Jethro’s lips and keep all their body parts where they were, and growled “Go for it.”

Jethro growled back, and then he was thrusting up into Tony and Tony was matching his motion with his own hips and his hand, rubbing against Jethro’s prostate and making his lover cry out. They moved as fast as they could given their positions; Tony gritting his teeth and fighting not to come, while Jethro’s body tightened up, his head and shoulders lifting up off the bed while he screamed out “Tony!!”, his hips stuttering and then locking into place while he came deep inside Tony’s ass.

Tony had a death grip on his own cock, willing the urge to come to subside, watching Jethro as his
lover slowly relaxed back into the mattress, breathing heavily. As soon as Tony was confident he wouldn’t lose control, he slowly lifted himself off Jethro’s cock, slid his fingers out of his ass, and leaned in close to kiss him deeply. Jethro hummed into Tony’s mouth, lost in that haze of pleasure Tony had spoken of earlier, but retaining enough sense of self to help Tony get them both into position. Jethro reached down, stroking Tony’s aching cock, and helped guide it to his own ass.

Tony entered Jethro slowly, not wanting to bring him out of his blissful state. He groaned quietly as he slid easily all the way in; Jethro was loose and pliant from his orgasm. Tony shifted a bit, moving to kiss and lick Jethro’s skin, starting a languid rhythm with his hips.

It didn’t take long for Jethro’s legs to tighten around Tony and for his arms to reach up, one hand gripping Tony’s hair, the other taking Tony’s hand, linking their fingers together, and settling back down onto the mattress. Tony kept the pace slow and even, feeling the tension build in his groin, the tingling along his spine, and realized he was moaning and grunting with every thrust.

“You can lose control with me, Tony… please. Take what you need,” Jethro whispered.

With that, Tony was lost. He was vaguely aware of speeding the motion of his hips, driving all the way into Jethro with each thrust, pulling nearly all the way out. Jethro had a strong grip on Tony’s hair, which only increased his passion. Faster, faster, until he felt like he was trying to get all of himself under Jethro’s skin. His orgasm took him by surprise, and he cried out wordlessly, the sound muffled into the pillow near Jethro’s head, feeling his lover shake beneath him.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been blissed out when he finally came back to himself. Jethro was stroking his hair and murmuring words he couldn’t quite catch. Tony sighed, then gingerly pushed himself up onto his forearms. “You okay?” he asked.

Jethro nodded. “I’m fantastic.” He reached up to slide the backs of his fingers along Tony’s face. “That was…” He shook his head. “I don’t know how to describe what that was.”

Tony smiled. “Yeah. I know exactly what you mean.” He shifted back and up, carefully pulling out and then turning to lie on his side. “I think I’m gonna need more painkillers.”

Jethro laughed quietly. “I’m not surprised.”

“We’re a complete mess, you know. There’s lube everywhere, and all kinds of… of… well, I’m sure Ducky would have a name for it all.”

Jethro grinned. “And yet I haven’t been this happy in a very long time.”

Tony tilted his head to one side. “I’ve never been this happy, Jethro.” His eyes went unfocused for a moment. “Don’t want to lose this.”

Jethro’s smile faded. “You won’t, Tony.”

Tony refocused on Jethro’s face. “Promise me something.”

“What?”

“That you won’t take too many chances while I’m away. That you’ll let McGee and Ziva watch your six. That you won’t drive into any rivers, or get hit by a car, or targeted by drug lords, or shot at…”

Jethro reached over to grasp Tony’s head in his hands. “Tony.” His lover fell silent. “I’ll even look both ways before crossing the street.”
Tony stared at him for a moment, then started laughing. “Okay, I guess I’m going a little overboard.”

“Not really. You’re just feeling vulnerable, that’s all.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m feeling the same way.”

Tony went quiet again, taking several minutes to just look at Jethro, tracing his face with his fingertips while Jethro’s hands combed through his hair.

“I love you, Jeth.”

“Me too, Tony. It’s gonna be okay.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Tony sighed. “Okay then.” There was a long pause. “Wanna shower and change the sheets?”

“Please.”

Not long afterwards, exhausted and clean, they were sound asleep, tangled together and hanging on like they’d never let go.
Leaving

6:30 am

Jethro woke slowly, opening his eyes to see Tony watching him. They gazed at each other for a moment, and then Tony moved forward, rolling on top of his lover and kissing him deeply. He pulled back and looked down at Jethro for a long moment before kissing him again. They continued like that for almost an hour, not speaking, not pushing it beyond what it was, just staying in the moment.

9:12 am

Jethro sat in the armchair in Tony’s spacious bedroom, sipping at his coffee and watching while Tony filled garment bags and suitcases with clothes and grooming products. He shook his head at the three different bottles of hair gel that went into one bag, and opened his mouth to ask Tony why he needed three different bottles. Thinking better of it, he had another sip of coffee instead. He wouldn’t put it past Tony to take his question as an excuse to convince him to try using the stuff.

Tony picked up yet another suit and looked it over carefully. Jethro shook his head. “Looks like you’re packing for a lot longer than just a few weeks.”

Tony glanced over at him and smiled. “It’s all about creating the right impression for the right situation. Last suit I packed is for tomorrow morning, when I first get to the field office. Not too fancy, not too casual. Right down the line. Depending on how people react, I’ve got three different clothing options for Tuesday.”

Jethro just stared at him, then had more coffee.

“You should let me take you on a shopping spree, Jeth… imagine what kind of impression you’d make in Armani or Zegna!”

“You think I need help making an impression?”

Tony considered that. “Nope. Head slaps and glares work great for you. The rest of us mere mortals have to embellish.” He carefully folded a dress shirt, placed it in the suitcase, then walked over to Jethro. Leaning down to brush a kiss over Jethro’s lips, he gingerly extracted the mug from his hand, took a sip of the coffee, then grimaced and shuddered theatrically before replacing the mug in Jethro’s grasp and heading back to the suitcase.

Jethro looked down into the mug, then back up at his lover. “Explain why it’s okay for you to drink from my coffee, but if I drink from something of yours, it’s the end of the world.”

“That’s different,” Tony replied loftily.

Jethro sighed, downed the rest of the coffee, then went into the kitchen for a refill.

When he came back, Tony was sitting on the bed, flipping through one of the files Vance’s assistant had given him the previous week. They were the abbreviated versions of the personnel files of the
agents on the two teams Tony would be dealing with; each team had one of the candidates for the
team leader position.

Jethro himself had only been given copies of the files concerning the two candidates. That hadn’t
stopped him from doing research on the rest of the agents who should be on Tony’s six, but Jethro
hadn’t said anything to Tony about that. Tony hadn’t asked, and Jethro hadn’t forgotten Vance’s
advice about letting Tony fly solo on this one. There was only one agent Jethro had any real
concerns about, but so far he’d kept his mouth shut, not wanting to step on Tony’s toes.

“Where are you staying?”

Tony closed the file and looked up. “Navy Lodge in Silverdale, not far from the field office. Got an
email from Morris Franklin a few days ago with all the travel arrangements.” Tony got up and
packed the files into his carry-on. “I upgraded to business class.”

Jethro nodded. “Wise choice. Economy sucks.” He stretched a bit and settled back into the chair. It
was comfortable, and he liked the idea of it ending up in the bedroom at his house… if Tony would
consent to move in. Not that Jethro had brought up that idea yet. “Would have even more leg room if
you were flying military transport.”

“Yeah, well, thank God for cost cutting.”

Jethro snorted. “What else you planning to do out there?”

“Besides work?” Tony shrugged. “Emailed a college friend last week… we played basketball
together, haven’t seen him since graduation, but we’ve been in touch on and off. He lives in Seattle,
so we’ll go out for drinks at some point. Play tourist too, buy souvenirs for the team…” His voice
trailed off as he looked through his bags. “Conditioner!” he exclaimed, and ran off to the bathroom.

Jethro chuckled into his coffee.

1:23 pm

They sat at the table by the window, eating sandwiches Jethro had picked up from the local deli.

“So… got any advice for me, Jethro?”

Jethro looked at him thoughtfully. “You know what you’re doing, Tony. You’ll make the right
choice.”

Tony smiled at him. “You’re biased.”

“Damn right. Rule 5, remember? You had skills before you came to NCIS, and you’ve been
working with me all these years.”

Tony grinned. “Best agent you’ve worked with, right?”

Jethro took a big bite of his sandwich and looked at Tony, then reached out to ruffle his hair. “Yup.”

Tony put his food down so he could tame the mess Jethro made, then shot him a mock glare. “Still,
would be nice to get some pointers. This is a new thing for me.”

“Trust your gut. Be yourself.”

Tony blinked at him. “You sure about that last one?”
Jethro smiled at him, reaching over again, this time to pat Tony’s cheek. “Yup.”

Tony took a deep breath. “Okay.”

3:15 pm

Tony walked back into the apartment, having made the first trip to the car. Jethro had brought the rest of the bags from the bedroom, and stood looking at them. He glanced up at Tony, raising an eyebrow. “You’re just as bad as my ex-wives.” He looked back at the bags and shook his head. “Maybe worse.”

Tony grinned at him. “You still love me, though, right?”

Jethro reached up and head slapped him lightly. Tony’s grin got wider, and he reached for his carry-on, but Jethro stopped him with a hand on his arm, pulling him suddenly into a fierce hug. Tony relaxed into it immediately, wrapping his arms around Jethro’s waist, while Jethro buried his face into Tony’s neck and inhaled deeply.

They stood like that for several minutes, until Jethro lifted his head and whispered into Tony’s ear, his hand on the back of Tony’s head. “You watch your six out there, Tony.”

Tony nodded, bringing his own hand up to Jethro’s neck and squeezing lightly. “You do the same here, okay?”

Jethro nodded in return, pulling back to look into Tony’s eyes. Tony looked back, refraining from saying anything about the slight sheen of moisture in Jethro’s eyes. He leaned in and kissed Jethro’s lips softly, reveling in the gentle response from his partner. Then he pulled back, resting his forehead against Jethro’s for a moment before running his fingers through the older man’s hair and squeezing his shoulder. “Love you, Jeth,” he whispered.

“Love you too, Tony.”

5:33 pm

Jethro had flashed his NCIS badge in order to accompany Tony to the gate. They talked idly about a variety of things, placing a few bets on how long Abby would wait to call Jethro that night, and how long it would take for McGee to send Tony a panicked email about his new responsibilities as senior field agent.

The call went out for first class passengers to board; Tony looked up, fidgeting in his seat a bit.

“You got something to read on the plane?” Jethro asked gruffly.

Tony blushed lightly, then opened his bag and pulled out a book, handing it over for Jethro to look at. It was entitled *The Greatest US Marine Corps Stories Ever Told: Unforgettable Stories of Courage, Honor and Sacrifice.* Jethro smiled softly and handed it back to him. Tony cleared his throat and put it back in his bag, after which Jethro reached into his jacket pocket and removed another book, giving it to Tony.


Jethro shrugged slightly. “You haven’t read it already?”

Tony shook his head. “Didn’t know it existed. I’ve got this boss, you know, demands an awful lot of
“Gonna demand a lot more when you get back.”

They fell silent, just looking at each other, until the call came for business class to board. Tony sighed and put his gift in his bag, then stood abruptly. “Not gonna drag this out,” he commented quietly.

“Good idea,” Jethro said fervently.

“I’ll call you when I get to the Lodge... well, no. It’s gonna be late, and we’ll both be tired. I’ll call you when I’m done with day one... that way we’ll have more to talk about.”

“You do that.”

Their hands brushed together as they both walked toward the waiting attendant. Tony handed her his boarding pass, and she checked it before giving it back. “Enjoy your trip, sir.”

He turned back toward Jethro. “Talk to you soon.”

Jethro nodded and gave him a small smile.

Tony snorted. “That’s what, a 1.6? You can do better than that! You don’t give me at least two points higher, I’m calling Abby right now.”

Jethro shook his head, but his smile widened.

“I’m calling that a 3.7, but it’s a gift.” Tony’s expression grew serious. “Take care of yourself, Jethro.”

“You too.”

Jethro watched until Tony disappeared down the ramp, and then he set off for his car, deciding not to stand there and watch the plane taxi out.

7:09 pm

Tony set his book down on his lap and gazed out the window at the clouds, thinking about too many things at once. Reviewing the personnel files in head, wondering if Abby was able to complete the mission he’d given her, thinking maybe he should have packed that extra suit, trying to remember where he’d put the directions to Silverdale from the airport, and finally settling on that intimate hour with Jethro that morning. Smiling a little, he reclined his seat and closed his eyes, cinematic history losing out to a blue-eyed Marine.

Staying

7:30 pm

Gibbs had various pieces of Tony’s cabinet laid out on the work table in the basement when his phone screamed. He glanced at the time before flipping it open. Damn it all, Tony won. Thought I had at least another hour.

“Hey, Abs.”

“Gibbs! Are you drunk?”
He closed his eyes and shook his head, then made an effort to sound stern. “Of course not.”

“Are you sure?”

“You really think I wouldn’t know?”

“Well, no… you are a Marine, and I’m assuming Marines can generally hold their liquor. But you’re always telling us not to assume, right? Rule 8! Tony says that he used to wake you up under the boat a lot, and that you were obviously hung over, but that hasn’t happened in a long time. That’s why I’m calling, though, ’cause Tony won’t be there to wake you up, not that you have a boat to be under anymore, although I guess you could start building one –“

“Abby!”

There was a pause, and then she spoke again in a small voice. “I just want to know that you’re okay, Gibbs.”

Gibbs sighed. “I know, Abs, and I appreciate that. I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Would you rather I pine away like some stupid heroine in some ridiculous TV movie?”

“How do you know about those movies?”

“Ex-wife number two. Are we done here?”

“Are you really sure you’re okay? McGee’s worried about being your senior field agent if you’re going to be all growly tomorrow.”

“McGee has seen me growly and lived.”

“But Tony was always there as a buffer. There’s no data on this – we’re in unchartered territory, Gibbs!”

“I’ll bring you your Caf-Pow first thing in the morning, Abby.”

“Yay! I’m going to hold you to that. We need to maintain normalcy.”

“Say goodnight, Abs.”

“Goodnight, Abs.”

Gibbs hung up, smiling and thinking that maybe the next few weeks wouldn’t be too bad after all.

8:47 pm

Gibbs was working on possible designs for the inlay on the cabinet doors when he heard footsteps above. It took him only a few seconds to identify Ducky’s tread. He smiled and went to the work bench to pull out a couple of glass jars and a bottle of bourbon.

Ducky reached the bottom of the stairs just as Gibbs was putting the cap back on the bottle. “Good evening, Jethro! I do hope you haven’t overindulged tonight.”

Gibbs shook his head and held out a jar for Ducky to take. “This is the first and only, Duck.”
“Really? That is good news! A toast then… to those who are missed, may they return speedily home.”

Gibbs inclined his head and clinked his jar against Ducky’s. Both men sipped their drinks, and Ducky gave Gibbs a steady, searching look before he nodded to himself, then turned and approached the table in the center of the basement. “A new project?”

“Cabinet for Tony. Something he can store things in when he’s here.” Gibbs moved to stand next to Ducky, setting his jar down on the table and moving a few pieces of wood so he could show the M.E. his plans.

“Anthony must be very excited about this. He’s always admired your work.”

“I’m teaching him; he’s helping me build it.”

Ducky smiled broadly and clapped his friend on the back. “Excellent! I am extremely pleased that the two of you found your way to each other after all this time. You both deserve to be happy.”

“Thanks, Duck.” Gibbs had another swallow of bourbon, then surprised himself by speaking up. “I’m going to ask Tony to move in.”

Ducky’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s a big step. Are you sure?”

Gibbs nodded. “Yeah. We spend pretty much all our time together anyway.”

“Our Anthony is a very independent man, Jethro. Will you be alright if he says no?”

Gibbs tilted his head to one side. “Don’t see why not. It won’t change anything if we keep things the way they are.”

“Good, good… he has no idea that you’re thinking along these lines?”

“No, and you’re not going to tell him.”

“Jethro!” Ducky drew himself up to his full height, clearly affronted. “I would never betray something you have so obviously told me in confidence.”

Gibbs sighed. “Sorry, Duck… Abby called a little while ago, and I guess I sort of forgot who I’m talking to.”

Ducky made a rude noise. “And now you’re confusing me with Abigail, who is much taller, younger, and, dare I add, female?”

Gibbs laughed. “That was pretty lame, huh?”

“Indeed. In fact, I believe this calls for another splash of bourbon, if you’d be so kind.”

Gibbs obliged him, and Ducky raised his glass again. “To you and Anthony, Jethro, may fate be kind to you both.”

12:42 am

Yawning and scratching his head, Gibbs set down the piece he was working on. Ducky had stayed on for a while, keeping him company while he worked. He had a mock up of one design for the inlay that he liked; he’d have to get McGee to show him how to take and send a picture on this new phone. Why they have to come out with a new version before anyone can figure out the old one…
He held up a rudely carved piece of wood. Sanded and oiled, he thought it would really look nice, but he wanted Tony’s go ahead first. He reached for his phone, then stopped himself. He wasn’t sure how long the flight to Seattle would be, and he didn’t want to distract Tony if he was driving. *It can wait until tomorrow.*

Gibbs sighed and went back to straightening up the pieces of wood and various tools on the table. He knew he was stalling… going upstairs to sleep in the bed alone wasn’t very appealing. “Damn, Tony… I miss you already.” He looked toward the bourbon, than shook his head. He wasn’t going to start that again. He put his hands on the table and looked at the plans for the cabinet. “Just stay safe,” he whispered.

*I’m sure he’ll try his hardest for you.*

Gibbs stepped back and turned quickly, his heart suddenly racing. “Shannon?!”

*Hi, Jethro. It’s so good to talk to you again.*

“You’re alright? Tony said you ran out of energy or something when you found me, when I was trapped in that car… that you wouldn’t be able to come back.”

*I did, and I couldn’t for a while, but I’m back now. I guess you could say I had to recharge on the other side.*

Gibbs smiled as his heart rate slowed back down. “Pretty good timing you’ve got there.”

Well… alright, I admit, I could have come back earlier – but you and Tony needed to have time together. I didn’t want to interfere with that.

“Neither of us would say you’re interfering, Shan. I’ve missed you.”

*And I’ve missed you… but you and Tony have a life to lead here. And Kelly and I have so much exploring to do there.*

“Oh yeah? What kind of exploring?”

She laughed, and he closed his eyes, savoring the sound.

*I can’t tell you that! You’ll find out one day. We’ll show both of you around.*

“Both of us… Shannon?”

*Don’t worry, Jethro… I didn’t mean anything by that. We have no way of knowing when it will be someone’s time. As far as I know, you and Tony will have many years together.*

Gibbs let go of the tension that had coiled in his gut. “Tony’s worried about what happens after we die… he wants to know who gets me, as he put it.”

Shannon laughed again. *Tell Tony he’s got nothing to worry about.*

“So you do know something?”

*I do, but it’s nothing I can share. You’ll find out one day.*

Gibbs was silent for a moment, trying to figure out what she knew, but gave it up as a lost cause. He knew her well enough that if she wasn’t allowed to clue him in, she wouldn’t, no matter what he said. “How’s Kelly?” he asked quietly.
She’s fine, Jethro. She misses you, but she’s happy you listened to her and chose life.

“Why…” Not sure how to ask, he let the question fade.

Why doesn’t she talk to you like I do?

Gibbs nodded, suddenly afraid to hear the answer.

Oh, Jethro, she loves you so much. Don’t for a second think it has anything to do with that. We just… we talked about the possibility, me, Kelly, and… well, someone else, too. No one you’d know. We didn’t think you’d handle it well… the last thing Kelly and I want is for you to slide into depression again.

Gibbs thought about that, and finally had to admit that talking to Kelly, being reminded so forcefully of everything she missed out on, could have that effect.

Maybe someday, when you and Tony are even closer than you are now, when we know he can be there to help you, maybe then?

Gibbs nodded, unable to speak, as it hit him for the first time that if Shannon was real, then so was Kelly, and he was so close to being able to talk to his baby girl again.

He was startled out of his sudden melancholy by his phone, which began singing Queen’s Loverboy. He grabbed it off the table and flipped it open. “Tony?”

“I sure as hell hope so. If anyone else is calling you with my ringtone, I’m gonna be really pissed off.”

“Where are you?”

“Seattle airport… waiting on my luggage. Sorry to call so late… just wanted to say hi.”

“Been working on your cabinet. Abby called… you won the bet.”

“Fantastic! I’ll add that to the list of things we can do when you’re here in a few weeks.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes and covered the phone with his hand. “Shannon? Wanna say hi to Tony?”

She giggled. Absolutely!

Gibbs uncovered the phone. “Ducky stopped by too… I think the team is conspiring to keep me from pining away without you. Oh, and there’s someone here who wants to say hi.” He held the phone out to basement, feeling slightly silly since he didn’t know where exactly Shannon was… if she was anywhere.

Hi Tony!

“Shannon?! Holy crap… you’re back?!”

Either that or you’re hallucinating.

“I’m talking to a ghost. Either option is hinky. And now I’m getting strange looks from other people, who shouldn’t be eavesdropping on private conversations!” That last part was clearly directed to the nameless other people.

Gibbs brought the phone back to his ear. “Get your luggage and get to the Lodge, will you? It’s late
and I don’t want you getting in an accident out there.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Tony…”

“Oh, look, my stuff’s showing up. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Jeth… and I’m really glad she’s back.”

“Yeah, me too. Bye, Tony.”

Gibbs hung up the phone, suddenly feeling much better about everything. “I’m gonna hit the rack, Shan. Will you be around?”

You know I will, Jethro. Get some sleep.

“Goodnight, Shannon… and tell Kelly I said goodnight, would you?” he added quietly.

Of course I will… goodnight, Jethro.

Gibbs headed for the stairs, switching off the lights as he reached the top, suddenly feeling exhausted by a day spent trying to wrestle emotions into submission. Shannon’s return had him feeling a little off-kilter, but it also made him feel as if he could stand to sleep in the empty bed.

He headed up the next flight of stairs to the bedroom. There was a bulky shape where there shouldn’t be one, resembling a large man in the dark, and he instantly dropped into a defensive crouch, with a fleeting thought for his gun. There was no movement from the shape, and he hit the lights, ready to do battle, then straightened up, at a loss for words.

Sitting on the chair next to the dresser was a giant teddy bear, probably close to two-thirds of his own height. It was dark brown and had a bow tie around its neck. There was a note stuck to its arm; Gibbs moved forward to pick it up, and had to squint a little to read it.

Gibbs – you can tell Tony ‘mission accomplished.’ He said you’d know what the bear is for. I’ve named him Beaker, after the lab assistant muppet, to keep Gonzo the hippo company. ~Abby

Gibbs stared at Beaker the bear, then shook his head and laughed. “I am not sleeping with a giant teddy bear, Tony!”

Chapter End Notes

*Author’s Note: The books do exist. Both were published in 2007. The Marine Corps book is by Iain C. Martin, and the one on cinema is by Richard Jewell. I found them on Amazon… haven’t read them yet, although I did buy them in a moment of weakness – in my defense, they both had really good reviews.
Day 1 – Monday morning

East Coast, 8:30 a.m. local time

Gibbs walked into the bullpen, carrying a cup of coffee, intentionally not looking at Tony’s empty chair. He’d gotten more sleep than he’d expected, and he had to admit that Beaker had gotten a chuckle out of him when he’d gotten up. He’d tried glaring the bear into submission, but hadn’t had much luck.

Gibbs’ steps slowed as he got closer to his desk; there were three cups of coffee sitting there. He looked around, but neither McGee nor Ziva were there. Segel was, and he cleared his throat when Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him. “Tim, Ziva and Abby, sir… um, Gibbs.”

Gibbs nodded and looked back at the coffee cups, then down at the one in his hand. He shook his head and smiled slightly, then sat as his desk, powering up his computer. “Where are McGee and David?”

“I think Ziva was going over a cold case and went to check on something with Abby. McGee said he had to check on some computers in the evidence locker.”

Gibbs nodded and sipped his coffee, waiting to be able to call up his email. When the computer was ready, he signed in and quickly scanned through his inbox. There was an email from Ducky, offering dinner at his home that evening; nothing else seemed particularly important. Gibbs replied, taking his friend up on the offer, then reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet and extracting a piece of paper, which he unfolded and then read after fishing out his glasses. He followed the instructions to log on to the secure server that McGee had set up, and smiled when he saw a new message from Tony, sent late last night.

Hey, Jethro! Hope you manage some sleep tonight without me. You should have some help, if Abby was successful in her mission. I’m about to hit the sack, but wanted to touch base first.

Room’s nice enough… decent size TV, stereo system I can live with, bed’s nowhere near good enough quality, but what can you do? Can guarantee it’s gonna be too damn empty.

This morning feels like it was years ago… but it was fantastic. Can’t remember the last time I spent such an intimate hour that didn’t result in a ‘happy ending,’ so to speak. Or write. Anyway, I loved it. You’re a goddamn revelation, you know that? I’m thanking my lucky stars that I made the choice I did when that whole thing with Jeanne went south.

I’m rambling, but hey, that’s nothing new. Alright… gonna get some sleep, will be in touch tomorrow. Meeting with Franklin at around 9 a.m. here. This time difference thing could be a pain, you know? K, goodnight, Jeth.

Tony

Gibbs realized he was grinning like a fool, and glanced up to see if Segel was paying attention. He was buried in a case file, so Gibbs let himself keep smiling while he typed a reply.

Hey yourself, Tony – slept okay, didn’t need the bear. So yeah, Abby says mission accomplished. You’re lucky I didn’t shoot the damn thing when it surprised me in the bedroom.
Hurry up and make a decision, will you? Flip a coin, I don’t care. Just get your butt back here where it belongs.

Hell, ignore that, you know I expect you to do a good job. Just try to do it quick.

And yeah, yesterday morning was fantastic. We should do that more often. Don’t know that I’m happy you went through that hell when your cover was blown, but I’ll thank those same stars.

Gibbs paused, looking at the screen, then his grin morphed into a smirk as he typed the last line.

Love, Jethro

He sat back and took another long sip of coffee, then hit ‘send.’ That oughta shake things up a bit, he thought.

McGee came back to the bullpen, hurrying to his desk. “Morning, Boss.”

Gibbs gave him a nod, waiting until McGee was seated at his desk. “McGee.”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Hunt up the forms for personnel evaluations.”

McGee frowned. “It’s midyear… don’t you usually do those in December?”


McGee’s eyes widened, and he stared at Gibbs. “Me?!”

“Sure as hell isn’t gonna be David or Segel.”

McGee stared at him. “How, uh, how long do I have?”

“Friday, first thing.”

“Um… yeah. Okay. No problem, Boss.”

Gibbs hid a smile, mentally revising his estimate of how soon McGee would be sending out that panicked email to Tony, and thinking about how he would cash in his winnings.

West Coast, 8:30 a.m. local time

Tony was finishing off the coffee he’d brewed in his room, along with the energy bar he fished out of one of his suitcases. He’d been told the regional office was close by, so he was giving himself a few minutes to check the local news, get the lay of the land. He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up his laptop, hitting a few buttons to log on to his email. Nothing exciting on his usual personal account; he logged on to the private server McGee had set up, and saw there was a message from Gibbs. Smiling, he opened it and started reading, taking a sip of coffee as he did. Seconds later, the coffee was spraying all over the bed as he stared at the signature. He jumped up, shaking his head as he checked to make sure his suit was safe.

Disaster averted, he double checked what he’d read, the smile growing on his face. Damn, Jeth… you are full of surprises.

He looked back at the bed and the coffee-stained sheets, making a mental note to leave an extra tip for Housekeeping.
West Coast, 9 a.m. local time

Tony made the drive from the Navy Lodge to the regional office in a little over five minutes. He showed his badge at the security check, reholstered his weapon after going through the metal detector, and got directions to Special Agent in Charge Morris Franklin’s office, which was up on the third floor.

Franklin was sitting at his desk when Tony reached the office. He nodded to Tony, waving him in while he finished his conversation. Tony looked around the room, noting the framed pictures of either Arizona or New Mexico desert hanging on the wall. Tony also observed Franklin; the man appeared to be several years younger than Gibbs, dark-skinned, though lighter than Vance, clean-shaven, with a healthy head of hair. His jacket and tie were a little rumpled, and he seemed to be on the edge of an argument with whomever he was talking to on the phone, his voice having that exaggerated patience that was just short of sarcasm.

“You do that,” he said in a deep voice which reminded Tony of James Earl Jones, “I’ll look forward to an update.” He hung up and stared at the phone, growling at it before shaking his head and smiling ruefully at Tony. “Yet another turf war with the local LEO’s,” he said, getting up out of his chair and coming around his desk to shake Tony’s hand. “Special Agent DiNozzo, it’s a pleasure.”

Franklin was tall and solid without being fat. He had a firm handshake that Tony approved of.

“Tony’s fine, sir.”

“Tony it is. Call me Morris. Please, grab a seat.” Franklin gestured toward a couple of arm chairs separated by a small table, and both men got comfortable.

“I want to thank you for coming out here to help out with this decision,” Franklin said.

“About that… can I ask why you aren’t making the decision yourself? Or at least a recommendation to Director Vance?”

Franklin exhaled loudly. “To be frank –“

“No pun intended,” Tony cut in, smiling slightly.

Franklin looked startled, then laughed. “Vance warned me about you. Said you’re damn good, but a little unorthodox.”

Tony grinned, but said nothing.

“To be frank,” Franklin repeated, raising an eyebrow, “it’s because once upon a time I was an idiot.”

Tony settled back in his chair. “I can relate to that.”

Franklin laughed again. “Yes, well… you read the files on the two candidates for the team lead?”

“Yes, several times. Senior Field Agent Michaela Burrows and Supervisory Special Agent Ryan Taylor. Both seem to be good fits on paper.”

“They are evenly matched, which would make the decision difficult under normal circumstances.”

Tony tilted his head. “I take it we’re dealing with abnormal circumstances.”

Franklin sighed and straightened his cuffs. “Burrows and I were… involved, I guess you’d say, before I took over the regional office.” He glanced at Tony, who kept his expression neutral. “It
lasted almost a year, and we weren’t exactly quiet about it. We broke it off before I was promoted to this position, but everyone here was around at the time or has heard about it.”

“So if she gets the position, someone cries favoritism…”

“And if she doesn’t, she cries bias against her because of our former relationship. So you see, I’m in a tough spot.”

“Vance knows?”

“Yes, he does. And there’s no love lost between Burrows and Taylor, which makes it all that much worse.”

“Fun times. I see why Gibbs has a rule against coworkers dating.”

Franklin chuckled. “How is that tough S.O.B.? Figures he’s got a rule about it. How many is he up to?”

Tony smiled. “Fifty, I think. And he’s good.”

“You’ve worked with him for years, right?”

“Going into number ten.”

“Don’t know how you’ve managed that… don’t get me wrong, Gibbs is a fantastic agent, and I think the world of him, but man, you don’t want to get in his way when he’s got his sights on something.”

“No kidding. You work with him much?”

“Not as much as I’d have liked… think I could still learn a lot from him even now.”

“I’m still learning,” Tony commented, smirking a bit at his own private double entendre.

Franklin cocked his head and looked at him. “I hear you and Gibbs are now leading the team together… how’s that working out?”

“So far, so good. I think we’ve been working together for so long, we know how to do it.”

Franklin nodded. “It’s an interesting experiment, kind of like these rookies being farmed around. Vance has some original ideas. Could be good for you guys – I imagine the MCRT in DC has a lot to deal with.”

Tony huffed out a breath. “I could tell you some stories.”

“I bet.” Franklin sighed. “Another time, I guess. Well. To get back to the point… Angelo Pena is Burrows’ current team lead. He’s retiring, has surgery scheduled on his back in a few weeks. He’s not in much, using up his sick days. Burrows has pretty much been acting lead, although Angel’s been staying in touch when he’s out, advising her as necessary.”

Tony sat forward a bit. “So how do we work this? Do they all know why I’m here?”

Franklin nodded. “They do. I was upfront with both Burrows and Taylor about it from the start. I’m thinking I’ll introduce you around, get you settled in. Do you have any questions?”

Tony thought about it. “I’ll have a desk on the main floor?”
Franklin nodded. “Absolutely. Figured you’d want to be able to observe. There are a couple of conference rooms you can use for private conversations as needed.”

“What kind of authority do I have?”

“You decide if and when you want to tag along out in the field, but field decisions are up to the respective team leads. You’re welcome to offer suggestions, provide back up, whatever you would usually do.”

“Sounds good.” Tony shifted in his seat. “I don’t suppose you have any leanings toward a particular candidate.”

Franklin grinned. “I do, but nothing I’m going to share. The Director and I both want you going into this without any bias from us.”

“Us? Vance has a favorite, does he?”

Franklin only smiled some more and stood up. “Come on, let’s get you started.”

Tony chuckled and followed him toward the door. “At least I get to study for this test.”

Franklin laughed, then stopped at his assistant’s desk. “Special Agent DiNozzo, this is Liz Thomas. Liz, Tony DiNozzo. Tony, you need any files, paperwork, anything, Liz is your go-to girl. And she knows I say that with the utmost respect.”

Tony smiled at Liz, who rolled her eyes and smiled back. “Anything I can get for you to start, Special Agent?”

“Tony, please. Actually, yeah, there is. Could I get copies of the last five case files for both Burrows’ and Taylor’s teams?”

“No problem… I’ll have them to you within the hour.”

“Thanks.” Tony grinned at her, then hurried out after Franklin.

**Day 1 – Monday Evening**

*West Coast, 7:45 p.m. local time*

Tony stretched after changing into a t-shirt and sweat pants and sat at the small desk in his room at the Navy Lodge. He started up his laptop and sat back, thinking about the day and the beginning of what was turning out to be a potentially difficult mission.

Franklin had brought him down one floor to the bullpen, which was eerily similar to the one back in DC. The layout was different, and there were no huge skylights, but the walls were the same color orange. The desks were closer together, with each team separated by a bit of distance and fewer dividing walls. There were also fewer plasma screens; in some ways, he was actually reminded of his days in Baltimore.

Tony turned his attention to his computer and called up his notes on the day so far. He’d decided to treat this like a case, and was proceeding accordingly. After being introduced to all the players, he’d spent most of the rest of the day going through the case files Liz had given him, as well as observing the interactions among the two teams.

Senior Field Agent Michaela Burrows was of medium height with short dark hair and facial
expressions that varied from serious to sour. She dressed sensibly, at least based on the one outfit Tony had seen so far. She’d shaken his hand firmly and given him a calculating look when they were introduced. Tony thought she’d be prettier if she smiled occasionally.

Her team consisted of two younger agents: Kathy Nichols, whose long blond hair, short skirts and tall heels Tony could definitely appreciate, although he didn’t think much of their practicality in the field, and Ethan ‘call me Fitzy’ Fitzgerald, who’d shed his probie status only a few months ago. He seemed genuinely eager to make friends.

Special Agent Ryan Taylor was around Tony’s age, a little shorter, with a laid-back attitude that Tony didn’t buy for a moment. He was experienced enough to recognize a cover when he saw it. Ryan’s team was also at two people. Senior Field Agent Eddie Wright, a few years younger than Tony, and immediately recognized as a kindred spirit, had already suggested going out for drinks sometime soon. The other agent was a probie, a Julie Stewart, who’d taken one look at Tony and tried to make herself as invisible as possible. It seemed to have worked, because Tony couldn’t remember too much about her.

Tony shook his head and thought back on the afternoon. Burrows’ team had been on cold cases after a stretch of two murder investigations one on top of the other. Taylor’s was wrapping up the paperwork on a major drug bust, so no one went out into the field that day.

The few meaningful interactions Tony had witnessed didn’t give him good first impressions of either candidate. Burrows was impatient with her team, even though it was obvious from the files that they’d done a great job. Taylor sat back and let his team do most of the work, taking every opportunity to give Burrows a hard time.

Shaking his head, Tony decided to think positive thoughts. He called up his email, raising his eyebrows when he saw a message from McGee.

Tony,

_You’ve got to help me out. I will buy you a six-pack. I’ll even go to one of those midnight movies with you when you get back. Seriously – Gibbs wants me to do midyear evaluations! I mean, what the hell? I’m supposed to judge Ziva? Kevin, I can do that. But I’m supposed to write up an evaluation on Gibbs?! What do I say? How do I say it? He’s Gibbs!_

_Two movies. Really._

_Tim_

Tony chuckled and reached for his cell phone. He hit speed dial 1, and smiled in anticipation.

“Tony.” Jethro’s voice was warm and welcoming.

“Jethro.”

“How was day one?”

“Interesting. Morris says hi. And you’re cheating.”

“Do tell.”

“Giving McGee those evals to do? Including the report on you for Vance?”

“I’ll enjoy my pay day.”
“You did that on purpose to make him scream for help sooner.”

“When did you usually do the evals, Tony?”

“Mid to late June.”

“And what’s the calendar say?”

“Okay, point taken. But still.”

“You won on Abby.”

“Hmm. True. They could cancel each other out.”

“No, they couldn’t. I fully intend to cash in on this one.”

“Huh. It is kind of a win-win, isn’t it?”

“Sexual favors often are.”

“I’ll let it go this time.”

“Yeah, right, Tony.”

Tony laughed and then remembered something.

“Hell of a way to sign that email earlier today, Jeth. I almost reverse-snorted my coffee.”

“Thought I’d shake things up a bit.”

Tony could hear the smile in Jethro’s voice.

“It worked.”

“Good.”

There was a pause, and Tony imagined he could hear Jethro swallowing some bourbon.

“So,” Jethro said, “make a decision yet?” He laughed a bit, and Tony could picture him ducking his head in that way he had… he suddenly felt homesick.

“I wish. This one isn’t going to be easy… so far neither candidate seems like a winner.”

“Think outside the box.”

“Crate.”

“What?”

“Nothing… just something Ziva said a while back.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Tony summarized what he was seeing so far with Burrows and Taylor, giving Jethro the reason why Franklin had passed the buck in the first place.

“What’s your next move?”
“I’ll go out in the field with both teams as soon as I can, see them in action. Should be able to get some insider info from Taylor’s SFA, and probably from both agents on Burrows’ team.” Tony yawned, surprising himself a bit.

“You should get some sleep,” Jethro suggested, his voice a little softer.

“Yeah. Been a long day.”

They were both silent for a moment, and then Tony started laughing.

“What’s up?” Jethro asked, a smile in his voice.

“Remember being in junior high, calling your girl, and neither one of you wants to hang up first?” Jethro laughed. “Miss ya, Tony.”

“Same here, Jeth.”

“Get some sleep.”

“You too... hey, Jeth?”

“Mmm?”

“I love you too.”

“I know.”

Tony heard the click as Jethro hung up, and he started laughing again. “Bastard,” he commented, grinning widely.
Separation, part 2

Tuesday, Long Distance

*Abby to Tony, email 8:17 a.m. Eastern time*

Subject: MISS YOU!!

Tonybear! How are you? Are you eating right? Sleeping okay? I was going to try to duplicate Gibbs’ scent for you in the lab, sort of an Eau de Jethro for you, so you could spray it on your pillow, but Gibbs wouldn’t sweat for me. I’m giving Timmy a mission to collect some when they’re in the field, but I’m not holding out much hope, ’cause he says he never sees Gibbs sweat. Maybe I’ll have him or Ziva try in the gym.

So far things are good, I mean the building hasn’t collapsed or anything. Tim seems a little freaked out – I guess Gibbs told him to do the evaluations that you usually do. But you’ll give him some advice, right? Segel’s been behaving himself; he seems to have settled in to being a probie instead of trying to act like he knows what’s going on, ’cause let me tell you, he really doesn’t. He still can’t seem to understand who Ziva really is. Come to think of it, do any of us really know who she is? Besides Gibbs, of course.

It was funny, yesterday Tim, Ziva and I all left Gibbs coffee on his desk. I think he kept it all and nuked it, which was really nice of him considering that he really prefers it fresh. Segel suggested he could have iced coffee, and Gibbs gave him one of those stares that makes you guys feel all of two feet tall. He hasn’t said much to Gibbs since then.

I hear Ducky had Gibbs over for dinner last night, which is great ‘cause I don’t think those two get to spend much time together. Have you ever found out how they met? You need to share if you have. Every time I ask Ducky, he gives me one of those enigmatic smiles and launches into a story about fate and coincidences and doesn’t really tell me anything. And if I ask Gibbs, he just smiles (4.3) and gives me a kiss on the cheek (no need to be jealous). I sort of imagine Gibbs trying to glare at Ducky and Ducky giving him one of his looks right back. They probably acknowledged each other as kindred spirits right away and then went out for bourbon.

What did Gibbs have to say about Beaker?

I am hugging you in my mind!

Love,

Abby

*Ducky to Tony, 9:22 a.m. Eastern time*

Subject: Hope you are well

Anthony, my dear boy,

I trust you are well and have no ill effects from your cross-country travel. Jethro and I had a lovely dinner together last night, and I am pleased to report that he was in good spirits. We had a delicious steak and potatoes sort of meal, just the kind of thing we can both appreciate. I took care of the potatoes and the greens – I do hope you are eating some salad at least once a day – and Jethro cooked the steaks. He has a truly deft touch with the meat, but refuses to share his secret. I dare say
he enjoys teasing me.

We had a nice time talking about some of the ‘good old days’ as I am fond of saying. Abigail, bless her soul, has been trying to ferret out secrets, but I assure you there’s nothing particularly ominous in our history. I did ask Jethro if he’d heard from you, and he immediately broke into a smile and told me about your email. I assure you he shared no details, but it was obvious from his smile, which I would rate as an 8.2 on Abby’s scale, that you made him quite happy.

I am reminded of a lovely couple I used to know, many years ago in Scotland. They’d been family friends, in fact had grown up together, and believe it or not their history resulted in the most interesting near-scandal years later…

Tony to Tim, email 7:35 a.m. Pacific time

Subject: Evals

McGee, McGoo, McGiggles,

Probie, my Probie, I accept your offer of a six-pack of beer and two midnight movies.

The evals really aren’t that bad. Have you read over the forms? You can handle it all just fine. I know it seems weird to write one for Gibbs… first time I had to do that. I got rip-roaring drunk the night before. That was way back before Kate, after Gibbs booted this former FBI chick, Viv Blackadder, off the team. That’s a story I should tell you some time. Anyway, I had this headache from the hangover, and believe me, I was feeling no fear. Wrote what I thought, didn’t pull any punches, submitted the damn thing right away. Of course, once I was entirely sober, I almost crapped my pants when I read back over what I’d written. I think the words ‘arrogant’ and ‘foolhardy’ figured in there at some point. Gibbs stopped in front of my desk later that day, and just stared at me. I stared back while I mentally revised my resume, and then he said, “Good job, DiNozzo,” and that was that.

So be honest. You know he respects that. I mean, hey, look where we are now! Get that worried look off your face – he’s not going to want to take you out on a date.

Heading off to work – watch his six for me, Tim.

Tony

Tim to Tony, 10:42 a.m., Eastern time

Subject: Re: Evals

Tony –

You’re such a putz.

Thanks.

Tim

Tony to Gibbs, text 8:23 a.m. Pacific time

Morning sunshine! Hope u + bear very happy, not too happy. Hugs n kisses.

Overheard in the bullpen, 11:25 a.m. Eastern time
“McGee!”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Get over here and show me how to use this text thing.”

_Gibbs to Tony, text 11:37 a.m. Eastern time_

Bear stayed on his chair. Consider yourself headslapped.

_Tony to Gibbs, text 8:40 a.m. Pacific time_

Did it for ya boss. Talk to you later.

_Julie Stewart to Kevin Segel, email 8:53 a.m., Pacific time_

Subject: Thanks

Hi Kevin,

Thanks for the inside info on Agent DiNozzo. I’m staying off his radar; I’m trying to make a good impression here, and I don’t need him to make me look bad. Have to say, I’m not seeing any of the playboy stuff you said everyone in D.C. talks about – Kathy was wearing one of her girly outfits yesterday, and he didn’t make any comments at all. If anything, he kind of looked skeptical.

Are you sure he’s really all there? Mentally, I mean. He hit himself on the head a few minutes ago. On purpose, not like an accident, and there was no reason for it. I mean, I know you said he’s a better agent than he comes across, and I have to assume the Director sent him out here for a reason, but that seems awfully strange.

You should apply for a position here once either Taylor or Burrows gets the promotion. There’s going to be at least one opening. I’m keeping my fingers crossed for Taylor – I’m so tired of him trying to push the paperwork off on me. Eddie’s being great though, and helps me out a lot.

Julie

_Tony to Abby, email 10:05 a.m. Pacific time_

Subject: I MISS YOU TOO!

Greetings to my Mistress of the Dark,

Thanks for the update on my man. Good to know the building is still intact, but remember it hasn’t even been two days yet. Watch for growlies. Speaking of which, you did awesome! Gibbs said he almost shot the bear, though. Why ‘Beaker?’ I think he secretly likes it, btw. And don’t worry, I’m fine. People here are a little strange, especially the girl-probie… she keeps looking at me and sort of smirking this morning, and I don’t know why. I’ve been a perfect gentleman. Yesterday she did her best to be invisible.

I can tell you, though, this choosing a team lead is not going to be an easy decision. I’m betting I’m going to be out here at least the two weeks, which isn’t great.

I got a really long email from the Duckman. Did you know that if you really follow his stories to the end, they’re actually pretty good? Sounds like he and Gibbs had a nice time. Do me a favor? See if you can talk Gibbs into taking a laptop home and show him how to use the webcam. Would be fantastic to see him. The GSS scores are great, but it’s just not the same.
About Ziva – don’t the two of you ever do girls’ night out? I don’t think she’s as inscrutable as she was when she first joined us. I bet you know her better than you think.

Oops, gotta go – Burrows’ team just got called out and I want to shadow them.

Later,

Tony

Tony to Ducky, email 2:51 p.m. Pacific time

Subject: Re: Hope you are well

Dear Ducky,

I’m doing just fine, thanks. I even managed to include some salad with my lunch… lettuce on a burger! That counts, right?

I got to head out into the field with one of the teams, or I would have answered you earlier. Thanks for the update on Gibbs; I know you are all watching out for him. Those GSS scores really help!

That was a great story, about your friends. I particularly liked the part about the duel – I didn’t think people did that anymore! You must have been honored to be asked to act as his second. Helps to have someone with medical training. And the run from the police – does Gibbs know this story?

Looks like Burrows is about to head out into the field again, so I am outta here. Say hi to the gremlin for me.

Tony

Tuesday Evening

Tony poked at the bottom of the carton of Chinese food, hoping to find another piece of shrimp. He was out of luck, so he tossed the carton in the trash and looked around the hotel room for the TV remote. He’d done his thinking for the evening and just wanted to relax before calling Gibbs. He’d tried earlier, but Gibbs had picked up and told Tony he was out in the field and they’d have to talk later.

He flipped channels for a few minutes, stopping here and there until he got to Turner Classic Movies, which was showing Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein. He fluffed the pillows up against the headboard and then sat back on the bed, letting himself get lost in the movie for a while.

By the second set of commercials, though, his mind had wandered back to work. It had been an interesting day. He’d gone back over case files for the first few hours, taking some breaks to read and answer emails from back home. He’d observed Taylor’s team for a bit, watching as Taylor did nothing to correct his initial impression that the man was lazy. He kept dumping paperwork on his probie, Julie Stewart, the girl who kept giving Tony strange looks. Tony was getting the impression that she was waiting for the second shoe to drop, which was a little disconcerting since he had no idea what happened with the first one.

Taylor’s SFA, Eddie Wright, was obviously used to handling his boss; as soon as Taylor’s attention was elsewhere, Eddie would deftly take some of the work from Julie and do it himself, always passing it back to Julie to give to Taylor, whether hard copy or email. Eddie had run into Tony in the break room at one point, and brushed off Taylor’s behavior as ‘delegating.’ He’d asked if Tony wanted to go out for a beer after work; Tony put him off for a day, wanting to gather more intel
before quizzing Eddie about both Taylor and Burrows.

So far, Burrows was ahead of Taylor for the team lead position. Tony had found that some of his first impressions were perhaps a bit off. Kathy Nichols, for example, was able to execute a quick change worthy of Clark Kent, going from what Tony had overheard Julie call a ‘girly outfit’ to field attire in record time. Burrows was still short with her team out in the field, but was certainly efficient. Tony had reservations about her ability to earn her team’s absolute trust and loyalty the way Gibbs had, but he rated her efficiency above Taylor’s laziness.

They’d been called out to investigate what could end up being the accidental death of a Marine in an alley behind a bar. Witness statements were conflicting and confusing, so it was likely to take a few days before they knew the truth. Nichols worked well with Burrows; she had potential to be promoted to SFA if Burrows got the team lead. Fitzy, barely out of probie status, had certainly been well-trained. He had good instincts, and didn’t hesitate to make suggestions. Burrows appeared to value his input, although Tony did notice her passing along some of Fitzy’s suggestions as her own orders to Nichols. He’d wait and see how the final reports came out before passing any judgments on that, though.

Tony tried to focus on the movie, but found it difficult. He focused on the day ahead instead… he figured he’d stick with Burrows and her team through their current case, and once that was done he’d switch over to shadow Taylor and see if the man was any better in the field. He sort of hoped not, as it might make his job a lot easier and get him back to D.C. that much sooner.

He glanced at his watch: 9:30 p.m. That meant it was pretty late back home. Maybe he shouldn’t try Gibbs again – if they’d caught a hot case, Gibbs would be working well into the early hours of the morning.

Just as Tony was getting caught up in the movie again, his phone rang with the Jaws theme. Smiling, he grabbed it off the nightstand, thinking he should find a better ringtone for Gibbs.

“Hey, Jeth.”

“Tony. How’s it going?”

“Going alright. If first impressions hold, I might have a recommendation for Franklin and Vance within a couple of weeks.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“How’s your case?”

“Petty Officer went UA under suspicious circumstances. Guy probably snuck off base to go see his girl, but his friends say he’s been getting some threats over the past few days. We’re looking into it. Ziva’s got Segel out in the field, McGee’s following up on the paper trail, and I’m going for coffee.”

“Ah. No phone sex tonight, huh?”

Gibbs let out a surprised laugh. “’Fraid not. Rain check?”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“You do that.”

“Don’t hesitate to use the bear the way it was intended.”
There was a long pause. Then: “Tony, I am not using a gigantic stuffed bear as a sex toy.”

Tony started laughing and found he couldn’t stop. He was vaguely conscious of Gibbs calling his name through the phone, but the mental images that statement brought up were too much. He laughed so hard his stomach hurt, and he thought he might lose his dinner.

“Tony!”

The growled shout finally calmed him down enough to speak. “Oh my God, Gibbs… I did NOT mean that! I got him for you because you always act like I’m your teddy bear when we’re sleeping in the same bed.”

“Shoulda just said what you meant,” Gibbs grumbled, but Tony could hear the hint of a smile in his voice. “I haven’t needed a teddy bear in bed since I was five, DiNozzo.”

Tony’s smile turned slightly evil. “If I remember correctly, before our trip to Stillwater you hadn’t had a bubble bath since you were five either. Look how well that turned out.”

There was another long pause, and then Gibbs’ voice came over the phone in little more than a whisper. “When you get back here, Tony, I think maybe we’ll have to indulge in a repeat performance – only this time I’ll be the one taking care of you.” There was a click as Gibbs hung up.

Tony stared unseeing at the TV, the phone still held to his ear. The images his brain was conjuring up were way more enticing than the movie; after a few seconds he visibly shook himself, flipped his phone shut, and headed for the shower.

Wednesday, Distance Long and Short

*Emma Collier to Gibbs, email 8:47 a.m. Eastern Time*

Subject: D.C. Visit!

Hi Leroy,

Just checking in to make sure you’re still okay with my visiting this weekend. I’m staying at the Hilton Garden Inn on 14th Street, room 312. I should be there around mid-afternoon tomorrow. Maybe there’s a good restaurant or bar near there where we could meet up for dinner? If you’re free, that is – I know you may have to work. That’s why I booked a place downtown, so I can go see the sights pretty easily if you’re busy. But that was originally your suggestion, wasn’t it?

I saw Jack yesterday when I stopped in the store to stock up on some things for Justin before I leave… it amazes me how much junk that kid can eat and stay skinny. I think the food companies add addictive chemicals so that kids have to eat or think they’re going to die. Anyway, Jack says to be sure to say hi to you and to Tony and ‘the kids’?? What kids? He also mentioned something about a duck, which I didn’t quite catch. I hope Jack’s feeling okay… he mentioned Tony several times, as if he thought I didn’t hear him or something.

I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to getting away! It’s been a long time since I’ve been out of Stillwater, and even longer since I didn’t have one or more kids with me. I’m very excited about this; it’s going to be so much fun to see you in your natural habitat (we both know Stillwater isn’t it) and I hope I’ll get to meet the people you work with.

Can’t wait to see you!

Emma
Gibbs to Emma, email 9:52 a.m. Eastern Time

Subject: Re: D.C. Visit!

Emma,

We caught a case yesterday, but so far it doesn’t seem to be shaping up into anything too serious. Dinner tomorrow should be fine. There’s a nice pub around the corner from your hotel; I’ll call you when I know I can get away and will pick you up at the hotel lobby.

Your son’s a teenage boy, so of course he thinks he’s going to die if he’s not always eating.

I can probably give you a tour of the building, if we’re not too busy. The duck my father was referring to is Dr. Donald Mallard, our medical examiner; Jack met him last time he visited. You’ll like him. And as far as I know, Jack is perfectly fine. He happens to really like Tony, which is a good thing since he and I are together.

Call me when you get into town.

Leroy

Gibbs to Tony, email 10:23 a.m. Eastern Time

Subject: hey

Hey Tony,

Keeping you in the loop about Emma. She emailed this morning, said she’s staying at the Hilton on 14th. Said Jack says hi. I managed to drop a hint that you and I are still involved, even though I still think you’re off base about her.

Jethro

Tony to Gibbs, email 7:30 a.m. Pacific Time

Subject: Re: hey

Hey yourself, Loverboy,

Knowing you, it wasn’t really a hint so much as a bald-faced statement. Something like ‘Tony is my boyfriend,’ although I don’t know if that’s really the right term. If you need to repeat it, try ‘Tony is my soulmate and you and I will never be more than friends.’ Although you may be cheating, in which case you’ll have to fly out here even if she doesn’t make a move. But she’s gonna.

Jack rocks; I’m thinking of adopting him.

Hope you caved and cuddled with Beaker last night.

Love,

Your Snuggly Bear

Gibbs to Tony, email 10:40 a.m. Eastern Time

Subject: Re: re: hey
Can it with the endearments, Snookums. It doesn’t help my reputation to be laughing at work.

For your information, I said that you and I were together, and I was even almost subtle about it.

You don’t need to adopt Jack, you’re already family.

I did not cave. The bear will have to get his own date.

Love, Jethro

Tony to Gibbs, email 7:45 a.m. Pacific Time

LOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOL

Overheard in the bullpen, 10:47 a.m. Eastern Time

“McGee!”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Get over here and tell me what the hell this means.”

Ziva to Tony, email 10:58 a.m. Eastern Time

Subject: Hello

Hello Tony,

I hope you are well and finding your new assignment interesting. It seems as though I am the only one who has not sent you an email, so I thought I should do so, even if I did see you just a few days ago.

Our latest case appears to be a Petty Officer who went UA because of some threats tied to either his gambling habit or his sex habit. He apparently slept with the wife of a Master Chief, who found out about it and sent him threatening letters, which Abby easily traced back to the Chief. Gibbs interrogated him first thing this morning, and the man caved easily. I do not understand how your country has been so successful when your own military cannot stand up to simple questioning.

Gibbs seems to be well. He laughed a few minutes ago while reading something on his computer, and then had to ask McGee to translate some chatspeak, so I assume you and he are communicating regularly. I promise you that we are all watching his back.

I can also tell you that you are missed, and we all wish you home safe soon.

Ziva

Tony to Ziva, email 8:12 a.m. Pacific Time

Subject: Re: Hello

Hello my lovely former Mossad Officer,

I’m doing great, thanks. Notice my use of a contraction in the previous sentence? I’m not sure you can get citizenship in the good ol’ US of A without using contractions, so you should start working on that.
Sounds like you’ve got a sordid tale of lust and betrayal going on. So far all we’ve got here is a dead Marine who may have just fallen and hit his head after one too many shots.

Shame on you for not realizing that Gibbs is a special force in interrogation. The strongest military mind has trouble standing firm in the face of that glare. Ask Abby; she swears the man is magic. It’s a damn good thing he’s on our side. Our enemies will just have to get their own Gibses. Which makes me think that there could be a plot to steal his DNA for cloning purposes, so make sure you watch out for that.

Hey, I was thinking you and Abby should do a girls’ night out sometime. Just let me know about it so I can do some visualization.

Thanks for watching out for Gibbs, Ziva, and I miss you guys too.

Tony

Tony to Montrell Davis, email 4:25 p.m. Pacific Time

Subject: Long time no beer

Hey Monty!

I know it’s been just about forever since I’m been in touch – I think the last time was when I left Baltimore and did that mass email out to all the Buckeye crew to update with my new job in D.C. I think we stayed in contact for a few months after that, but then I fell off the map, so to speak. The new job was crazy, the new boss was crazy, life was insane. Not a good excuse, I know.

My point, and I do have one, is that I’m in the area… I’m still based in D.C., but I’m on temporary assignment out here in Silverdale, so of course I’m thinking maybe we can meet up for a beer or five and talk over old times, especially that one game of HORSE where I so kicked your ass. So let me know if you’ve got some time to spare this weekend, ‘k?!

Tony D.

Montrell to Tony, email 5:46 p.m. Pacific Time

Subject: Damn right that’s a lousy excuse

Tony D! Talk about a blast from the past. I’ll forgive you, this time. Next time, you’re buying all night.

There’s a great place here in downtown Seattle, easy enough to get to, not too touristy. I’ll send you directions later, kinda in a rush right now. Say Saturday evening around 8?

For the record, I beat you in every other game of HORSE we ever played. The only reason you kicked my ass that day was because you poured that last shot out into the plant by the front door. Hanson has a picture, so don’t bother denying it.

Monty

Tony to Montrell, email 5:52 p.m. Pacific Time

You can fabricate all the so-called evidence you want, my forensics expert will debunk all of it.

Saturday it is!
**Interview In a Bar**

That evening, Tony walked into the bar down the street from the Navy Lodge and looked around, spotting Eddie when he waved from a booth along the far wall. Tony waved back and made a ‘need a beer’ gesture, which Eddie responded to by raising his nearly full mug. Tony nodded and went to the bar, then brought his beer over to the booth and sat down.

Eddie raised his mug. “Cheers.” The glass clinked, and each man took a healthy swallow.

“So,” Eddie said, “what do you want to know?”

Tony laughed. “You’re not all that subtle, are you?”

Eddie grinned. “Subtle works fine with Franklin, but it’s a bit lost on either Burrows or Ryan. Kathy gets it, and so does Fitzy, although you’d never know it with his sense of humor.”

“Sense of propriety, you mean.”

“Yeah,” Eddie nodded. “Kid’s got a good head on his shoulders, reads people much better than anyone gives him credit for. He’s got a good future with the agency.”

Tony sat back. “What’s with girl-probie?”

Eddie laughed. “You mean the strange looks and the wary attitude?”

“Yeah, that.”

“She’s got a friend out your way, another rookie who she went through FLETC with, joined up with your team.”

“Kevin Segel.”

“I think so. Anyway, when Franklin told us you were coming to bail him out, and let me tell you, Burrows wasn’t happy about that, Julie called him up for some info.”

“She spying for Taylor?”

Eddie snorted. “As if. Not that she wouldn’t if he asked her to, she’s ambitious. But he doesn’t give her all that much credit for intelligence.”

“Any reason?”

“Yeah, the guy’s a complete chauvinist. Doesn’t think much of women agents.”

“That’s why he has issues with Burrows?”

“Most definitely. It’s a mutual derision.”

“Does he really want the promotion? Doesn’t seem as if he’s trying all that hard, delegating the way he is.”

Eddie grinned. “Well… yeah, he wants it. The one thing about you that scuttlebutt communicated before your arrival was that you’re one hell of a ladies’ man, so Ry figures he’s got the inside track. Man’s different in the field, though. You’ll see when we get out there.”
Tony nodded, smiling a bit at how far off scuttlebutt was, and then as if on cue the Jaws theme came from his belt. He grabbed his phone and flipped it open, shooting Eddie an apologetic look. “Hey, sweetheart.”

“Snookums,” Gibbs replied.

“Miss ya, babe.”

Gibbs chuckled. “Let me guess, you’re not alone.”

“Just out for a drink with Eddie here… say hi, Eddie.” He held out the phone, and Eddie obliged by leaning in and saying “Hi, Eddie.”

Tony brought the phone back to his ear.

“Establishing a cover, DiNozzo?”

“You got it. I’ll give you a call when I get back to my room.”

“Have fun.”

“Bye, love.”

There was an amused snort on the other end before Gibbs hung up. Tony put the phone back in its holder and turned to Eddie, who was looking at him with one eyebrow raised.

“You’re not wearing a ring, so I’m assuming she’s not your wife… you use the Jaws theme for your girlfriend?”

Tony smiled. “Inside joke.”

“Good thing she’s got a sense of humor.”

“Very dry sense of humor, actually.”

Eddie motioned to the waitress for another round, then looked back at Tony. “So what’s her best physical attribute?”

“The most amazing blue eyes you’ve ever seen.”

“Eyes are the windows to the soul,” Eddie commented. “My girl’s got a great ass.”

Tony laughed. “I’ll be sure to verify that if I get to meet her.”

“She’ll be sure that you do.”

Tony grinned at him, then smiled at the waitress when she brought them their drinks. “So, if it were up to you?”

Eddie looked at him thoughtfully. “Ryan. And not just ‘cause I work with the guy. But I’ll let you figure out the why. Be good to have a neutral observer.”

“I get that. Tell me one positive and one negative about each of them.”

Eddie thought that one over, then tilted his head. “Alright. Don’t see the harm there. Burrows, she’s all about the job. Total fan of Shepherd when she was Director, although she never met her. That’s
both her plus and her minus, by the way.”

Tony could tell Eddie wasn’t going to elaborate, so he simply nodded. “And Taylor?”

“Ryan’s minus is what you’ve already seen and what I’ve already told you… he hates paperwork and doesn’t respect women as agents. His plus – he may not value Julie’s ability in the field, or Kathy’s, or Burrows’, but he’ll throw himself in the line of fire for them if necessary.” Eddie pointed a finger at Tony. “He’d do it for you, too, even though he’s only just met you. So it’s not just a women and children first thing; he’s got his natural protective streak, and it makes him a good leader in the field.”

“I can respect that.” Tony had another swallow. “Thanks for the insight – I appreciate it. And I can tell you I won’t base my recommendation on what you’ve told me, I’ll just use it as another perspective.”

Eddie grinned at him. “You’re going to ask all the others the same thing, aren’t you?”

Tony raised his mug and tapped it against Eddie’s. “Yup. It’s all data, together with case files and observations, both in the field and in the office.”

“I can get behind that… and if you can conduct an interview with beer, why not?”

“What say we add some potato skins?”

“You’re a smart man, DiNozzo.”

**Calling Back**

Tony found a jazz station on the radio and got into bed before calling Jethro back.

“Hi Jeth,” he said, when Jethro picked up.

“Hey, Tony. How’s your cover?”

“Just fine. Luckily Eddie didn’t ask to see a picture of my girl.”

“Could have shown him Abby or Ziva.”

“Couldn’t… told him my girl has the most amazing blue eyes.”

Jethro laughed. “Gee, thanks, snookums.”

“I may have to visit dire retribution upon you if you keep calling me that.”

“Like to see you try.”

“Could be fun.”

“Mmm. How’s the evaluation going?”

“Not bad. Eddie gave me some new angles, and I’ll ask the others some questions as I get going on this. Probably interview Burrows and Taylor at some point. Need your opinion too.”

“Ask me again if you’re completely stuck at the end of two weeks.”

“Figured you’d say something like that.”
“You don’t really need my input, Tony.”

“Maybe not, but I’d still like to have it.”

“We’ll see.”

“How’s your case coming?”

“Pretty sure our Petty Officer is alive, just hiding out.”

“Ziva shared some of the details.”

“Yeah, just gotta find him.”

“So, Emma emailed, huh?”

“Yeah, and then Jack called this evening, told me point blank not to screw up with you. Said if I do he’ll formally adopt you and disinherit me.”

Tony laughed. “I love Jack. You realize this proves I’m right about Emma’s intentions.”

“No, it just proves my father is paranoid. Not only that, he’s fallen for your charm.”

Tony pouted. “Thought he wasn’t the only one.”

“He’s not.”

“Hey, Jeth… thanks for what you wrote earlier - that I’m already family.”

Tony could hear Jethro clearing his throat. “You are, Tony. Have been for a long time.”

Tony wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he deflected. “What are you doing right now?”

“Is this where you ask me what I’m wearing?”

Tony laughed. “What are you wearing?”

“T-shirt and boxers. Laying on the bed, was reading when you called. What about you?”

“Laying in bed, some jazz on the radio, a smokin’ hot voice on the other end of the line.”

“You left something out.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. So what are you wearing?”

“Nothing.”

There was silence, and then, “Aw, hell.”

“You up for your first phone sex with a guy?”

“Am now.”

Tony made a growling noise. “So why don’t you tell me how you’re gonna take care of me in a bubble bath?”
“Hold on.” There was some rustling, then “ok.”

“Did you just strip?”

“Yup.”

“Damn, Jethro.”

“Bubble bath, huh?”

Tony shifted the phone to his left hand, letting his right drift down to his groin. “Yeah.”

“Well... first I'll make sure the water’s really hot, so the room’s full of steam. Lots of bubbles too. Only light’s from a few candles over by the sink.”

Tony’s fingers gently stroked over his cock, which was already hard. “Sounds nice.”

“Mmm. I get in the bath first, and you follow, sitting in front of me, facing away.”

Tony closed his eyes, focusing on Jethro’s voice while he shifted his legs apart, palming his balls and rubbing gently. “Then what?”

“You lean back and relax. The water’s really hot, and you’re a little light-headed. My hands are moving over your chest and your stomach, bumping into your dick every so often, but I’m not taking hold of you, not yet.”

Tony made a small sound of protest, and Jethro’s voice changed a bit. “Tell me what you’re doing, Tony.”

“Rubbing my balls, stroking my cock.”

“Stop.”

“Jethro—”

“Really, Tony. Stop. Keep hold of the phone with one hand, lay your other hand down on the mattress, and just listen.”

Tony groaned quietly, but did as Jethro said. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll find out in a minute or two.”

Tony’s eyes flew open as images started to run through his head, and Jethro chuckled. “Stop thinking, Tony. Just lie back and listen.”

“Okay... okay.”

“So... I’m caressing you now, stopping on your nipples, pinching a little, rubbing circles around them with my fingertips. Then I move my left hand up to your hair, and I’m running my fingers through it, while my right hand is down at your dick… I take hold of you and I’m stroking you now, not too hard, not too light. Just like I’m doing to myself right now.”

Tony moaned softly, his free hand clenching on the sheet below him. His legs shifted restlessly, and his cock felt hot and heavy on his abdomen.

“Can you feel it, Tony? You feel my hands on you?”
Tony nodded, then remembered that Jethro wasn’t in the room. “Yeah… god, yeah. So good.”

“Yeah… it’s good, Tony. You press back against me, and you can feel my dick resting against your ass. And I’m running my fingers over your slit now, and you’re caught between what you want inside you and what you want around you.”

Tony took a deep breath, forcing his hand to stay where it was. He wanted Jethro with him, right there, wanted to feel him and touch him and smell him, wanted him inside, wanted him everywhere. “Jeth…”

“I know, Tony. I know.” Jethro’s breath was coming faster now, his own need clear across the miles that separated them.

“Jethro, I want —“

“Soon. Soon, Tony. Now I’m gripping your hair in my hand, and you can’t move… your legs feel heavy in the water, and the steam has you almost dizzy. It’s your ass against my dick, and my hand on yours, and now I’m letting go of your hair –“ Jethro’s voice cut off for a moment, and Tony heard him groan and take a deep breath before he was talking again, “- and I’m playing with your balls while I get the lube.”

Tony shifted restlessly. “Jethro, I can’t…”

“Wait. Wait a little longer. Not much longer for me either, Tone. I’m working on myself pretty good here, thinking of you in that bath, of my fingers opening you up now, it doesn’t take long, you’re so relaxed in the heat… and… and now you shift away a little, I move you forward and up and I shift down and right there –“ a gasp and a moan, and Tony’s not sure who it’s from, “- I’m sliding inside, and it’s so good, so hot and tight, and soft and warm and go ahead, now, Tony, touch yourself now, I’m in you and we’re moving together and it’s my hand on you and it’s moving so fast now –”

Tony moved quickly, calling out incoherently when his hand closed on his cock, spreading the leaking fluid quickly over the shaft before his hand starting moving fast, his muscles already tensing up from listening to the sounds Jethro was making, not only his voice, but the sound of flesh on flesh, both here in the room and there on Jethro’s bed, and then Jethro was crying Tony’s name, and Tony flung his head back and yelled as he came, whispering Jethro’s name over and over afterwards without knowing he did so, while the movement of his hand slowed and he gradually drifted into that boneless state of pleasure.

Tony wasn’t sure how much longer it was until he came back to himself, hearing Jethro’s voice in his ear. “Tony? You okay?”

“Damn, Jeth. I’m awesome. You’re awesome. You’re full of surprises, that’s what you are. How the hell does a functional mute suddenly come out with all that?”

“Lots of time deployed away from home.”

“Wow.” Tony looked around for something to clean up with. “I might have to take a shower and ask for a clean set of sheets.”

Jethro laughed. “I won’t be putting my t-shirt back on, that’s for sure.”

Tony grinned. “Good. Hate to think I’m the only one.”

“Oh, you’re not.”
They were both silent for a minute, then Tony sighed. “This sucks.”

“Yeah, it does. Could be worse, though.”

“How so?”

“You could have a roommate.”

Tony laughed. “I guess you’re right. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Of course. Good night, Tony.”

“Night, Jeth.”
Thursday

Early Morning

Jethro Gibbs woke up before his alarm and stared up at the ceiling, listening to the birds. The problem with phone sex, he thought, is you just feel more alone afterwards. The birds reminded him of his resolution to ask Tony to move in, and he had a sudden urge to call him and ask right then.

Laughing at himself, he got up and headed downstairs to get his first coffee of the day. He brought the coffee back upstairs, showered, and ended up draining the mug while standing in the bedroom after getting dressed. In a moment of pure whimsy, he’d put one of Tony’s Ohio State t-shirts on underneath his polo – probably too many layers for D.C. in June, but at the moment he didn’t much care.

He set the coffee mug down on the dresser, then looked over at Beaker, still on his chair. Gibbs glared at the bear, and was sure the bear was glaring back. Gibbs huffed out a breath and moved toward the door, head-slapping Beaker on his way out.

The Case Becomes a Race

They had another lead on their missing petty officer by late morning, and Gibbs sent McGee, Ziva and Segel to follow up. He wanted to go with them, but Vance had asked Gibbs for an update on Segel’s progress, and Gibbs wanted to stay on his good side, at least until Tony was safely home.

Vance’s assistant waved Gibbs in to the office. The man himself was seated at the conference table, looking through several files spread out in front of him. “Gibbs, have a seat.”

Gibbs sat a few chairs away from Vance. “You wanted an update on the rookie.”

Vance looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. “Right to the point, I see.”

“My team’s out in the field; I should be there.”

“How’s McGee doing as senior field agent?”

“So far, so good. Only sent DiNozzo one panicked email.”

Vance grinned. “Midyear evals?”

“Yup.”

“He’s gotta deal with it sooner or later.”

“McGee will be fine.”

“So… Segel.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Too early to say. Kid’s got potential. Needs to stop making assumptions about people, pay closer attention to his surroundings. We’ll see.”

Vance nodded. “DiNozzo’s okay?”
“Tony’s fine.”

“Morris Franklin is impressed with him.”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “I’m not surprised.”

“Said it’s too bad DiNozzo didn’t accept the position himself.”

Gibbs simply stared at Vance, who stared back and then smiled and gestured toward the files.

“Segel’s applied for a position out there. Should be a few opening up once the team lead is decided.”

Gibbs inclined his head. “Segel’s got a lot to learn – where he does it probably doesn’t matter.”

Vance shook his head. “Sure it does. He’s learning from the best right now.”

“We done here? I’d like to check in with my team.”

Vance sighed. “Go. We’ll talk again once DiNozzo makes his recommendation.”

Gibbs got to his feet and headed out, pulling his cell phone off his belt and flipping it open to call McGee.

“Boss?”

“Update, McGee.”

“I’ll call you back – we’re in the middle of something here.”

Gibbs shot a surprised look at the phone: McGee had hung up on him. Smiling, he headed out on a coffee and Caf-Pow run.

When Gibbs returned to the bullpen, having stopped by Abby’s lab and narrowly escaped her attempts to get him to sweat into a test tube, his team was just returning.

They were all moving fast; McGee was giving orders and Ziva and Segel were moving quickly to their desks. Ziva got on the phone, Segel on his computer, and McGee came over to Gibbs’ desk.

“Petty Officer Valdez had been there, Boss, but he was gone by the time we arrived.”

“Any leads?”

“Ziva and Segel are working on that now. There’s more, though.”

Gibbs waited, resisting the urge to roll his eyes when McGee didn’t speak right away. “What, McGee?”

“Um, well, when we arrived at the apartment, there were two other men at the door… big guys, not military, had what look like gang tattoos. They were also looking for Valdez – one of them said if we find him first, we should tell him to sleep in his own bed.”

Gibbs considered that. “Master Chief has connections.”

“Looks that way. I have a feeling things won’t go well for Valdez if they find him first.”

“Ya think?”

McGee moved to check in with Segel, while Gibbs returned to his desk. He watched his people
work for a moment, then looked over at Tony’s empty seat.

It was going to be a long couple of weeks.

*Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, email 1:27 p.m. Eastern time*

Subject: Oh boy

Hey Jethro,

Remember how Kate used to be all war of the sexes? She could have taken lessons from Burrows and Taylor, and I say that with the utmost affection for her and hope Ari’s rotting in that really hot place. First thing this morning the two of them get into a turf war, arguing about whose team should be doing what. Burrows’ team is stalled on this probably accidental death, and Taylor apparently made a comment, and it all snowballed from there. I’m not sure who started what, since I walked in on it, but I gotta tell you, if this keeps up, Burrows is getting my rec and I’m heading home early. Taylor’s a jackass; his SFA says he’s good out in the field, but he’s a disaster behind a desk. Worse than you without coffee. And I say that with the utmost respect, affection, and hope for sexual favors. It took said SFA, Eddie, whispering in Taylor’s ear that he probably wasn’t looking real good right now to get the whole fiasco to stop. The both of ‘em are up in Franklin’s office right now, getting a talking to, and both Eddie and Burrows’ acting SFA have come to see me to plead their bosses’ cases. The probies are keeping quiet.

This sucks. I’d almost rather be Agent Afloating it again, except that this shouldn’t last nearly so long.

Gonna follow your example and go for coffee, find a nice park bench somewhere, and run everything from last night’s phone call through my head.

Tony

*Jethro to Tony, email 1:45 p.m. Eastern time*

Subject: re: oh boy

Whatever you do, do NOT let Franklin talk you into staying. Vance already told me Franklin wants you as team lead.

By the way, you’d be proud of McGee – he hung up on me this morning.

Jethro

*Tony to Jethro, email 2:25 p.m. Eastern time*

Subject: re: re: oh boy

Sending McGee a congratulatory email momentarily.

About staying… Ha! Not happening. Don’t even go there. I’m sure McGee’s doing great, but I don’t trust Probie, Probette and Ultra-Probie to watch your six properly – and you need me there to handle your six properly in any case. And I mean that in every dirty way imaginable.

Tony

*Tony DiNozzo to Tim McGee, email 2:28 p.m. Eastern time*
Subject: Hoo Rah

Way to go, McBalls! Hanging up on the bossman! Probie’s got big brass ones.

I shall weep at your funeral.

Tim to Tony, email 3:15 p.m. Eastern time

Subject: re: Hoo Rah

I hung up on Gibbs hours ago, and he didn’t even head slap me. Looks like I’m gonna live. Sorry to disappoint you.

Tony to Tim, email 3:32 p.m. Eastern time

Subject: re: re: Hoo Rah

Don’t be an idiot, Tim.

How are those evals coming? Due tomorrow, right?

Tim to Tony, email 3:39 p.m. Eastern time

I hate you.

Can I send you a draft to look over tonight??

Emma Collier to Jethro Gibbs, text 4:53 p.m. Eastern time

Here at the hotel! Dinner later?

Dinner with Emma

Gibbs waited in the hotel lobby, feeling unaccountably ill at ease. Tony’s certainty about Emma’s motives for visiting bothered him; he still didn’t really believe that Emma was interested in him that way, but he could be wrong – and if he was wrong, he’d have to hurt her feelings. He really didn’t want one more thing in his life to feel guilty about.

He relaxed when he spotted Emma walking out of the elevator. She was dressed casually in a lavender short-sleeved shirt, jeans and sneakers, and wasn’t showing any kind of inappropriate skin. Tony’s wrong. God, that’s a relief.

“Leroy!” Emma’s face lit up when she saw him, and she walked quickly to where he stood, giving him a quick hug and then stepping back to look him over. “You look great.”

Gibbs gave her a gentle smile. “You too. How was the drive?”

“It was fine. I only almost got lost twice.”

Gibbs shot her a knowing grin as he began walking, steering her toward the front doors. “And how many times did you really get lost?”

She glared at him. “No fair. You remember too well.”

He kept his gaze steady on her face as they stepped outside. She sighed dramatically. “Only once. And it was only for a few minutes.”
They walked to a small pub two blocks from the hotel. It was early, around 5:30, but neither of them had eaten lunch. “Great burgers,” Gibbs commented after the waitress seated them and took their order for two beers on tap.

Emma picked up her menu and made a face. “I try not to eat red meat anymore.”

Gibbs stared at her. “What happened to the girl who said vegetarians were idiots?”

She glared back. “I never said I was a vegetarian. It’s just the steaks and burgers. Do you know what they feed those poor cows? Ever heard of mad cow disease?”

Gibbs shook his head, taking his beer from the waitress and raising it in a toast. “To old friends.”

“Old friends,” Emma agreed, tapping her glass to his. “What are you having?” she asked, after taking a sip.

“Cowboy burger.”

“Of course. You aren’t worried about all those onions?”

He grinned. “Nope. No one to kiss with Tony away.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “I think I’ll get the grilled chicken. Can I have some of your fries?”

“No.”

She kicked him under the table. “Why are we regressing to junior high?”

Gibbs shrugged. “We’re not the only ones. Maybe it’s a new trend.”

At her curious look, he told her a little of what Tony had emailed him about the juvenile behavior of his current coworkers, interrupted once by the waitress coming to take their orders.

“Sounds like he should step in and take that job. He’d obviously do better than either of them,” Emma commented.

Gibbs just shook his head and changed the subject. They talked about her kids, his team, her life in Stillwater, his time in the Marines. She asked about visiting NCIS, and he nodded. “Maybe Saturday… might have the day free if this case gets wrapped tomorrow. We just need to find this guy before the bad guys get to him.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “Are they going to kill him?”

Gibbs shook his head. “I don’t think so. Teach him a lesson, maybe. Anyway, I’m on call this weekend, but how about we plan on dinner Saturday?”

He walked her back to the hotel, declining her invitation to hang out for a while, wanting to see if the team had made any progress toward finding Valdez. She wrinkled her nose at him, and for a moment he flashed back to fourth grade and meeting her for the first time; her initial reaction to his theft of her lunch cookies had been much the same.

“I’ll hit some of the museums tomorrow… where’s the Smithsonian?”

He told her the best way to get there, and then headed back to the Navy Yard.

Late Evening
Gibbs’ cell rang just as he was getting up from his desk.

*Hey, boy, where’d you get it from…*

He grabbed the phone off his belt, returning Ziva’s smile while he flipped it open. “Tony.”

“*Jethro. You home yet?*”

“Nope. Just heading for coffee.” He rolled his eyes at Ziva’s exaggerated waving. “Ziva says hi.”

“*Say hi for me. Got a break in the case?*”

“Yeah… McGee and Segel are picking up Valdez now.”

“*McGee’s only got Ultra-Probie for back up? You sure that’s a good idea, Boss?*”

Gibbs hit the button to call the elevator. “Yeah. Valdez decided he’d rather face us than the Master Chief’s gang connections.”

“*Smart man. What’s a little time in the brig when you’ve got all your body parts still attached?*”

Gibbs laughed as he walked onto the empty elevator, earning some strange looks from a few of the agents pulling a late shift. “Guess that’s what he thought. Called dispatch a little while ago, asked for help. McGee and Segel are picking him up at a motel just outside of Baltimore.”

“*Fun. You’re staying until they get back.*”

“*Yup.*”

“*Meet up with Emma yet?*” Tony’s voice was a little too casual; Gibbs decided to deal with it right away.

“We had dinner at Mike’s B&G. I had the cowboy steak, she had a grilled chicken sandwich, and we picked on each other like we did in junior high. She wore completely unrevealing clothing and didn’t make a single flirtatious move. I brought you up in conversation several times. I might see her on Saturday.”

Tony was quiet for a moment, then laughed softly. “*Sorry, Jethro. Just thinking I should be there to protect my territory.*”

“I’m territory?”

“*Yup. I’ve got a detailed map, and I’m pretty sure I’ve staked my claim a few times.*”

“I think I remember that.”

“You think? *Should I be hurt?*”

“No,” Gibbs said softly. The elevator opened, and he walked out into the dark of the evening. Instead of heading directly for the coffee shop, he set off toward the outdoor lot where he’d parked his car when he got back from dinner. “Gonna go sit in the car for a minute so we can talk without me having to watch what I say.”

“*Awesome.*”

Gibbs smiled as he looked around before getting in his car. “I’m still in a public place, Tony.”
“That’s okay, Jeth. Just want to touch base, that’s all.”

“You alright?” Gibbs frowned at the lack of energy in Tony’s voice.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just... today was such a pain in the ass.”

“Thought I was the only pain in your ass, Tony.”

“Good one. And pain isn’t the thing I remember from when you’ve been in my ass.”

“Gonna try to get back there next weekend. Just so you know.”

“That’s what I needed to hear.” Tony seemed to perk up a bit. “You book a flight yet?”

“Me? You’re the one who’s losing the bet.”

“Remains to be seen.”

Gibbs shook his head. “So, what was the fallout from this morning’s fiasco?”

Tony made a growling noise. “Everyone was very professional after Franklin lit into those two numskulls. Taylor even did some work.”

“You really got to stick it out longer after that?”

“Yeah, Jeth, I do. Gotta see Taylor in the field. Wouldn’t be fair to Franklin to make a snap decision.”

Gibbs sighed. “You’re right. I don’t like it, but you’re right.” Then he thought of something that would distract Tony during those bad moments. “Got a surprise for you, when I see you.”

“What is it?”

“Not telling. Wouldn’t be a surprise anymore if I did.”

“You’re doing this on purpose. Am I going to like it?”

Gibbs considered that. “I hope so, Tony.”

“Give me a hint.”

“No.”

“Just a little one?”

“No.”

“Pleeeeeease?”

Gibbs laughed. “Okay, fine. It involves birds singing.”

“Say what?”

“I gave you a hint. Nothing says I have to repeat it.”

“Birds singing? That makes no sense!”
“Does to me.”

“We’re going camping?”

“No.”

“We’re going on vacation in Hawaii?”

“No.”

“We’re going on vacation somewhere else tropical?”

“No.”

“You bought me a pet bird?”

“No.”

“You still love me?”

“Of course.”

“Just making sure you weren’t stuck on that word. You realize this is going to drive me crazy, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to enlist Abby’s help.”

“You go right ahead.”

Tony sighed loudly. “This is horribly unfair, Jethro. And I love it.”

“Good.”

“You’re even more monosyllabic than usual. Coffee withdrawal?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s two. Better go get that swill you drink before your veins collapse or something.”

Gibbs laughed. “Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Bye, Tony.”

“Bye, Jethro.”
Emma

Friday Afternoon, East Coast

An Unexpected Visitor

The day had started out well. Derrick Valdez was extremely cooperative in interrogation, telling Ziva and McGee everything they wanted to know. Unfortunately it wasn’t enough to bring in the Master Chief; Valdez couldn’t supply any proof of the man’s involvement with the supposed gang members, and the legal department didn’t think they had enough to charge him with anything serious. Valdez would likely get some time in the brig for being UA, along with some other disciplinary measures. Whatever the final outcomes, NCIS was no longer involved.

After the interrogation and the case paperwork were done, McGee brought Gibbs his mid-year evaluations for Ziva, Segel and both team leaders. The new senior field agent proved to be highly observant, candid, and able to back up his statements with data. His comments about Gibbs’ performance were honest and provided constructive criticism where they should. He also wrote about both team leaders’ professionalism, something that would be read without any deeper meaning unless someone, like Vance, was clearly in the know about the personal relationship between them.

Gibbs signed off on all of the reports and handed them to McGee. “Go ahead and bring those up to the Director, Tim – you did good.”

McGee smiled proudly. “Thanks, Boss.” He turned to go, then paused and moved to face Gibbs again. “Uh, I think you should know… I asked Tony to read over all the evaluations, except the one I wrote on him, of course.”

Gibbs tilted his head slightly. “I assume he did?”

“Yes, last night.”

Gibbs waited for a moment, then sighed when McGee stayed quiet. “And what did he tell you, McGee?”

“He told me not to change a thing, Boss.”

Gibbs smiled, and made a shooing motion with one hand. “Go on, go deliver ‘em.”

McGee grinned at him before heading for the stairs.

After that, there was more paperwork, cold cases, and Tony’s almost incessant texts as he tried to guess what the birds singing meant. Each guess was more outlandish than the last, with the latest being an attempt to decode ‘birds singing’ into a really bizarre sex act. Gibbs was a little worried that if Tony kept this up, he might accidentally hit on the right answer, although he was sure that if Tony did guess that Gibbs was going to ask him to move in, he would only do it as a joke. Gibbs just hoped he’d have enough time to figure out what to do if that actually happened.

Heavy rain started up shortly after noon, and Segel ended up going out to get lunch for everyone. When he returned, dripping water, it turned out he’d brought more than lunch.

“Um, Agent Gibbs, you have a visitor…”

Gibbs looked up, visibly startled to see Emma there. “Emma? I thought we said tomorrow…”
Emma gave him a slightly embarrassed smile. “I know, but it just didn’t seem like a good day to go see the sights, and I got tired of sitting in the hotel room… are you too busy?”

Gibbs shook his head, conscious of McGee’s and Ziva’s eyes on him as he moved from behind his desk. He made the necessary introductions, explaining that Emma was an old friend from Stillwater. McGee was friendly but kept shooting Gibbs worried looks. Ziva smiled and shook Emma’s hand, but the smile left her face as soon as Emma turned away and she glared at Gibbs.

When Emma asked where to find the bathroom, McGee offered to show her. As soon as they were out of sight, Ziva stepped into Gibbs’ space. “Tell me you are not going to betray Tony.”

Gibbs stared at her. “You really think that little of me?”

Ziva took a step back and glanced away. “No. No, I do not… but – the timing is strange. And Tony is my friend.” Her eyes were back on his, her expression concerned.

Gibbs nodded, understanding where she was coming from, even though he didn’t like it. “I’m glad you’ve got his back, Ziva. But I promise you, there’s nothing to worry about. Tony knows she’s here; he met her in Stillwater. She’s a friend, Ziva, nothing more.”

He met Ziva’s eyes squarely. She looked back at him, then nodded once. “I apologize for jumping to the worst possible conclusion.”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “Don’t make it worse by breaking a rule.”

She inclined her head, then shot him a look full of mischief. “Abby will be upset.”

He frowned at her, then sighed as he realized she was probably right.

As it turned out, Abby was more than upset. Her welcoming smile faded when she saw Emma follow Gibbs into the lab, and it disappeared altogether when Gibbs introduced them.

Abby stared just long enough to make Emma shift nervously before glancing at Gibbs and holding out her hand. “Hi,” she said curtly, shaking Emma’s hand rapidly and letting go right away. She turned to Gibbs, who could see the impending explosion, and signed for Abby to wait for a moment.

Abby signed back, her hands and fingers moving so rapidly that Gibbs had to ask her to slow down. “Hold on, Abs – let me take Emma to meet Ducky, and I’ll be right back.”

Abby was still signing furiously as Gibbs backed away, following Emma out of the lab.

“She seemed a little upset…” Emma’s voice trailed off uncertainly.

“Abby? She’s fine. She a bit… high strung.”

Emma looked at him skeptically as they walked on to the elevator, but didn’t say anything else.

Ducky and Palmer were working on inventory when Gibbs and Emma walked into Autopsy, a fact that had Gibbs rather relieved since he hadn’t even considered that there could have been a body on one of the tables.

“Jethro! A pleasure to see you this fine afternoon.”

“You looked outside recently, Duck?”

“Nonsense. Rain in June bodes well for the summer; the crops shall have plenty to drink.”
Gibbs made a show of looking around the room. “Don’t see any crops in here.”

“Unless you count the bodies in the freezer!” Palmer spoke up, grinning.

Emma’s eyes widened as she looked over at the wall with its numbered drawers. Gibbs and Ducky stared at Palmer until his smile faded and he stood up from his chair. “Uh, I’ll just go visit Abby…”

Gibbs shook his head and pointed at the chair. “Sit. Stay.” He turned to Emma. “Emma Collier, this is Dr. Donald Mallard, our medical examiner and a close friend, and his assistant, Jimmy Palmer.” Emma smiled and reached out to shake both their hands. “Emma’s an old friend from Stillwater, visiting for the weekend.”

Ducky beamed at her. “My dear girl, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I take it you’ve known Jethro since he was a wee lad?”

Emma laughed. “Since fourth grade when he tried to steal my lunch cookies. Only I know him as Leroy, so forgive me if I continue to call him that.”

“It’s hard to imagine Agent Gibbs as a kid,” Palmer mused.

“I could tell you some really interesting stories.” Emma shot Gibbs a mischievous look.

Gibbs threw his hands up. “That’s my cue. Duck, you mind entertaining Emma for a few minutes while I talk shop with Abby?”

“Not at all, Jethro. Emma, my dear, would you care for some tea?”

Gibbs left the three of them talking amiably and headed back to Abby’s lab.

She pounced at soon as he entered. “Gibbs!”

“What’s the problem, Abby?”

“She, you, why?”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “Not often you’re at a loss for words.”

“Gibbs, what is she doing here?”

“I told you – she’s an old friend from Stillwater. Tony and I ran into her while we were up there, and she’s come for a visit and to play tourist.”

“Why is she here now, when Tony’s away?”

Gibbs shrugged. “She timed her visit for when her son is staying with his dad.”

Abby stared at him. “You love Tony.”

Gibbs raised his eyebrows. “Yeah. What’s that got to do with this?”

“It’s just one more sign that the universe is trending toward disorder! Don’t you think the timing is suspicious?”

“No, actually, I don’t. Emma asked if she could visit this weekend before she knew Tony wouldn’t be around. And yes, she knows about us.”
Abby’s eyes narrowed. “Where is she staying?”

“At the Hilton, not with me. Abby, I’ve known Emma since we were in fourth grade. She’s not interested in me and I’m not interested in her.”

“Is she married?”

“Divorced.”

“Seeing someone?”

“I don’t think so.”

Abby snorted and turned to her computer. “I don’t believe she’s not interested.”

“Hey.”

Abby turned around, pouting. Gibbs reached out and pulled her into a hug. “Even if she were, I’m not. Not gonna screw up the best thing in my life, okay?”

Abby hugged back, then sighed. “Okay. But I’m calling Tony.”

Gibbs kissed her on the cheek as he pulled back. “You do that.” He left her muttering to herself and headed back to Autopsy, only to be sidetracked by a request from Vance to go to MTAC for a briefing. It was almost an hour later when he was able to return and found Emma and Ducky deep in conversation – luckily, not about him.

“Ah, Jethro! Your friend Emma is a fascinating young woman. I’ve been telling her about some of my forays into forensic psychology, and she has been able to make some astonishingly accurate guesses about the outcomes. I do believe she has a natural talent.”

“Really, Duck? Nice to know she’s good for something.”

“Jethro!”

Emma just laughed. “It’s alright, Dr. Mallard. Leroy and I have been reverting to junior high since dinner last night. He’s just jealous.”

Ducky smiled at her. “If you say so, my dear. And I haven’t I told you to please call me Ducky?”

Gibbs shifted a little. “Want the rest of the tour? Then I have to get back to work.”

Emma stood and held out her hand to Ducky. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Ducky. I’d better go before Leroy turns into Grouchy Gibbs.” Palmer choked back a laugh and she turned to him. “That’s what he turned into every time his dad told him to do something he didn’t want to do. We’d be hanging out on the ball field, someone would see Jack Gibbs coming for his son, and the call would go out: ‘Grouchy Gibbs alert!’ We all knew Leroy was going to be a bear to deal with after that.”

Gibbs smiled at the word ‘bear,’ thinking of Beaker sitting in his bedroom. “Alright, let’s go before you seriously embarrass me.”

He led her out of Autopsy and off to a tour of the rest of the building.

**Friday Morning, West Coast**

911
Tony glanced at his phone when it chirped the incoming text notification. He picked it up off the conference table, read the message from Abby – 911 – and looked at Kathy Nichols. “Excuse me for a moment? I need to make a call.” She nodded, her expression a mix of bored and nervous.

Tony walked out into the hallway, hitting the button to speed dial Abby while he made his way to the window at the end of the hall, where he could get some privacy in an alcove.

“Tony!”

“What’s wrong? Is Gibbs okay?”

“No! I mean, yes, he’s fine, but there’s a serious problem here!”

“Abby, spit it out before I freak out, will you please?”

“Really, he’s fine. It’s just that he’s got this woman with him, and he’s giving her a tour, as if that’s not weird enough, and he says she’s just an old friend, but –“

“You mean Emma? That’s not a big deal, Abby. They’ve been friends since they were kids; we ran into her when we were visiting Jack.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then Abby spoke again. “It’s just, I’m kinda worried, you know?”

“About what?”

“Tony!”

“Okay, I get it… Abby, do you really think Gibbs is going to sleep around?”

“No, but you’re not here, and he could have a moment of weakness!”

“Gibbs is one of the strongest men I know.”

“Yeah, but what if she does something?”

“You think she’s going to jump him?”

“Even if he’s not interested, she could still have an effect on him… or worse! Men get sexually assaulted every day, Tony!”

“How did we get from Gibbs giving an old friend a tour of the building to him being attacked?”

“Women are capable of assaulting men, you know.”

“I do know. Do you have any data to suggest Emma is planning to launch an attack on Gibbs?”

“No.”

“You’re pouting, aren’t you?”

“Yes! Tony, you’re not taking this seriously!”

“Which part? The part where the guy who lives and breathes the Marine motto of Semper Fi is going to cheat on his partner? Or the part where the woman with no training whatsoever is going to somehow subdue a former Marine and federal agent to have her wicked way with him?”
“But what if she makes a move on him?”

“What if she does? Abby, do you really think Gibbs is going to cheat on me?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“What if she makes a move and he gets all upset and feels guilty and then starts drinking too much? What if you get jealous and break up with him?”

Tony laughed. “It’s not his fault if some woman makes a move, Abby. I’m not going to break up with him over something he can’t control. And since when do you have so little faith in Gibbs?”

“It’s not that. It’s like I told Gibbs – it’s the increasing disorder in the universe. First Vance finds out, then you’re gone, now she shows up… I’m not liking this trend. It’s that second law of thermodynamics –“

“Seriously, Abs, there’s nothing to worry about. Besides, if she makes a move, Gibbs has to fly out here to visit on his first free weekend.”

“You guys bet on what she’s going to do?!”

“Yup. I say she’s interested, he says she isn’t. Whoever’s wrong gets to make a cross-country flight.”

“So you’re not upset about this.”

“No, Abs, I’m not. Come on, use the rational part of your brain. You’ve known Gibbs even longer than I have. You really think he’s gonna misbehave?”

There was a long sigh. “No, I guess not.”

“Look, see what Ducky says, okay? If he’s worried, call me back and I’ll call Gibbs. But I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Okay, Tony. I miss you.”

“Me too, Abs.”

Tony shook his head, flipped his phone shut and hooked it on his belt, then went back to the conference room. “Sorry about that… issue back at home. Where were we?”

The rest of the interview went smoothly enough. Kathy Nichols was clearly in favor of Burrows getting the promotion, and just as clearly motivated out of self-interest. She knew she would be up for the SFA position, and she wanted it.

“Give me one pro and one con on both Burrows and Taylor.”

Kathy thought about it briefly. “Con on Michaela – she’s a little sparse on the encouragement. She expects us to do our jobs, and gets impatient when we don’t. But the flip side is she’s extremely thorough; she makes us all better agents. She’s a good teacher, just ask Fitzy.”

“How about Taylor?”

“I’d think that was obvious. He hates paperwork and he’s a dinosaur – thinks women belong in the kitchen or some nonsense.”
“Good side?”

Kathy sighed. “He’s really good in the field. I was temporarily assigned to his team about eight months ago when Angel first hurt his back and Michaela was on vacation. He’s got good instincts and makes some pretty amazing intuitive leaps that generally pan out.”

Tony made a few notes and then smiled at her. “Thanks. I’ll take all of this into account when I make my recommendation.”

She nodded at him and left. Tony looked through his notes and sighed quietly. The administrative side of the job kinda sucks. No wonder Gibbs gets pissy so much. I guess this is good practice for when I do get my own team. He picked up his phone and fired off a quick text to McGee: ‘Abs freaking out – should I worry?’

He got an answer fairly quickly. ‘Boss giving female friend a tour’
‘Got that. Repeat – should I worry?’
‘U asking me? U know Gibbs better’
‘Y, much. She flirting?’
‘Not that I’ve seen’
‘K thnx’

Tony sat back, thinking. If I can make a legit decision by the end of next week, I can just go home no matter what Emma does or doesn’t do. He smiled, realizing he pictured home as Gibbs’ house, not his apartment. Glancing at his watch, he gathered up his papers and left the conference room for his desk, deciding to work through lunch. He, Eddie and Fitzy were planning to hit a local jazz club later that evening, and he wanted to be able to go back to the hotel room and relax for a bit first.

Email from Abby Sciuto to Tony DiNozzo, 3:30 p.m. Eastern Time

Subject: Never mind

Hey Tony,

I talked to Ducky, well, really me and McGee talked to Ducky, and he wasn’t very happy with us. Said Emma’s a ‘lovely young woman’ and wasn’t flirting with Gibbs at all, and don’t we know Gibbs well enough by now to know he wouldn’t cheat on you? I think he wanted to head slap us, but of course he wouldn’t. So I guess you can ignore my 911 and make plans to come back home soon cause you’re gonna lose that bet.

Sorry for freaking you out –

Abby

Friday Evening, East Coast

Phone Call

Gibbs walked back into the house, tossed his keys on the side table near the door, and went into the living room to start cleaning up.

He’d picked Emma up at the hotel after work and brought her back to the house for pizza and beer;
they’d both been in the mood to reminisce and he had no interest in going out to eat two nights in a row. After dissecting high school from the perspective of so many years later, they’d talked about their respective families for a while, and Gibbs had found it pleasant to be able to talk about his girls with someone who’d known him before he’d even met Shannon, even if it was just the superficial stuff. Emma had wandered around the room at one point, looking at the few pictures he had up, one of him and Jack and the one of Shannon on the wall. She’d seemed puzzled about something, but shrugged it off when Gibbs asked. Then they’d gone back to their years growing up, and by the time Emma was ready to go back to the hotel, Gibbs found he was actually feeling younger. That feeling stuck with him as he straightened things up, and he found he wished Tony was here so he could share it. He realized he didn’t know much about Tony’s childhood, beyond the bits and pieces the younger man had dropped over the years – meeting DiNozzo Senior had certainly been enlightening, but Gibbs made a mental note to pursue the subject with Tony someday. He was sure Tony would enjoy hearing more stories about growing up in Stillwater.

It was after midnight when he finally got down into the basement to do a little more work on the cabinet. Tony had given him the go-ahead on the inlays Gibbs had designed, once McGee showed Gibbs how to take and send a picture, so he was ready to move on the next phase of the project. He was making measurements on the pieces that would become the doors when Tony’s ringtone echoed through the basement. Gibbs glanced at his watch as he answered the phone, surprised to see it was almost two in the morning.

“Hey, Tony.”

“Hey yourself. I figured I wasn’t gonna wake you up.”

“Wouldn’t mind if you did.”

“Abby make a voodoo doll of Emma yet?”

“I don’t think she had an opportunity to get any of her hair, so no.”

Tony laughed. “Probably a good thing. If anyone could get one of those dolls to work, it would be Abby. So, what’cha doing?”

“Measurements for the cabinet. Working on that inlay since you said it was okay.”

“More than okay, Jeth. I like the design a lot.”

“Glad to hear it. How was your evening? You end it early?”

“Sort of… Eddie and Fitzy and I went to a jazz club to hang out. They’re on Taylor’s team.”

“You guys get a case yet?”

“No yet. On call, but so far so good. Wrapped up the Valdez case this morning, on cold cases so far. Figure that won’t last.”

“When does it ever?”
“Good point.”

“You get together with Emma after the tour today?”

“Yup. Pizza and beer and lots of revisiting the past tonight.”

“Good for you. Glad you’ve got that shared history and can talk about it.”

“Yeah… makes me feel younger than you.”

“Pfft. You calling me old?”

“Like I’m in any position to do that.”

“Good point.”

“Hey.”

Tony made a sound that Gibbs could only describe as a snicker. “I think the hair gives it away, Jethro.”

“Just wait – take a good look at your father, you’ll see what the future holds for you.”

“Bite your tongue.”

“Rather you do it for me.”

“Mmmm, like the sound of that.”

“Make a decision already, will you?”

“Hey, maybe we’ll get lucky and Taylor’s team will get a big case this weekend… I can shadow him, finish up, and make it home by next Saturday.”

“You’ll be coming home next weekend anyway… you’re wrong about Emma.”

“She hasn’t left yet, Jethro.”

“Come on, Tony… she was just here for several hours and didn’t make a single flirtatious move. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

“Maybe not… I’d be happy to be wrong, you know. You don’t need to have to deal with losing a friend.”

“Nothing to worry about.”

“Got plans for the weekend?”

“Yeah… taking her on a tour of the monuments and the Smithsonian if we don’t get a case. If we do, she’ll just go on her own.”

“When does she go back?”

“Sunday afternoon, I think. Her son gets home from visiting his dad Sunday night. What are you doing this weekend?”

“Burrows’ team is off, so unless Taylor’s gets called out, I’m gonna play tourist. Got a few places I
want to check out... the usual stuff, like the Space Needle, but there’s also a science fiction museum where I can get something for Probie, and a place I’m gonna check out for you.”

“Tony…”

“Hey, even if you don’t end up coming out here, I can get you something, right?”

Gibbs sighed. “Yeah, you can.”

“Cool. Oh, and tomorrow night I’m meeting up with a college buddy, going out for dinner to catch up.”

“Sounds good, Tony.” Gibbs stifled a yawn, but Tony heard it anyway.

“Go get some sleep, Jethro. You could get called out and it would be nice to be awake for a case, you know?”

“What, no phone sex?”

Tony laughed. “Now you sound like me. Go sleep. There will be more opportunities for phone sex later.”

“All right, Tony… good night.”

“Night, Jethro.”

Gibbs heard the beep of Tony hanging up, and looked around the basement. He was tempted to keep working, but decided not to – he’d have time this weekend if they didn’t catch a case. Stretching a bit, he started to move toward the stairs when he heard Shannon’s voice.

Who’s Emma?

“Hey, Shan. You weren’t watching?”

Watching what? She sounded distinctly suspicious.

“I don’t spy on you, you know.

“Thought you said you tried to hit Diane that time.”

You were hurting, Jethro, and I don’t mean physically. When you’re unhappy, I can feel it, and I like to check in on you.

“Thanks.”

Are you alright? You sound… wistful.


I know.

“Yeah.”

So... who’s Emma?

Gibbs laughed, and gave Shannon a brief explanation, including Tony’s impressions and the bet they had going. He reminded her that he’d mentioned Emma from time to time over the years.

I remember now. Just be careful, okay?
“You can’t really think that I’d –“

No, of course not! It’s just… look, if she does try something, you’re going to feel horrible about it. You care deeply, Jethro, you know you do. You won’t want to hurt her anymore than you want to betray Tony.

Gibbs was quiet for a moment. The two conversations with women from his past were making him feel both nostalgic and melancholy. “Don’t think anyone knows me like you do, Shannon.”

Oh, I’m guessing Tony knows you better than you think. And give him time – you guys haven’t really been together that long, right?

“Yeah.”

So go get some sleep… we can talk some other time, when it’s not so late.

Gibbs nodded, then headed for the stairs. “Hey, Shan?”

Jethro?

“If you don’t spy on me, how’d you know to ask about Emma?”

Giggles filled the air. Um… oops?

Gibbs chuckled. “Good night, Shannon. Say goodnight to Kelly for me?”

Good night, Jethro – and you know I will.

Saturday Evening, East and West

At the Hotel

Gibbs parked his car on the street near Emma’s hotel while she talked happily about the gifts she’d gotten her sons. It was close to seven p.m.; they’d done the monuments, the museum, and an early dinner. He was looking forward to getting into his basement; all this time spent being social was starting to grate on him, although he was pleased with the gift he’d gotten Tony at the museum shop.

He walked Emma to the hotel lobby, fully intending to say goodbye, head home, and hopefully talk to Tony later on, when she turned to him quickly. “Hey, Lee, remember I said I have that photo album from high school that I forgot to grab last night?”

“Yeah… with the picture of Ed and Chuck puking their guts out at the graduation party?”

“Yup! Come upstairs and see it – won’t take long.”

Gibbs sighed mentally… but he figured taking a picture of that shot on his phone, in case he ever had another run in with Ed in Stillwater, would be a good idea. “Okay, but my basement is calling.”

Emma laughed as they walked to the elevator. “You do remember that you hated wood shop in tenth grade, right?”

“I was more into cars back then,” he protested.

“I remember that. That car Jack finished up for you is something else.”

“Yeah, it is.”
He waited while she dug out the key card, then followed her into the room. It was a standard setting: king size bed, small desk against the wall next to the dresser holding the flat screen TV. Emma opened a drawer and pulled out the album, setting it down on the desk. “Here, take a look… I’ll be right back.”

Gibbs opened the album as she headed for the bathroom. The pictures started with the summer before ninth grade – it was sort of surprising to see himself so young; he hadn’t seen pictures from back then in a long time. He smiled at a few of him and Emma mugging for the camera at the beginning of junior year, and then shook his head when Steve Tremont, Emma’s ex-husband, showed up soon after and in almost every picture since.

“What do you think?”

He turned around at the sound of Emma’s voice right behind him, stepping back at the sight of her in skimpy black lingerie and nothing else. She moved forward quickly, and before he realized what was happening she was in his arms, her lips pressed to his.

His arms had gone around her automatically, and for a moment he was so shocked he did nothing. She pushed against him, one hand sliding up into his hair while the other moved down to his rear. That was enough to shock him into motion, and he moved his arms back quickly, getting a hold of hers to pull them away.

Gibbs stepped back, she moved forward, his legs hit the bed, and he fell back onto the mattress, with her landing on top of him. She continued kissing him, but there was an air of desperation in her actions. He shifted his weight, carefully tipping her off of him while he pulled away, keeping his grip on her arms to hold her back while he moved off the bed.

He let go of her as he stood; she lay there for a moment, looking up at him, then turned away and curled into herself. Gibbs looked at her, then down at his hands, surprised to see them shaking slightly. He cleared his throat, then moved quickly to the bathroom, grabbing the complimentary bathrobe off the hook on the door and bringing it to her.

She was sitting up as he approached; she took the robe without looking at him and put it on, then stayed motionless, looking down at the floor. Gibbs watched her for a moment, glanced toward the door to the hallway, then sighed and sat down on the bed, leaving several feet between them.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Gibbs shook his head. “Emma… you never gave a hint of anything like this the past couple of days – and I think I’ve got enough experience to be able to tell that you weren’t really feeling it.”

She gave a brittle laugh and turned to face him. “You’re right, Lee… I don’t think I even realized it until I was kissing you and felt nothing. And you didn’t respond, which made it worse. But here I am, in this silly outfit… what else could I do but keep trying?”

“Why try at all?”

She sighed and reached up to run a shaking hand through her hair. “Seeing you in Stillwater – I was so happy to reconnect. The divorce wasn’t easy, even if it was pretty amicable. I’m stuck in that little town, living with my parents again after all these years… I was a wife and mother, that’s all. What other choice do I have? Steve doesn’t make enough money for me to afford my own place on top of saving for Justin’s college education.” Her voice trailed off for a moment, then she looked over at him, giving him a rueful smile. “I know that one date was awful, and we never tried again… but you are a good looking guy, Lee – and we were so close once. I thought maybe you were my way out.”
Gibbs reached out and gently brushed away the tear making its way down her cheek. “You know I’m with Tony. It was you who told Ed, wasn’t it?”

She nodded, the tears coming a little faster. “I didn’t mean to. We were talking, and I was sort of disappointed when you said you were with someone. I guess I didn’t think it would matter… you can’t be serious about it.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Emma, I’m in love with him.”

She stared at him. “How is that even possible? You’re not gay… I mean, you never once looked at a guy with any interest. There’s no pictures of him in your house – I thought you were just, I don’t know, friends with benefits?”

Gibbs sighed. “You didn’t go upstairs. That’s where the pictures are. Tony’s been a huge part of my life since we started working together about nine years ago. We’ve only been together for a short time, but it’s real. He’s not going anywhere, and neither am I. We’ve both found out that it’s who we are that matters, not the bodies we happen to have.”

Emma shrugged; it was clear to Gibbs that she didn’t really understand. He got to his feet and leaned against the desk. “This is why you came to visit? To find a way out?”

“Not at first. I really did want to catch up. You were my best friend, Lee, before Steve and I got together.”

“Yeah, I know. And you were mine. But we’re different people now, Emma. I think you’re not being entirely honest with yourself… why did you pack that –” he gestured toward the lingerie she wore under the robe “- if you didn’t have something like this in mind?”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t know, Lee. I said I’m sorry… what more do you want from me?”

Gibbs laughed quietly, without humor. “Friendship, Emma. That’s all. I’m not looking for anything more, never was.”

“I know,” she said shortly. She got up off the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Gibbs wasn’t sure what to do; he wanted to go home, pour a very large glass of bourbon, and lose himself in the basement. Leaving Emma like this, though… he couldn’t do it. He wandered around the room for a moment, finally sitting on one of the chairs near the window. He thought about sending Tony a text, but he didn’t want to ruin his lover’s evening with his college friend.

Emma emerged from the bathroom after about ten minutes. She was back in the shirt and jeans she’d worn sight-seeing, and her face was scrubbed clean of tear tracks and makeup, with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was visibly startled to see him still there. “I thought you’d left.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Couldn’t, not like that.”

She gave him a slight smile. “You’re a good man… better than I deserve.”

“You’re still my friend, Emma… aren’t you?”

Emma bit her lip, blinking back new tears. “Yes, if you still want.”

“I want.”
She ducked her head and nodded, then cleared her throat and sat back down on the bed. “I am sorry, Lee. I shouldn’t have told Ed, or discounted your relationship with Tony, or tried to seduce you…”

Gibbs raised his eyebrows. “I’d work on the technique, if I were you.”

She stared at him for a moment, then started laughing. “Can’t blame you for that, I guess.”

Gibbs got to his feet. “Look, Emma… I made a lot of mistakes after I lost Shannon. But somehow things finally started going my way – and Tony makes me happier than I’ve been in a very long time. If I can find the right person, you can too.”

Emma looked at him thoughtfully. “Did you ever think your life would turn out the way it did?”

He snorted and gave her the same look he sometimes gave Abby when she went on about stuff he really didn’t want to know. “Of course not.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She shook her head. “I think I’ll head home in the morning… I’ve got some thinking to do, and I can probably do it better before Justin gets home.”

Gibbs nodded and gave her a small smile. “Take care of yourself, Emma.”

She looked at him seriously. “Will you tell Tony about this?”

“We don’t have secrets from each other.”

“You’re lucky. Please tell him I’m sorry and that it won’t happen again? And that I really would like to spend time with the guy who could turn Leroy Jethro Gibbs gay.”

Gibbs grinned. “Now that sounds more like the Emma I know.”

She smiled back. “She’s still in here somewhere.”

Neither of them seemed to want to get physically close, so Gibbs turned toward the door. He stopped and turned back as he opened it. “Let me know when you’re home safe, okay?”

“Okay.”

Gibbs walked out into the hall, closing the door behind him. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then made his way to the elevator to head back home.

_Dinner with a Friend_

Tony had another bite of his lasagna verdi, closing his eyes and savoring the authentic flavors. “This is amazing, Monty.”

Montrell Davis smiled, his white teeth in bright contrast with his dark skin. “Knew you’d like it, T. You always were a foodie. Don’t suppose that’s changed.”

Tony grinned at him. “No way. Other things, yeah, but an appreciation of good food, especially good Italian food… you just don’t let that slide.”

“Nope. And the food here at LaSpiga alone is worth the cross-country flight.”

“No kidding. I’m gonna have to bring Jethro here if he comes next weekend.”

“Jethro?”
“Yeah… Gibbs. My boss.”

“Your boss is coming out here to check up on you?”

Tony breathed in through gritted teeth and gave Montrell a speculative look. “Remember that girl junior year… the one who had the crush on Ted?”

Montrell gave Tony an amused look. “Sure, deflect away. Yeah, I remember Janine.”

“Yeah, that was her name. Well… remember how everyone gave Ted a hard time when she was clearly into him, ‘cause she had the whole really unattractive thing going?”

“Yeeeeeah… so what’s your point?”

“Remember how it turned out that was really sort of an ugly duckling thing? She showed up with that other guy… what’s his name… the guy from the fencing team – and she looked amazing?”

Montrell nodded thoughtfully. “Remember that too. What’s your point, T?”

“Remember how we were all kicking ourselves for not making a move?”

“T! Point!”

“Sometimes someone you think you aren’t attracted to turns out to be someone you’re really attracted to, you know?”

Montrell sat back and stared at Tony. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re attracted to your boss?” He laughed. “Good one, man.”

Tony took another bite of his dinner and shook his head. “Nah, not attracted to… involved in a deeply committed relationship with.”

Montrell abruptly stopped laughing. “You’re kidding.”

Tony shook his head. “Nope.”

“You’re sleeping with your boss.”

“Well, not right this second, but yeah.”

“Sex Machine is into guys?”

Tony shook his head as he shoveled another piece of lasagna into his mouth. “Nope, not guys. One guy. Just Jethro.”

Montrell shook his head. “Man, that’s something else. Never would have thought that could happen.”

“Yeah, well, we never thought we’d find Janine attractive either. Miracles do happen. Wonder what happened to her anyway… what was her last name? Ellis? Elden?”

“Davis.”

Tony shook his head. “Nah, man, that wasn’t it… I know it started with an E. Elway?”

Montrell grinned. “It was Elwood. Now it’s Davis.”
Tony stared at him. “You’re shittin’ me. You married her?!”

Montrell grabbed his wallet out of his back pocket and removed a picture. “Second kid is due in a couple of months.”

Tony stared at the picture. “You dog. You let me go on… sorry, man.”

“No big. It was true. Now stop deflecting… how the hell did Tony ‘hot for anything female’ DiNozzo end up with his male boss?”

Tony shrugged. “Not anything female,” he grumbled. “I do have standards. We were talking, I said something, he asked a question, we decided to see what could happen. We’ve been figuring it out for the past couple of months. It’s good, Monty… best relationship I’ve ever been in.”

Montrell shook his head. “I get the feeling you’re leaving out a few details. Any of the other brothers know?”

“No. You’re the first one I’ve told. I mean, everyone we work closely with is in the know, but that’s it.”

“Wow. So is sex with a guy really good?”

Tony grinned. “Sex with that one guy is amazing. Couldn’t tell you about any others. Jethro’s the first and only.”

“You think you’re in it for the long haul?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. I really do.”

“Wow. Make sure you invite me to the wedding.”

Tony shot him a look. “Yeah, right.”

“You owe me after dissin’ my wife like that.”

“Hey, I didn’t know she was your wife!”

Montrell laughed. “Just like old times, huh, T?”

Tony grinned happily. “In some ways, yeah.”

Reassurances

Tony whistled as he walked into his hotel room. Catching up with Monty had been fun; he needed to reconnect with more of his frat brothers. He’d been pretty sure Monty wouldn’t have an issue with him being involved with Jethro; they’d both had gay friends in college. It’s nice to be able to share with friends outside NCIS.

The Jaws theme sounded from his phone; Tony picked it up and flipped it open eagerly. “Jethro! You have excellent timing.”

“Hey, Tony.”

Tony frowned. “What’s wrong? You sound kinda down.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Jethro spoke up. “I’ll be flying out your way next
Tony sat quickly on the bed. “Emma made a move on you.”

“Oh yeah.” Jethro gave him a quick summary of what happened. “I’m sorry, Tony… I really didn’t see it coming. If I’d known, I’d never have –”

“Whoa, Jeth, relax. If she’s as confused and unhappy as it sounds, well – we were both reading her right, just different parts, that’s all. You couldn’t know.”

Jethro laughed quietly. “Never should have gone up to her room. Just, after all that time with no sign… didn’t really think it was a problem.”

Tony ached at the pain he heard in Jethro’s voice. “You didn’t know… didn’t expect her to mess with your friendship like that.”

“Maybe… but if I’d paid more attention… I’m supposed to be so good at reading people. I missed it, and I ended up practically betraying you, upsetting her…”

“Jethro.”

“Tony?”

“Did you kiss her back?”

“No.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Hell no.”

“Did you even get hard?”

“No. There was nothing sexy about it… the whole thing was just… wrong.”

“Then I don’t see how you were in the same universe as betrayal when it comes to us.”

Jethro sighed. “Still feel pretty lousy.”

Tony bit his lip, thinking. “How did Emma take the rejection?”

“She was upset… but maybe more with herself than with me.”

“You two still friends?”

“Dunno. Said we were…”

They were both quiet. Finally Tony spoke up. “Jethro… you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, Tony. Just feel like crap right now.”

“I could take a few personal days, fly back there.”

“Nice thought, but no. Don’t want Vance to think we can’t keep personal and professional separate.”

“If you’re sure.”
“I’m sure, Tony… only had one drink tonight.”

Tony could hear the slight smile in Jethro’s voice. “Not bad, Jeth. And hey, now I get to show you around Seattle. Had the best Italian food tonight, gonna take you there.”

“Sounds good, Tone.”

“You still sound down, Jethro.”

“Yeah, well…”

“Hey – close your eyes for a second.”

“Not really in the mood right now, Tony.”

“I get that… that’s not what I’m aiming for. Your eyes closed yet?”

“Yeah.”

Tony closed his own eyes and focused on the sense memory of Jethro’s touch. “Think back to the morning before I left. That hour we spent together, just being with each other, touching without love-making – we were so connected.”

He heard Jethro sigh over the phone. “Was pretty amazing.”

“One of the best moments of my life, Jethro. Think of that every time what happened tonight starts to bother you.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

“And sleep with Beaker tonight if you need someone to hold onto.”

He got a real laugh out of Jethro with that one. “You’re something else, DiNozzo.”

“Don’t you forget that, Gibbs.”

“I’m gonna take Friday off, fly out there.”

“How’s that any different from me coming to you?”

“I’ve got an ace up my sleeve.”

“What the hell kind of ace is going to keep Vance off our backs?”

“His wife.”

“Huh?”

“Trust me.”

“With my life. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do. Love you, Tony.”

“You too, Jethro. Sleep well.”

They hung up and Tony lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and thinking for a long time.
A Ducky Interlude

It had been a late and mostly restless night. Gibbs had gotten a few hours of sleep after talking with Tony, but once he had woken up, he couldn't shake the feeling that Beaker was staring accusingly at him. He'd finally given it up, head-slapped Beaker, and headed down to the kitchen for coffee and then back to the basement.

A few hours of woodworking had helped a bit, although he'd spent much of that time willing dispatch to call with a case; he could use the distraction.

It was close to 9 a.m. when Gibbs heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Ducky making his way down. Tossing his pencil and ruler down on the table, he got up and took a few steps forward. “What brings you here, Duck?”

Ducky gave him a considering look as he made it to the bottom of the stairs, then tilted his head and smiled. “A phone call from a concerned friend,” he commented as he looked around for a chair.

Gibbs grabbed the chair Tony usually used and set it down near his own, then resumed his own seat and picked up his coffee mug, taking a sip. “Abby?”

“No, indeed,” Ducky said as he sat down. “It was Anthony. He called about an hour ago, asked me to swing by if I had a chance.” Ducky noticed Gibbs’ eyes drop to the table before he continued. “He didn’t tell me why, just said he thought you could use a friend.”

Gibbs huffed into his coffee mug, torn between affection and annoyance with his long-distance partner. “I owe him a head-slap,” he muttered.

Ducky watched him for a moment, then spoke up when it was clear Gibbs wasn’t going to say anything. “Was he right, Jethro?”

Gibbs emptied his mug, then stood up. “Coffee, Duck?”

“I would prefer tea, but coffee will do if the alternative is not available.”

Ducky watched Gibbs ascend the stairs, noticing that his friend’s shoulders weren’t quite as straight as usual. He stayed quiet, debating with himself a bit, until Gibbs returned with two full mugs. “Thank you, my dear.” He took a sip, refraining from commenting on the bitter taste, before he spoke up again. “Well, Jethro – I venture to guess that your body language and general avoidance mean that Tony was right to request my assistance.”

Gibbs smiled slightly. “Gonna use your forensic psychology skills on me, Doctor?”

“Nothing so complicated, I assure you, since I sincerely doubt that you have committed any crime. Might I assume that the problem is the same one Abigail and Timothy came to me with Friday afternoon?”

Gibbs looked up at him, eyes narrowing. “They did what?”

Ducky set him mug down on the table. “Oh, dear. You didn’t know?”

There was no response, but the clenching of Gibbs’ jaw made it clear that to Ducky that he’d gotten his young friends in trouble. “Really, Jethro. It’s too bad that you always seem to know everything except when it’s something like this. Of all the times to choose to be willfully blind –“
Gibbs turned to him suddenly. “She gave me no indication, Duck, and there’s no way I’d have gone to her room if I’d known. “ His voice rose. “You think like they do, that I’d betray Tony?”

Ducky frowned at him. “Jethro.” He watched his friend settle down, then continued. “I wasn’t referring to the concerns that our friends voiced to me; I am talking about how much they care about both you and Tony and want this relationship of yours to succeed.” He waited until a slump of the shoulders and another sip of coffee told him when to continue. “Don’t you know by now how much your team cares for you?”

Gibbs’ eyebrows rose at that, then he sighed. “Yeah, Duck, I do.”

“Don’t be angry, then. It’s not everyone who has such good friends at their back.”

Nodding, Gibbs met Ducky’s gaze squarely. “I know.” Another sip of coffee, then, “Tony didn’t need to bother you.”

Ducky snorted in annoyance. “He loves you, Jethro – what did you expect? I assume he offered to come rushing to your side, and you turned him down.”

Gibbs couldn’t stop the slight duck of his head and the small smile at the sudden mental image of Tony in shining knight’s armor, riding a white horse through the front door.

“Oh, I see I was correct. Would you like to tell me what happened?”

Gibbs straightened up and shook his head, more at himself than at Ducky’s request. “Tony thought Emma was looking for something romantic from me; I didn’t. Turns out he was right.”

Ducky pondered that for a moment. “I’m sure there’s more to the story, Jethro. The talk I had with Emma on Friday was most interesting, and not once did I see any indication that she thought of you as more than an old friend.”

“She doesn’t.”

“Dear me, now I’m confused. If she only sees you as a friend –“

“Then why did she embarrass both of us with an awkward attempt at seduction?”

“Oh, my.”

They were both silent for a moment, and then Gibbs ran his hand through his hair and told him the whole story. Ducky listened attentively, sipping his coffee and managing not to grimace at the strong flavor. He much preferred the subtlety of tea.

It didn’t take long for Gibbs to finish his narrative. Ducky looked at him thoughtfully. “I assume that once you came home you called Anthony, who told you that you weren’t to blame.”

Gibbs nodded.

“And yet, you still feel guilty. Why?”

Gibbs laughed quietly. “I dunno, Duck. I knew she wasn’t happy. We talked about the past, not the present – maybe if we had, it wouldn’t have happened. She made a move because she didn’t think Tony and I were serious… did I do something to give her that idea?”

“I sincerely doubt that, my friend. She could have simply asked, you know. You said she thought you were…”
“Friends with benefits.”

“Ah, yes. Such a quaint phrase. So you feel it was your fault that she attempted to seduce you because you don’t display revealing photographs in your living room?”

Gibbs shot Ducky an amused look. “I suppose when you put it that way, it’s a little silly.”

Ducky raised his mug and saluted Gibbs before taking a sip. “You really must stock some tea in your kitchen, Jethro. What else is bothering you? You didn’t make love to her, so you didn’t betray Tony.”

Gibbs glared into his coffee and shook his head. “Wasn’t even close to turned on. Nothing sexy about it – just sad and awkward. It was like she was forcing herself into it.”

“Perhaps she was.” Ducky thought about it for a moment, then set his mug down and looked earnestly at his friend. “Jethro, she never went to college, did she?”

Gibbs shook his head. “She and Steve got married pretty quickly, and they started a family almost right away.”

“Yes, that makes sense… do you recall on Friday I told you she had a talent for psychological analysis?”

Gibbs nodded.

“Well, I asked her if she had a degree in psychology; she looked sad for a moment and changed the subject. I think your friend doesn’t feel she has the means to make more of her life than what she has. She has been a wife and mother for so long, it’s all she knows. She’s back to living with her parents, which many people would consider a sign of failure, but she’s coping because of her son, and then she runs into you one weekend and you reconnect. She sees an opportunity to reclaim a portion of her identity as she defines it, as part of a couple, and to reclaim some sense of self-worth. But she knows you are involved with someone, although she has a difficult time believing it because it’s not the sort of relationship she’d expect you to be involved in.”

“With a man,” Gibbs clarified.

“Exactly. Put that together with the fact that she truly feels no more for you than friendship, and she’s unsure of a course of action.”

“Still feels like I should have seen it.”

Ducky shook his head emphatically. “Jethro, I doubt she truly came on this visit with a definite intent. I think she thought of it as a possibility, and talked herself into it over the course of the weekend. It was a spontaneous act, one which I’m sure she now regrets, given the scenario you have described to me. I expect she wasn’t truly comfortable with the course of action she was considering, and as such she wouldn’t have telegraphed it in her behavior. There’s no reason to think you would have known.”

Gibbs gazed at Ducky thoughtfully. “Then why did Tony think she would do what she did? And why did the rest of the team have so little faith in me?”

Ducky sighed. “You’d know better than I why Anthony was successful with his prediction. And I believe the others were simply worried because they want to protect you and your relationship. You must admit, Jethro, that you all have a tendency to close ranks against outsiders. For such an attractive group of people, you are all surprisingly unsuccessful at maintaining romantic relationships.
Perhaps it makes that much more sense that you and Anthony have found your way to each other. But I digress. You were predisposed not to be able to see her inner conflict, Jethro, because the person you were seeing was still, to some extent in your mind, a teenage girl with whom you were never more than friends.”

Gibbs sat still for a moment, eyes narrowed slightly as he thought it over. He tilted his head a bit, then looked over at Ducky. “Points taken, Duck. Not sure I’m as guiltless as you say, but –“

He was interrupted by the sound of ‘Geek and Gamer Girls’ emanating from his phone, and picked it up off his belt right away. “Yeah, Gibbs.” He listened, then nodded and wrote a few notes on the small pad lying on the table. “Okay, McGee – call the others, I’ll meet you there.” He flipped the phone shut and stood. “We got a body in Rock Creek Park.”

Ducky nodded. “I’ll phone Mr. Palmer, and we’ll meet you there as soon as may be.” He headed for the stairs, then turned back. “I do hope Anthony’s early morning call was not in vain, Jethro.”

Gibbs shot him a half smile. “It wasn’t. Thanks, Duck.”

Ducky smiled and headed up the stairs.

Left alone, Gibbs stood for a moment, looking over the cabinet pieces, then flipped the phone open again, hitting speed dial 1. His eyebrows shot up when he got a recorded message, but he stayed on the line as he moved toward the stairs. “Tony, it’s Jethro. Consider yourself head-slapped for sending Ducky. We’ve got a body, so I’m off to work. You better have a good reason for not picking up… you forget rule three?” He moved to hang up, then stopped and brought the phone back to his ear.

“Hey, Tony – thanks.”
Limited Communication

Sunday, East Coast, 9:42 p.m.

Fear in the Bullpen

Tim McGee peered carefully around the corner of the partition. From his vantage point, Gibbs’ desk was on the right side of the bullpen; there was no sign of the desk’s owner, for which he was hugely thankful. Ziva sat at her computer, glancing up every few seconds, a wary expression on her face. McGee looked around furtively, then hurried over to her side.

Ziva jumped slightly as McGee practically slid behind her desk. “McGee! Do not do that again, or –“

“Is he around?”

“Who, he? You mean Gibbs?”

“No, I mean the wild beast who kidnapped Gibbs and took his place.”

“I am sure it is just Gibbs.”

“I know that, Ziva… what’s got him so angry, anyway? Did Tony do something?”

Ziva shook her head. “I think it is that he has not done something he should have. He has broken rule 3, if I am any judge.”

“Ouch. That explains it.”

Ziva gave him a pointed look. “Better you should get back to work than worry about what is going on with Gibbs and Tony. If we do not find a suspect for the Seaman’s murder, Gibbs will direct his anger at us.” She looked around the room. “Where is Segel?”

“What’ve we got!!”

McGee practically flew into the air and back to his own desk at the sound of Gibbs’ voice. Ziva took on the beast while the new second in command typed frantically on his keyboard. “Seaman Matt Gilman was last seen at about 10 p.m. when he left his friends at the bar on 10th Street. His group of friends remained at the bar until closing, which gives them all alibis since Dr. Mallard places the time of death at 3:30 a.m. and the bar closed at 4.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Ziva paused and glanced at him, then continued in a slightly louder voice. “Abby has run the tox screen, and found the presence of prescription and over-the-counter medications, which she says in combination could have disastrous effects. Segel and I went through the Seaman’s apartment and found the latter pills, but not the former. We canvassed all the pharmacies in the area and found no one who had filled any prescriptions for him.”

Gibbs nodded abruptly, then reached for his cell phone, flipping it open and hitting a few buttons.
His eyes narrowed and Ziva could see the muscles in his jaw clench. Gibbs turned his back on her and walked closer to where McGee was staring at his computer screen. “McGee.” There was no reaction from the new senior field agent. “McGee!”

McGee visibly startled. “Uh, Boss…”

“You got something or not?”

“I do – but it’s not about the Seaman’s murder.”

“Then what?”

McGee looked up at Gibbs. “There’s been a series of bomb threats in the Seattle area… all Naval targets. At least two explosions, several people injured… two fatalities.” He looked up at Gibbs and was shocked to see the color drain out of the man’s face. Gibbs stared at him for a moment, then turned and made his way to the stairs.

_Vance and MTAC_

Vance was just hanging up the phone as Gibbs burst in to the office, sending the door bouncing off the wall. “I was just about to call you up here; how’d you find out?”

“McGee.”

Vance nodded. “Fatalities are a petty officer and a civilian – not NCIS personnel. Don’t know about the injuries. Three threats so far, two explosions; Franklin sent teams out.” Vance tilted his head toward the door. “I’m heading to MTAC for an update – I assume you want to come along.”

Gibbs simply followed.

Vance marched into MTAC and paused by one of the board operators. “I’ll have the Silverdale office up in a moment, Sir.”

Vance moved in front of the big screen, tapping his fingers against his leg while he waited. Gibbs stood next to him, very still, trying not to think.

“Silverdale is up, Sir.”

The screen switched from standby mode to a visual; Tony’s face and upper body filled the screen, his shirt ripped, and a multitude of small cuts covering his face. Gibbs took an involuntary step forward, not quite stifling a quick intake of breath. Tony’s eyes moved from Vance to Gibbs and stayed there a moment before refocusing on the Director, who lost no time in asking questions.

“DiNozzo – where’s Franklin?”

“Updating various Naval and civilian officials, Director. I seem to be ranking agent in the building, so I guess this falls to me.”

“Report,” Vance said, his voice steady.

Tony nodded once. “First threat was phoned in to the Everett base sometime around midnight. Franklin sent Taylor’s team out to help with the investigation, and I rode along as an observer. We found what appeared to be a bomb but turned out to be fake. Next threat was made against the Naval recruiting office four hours later, and that one wasn’t fake. Bomb went off just after we arrived on site, too late to clear the area. Two fatalities, and several of us were hit by flying glass, as you can
“Where do things stand now? I have to brief SecNav shortly.”

Tony shook his head. “There’s been another threat phoned in to our regional office at Whidbey Island, but so far nothing’s been found. They’ve got dogs sweeping the area, and Burrows’ team is out there. Taylor’s is handling the investigation at the recruiting office. Franklin asked me to step in here to coordinate the investigation while he’s out of the office. We’ve got agents tracing the calls, and others following up on any leads. So far there’s been nothing much else to go on, except that we have recordings of the threats, and they all seem to be the same person.”

Gibbs stepped forward again and spoke up. “Any reason given for the bombings?”

Tony shook his head. “None. The caller just states that there’s a bomb and gives the general location – nothing else.”

Vance glanced at Gibbs and cleared his throat. “Thank you, Agent DiNozzo. Top priority is keeping our people as safe as possible; you know what to do about the rest.”

Tony blinked, then smiled slightly, inclining his head. “Thank you, Director.”

Vance glanced over at the board operators, raising his hand to cut the feed, then stopped when he saw how Gibbs was staring at the screen; a glance in that direction showed Tony returning the stare. Vance lowered his hand and walked over the board. “Clear the room,” he ordered. He saw Gibbs and Tony both look at him, surprised, and he looked back. “Three minutes,” he said, before following the others out.

Gibbs stared after his boss for a moment, then turned to look back at Tony. “You okay?”

Tony nodded. “Been better, but basically, yeah. Exhausted… been on the go for a long time, no sleep to speak of last night.”

Gibbs’ eyes roamed over Tony’s face. “You get those cuts looked at?”

“Yeah… paramedic on scene took take of them.” Tony paused and looked at him closely. “You look tired, Jethro.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Little sleep on this end too, though not for the same reason.”

“I should hope not. Ducky come see you?”

“Yeah… which you’d know about if you’d bothered to check your messages.”

Tony grimaced. “Sorry about that… left the hotel room in a hurry, forgot my phone. It’s been sitting there all day. Would have called from the office if I’d had a chance, but we’ve been running all day.”

Gibbs nodded. “Just happy you’re okay, Tony.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“We’ve got a murdered Seaman – not sure what kind of hours I’ll be pulling, but you call when you can.”

Tony nodded, then glanced down; Gibbs could hear a phone ringing. “I’d better go, Jeth… I’m at Franklin’s desk, and this could be important.”
“Go. We’ll talk later.”

Tony nodded and cut the feed on his end. Gibbs stared at the screen a moment longer, then sighed and headed for the door. The other agents filed back in as soon as he walked out onto the landing; Vance was standing there waiting. Gibbs looked at him thoughtfully. “That was unexpected.”

Vance raised his eyebrows. “I remember sneaking a few moments of unauthorized chat on official lines when I wanted to speak to Jackie.”

Gibbs’ eyebrows rose in turn. “Not sure it’s the same thing, Leon.”

Vance smiled. “Not sure it isn’t.” He glanced down at Gibbs’ team, still working on leads for the Gilman case. “Send them home, Gibbs. You can pick it up in the morning.”

Gibbs nodded, then headed for the stairs while Vance walked toward his office.

**Monday, East Coast, 1:15 a.m.**

Gibbs went from fast asleep to wide awake before the first couple of lines of Tony’s Queen ring tone ended. He turned over on the couch and reached for his cell on the coffee table.

“Hey, Tony.”

“Jethro… sorry to wake you, just got back to my room.”

Gibbs looked at his watch. “You been going for about 24 hours.”

“A little under, but feels longer.”

“Any more bombs?”

“No… Franklin got a call a few hours after we spoke, guy said he’ll be back.”

“He give a timeline?”

“No… did give us some idea of motive, though – revenge.”

“For what?”

“No idea.”

“Not big on hints, is he?”

“Nope.”

Gibbs stretched as something in him relaxed. “You okay?”

“Yeah. What about you? How’s the case going?”

“Not. Seaman died from a lethal combination of drugs.”

“Suicide?”

“Doesn’t look like it… prescription wasn’t his.”

“Creepy murder, then.”
“Dunno about the creepy, but yeah.”

“I’m surprised you’re at home.”

“Vance kicked us out, said to pick it up in the morning.”

“Speaking of our esteemed director, what was up with the Hallmark moment there?”

Gibbs laughed. “Apparently we remind him of him and Jackie.”

“On what planet does that make any sense?”

“Kind of what I said.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“True.”

“Miss you, Jethro.”

“Yeah… you too.”

“Did Ducky help?”

“He did. Case helps too… and now I’m more worried about you than about Emma.”

“She’ll be alright.”

Gibbs was silent for a moment, then sighed. “Sleep better when you’re here.”

“Beaker isn’t doing it for you?”

Gibbs laughed again. “Haven’t tried him out. Would rather just stick with the real thing.”

“You can have the real thing this weekend… if you can make it out here.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I hope so.”

“Get some sleep, Tony… you need the rest if you’re going to go after the bomber.”

“Yeah… you too, Jeth – love you.”

“Love you too, Tony.”

More Monday

Email from Abby Scuito to Tony DiNozzo, 2:53 p.m. Eastern time

Subject: Be careful!

Hi Tony Bear!

Timmy told me about your mad bomber – not that I know that he’s clinically insane or anything, but wouldn’t you sort of have to be to kill indiscriminately like that? Please please please be careful – Gibbs isn’t the only one here who loves you and needs you back home, you know?
Abby

Email from Julie Stewart to Kevin Segel, 1:45 p.m. Pacific Time

Subject: Wow

Kevin,

Things are crazy here. Agent DiNozzo is like a man possessed, trying to track down the guy who set off those bombs – if there were something to go on, I’d understand, but there’s nothing. He’s got us trying to find everyone who might have a reason to get revenge against the Navy or NCIS… do you have any idea how many people that would be?!? Franklin’s sort of given him the lead on this case, which was unexpected. Taylor doesn’t seem to mind, but Burrows is really pissed off about it. Both teams are on the bombing case, and Taylor and Burrows aren’t getting along at all. Eddie’s trying to get Taylor to back off… I overheard him making a comment to Fitzy that there’s no way Taylor’s going to get the team lead if he can’t stop snarking at Burrows. Michaela’s playing it smarter – she’s more subtle about her digs at Ryan, and never says anything unprofessional in front of DiNozzo.

Whatever… I just hope a position opens up and you get a chance to come out this way.

Julie

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 5:42 Pacific Time

Subject: What’s up, Boss?

Hey Jethro,

No luck with our case on this end. Got a whole bunch of things to follow up on, but it’s really a shot in the dark, or a needle in a haystack, or any number of idioms that Ziva can pretend she doesn’t know. It’s been crazy here – Franklin’s got me in charge of the investigation, at least on the NCIS end of things. A lot of it is delegating and talking to all sorts of Navy brass and not-so-brass, along with the local LEOs, who want their say too. I get reports all the time, and I have a meeting in about an hour with a bunch of bigwigs. Why anyone would want these political jobs is beyond me. Good thing you’re not here – you’d have shot someone by now. Actually, I may shoot someone soon – Burrows and Taylor are more concerned about jockeying for position than they are about catching the guy. I’ve spoken to both of them individually, but I’m not holding out much hope that they’ll pull it together. Gives me a whole new level of respect for you and Vance and the leadership you’ve shown us over the years. Franklin’s a great guy, but he just doesn’t command the same level of respect, I guess.

Got an update on your case from McGee… guess you’re narrowing things down a bit. I’m thinking the girlfriend did it, but that’s only to be consistent.

I know I said it on the phone last night, but I miss you, and I miss D.C., and I really want to get home soon. But I’ll settle for you coming out here this weekend… made some reservations for us, private cabin and everything. Figured staying at the Navy Lodge wasn’t such a great idea, given the activities I have planned. Don’t worry, close enough to get to work if we catch a break on the bomber. And refundable deposit if you can’t make it out here.

Gotta go, will be in touch when I can –

Tony

Tuesday
Text from Jethro Gibbs to Tony DiNozzo, 4:38 p.m. Eastern Time

Got your email, very busy here. You may be right, girlfriend now prime suspect.

Text from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 1:52 p.m. Pacific Time

I rock, solving D.C. case from here. Unfortunately bomber case fizzling. Meetings, meetings, meetings.

Phone message from Jethro Gibbs to Tony DiNozzo, 8:23 p.m. Eastern Time

Hey Tony, turns out there was more than one girlfriend… don’t suppose you can tell me which one, can you? Got more of a motive now, although both had opportunity. Got ‘em both in interrogation, gonna be a long night. Talk to you tomorrow?

Wednesday

Email from Tim McGee to Tony DiNozzo, 11:34 a.m. Eastern Time

Subject: Girlfriend pool

Hi Tony,

Before I forget, Ziva, Abby, and Palmer say hi. Ducky said he wishes you all the best and that you’re missed. I asked Gibbs if he wanted me to pass along any messages – he just looked at me and smirked a bit. If that’s a message, I don’t want to know about it.

Anyway, we were here really late last night, interrogating Seaman Gilman’s two girlfriends. Would you believe neither of them broke? One refused to say anything without a lawyer present, and the other wouldn’t stop crying. Who’d have thought that would make for a great anti-Gibbs defense?

So we have a pool going; $10 to get in on it. Cry-girl or laywer-girl? I’ve attached transcripts of the interrogations for you.

Tim

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Tim McGee, 10:05 a.m. Pacific Time

Subject: re: Girlfriend Pool

Put me down for both – they worked together.

Tony

Email from Tim McGee to Tony DiNozzo, 2:17 p.m. Eastern Time

Ok, but it’s your loss.

11:32 p.m. Pacific Time

Tony looked up from the reports strewn across his bed as the first notes of the Jaws theme filled the room. He started lifting papers, trying to find the phone, scrambling across the room as he remembered he left it in his jacket pocket.

“Jethro!”
“Hey, Tony. How’s it going?”

“Okay, I guess. Case is completely stalled out… we’ve got nothing to go on here. Security’s heightened at all the area bases and offices, but no one’s heard a peep out of the guy since he said he’d be back. Solve yours yet?”

“Yup.”

“So who won the pool?”

“Who do you think?”

“No way. I was right?”

“You were right.”

“Seriously? I was just trying to get McGee riled up.”

“Turns out they each got suspicious that Gilman was cheating. They both followed him, ended up meeting, one got the pills from the pharmacy where she works while the other slipped them to him.”

“So the one who worked at the pharmacy knew what meds he was taking and what would happen to him. She tell the other one?”

“Looks like.”

“Wow, Jethro… I need to get home soon. You’re reverting to almost monosyllabic.”

“I’m tired of this, Tony. Want to be with you.”

Tony swallowed hard. “Could take the edge off right now,” he offered.

“Tempting, but no. Couldn’t do it justice. Booked a flight for Friday morning, should land in Seattle around 3 in the afternoon. Heading home Monday morning.”

“Wow… two days off? Is this a sign of the apocalypse?”

Gibbs snorted. “I’ve earned them.”

“You probably have a year’s worth stored up. How did Vance react when you made the request?”

“Gonna see him tomorrow.”

Tony laughed. “I want to be a fly on the wall for that one.”

“I’ll see you soon, Tony… gonna go hit the rack.”

“Can’t wait, Jethro. Sleep well.”

“You too, Tony.”

**Thursday Morning, Vance’s Office**

Vance looked up from the paper Gibbs had handed him, then sat back and fished around in his jacket pocket for a toothpick. “You want to do what?”

“Case is solved, Leon. My team’s not on call this weekend.”
“Two days off to go to Seattle?”

Gibbs just looked at the director.

Vance shook his head. “Bombing case isn’t solved yet. DiNozzo needs to stay focused.”

Gibbs stared at Vance for a moment. “DiNozzo needs a break, Leon. They’ve heard nothing from the bomber, security’s been increased; there’s nothing more Tony or anyone else can do unless they can dig up more leads.”

Vance chewed on his toothpick, then shook his head. “Too risky. What if the bomber does something while you’re out there?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Then you’ve got me on the case as well.”

Vance stood abruptly, straightening his jacket, then looked back down at the paper, shifting it around with his fingers. “I’m asking you to be patient, Gibbs.”

“Been patient, Leon.”

Vance grimaced. Gibbs rolled his eyes, then tilted his head to one side. “Guess I’ll see you at dinner, then.”

“Dinner? What dinner?”

“The one your wife wants to have at your place, remember?”

“That was for you and DiNozzo.”

“I’m sure Tony will be sorry to miss it.”

Vance stared at Gibbs. “You know I don’t like crossing that line between work and home, Gibbs.”

“That’s your issue, Leon, not mine.”

“You’ll tell Jackie I wouldn’t let you take the trip out there, won’t you?”

Gibbs’ face was the picture of innocence. “Would I do that?”

“Yes,” Vance said sourly. He picked up the leave request and sighed heavily. “Anything for peace at home,” he muttered. He sat back down and signed the request, then handed it to Gibbs. “Have fun – just don’t interfere with DiNozzo doing his job.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Gibbs shot Vance a grin, then headed out of the office.

Text from Jethro Gibbs to Tony DiNozzo, 10:12 a.m. Eastern Time

Vance signed off. See you tomorrow. Will text you flight number and ETA.

Text from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 7:15 a.m. Pacific Time

Can’t wait! I’ll meet you at the airport. Gonna work late tonight so we can clear out of here. Give Beaker a hug for me.

Friday Morning

Gibbs stood as his flight was called for boarding. He flipped his cell open and hit speed dial, smiling
as he heard Tony’s voice.

“Tell me you’re still coming.”

“Flight’s boarding now. I’m on my way.”

“See you soon, Jethro… all of you.”

“You bet, Tony.”

Gibbs flipped the phone shut, grinning in anticipation. *Gonna be a good weekend.*
Reunion

Chapter Notes

Tremendous thanks to gosgirl for the beta read on the first part of this chapter, and for talking me out of the trees and helping me figure out how to tell the rest of this story. This chapter includes spoilers for the movie Jaws.

Reunited, And It Feels So… Strange

Gibbs reached for his phone, turning it on as he stood, waiting for the people sitting closer to the aisle to gather their things and get out of his way. He grabbed his duffle bag from the overhead compartment as soon as he could, then followed the rest of the passengers off the plane, nodding to the flight attendant as she wished them all a pleasant day. Gibbs hched his bag a little higher on his shoulder as he walked off the plane and into the connecting tunnel to the gate at the Seattle airport, then looked down at his phone and hit speed dial 1.

“DiNozzo.”

“Hey, Tony.”

“Hey Jeth - where are you?”

“Walking into the gate now. You?”

“A little to your left.”

Jethro turned his head, and saw Tony leaning back against the wall opposite the gate, his phone to his ear, one foot up against the wall and one hand in his jeans pocket. Tony grinned at him, and spoke into the phone.

“Flashed my very special agent badge, sauntered past security.”

Jethro flipped his phone shut and kept moving, glancing around to make sure he didn’t walk into anyone in his haste to reach his partner. Tony followed suit with his own phone, pocketed it, and pushed off from the wall, standing square to face Jethro as he approached. Jethro stopped when he was about two feet away from Tony, and the two men stood there looking at each other. Tony’s arm twitched forward, then stilled as he glanced around at the other people moving by. His eyes met Jethro’s, Jethro raised an eyebrow, Tony smiled, and they turned as one to move with the rest of the disembarking passengers.

“Got a bag to pick up, Boss?”

“Not your boss, Tony. And nope, just this.” Jethro shrugged his shoulder, lifting his bag a little.

Tony glanced at it. “Traveling light?”

“Figured I wasn’t gonna need that many clothes.”

Grinning, Tony clapped Jethro on the back. “I like the way you think.” Jethro shot him a look, the
corner of this mouth twitching up just a bit.

“So,” Tony said, as they made their way toward the exit, “how’d everyone take the news of your weekend away?”

“McGee and Ziva asked me to say hi. Ducky said he’ll toast to us with a glass of scotch tonight.”

“And Abby?”

Jethro blinked as he remembered Abby’s reaction when he told her about his trip.

“Gibbs!! That’s so awesome! Tony’s going to be so happy – wait.” Abby took a step back and her eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Tony said you’d be flying out there if your friend made a move on you – she did, didn’t she?! I’m going to kill her and leave no forensic evidence! How dare she try to come between you and Tony?!” Abby started pacing, flinging her arms around as she moved. “Of all the low-down, despicable… Gibbs, this is just another example of increasing chaos – you can’t let her do this. She is SO banned from my lab! And – and the Navy Yard! I’m alerting security right now.” Abby broke off her pacing marched toward the phone.

“No need. She went home.”

“How dare she leave before I can kill her?! Do you have some of her hair? I’m making a voodoo doll.” Abby turned to Gibbs, then suddenly melted, grabbing his arm. “Oh, Gibbs! You must have been so unhappy – you trusted her and she betrayed you.”

“I’m fine, Abs.”

“Does Tony know?”

“He knows.”

“Is he upset?”

“Tony’s fine too.”

Abby looked at him with narrowed eyes, then pulled him into a hug. “I just want you to be happy, Gibbs.”

He glanced at Tony. “She was excited.”

They reached Tony’s rental car; Jethro stowed his bag in the back seat, then slid into the front passenger seat while Tony started it up. “We’re heading straight for the cabin, Jeth.”

“Bomber’s still out there – this a good idea?”

Tony glanced at Jethro and nodded before turning to look behind him while backing out of the parking spot. “They’ll call if anything comes up, but we’re at a standstill unless he phones in another threat. And it’s not that far… just need to take the ferry to Vashon Island. Private cabin all to ourselves; I paid to have them stock up the fridge. They leave the key at the cabin, and they do automatic check out, so we don’t need to see anyone until we head back to town.”

“Sounds good.”

Tony smiled as he put the car in drive and headed for the parking lot exit.

The drive to the ferry wasn’t that long, once they got away from the airport. They talked about their
co-workers, the cases, everything that wasn’t personal. Jethro would have been worried about that if Tony’s body language had been anything but relaxed, but Tony was smiling and laughing and looking fantastic with his green short-sleeved shirt bringing out his eyes. The evidence from the bombing was still on his face, but he obviously wasn’t concerned about it.

At one point Tony leaned closer to Jethro to point out a landmark; Jethro had no idea what it was because he closed his eyes and just breathed in Tony’s scent.

Once they were on the ferry, they got out of the car and stood at the railing, watching the water and talking quietly about everything the Silverdale office had been doing about the bomber. Their hands rested next to each other on that railing, touching throughout the entire ride.

After the ferry, Tony drove them toward the town, turning off the main road before they reached it and eventually onto a private road. They drove past the inn, onto a gravel road, and then parked next to a wood cabin at the end of the road.

Tony shot Jethro a smile, and they got out of the car, grabbing their bags and looking around. The cabin was a single floor, with cedar shake shingles and a grey roof with green gutters matching the doors and window trim. A deck sat at one end, two sets of stairs running up to meet it; there were wicker chairs with cushions sitting in the corner, two small tables sitting between them. There was a small lawn surrounding the cabin, with woods on three sides and a pond off to the right.

Tony led the way to the front door, bending over to lift the mat and take the key out from under it. Jethro shifted his gaze away from Tony’s rear, looking at the surrounding woods, taking in the sight and smell of the pine and broad-leaf trees that stood nearby. Tony got the door open, and Jethro followed him in, pushing the door shut as Tony dropped his bag and immediately began exploring. Jethro set his bag down as well, turning to lock the door before leaning back against the wall to watch Tony move through the cabin.

The layout was simple, with a decent size full kitchen opposite the door including a counter and bar stools. There was also a table that could seat four if it was pulled away from the wall, and beyond that the living space, with a rocking chair, a couch, a pellet stove, and an entertainment unit in the corner. It was no surprise that Tony went straight for it, opening it up and crowing at the flat screen TV sitting inside.

“Hey, Jethro, check it out! I hope you weren’t planning on roughing it – there’s even a DVD collection in here! Oh, some of the classics! Jaws! That’s awesome – you know the theme from that movie is your ringtone on my phone, right? They said when I called that there’s full cable too, so we can catch up on the news – and we’ve got to find a baseball game. That’s kind of like our song, you know? Baseball, I mean. It’s a game, not a song, but hey.” Tony moved away from the TV to the sleeping area; Jethro moved forward to stand just past the kitchen, taking in the queen size bed with its slatted headboard and the two large windows on the wall to the right, looking over the deck.

Jethro’s brow creased a little bit as Tony moved past the bed without comment, heading into the bathroom and letting out a little whoop of delight. “Nice! Jacuzzi for two!” He came back out and flashed Jethro a big grin, then moved past him to walk quickly into the kitchen, opening the fridge and cabinets and giving Jethro a running commentary of its contents. Jethro just turned to watch him, eyes narrowing a bit as he considered the younger man.

“Nice. They stocked the good stuff, coffee and beer that you like. And my cereal… yup, the milk’s fresh. Hey, donuts!”

Jethro rolled his eyes and shook his head, a small smile starting to appear. Tony was just way too obvious.
When his partner moved back into the living area and toward the double doors leading to the deck, Jethro took a quick step forward and grabbed his arm, swinging him around and into a fierce hug. He held on tight, feeling the tension slowly leave Tony’s body, although not entirely. Tony’s arms came up and he returned the hug just as fiercely, burrowing his head into Jethro’s neck.

Jethro inhaled deeply, pressed a kiss to Tony’s hair, then released him. It took a moment, but Tony let go too, then stepped back to look at Jethro, his expression a combination of confused and chagrined. Jethro took hold of Tony’s shoulders, turned him around, and marched him toward the couch. “Sit.”

Tony sat.

Jethro sat down too, leaving a little space between them. “What’s got you so rattled, Tony? You were the picture of confidence when I first saw you at the airport. Now you’re reminding me of McGee when he first joined the team.”

“Hey!”

Jethro looked at him, tilted his head, and raised his eyebrows. Tony’s glare was half-hearted at best; he threw himself back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. “Sorry, Jethro.”

Jethro reached out and laid his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “For what?”

“No need to apologize – just explain.”

Tony reached up to grab Jethro’s hand, entwining their fingers. “Remember when we went to that wood shop, and I got all pissy because you said you didn’t think of me as a guy?”

Jethro chuckled. “Yup. I remember what we did later that night too. Kinda hoping we can do it again – unless you’re having second thoughts.”

“No!” Tony sat up, gripping Jethro’s hand tightly, and running his free hand through his hair. “It’s not like that Jeth.” He sighed and stared at the floor. “Lemme think for a sec, okay?”

Jethro nodded, letting go of Tony’s hand as the other man stood and paced restlessly around for a moment. He sat quietly, watching as Tony’s expression changed to one of resolve and he came back to sit on the couch, one leg up on the cushions as he faced Jethro.

“So… I love you. You know that, right?”

Jethro nodded.

“And I’m not worried or ashamed or any of that about anything that we do together.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Tony shot him a small smile. “It’s just… last week I had dinner with one of my college buddies – we played basketball together. Turns out he married the ugly duckling, who, let me tell you, is now light years beyond a swan.”

Jethro reached out and at the last second turned the head slap into a caress, running his fingers through Tony’s hair. “Point, Tony.”

“Right.” Tony leaned into the caress for a moment, then straightened up. “Anyway, Monty was
totally cool with us, surprised, maybe, but cool. But it got me thinking, a little, about how unexpected this is—“ he waved his hand between the two of them “- and how I never in a million years would have thought, back then, that I could be with a guy. Not that I ever thought about it. Ever. So now I’ve been thinking about how strange life can get, when you step back and look at it…” His voice trailed off, and the confused look came back.

“And suddenly what’s been perfectly normal is anything but,” Jethro finished.

“Yeah.” Tony looked at him, his eyes searching Jethro’s. “You know, that color blue is freaking amazing on you. Anyway, then the bombings started and I didn’t have any time to think about it, and I was almost glad Emma did what she did ‘cause it meant you were gonna be here, so I went to the airport to pick you up, and I was going to hug you and then I realized that we’re two guys, and even though it’s the west coast, it might still cause some problems.”

“And that made you feel awkward about us being together.”

“Yeah. Does that make any sense at all?”

Jethro smiled. “Yup. Come on, let’s get a snack and watch a movie or take a walk. We don’t have to rush anything.”

Tony exhaled and smiled. “Thanks, Jeth.” He stood, extending a hand to pull Jethro up, and they both headed to the kitchen.

Reconnection

The rest of the afternoon began with sandwiches. They worked together to create what Tony termed ‘masterpieces,’ eating at the counter and drinking beer while Tony told stories about his basketball days at Ohio State. Jethro listened, occasionally asked questions, and avoided touching Tony, determined to let his partner set the pace for the rest of the day.

After eating they unpacked their bags and then set out for a walk. There was a mown path that cut through the woods and wound around to extensive gardens. Jethro made some mental notes about a few things he saw and liked, thinking about doing something with his yard if he ever had the time. They sat on a bench for a while; Tony asked some questions about what the team had been up to in DC, realizing how out of touch he’d been while trying to deal with the bomber. They saw a few other guests wandering around; some people waved, and Tony waved back, but no one approached.

Back at the cabin after the walk, Tony pulled out some more beer and looked toward the couch, raising his eyebrows at Jethro. Jethro shrugged and nodded, and Tony set them down on one of the side tables before going over to the entertainment center and pulling out Jaws. “Please?”

Jethro grinned. “Sure, why not? Haven’t seen it in years.”

They watched companionably, sitting close together on the couch, although Tony shifted around during the more dramatic scenes, brushing against Jethro, who would take each opportunity to touch him back. They were both quiet while Quint talked about the fate of the U.S.S Indianapolis; Tony shook his head and muttered “ Fucking brilliant” at the end of the scene. Jethro glanced at him, leaned in and whispered, “They got the date wrong,” earning a head slap for his trouble. He sat back, grinning widely at Tony, who remained immersed in the movie.

When Quint, Brody and Hooper started singing, Jethro surprised Tony by joining in. Tony gave him an incredulous look, then followed suit.

Show me the way to go home
I’m tired and I want to go to bed

I had a little drink about an hour ago and it’s gone straight to my head

They watched the rest of the movie in relative silence, until Tony’s fist pump when Brody killed the shark.

“Think you could make that shot, Boss?”

Jethro rolled his eyes and cuffed Tony lightly across the back of the head. “Piece of cake, DiNozzo.”

Tony grinned at him, then reached out to grasp Jethro’s hand, holding it until the credits ended. He got up to remove the DVD while Jethro headed for the bathroom and then the kitchen, poking through the fridge and cabinets. “Wanna eat soon?”

“Sure.” Tony flipped channels until he came to a pre-game show. “Mariners game?” he called out. Getting no response, he left it there and joined Jethro in the kitchen. They threw together a pasta dinner, eating in front of the TV and criticizing the game coverage. Once they were finished, Jethro cleaned up while Tony took a turn in the bathroom, after which they both ended up back on the couch.

They watched the game for a while longer, but when it became obvious the Mariners were going to win, Tony started flipping channels, tossing the remote down when he came to an old western. “Gary Cooper, Jethro! Gotta love that. I think DeMille directed this one.”

Jethro looked sidelong at Tony, who glanced back at him and winked. A few minutes later, while Wild Bill Hickok was talking with General Custer, Tony reached over and began running the tips of his fingers over the back of Jethro’s neck, making him shiver. Tony squeezed Jethro’s neck a bit, then resumed the light touch, scooting a little closer to Jethro on the couch so that their thighs touched.

Jethro turned his face into Tony’s neck, breathing deeply before nipping gently, getting a startled laugh out of the other man. Tony grabbed Jethro’s hand and brought it up to his mouth, kissing the back of it before lightly running his teeth over the skin, getting Jethro to shiver again. Jethro growled low in his throat, and shifted to face Tony, bringing his other hand up to Tony’s hair and running his fingers through it before pulling him close for a gentle kiss to the lips, their first since Tony had left D.C.

Tony made a sound that was a cross between a grunt and a moan, shifting over in turn for easier access. Lips slid together easily while tongues caressed lightly, and hands tangled in hair. Tony released Jethro’s hand to move his arm around his waist, pulling him even closer. Jethro broke off the kiss and moved his mouth to Tony’s neck, nibbling and licking and murmuring his name. Tony dropped his head to the back of the couch, humming in appreciation as Jethro moved along the younger man’s lower jaw and then back to his mouth, kissing with more abandon when Tony opened for him, making it clear that he was game for anything Jethro wanted.

Jethro groaned at Tony’s submission, then pressed against him, moving his hand from Tony’s hair to his shirt, pulling it out of his jeans and reaching under to caress Tony’s abdomen. Tony stretched backwards, taking Jethro’s other hand back and entwining their fingers. “Feels so good, Jeth. Dunno why I felt funny about stuff before.”

Jethro pulled back and grinned at him. “You had a moment of insanity, that’s all. Just means we’ll have to do this a lot so you don’t forget again.”
Tony laughed. “Trust me – I didn’t forget.”

Jethro pulled Tony’s shirt up further and gazed at the exposed skin. “You’re incredible. Let’s get this show started.”

“Thought we already did,” Tony commented with a smile. He pushed Jethro back and reached for the remote, shuttering off the movie while Jethro stood and went to the windows, closing all the blinds. Tony sat and watched him move, marveling at how ageless his lover appeared. Jethro made his way to the bed, closing the blinds covering the big windows near it, but leaving the blinds of the two small windows above the bed open; moonlight was starting to shine through. He turned to look back at Tony, who had one arm propped on the back of the couch, looking over it at him.

Jethro tilted his head. “You gonna join me, or am I supposed to start without you?”

Tony dropped his head. “Oh, wow, Jeth. That’s one hell of a mental image.”

Jethro grinned. “Some other time. Want you over here with me.”

Tony jumped up and moved toward the bed, pulling his shirt off over his head, unbuckling his belt, and trying to toe his shoes off as he walked, which of course made him trip. He caught himself, though, and looked up to see Jethro shedding his own clothes, unzipping his jeans and pulling them down and off, his boxers following.

“Wow.”

Jethro, stepping out of his pants, looked up to see Tony staring at him, eyes wide and white in the moonlight. “What?”

Tony spluttered, waving his hands toward the older man. “Would you look at yourself? No one looks like that at your age. Hell, no one looks like that at any age.”

Jethro shook his head. “Dunno what you mean.”

Tony stepped closer, then stopped and got rid of the rest of his clothing. He straightened up and moved in front of Jethro, stopping about an arm’s length away. “I’m serious. Look at you… your stomach’s practically flat, your posture is so straight…” He reached out one hand and ran the tips of his fingers over Jethro’s chest. “The silver hair on your body looks fantastic in this light.” The fingers traveled downward, just grazing the head of Jethro’s erection, picking up some of the moisture there and trailing it along one side. Jethro closed his eyes, sucked in a breath, and shuddered. Tony moved around behind him, fingers moving over Jethro’s hip and around to his ass, tracing the curves there. “You’ve got the most amazing ass, Jethro… so much muscle, so round and just made for touching.” His fingers moved up then, along the small of Jethro’s back, following the long lines up to his shoulders, his neck, and finally into his hair. “You’re the most incredible, sexy, amazing man.”

Tony stepped in close behind Jethro, one hand on his shoulder now and the other reaching around and tracing lazy circles on Jethro’s abdomen. He pushed his own hard cock against Jethro’s ass, almost between his cheeks, and moved the other hand to palm Jethro’s cock, pressing it against his lover’s stomach as he held him close.

Jethro’s head dropped back on Tony’s shoulder, and he growled out something fairly inarticulate, gripping Tony’s thighs tightly. Tony thrust against him once, then brought his lips to Jethro’s ear. “Anything you want, Jethro. Your call.”

Jethro stood there for a moment, savoring the feeling of Tony against him, then straightened up and turned, pulling Tony close and pressing their cocks together, getting a gasp and a moan out of his
partner. He reached down between them, running his palm over both cockheads, spreading the moisture around before sliding his hand down to take both erections in his hand and jacking them slowly.

They both groaned at that, and Jethro leaned forward to capture Tony’s mouth with his, kissing him fiercely. “Want to get inside you, Tony.”

Tony’s arms tightened around Jethro and he returned the kiss, sweeping his tongue through Jethro’s mouth, running his lips over Jethro’s somehow owning and submitting at the same time before pulling back. “Sounds perfect.”

Jethro let go of Tony and stepped back, watching as Tony moved to the bed, throwing the covers down toward the foot of it and laying on his back. He then turned onto his side for a minute, pulling a small container of lube out of the drawer in the bedside table and laying it on the bed next to him. He looked up at Jethro. “Not too slow, okay? Been too long.”

Jethro nodded, unable to form words while looking at Tony spread out on the bed in front of him. He moved quickly, straddling Tony, kissing him thoroughly before scooting down a bit and without warning taking Tony’s cock into his mouth.

“Jethro!” After that one word, Tony could only give voice to moans and gasps and an occasional plea while Jethro licked and sucked and took as much of Tony’s cock into his mouth as he could. He didn’t stop until Tony’s hips began to thrust a bit, after which he pulled away, staring down at Tony whose chest was heaving as he breathed in short pants and clutched at the sheets.

Grabbing the lube, Jethro spread some onto his fingers and then tapped Tony’s legs. Tony drew his legs up, planting the soles of his feet on the bed and watching as Jethro reached for his anus, spreading the lube over the tight ring of muscle before moving one finger in a spiraling motion, entering Tony smoothly and carefully, working to loosen the muscles as quickly as he could. For a while the only sound in the cabin was their breathing as a second finger followed, then a third, until Tony finally threw his head back. “Jeth! Please.”

Jethro smiled, then withdrew his fingers and moved forward until he was straddling Tony’s abs. He grabbed Tony’s hand and squirted some of the lube into his palm, then tossed the container onto the nightstand and gently brought Tony’s hand to his own cock.

Tony’s eyes met Jethro’s as he spread the lube over his lover’s erection; the moonlight was bright enough for them to easily see each other’s faces. Propping himself up on one arm, Tony leaned in to kiss Jethro’s torso, running his tongue over the skin, tasting sweat and feeling the muscles jump a bit at his touch. He could feel Jethro’s legs trembling a bit as he worked on his cock, and finally lay back and let go.

Jethro shook himself and moved back, lowering himself onto Tony, who swung his own legs back to allow for easier access. Taking his cock in hand, Jethro quickly located Tony’s stretched anus and positioned himself so the head of his cock just breached the entrance.

“Yesss…” Tony hissed, shivering with pleasure.

Jethro let go and braced himself on his forearms, shifting his hips forward and smoothly sliding into Tony, who arched his back and shuddered violently, inhaling sharply through gritted teeth. Jethro stopped moving and reached out to touch Tony’s face. “Am I hurting you?”

Tony shook his head quickly. “No – just trying not to come.” His voice was strained. “You better hurry.”
The realization that Tony was already so close hit Jethro hard – that Tony wanted him that badly was somehow a bit of a shock. Jethro thrust forward, burying himself in his lover, his own groan mingling with Tony’s cry of pleasure.

Tony grabbed Jethro’s shoulders. “Give it to me, Jeth – hard and fast. I need it.”

Jethro couldn’t help but do as Tony demanded. He thrust carefully a few times, but when it was clear that Tony was feeling no pain, he let himself collapse down on his lover, grabbing him at the hip and shoulder, and thrusting in and out as hard, deep, and fast as he could. Tony cried out in ecstasy, and Jethro realized that neither one of them was going to last long. He fought back his orgasm as long as he could, but Tony writhing beneath him was taxing what little control he had. He pressed down, holding Tony in place, feeling Tony’s cock rubbing against his stomach. Tony was almost sobbing with the need to come, and Jethro’s breath was catching in his throat as he moved.

“Tony – god – yes… love you, love you so much –“ And Jethro thrust deeply into his partner one last time, gripping him tightly and letting his control evaporate as he felt and heard Tony coming with a low cry. He growled as his own orgasm hit, his hips moving uncontrollably for a moment and then stilling, pressed tightly against Tony as he came deep inside him.

There was no sound for a few seconds as neither of them could breathe – and then their bodies relaxed and they were both panting for air. Jethro’s forehead rested on Tony’s shoulder, and Tony moved his arms to hold him tightly. As Jethro’s mind got back in gear, he realized tears were tracking down his face. He awkwardly moved back a bit, met Tony’s gaze – and saw tears moving down his cheeks too.

Their lips met again in a kiss – saying everything neither of them had words to express.

It was a while before they’d calmed sufficiently for Jethro to pull out, stagger into the bathroom, and come back with a moist towel, cleaning them both and then tossing the towel onto the bathroom floor. Tony shifted over to make more room while Jethro grabbed the sheet from the foot of the bed and brought it up to cover them both.

Jethro moved to entwine his legs with Tony’s, wrapping one arm around him and laying his head on Tony’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure what time it was, and he didn’t care. He was already drifting off to sleep when he felt Tony kiss his hair. “Goodnight, Jeth,” the younger man whispered. Jethro tightened his arms around Tony in response, and then fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.
The sound of birdsong woke Tony early the next morning, but it was the soft snores coming from right next to him, along with the feel of the hard body in his arms, that jolted him into full awareness. He tightened his arms around Jethro, getting a quiet snort and a leg thrown over his own in response. The snores continued almost immediately, so Tony relaxed, gently resting his jaw on top of the grey hair lying on his shoulder.

His first thought was *Jeth smells good*. His second was *what the hell was wrong with me yesterday?*

Tony had woken up early the previous morning, despite a long day of trying yet again to track down the elusive bomber. He’d been in too good a mood, too happy and excited to get angry with Burrows’ and Taylor’s antics as they continued to jockey for position. Ambition was all well and good, but the impossible tasks they were setting for their teams were getting in the way of doing anything truly useful. A hint from Tony had Franklin demanding that the team knock off a little early and take the weekend to relax unless there was anything new on the case. Eddie Wright had invited Tony out for a beer, but Tony had declined, saying he had company coming to visit.

*“Your girl?”*

*“Kinda…”* Tony had grinned at Eddie on his way out, and Eddie had waved at him, telling him to do everything Eddie wouldn’t. Tony had laughed to himself, thinking that was a given.

He’d been full of eager anticipation as he drove to the airport, despite the semi-philosophical thoughts he’d been having all week about how life could go in unexpected directions – it really hadn’t been until that aborted intention to hug the man at the gate that he’d suddenly felt awkward. He’d covered well, but he shouldn’t have been surprised that Jethro eventually picked up on it.

Tony shifted uncomfortably, suddenly angry with himself for making Jethro think he was regretting any part of their relationship. There were no second thoughts – just a sudden inability to cross that line back into the comfort zone they’d discovered so quickly as their relationship had changed. Tony dropped a kiss on the top of Jethro’s head as a thank you for the man’s patience, insight, and willingness to talk about it all. He shook his head at his good luck – that Jethro would have gone through three divorces, walling himself off emotionally to almost all comers until ending up being able to communicate with his male second… *just goes to show that this is for real. Real as in permanent… this is IT.*

Tony’s eyes snapped open as the realization truly hit for the first time. “This is IT,” he repeated out loud, trying it on for size, and grinning widely as he realized that he really, really liked the sound of that.

Jethro shifted in his arms and Tony let out a small squeak as his lover nipped the soft skin just below his shoulder. “Wha’ssit?”

Tony grinned. “This.”

“Huh?”

“This. You, me, us, whatever… this is IT.”

Jethro scooted sideways, just enough to tilt his head up and look at Tony’s grinning face. “It?” he
Tony nodded. “It. This is it for me, Jeth.”

Jethro blinked, then nodded. “Mmm hmm.” He settled back down, kissing Tony’s shoulder again as he shifted a little closer and sighed.

Tony stared down at Jethro, his grin fading into indignation. “Hey!”

“Mmm?”

“I have a major, life-changing revelation and all you can do is go back to sleep?!”

Jethro chuckled. “Tony, you think we’d be here like this if we hadn’t already had the life-changing revelations?”

Tony grumbled quietly. “Well, yeah, but still… I mean it, Jethro. Far as I’m concerned, this is permanent.”

Jethro tightened his arms around Tony and stayed silent for a moment before responding. “Good.” He gave a little nod. “You like waking up to the birds?”

“What?”

“Birds? You like ‘em singing in the morning?”

“Jethro, what the hell?”

“Just answer the question.”

Tony could feel Jethro smiling against his skin. “Oookay… yeah, I like them just fine. Don’t get to hear them much from my apartment.”

“’s what I thought. So move in with me.”

Tony blinked rapidly, frozen for a moment. Then he reached down and pinched Jethro’s ass through the sheet.

“Ow!” Jethro flailed around a bit and then rolled over on top of Tony, grabbing his arms and pinning them down. Tony stared up at him, eyes wide. Jethro took in his shocked expression and grinned. “You looking for a rematch on that pillow fight, Tony?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “I won, so I don’t need a rematch. Stop changing the subject.”

Jethro mock-growled at him. “What’d you pinch me for?”

“Had to make sure you’re awake.”

Jethro released Tony’s arms and propped himself up on one elbow, resting his head on his hand. “What makes you think I’m not?”

Tony’s gaze shifted around the room, then met Jethro’s squarely. “How about you just repeat what you asked me a moment ago.”

Jethro shrugged, then shot Tony a quick half-smile. “Okay. What makes you think I’m not awake?”
“Jethro!”

“What? That’s the question I asked… oh, why’d you pinch me? Or do you mean the one about the birds?”

Tony groaned and raised his head to thud it back against the pillow. “You should have warning labels about your sense of humor.”

Jethro’s eyebrows shot up. “Me? Looks who’s talking.”

Tony sighed in exasperation. “Jeth… please.”

Jethro sat up, looking seriously at Tony. “Been thinking about it since before you left D.C. No pressure… just think it would be nice to wake up together at the house all the time.”

Shifting up and resting his back against the headboard, Tony reached out to run his fingers through Jethro’s hair. “Don’t you think it’s a little soon?”

Taking hold of Tony’s hand, Jethro looked at it thoughtfully, then started tracing lines along the back if it. He shrugged again. “We’ve known each other a long time. You said yourself this is permanent. Why waste money on your apartment if you don’t have to?”

Tony grinned. “How romantic.”

Jethro rolled his eyes. “Tony…”

Smile growing, Tony batted his eyelashes.

Jethro shook his head, unable to stop his own grin. “You want flowers and poetry?”

Tony’s jaw dropped. “You’d write me poetry?”

“Doubt it.”

“Way to let me down, Jeth.”

“Tony.” Jethro reached out with both hands, cupping Tony’s face. “I’ve missed you. It’s not right without you… not at work, not at home. Would like to have it be your home too. That’s all.”

Tony’s eyes searched Jethro’s. “You think it’ll work?”

“Sure. You don’t?”

“It’s not that… exactly. It’s just – I’ve never lived with anyone before, except for my frat brothers. Wendy and I were waiting until we got married to buy a place together; our apartments were too small for two people. Jeanne and I were talking about it, but I kept putting her off – you know why. And what about you? I mean, you made it work with Shannon, but three exes, so something didn’t go right –“

Jethro leaned forward and pulled Tony into a hug. “Relax.”

The tension flowed out of Tony’s body almost immediately as he automatically reached up to return the hug. “Sorry , Jeth.” His voice was muffled in Jethro’s neck. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

Jethro reached up and ran his hand over Tony’s hair. “It’s okay, Tony. Like I said, no pressure. I’m not gonna be upset if you want to wait… hell, if you never want to move in, it’s okay, as long as
we’re spending most nights together.”

“No question about that, Jethro. I’ve missed you too.” Tony pulled back and looked at Jethro carefully; his lover’s expression was calm, with just a hint of regret. “What’s wrong?”

Jethro shook his head. “Shoulda waited to bring it up, after yesterday. Too soon.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to move into Jethro’s space, pushing him back onto the bed and pinning him down. “Nuh uh. I’m glad you brought it up.” He leaned in, kissing Jethro’s lips lightly. Jethro responded immediately, his hands caressing Tony’s sides and back while Tony deepened the kiss, running his fingers along Jethro’s arms and neck, making the older man shiver.

Tony pulled away after a few minutes. “Let me think about it, okay? This is too important to jump in without being sure… don’t want to screw it up.”

Jethro nodded. “Take all the time you want.”

Tony leaned in again, nuzzling Jethro’s neck. “I won’t leave you hanging too long… promise.” He scooted down a bit, resting his head on Jethro’s chest. “What time is it?”

Jethro squirmed around a bit, reaching for his watch on the nightstand. “A little before seven.”

“Ugh. Can we go back to sleep for a while?”

“Sure. Gotta hit the head, though.”

They took turns in the bathroom, then settled back into bed, Tony curling up behind Jethro, putting his arms around him and kissing the back of his neck. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Despite the shock, I’m really glad you asked me… to move in, I mean.”

“Me too, Tony.”

**Unexpected**

Jethro woke up again a few hours later. He reached up to rub his eyes with one hand, the other still trapped by Tony’s arms around him. Smiling slightly, Jethro turned around slowly, careful not to wake his partner. He looked at Tony’s face for a moment, a sense of rightness settling into his gut as he thought about the possibility of waking up like this for the rest of his life. *Whether or not he takes me up on the offer, we’ll be together.*

He reached over and gently started tracing Tony’s face with his fingers, running them along his cheekbones, then his nose. As he reached Tony’s lips, the younger man twitched violently, moving backwards and rubbing at his face.

Jethro’s chuckle turned into a full blown laugh when Tony glared at him. Tony joined in seconds later, and Jethro found himself wishing he could tell Shannon how happy he was in that moment. Then Tony moved in, pulling Jethro close, and thoughts of anyone except his partner flew from Jethro’s mind as he was kissed into submission.

Tony turned aggressive, rolling over on top of Jethro, pressing into him and muttering something into his neck as his hands moved down toward Jethro’s groin – and then Jethro’s cell phone rang.

Tony dropped his head and groaned as Jethro tried to reach his cell where it sat on the nightstand.
“There are times when ‘never be unreachable’ is just a suggestion, Jeth.”

Jethro rolled his eyes. “Not goin’ anywhere, Tony… what if it’s about the bomber?”

“They’d be calling me, not you,” Tony pointed out, but Jethro had already flipped the phone open.

“Yeah, Gibbs.”

“Hi, Leroy.”

“Emma?” Jethro turned and met Tony’s surprised gaze.

“That’s me. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Almost. How are you?”

“Um… I’m alright. I wanted to let you know that… and to make sure things are okay between you and Tony.”

“We’re fine.” Jethro settled back against the headboard, reaching out to take Tony’s hand.

“Good. Listen… I wanted to tell you I’m really sorry about how I acted last Saturday. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I know I need to make a life for myself, not try to live through Steve, or you, or any other guy, really.”

“Sounds like you’re on the right track.”

“I think so. I emailed your friend, Dr. Mallard… he put me in touch with some people, and I think I’m going to go back to school, get a degree in psychology. He thinks I have a talent for it.”

“That’s great, Emma.”

“Thanks. So, um… we’re still friends, right? I really did have fun visiting with you, before I messed up.”

“We’re still friends. Don’t worry about what happened… it’s not much worse than the time you told Justin Parks you had a crush on him.”

“Oh, god, don’t remind me! That was one of the worst moments of junior high. Ever. And it was your fault.”

“Was not.”

“Yes, it was! You dared me to do it.”

“Not my fault you listened.”

“Yes, it is. Anyway, Leroy… I was wondering if you could tell me how to contact Tony.”

“You want to speak to Tony?” Jethro glanced over at the man in question, who immediately shook his head.

“I need to apologize… I want him to know I never meant to hurt you, or him, or interfere in your relationship.”

“I can pass that along, if you want.”
“It’s tempting… but I need to do it myself.”

“Hold on.”

Jethro held out the phone. Tony glared at him, then rolled his eyes and took it.

“Hello, Emma.”

There was a short pause. Then – “I’m going to kill Leroy.”

“Gonna have to go through me first,” Tony said. He was smiling, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, and Jethro wondered if he’d made a tactical error in letting Emma talk to him.

“Tony… oh, no. When Leroy said I almost interrupted, did he mean…”

“Basically, yeah.”

“Oh, god. I am so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it – you couldn’t know.”

“You’re back from out west?”

“No, Jethro’s here.” Tony glanced at Jethro. “He decided to come for a visit since it looks like I’m going to be here a while longer.”

There was a long sigh on the other end of the phone. “Look, Tony… Leroy said he was going to tell you about what happened.”

“He did. You don’t have to explain, Emma. I kind of get it.”

“Do you? I’m not sure I do, not entirely. I just want you to know that I’m sorry, and it will never happen again.”

“Okay.”

“I mean that. It never would have happened at all if I’d realized how serious the two of you are – I’m not that kind of person.”

“Emma… it’s okay. Mostly. Look – you’re Jethro’s friend, and I think it was really good for him to reconnect with you and with his past. So… clean slate, alright?”

“Thanks for being so understanding, Tony.”

“Hey, you’d have to be crazy not to be attracted to the guy, right?”

Emma laughed weakly. “I suppose… he got you to walk on the wild side, didn’t he?”

Tony grinned at Jethro. “He sure did. And I did the same for him. Listen, I gotta go – you want to talk to Jethro again?”

“If you don’t mind… thanks again.”

Tony tossed the phone to his lover and lay back, giving Jethro a challenging look.

Jethro shook his head as he brought the phone back to his ear. “Hey.”
“He hates me, doesn’t he?”

“No… I think he’s just marking his territory.”

“Ew. That’s a visual I didn’t need.”

Jethro let out a surprised laugh. “I didn’t mean it that way. Emma – Tony’s a great guy. He’s just feeling a little threatened at the moment. So I’m gonna go back to what we were about to do and let him know he’s got nothing to worry about.” He winked at Tony, who grinned, his eyes lighting up happily. “Take care of yourself… I’ll be in touch soon.”

“Alright… tell Tony he’s a lucky man.”

“He knows that already.”

“Bye, Leroy. Take care of yourself.”

“Bye, Emma.”

Jethro flipped the phone shut and tossed it back on the table, then turned to look at Tony, who was looking back at him with a slight smile.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Jethro tilted his head and thought about it for a second. “Yup.”

“A little bit of revenge?”

Shrugging, Jethro reached up to scratch the back of his head. “Maybe.”

Tony grinned at him. “I like it.”

Jethro turned to look at his cell. “Maybe you should put a ringtone in for her. Just so we know.”

Tony’s eyes lit up. “Great idea. Give it to me.”

Jethro grabbed the phone and handed it over. Tony immediately flipped it open and started punching some buttons. “You got something in mind already?”

Tony nodded, hit some more keys, then held the phone up.

Cruella de Vil, Cruella de Vil

If she doesn’t scare you
No evil thing will

“It’s from Disney’s 101 Dalmatians,” Tony said helpfully.

Jethro chuckled in spite of himself. “I remember that.”

Tony smiled, then hit another key to silence the phone and handed it back. “Come on, let’s get something to eat. She kinda shattered the mood, you know?”

Jethro sighed and nodded. “Okay. Eggs and bacon?”

“Sounds good,” Tony said and he rummaged through the closet and pulled out a pair of sweatpants.
“I’ll start some coffee, you start the bacon.”

“Shouldn’t that be the other way around?”

Tony grinned. “Nope. It’s your punishment for answering the phone.”

Jethro shook his head but smiled as he got out of bed and grabbed the sweatpants Tony tossed to him. “Alright… this time.”

“We can wrestle for it next time,” Tony suggested, smirking.

Jethro laughed and headed for the kitchen, dodging as Tony tried to swat his ass. It was shaping up to be a pretty good day.
Tony sat on the steps of the porch at the cabin, listening to the crickets and frogs just as the last of the sunlight disappeared from the sky. He could also hear Jethro moving around inside, cleaning up from their dinner. Tony had cooked, and Jethro had insisted that his lover relax while he took care of the dishes.

They’d had a great day; after getting up and making breakfast, they’d decided to go for another walk while they talked about what to do. Tony had done some research and planned a day on the water for Jethro, starting with a few hours of kayaking. Jethro had proven himself adept with the boat, maneuvering expertly, while Tony had taken a little longer to catch on, never having done it before. There’d been a lot of laughter involved.

After that, he’d surprised Jethro with tickets for a whale watch; they’d been lucky enough to encounter a pod of orca as well as having a few sightings of grey whales. Tony had taken a few pictures of Jethro leaning on the railing of the boat, sending one to Abby, who’d texted him back with virtual hugs for both of them. Once that trip was over, they’d walked on the beach for a while before returning to the cabin for a leisurely dinner.

Tony shifted around on the step, sitting forward to rest his elbows on his legs while he looked out toward the pond, which was barely visible in the low moonlight. It had been a great day, but in the back of his mind he’d had some thoughts nagging at him… namely thoughts of moving in with Jethro. The idea was both exciting and moderately terrifying, and Tony had no idea what he wanted to do.

His reflections were interrupted by the sound of the door opening behind him, and then Jethro’s footsteps approaching along with the creak of wood as the older man settled on the step next to Tony and handed him a beer. Tony took the bottle, twisted the cap off, and held the bottle out for Jethro to tap. They each took a sip, then Jethro leaned back, resting his arms on a step behind him while he looked out toward the pond.

Tony had some more beer while they both sat in silence, watching as the moon rose slowly and the pond became easier to see. Fireflies showed up, flashing their lights over the grass surrounding the cabin. Jethro watched them, his lips curving into a gentle smile. Tony watched Jethro, fascinated; he didn’t think he’d ever seen that expression on the man’s face before. After a moment, Jethro glanced over at Tony and his smile widened. Tony raised his eyebrows, and Jethro looked back out at the pond.

“Before I left on my last deployment, before I lost -“ Jethro cleared his throat, then continued. “We went to Stillwater to visit Jack. First night we were there, Shannon and Jack sat at the table talking, and I took Kelly out for a walk. We chased fireflies on the town green near the train station. I caught one for her, and put it in her hands… she couldn’t stop giggling.”

Tony listened, gazing at Jethro’s face as he recounted the happy memory.

“She wanted to know how the fireflies made the light… I had no idea, so I made up a story about tiny elves and lanterns.” Jethro ducked his head and laughed quietly. “A few months later, Shannon wrote to me and said Kelly got into an argument with her teacher at school – told her she was wrong about the fireflies, that her daddy told her about the elves, and that she should stop hiding the truth.” Jethro shook his head, smiling.

Tony reached out and rested his hand on Jethro’s shoulder. “Sounds like a Gibbs to me.”
Jethro shot Tony a look, then chuckled before taking a long swallow of his beer. “Shannon was trying to be mad at me, but I could tell from the way she wrote the story that she was proud of Kelly for standing up for what she believed in.”

“Did Kelly ever learn the truth?”

Jethro nodded. “Shannon took her to the library and they looked up fireflies. Kelly read about them, then said maybe I was wrong about the lanterns, that the elves really made the chemical that makes the light. She wouldn’t give in on that point, so Shannon charged me with explaining the real thing when I got back.”

“Which you never got to do.”

Jethro sighed and shook his head. “Which I never got to do.” He looked over at Tony. “Still hurts – but not as much as it did.”

“Knowing they’re still around, on the other side or whatever… that helps, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Tony hesitated, picking at the label on his beer. “Maybe someday you’ll talk to Kelly, and you can explain it then.”

Jethro blinked at that, tilting his head to one side. Then he reached up to lay his hand over Tony’s where it still sat on his shoulder, lightly squeezing his fingers. “Maybe.”

They sat in companionable silence a while longer, and then Tony’s cell rang, startling them both. Tony grimaced as he picked it up and looked at the screen. “Eddie,” he said. Jethro let go of Tony’s hand, tensing slightly as he waited to see if their weekend was going to be cut short.

Tony flipped the phone open. “Hey, Eddie. What’cha got?”

“Sorry to interrupt your evening, Tony. Thought you’d want to know… note came in to the office earlier today, seems to be from the bomber.”

“Only seems?”

“The writing checks out. No prints or anything else on the paper that might give us any real info.”

“DNA on the stamp?”

“No… sticky, not licky.”

“That’s one way of putting it. What’s it say?”

“You’re next.”

“Me personally?”

“Ha. Maybe if Michaela is the bomber. Think she’s pissed you haven’t made a decision yet. The letter was addressed to NCIS, not any one person. Bomb sniffing dogs have been brought in, and we’ve got people going through the air ducts and places the dogs can’t reach. Nothing so far.”

“Need me to come in?”

“Would love to meet your girl, but no. Just wanted to keep you in the loop. Tell her I’m sorry to
interrupt… better yet, put her on and I’ll convince her to come away with me instead.”

Tony looked at Jethro and laughed. “Not a chance, man.”

“Hey, it was worth a shot. I’ll call you if there’s anything new… enjoy your romantic getaway.”

“Oh, I am. Thanks, Eddie.”

Tony hung up and updated Jethro on the case. “He wants to convince you to dump me and run off with him.”

Jethro’s eyebrows rose. “I’m guessing you didn’t exactly tell him my true identity.”

Tony tapped the side of his nose. “Got it in one.”

Jethro shook his head. “Think I’ll stick with you.”

“Smart man.” Tony grinned at him, reaching out to ruffle Jethro’s hair.

Jethro batted his hand away. “Think we should stay here tomorrow?”

Tony grimaced. “Maybe not. Might be better to be closer to the action, just in case.” He shook his head. “Hate to cut it short.”

Jethro shrugged. “We can come back here someday, if we want.”

Tony smiled. “Great idea. Make it a tradition.”

“I like the way you think.”

“Me too, actually. Hey… we could leave after lunch, get a room at one of the fancy hotels. I could take you to dinner at the restaurant I told you about… want to meet Monty? I can text him, see if he’s free.”

“Sure.”

Tony leaned back, making a mental list of what they’d need to do the next morning. Jethro watched him for a moment, catching the slightly furrowed brow. He reached up to run his hand through Tony’s hair. “We could stay here, if you’d rather.”

“Hmm?” Tony looked at him. “Might be easier to just go… I’ll have to check the ferry schedule, but if something happens, it would be better to be on the mainland. I’d suggest heading back tonight, but we may have already missed the last ferry anyway.”

“No new leads to follow?”

“Eddie says no.”

“Then let’s do what you suggested… stay here until tomorrow afternoon, head back, treat ourselves to some fancy digs for the night.”

Tony smiled. “I’m good with that.”

They sat for a while longer; Jethro continued to run his hand through Tony’s hair, and Tony leaned back into the touch. They could see moonlight sparkling on the water now. The crickets and frogs were still singing, but the fireflies had apparently taken the elves home for the night.
Jethro leaned in toward Tony and placed a gentle kiss on his neck. “Wanna go inside?”

Tony rested his head on Jethro’s for a moment, then nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me.” Jethro stood first, holding out his hand to Tony, who groaned as he stood. “Ow… I think I used some of these muscles for the first time in my life today.”

Jethro grinned at him. “Wimp.”

“Hey!”

They moved inside, Jethro locking the door behind them. He grabbed some towels from the closet while Tony was in the bathroom and laid them out on the bed after pulling the sheets down toward the foot, then went into the nightstand drawer and pulled out the bottle of massage oil he’d brought with him, setting it down next to the lamp. He then closed the blinds, letting moonlight come in like it had the night before, through the windows higher up above the headboard.

Tony came out into the bedroom, talking. “I took some Advil, Jeth… think I stiffened up, sitting out there. Who knew kayaking was so difficult?” He stopped as Jethro moved to stand in front of him, reaching out to rub his shoulders.

“Why don’t you get undressed and lay down?” He tilted his head toward the bed. “I’ll just be a minute, then I’ll take care of those sore muscles for you.”

Tony grinned. “I like the way you think.” He was already shedding his clothing by the time Jethro stepped into the bathroom.

Emerging from that room a few minutes later, wearing only his boxers, Jethro stopped short, taking in the sight of Tony spread out on his stomach on the towels, naked, his lower half bathed in moonlight. “Wow,” he said quietly, slipping off his remaining clothes as he moved closer to the bed.

Tony turned his head toward him and smiled, wriggling his hips a bit. Jethro grinned back, showing teeth. “You better stop that if you still want that massage,” he commented, with a slight growl in his voice.

“Hell of a choice, Jethro. I want both.”

“You can have both.”

“Remind me why we didn’t start doing this years ago?”

Jethro laughed. “Think we could have managed it?”

Tony thought about that for a second, eyeing Jethro’s naked groin, then started laughing too. “Don’t think it would have occurred to us… or if it did, one or both of us would have run away screaming.”

Jethro stood by the bed, picking up the bottle of oil and pouring a bit into his hands, rubbing them to warm it up after setting the bottle down and moving onto the bed to straddle Tony, sitting on his rear. “Nah. Remember that stakeout with Pacci’s killer?”

Tony laughed, then sighed as Jethro started working on his shoulders. “Mmm. Yeah… that landlord who thought we were a couple.”

“Neither of us screamed then.”

“True. Wonder – oh, right there – wonder why?”
Jethro shrugged as he continued working on Tony’s shoulders and upper arms. “We were professionals.”

“I seem to recall some smirking.”

“There may have been smirking.”

“At least Kate wasn’t there at the time. I’d never have heard the end of it.”

Jethro snorted in agreement, then focused on his work. Tony fell silent, except for the occasional moan or hum of appreciation. Jethro scooted back as he massaged Tony, working his way down the younger man’s back and sides, feeling the muscles relaxing. He lost focus a few times while he worked on Tony’s buttocks… he was fairly certain they weren’t bothering Tony at all, but it didn’t hurt to make sure. By the time he was done with them and moving on to Tony’s legs, he was sporting an impressively hard erection.

Finishing off with Tony’s feet, he moved back up to his neck, then wiped the remaining oil off his hands with the edge of one of the towels before running his fingers through Tony’s hair and massaging his scalp. Tony didn’t move or make a sound; the man was clearly boneless.

Jethro finally shifted off of him, then traced his fingers along Tony’s spine. “Tony… hey, Tony?”

The only response he got was a snore.

He stared at Tony for a moment, then looked down at his raging hard-on. Groaning, he flopped down onto his back. “Next time, sex first,” he muttered. He looked over at Tony, torn between his desire to let the man sleep and his desire for something else entirely. He went so far as to reach out and poke him in the side… Tony shifted a bit and murmured something incoherent, but didn’t wake up.

Jethro sighed and got up, heading into the bathroom where he turned on the shower and stepped beneath the cold water for just long enough to relieve the pressure. He dried off and walked back to the bed, where Tony was still fast asleep. He reached out and gently smoothed Tony’s hair back from his face; Tony smiled in his sleep and snuggled into his pillow. Jethro smiled back, then moved to pull the sheets up and over the sleeping man, going around to the other side of the bed to crawl in beside his lover. He put an arm around Tony and moved close to him, breathing in his scent and closing his eyes, willing sleep to come quickly.

Just like when we went to Stillwater… next time we take a vacation, I’m making him drink coffee before bed.
Sunday in Seattle

Morning at the Cabin

The first thing Tony realized when he woke up was that it was still quite dark; the moonlight had shifted away from the windows. The second thing he realized was that he’d fallen asleep while Jethro was giving him a massage. Ah, hell.

He turned onto his side, propping his head up on his elbow to watch Jethro as he slept. Even though the moon was no longer illuminating the bed, there was still enough dim light for him to see the man clearly.

Jethro was on his back, with most of his torso visible; the rest of his body was covered by the bed sheet. Tony reached out with his free hand and rested his fingers gently on Jethro’s shoulder, but the older man didn’t react, so Tony pulled back, content to spend some time thinking.

Still can’t believe he wants me to move in… we’ve been through a lot, sure, but it’s only been a couple of months, if that. He can’t know that it’ll work out. Tony shifted over onto his stomach, lacing his fingers together and resting his head on the backs of his hands, still looking at his lover. Yeah, we’ve spent an awful lot of time together since we met in Baltimore, but not this way – what if it’s too much togetherness? We’re still in what they call the ‘honeymoon phase,’ right? Oops, better not call it that around Abby, she’ll think we went to Vegas. Heh. Wonder which of us would be ‘Mrs.?’ Like I don’t know the answer to that… idiot. What happens when two guys get married, anyway? I mean, I know what happens, but – does one of them change his name? I’d think they’d both be ‘mister.’ Right? I guess they could hyphenate or something. Gibbs-DiNozzo? Or DiNozzo-Gibbs? Man, I need a head slap.

Still, Tony sighed loudly, eyes narrowing as he looked at Jethro for a reaction, but the man stayed asleep. Alright, focus, Anthony. Would it be so bad to move in? I guess not, unless he wouldn’t want my stuff coming with me… why wouldn’t he want my stuff? His TV is ancient, his couch kinda sucks… maybe he just wants me for my furniture? Tony chuckled quietly at that. Why am I so worried about this? Maybe ’cause it’s just too important to let us screw it up. This is IT. Don’t want to mess with that. Might be safer and better in the long run to keep my place… have some space between us when we need it. There’s no need to rush things, right? It’s not like either of us are in any hurry.

Satisfied for the time being, Tony decided it was time to make up for falling asleep at the worst possible moment. He shifted onto his side again, propping himself up on his right arm while reaching out with his left to slowly move the sheet down Jethro’s body. His eyes followed its movement, watching intently as more of Jethro’s skin was exposed. He stopped for a moment when Jethro’s hand moved to his stomach swiping clumsily at the irritation of the fabric moving over his skin. Tony waited to make sure Jethro was still asleep, then carefully lifted the sheet up and off, letting it settle near their feet. He took a moment to admire the picture Jethro made: his head turned slightly away, the hand near Tony resting on his stomach while his other arm was resting above his head. His right knee was bent a little, while his left leg was lying straight, at a little bit of an angle toward Tony. The result framed Jethro’s half-hard cock nicely, and Tony grinned as he decided what he was going to do.

He slowly moved over and down on the bed, trying not to wake Jethro, figuring it would be just like the man to wake up at this particular moment. Luck was with Tony, though, and he smiled again as he reached out to gently palm Jethro’s cock and lift it so that he could take it into his mouth.
He used his tongue to caress the semi-hard flesh, running it softly against all the ridges along the shaft and teasing the area right below the head, then moving to the slit and gently rubbing it. Jethro shifted in his sleep, murmuring something, but didn’t wake up. Tony continued what he was doing, licking and rubbing without sucking, feeling Jethro’s cock grow harder, longer, and wider. When Jethro shifted restlessly a second time, moving his legs further apart, Tony slid his cock out of his mouth and scooted over again, this time even lower on the bed so he could take one of Jethro’s balls in his mouth.

He handled it gently, rolling it over his tongue, sucking with just a hint of pressure. His reward came a moment later, as Jethro groaned out Tony’s name and reached down to run his fingers through Tony’s hair. Tony glanced up to see Jethro’s head raised up off the pillow, looking down at him, his mouth hanging a little open as his breathing sped up. Tony pulled back, shot Jethro a huge smile, then moved to the other ball, giving it the same treatment.

“Tony… oh, yeah – that’s perfect.”

Tony shifted position again, moving to straddle one of Jethro’s legs, shifting his weight to his right hand while he reached up with his left, searching for Jethro’s. He found it quickly, lacing their fingers together and hanging on as he moved from Jethro’s balls back to his cock, which was standing up at attention, fully erect. Jethro’s gasp of pleasure as Tony ran his lips over the head and down the shaft sparked a burst of happiness in Tony’s chest, and he hummed with contentment. He then started moving, his head dipping down and lifting up, keeping his lips against Jethro’s skin while working over the shaft and head with his tongue.

The fingers in Tony’s hair tightened, and Jethro began to influence the pace of Tony’s movement, using his hand to pull and push on Tony’s head, relaxing a bit when Tony hit the perfect rhythm. Jethro’s hips started to flex, just enough to move in time with Tony, not enough to make him uncomfortable. Tony gradually took Jethro’s cock in deeper and deeper, as far as he could go, setting a separate rhythm with his tongue that was driving Jethro wild. He could hear his lover’s moans and gasps becoming more frequent, and did everything he could to get Jethro to lose control before his jaw began to hurt too much.

It didn’t take too long before he could feel Jethro’s legs and abdomen trembling, and then with a cry of “God, Tony!” Jethro’s hips jerked up and he was coming into Tony’s mouth, his grip on Tony’s hand and hair just shy of too rough. Tony hung on through the spasms, swallowing as fast as he could until his lover went limp, at which point he pulled back slowly, licking Jethro clean as he went. He then rested his head on Jethro’s head, gasping for breath and catching up with his own body’s demand for oxygen.

Jethro ran his fingers through Tony’s hair, enjoying the little aftershocks that ran through him. They both lay there until their breathing slowed, then Jethro pulled on Tony’s hair just a bit, getting him to move up and away as the older man sat up and rolled over to pin his lover down on the mattress while thoroughly kissing his mouth.

Tony smiled against Jethro’s lips, moving his arms around his back and pressing his own impressive erection against Jethro’s leg. “Little help here, Jeth?”

“You bet.” Jethro moved a little onto his side, continuing to kiss Tony, tasting himself on his lover’s tongue while he reached down with one hand, rubbing him palm over the head of Tony’s cock, collecting the moisture and then smoothing it down over Tony’s shaft, catching Tony’s hiss of pleasure in his mouth. He kept Tony pinned while his hand moved slowly up and down, letting go every so often to reach down and tickle or caress Tony’s balls, keeping the touches random and unpredictable until Tony was writhing beneath him and groaning into Jethro’s mouth.
Jethro increased the speed and pressure bit by bit, driving Tony crazy as he used his own body to keep him from moving. He wrapped his legs around Tony’s, holding his hips down, getting a surprised cry out of him as he tightened his grip on Tony’s hair while he moved the pad of his thumb roughly over Tony’s slit. Jethro pressed Tony even harder into the mattress, controlling his lover, feeling Tony shiver at the possessive growls he let lose as his tongue invaded Tony’s mouth. He felt Tony’s absolute surrender seconds before his lover cried out, his cock pulsing as he released into Jethro’s hand.

Jethro stilled his hand, holding onto to Tony carefully, continuing to press him into the mattress until the shaking stopped and Tony sighed into his mouth. Then he let go, letting himself fall off of Tony and onto the bed, pulling Tony over onto his side as he continued to kiss him, pouring all the intense emotions into the movement of his lips on Tony’s. They stayed like that, the kisses gentling bit by bit, until Tony drifted off to sleep again, with Jethro following after clumsily using the sheet to clean them off.

**Leaving The Island**

Jethro stepped out of the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel as he moved toward the clothes he’d taken out earlier. He’d woken up to an empty bed and a note on Tony’s pillow saying he’d gone to the main building to settle up with the innkeeper and use the internet access there to make arrangements for their night in Seattle.

Jethro got dressed quickly, packing his things into his duffle bag and then going ahead with packing Tony’s as well. He brought both bags near the front door, then started in on making a big breakfast. It was almost ten-thirty; Jethro was surprised he’d slept so late.

He was just about to put Tony’s plate of ham, eggs and potatoes into the oven to keep warm when the door opened and Tony walked in.

“Wow… smells great!”

Jethro grinned at him as Tony crowded him against the counter and kissed him enthusiastically. “I’m a man of many talents.”

Tony narrowed his eyes and made a sexy growling noise. “Oh, yes you are.”

Jethro backed up a step and handed Tony his plate. “Eat.”

They both sat at the table near the window, enjoying the food and looking out at the pond. “This is awesome, Jeth.”

“Can make you breakfast more often if you move in, you know.”

Tony raised his eyebrows and pointed at Jethro with his fork. “On a work day?”

Jethro shrugged. “Can make you coffee.”

Tony grinned at that. “You are such an addict.” He focused his attention on his plate, taking a huge bite of ham and eggs.

Jethro took the evasion in stride and went back to his own food. “So, what’s the plan?”

“They’re really understanding… not charging us for tonight. Helps that there’s a couple wanting to upgrade to this cabin for the all of next week.”
Nodding, Jethro sipped his coffee. “That’s good. When’s the ferry?”

“We’ve got time to clean up before heading out… it doesn’t leave for over an hour.” Tony finished off his food and sat back, coffee mug in hand. “I made us reservations for tonight at the Hotel Andra; it’s a luxury hotel with a sort of Scandinavian theme.” He looked at Jethro’s amused face. “Guess all you care about it that it’s got a bed.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Tony sighed, shaking his head. “We’re gonna have to work on that. Oh, and I texted Monty – he’s going to meet us for dinner at La Spiga at seven.”

Jethro nodded. “What’s on the agenda for the afternoon?”

“Have a place I want to take you to… think you’ll enjoy it. Then we’ll see, play it by ear.” Tony stretched and scratched the back of his neck. “You know, they asked me at the front desk if we enjoyed our stay… I told them that it was perfect and we’re planning to come back some time. Said the fireflies were made to order, and they got all confused.” He looked at Jethro. “Apparently there aren’t really fireflies on the West Coast… not the glowy kind, anyway.”

Jethro shrugged. “Well, we saw ‘em.”

Tony nodded, thinking, then he stood up and started to clear the table. “I kind of like the idea that Kelly put them there.” Jethro looked startled, and Tony smiled at him, squeezing his shoulder before picking up the dirty dishes and heading for the sink. He glanced over a Jethro a few minutes later as he cleaned, happy to see his partner looking out the window at the pond, a gentle smile on his face.

About half an hour later, after all the coffee was gone, they walked outside and headed to the car, tossing their bags in the back seat. Jethro turned and leaned against the passenger side, looking back at the cabin. Tony watched him for a moment, then smiled and pulled out his cell, jogging over to take some pictures of the exterior and the pond. Jethro’s lips quirked up in a small smile as Tony returned, handing him the phone. “Check it out… I took some pictures of inside while you were still sleeping.”

Jethro just looked at Tony, who shot him a cheeky grin as he got in the car. Rolling his eyes, Jethro followed suit, buckling up and then flipping through the pictures after Tony showed him how. He stopped on one of him asleep, the sheets tangled around his waist. He glanced over at Tony, whose expression was a little too serious as he started the engine and headed back down the driveway. Looking back down at the screen, he found several more of him sleeping.

“How do I delete a picture?”

“Don’t you dare. Those are mine.”

“I see any of these on Abby’s computer, I’ll head slap you into next week.”

“Of course.” Tony reached out and squeezed Jethro’s leg. Jethro shook his head, smiling, as he set the phone down and covered Tony’s hand with his own.

Seattle

“That was so fantastic, Jethro! You have to build another boat so we can go sailing at home. After you finish my cabinet, of course.” Tony’s eyes were still shining as they walked into their room after their afternoon out on the water. Jethro followed, a fond grin on his face as he watched Tony practically dance around the room. The younger man came to a stop directly in front of him. “Do you
have any idea how sexy you are, handling a boat?”

Jethro laughed. “I’m starting to think that you think me breathing is sexy.”

“It is!” Tony nodded emphatically, then looked at the clock on the wall and yelped. “Gotta get ready for dinner!” He moved toward the bathroom, shedding clothes as he went.

Jethro shook his head and looked around the room. It was spacious and a little more upscale than he was generally comfortable in, but Tony was happy so he wasn’t about to complain. *Doesn’t hurt to enjoy some of the finer things, sometimes.* He walked over to the closet, pulling out the one pair of slacks he’d brought with him, along with a button-down shirt. He hadn’t initially planned to bring anything other than jeans and t-shirts, but then he’d remembered he was visiting Tony, and Tony definitely liked some of the finer things in life.

As a case in point, Tony had sprung for what the hotel called a ‘Superia’ room – 400 square feet with a king-size bed, sitting area and walk in closet. Jethro had immediately protested that they didn’t need so much for one night, earning himself a rare, unprovoked head slap. Tony had immediately followed up with an intense kiss that had Jethro’s attention focused on the bed, but before he could even make the suggestion, Tony was herding him toward the door, saying they needed to get moving.

The surprise Tony had in store turned out to be a trip to the Center for Wooden Boats, where they rented a small, historically constructed wooden sailboat, which Jethro expertly guided around Lake Union for three hours. Tony had asked a ton of questions, and Jethro had a great time teaching him the basics of sailing.

Jethro found the room’s iron and ironing board and set to work getting rid of wrinkles while Tony showered. He was tempted to join him, but he knew Tony wanted to get to the restaurant on time, so he refrained, making a mental note to make sure Tony drank some coffee after dinner.

When Tony emerged, clearly in a state of nervous anticipation, Jethro headed into the bathroom for his own shower, and was back out and getting dressed in less than ten minutes. He slipped his wallet into his back pocket, then grabbed his duffle bag and rooted through it while Tony shifted his feet impatiently. “We need to get going, Jeth!”

“Hold on a sec… here, Tony. I got you something.” He pulled a gaily wrapped box out of his bag and held it out.

Tony’s eyes widened, and he moved forward eagerly. “You got me a present? When?”

Jethro smiled at his lover’s enthusiasm. “Bought it in D.C. Went looking for something special, and thought of you – us, really – when I saw it.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up as he looked at the wrapping. “You went to the Smithsonian?”

Jethro shrugged, ducking his head a bit. “Abby said you like their gift shop.”

Tony smiled. “This is awesome, Jeth.”

Tony looked at Jethro seriously, reaching out to touch his arm. “You bought me a present, Jethro. It’s more than enough.” He set the box down on the table in the sitting area and proceeded to rip the paper off the box. Moments later he removed a small sculpture – it was a miniature version of Rodin’s Thinker, sitting on a spring like a jack-in-the-box, with the words ‘Think Outside The Box’
Jethro watched Tony’s face carefully. “Reminded me of what you said when Vance found out about us and wanted to send you out here.”

Tony nodded, then set the sculpture down on the table and reached out to pull Jethro into a fierce hug. “It’s perfect, Jeth. Thank you.”

Jethro tightened his arms around his lover. “Glad you like it.”

Tony stepped back, glancing down at his present again before exhaling forcefully. “Okay. Much as I want to throw you down on that bed and give you a very thorough demonstration of my appreciation, we need to get going or I’ll never hear the end of it from Monty.”

It was about a ten minute drive to the restaurant; Tony’s friend was waiting at the bar when they got there. Jethro looked Tony’s friend over carefully. Montrell Davis was about an inch taller than Tony, dark-skinned, with tightly curled short hair and a well-trimmed mustache and beard. He clearly kept himself in shape, and was just as clearly happy to see Tony. They greeted each other with some sort of bizarre handshake that almost had Jethro smirking.

Tony gestured toward his partner. “Monty, this is Jethro Gibbs, my partner. Jeth, this is Montrell Davis, fellow Buckeye and all around pain in the ass.”

Montrell shot Tony a look before moving forward to shake Jethro’s hand. “Gotta say, you’re not quite what I expected, Jethro.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “See what I mean? Pain in the ass. PITA.”

Montrell grinned at Tony, then shot Jethro a conspiratorial look. “We could leave him out here, tied to a lamppost like the dog he is, have a nice, quiet dinner.”

“Hey!”

Jethro grinned. “Maybe next time.”

Tony gave him a disgusted look. “Just see if you get lucky tonight.”

Montrell laughed. “Let’s go in. I wouldn’t want to spoil your evening.”

Dinner turned out to be a pleasant surprise; the food was excellent and the conversation interesting. Jethro hadn’t been sure what to expect, meeting one of Tony’s college buddies for the first time, especially given their new relationship, but Montrell turned out to be interesting to talk to, with a dry sense of humor that Jethro could appreciate, and he was obviously a good friend to Tony. He shared some stories from their college days, tales that had all three of them laughing.

As dinner drew to a close and the waiter was clearing the tables, Tony excused himself to hit the restroom and check in with Eddie. As soon as he was gone, Montrell turned to Jethro with a serious expression. “You’re really not what I expected, Jethro.”

Jethro sat back and tilted his head. “Older?”

Montrell snorted. “Let’s try male first. But yeah, older is a bit of a surprise too.” He leaned forward, crossing his forearms on the table in front of him. “I know a lot of time has passed since I last saw Tony, but let’s face it, most guys do their sexual experimenting in college, and Tony never showed any interest in guys back then. So I gotta ask… does your being his boss have anything to do with
Jethro looked at Montrell thoughtfully. “Only in the sense that our working together for almost a
decade, dealing with dangerous situations and having each other’s backs, brought us closer together
than most.” He paused while the waiter returned with their coffee; Jethro had ordered Tony an extra
large mug. Jethro looked down at his own mug for a moment, then back up at Montrell, whose gaze
never wavered. “Tony and I have had a connection since we first met. Somewhere along the line he
became a friend. Then about two months ago more than a friend.” Jethro’s gaze sharpened slightly as
he met Montrell’s eyes. “I’m only telling you this because you obviously care about him. Before
Tony, I never had any interest in men either – and I still don’t. It’s just him.”

Montrell looked skeptical. “Not many people can look past the surface like that.”

Jethro shrugged. “Doesn’t matter if you believe me or not. Tony knows how I feel.”

Montrell nodded. “That is all that matters, really.” He glanced over to where Tony was making his
way back to the table. “Hurt him and I’ll hunt you down. Me and the rest of the frat brothers. We
protect our own.”

Jethro nodded. “So do I.” He saluted Montrell with his coffee. “Semper Fi.”

Montrell grinned at him. “Forgot you were a Marine.”

Tony pulled out his chair and sat back down. “How can you, with that haircut?”

Jethro just raised his eyebrows at Tony, who grinned at him. “Nothing new at the office, Jethro.
Looks like we get the night to ourselves.” He looked down at his coffee. “What’s with the giant
mug?”

Jethro just tilted his head and looked at him impassively. Tony glanced between him and the mug,
then smiled. “Ah. I get it.”

Montrell looked between the two of them. “I don’t.”

Tony took a long sip, then smiled at his friend. “I, ah… fell asleep at an unfortunate moment last
night.”

Montrell shook his head, chuckling. “That’s got to be a first.”

Jethro grinned. “Unfortunately, no.”

“Seriously? Wow. We might have to change your pledge name.”

Tony grimaced. “Hey, it’s been a rough month.”

Montrell smiled, then looked at his watch. “Hate to break up the party, but if I don’t get home to help
Janine get the kid to bed, there’s going to be hell to pay.” He reached for his wallet, and handed
Tony a few bills. “Jethro, it was a pleasure meeting you. T, next time you’re out this way, we’ll get
back out on the court, shoot some hoops.”

Tony smiled. “It’s a deal. Say hi to Janine for me.”

Montrell nodded, looked at Jethro thoughtfully for a moment, then turned back to Tony. “Gotta say,
T, I think maybe I get it.” Tony’s smile turned into a grin and he stood up, pulling his friend into a
quick hug. Jethro stood too and shook Montrell’s hand, and then the two men were left to finish their
coffee.

They went straight back to the hotel, and were walking through the lobby when Tony stopped short with a quiet, “Uh oh.”

Jethro stopped too, looking at him curiously, then following his gaze to the young couple who’d just emerged from one of the hotel’s fancy restaurants. The man was probably in his late twenties, medium height, with short brown hair and a slightly ruddy complexion. The woman with him was around the same age, with long, straight blond hair, wearing a brilliant blue dress and heels that brought her almost to her companion’s height. They were both laughing, their arms around each other, and then the man’s gaze fell on Tony and Jethro.

“Tony!”

Tony smiled. “Hey, Fitzy!” He glanced at Jethro. “Think we’re about to be outed, Jeth,” he said quietly.

Jethro watched the couple approach them. He recognized the young agent as they drew closer; he’d read the files of all the agents Tony was likely to interact with. Ethan Fitzgerald was a promising probationary agent, and he knew that Tony liked him.

Fitzy came to a halt in front of them. “Tony DiNozzo, I’d like you to meet Brooke Haskell… my fiancée.”

Tony’s face lit up. “Seriously?! That’s great news! Congratulations.” He bowed toward Brooke, taking her hand and bestowing a gentle kiss on it before admiring her ring, as she clearly expected him to do. “I take it this change in status happened just now?”

Brooke nodded. “Ethan proposed over desert.” She turned toward her future husband, her eyes dancing. “The ring was on top of the frosting on the cake.”

Jethro smiled as the young couple turned their attention to him. “Congratulations to you both.”

Fitzy glanced between Jethro and Tony. Tony cleared his throat. “Ah, this is Jethro Gibbs. Jethro, Ethan Fitzgerald… Burrows’ probie at the regional office.”

Jethro and Fitzy shook hands, and Fitzy formally introduced him to his new fiancée. “Gibbs… you’re part of Tony’s team.”

Jethro nodded. “That’s right.”

Fitzy glanced back and forth between the two men, then grinned at Jethro. “I see you have blue eyes.”

Tony groaned and dropped his head. Jethro shot him a puzzled glance; Brooke looked even more confused than he was. Fitzy laughed and clapped Tony on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I won’t spill the beans. But Eddie’s gonna be real disappointed when he tries to steal your girl.”

Tony shook his head while Brooke looked between the two men, understanding dawning in her eyes. “We won’t hold you up… we’re headed to my parents’ house to share the news.”

Jethro gave her a warm smile. Her enthusiasm was almost contagious. “It was a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard good things about this young man – congratulations again.”

Fitzy beamed at them both, then set off with Brooke, winking at Tony as he passed by. Jethro raised
his eyebrows at Tony, who gave him a weak smile. “I may have mentioned my ‘girl’s’ beautiful blue
eyes the last time I went out for drinks with Eddie and Fitzy.”

Jethro snorted and tugged on Tony’s arm, pulling him toward the elevator.

**Showing Appreciation**

Tony was quiet on the ride up to their floor. Jethro reached out and squeezed the back of neck, letting go as the elevator doors opened and they stepped out. “You worried he’s going to say something at the office tomorrow?”

Tony shook his head. “No, not really. Fitzy’s a good guy; he said he won’t, so he won’t.” Tony glanced at Jethro as he fished the key card out of his pocket. “Would it bother you if he did?”

Jethro shook his head. “Nah. Could cause a few problems back at the Navy Yard if word spreads, but Vance is the only one we need to worry about, and we’ve pretty much dealt with that.”

Tony nodded, swiped the card, and they entered the room. Jethro moved to the sitting area, sinking into one of the large arm chairs and removing his shoes, while Tony did the same closer to the bed before disappearing into the bathroom. Jethro leaned back, resting his head on the back of the chair and closing his eyes. He listened to the sounds of Tony moving around, of water running, and eventually felt him come close. He opened his eyes to see Tony standing in front of him, naked, looking at him seriously.

“What’s got you so quiet?”

Tony sighed. “Just wishing I was going back east with you tomorrow.”

Jethro nodded, then reached out toward his lover, who took his hand and let himself be pulled close and kissed gently. “Won’t be much longer, right? Close out the bomber case, let Franklin and Vance have your recommendation.”

Tony nodded, his expression brightening as he leaned and rested his forehead on Jethro’s. “Enough angst. Tell me what you want tonight, Jeth. Wanna show you proper appreciation for my present.”

Jethro smiled. “You had enough coffee?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Any more coffee and we won’t have to worry about me falling asleep – we’ll have to worry about being interrupted every few minutes with bathroom breaks.”

Jethro chuckled and tugged on Tony again. “I want whatever you want.”

Tony smiled. “Then go get undressed and meet me at the bed, Marine.”

When Jethro emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, he found Tony already sitting cross-legged on the bed. Jethro joined him and was pulled into a gentle hug, which morphed into something more as Tony began kissing and nipping at his neck. Jethro moved one hand to the back of Tony’s head and began running his fingers through his partner’s hair; Tony murmured quietly in appreciation and moved to Jethro’s mouth, letting his tongue conduct a leisurely exploration. Jethro was content to let Tony set the pace and matched him move for move.

After several minutes of caresses, light touches, and heady kisses, Tony pulled back and pushed Jethro to lie back on the bed. “Let me take care of you, Jeth.”

Jethro looked up into Tony’s eyes and nodded, spreading his arms to rest on the mattress, his hands
lying palms up. Tony sighed and moved to cover Jethro’s body with his own, beginning a long, slow
survey of all the sensitive spots he could find on the older man. He started at Jethro’s ear, whispering
his thanks for his present, for Jethro making the trip out, for Jethro just being himself. From there he
moved down to his lover’s mouth, then his neck, his chest, lingering at each nipple for a time, then to
Jethro’s stomach, where he paused and bit him lightly in a ticklish spot, making Jethro laugh.

That laugh triggered a change in pace and intent, and their love-making became part enticement and
part wrestling match. Jethro didn’t use any super-sneaky Marine moves, as Tony called them, more
interested in seeing what Tony had in store for him than in gaining the upper hand. There was still a
lot of laughing going on, as each man sought out ticklish areas on the other. Finally, Tony pulled
back and met Jethro’s gaze seriously, running his fingers over Jethro’s lips while he reached down
and took his partner’s erection in hand. Jethro sighed and hummed and lay back, once more signaling
his willingness to let Tony stay in the driver’s seat.

Tony went back to his more leisurely exploration, using his fingers more than his mouth this time,
touching everything he could reach with one hand while continuing to slowly pump Jethro’s cock
with the other. It didn’t take long before Jethro was panting and shifting around on the bed,
restraining himself from reaching for Tony to hurry things along. Tony finally took Jethro’s hand and
guided it to his own erection, laying down on his side and closing his eyes while Jethro reciprocated
the arousing strokes and touches Tony continued to give him.

Finally, both men were taken to the edge of their endurance, and Tony motioned for Jethro to turn over, moving between his legs afterward
and lining up to enter him slowly and carefully while Jethro was still on his knees. Tony groaned
deep in his chest as he slid inside, and Jethro sighed and pushed back, taking him in more quickly
than Tony had intended, earning a light slap to one buttock that sent a shiver through him.

Tony held still for a moment, calming himself down as best he could, before guiding Jethro to lie flat
on his stomach, easing himself down with him so he didn’t slip out. He then rested his weight on his
lover, pressing down, running one hand along Jethro’s side and the other over his neck and the back
of his head, murmuring disjointed words of love in his ear.

Jethro stretched beneath him, shifting his hips a little and making Tony moan with pleasure at the
movement. Tony shifted to rest his weight on one hand and the opposite forearm, then began to
slowly thrust in and out of Jethro’s ass, moving carefully until he was balls-deep and Jethro remained
relaxed and open.

Then Tony picked up the pace, shifting angles until he found the one he was looking for, as
indicated by Jethro’s startled cry of pleasure. Tony kept that angle of penetration, gradually speeding
up, moving his hips faster and faster until he was grunting with each hard thrust and Jethro was
almost begging for release. Tony grabbed Jethro’s shoulder and moved them both onto their right
sides, taking a moment to regain his rhythm, matching it with one hand on Jethro’s cock, the other
grasping Jethro’s hair, holding on tightly and pulling his head back. Tony’s mouth descended on
Jethro’s neck, and he bit down lightly, growling as he thrust hard and quick into his lover until
Jethro’s back arched and he came with a shout of Tony’s name. Tony followed him immediately, his
hips continuing to move, slowing until he came to rest, spent and happy.

They lay like that for a while, dozing a bit until Tony came back to himself enough to carefully pull
out and get to his feet, walking slowly into the bathroom to get a damp washcloth and clean them
both off. He tossed the cloth in the general direction of the bathroom before getting under the covers with Jethro, kissing him deeply before they wrapped arms and legs around each other and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Shockwave

Chapter Notes

The resemblance of some aspects of this chapter to the season 9 finale is unintentional and coincidental... and either fortunate or unfortunate, depending on how you look at it!

Leave-Taking

Jethro woke just as the early morning light started to filter in through the curtains. For a moment he had no idea where he was, but then he felt a light touch that started at the back of his neck and moved gently over his shoulder blade, down his back, over his buttocks, along his thighs, then made the return journey, stopping on his neck with a slow massage.

He hummed quietly, then turned to face Tony, who was propped up on one elbow, his hand supporting his head while his eyes roamed slowly over Jethro’s body, finally moving up to his face. Their eyes met, and Jethro reached out to run his fingers along the contours of Tony’s face. Tony smiled, then closed his eyes and continued to touch Jethro, committing the feel of him to memory. Jethro followed suit, and they stayed there, legs twined together, until the call came at around six a.m.

Tony sighed and pulled away from his lover, Jethro’s hand trailing along his back as he moved. The younger man stretched for the phone, glancing back at Jethro and smiling before flipping it open and bringing it to his ear.

“DiNozzo… hey Eddie.”

Jethro watched Tony’s expression grow serious, then sighed as he turned to slide out from under the sheets, moving to grab one of the complimentary robes while Tony asked Eddie some questions. They needed to get up soon anyway; the plan had been to have breakfast at the hotel restaurant before Tony drove Jethro to the airport to catch his ten o’clock flight. Now it looked like Jethro would have to take a cab, judging by the way Tony was getting up and moving toward his duffle.

“Be there soon as I can – traffic should be light this early.” Tony flipped the phone shut and looked over at Jethro apologetically. “Bomber sent an email from an anonymous server about ten minutes ago. Claims four different sites as targets, doesn’t name them… gave us a bunch of riddles. They’re working on it at the office, FBI’s been called in. The bombs are supposedly set to go off at eleven.”

Jethro started to offer to go in with Tony and help, but stopped abruptly as he remembered Vance’s advice to let Tony spread his own wings. He sighed, smiled softly at Tony and reached out to pat him lightly on the back of his head, then turned to go into the bathroom, leaving a confused Tony in his wake.

They showered together, but only to save time. There were a few hurried caresses as they dressed, and Jethro grabbed Tony by the arm as they were about to leave the room, pulling him into a fervent kiss, resting one hand on the back of Tony’s head to hold him in place. Tony reciprocated immediately, pouring as much passion and love into the kiss as he could before pulling back abruptly. “Jeth… damn it, I have to go.”
Jethro nodded. “I know. I’ll get a cab to the airport. You go stop this guy.”

Tony nodded; they grabbed their bags and headed for the lobby.

Tony stood with Jethro while he hailed a cab. There were several parked near the hotel entrance, and it was only seconds before one pulled even with them and Jethro opened the door to toss his bag onto the back seat. He turned toward his partner. “Update me when you can.”

Tony shot him a small smile. “Gonna try to set a record with this one, Jeth. Got a lot of incentive to get home soon.”

Jethro grinned back. “I should hope so.”

Tony reached out to clap him on the shoulder, then turned away to leave. Jethro stepped away from the cab and reached out, grabbing his arm. Tony turned back, and Jethro smiled. “I’m proud of you, Tony.”

Tony stared at Jetho, a shy smile appearing on his face. The smile melted away into a look of resolve, and he stepped close, leaning in and laying a soft kiss on Jethro’s lips. He stepped back quickly. “Talk to you soon, Jethro.” Then he turned and headed for his car, leaving Jethro staring after him, his expression warring between shocked and amused.

The ride to the airport didn’t take long. Gibbs kept himself occupied with breakfast, lots of coffee, and a paperback thriller he picked up at one of the stores there. His flight left on time, and he slept through most of it.

He was surprised to see McGee and Ziva waiting for him as he walked out of the gate. The looks on their faces sent his gut churning. “What are you two doing here?”

They glanced at each other, then back at Gibbs. Ziva stood a bit straighter and answered him. “Four bombs have exploded in Seattle, Gibbs. All naval targets.” She looked at him from under her lashes, and he realized her eyes were devoid of makeup.

“Tony?”

Ziva took a deep breath, then let it out suddenly and pressed her lips together. She looked at McGee, who met her eyes and then turned to look at Gibbs. “We don’t know, not for sure. NCIS agents were at one of the targets. We’ve got conflicting reports… anything from one to all agents killed.”

Gibbs stared at her, unable for a moment to form words. He looked around, and for the first time noticed the small crowds gathered around TV screens tuned to ZNN, showing pictures of fires, flashing lights, and smoking buildings.

“Boss…” McGee hesitantly touched his arm. “Director Vance sent us to pick you up… we’re to get you to MTAC as quickly as possible… he’s trying to find out who, uh…”

“Who’s dead.” Gibbs’ voice was flat and emotionless.

Ziva nodded. “Yes… but, I do not think it will turn out to be Tony. He has proven that he has more lives than a cat.”

Gibbs looked at her. On some level he appreciated her confidence and attempt to reassure him, but on another level he wanted her to just be quiet. “Let’s go.”

They led the way out of the airport and to the car, while Gibbs moved behind them, his attention
mostly on the memory of Tony’s touch that morning.

**Before the Bombs**

Tony forced himself to focus on the case. All he wanted was to be back in that hotel room with Jethro, so it wasn’t easy. Anger about his weekend being cut short, even it was only by a few hours, began to interfere with his focus, so he looked around the room for a distraction.

The mood at the regional office was tense as NCIS and FBI agents worked to decipher the riddles left by the bomber. Everyone was conscious of the minutes ticking away; it was already 9:45 – they had a little over an hour before the bombs were supposed to detonate.

Morris Franklin was conferring with the ranking FBI agent, a woman by the name of Melinda Graves… Tony thought that last name to be particularly ominous, but he hadn’t said as much to anyone, not wanting to add to the tension. Burrows and Taylor were arguing in soft voices about possible locations, while agents on both their teams were on the phone with various police and military officials.

Eddie looked up as Fitzy jogged into the room, returning from whatever errand he’d been running. “Hey, Tony! You hear Fitzy went and got himself engaged last night?”

“No, we ran into him as he and Brooke were leaving the restaurant.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Tony wanted to bang his head against his desk. He shot a panicked look at Fitzy, who winked at him as Eddie’s head whipped toward him.

“Fitzy! You met Tony’s girl and you didn’t tell me? What’s she like?”

Fitzy grinned at Eddie. “She’s pretty amazing, Eddie. Almost as tall as Tony, amazing blue eyes, fantastic hair…”

Eddie sighed. “Think I’ve got a chance?” he asked, sending a devilish grin in Tony’s direction. Tony just sat back and crossed his arms, raising his eyebrows and smirking slightly.

Fitzy shook his head. “The way she was looking at Tony? No way. Shoulda seen the way they moved together… it was like they’ve got some mental communication or something.”

Eddie turned to Tony, about to barrage him with questions, when a shrill whistle pierced the air. They all turned toward Franklin, who stood in the middle of the room with Graves at his side.

“Listen up, people! We think we’ve got the possible locations narrowed down… there are six, so we’re going to divide you all up and send you out immediately. FBI’s taking three, we’re taking three. I’m coming around with your assignments now.”

There was a mad rush as agents gathered their gear and got ready to head out. Tony was going with both Burrows’ and Taylor’s teams – everyone was doubling up so as to cover the most ground at each site as quickly as possible.

The arguing began as soon as they arrived at the suspected bomb target on the naval base in Everett. Taylor began issuing orders as soon as they all got out of the cars. “Building’s been evacuated, and MPs are keeping the area clear. Eddie, you take Julie and sweep the perimeter of the building; Michaela, take Kathy and hit the second floor. Tony and I will sweep the first.”

Burrows’ face twisted into an ugly expression. “Who died and made you leader, Ryan? You don’t get to order my people around.”
Tony stopped walking toward the building and turned back to them, glancing at his watch to see that they had twenty minutes before the bombs were supposed to go off.

Taylor leaned against his car and put one hand on his hip while he smirked at Burrows. “Franklin didn’t appoint anyone specifically. I’ve been a team leader for three years; you’ve been a temporary replacement for a few weeks.”

Burrows crossed her arms over her chest. “My team’s MCRT for this region.”


Tony glanced over at Eddie, who rolled his eyes and shrugged. The others stood around while Burrows and Taylor argued, until Fitzy and Julie exchanged glances and headed toward the front door of the building. Tony caught their movement out of the corner of his eye.

“Hey! Hold up!”

Tony jogged toward them, and saw Fitzy open the door and head inside while Julie headed off to go around the building. He heard Eddie call out to him, and glanced back to see Kathy following while Michaela and Ryan continued to argue. He turned back toward the building and just before he reached the door, there was a bright flash along with overwhelming noise and heat and the feeling of flying, then nothing.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Director’s Office**

Director Vance was standing in front of the desk in his office, watching the ZNN feed when the door flew open with such force that it put a dent in the wall. Gibbs strode in, moving into Vance’s space, clearly ready for a fight. Vance glanced at him, then picked up the remote from the table and turned off the flat screen.

“Gibbs.”

“What the hell, Leon?! Why can’t we get any reliable intel?”

“Jethro…”

Gibbs turned to see Ducky getting up from one of the armchairs in the corner. “Duck – what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you, my dear friend.”

Vance pulled a toothpick out of his jacket pocket and began chewing on it. “I asked Dr. Mallard to be here so he could run interference if necessary.”

Gibbs gritted his teeth. “Damn it, Leon. What’s going on back there?”

Vance sighed, then turned the TV back on, muting the sound. Smoky piles of rubble filled the screen. “It’s chaos, Gibbs. Four explosions, all within about twenty minutes of each other. People are panicking; some idiot news anchor called it the West Coast 9/11, so besides the bombs they’re dealing with hysteria. Car accidents all over the place as people try to leave the city. Phone and internet are overloaded, connections spotty at best. I’ve been trying, but no one knows who’s doing what. Franklin told me where each agent was assigned, but there are multiple injuries at each site, and the hospitals are overloaded with accident victims as well as bombing victims.” He paused and removed the toothpick. “I’m sorry, Gibbs. I know you want to find out what happened to DiNozzo, but all we’ve got at this point is conflicting information.”

Gibbs stared at him, then looked to Ducky, whose expression was a combination of sad and bewildered. “We’ve all been trying to find out where Tony is, Jethro. So far I’ve heard that he was taken alive to an area hospital, that he’s directing clean-up efforts, and that he’s – well.”

They could see the muscles in Gibbs’ jaw clench as he watched the flickering images on the screen. “I need to go back.”

Vance shook his head. “Nothing’s flying into Seattle right now. Not even military. Not until we have some idea what this guy’s next move is. For all we know, he’s only part of a larger organization.”

Gibbs turned toward Vance, slamming his hand down on the table. “Let me get out there and find out!”

Vance’s eyes narrowed, and he straightened a bit, drawing himself up to his full height. “What good do you think you’re going to do if you don’t know what’s happened to DiNozzo? Face it, Gibbs,
your relationship with him makes you the last person who can effectively work this case!"

Gibbs moved forward, only to be stopped by Ducky’s hand on his arm.

“Jethro.”

Gibbs turned to face his friend; Ducky saw the anguish in his eyes and squeezed his arm gently. “I see your pain, dear boy. We all share it, to some extent. And that’s what I want you to remember.” He raised his hand, palm out, as Gibbs opened his mouth to speak. “Jethro. You have a family here who needs you. And as much as you may not wish to admit it, you need them. I cannot tell you how much I hope that young Tony is safe and sound – but if he is not, Abby, and Tim, and Ziva? They would want to be there for you, and they would need you to be there for them. As would I.”

Gibbs stared at Ducky for a moment, then closed his eyes; his shoulders slumped slightly. He took a deep breath, then nodded, sending a questioning look to Vance, who inclined his head. “Your team is continuing to contact all the area hospitals, as well as any NCIS agents in the area who can respond. I’m sure they will work through the night. I’ll have food brought in.”

Gibbs nodded, turning his gaze back on the screen. Ducky and Vance exchanged glances; Ducky reached out again to take Gibbs’ arm. “Come, Jethro – let’s go see Abigail. I’m sure she needs you right now.”

To Abby

They walked down the stairs and toward the bullpen, Gibbs moving slower than usual to keep pace with Ducky. A quick and automatic survey of his remaining team from the landing above showed them all hard at work. McGee was on his feet, typing into two computers while talking on the phone. Segel was arguing on his phone, running his hand through his hair and gritting his teeth as he listened to the person on the other end of the line. Ziva was also on the phone, speaking Hebrew while scrolling through her monitor. Gibbs felt a surge of pride at how hard his team was working, despite their anxiety. It didn’t do much to dispel the empty ache in his gut, but it helped a little.

Ziva met his gaze as he walked past her desk; the corners of her mouth dropped and she shook her head with a little shrug. Gibbs nodded once in acknowledgement. Neither McGee nor Segel looked his way as he passed, both of them completely focused on trying to find answers. Ducky was silent, moving with him into the elevator and pushing the button for the right floor.

Gibbs stared at the doors, conscious of Ducky’s eyes on him, but not sure what he could say. He glanced at his friend, and Ducky reached up to squeeze his shoulder in response. Gibbs sighed, steeling himself a bit as the elevator opened opposite Abby’s lab. He walked in, Ducky following behind, to see Abby sitting at her desk in the inner room. She was hunched over, resting her chin on one hand, while the other moved the computer mouse, clicking at apparently random intervals.

“Abs.”

She looked up, and he was surprised to see her face devoid of makeup.

“She’s going to be alright, Abby.”

She shook her head. “How can you say that, Gibbs?” Then she was up out of her chair and running into his arms, hugging him tightly. He closed his eyes for a moment, and whispered into her ear.

“Because he has to be.”

Abby sniffled quietly, then backed away abruptly. “Why can’t we find out what’s going on?”
Gibbs sighed and reached out to take her hand. “Too much happening at once. Multiple bombs, the city’s in a panic. You know how it goes.”

She nodded vehemently. “Yes! Chaos, that’s the problem, Gibbs! Sending Tony to Seattle, all that did was encourage disorder. Vance probably increased the rate of entropy. Separating you and Tony was just wrong. It messed with the stability of the universe, and now look what’s happened.”

Gibbs gave her a small smile. “Does that mean the universe is expanding faster now?”

Abby’s eyes widened, and her mouth stretched into an involuntary smile. “You do listen to me!”

“Course I do.”

Her smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. “Gibbs… Tony’s got to be okay.”

“McGee will find out something soon. You ever known him to fail?”

“There was that time he sent you on a panty raid.”

“Besides that.”

“Not really. Although I never did understand how he could be a boy scout and not recognize poison ivy.”

“Ah, bet that was Tony’s fault somehow.”

Her smile came back, but it was tremulous at best. “Gibbs…”

“I know, Abby.” He pulled her back into a hug and stood there, glancing around to see that Ducky had disappeared.

Gibbs stayed with Abby for a little while longer, getting her settled down and reenergized to see what she could find out about what was happening out west. He walked out of the lab and hesitated; without an audience, he wasn’t sure what to do next. Sighing, he headed for the men’s room.

He walked in and moved to one of the sinks, standing there and looking into the mirror. Images flooded his mind: Tony in the cabin, standing in the moonlight, Tony on the water in a kayak, laughing at his own ineptitude, Tony on the boat during the whale watch, his expression a mix of delight and awe as he watched the orcas move by.

Gibbs abruptly turned on the water, leaning over to splash his face, then grabbing some paper towel to dry off. He experienced a sudden flashback, remembering the case involving Shannon’s mother a few months back. He’d been in a similar state then, and when Tony had walked in and asked if Gibbs needed anything, Gibbs had said for him to leave.

He swallowed and clenched his jaw, trying to hold the emotions in check. “Need you to stay this time, Tony,” he whispered. “Please… really need you to stay.”

It was Ducky who found him some time later, sitting on the bathroom floor, leaning back against the wall, staring at nothing. It only took a little encouragement to coax him to his feet and get him back to Abby’s lab, where he was convinced to lie down on her futon and try to get some sleep.

**Dream State**

*Gibbs found himself in a beautiful green meadow, surrounded by butterflies moving gracefully from flower to flower. He was vaguely surprised that he wasn’t more surprised… he remembered feeling*
overwhelmed by the possibility of Tony’s death, falling asleep in the lab… and now he was here.

“I’ve missed you, Jethro.”

He turned around, and froze for a moment, staring at Shannon’s smiling face. Then he was moving forward, and so was she, and their arms were around each other and they were both holding on tightly.

Eventually he pulled back, bringing his hands up to frame her face. “Is this real?”

Shannon smiled at him, reaching up to trace his lips with her fingers. “Yes and no.”

He smiled and shook his head. “You always did love to give me riddles.”

“And you loved to solve them.”

He leaned forward and kissed her lips lightly. Then he turned his head to look around the meadow. “Is Kelly here?”

“In a way,” Shannon said, tilting her head to look down at the grass. He followed her gaze and smiled at the fireflies dancing near his feet.

“Why?”

She gazed at him a moment, then took his hand and led him to a bench that he was pretty sure hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“Jethro… I can tell when you feel strongly about something. I know something’s got you shaken up pretty badly. Kelly and I didn’t want to add to that.”

Jethro looked at her. “I miss her, Shan. Miss you.”

“I know. We will be together someday, Jethro… the four of us.”

“Four?”

She smiled. “You’ve forgotten Tony already?” The smile disappeared quickly as the color drained from Jethro’s face. “Jethro? What is it?”

Jethro’s jaw clenched and he swallowed, holding tightly to his emotions. “Is… is Tony here?”

Shannon’s brow furrowed. “Why would… oh, Jethro. Is that why you’ve been so upset?”

Jethro reached out to grab onto her hand, using the other to wipe at his eyes. “There was a bomb… we don’t know if Tony’s alive or dead.”

Shannon’s own eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry, Jethro. I didn’t know.”

“Can you find out?”

She shook her head. “I’m not connected to him as I am to you… not yet. I have less chance than you.”

Jethro shot her a puzzled look. “Yet?”

“I’ll explain… when this is more real than not.”
Jethro nodded, his mind not really on the question. He squeezed her hand. “It’s so good to be with you again… just wish it were for a happier reason.”

“It will be, someday. Not before your time.” She squeezed back. “Jethro… if the worst has happened, we’ll take care of him. Please don’t stop living your life.”

Jethro sighed. “No promises. Only so much loss I can take, Shan.”

“Jethro…” Her voice took on a warning tone, but she looked down at their joined hands, distracted.

He followed suit as he realized that the touch from her hand was fading. “Shannon?” There was a ringing sound; Shannon’s hand started to fade from sight.

“Jethro?”

He could barely see her face; only her eyes were clearly visible. “Shannon!”

“Jethro, it’s your phone.”

He could see her lips moving, but the voice wasn’t hers. She’d almost completely disappeared, and the meadow was fading too – the fireflies were gone.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned toward it.

Your phone, Jethro.”

Gibbs woke abruptly, opening his eyes to see Ducky crouched above him, holding the ringing cell phone, while Abby, Ziva, Segel and McGee hovered in the background. He sat up, shaking his head a bit, still able to smell the grass and feel the sun on his face. He reached out and took the phone, flipping it open, his glance taking in the worried and hopeful faces of his friends.

“Yeah, Gibbs.”

Waking Up

“Tony? Tony, can you hear me? Come on, open those eyes…”

It was a female voice. It took a lot of effort, but Tony managed to open his eyes, blinking against the light. The woman bending over him was blurry, but he could make out red hair. He suddenly remembered the explosion, and drew in a sharp breath.

No… I can’t be dead. Can’t leave him.

“Shannon?” His grimaced as his voice quavered a bit.

“No, sweetie, my name is Clarice. I’m your nurse. You’re in a hospital. I hear you got blown up just a bit. How do you feel?”

Tony blinked, and Clarice came into focus. Her hair was red, but she looked nothing like the picture of Shannon on the wall in Gibbs’ living room. Thank God. “Um… I’m okay, I guess.” He tried to sit up a bit, then groaned and stopped moving. “Or not.”

Clarice smiled at him and patted his hand. “You hit the pavement pretty hard. Your chart says your back is covered with bruises. You’ll be feeling that for a while.” She straightened up a bit and handed him the control for the bed. “Here you go… use this and let the bed move for you. I’ll go get the doctor… might be a while, we’re pretty busy.” She moved the wheeled tray closer to the bed.
“There’s water if you want it. Oh, and there’s a friend waiting to see you… shall I send him in?”

Tony hit the button and the head of the bed began to rise. “Please.”

She patted his hand again and walked out. Eddie walked in moments later, looking disheveled.

“Hey, Tony.”

“Eddie… what happened?”

Eddie sighed and pulled a chair close to the bed, then sat down and looked at Tony. “What do you remember?”

“Everything, I think. Burrows and Taylor arguing, Fitzy heading into the building, Julie going around the side, then the bomb went off.”

Eddie nodded and his gaze dropped to the floor. Tony’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then widened.

“Oh, no. Who?”

Eddie looked up, blinking rapidly. “Fitzy didn’t make it.”

Tony’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. He shook his head, looking around the room, gritting his teeth as he tried to compose himself. He glanced back at Eddie as the other man continued to talk.

“M.E. says it was quick… there was a tripwire just inside the door. He never had a chance to feel anything.”

“Damn it. His fiancée?”

Eddie nodded. “I went to see her. She’s got family in the area; they’re with her now.”

Tony shook his head. “It’s not right. They just got engaged!” His voice rose, and Eddie stood, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“We take that risk every day, you know that.”

Tony’s hand clenched on the bed sheet, then relaxed. “Yeah… I know. Doesn’t make it any easier.”

Eddie shook his head. “No, it doesn’t.” He cleared his throat. “Julie’s here too, in better shape than you. She wasn’t in the direct line of the blast; they’re just keeping her for observation.”

“What about the two idiots?”

Eddie shot him a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “They’re helping with the aftermath… everyone’s searching for the bomber. We haven’t heard anything from him since the bombs went off.”

Tony looked around. “How long was I out?”

“It was what, after 10:30 this morning? A little more than twelve hours. You’re one of the lucky ones, actually… the city’s in chaos, and it’s been really difficult to get information in or out.”

“Why?”

“Three other bombs went off at three different locations. Besides the damage, there’s the hysteria… whole region is convinced it’s the next 9/11.”
Tony’s eyes widened. “Jethro!”

“Who?”

“Damn it, Eddie, where’s my cell?!”

Eddie looked confused. “Broken in the explosion… what’s the matter?”

Tony reached for the phone next to the bed, ignoring the question. “Gotta let him know I’m alive,” Tony muttered. He dialed and waited for a minute… then slammed the receiver down. “Fuck! All circuits are busy,” he mimicked, then looked at Eddie. “Give me your cell.”

Eddie handed it over without comment. Tony punched in the number, then waited with the phone to his ear, biting his lip. “It’s ringing.”

“Yeah, Gibbs.”

“Jethro, it’s me. I’m okay.”

“Tony?”

“Yeah, Jeth, it’s me. Really. I caught the edge of the explosion, but I’m okay. Just woke up a few minutes ago, or I’d have gotten word to you sooner.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then a long sigh. “Tony, that’s the best news I think I’ve heard in a very long time.”

Tony grinned at the relief and the smile he could hear in Jethro’s voice. He could also hear some cheering and happy voices in the background. “Guess everyone’s there, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Jethro… you alright?”

“I am now.”

“Gonna be one hell of a reunion when I get home.”

“Oh yeah. Make it quick, Tone. Need you here.”

“Soon as possible, trust me. Uh, Jeth… Fitzy’s gone.”

“Ah, hell.” There was a short silence. “How’d it go down?”

“I’ll tell you later… long and annoying story. If it were up to me, NCIS would be short a couple of idiots… Jeth? You there?” He heard a clicking noise, then silence. “Dropped call… well, at least I got through.”

He looked over at Eddie, who was looking back at him accusingly. Tony shot him a wide smile. Eddie shook his head as he took his phone back. “I take it your ‘girl’ is named Jethro?” he asked, using air quotes at the appropriate moment.

Tony scratched his head. “I admit that I may have let you draw certain conclusions about some aspects of my relationship.”

Eddie rolled his eyes, then glared at Tony. “If he’s as great as you and Fitzy said…” He cut himself
off abruptly.

Tony sighed. “You ever lost someone in the line of duty like this before?”

Eddie shook his head.

“Want some advice?”

“Please.”

“Don’t shut it down. Enjoy the memories. He deserves that.”

Eddie nodded, then took a deep breath. “Okay. You’re right.” He narrowed his eyes a bit as he met Tony’s gaze. “As I was saying, if Jethro is as great as you and Fitzy said, maybe I’ll make a play for him anyway.”

Tony laughed. “Good luck with that. You into intensely driven, grey-haired Marines?”

Eddie blinked. “Um. I hope you two will be very happy together.”

“We already are. And no offense, but we’ll be a lot happier when I finally get to go home.”

“Gotta get that bomber first.”

“Yeah.”

Eddie held out his hand. “For Ethan.”

Tony reached out and gave Eddie a firm handshake. “For Ethan.”

They talked for a few more minutes, then Eddie decided he’d better get back to the office and see what needed to be done. Tony tried to relax after he left, thinking back over his interactions with Special Agent Ethan Fitzgerald, quietly mourning the loss of a good man and promising young agent.

He eventually grabbed the phone and tried again to reach Jethro through the land line. He got the same annoying, automated voice, so he hung up and switched off the bedside light, lowering the head of the bed a bit and closing his eyes again. “Love you, Jethro,” he murmured, smiling a bit as he let his thoughts roam back over the weekend until he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: For anyone wanting to know a little bit more about the ‘reality’ behind Gibbs’ dream, there’s a chapter in my Missing Scenes from the FIOverse that deals with some things from Shannon’s point of view (written well before this particular story).
Relief

Gibbs flipped his phone shut and closed his eyes, slumping a little where he still sat on the floor. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Ducky smiling down at him. “My heartiest congratulations, Jethro.”

Gibbs’ lips twitched into a small half-smile. “Don’t think I had much to do with it, Duck.”

Ducky’s eyebrows rose. “Don’t sell yourself short, my friend. For all you know, it was your relationship with Tony that helped him to hang on. But that’s not the only reason for offering my felicitations - you have become more open since you and Tony started this relationship.” Ducky turned and looked at the other three, who were talking animatedly, big smiles on all their faces. “You aren’t as cautious about showing your emotions as you were. I do believe young Anthony is very good for you.”

Gibbs just looked contemplatively at Ducky for a moment, then gave him a bright smile. “Gotta agree with you there, Duck.”

Ducky laughed, delighted. McGee came over at that moment, also smiling widely, and held out a hand to give Gibbs some leverage to get up off the floor. As soon as the older man was on his feet, Abby rushed over and almost knocked him back down, wrapping herself around him in an enthusiastic hug. “Gibbs! Tony’s alive!”

“I know, Abs.”

She hopped backwards, bouncing in place a bit. “This calls for a party!”

Ziva looked at her. “It is very late, Abby.”

Abby pursed her lips, then nodded. “Okay. But we’re having a real party when Tony gets home.”

“Oh Agent DiNozzo coming home, Ms. Sciuto?”

They turned to see Director Vance striding into the lab. His jacket and tie were missing, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up past his elbows.

Gibbs stepped forward to meet him. “Got a call from him. He’s in the hospital, just woke up.”

Vance nodded. “Good. Extent of his injuries?”

“Don’t know. Lost the connection.” Gibbs hesitated for a moment, then continued. “He did confirm that Special Agent Ethan Fitzgerald was one of the bombing victims.”

The others shifted uncomfortably at that unexpected news.

Vance shook his head. “Damn. He was a promising agent.”

“Just got engaged the other night.”

Vance grimaced. “Tell DiNozzo to get me her contact information as soon as he can. I’ll talk to Legal, see what we can do for her, if anything.” He looked around the room. “Go home, all of you. Get some rest. I’ll see you all at noon.” He turned and left the lab.
McGee cleared his throat. “Was Agent Fitzgerald a friend of Tony’s?”

Gibbs nodded. “Yeah.” He sighed a little, looking up at the ceiling and then around at his team. “You heard the man… go home. Come in tomorrow ready for anything. Seattle office may need backup.”

There was a chorus of ‘goodnights’ as the lab emptied. Gibbs remained for a moment, thinking back over his dream. He glanced toward the door, hearing the ding of the elevator, then looked around the empty room. “He’s alive, Shannon. Everything’s going to be okay.”

He couldn’t say for sure, but he thought for a moment that he felt her presence. Smiling slightly, he turned out the lights as he walked out of the lab to head home.

**Long Distance Talk**

Gibbs was sitting at his kitchen table the next morning with his second cup of coffee when his home phone rang. “Yeah, Gibbs.”

“**Hey, Jeth. You didn’t answer your cell.**”

“Tony? You alright?”

“**Yeah, actually, I think I am.**”

“You see a doctor?”

“I am in a hospital, Jethro.”

“Funny guy. Consider yourself head-slapped.” Gibbs sat back, sipping at his coffee, and enjoying the sound of Tony’s voice. “So, what’d he say?”

“She said that I’m lucky. Pretty badly bruised all along my back where I hit the ground. Relatively minor concussion, which was probably helped by the fact that my head hit some bushes instead of the pavement and I was unconscious for so long. I’m pretty lucky – if my head had hit the pavement the way the rest of me did, I’d probably be dead.”

Gibbs shifted a bit in his chair as he tried not to think about what could have happened. “So when’re you getting out of there?”

“They wanna keep me at least one more day… Eddie offered to have me stay at his place if they insist on the usual post-concussion protocol.” Tony cleared his throat. “Um… I kinda outed us to him, Jethro.”

“Yeah? How’d that happen?”

“He was here with me at the hospital when I called you last night. Used his cell… Jeth, I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m really not. Needed to let you know I was okay – didn’t really care who heard me.”

Gibbs smiled. “Not a problem, Tony. I’d probably have done the same thing.”

Tony sighed quietly. “**Thanks.**”

“Sure. Anything more from the bomber?”

“**Not that I’ve heard. Eddie texted me, said all our agents are accounted for… Fitzy was the only NCIS casualty. There’s a few others hospitalized, but no one’s in serious condition.**”
“Good to know. Hey, send Vance Fitzy’s fiancee’s info when you get a chance. He wants to see if there’s something we can do for her.”

“That’s awfully nice of him. Sometimes I forget he’s a family man.”

“Heh. Don’t forget about that dinner invitation.”

“Maybe he’ll authorize some more vacation time for us if we try to take him up on that when I get back.”

“Any idea when that will be?”

“Dunno. Depends on what happens with this bomber, not to mention my recommendation for team lead.”

Gibbs sighed. “Flip a coin?”

“Ha. After what happened to Fitzy? Not a chance. If it were up to me, they’d both lose their badges.”

“You’re right… it’s not a joke. Do what you need to do.”

“Thanks.”

They were both quiet for a few moments. Then Tony laughed softly. “There’s so much I want to say, I don’t even know where to start.”

“I think I know what you mean.”

“Think we’d be better at this if one of us was a woman?”

It was Gibbs’ turn to laugh. “Past experience suggests we’d have a twenty-five percent chance.”

“And you say I’m the funny guy. Hey, say hi to Shannon for me, okay?”

“I will, Tony. Watch your six.”

“You too, Jeth.”

The Days After the Bombing

Email from Abby Sciuto to Tony DiNozzo, 1:15 p.m. Eastern Time, three days after the bombing

Subject: You’re alive!

Tony!

Gibbs gave us all an update, said you’re out of the hospital. We were all kind of upset that we didn’t hear from you directly, but Gibbs said you didn’t have a computer in the hospital and that you broke your cell phone when you got blown up, and now you’re super busy trying to catch the bad guy, so we forgive you, although Bert wants a hug when you get back.

Please tell me you’re coming home soon! You’ve been gone way too long… Gibbs needs you, I need you, even McGee and Ziva need you! They say hi and come home soon or else. McGee is threatening to do things to your computer, and Ziva’s playing with paper clips again. Actually, forget I told you that, ‘cause it might be incentive to stay over there. But if nothing else, Gibbs is plenty of
Ducky and Jimmy miss you a lot, and I think Kevin – well, no, he doesn’t know you very well. But Beaker needs you too – he’s been all alone in Gibbs’ house, ‘cause Gibbs is almost always here, trying to do what he can on this end to help you guys out there. He keeps trying to get Vance to let him and the team go to Seattle, but Vance says no every time. I think Gibbs tried to use more vacation days, but Vance wouldn’t approve them. Jerk.

We’re so having a party for you when you get back… I’m calling it the Holding Back the Chaos party, ‘cause when you get back, the universe will be stable again.

Love you!

Abby

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Abby Scuito, 10:28 a.m. Pacific Time, three days after the bombing

On desk duty, crazy busy. Pretend I’m hugging you. Hug Gibbs for me and say hi to everyone! Looking forward to my party!

Love you too,

Tony

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 2:15 p.m. Pacific Time, three days after the bombing

Subject: Back at work

Hey Jeth,

I know I’ve kinda been out of touch the last day or so… didn’t get out of the hospital until this morning, and it’s been work work work ever since. I’m on desk duty – tell Ducky, he’ll be happy. Got a bit of a headache, my back hurts every time I move, but I’m basically alright.

Things are really subdued here, even though it’s a nonstop hunt for the bomber. Fitzy was a good guy, and everyone knew him and liked him. Burrows and Taylor, the two idiots, won’t make eye contact with me – which is really good, ‘cause I still want to drop kick the both of them into the ocean. I think Burrows is starting to get back to normal though; she’s showing signs of impatience again.

Tell everyone I said hi and that I’m okay and should be home soon. Kind of avoiding the whole email and phone thing with them right now. There are some things I don’t really want to talk about yet, you know?

Love you,

Tony

Email from Jethro Gibbs to Tony DiNozzo, 6:10 p.m. Eastern Time, three days after the bombing

Subject: re: Back at work

Hey Tony,

Take care of yourself. You’ll get the guy. Trying to get to Seattle, but Vance is being an ass. Not going to push too hard, don’t want to give him a reason to keep you out there longer.
I do know.

Love you back,

Jethro

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 10:32 a.m. Pacific Time, four days after the bombing

Subject: We got him

It’s over – the bomber turned out to be a former NCIS agent by the name of Max Aronson, who lost his job due to psychological problems. He’d been rejected from both the Marines and the Navy before that, so he’s apparently been holding a grudge for a long time. He sent us a DVD through snail mail – I’ll explain that later – in which he takes responsibility for the bombings and gives this long, rambling explanation that frankly makes no sense. They rushed some dental records and DNA after that, and it turns out he’s one of the bodies from the second bombing site. They’ve got shrinks looking at the DVD to figure out if his death was suicide or accident. Franklin should be updating Vance right about now too.

I’m glad the guy’s gone, but at the same time it’s a bit of a let-down… no one seems to know what to do with themselves around here. Everyone’s been so focused on finding him, and we all wanted revenge for Fitzy – but I guess we won’t get that now. Not just Fitzy, either… death toll from the bombings is up to seventeen people – one agent, three Marines, two Seamen, a Petty Officer, and the rest civilians who were either caught in the bombs or were in car accidents when the area went into a panic. The last one died early this morning.

Fitzy’s funeral is tomorrow. After that I intend to give Franklin my recommendation and head home as soon as possible. Eddie and I are going out tonight to celebrate Fitzy’s memory… I intend to get completely wasted.

Miss you –

Tony

Email from Jethro Gibbs to Tony DiNozzo, 3:05 p.m. Eastern Time, four days after the bombing

Subject: re: We got him

Good.

Vance is going to be at the funeral – I tried to come, but he’s got me here playing paper Pusher while he’s gone.

Come home.

J

P.S. I know what snail mail is, and no, it’s not because McGee told me.

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 6:20 p.m. Pacific Time, four days after the bombing

Subject: re: re: We got him

Vance is coming here? So much for getting wasted. That’s good, though… maybe I can deal with both him and Franklin at once and get home that much sooner.
Tony

*The Funeral, St. Patrick Catholic Church of Seattle, five days after the bombing*

Tony stood quietly at the base of the steps leading into the church, waiting for the rest of the mourners to emerge. He’d spent the funeral in a pew near the back of the church; Fitzy had been a local boy, and the church was full of family and friends. He’d seen Brooke before the ceremony started; she was pale and quiet, but held her head high as she walked to her seat at the front of the church, surrounded by members of both her own and Fitzy’s family.

The ceremony had been long, and had brought back memories he’d have been happier to keep buried. He was glad he’d attended, though – it was nice to hear about Fitzy from people who’d known him outside of work. Eddie had gotten up to say a few words, using a combination of gentle humor and true mourning that had been strangely uplifting. He’d referred to Fitzy as a member of what he called the ‘Seattle Rat Pack’ and to Tony’s surprise and pleasure had included him in that group.

Eddie walked out, along with some of the other members of the office in attendance: Julie Stewart, her arm in a sling, Morris Franklin, looking glum and preoccupied, and Director Vance, who saw Tony and said something to Franklin before moving in Tony’s direction.

Tony straightened up as Vance approached. “Director.”

“DiNozzo.” Vance stopped next to him, turning to watch the crowd still exiting the church. “You going to the burial service?”

“Family only, sir.”

Vance nodded. “Right, I knew that.” He watched as more NCIS personnel walked by, including Burrows and Nichols, with Taylor nearby but not speaking to either of the two women. “Franklin’s office in two hours… I want to get this issue of team lead settled.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vance shot him a look, then took a toothpick out of his jacket and stuck it between his lips. “See you then.” He strode off toward his car, the two agents acting as bodyguards falling into place behind him.

“Hey, Tony!”

Tony turned to see Eddie jogging toward him. “Some of us are heading over to the pub around the corner… wanna join?”

“Thanks, but no… gotta meet with Vance and Franklin soon.”

Eddie grimaced. “Don’t envy you that decision. Neither of those two is a popular choice right now. Already heard from a few people that they’d request a transfer over working on either’s team.”

“I’ve got an idea that should help.”

“Does it include public humiliation in the stocks? ‘Cause that’s what they deserve.”

Tony smiled. “I’ll leave that up to Vance… may drop a hint, though. I think he’d consider it.”

“Nice.” Eddie clapped him on the shoulder. “See you later.”
Tony nodded and went back to watching the mourners. He saw Brooke walking out a few minutes later, and moved forward quickly.

“Brooke?”

She looked up at him, her eyes tired and her face drawn. “Yes?”

“I’m not sure if you remember me… my partner and I ran into you and Fitzy right after you got engaged, outside the restaurant.”

She looked at him, then smiled slightly. “I do remember… Tony, right?”

He smiled. “That’s right.”

An older man stepped closer to her. “Brooke, we need to leave for the cemetery.”

“In a minute… this is Tony, he worked with Ethan. Tony, this is my father, Steven.”

Tony reached out and shook the older man’s hand. “I’m very sorry for your loss, sir. I was hoping to speak to Brooke for a minute, if she doesn’t mind.”

Steven looked at his daughter, who nodded. “It’s alright… I’ll meet you at the car, Dad.”

Tony led Brooke to a bench outside the church and they sat down. She took a deep breath. “You were with Ethan when he died, weren’t you?”

Tony nodded. “I was there.”

“Did he… did he say anything before…?”

“I’m sorry… he was ahead of me, moving into the building. I don’t think he had time to say anything.”

She dropped her head, and a tear made its way down her face. “Oh. I was hoping…”

“You thought I had a message for you from him?”

She nodded.

“I guess I do, in a way… listen, this is going to sound crazy, but… I can promise you that he’s in a really good place, and he’s thinking of you – watching over you, even.”

Brooke raised her head and looked at him seriously. “How can you be sure?”

Tony took a deep breath. “I’ve had… experiences, I guess you could say. Someone really close to someone who means a lot to me… I’m sorry, I’m not explaining this very clearly.”

“Someone close to your partner?”

Tony nodded. Brooke sat there for a moment. “You think Ethan’s happy?”

“Yes. I really do. Not happy because he’s away from you, but he’s still… him.”

Her brow furrowed as she considered that. “Why are you telling me this?”

Tony sighed. “Because I’ve seen what grief can do… look, Jethro walled himself away from people for a long time. He tried, but he wouldn’t let go enough to let it work with someone else.” He gently
took her hand, noticing that she was wearing her engagement ring. “I know I met you for all of a few minutes, but Fitzy, uh, Ethan was a great guy, and I know he was crazy about you. Don’t make the same mistake Jethro did, and if it helps to know that Ethan really is in a good place, and to remember that you can make him happy by being happy, then it’s worth it for me to come across as an interfering crazy person.”

That got a small smile from her, and she leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. “Thank you. I don’t know yet, but maybe that will help. And for what it’s worth, I don’t really think you’re crazy. Ethan said you were a good man, and I think he was right.” She looked over to where her father was standing next to his car in the parking lot. “I should go.” They both stood. “Thanks, Tony.” She smiled again, then got up and headed toward the car. Tony couldn’t be sure, but he thought maybe her steps were a little bit lighter.

The Decision

Tony walked into Morris Franklin’s office to find the SAC at his desk and Vance sitting in one of the armchairs on the other side. Tony nodded to both men, then slid into the remaining chair. Franklin glanced at Vance, who waved his hand toward him and settled back to look at Tony.

“So, Agent DiNozzo,” Franklin began, “we’d like to hear your recommendation for the new lead for the MCRT here in Seattle – Burrows, or Taylor?”

Tony looked from Franklin to Vance and back. “Neither.”

Vance sat forward slightly. “Reasons?”

Tony straightened his back a bit and tugged on the sleeve of his Armani jacket. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Are you saying they caused Agent Fitzgerald’s death?”

Tony shook his head slowly. “No, Aronson did that. But they might have prevented it, if they hadn’t been so absorbed in their own little egotistical war.” He went into detail about what he’d seen before the bomb went off. “Either of them might have thought to look for a tripwire.”

Vance pulled a toothpick out of his jacket pocket. “Shouldn’t Agent Fitzgerald have waited for them?”

“Yes, he should. But he was given no direction, and he was aware of the time crunch – we had maybe twenty minutes before the bombs were set to go off, assuming Aronson was being truthful in his email.”

Franklin sighed and sat back. “One mistake doesn’t necessarily make them both ineligible for the position.”

“One mistake that may have cost an agent his life. But it’s not just that. You know that Burrows and Taylor have been acting like spoiled children, arguing in the office, trying to show each other up. You spoke to them on at least one occasion.”

Vance tilted his head. “Go on.”

Tony wanted to growl in frustration, but he held back. “Burrows drives her team hard, but doesn’t make up for it by teaching her agents what they need to know. She puts her own performance ahead of the rest of her team’s well-being. Taylor’s lazy; he pushes his paperwork off on his team members. In my professional opinion, neither of them is ready or qualified to lead the MCRT.”
Vance and Franklin looked at each other, and then Vance turned back to Tony. “Just so happens we agree with you, DiNozzo. We’d both like to offer you the position.”

Tony shook his head. “No. I told you before, Director, I’m happy in D.C., and I want my shot at the MCRT there someday.” He glanced at Franklin. “No offense, but I intend to be on a plane tomorrow morning.”

Vance shook his head. “DiNozzo, you’ve turned down a team lead once already. You really think you’re doing your career any good –“

“If you’d rather have my resignation, Director, I can have that typed up and ready to go within a few minutes.”

Vance sighed, while Franklin stared at Tony, clearly not expecting that response. “Agent DiNozzo,” Vance said, sounding tired, “I’m not stupid enough to shoot myself or NCIS in the foot. I don’t want your resignation; your position as co-leader of the MCRT in D.C. is secure.”

Tony nodded at Vance, then shot Franklin a small smile. “I have personal reasons for wanting to stay in D.C., Morris… nothing to do with you or this office. If you take away Burrows and Taylor, you’ve got good people here.” He hesitated, then narrowed his eyes and continued. “However… you should have been more professional about submitting your recommendation to Director Vance, instead of passing the buck, and Director,” Tony turned toward Vance, “you shouldn’t have given in to your own issues with me and used this as an opportunity to get me out of D.C.” Tony then looked straight ahead. “If everyone had done their jobs the way they were supposed to, Fitzy and Brooke might be planning their wedding right now.”

Franklin shifted uncomfortably, looking at Vance again, who gave nothing away as he stared at Tony. “It’s our loss that you don’t want to stay, Tony.”

Tony shook his head. “No, Fitzy’s death was your loss. You’ve got an excellent candidate here in the office, anyway… Edward Wright.”

Vance chewed on his toothpick while Franklin looked puzzled. “He didn’t apply for the position,” the SAC said.

Tony shrugged. “I never applied for Rota all those years ago, but Director Shepherd offered it to me anyway.”

Vance considered that. “Bring in Wright’s file,” he suggested. Franklin made a call, and the file was on his desk within a few minutes. Both men went through it quickly while Tony waited, and then Vance looked up at him. “Why?”

“He’s observant and has good people skills. He’s got a good work ethic; he stayed focused on the job and out of the turf war Burrows and Taylor were conducting. From what I can tell, he’s been doing a good part of Taylor’s job already anyway. He teaches his probie and supports the agents he works with, both on and off his team.”

Vance paged through the file again, then looked at Franklin with one eyebrow raised. Franklin nodded, then called his assistant and asked that Agents Wright, Burrows and Taylor come to his office. Tony got up from his chair and moved to the window, deciding to separate himself from the upcoming conversation. Vance closed Eddie’s file and stood as well, tossing his toothpick into the trash and talking to Franklin in a low voice.

A few minutes later, the door opened and the three agents walked in, lining up in front of Franklin’s
Vance cleared his throat. “Special Agent Wright… you are temporarily promoted to Supervisory Special Agent of the Seattle MCRT, with the expectation that the promotion will become permanent if you perform well in the field.”

Eddie’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “Uh… thank you, Director.”

Vance inclined his head, glancing at Franklin, who held out his hand to shake Eddie’s. “We’ll be doing some restructuring… give me a list of agents you think are qualified for the new MCRT and we’ll move from there.”

Eddie nodded and glanced at Vance, who also shook his hand, then turned to look at the other two agents, his face taking on a stern expression. Burrows was red-faced and angry; Taylor was chewing the inside of his cheek and nodding to himself.

“Agents Burrows and Taylor… you are both on administrative leave while we review your conduct over the past several weeks, particularly your roles in Agent Fitzgerald’s death. Should we decide in favor of you remaining with this agency, we’ll determine the right fit.” Vance stared at them for a moment, then tilted his head toward the door, glancing at it and then back at them. All three agents left without a word, shutting the door behind them.

Franklin shook his head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say neither of them care all that much about what happened to Fitzgerald.” He looked at Vance. “Probably best they both get reassigned away from this office.”

“If they’re still agents after the review, they will be.”

Tony stood silently, watching and listening. Vance turned to him. “You’re free to go, DiNozzo. I’ll see you back at the Navy Yard day after tomorrow.”

Tony nodded, moved forward to shake Franklin’s hand and say his goodbyes, then headed out of the room and over to the desk he’d been using.

Michaela Burrows stopped him partway there, grabbing his arm. “I can’t believe you sabotaged me with the Director,” she hissed.

Tony twisted his arm out of her grasp and stepped into her personal space, glaring at her. “You did it to yourself when you let your probie walk into a building rigged to explode. Get over yourself and learn from this before you get someone else killed.” He continued on to his desk; he’d never once hit a woman outside the line of duty, but he was sorely tempted now.

Ryan Taylor was packing up his personal belongings. He looked over at Tony and gave him a rueful smile. “For what it’s worth,” he said, nodding in the direction of Eddie’s desk, where the new team lead was being congratulated by a number of people, “you made a good choice there.”

“I know.”

Taylor nodded to him and left, followed not long after by Burrows, who was clearly still furious. Tony sat down at his desk and watched for a moment as Eddie talked with several agents from other teams, then smiled as he refocused on his computer and started the process of booking his flight home. About half an hour later, Eddie approached him.

“Tony… thanks.”
Tony grinned and grasped the outstretched hand. “It’s well-deserved. You should have applied in the first place.”

Eddie shrugged. “Didn’t think I’d earned it yet.”

“That’s why you’re going to succeed.”

Eddie stepped back and moved to his desk to grab his pack. “Wanna grab some dinner? You can tell me all about your Jethro.”

“You mean Gibbs?”

Eddie stopped and stared at Tony. “Jethro is Special Agent Gibbs? Seriously? The guy’s a freaking NCIS legend!”

Tony grinned. “That’s him.”

“Holy crap. You have any idea what the guy’s reputation is?”

“I’ve only worked for him for about nine years… so, yeah, I have a clue.”

“You must be a very brave man.”

Tony laughed and clapped Eddie on the shoulder. “Come on… I hear a burger calling my name.” They moved toward the door. “So, which member of the Rat Pack am I, anyway?”

Eddie stared at him, then shook his head and hurried to catch up. “I was thinking sort of a combination between Lawford and Bishop.”

“Really? Not Martin? ‘Cause I kind of see myself as sort of Martin-esque… you could be Sinatra – can you sing?”

*Text from Kevin Segel to Julie Stewart, 11:30 a.m. Eastern Time, six days after the bombing*

Reassigned to Seattle office MCRT, moving out there next week.

*Text from Tony DiNozzo to Jethro Gibbs, 7 a.m. Pacific Time, six days after the bombing*

10 a.m. flight to DC. I’m coming home.
Tony unbuckled his seat belt and stood as soon as the plane’s captain came over the PA to wish everyone a good evening. He waited to get into the aisle, resisting the impulse to drum his hands on the seat in front of him; it had been a very long week, and all he wanted was to see Jethro now.

An elderly woman stopped at the seat behind him and smiled, motioning for him to go ahead. Her friend peered around from behind, also smiling, and giving him a quick once-over. He grinned and winked at them. “Thank you, ladies!” He scooted out from his seat, and, remembering that he was wearing tight jeans and a snugly fitting t-shirt, he wiggled his rear just a bit. Sure enough, he heard the two women giggle excitedly. Looking over his shoulder, he flashed them a smile, and heard one of them whisper in a strong Southern accent, “Mercy me, Millie! Did you see that?”

He nodded to the flight attendant on his way out of the plane, then walked quickly to the gate, his heart rate increasing a bit as he looked for his partner.

It only took a few seconds to spot him, leaning against a pillar on the opposite side of the concourse, in almost the exact pose Tony had taken just over a week ago when their roles had been reversed in Seattle. Jethro was also in jeans and a t-shirt, better-fitting ones than usual that Tony had gotten him while he was recovering from his ordeal with the rental car killer.

Tony walked quickly over to his lover while Jethro pushed off from the wall; his bag fell to the floor and he enveloped Jethro in a fierce hug, squeezing his eyes shut and burying his face in Jethro’s neck as he felt the other man’s arms come around him and return the hug just as fervently.

They stood there like that for a moment, oblivious to anyone else, when Tony heard one of the women from the plane.

“Well, isn’t that the sweetest thing! Millie, look how close that boy is to his father!”

Jethro chuckled into Tony’s shoulder.

“I don’t know, Gertie...” Millie sounded suspicious. “I think they’re one of them.”

Tony pulled back slightly, enough to peer around Jethro while still holding onto him, to see Mille and Gertie, the former watching them with narrowed eyes while the latter looked shocked.

“No! In public?!”

Tony buried his face back in Jethro’s neck, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. He could feel Jethro grinning now against his neck, and pulled back after a moment, whispering in Jethro’s ear. “Let’s go home, Dad.”

He danced backwards and ducked, but wasn’t fast enough to avoid the head slap.

“I’m sorry, Gertie, you were right after all. They must be father and son.”

Tony bent down to grab his backpack and set off, grinning again at the two women, who were still watching them. As Jethro caught up and drew even with him, he reached out and took Tony’s hand, interlacing their fingers.
“Lord Almighty,” they heard from behind them, “now I’m just confused.”

Neither Jethro nor Tony spoke as they reached baggage claim with their hands still clasped. A tired businessman stopped close to them, his expression changing to a glare as he spotted their joined hands. He looked up to see Jethro glaring back, and turned away, moving off several yards with a look of disgust on his face.

Tony squeezed Jethro’s hand tightly. “Way to go with the PDA, Jeth.” At the older man’s confused expression, he added, “Public display of affection.”

Jethro shrugged slightly. “I thought you were dead.”

Tony blinked, then moved to stand in front of him. “I’m sorry, Jeth. I’d have been in touch sooner, if I could.” He reached up to caress Jethro’s face.

Jethro reached up with his own free hand and gripped Tony’s upper arm. “I know you would have.”

The businessman cleared his throat loudly and muttered under his breath. Tony caught the words ‘fags’ and ‘disgrace’ and he rolled his eyes, letting his head fall back as he stared up at the ceiling. Then he sighed, looking over at the guy. “Lemme go for a sec, Jeth.”

“Tony…”

“Just going to have some fun, promise.” He winked at Jethro, then walked over to the businessman, who looked at him warily and stepped back. Tony pulled his badge out of his pocket and flashed it surreptitiously, looking around in a furtive manner. When he drew close to the man, who now looked confused, he spoke in a low voice. “Federal agents, working undercover. Can we count on your discretion?”

“Uh, of course… I mean –“

Tony cut him off. “Good. Your name?”

“Um, James Fenton.”

“Ok, Jimmy-boy – you don’t mind if I call you that, do you? Good. All right, so… my boss and I are working a sting – we’re posing as a gay couple to throw our target off the scent. Who’s going to think two gay guys are feds, right? Of course I’m right, I’m a Special Agent. So here’s the deal. We have to get into position by the taxi stand, but we need a look out. You up for the job?”

Fenton’s eyes widened comically. “Yes, yes, of course!”

“Good. Knew we could count on you. Could tell by the clothes. Okay, so here’s what you do. Our target is a man with a wooden leg… I know, it sounds crazy, but who’s going to think an international arms dealer would have a wooden leg? Only a Special Agent… and now you, my friend. You’re part of an elite group. You with me, Jimmy-boy?” Fenton nodded, speechless. “So here’s the deal. You wait here, and when you see the guy with the wooden leg, you go up to him and you say, ‘The mouse devoured the hawk.’ Repeat it back.”

“The mouse devoured the hawk?” Fenton said, in an awed voice.

“Excellent. That’s the signal meaning the coast is clear. As soon as you’ve said it, head to the nearest men’s room and stay there for twenty minutes. After that, go home and tell no one. We’ll be in touch.”
Tony held his finger up to his nose, tapping it and nodding significantly. Fenton hurried to do the same thing. Tony nodded again and did an about face with almost military precision, walking back to stand next to Jethro and throwing an arm around his shoulders.

Jethro stared at him, then leaned back a little to peer at Fenton, who nodded and gave him a thumbs up. He straightened up and looked back at Tony. “What’d you say to him?”

Tony grinned. “Messed with his head. I’ll tell you when we get out of here… ah, there it is.” He grabbed his suitcase and the two of them set off for the exit. Tony took a moment to look back at Fenton, who was ignoring the baggage passing by, bending down to look at people’s legs. That gave him a fit of the giggles, which made it hard to explain as they walked out of the airport. By the time he finished, they’d reached the car and Jethro was laughing as he put Tony’s suitcase in the trunk.

“How long do you think he’ll wait for the guy with the wooden leg?”

Tony grinned. “At least an hour, probably more.”

Jethro thought about that. “Good. Airport security will question him for loitering.” He looked sideways at his partner as they got in the car. “You didn’t identify which agency, did you?”

Tony smiled. “Nope.”

“Good job, Tony.”

**Home**

The ride to Gibbs’ house from the airport was quiet. Tony’s initial euphoria at being back home was fading fast; all he could think of was that his life was getting back to normal, while Fitzy and Brooke would never have the future they’d hoped for.

“You okay, Tony?” Jethro reached out and gently squeezed Tony’s shoulder before bringing his hand back to the steering wheel as he turned onto his street.

Tony sighed. “Yes and no. I am ‘cause I’m finally home, and I’m not ‘cause I keep thinking about Fitzy and his fiancée.”

Jethro nodded. “Yeah, I know. Stuff like that doesn’t leave you alone.”

“Reason for rule 10?”

Jethro shook his head. “Fitzy was a fellow agent and a friend. That’s different from caring too much about the victims or the suspects.”

“I guess.” Tony drummed his fingers on his thigh. “I just… I can’t help but feel that it’s my fault. If I’d stuck with him instead of being distracted by Burrows and Taylor…”

Jethro sighed as he turned into his driveway and parked the car. He switched off the engine and undid his seatbelt, then turned to face Tony. “I should have stayed to help.”

Tony shook his head as he got out of his own seatbelt and mirrored Jethro’s position. “No, Jeth. If you had… tell me something. If you’d stayed, where would you have been?”

Jethro thought about it. “Probably up front, ignoring the bickering.”

“Exactly. And if we hadn’t seen the tripwire, just like Fitzy didn’t? You’d be dead. Maybe we both would be.”
Jethro thought about that. “Guess we owe the Director a thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Some advice Vance gave me, a while back. Said to let you spread your wings, give you space… professionally, of course.”

“Vance gave you advice?”

“Yeah.” Jethro reached up to scratch his head. “Weird, huh?”

“You said it.” Tony stretched, then looked at the house. “You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

They both got out of the car; Jethro popped the trunk, Tony grabbed his bags, and they headed inside.

As soon as Jethro locked the door behind him, he was pulled into another hug. “God, I missed you,” Tony murmured.

“Me too.”

Tony sighed loudly. “Think we could skip dinner?”

“Well…” Jethro was cut off by the sound of Tony’s stomach growling loudly. “Guess not.”

Tony grinned and pulled back, kissing Jethro on the tip of his nose before heading into the kitchen. Jethro watched him go, shaking his head. A moment later, Tony poked his head around the corner. “What the hell have you been eating? There’s nothing here.”

Jethro joined him, watching as Tony peered into empty cabinets. “Haven’t been home much.”

“Why not?”

“Been at work, mostly.” Jethro cleared his throat. “And when I wasn’t at work, I was staying at your place.”

Tony popped his head out of the empty refrigerator. “My place?”

“Yeah… needed to feel closer to you.”

Tony smiled, a gentle one that reached his eyes. “I’m a lucky guy, Jethro.”

Jethro shrugged, feeling his ears start to turn red. “Wanna order pizza?”

“Sure. But I’m going to want some ice cream, and there’s nothing in your freezer. How do you live?”

Jethro shrugged. “Ice cream can wait until tomorrow.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You’re out of coffee too.”

Jethro fished his keys out of his pocket and headed for the door. “Coffee and ice cream, coming up. Order the pizza, will ya?”

Tony grinned as the door closed behind his lover. He called the restaurant, ordering both his and
Jethro’s favorites, then grabbed his bags and brought them upstairs. He laughed as he saw Beaker sitting in the chair, listing a little to one side. “I see Jethro’s been practicing his head slaps.” He dumped the bags next to the dresser, then walked over to the pictures of the two of them hanging on the wall. They were the ones from the team dinner not long after he and Jethro had gotten together. He looked at them for a moment, smiling softly, then his brow creased a bit as he looked around the room. Moments later, he was heading for the basement.

He switched on the light as he walked down the stairs, breathing in the scent of the sawdust and feeling his spirits start to rise back up. Moving over to the worktable, he saw the pieces of the cabinet that Jethro was making for him; it didn’t look like much progress had been made. He reached out to run his fingers over one of the sanded edges and smiled again, glad that he and Jethro would be able to continue working on it together. Then he let his hand drop to his side and looked around the room. “Shannon?”

He waited a few minutes, then tried again. “Shannon? You around?”

Tony! I’m glad to see that you weren’t seriously hurt.

“Yeah… you knew about the bombing?”

Jethro and I talked about it a bit, before he knew you were okay.

Tony grimaced. “Guess he was really upset.”

He was very worried about you. He asked me if you were here, on this side - with us.

“He did? Wow.” Tony bit his lip, troubled by how stressed Jethro must have been.

It’s alright, Tony. In a way, it was a good thing – his emotions were so strong, he actually bridged the gap between our different sides.

“Um… okay.”

Shannon laughed. That means he was here, briefly… sort of.

The color drained from Tony’s face. “Jethro died?!?”

NO, Tony! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way… sometimes people can reach us in their dreams. We… we got to see each other, hold each other, just for a moment. It was the first time… Shannon’s voice trailed off, and Tony’s heart ached for her.

“Shannon… I’m sorry.”

For what?

Tony let out a humorless laugh. “I’m not even sure. For keeping him here, away from you?”

Don’t even be so ridiculous. I’ll tell Jethro to give you the hardest head slap ever.

“It’s got to be strange, talking to your husband’s lover.”

I suppose so, if I think about it. But, don’t you see, Jethro’s happy. I’ve always wanted that, more than anything. He hasn’t been, not really, not with any of those other women.

“So you’re really okay with our relationship? It doesn’t bother you?”
No, it doesn’t. Jethro deserves to be happy, and I’m thrilled he’s found another soul mate.

“Yeah?” Tony couldn’t quite help the smile that spread over his face when Shannon called him that.
“Hey, if you’re his soul mate, and I’m his soul mate, what does that make you and me?”


“Hey! You didn’t answer the question!”

“What question?”

Tony looked up to see Jethro peering down at him from the top of the stairs. “Nothing, Jeth.”

“You call for the pizza?”

“Of course. Should be here soon. What flavor ice cream did you get?”

Jethro shot Tony an amused look as he joined him at the top of the stairs. “Coffee.”

“Of course.” Tony grinned at him. “You’re so predictable.”

Jethro grunted and led the way into the kitchen, where Tony helped him unpack the beer and the few other groceries he’d picked up. By the time they were done, the pizza arrived.

They settled on the couch, the pizza and beer sitting on the table in front of them. “So,” Tony asked, after swallowing his first gigantic mouthful of pizza, “what’s on the agenda for tomorrow?”

Jethro chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. “Gotta go see Vance at some point.”

“Work?! But tomorrow’s Sunday and we’re not on call!”

Jethro just raised his eyebrows and took another bite.

Tony sighed and had some beer. “Wonder if he’s going to try to reassign me.”

Jethro swallowed and stared at him. “Why the hell would he do that?”

Tony shrugged. “I dunno… doesn’t seem like he thinks of me as a real team leader here. He made a bunch of comments when we had our meeting yesterday.”

“Like what?”

“Just said not taking the team lead out there wasn’t the best move for my career… stuff like that. Of course, then he said my position here is secure… why can’t we have a director who speaks plainly?”

“We did… Morrow.”

“Let’s get him back.”

Jethro laughed. “Eat your pizza.”

Private Reunion

Tony flipped channels on the TV while Jethro cleaned up in the kitchen. The younger man had offered to help, but Jethro had told him to stay put and relax, so Tony did. He tuned in to Turner Classic Movies and tossed the remote on the coffee table, settling in to watch.
Jethro returned a few minutes later, settling in next to Tony after switching off the overhead light and the table lamp. “What are we watching?”


Jethro grinned. “You’re gonna use that on McGee, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

They watched the movie in silence for a while, Tony snuggled into Jethro and Jethro with his arm around Tony, running his fingers though his hair. The movie paused for commercials, and Tony sat up a little, turning to look at Jethro. “Can I just say how much I love this?”

“The movie?”

Tony waved his arm around the room. “No, silly. All of this. You, me, just relaxing after we haven’t seen each other for a week and you thought I was dead. I actually love that we weren’t ripping each other’s clothes off as soon as we got in the door.”

Jethro’s eyebrows climbed into his hair. “You don’t want to have sex?”

Tony reached out and smacked him on the head. Jethro grinned. “Don’t even go there. Of course I want to have sex – I’m predictable too. It’s just… it’s not just about that. There’s no pressure… the passion’s there, and don’t get me wrong, it’s fantastic – but we can be together like this too. We just fit, you know? It’s easy.”

Smiling, Jethro pulled Tony back down into a loose embrace. “Yeah, I know. This is the way it’s supposed to be.”

Tony was silent for a few minutes, then spoke quietly. “I never had this before, Jeth. Ever.”

Jethro just tightened his arm around Tony and dropped a gentle kiss on his hair. He watched the movie with Tony until it ended; when the next movie started up, Tony gave him a brief synopsis and shifted around a bit until they ended up with Jethro’s back against the arm of the couch, his legs on either side of Tony, holding him loosely in his arms. Tony was stretched out on the couch with one lower leg resting on the other arm, the other leg propped up against the back of the couch, and his head resting against Jethro’s chest.

About ten minutes into the second movie, Jethro let go of Tony, resting one hand flat on his lover’s stomach while the other moved to lightly run the tips of his fingers up and down Tony’s arm. He watched goose bumps form in their wake, and rested his head against Tony’s when the younger man sighed and snuggled back against him.

A few minutes later, Jethro gently tugged on Tony’s t-shirt, taking it out of his jeans, then moving his hand underneath to rest again on Tony’s stomach. Tony hummed and dropped his own hand to Jethro’s leg, stroking it through the denim. Jethro dipped his head and kissed the side of Tony’s neck; Tony tilted his head away from the TV, giving Jethro more room. The hand on Tony’s stomach started tracing small circles on his skin, and he continued the light caresses on Tony’s arm, gently nibbling on his neck. Tony sighed again, then shifted as if to turn over, but Jethro put more pressure Tony’s abdomen to stop him from moving.

“Don’t. Let me take care of you tonight.”
Tony immediately stretched and relaxed, sinking back into Jethro and becoming relatively boneless.

“That’s my boy.”

Jethro kept up the stroking and kissing, rubbing his face against Tony’s hair every now and then. Tony lay with his eyes closed, no longer paying any attention to the movie, giving himself up to whatever Jethro wanted to do.

After a while, Jethro moved his hand out from under Tony’s shirt, bringing it up to Tony’s hair, burying his fingers there and getting Tony to tilt his head enough for Jethro to kiss and lick his lips. Tony groaned a bit at the feel of Jethro’s lips on his, pushing back against him and feeling Jethro’s growing erection against his lower back. Jethro hummed a bit as he felt Tony press against him, then moved his hand from Tony’s arm to his waist, tugging on his belt until he managed to get it undone. Tony moved to help; Jethro gently took hold of his hand and put it back on his own leg. “Let me.”

Tony nodded, his breathing speeding up a bit as Jethro unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, loosening the denim before sliding his hand inside and gently stroking Tony’s cock. “Jethro,” he breathed, gasping a little as Jethro’s hand squeezed him lightly.

“Mine, Tony. You’re mine.”

“Yours,” Tony sighed.

Jethro growled low in his throat and gripped Tony’s hair a bit harder, pulling his head back while he gathered moisture from the tip of Tony’s cock onto his palm, then started to stroke him in earnest. Tony cried out a bit at the sudden simulation, his hips jerking as Jethro pulled his head further back and growled into his ear. “Gonna make you come fast, Tony… then I’m gonna take you upstairs and make love to you, make you come again…” Jethro moved his legs across Tony’s thighs, holding them down and stopping Tony’s hip motion, making the younger man gasp and writhe a bit in his arms. Jethro moved his hand over Tony’s cock even faster, forcing him to turn his head for another kiss, locking their lips together and invading Tony’s mouth with his tongue. He could feel Tony’s grip on his legs, feel his lover tensing up, and he pulled back suddenly. “Come on, DiNozzo!”

“Boss!” Tony half-screamed, half-gasped, then came hard into Jethro’s hand.

Jethro immediately softened his grip on Tony’s cock, holding it loosely, while the hand gripping Tony’s hair let go and began stroking him gently. Tony’s head dropped back against Jethro’s shoulder, breathing hard but smiling.

Once Tony calmed down, Jethro removed his hand from Tony’s groin, wiping it off on his lover’s shirt. Tony laughed a bit at that, then turned his head to look up at Jethro. “That was a first, calling me DiNozzo like that.”

Jethro ducked his head and gave Tony a sheepish smile. “Felt all possessive, I guess. It just came out like that.”

Tony grinned. “Obviously I liked it… like you all caveman.”

Jethro’s arms tightened around his lover. “It’s just… I thought you were dead, Tony.” His voice caught a bit at the word, and Tony pulled out of his grasp to sit up and face him.

“I get it, Jethro. I do. I’d probably have reacted in a similar way if I’d gotten you back from psycho car killer in one piece.” He pulled Jethro in to a hug, and the two men held onto each other tightly. Once Jethro relaxed, Tony nudged him with his shoulder. “You said something about taking me upstairs and doing that again…”
Jethro chuckled and reached for the remote, switching off the TV and leaving the room with only the light coming in through the curtains. They got to their feet; Tony gasped a bit when he stood up too quickly, and Jethro was immediately at his side. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not at all, Jeth… forgot about my back still being sore, that’s all.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t –“

“Of course we should. I’ll take some of your grunt candy first, that’s all.” Tony took Jethro’s hand and tugged him toward the stairs.

Jethro started removing his clothes as soon as he made it into the bedroom. Tony detoured into the bathroom down the hall, downing three ibuprofen pills before joining his lover. With Jethro’s help, he was naked in record time; he lay back on the bed while Jethro went to the nightstand, taking out the lube and slicking his cock quickly before putting more on his fingers and then crawling onto the bed and kneeling between Tony’s legs.

Tony accommodated him by spreading his legs wide. “Dispensing with the foreplay?”

Jethro grinned. “What was all that on the couch?” He reached down to rub the gel over Tony’s anus, inserting a finger quickly yet carefully. “Want to be in you, Tony. Need the connection.”

Tony nodded, reaching for Jethro’s groin and fondling his balls, getting a gasp and a groan of pleasure out of the older man. “I get it, Jeth.”

They fell silent, staring into each other’s eyes while Jethro got Tony ready for him and Tony continued to stroke his lover, feeling his thighs tremble and his cock twitch every so often. It didn’t take long for Jethro to find Tony’s prostate, and the stimulation soon had Tony hard and leaking again.

Tony let go of Jethro and held out his arms. “C’mere. Want you now.”

Jethro’s fingers slipped out, and he moved forward, grasping his cock to line it up with Tony’s entrance, sliding in slowly as he settled his body on Tony’s. Both men groaned as he slid all the way in; Jethro rested his head on Tony’s shoulder, while Tony put his arms around his lover and stroked his back.

“Love you, Jethro,” he whispered.

Jethro raised his head. “Love you too, Tony… so much. Don’t know what I’d have done if you’d been gone for good.”

Tony’s arms tightened around him. “I’m here, Jeth… can’t guarantee the future, but I’m here now. Always will be, if I have any say in it.”

Jethro dropped his head against Tony’s shoulder and nodded, unable to speak. He gritted his teeth until the urge to let the tears fall passed, and then he started moving his hips, letting his cock glide slowly in and out of Tony’s ass, building the pace bit by bit as he moved up onto his forearms so he could look Tony in the eye.

He let the pace and the passion build slowly, just gazing at his lover, memorizing the changing expressions on Tony’s face as his arousal increased. His hips sped up bit by bit, and he increased the force of his thrusts carefully, mindful of Tony’s back. They continued like that until Tony was incoherent with lust, breathing heavily and moaning with every move Jethro made, his mouth hanging open as he gasped for air. Finally his hands gripped Jethro’s shoulders tightly and he threw...
back his head, crying out with his second orgasm of the night. Jethro let go of his restraint as soon as Tony started coming, pressing his face into Tony’s neck and pumping into him as fast as he could, coming less than a minute after Tony.

Jethro collapsed onto his lover; both men were breathing hard and drenched in sweat. They lay there until their breathing evened out, and then Tony turned to look at Jethro. “Shower?”

They cleaned up quickly, making their way back into bed soon after. Tony lay on his back, while Jethro got into his usual position of using Tony like a giant teddy bear, his head on Tony’s chest, his legs tangled with Tony’s. “You setting the alarm?” Tony asked.

“Nope. Vance didn’t set a time. We’ll get there when we get there.”

“Good.”

They lay there for a while, neither one ready to sleep. Tony ran his hand gently up and down Jethro’s back, then cleared his throat. “My lease is up in just over a month… was thinking I’d move in then, if the offer’s still open.”

Jethro rolled off of Tony and sat up. “Of course it’s still open. I didn’t think you were ready… you were mostly avoiding talking about it last weekend.”

Tony reached for Jethro’s hand. “I know… I wasn’t sure. Worried about whether it would put a strain on us, what would happen if things didn’t work out. I was afraid of ruining what we’ve got. Then I started thinking, this past week… went to dinner with Fitzy and Eddie a few times before you came out there, and Fitzy talked a lot about Brooke. They’d been dating for over four years, and Fitzy as still all starry-eyed about her. Eddie asked him why he hadn’t already proposed, and Fitzy said he was waiting for the right time… their jobs, their families… all that stuff that gets in the way, and you think you have all the time in the world…” He looked at Jethro, squeezing his hand and reaching out to touch his face. “I don’t want to wait. We’ve been through a lot already, just in a few months, and I think maybe it’s made us stronger. I don’t want to wait for perfect, ‘cause I’m thinking maybe this is as close as it gets.”

Jethro reached up with his free hand, cupping it at the back of Tony’s head and pulling him closer, kissing him gently, pouring all his love and relief and joy that Tony was here with him into the touch. When he pulled back, Tony looked at him, eyes wide. “Wow,” he said quietly.

Jethro smiled. “Welcome home, Tony.”
Wake Up Call

Tony groaned when *Ride of the Valkyries* sounded from his cell on the nightstand. He reached out, fumbling for it while Jethro snuggled in closer. “Who’zat?”

“All right,” Tony replied as he flipped the phone open. “Hey girl, whas’up?”

“*Tony! How are you?*”

“M’ok. Tired. Wha’ time’zit?”

Abby giggled. “I guess you and Gibbs were very busy last night.”

“Yes, we were, and no, you can’t have details.”

“*Bummer. It’s almost nine, Tony. Gibbs never sleeps this late. You must have done a number on him.*”

Tony rubbed at his face. “Was a mutual doing. Hanging up now.”

“No, wait! I talked to everyone else, and the Holding Back the Chaos party is going to be at Gibbs’ place later this afternoon. Say, three o’clock?”

Tony reached up and rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, okay. We’ve got to go in and see Vance, but we should be back by then.”

“*Cool. Hey, it’s going to double as a Goodbye and Good Luck party for Kevin, okay? You don’t mind, do you?*”

“Course not. Where’s he going?”

“Seattle, silly! He was tapped to join the new teams out there.”

“Good for him. Should be a good fit. We done?”

“*Tony, I had no idea you were so grumpy after a night of great sex.*”

“Sorry, Abs. Just real tired, that’s all.”

“*Go Boss-man! Guess he’s got mad skills.*”

“Yes… yes, he does and no, I’m still not giving you details. See you later.” Tony flipped the phone shut and sighed as he let his arm drop back onto the bed.

“What was that all about?”

“Abby scheduled a dual party for this afternoon, here at the house.”

Jethro sighed. “Okay.”

Tony smiled. “What, no protests? No complaints about having to be social at home?”

Jethro shook his head and tightened his hold on Tony. “Nah. ‘Sides, gotta get used to it if you’re
moving in.”

Tony let go of his phone and hugged Jethro closer. “Yeah, guess you do at that.”

They lay there for a few minutes, until Jethro sighed. “Might as well go see Vance for this debriefing he wants.”

Tony sighed quietly. “Yeah. Don’ wanna, though.”

Jethro chuckled. “Me neither. But we should at least try to stay on his good side.”

“He’s got one?”

Jethro reached up and tapped Tony lightly on the back of the head. “He does, actually. Should see him with his kids.”

Tony shifted over a bit, then turned to face his lover. “Knew you two had some sort of nudge-nudge-wink-wink thing going on. When’d you see him with his kids?”

Jethro kissed the tip of Tony’s nose. “Remember when Vance took McGee and Ziva out to Chicago?”

“That boxing case… friend of his got killed.”

“Mmm hmm. Confronted him at his house over his involvement. Stayed for dinner with the whole family.”

Tony sat up a bit and stared at him. “How did I not hear about that?”

Jethro stretched a bit and stared up at him, relaxing back into the pillow. “Not like we were together back then. Lots you never heard about.”

Tony’s eyes searched his for a moment. “Gonna catch me up?”

Jethro shrugged. “Sure, if you want. Not really all that exciting.”

“Might help me understand the enigma that is our director.”

“Might. Remind me sometime, I’ll give you the whole story.”

“Cool.” Tony flopped back down onto the mattress. “How about you go meet with Vance and fill me in later?”

“Some Saint Bernard you are.”

“Guilt trip? Really?”

“Is it working?”

Tony sighed, then sat up again. “Yeah.”

“There you go.”

Tony gave Jethro a sour look. “You do realize I wanted to spend the whole morning in bed.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”
Tony’s jaw dropped. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

Jethro laughed, then threw back the covers. “Of course I’m kidding. Come on, I’ll wash your back.”

Tony grinned. “Incentive’s a good thing.” He jumped up out of bed and hurried to catch up.

**Caught**

Gibbs and Tony arrived at Vance’s office around 10:30; his assistant waved them on without even looking up at them. They walked in to find Vance sitting at the head of his conference table, some papers spread out in front of him. He was dressed down, in an Oxford shirt with no jacket or tie.

“Pretty casual, Leon,” Gibbs commented as he pulled out the chair Vance indicated and sat down.

Vance raised an eyebrow at him. “Since when do you notice clothes, Gibbs?”

“I notice, I just don’t usually comment.”

Tony smirked a bit as he took a seat at the other side of the table, opposite Gibbs. “Director,” he said in greeting.

“DiNozzo.” Vance inclined his head, then sat back a bit, his fingers tapping the table top. “What time did your flight get in last night?”


Vance nodded. “7:30. Huh.” He pulled a toothpick out of his shirt pocket and chewed on it for a moment. “Got something I want to share with you.” He sorted through the papers on the table, then picked one up. “Incident report from Dulles International, faxed over last night about two hours after your flight landed.”

Tony’s eyes widened and he stared at Gibbs, whose lips twitched slightly as he stared back. Vance cleared his throat and began summarizing the report.

“Says here airport security detained a man after a complaint was lodged by a recently arrived passenger who reported being accosted in the baggage claim area. Older gentleman, Vietnam vet and respected business man… lost a leg during the war, recently fitted with the latest in prosthetic technology, flew in to D.C. for a final check on his new leg at Bethesda before taking it to replace the old one. Old one’s wood, by the way… little fact that appears to be relevant here.”

Tony bit his cheek to stop himself from laughing out loud. Gibbs just looked mildly interested, but Tony could see his jaw muscles twitch. Vance looked from one to the other before glancing back down at the incident report.

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“Moving on… the detained man, one James Fenton of Falls Church, had been under observation because he’d been hanging around the baggage claim area for a long time. He approached our respected business man, one Arthur Robinson, and told him something about rodents and predatory birds… Robinson became confused, tried to give Fenton the brush off, at which point Fenton persisted in following the man and repeating his statement.”

Vance paused again and watched his agents. Tony blinked rapidly, putting on an expression of extreme interest, while Gibbs did his best to look bored. Vance shook his head and continued the story.

“Security moved in when it became clear that Robinson was becoming agitated. They brought both
men in for questioning, at which point Fenton claimed to be working with two undercover agents who were masquerading as a gay couple.” Vance bit down on the toothpick so hard that it snapped; he reached up, removed the pieces, placed them carefully on the table, then went into his pocket for another one, which he immediately stuck between his teeth.

“Fenton went on to say that he was given a code phrase to pass on to a man with a wooden leg, whom the feds claimed to be an international arms dealer. He didn’t have names for these supposed agents, but he did provide physical descriptions.” Vance set the paper down carefully, straightening it on the table top for a moment before reaching up to remove the toothpick and set it down next to the paper. He then twisted his neck a bit, shrugging one shoulder up and rotating it a bit, tilting his head to stretch, then settled in and stared at Gibbs. “Don’t bother denying that you two were involved. Timing’s right, description’s right, and like you, I’m not a big fan of coincidences.”

Tony couldn’t contain it any longer. “In our defense,” he began, only to be immediately cut off.

“What possible defense can you give for misusing your status in such an asinine way?”

Gibbs tilted his head. “Would it have been okay if we’d been less asinine?”

“No!”

“Hey,” Tony cut in, “it was my fault. Gibbs really didn’t have anything to do with it.”


Tony cleared his throat and shifted a bit in his chair. “This guy, Fenton, he saw us waiting for my suitcase. We were, um...”

“Holding hands,” Gibbs supplied helpfully.

“Yeah, that. Fenton’s apparently more than a little homophobic, and he had a few choice comments to make. So I, uh, decided to have a little fun with him.”

Vance transferred his gaze from Tony to Gibbs. “You were...”

“Holding hands,” Gibbs repeated, giving a little nod to punctuate his words.

Vance blinked. Gibbs sighed. “That was pretty tame compared to the hug Tony got when he got off the plane.”

Vance remained speechless. Gibbs shook his head. “Come on, Leon... what do you think a reunion between you and your wife would have been like if you’d thought she was dead?”

Vance’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re really that serious?”

Gibbs snorted. “Nah, we thought we’d screw with our careers for fun. Oh, and DiNozzo’ll be putting in a change of address form in about a month... gonna be the same as mine.”

Vance reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose. “All that aside, why mess with Fenton?”

Tony sat forward and placed his elbows on the table. “Because I don’t appreciate someone calling me a fag, or making disparaging remarks about one of the best men I know, and the best relationship I’ve ever been in.”

Vance looked at him for a moment and then sighed, his body slumping a bit. “I get that. I do.” He pushed his chair back suddenly, sitting back and stretching his arms out a bit before looking at Tony
again. “You’d think as head of a federal agency, I’d be immune from being judged for the color of my skin, but I’m not.” His expression clouded over a bit. “Jared ran into some prejudice at school a few weeks ago – some kid used a word I won’t repeat.”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed. “How’d he handle it?”

Vance smiled. “With a mean right hook. Then he found Kayla and told her, and the kid ended up with one hell of a bruise on his shin.”

“Good for them.”

Vance sighed. “Jackie doesn’t agree… she’s glad they stood up for themselves, but wishes they’d done it in a less physical manner.” He took another toothpick out of his jacket pocket and stuck it in his mouth.

Tony wasn’t sure what to say; he tried to get the conversation back on track. “So, um, what happened with Fenton?”

Vance checked the incident report. “Being held for psychiatric evaluation until all agencies report back.”

All three men stared at each other for a moment. Vance sat forward in his chair. “I ever tell you I was best man at my friends’ Antwan’s and Tyrone’s wedding? Was right after gay marriage was legalized here in D.C.”

Gibbs and Tony both shook their heads. “I’m sure it was a very nice wedding,” Gibbs said.

Vance nodded. “Yes, yes it was.” He looked back at the report, then over at Tony.

“Come on,” Tony said, “what were the odds that there’d actually be a guy with a wooden leg?”

Vance and Gibbs exchanged glances. “Could probably have McGee calculate them,” Gibbs offered.

“Probably could,” Vance agreed. He sighed as he looked at the report. “Seems kind of low priority… sort of thing that might not clear my desk for a few days.”

Gibbs nodded. “Understandable. You’re a busy man.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Vance chewed his toothpick again, then reached up to take it out of his mouth and pointed it at Tony. “You never, ever use your badge in that manner again. Clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Excellent. Now, DiNozzo, I’d like a more detailed assessment of the overall situation at the Silverdale office, and Gibbs, I’d like to hear your input as well where restructuring is concerned.”

The ensuing discussion lasted close to two hours, and might have gone longer had Vance’s assistant not buzzed him with the information that his wife had arrived for lunch. All three men got to their feet as Jackie Vance walked in to the office. She went straight to her husband, dropping a light kiss on his lips and smiling at him before turning to the other men. “Gibbs, good to see you again.” She reached out to rest her hand on his arm for a moment while he smiled and returned her greeting, then she turned to Tony. “Agent DiNozzo, right?”

Tony nodded. “Tony, ma’am.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ma’am me. Call me Jackie.”
Tony flashed his biggest smile. “You got it, Jackie.”

She smiled back, then looked at her husband. “How’s Tuesday night?”

“For what?”

“Having your friends here over for dinner.”

Vance’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth; Jackie just raised her eyebrows, and Vance’s mouth closed as he nodded. She smiled and patted his hand, then turned to Gibbs and Tony. “Does 7:30 work for you boys?”

Gibbs was doing his best not to smile. “7:30 Tuesday sounds perfect.”

Tony grinned. “Looking forward to it. Let us know what we should bring.”

Jackie smiled. “A bottle of red would be good.”

“Your wish is our command.” Tony bowed slightly, making Jackie laugh.

Gibbs cleared his throat. “We’ll leave you to your lunch plans.” He and Tony turned to leave, pausing at the doorway when Vance called out.

“Hey, DiNozzo… I’m putting a commendation in your file for the job you did out west. Not just your original assignment, but how you handled the bomber case.” Vance looked seriously at him. “Might want to consider setting your sights a little higher than leading the MCRT.” He nodded to them both, then turned to talk to his wife as they left.

And Again

Tony and Jethro managed to stay serious all the way back to the car, and even as Jethro pulled out of the Navy Yard. Once they were on the main road, however, Tony couldn’t contain it any longer. A small laugh sounding more like a snort escaped his mouth. He cleared his throat, then giggled. Jethro shot him a look, his lips twitching, Tony’s eyes met his, and they were both lost. Tony laughed hysterically, leaning back against the car door, while Jethro tried to keep his eyes on the road, grinning hugely, unable to stop the occasional laugh from getting out.

“Seriously, what are the odds?” Tony gasped out. “When do you ever see a guy with a wooden leg anywhere?”

Jethro shook his head. “You don’t.”

“Exactly my point.” Tony reached up to wipe at his eyes, then tried to settle into his seat. “It’s like the universe is out to get us. Maybe Abby’s right.”

Jethro shrugged, then pulled into the grocery store parking lot. “You gonna go on about that like she does?”

Tony shook his head. “Nah. I’ll leave the mumbo jumbo to her. Why are we here?”

“Burgers. Figured I’d fire up the grill for this party. And I’m sure she’d argue with that description.”

They did the shopping, stocking up on a variety of munchies as well as ground beef, hamburger buns, and anything anyone might want to pile on to their burger. The rest of the ride home was quiet as Tony grew contemplative and Jethro gave him room to think.
After unpacking, removing shoes, and grabbing a few energy bars as a snack, they sat down on the couch in the living room. Tony finished off his bar, drank some water, then looked over at Jethro. “What do you suppose he meant?”

“About looking beyond the MCRT?”

“Yeah.” Tony smoothed out the energy bar wrapper, then crumpled it up and tossed it on the table. Jethro watched him curiously.

“Seems to me he’s telling you your potential goes beyond team lead.”

Tony shook his head, puzzled. “What, like Director?”

Jethro nodded. “Sure, why not?”

“Me? Director of NCIS? That’s crazy talk.”

Jethro reached out and took Tony’s hand. “No, it’s not. Tony, you were ready for Rota years ago. You’re more than ready to lead a team now. You’ll take over for me when I retire, and from there anything’s possible.”

“Thought Vance didn’t like me.” Tony gripped Jethro’s hand firmly, tracing random patterns on the back of it with his free hand.

Jethro shook his head. “Maybe he didn’t have you figured out for a while, but you can bet he does now. At least with respect the job. Not sure he knows what to make of you outside of it.”

Tony shot him a look. “I hope not. Don’t like the idea of him inside my head.”

Jethro grinned and shifted a little closer. “Okay if I get in your head?”

“You bet. Anytime.” Tony leaned in and kissed Jethro lightly on the lips. “Too bad the party will be starting soon.”

“Mmm. Yeah.” Jethro returned the kiss for a moment, reaching up to run his fingers through Tony’s hair. “Doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy each other right here for a few minutes.”

Tony kept his grip on Jethro’s hand, using his free arm to encircle his waist. “Rule Five.”

Jethro nuzzled Tony’s neck for a moment. “You don’t waste good.” He shifted closer on the couch, tugging gently on Tony’s hair to bring his face closer. “And damn, you’re good, Tony,” he whispered in Tony’s ear.

Tony hummed happily, disentangling his hand from his partner’s and reaching forward to pull Jethro’s shirt out of his pants, following up by running his hand over Jethro’s abdomen, up to his chest, then around to his back, caressing the skin gently. Jethro sighed and shivered, tilting his head back as Tony moved in, nipping at his neck before running his tongue up to Jethro’s ear and teasing the lobe. “I want you right now, Jeth… wanna show you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

Jethro’s eyes opened, and he pulled on Tony’s hair again, moving his head back this time, staring into his eyes for a moment before moving in and kissing him passionately, keeping his grip on Tony’s hair while pulling his shirt out of his jeans, then working his way down into those jeans and palming Tony’s ass. Tony responded with a sharp intake of breath, pulling Jethro closer with the arm around his back, using the other hand to fumble with his belt and zipper.
Jethro groaned and he felt Tony tugging his pants open. “Don’t have time…”

Tony’s mouth found his, his tongue caressing Jethro’s, while his fingers found Jethro’s erection. He swallowed Jethro’s moan and pushed him down onto the couch, adjusting his legs to straddle him and leave him room to work.

“You are right, Abby – that is extremely hot.”

It was almost impossible to tell whose arms and legs were whose amidst all the flailing. Tony fell off the couch and landed on the floor, pulling Jethro, whose hand was still stuck in Tony’s jeans, over on top of him. After a great deal of swearing, pushing, and shoving, Jethro got his hand loose, and Tony reached up to grab two pillows off the couch, handing one to his lover while holding the other in front of his own groin. Then he looked up from his position on the floor to see Ziva and Abby, their arms full of bags, watching them avidly. Abby had a huge grin on her face, while Ziva met Tony’s eyes and winked.

“We will leave you two to get settled,” she said, as she headed toward the kitchen. Abby just stood there, looking at them.

Tony glared at her while Jethro sat up, red-faced, with his pillow strategically located. “You said three!”

“For the party,” Abby explained, completely unrepentant. “Had to get here earlier to set up.”

“Abby!” Ziva’s voice sounded from the kitchen. “Give them some privacy! How would you feel if they interrupted you?”

Abby scurried off. “Are you kidding? I’d invite them to join in!”

Tony groaned and rested his forehead on the seat of the couch. “We forgot to lock the door, didn’t we?”

“Uh huh.”

“You alright?” He turned his head to look at Jethro, who was staring at the opposite wall with a pained expression. “Jethro? Seriously, did I hurt you?”

Jethro tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. “Do you have any idea how long it’s going to be until we can pick up where we just left off?”

Tony sighed. “Too long.” He looked at Jethro and reached out to stroke his hair. “Sorry.”

Jethro reached over and gave him a head slap. “Don’t be ridiculous. You couldn’t know they’d be so early.”

“Could’ve guessed,” Tony muttered.

Jethro sighed. “Cold showers?”

“Showers, plural?”

“Yeah. One of us to stand guard while the other’s in there.”

“Good idea. Ziva picks locks.”

They helped each other up off the floor, and Jethro fastened his pants. “Hold on,” Jethro said, as he
headed for the kitchen, Tony following.

Abby and Ziva were whispering and giggling; Ziva caught sight of the men first and managed to school her features into a more dignified appearance. Abby turned to face them, her whole face lit up with delight. “Gibbs! Tony!”

Jethro looked at Tony and nodded. Tony walked closer to Ziva, and they each reached out to deliver simultaneous head slaps to the two women.

Abby reached up to rub at her head. “Ow, Gibbs!” She tried to look wounded, but couldn’t keep from glancing down at his crotch and grinning, earning herself a second tap on the head.

Ziva glared at Tony and moved forward. “Ah, ah, ah,” he said, stepping back a pace. “You can’t head slap your team leader!”

Ziva’s glare intensified, and Tony grinned at her. Jethro rolled his eyes and grabbed Tony’s arm, pulling him backwards. Then he glared at the two women. “We’re going upstairs to change. No, we will not be doing anything you’d want to see, and no, you may not come upstairs to check… and no, you may not tell anyone else about what you saw.”

And with that he turned, tugging Tony out of the room and up the stairs, pretending not to hear the whispers and giggles start up again.
Holding Back the Chaos

Cookies and Caution

Tony went through the stack of CDs that Tim had brought with him, along with a CD player and speakers so that they could actually listen to music. “You didn’t bring anything besides jazz, McColtrane?”

McGee shrugged. “Abby said she wanted this to be a quiet party. Happy and mellow.”

“Actually, that sounds pretty good.” Tony grabbed some Ella Fitzgerald and got it going – the opening to ‘A Tisket, A Tasket’ flowed from the speakers. “Get me a beer, would you?”

McGee just laughed and walked away. Tony rolled his eyes at Abby, who jumped in front of him, holding out a beer and wearing a huge smile. “Don’t say a word.”

Abby beamed at him. “I’m just so happy for you guys.”

Tony saluted her with the beer and took a sip. “Thanks. I’m happy for us too.”

Abby leaned into him for a moment. “Things are good, right? I mean, obviously the passion is there, ‘cause, wow –“

“Do not speak of what you saw earlier. Ever. Unless you want your Caf-Pow supply to mysteriously dry up.”

Abby tilted her head and smirked. “Gibbs wouldn’t do that to me.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “I think I’ve got ways to convince him.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t make me threaten you with my forensics.”

“Never.” Tony set his beer down next to the CD player and pulled Abby into a hug. “It’s going great, Abs. It’s everything I could have wanted. Would you believe he hugged me at the airport?”

Abby made happy noises. “Was it a manly hug, just like a back-slapping thing, or a real, full-on, I-love-you-and-I’m-so-glad-you’re-not-dead hug?”

“Full on.”

“Tony! That’s awesome!”

“Yeah, it really is – hey!” He reached up to rub the back of his head. Abby stepped back to see Gibbs standing there, glaring at Tony.

“Think we overshared enough for one day already, don’t you?”

Tony grinned at him. “Yeah.”

Gibbs tried to keep a straight face, but Abby launched into his arms. “Gibbs! Your eyes are twinkling! Your eyes haven’t twinkled in like, forever!”

Gibbs wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hair. “Got reason to twinkle now, Abs. Go talk to McGee, I wanna ask Tony something.”
“Yes, sir!” Gibbs tapped her lightly on the head. “Ma’am!” She stepped back from Gibbs, grinned at the two men, then whirled around and looked for McGee. He was standing at the window, watching the street, so she followed orders and moved to join him. “Timmy?”

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting for Kevin.”

“Why?”

McGee glanced at her. “Two reasons. First, I want to be in position if he’s bringing those amazing cookies. Tony’s gonna hog them otherwise.”

Abby nodded. “Sounds reasonable. Second?”

McGee turned and motioned to where Gibbs and Tony were standing next to each other, now talking to Ducky. “Look at them.”

Abby smiled as she looked at her favorite couple. Tony’s arm was loosely around Gibbs’ shoulders, his fingertips lightly stroking the fabric resting on Gibbs’ upper arm. Gibbs was leaning into his partner just a little, smiling at whatever Ducky was saying, holding a beer in one hand while the other rested on Tony’s opposite hip. “I know! Isn’t it great! I’m not surprised Tony’s all public with the affection, but it’s so nice to see Gibbs like that too.”

McGee sighed. “Yeah, I know. But Kevin doesn’t.”

Abby turned to look at him, her eyes wide. “I didn’t think of that! Do you think I messed up, having the two parties in one?”

Shrugging, McGee turned back to the window. “It’s not like they can’t go back to normal, act like they’re just friends and co-workers.”

Abby wrinkled her nose. “But they shouldn’t have to. This is Gibbs’ home, and they shouldn’t have to hide here.”

“You could always go ask them if they care if Kevin finds out.”

“You know him better than they do. Do you think he’d be okay with it?”

“I have no idea. It’s not like we’ve had tons of personal conversations… Jimmy’s pretty tight with him, he might know.”

Abby looked around for Jimmy, but didn’t see him. “Where is he? Is he here yet?”

“He was… he may have gone back out to pick up Breena. I think he said something about going to get her.”

Abby glanced out the window. “Too late… here’s Kevin.”

McGee stretched up a bit as he watched his probie get out of the car. “He’s got the cookies. Abby, go tell Gibbs and Tony that he’s on his way in.”

Abby saluted and trotted over to where the three men were still talking. “Gibbs! Tony! Kevin just arrived, and we thought you guys might want to cool it with the PDA if you don’t want him to know
about you.”

Each man immediately dropped his arm from around the other and they stepped a bit apart. “Thanks, Abs,” Tony said, smiling at her. Gibbs nodded to her, and Ducky raised his glass.

She leapt at Tony, pulling him into another hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think. We should have done things differently.”

Tony hugged her back. “It’s no big deal, Abby.” His head shot up as the door opened. “Hey, does he have those cookies?!” He let go of her and moved quickly toward the door. “Back off, McThief!” he called out.

Everyone watched as Tony and McGee jockeyed for position, giving Segel the opportunity to dodge past them and bring the cookies over to the table with the rest of the food. Abby reached out and snagged two cookies before he had a chance to put the plate on the table; Tony and McGee weren’t far behind.

Gibbs watched, then looked over at Ducky. “Those cookies really that good?” Ducky shrugged and chuckled.

**Goodbye, Ultra-Probie**

Kevin Segel watched the small group of teammates and friends as they laughed and talked with each other after eating the burgers Gibbs had grilled. Jimmy had, as always, made sure to bring Kevin into the conversations, even though it wasn’t really so necessary anymore. Kevin had learned his lesson; his time with the MCRT had taught him not only to avoid making assumptions, but also to value the expertise of the people he worked with.

He was going to miss these people – not only for their knowledge and experience, but also for their quirky personalities. He couldn’t call them friends, not exactly, except for Jimmy, but he could certainly value them as colleagues. He was looking forward to his move to Seattle and the Silverdale office, though; Julie had told him good things about the new team leader.

Kevin sighed as he saw DiNozzo make yet one more aborted move to touch Gibbs. That was the third one… or maybe the fourth. So far Kevin had counted seven such moves on Gibbs’ part, along with four lingering glances between the two men; he’d lost count of the number of subtle brushes that had happened between them. He smiled slightly as he pushed off the arm of the couch where he’d been perched and went in search of his mentor. This group had messed with his perceptions enough; it was time to get a bit of his own back.

He found Tim McGee in the kitchen, in front of the open refrigerator, debating between two different beers. “Hey, Tim… could you do me a favor?”

McGee glanced at him and held out one of the bottles; Kevin grinned and took it. They popped off the caps, toasted each other silently, and drank.

“Sure, Kevin… what’s up?”

“Um… would you mind letting Gibbs and DiNozzo know that they can stop pretending?”

McGee blinked. “Pretending?”

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “I know you tried to help them hide it… you sent me away pretty quickly when Gibbs got that phone call down in the lab, when we didn’t know if DiNozzo was alive. But it wasn’t really all that hard to figure out.”
McGee leaned back against the counter and took another sip of his beer. “What exactly do you think you’ve figured out?”

Kevin set his bottle down on the counter and leaned on one hand. “That our co-leaders are romantically involved.”

McGee stared for a moment. “What’s your evidence?”

“Observations. Lots of times they were in each other’s space, Gibbs’ reaction when I got DiNozzo hurt that time, all those times Abby slipped up and had to quickly change what she was saying, Gibbs taking a long weekend in Seattle… you guys did tell me not to believe in coincidences, you know. Gibbs’ reaction when we heard about the bombing, the way you practically threw me out of the lab as soon as Gibbs said DiNozzo’s name on the phone – give me some credit, I am a federal agent, after all.” Kevin laughed a bit. “If I did have any doubts, they’d have been cleared up just in the past couple of hours… lots of little data points just watching the two of them.”

McGee shook his head. “Guess we should have known better than to think we could really hide it.” He shot Kevin a sharp look. “You’re okay with it?”

Kevin nodded. “Doesn’t bother me. I figure if you and Ziva aren’t worried about unfair treatment, then there’s no reason for me to be.” His brow furrowed a bit. “Doesn’t mean I get it either... I don’t see the appeal at all. But whatever.”

McGee smiled. “I think I’m proud of you, Probie.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “I can’t wait to head out to Seattle.”

“You’ll still be a probie, you know.”

Kevin sighed. “Yeah.”

They left the kitchen and rejoined the party. Abby was sitting on the couch, taking animatedly with Breena. Jimmy and Ziva were talking to Tony, who was hovering over the cookies. Gibbs was leaning back against the wall, near Shannon’s picture, listening to one of Ducky’s stories. McGee cleared his throat and motioned to Kevin to wait, then walked up to his boss.

Kevin watched while they spoke, and saw Gibbs’ eyebrows climb up into his hair. He flinched slightly when Gibbs turned to look at him, his expression neutral. Kevin swallowed as Gibbs pointed at him and then motioned with his finger for him to approach; he squared his shoulders and walked over to the older man.

Gibbs looked at him for a moment. “You figured it out, huh?”

Kevin nodded. “Good job.”

Kevin released a breath he hadn’t really known he was holding. “I won’t say anything to anyone, Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs shot him a crooked half-smile. “Appreciate that, Segel. Your new team leader knows, and so does the Director, but that’s it other than the people in this room. We’d like to keep it that way.”

Kevin nodded again, then relaxed as Gibbs clapped him on the upper arm before pushing off the wall and walking over to DiNozzo, who was clearly startled when Gibbs slid his arm around
DiNozzo’s waist. Gibbs leaned in and whispered in DiNozzo’s ear; the younger man gave him a brilliant smile and looked around the room, meeting Kevin’s eyes and saluting him with a raised cookie. Kevin smiled back at him; DiNozzo said something to Gibbs, then moved away from him to join Kevin. “Good work, Ultra-Probie! Told ya to be more observant.”

Kevin nodded. “Bet you didn’t expect me to observe you guys, though.”

DiNozzo grinned. “Always expect the unexpected.”

“Not sure I could have expected that, but hey, to each his own.”

DiNozzo nodded to him and held up a cookie. “I will pay you for the recipe.”

Kevin grinned. “I’ll email it to you.”

“Awesome.”

“Hey, Agent DiNozzo –“

“Pfft. Tony. You’re heading out to Seattle tomorrow, right? I’m not really your supervisor anymore.”

“Okay, Tony… I wanted to thank you for recommending me for the Seattle MCRT – really means a lot to me.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Wasn’t me, Probie… not that I wouldn’t have, I just didn’t think of it. Didn’t really talk to the Director in detail about the reassignments until this morning anyway.”

Kevin’s brow furrowed. “Then who…”

“Me.”

Kevin jumped at the soft voice behind him, then turned to see Gibbs standing there. “How’d you…”

Tony shook his head, grinning. “Don’t question it, Probie… Abby says it’s magic, and she’s probably right.”

Gibbs tilted his head and looked at Segel closely. “Once you got your head out of your ass, you showed you had potential. You listened to your team members, followed orders, showed some initiative lately, and tossed your preconceptions out the window. Told Vance it’s a good fit.”

Kevin stared at Gibbs. “Thank you. I wouldn’t have expected, I mean…” His voice trailed off, and Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him, but then he was saved by Abby getting up in the middle of the room and tapping a fork against her beer bottle.

Everyone quieted down and moved closer to hear what she wanted to say. She smiled as she looked around the room, then raised her beer in the air. “First of all, I want to say welcome back to Tony! And don’t even think of leaving again.”

There were various cries of agreement and some clapping. Tony grinned and gave a little bow. Abby cleared her throat and continued. “I also want to say that now things can get back to normal, and we can slow the progression of random disorder. Not that we can stop it, because hey, the laws of thermodynamics are real laws – not like Gibbs’ rules, which isn’t to say that they aren’t super important, Bossman, ’cause they are, but scientific laws, you can’t just break them, you know?”

Ducky spoke up. “Do try to stay focused, dear girl.”
Several people laughed at that; Gibbs shot Ducky an incredulous look, which got everyone laughing harder, including Ducky himself.

Abby wadded up a napkin and tossed it at him. “As I was saying, Tony’s home and he and Gibbs are happy, which means the universe can settle back down to normalcy. Maybe even more normalcy than it’s had in a while, since Gibbs hasn’t been happy like this in a long time, so actually I guess we have to wonder what the true state of normal really is—“

“Abby.”

“Sorry, Gibbs, refocusing! Okay, the other thing I want to say is Kevin! Kevin’s leaving us, which is going to provide more balance for NCIS – West Coast gets its teams squared away and East Coast gets back to normal. Um, no offense or anything, Kevin, ‘cause you turned out to be much cooler than we thought at first, I mean, you really turned it around after Ziva beat you up, you know?”

More clapping, and Kevin blushed a little. He straightened up a bit, and called out to Ziva. “I want a rematch in twenty years.”

Ziva smiled. “It is a deal. I will still wipe your clock.”

Tony groaned. “Clean your clock, Ziva. Or wipe the floor with him. You don’t wipe a clock.”

“I have never seen anyone clean a clock either.”

Kevin became the center of attention for a while, as the team asked him questions about where he was going to stay at first, whether he already knew anyone out there, and then gave him various pieces of advice, some of which was actually helpful.

After about an hour, he stood up from his seat on the couch and cleared his throat, getting everyone’s attention. “Um, I still have a few things I have to do before I head out west tomorrow, so I’m going to take off… just want to thank everyone for everything… all the advice, everything you guys have taught me, and especially you, Dr. Mallard, and Jimmy – you kind of opened my eyes a bit toward the beginning there, and I really appreciate it.”

It took another fifteen minutes before Kevin was able to get out the door; he glanced back and smiled at the way the entire team gathered around Gibbs and Tony. He wasn’t sorry to go, but he did hope that his new team would grow to have that kind of bond.

**Sharing**

Once Segel was gone, the party got even more mellow. Everyone ended up on the couch or one of the surrounding chairs; Tony sat in an armchair with Gibbs perched on one of the arms, his elbow propped on Tony’s shoulder. McGee had put on some smooth instrumental jazz, and they were all relaxing as the sky outside grew dark.

Gibbs took advantage of a momentary lull in the conversation. “Got something to tell you all.”

Everyone turned toward him; Tony looked up at him and smiled. Abby gasped and called out, “You’re getting married!”

Gibbs rolled his eyes and they all laughed. Tony shook his head. “No, Abs, we’re not. But… I am moving in here in about a month.”

Abby jumped to her feet and tackled them both, knocking Gibbs back against the wall. “That is SO cool! The coolest thing ever! I’m so happy for you guys!”
“Mazel tov, Gibbs, Tony,” Ziva said, raising her glass. “I’m sure you will be very happy.”

They thanked her. Jimmy looked around the room. “Where are you guys going to put all Tony’s stuff?”

Gibbs shrugged. “We’ll figure it out. Think we’ll do some rearranging.”

Ducky patted the couch he was currently sitting on. “I’m sure the Salvation Army or some other organization could make good use of this furniture,” he commented.

Gibbs and Tony spoke in unison. “The couch stays.”

“Ah,” Ducky smiled. “I take it there are some good memories associated with this particular piece?”

Tony just grinned, but Gibbs surprised him. “First kiss on that couch.”

Abby and Ziva shared a look. “Bet there’s been more than that,” Abby said, a wicked little grin on her face. She made a zipping motion in front of her lips when both Gibbs and Tony stared at her.

Ziva smiled at them. “That sounds very romantic.”

Gibbs just grinned, surprising them all by how much younger he suddenly seemed.

“You gonna call some movers, or do you want help?” McGee asked.

Tony shrugged. “Not sure yet. I’ll let you know… thanks.”

Conversation turned to the logistics of the move; everyone was completely supportive and excited for them. Gibbs got up after a while, gathering a few empty beer bottles and bringing them into the kitchen. He was rinsing them out in the sink when Ducky appeared next to him.

“My congratulations, Jethro. I am very happy for you.”

“Thanks, Duck.”

Ducky regarded him for a moment. “You have changed, you know.” Gibbs raised an eyebrow and waited. Ducky smiled. “Anthony has been good for you. You are more open, and you smile so readily.”

“Yeah? What’s the latest average on the GSS?”

Ducky laughed. “You’ll have to ask Abigail, but I believe that today it would be somewhere between an 8 and a 9. Love suits you.”

“Tony suits me.”

“That he does, my friend, that he does.”

**Finishing What They Started**

Jethro locked the door after Ziva and Abby left, then joined Tony in the kitchen where he was cleaning up. “What’s the deal with the cookies?”

“Segel’s cookies? You never tried one?”

Jethro shook his head. Tony sighed. “Lots of work still to be done with you. There aren’t any left…
he said he was gonna send me the recipe, so I’ll make some and you can try them.”

“Okay.” Jethro watched Tony finish the dishes; Abby and Ziva had done most of the cleaning, with McGee’s help, but there were still a few things left. “Could finish that up tomorrow.”

“Got work tomorrow morning… easier to do it now.”

“Wanna do you now.”

Tony laughed and looked over at Jethro, who stood there grinning. “We do need to get back to what we were doing when we were so rudely interrupted.” He looked down at the sink. “I’m almost done here. Why don’t you go on up, and I’ll be there in a minute?”

Jethro reached out and patted Tony lightly on the back of his head, then turned and headed up the stairs. He thought over the evening as he walked into the bedroom, especially about what Ducky had said. He knew he’d been much more demonstrative than usual tonight, but it felt right. And it wasn’t that it wasn’t him – it just wasn’t the him he’d become after Shannon’s death. He shied away from that topic – not something he wanted to dwell on, not with Tony jogging up the stairs to join him.

Tony stopped in the doorway and smiled at him. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You were awesome today, you know that?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Always wanted to be in a relationship where it was comfortable to share stuff like that with friends. Haven’t had that since… well. Don’t need to go there.”

Jethro chuckled quietly as he moved toward Tony.

“What’s funny?”

“Just that we’re so in sync with what we’re thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Tony smiled, reaching out to pull Jethro’s t-shirt off over his head. “Think we’ll be in sync in bed too?”

Jethro copied Tony’s moves and then went further, helping his lover out of his clothes. “Don’t doubt it.”

Moments later both men were standing naked in the middle of the room, just looking at each other. Tony reached out and ran the tips of his fingers down the side of Jethro’s face; Jethro turned his head and tried to catch them with his teeth, but Tony moved them down to Jethro’s chest, sliding through the hair and over the nipples, getting a low hum of approval from his lover. He grinned, then gracefully dropped to his knees, leaning in to nip lightly at Jethro’s inner thigh, his hair brushing softly against Jethro’s balls.

Jethro reached down to run his fingers through that hair, watching as his own cock quickly grew thicker and harder as Tony nipped, licked and sucked along Jethro’s abdomen. “Tony…”
Tony pulled away a bit and looked up, smiling happily. “Just playing a bit. Don’t want to make you come, that’s for later. Preferably in me, although I’m willing to negotiate if you want something different.”

Jethro shook his head. “No, I’m good with your plan.”

Tony’s smile widened; he leaned back in, this time licking Jethro’s shaft, working his way up and teasing the sensitive skin under the head. Jethro groaned and closed his eyes, afraid that watching would be too much.

Tony smiled against Jethro’s cock, then moved to take the tip into his mouth, reaching up to caress and play with Jethro’s balls while he licked and sucked, enjoying the taste. Jethro spread his legs a bit, giving Tony more access. Tony kept one hand at Jethro’s scrotum, rolling the balls in his palm, while the other moved around to Jethro’s ass; he squeezed and massaged the muscles there as he took more and more of Jethro’s cock into his mouth, slowly moving his head up and down along the length.

Jethro bit his lip, reveling in the multiple sensations Tony was creating, enjoying the feeling of being at Tony’s mercy. He was starting to rethink Tony’s plan when the younger man pulled back from his groin and just hugged him fiercely as he knelt on the floor. Jethro’s eyes opened and he looked down, swallowing heavily at the sight of Tony’s face pressed against his erection, eyes closed, a slight smile on his lips.

“Tony,” he whispered.

Tony looked up at him; Jethro was surprised to see a sheen of tears in his eyes. “Tony?”

Tony shook his head. “Just realized we could have lost this, Jeth.”

Jethro moved quickly, kneeling down and pulling Tony into his arms. “We didn’t. You’re safe, we’re here. You heard Abby – the universe is back on course now.”

Tony laughed quietly; there was a slight hitch in the noise, but neither man commented on that. He moved back a little and captured Jethro’s lips in a gentle kiss, sweeping his tongue over them and into Jethro’s mouth. The kiss stayed light at first, but quickly turned more passionate and demanding. They pressed against each other, erections rubbing together, hands moving through hair and over backs and buttocks. Then Jethro shifted the wrong way, and his knee protested. “Ow,” he muttered into Tony’s mouth.

Tony chuckled. “Wanna take this somewhere more comfortable?”

“Yeah.” They scrambled to their feet, and tumbled onto the bed, wrestling for a moment as each tried to turn the other onto his back. Jethro was finally successful, and he set himself to the task of making Tony feel good, nipping and licking his way from Tony’s neck to his nipples to his stomach to his cock. He returned the favor for a few minutes, mouthing and sucking on Tony’s cock and balls until Tony was moaning and tossing his head and muttering something Jethro couldn’t quite catch. He pulled back and looked up at Tony’s face. “What language was that?”

Tony looked back at him, panting. “No clue.” He shifted his weight, rolling them over, reaching for the nightstand. He managed to get the drawer open and pulled out the lube, handing it to Jethro, who popped the lid and spread some on his fingers, tossing the container somewhere onto the mattress. He tugged Tony onto his side, taking the man’s cock back into his mouth while his slick fingers moved to Tony’s ass, running along the crack and over his anus, dipping in just a bit as he went back to what he’d been doing.
He kept at it, bringing Tony to the brink more than once before backing off, opening his lover up with first one, then two, then three fingers. Tony flung his leg over Jethro, his foot pressing against Jethro’s ass, thrusting carefully into Jethro’s mouth, grunting and whining incoherently.

Finally Jethro couldn’t take it anymore; he removed his fingers from Tony’s ass and pulled back, getting a whine of protest from his lover, who tightened his grip on Jethro’s hair. “Hey,” Jethro said quietly, breathing hard, “roll over. On your stomach.”

Tony’s eyes blinked open and he stared at Jethro for a moment until the words sunk in and he moved to do as Jethro asked, one hand reaching out to grab onto the sheets while the other moved underneath to grasp his own cock. Jethro moved to kneel between Tony’s legs, repositioning them a bit and taking hold of his own cock, placing the head against Tony’s anus and getting a moan of anticipation from the younger man. He let go of himself and reached up with one hand to grasp Tony’s shoulder, placing the other on Tony’s hip. “Ready?”

Tony nodded, breathing harshly as he gripped the base of his cock to keep himself from coming. “More than ready, Jeth.”

“Hang on.”

Jethro moved forward, breaching the ring of muscle, holding himself in place for a moment to let Tony get used to it. Tony was shifting around underneath him, writhing a bit as he adjusted his position to be able to move his hand. “Now, Jeth, can’t wait much longer.”

Jethro pushed forward, sliding into Tony in one smooth, steady motion, getting a cry from his lover. “God, that’s so good, Jeth.”

Jethro moved his arms so that he was supporting as much of his weight as he could on his hands. “Gonna be quick, Tony, can’t last long tonight.”

Tony just pushed backwards, clenching around Jethro’s cock at the same time, getting a surprised grunt from the older man. Jethro grinned, leaning in and nipping Tony’s neck, getting a breathy laugh out of him, then suddenly pulling his hips back and thrusting forward, setting up a quick rhythm that gave Tony little time to adjust.

“Jethro!” Tony gasped and began stroking himself in time with Jethro’s thrusts, as best he could with his hand trapped underneath. He writhed and moaned and gritted his teeth trying to match Jethro’s motion with his own hips. “Jeth, gonna come…”

Jethro slid his arms under Tony’s shoulders, grabbing on from underneath and letting himself go, pounding into Tony, who was almost screaming with each thrust in. “Come for me, Tone, come on, want it, want you so much, always gonna want you, yeah, come on, come on, god, yesss, oh god, come on, Tone!” Jethro came hard as he called out Tony’s name, feeling his lover’s release at almost the same time.

It was several minutes before Jethro came back to full awareness. He didn’t really want to – it was so nice not thinking, just feeling Tony against him and around him and basking in the moment. He carefully pulled out of Tony’s ass, then slowly moved his arms and legs until he had enough balance to move forward enough to grab some tissues and clean up as best he could. Tony was less with it than Jethro, but he rolled over at the right time to get cleaned up, then clumsily helped move the sheets until they were both under them, lying on their sides and facing each other.

They snuggled together, Jethro’s arms around Tony, Tony’s arms around Jethro, his head resting against Jethro’s chest. “Nigh’, Jeth” he mumbled.
Jethro pressed a kiss to the top of Tony’s head. “Night, Tony. Sleep well.” He yawned widely, then tumbled after Tony into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Sharing On A Monday

Tony whistled quietly as he rode the elevator up to the bullpen the morning after the party. He and Gibbs had driven in to work separately, keeping up appearances. The team knew about them, Vance knew about them, but the rest of NCIS didn’t, and they wanted to keep it that way. Tony shifted his backpack on his shoulder, glancing at the woman from Human Resources who was sharing the elevator. She was giving him a once-over from the corner of her eyes; he watched her, grinning when her eyes met his and she blushed a deep red. The elevator doors opened and Tony winked at her, then stepped out and sauntered over to his desk.

He grinned even wider at his audience. McGee and Ziva were watching him, the former looking slightly wary, the latter with a small smirk on her lips. “Gooooood morning, Probies!” Tony tossed his backpack next to his desk and slid into his chair, turning his computer on with a flourish.

“Good morning, Tony,” Ziva said. She gave him a slightly coquettish look. “You are in a good mood.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I am home. H.O.M.E. I’d sing it, but I don’t want to attract groupies.”

“No groupies,” Gibbs ordered, as he breezed past their desks on the way to his own.

“No groupies, Boss, got it!” Tony focused on his computer monitor for a moment before looking over at Gibbs, who just happened to be looking back at him. They smiled at each other across the way, then they both focused on their work, which consisted of cold case files until they got a call from dispatch.

Several hours later, Tony was muttering irritably under his breath. McGee was driving him nuts; he kept glancing between Gibbs and Tony, watching them throughout the day. Every time Gibbs barked out a question or an order, McGee would look at Tony, as if waiting for something.

Tony’s computer dinged with an instant message alert.

Lj_gibbs: What’s up with McGee?

Ad_dinozzo: No idea. I’m gonna go postal on him soon if he doesn’t stop.

Lj_gibbs: Find out.

Tony looked up to see Gibbs rise from his chair. “Goin’ for coffee.” The senior agent winked at Tony as he passed by his desk, then called out, “Ziva!”

Ziva sat up straight in her chair and stared at Tony, eyes wide. She popped up, grabbing her bag and running after Gibbs, just in time to follow him into the elevator. Tony’s eyebrows shot up, then he pursed his lips and turned to look at McGee, who was once again watching him. Their eyes met, and McGee swallowed convulsively, quickly turning back to his computer. Tony’s eyes narrowed; he pushed his chair back from his desk, turned it to face McGee, then walked the chair forward as he sat in it until it crashed into the side of McGee’s desk.

“Tony –“

“McGee.” Tony leaned forward. “What is going on?”
“Going on? Nothing.”

“HA! You’ve been watching me and Gibbs all morning. Why?”

McGee glanced at Gibbs’ desk before looking back at Tony. “No reason.”

“Puh-leeze, Probie! You’re watching us. Investigating. Analyzing. Tell me why or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else Gibbs will be the one asking.”

“Gibbs?!”

“He messaged me – messaged me, Probie! – asking why you kept looking at us.”

“He noticed?”

“Duh. Gibbs sees all.”

“Crap.”

“Explain. Now. Or prepare to be head-slapped, and not by me.”

McGee grimaced. “Not here.”

“Then where?”

McGee looked around, then got up and headed for the men’s room. Tony followed, grinning in anticipation. They walked in, checked to make sure the room was empty, and then McGee locked the door. He turned to look at Tony, opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it, looking perturbed.

“Spit it out, McFreak.”

McGee scrunched up his face a bit, obviously trying to figure out what to say. “Look, Tony – I’m sorry. I should’ve been more focused on my work.”

“The question is why you were so focused on us? I was under the impression you’re okay with me and Gibbs.”

“I am!”

“So what is it? Waiting for one of us to screw up?”

“Of course not.”

Tony stared at him for a moment, then flashed a megawatt smile. “Oh, I get it! You’re intrigued. You wanna know what it’s like… thinking about a walk on the wild side, Probie? Gotta say, I’m not interested in sharing Gibbs, and I don’t want anyone other than him… but I bet Abby knows someone –“

“Tony! I’m not interested!”


McGee sighed. “I knew Abby was going to get me in trouble.”
“Abby? What does she have to do with this?”

McGee sighed and his shoulders slumped. “Look, I know that she and Ziva walked in on you guys before the party.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “You know? We swore them to secrecy! She can kiss her Caf-Pows goodbye!”

“Tony… I know Abby promised she wouldn’t say anything.”

“You’re telling me she didn’t say anything?” Tony’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t know sign language.”

“No… she’s really good at charades.”

Tony stifled a laugh. “Okay… so Abby couldn’t help herself, she had to share how amazingly hot Jethro and I are together. Still doesn’t explain why you’re staring at us.” Tony watched the younger man for a moment, then laughed. “Aw, McPrude! You’re blushing!”

McGee rolled his eyes. “Can’t you just drop it?”

“Negatory, good buddy. Spill.”

McGee reached up to rub at his eyes. “Okay, look… Abby, um… informed me of what was going on when they walked in… and she said she was really surprised.”

“Abby was surprised that Jethro and I have sex?”

“Um… not exactly. She was surprised that you appeared to be, um…”

“What? Turned on? Happy? In love?”

“Dominant.”

Tony was speechless. He stared at McGee long enough for the other agent to start fidgeting. “So, what you’re saying is that Abby thinks I’m submissive to Gibbs’ alpha male, that you share those expectations, and that you’ve been watching us all morning looking for hints that Gibbs is my sex slave outside the office. Which is actually a really interesting idea, now that I think of it…” Tony’s eyes shifted away from McGee for a moment before coming back to rest on his face.

“Come on, Tony… you have to admit that it’s difficult to think of Gibbs as anything other than an exclusive top.”

“You actually know what that means, McVirgin?”

“Ha ha. Yes, I know what that means.” McGee cleared his throat. “So, what you’re saying is that you top Gibbs? I find that hard to believe.”

Gibbs leaned in from directly behind McGee, and whispered into his ear. “We switch.”

“Boss!” McGee jumped and spun around, his face paling visibly. “Boss, I, uh…”

Gibbs stared at him. McGee fell silent and looked at the floor.

“My life with Tony,” Gibbs continued, in a quiet voice, “is private. We will share what we choose to share.”
“You choose to share that we switch, Boss?”

Gibbs looked over at Tony and winked. Then he continued in that same quiet voice, “If it gets the rest of our team to focus more on their work and less on our sex life, it’s worth it.” He leaned in closer to McGee, practically whispering. “Don’t make assumptions. And stop speculating.”

McGee flinched. Gibbs shot Tony a wicked smile, then left as soundlessly as he’d come in. McGee exhaled loudly and brought a hand up to his forehead. “I think my life just flashed before my eyes.”

“I can’t believe Gibbs actually publicly admitted something about our sex life,” Tony said, in an admiring tone of voice. “And he used instant messaging. All in one day. I should check my horoscope. Or maybe play the lottery.” He refocused on his teammate. “Gonna be okay, there, Probie?”

McGee muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a swear word. “I am never playing charades with Abby again.”

“Just think,” Tony mused, “now you know a big, juicy piece of gossip that Abby doesn’t know. You can get a lot of mileage out of that.” He clapped McGee on the shoulder and then headed for the door, which was already unlocked.

Gibbs was waiting for him, leaning against the wall outside the bathroom and sipping his coffee. Tony looked at him, a small smile on his face. “You picked the lock.”

“Uh huh.”

“Awfully fast coffee run.”

“Yup.”

“Surprised me there.”

Gibbs looked at him sideways, that half smile appearing on his lips. “Not like they don’t know we have sex. And I doubt McGee will step out of line again anytime soon.”

“Yeah. I think he’s going to need some time in there to recover.” Tony tilted his head to one side as he looked at Gibbs. “And the next time Abby gets nosy, he’ll be more likely to squash the speculation. Ziva?”

“Knows not to cross the line.”

Tony nodded. “Still… thought you were against oversharing.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Give them just enough to think they know something…”

“And they lay off. Nice one, Boss!” Gibbs grinned, then set off for his desk, Tony close behind. “One more question, though… when did you lean to use instant messaging?”

**Dinner On A Tuesday**

Tony inspected his reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of his bathroom door. He was going for upscale casual and felt he’d succeeded. He patted his abdomen and sighed… better not have too much dessert. Moving back to the counter by the sink, he checked his watch and then started fiddling with his hair again. He still had about twenty minutes until Gibbs was supposed to pick him up.
He was looking forward to spending time with Jethro that evening, since they’d been apart the night before. He hadn’t been to his apartment in weeks; they’d gone to their respective homes Monday night so Tony could do things like pay bills, catch up on laundry, and clean out his fridge. Neither man had particularly wanted to spend time away from the other, but it seemed like a good idea. Tony had also drafted a letter to his landlord, stating his intention not to renew his lease; anticipating moving in with Jethro had made him feel better about the temporary separation.

They hadn’t gotten a case. Vance had called the entire team into his office not long after the conversation with McGee in the men’s room. Tony had experienced an unpleasant flashback to that horrible meeting after Jenny’s death when Vance had split up the team, but his trepidation hadn’t been warranted. SecNav wanted an internal review of NCIS’ handling of the bomber case in Seattle, along with an analysis of the communication breakdown following the four bombs that had gone off. The MCRT was taken off rotation to focus on the review, and would likely be at it through the week. Tony had spent the last day and a half at work going through his own reports as well as copies of the ones written by the Seattle agents, looking for patterns and weaknesses.

He froze as he heard his front door open, then relaxed as he heard Jethro’s voice. “Tony?”

“In here, Jeth.”

Jethro appeared in the mirror, standing slightly behind Tony, looking at him admiringly. “Nice.”

Tony grinned at him and gave him a once-over. Dark slacks, blue shirt that matched his eyes, along with the most expensive shoes the man owned. He frowned and turned to face him, reaching for his belt and undoing it.

Jethro’s eyebrows shot up. “Not sure we’ve really got time, Tony.”

Tony snorted. “Sure we do. But that’s not what I’m doing.” He slid the offending belt out of the loops and held it up. “This is brown. Your slacks are charcoal grey and your shoes are black. What were you thinking?”

Jethro’s lips twitched. “It’s my nicest belt.”

Tony rolled his eyes and scooted past Jethro, pinching his rear as he headed for the closet. He reappeared moments later, holding a woven leather black belt with a stylized silver buckle. “This is so much better. Goes with the shoes too.”

Jethro watched as Tony threaded the belt through the loops and fastened it. “Haven’t needed help dressing since I was four,” he commented.

Tony smiled. “Bet you were adorable at four.”

“Ask Jack. I’m sure he’d be happy to show you some pictures.”

“I’ll add that to my to-do list.” Tony stepped back and looked his partner over carefully. “Dahling, you look mahvelous.”

Jethro stared at him. “Must you?”

Tony grinned. “Gotta keep you on your toes.”

Jethro ducked his head a bit and smiled. “You definitely do that.”

Tony popped back into the bathroom, giving his hair one final check. “Hey, I wrote the letter today,
that I won’t be renewing the lease.”

Jethro moved in close and reached out to ruffle Tony’s hair. “That’s great.”

“Jethro! It’s all messy now.”

“I kinda like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Gives you that rugged look.”

Tony stepped back and checked himself out at several different angles. “Huh. Less GQ and more National Geographic. Hey, did you ever look at that magazine for the half-naked women when you were a kid?”

Jethro shook his head and laughed. “We should get going.”

“Yeah, hold on, let me grab the wine.”

“I could have picked something up on the way here.”

Tony stopped and looked at him. “No, you really couldn’t.” He walked into the kitchen and came out cradling a bottle. “Ready when you are.”

“You’re carrying that thing as if it’s a baby.”

“Jethro… this is a 2001 Chappellet Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“That supposed to tell me something?”

Tony sighed. “Let’s go.” He didn’t catch Jethro grinning at him as he headed for the door.

The drive to the Vances’ home didn’t take too long. Jethro drove while Tony held on to the bottle, complaining about the vibrations from the Challenger’s engine and worrying that they would affect the wine. They parked in the driveway and walked side by side to the front door, which opened as they reached it.

Leon Vance stood there, looking at them while they looked back at him.

“Leon,” Gibbs drawled. Tony gave the Director a bright smile and held out the wine as Vance stepped back and gestured for them to enter.

“Gibbs, DiNozzo.”

“Leon! This isn’t work. Jethro, Tony, make yourselves at home.” Jackie came to stand next to her husband, favoring both men with a bright smile and holding out her hand to Gibbs, who gave her a genuine smile, took her hand, and raised it to his lips.

“Thanks for having us over.”

Jackie turned her head and gave him a slightly wicked smile. “Jethro, you are a charmer. Leon, you takin’ notes?”

Vance rolled his eyes and took the bottle from Tony while Jackie waved them in. “Come on in, get comfortable. Dinner will be ready soon.”
Vance’s eyebrows shot up as he looked at the bottle. “This what I think it is?”

Tony nodded. “Probably.”

“Been saving it for a special occasion?”

Tony nodded again. “Figured this qualified.”

“You bring something like this every time, we’ll do this more often.” Vance made a noise of appreciation and clapped Tony on the back.

Gibbs gave him a look of mock horror. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Leon.”

Vance shot him a smile and waved them into the living room while he went to put the wine on the dining room table. Jackie fussed over her guests for a moment, asking what she could get them, then called out to her children. “Kayla, Jared, our friends are here!”


Kayla and Jared came running in, both reaching out to shake hands with Gibbs, who they’d met before. Gibbs smiled at them, then motioned to Tony. “This is my partner, Tony DiNozzo.” Kayla smiled widely at Tony when he kissed the back of her hand and called her ‘Mademoiselle’ and Jared looked him over seriously. “You play video games?”

Tony grinned at him. “I am the king of video games!”

Jared’s eyes lit up, and he turned to his mother. “Mom, can Tony play X-Box with me?”

Jackie hesitated.

“She looked at Tony, who shrugged and smiled. “All right, if Tony doesn’t mind.”

About half an hour later, Gibbs and Vance were standing near the fireplace, talking over the SecNav’s review, while Tony and Jared were racing cars on the flat screen, with Kayla sitting next to Tony and cheering them on.

Vance shook his head. “Looks like you brought a kid to dinner.”

“I did,” Gibbs commented dryly.

“At least he’ll keep you young.”

“That’s for sure.”

Jackie approached them from the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready.”

Vance gave her a smile and a light kiss on the lips as she put her arms around him. “You can tell the kids to stop playing.”

She rolled her eyes at him, then looked at Gibbs. “He tries to get me to do his dirty work all the time.”

Gibbs smiled at her, then gestured toward the three people on the couch. “Jackie… I introduced Tony as my partner, but that could mean work partner. Wasn’t sure if you wanted the kids…” His
voice trailed off.

Jackie reached out and laid her hand on his arm. “We like to be up front with the kids. They know that you two are together.”

Vance spoke up. “Would appreciate you not giving them any show above a PG rating, though.”

Jackie smacked him lightly on the arm. “Jethro’s got too much class for that, Leon!”

Leon blinked and looked at Gibbs, who raised his eyebrows. “The lady of the house is never wrong.”

Jackie smirked at him, then turned toward the couch. “Kids!”

All three heads turned in her direction, causing Vance and Gibbs to share a smirk.

“Dinner’s on!”

Jackie had gone all out on dinner. She had several courses going, including appetizers, salad, and a main dish of grilled steak that went well with Tony’s wine. Gibbs and Tony were seated together on one side of the table, with their hosts at either end and the kids across from them. Tony sat a little stiffly until Gibbs casually reached out and rested his arm around Tony’s shoulders in between the appetizers and the salads. Tony jumped and gave Gibbs a wide-eyed look, which earned peals of laughter from the kids, a smile from Jackie, and a shake of the head from Vance.

Kayla watched them for a moment, apparently gathering her nerve. “Are you guys going to get married?”

“Kayla!” Jackie exclaimed.

Gibbs smiled at her. “We don’t have any plans along those lines just yet.”

She looked disappointed. “Why not?”

Tony cut in before Jackie could reprimand her. “We’ve only been together for a couple of months. I think we need some time before we start thinking about marriage – that’s a pretty big step.”

Kayla’s eyes got dreamy. “It would be so romantic!”

Tony cocked his head. “Have you been talking to Abby?”

“Who’s Abby?”

The conversation flowed easily after that. Kayla advised them to get her father to organize the wedding, since he did such a great job for his friends. That led Vance to tell stories about his college days, which Gibbs followed up with some stories from when he was a kid in Stillwater. Tony told them all about their adventure in the airport with the man with the wooden leg, which earned him a half-hearted glare from Vance but got a lot of laughs from his family.

Jared paid close attention to that story. “So you played a trick on that guy because he was prejudiced?”

“Sure did. Thought it would be better to do that than to get really angry and maybe make things worse.”

Jared looked at him thoughtfully. “There’s this kid at school… he doesn’t like me ‘cause I’m black.”
Tony shook his head. “I’m sorry to hear that. Not fair, is it? People should be judged by how they act, not something like the color of their skin.”

Jared wrinkled his nose. “Yeah. I hit him when he called me a bad name.”

“I kicked him,” Kayla chimed in.

Jackie sighed. “And you both know that reacting with violence doesn’t solve the problem.”

Jared nodded. “Mom took away the X-Box for a whole week,” he said confidentially to Tony.

“That’s pretty heavy-duty. Guess you won’t punch the guy again.”

Jared shook his head. “Can people get in trouble for hating someone for the color of their skin?”

Tony glanced over at Jackie, who waved her hands helplessly. He cleared his throat, and tackled the question. “Sure they can. Depends on what they do, though. People are entitled to their opinions… you just have to hope that they can be smart enough to make up their minds based on the right reasons.”

Gibbs reached over and squeezed Tony’s hand. Tony shot him a look that pleaded for help, but Gibbs just looked back at him and smiled.

Jared sighed as he watched his father get up and clear away the plates. “Do you ever arrest people when they don’t have the right reasons?”

Tony thought about that for a moment. “I used to a lot more when I was a cop, before I came to work at NCIS.”

Kayla spoke up. “Maybe you could come talk at our school! We have a diversity week coming up, and they’re bringing in speakers to talk to us about how important it is to respect people of all kinds.”

She looked at him hopefully.

Tony looked at Gibbs, a bit panicked. Gibbs tilted his head and looked back. “Would be a great thing to do, Tony. You could ask Ziva to go too… she’d have your back.” He grinned suddenly.

Vance spoke up. “Kayla’s got a good idea there. I’ll authorize the release time through HR.”

Jackie smiled. “That sounds wonderful. Tony, thank you so much. Now, who’s up for dessert?”

**Back Home**

Jethro followed Tony into the apartment, dropping his overnight bag next to the door as he threw the deadbolt.

Tony yawned as he headed for the bedroom. “Gonna grab a t-shirt and sweats,” he tossed back over his shoulder.

Jethro picked up his bag and followed him into the room. Tony unbuttoned his shirt, then opened a drawer in his dresser, digging for a t-shirt. “So what were you and Vance talking about there while we finished up our game?”

Jethro followed suit, slipping his shoes off and changing quickly while he talked. “You impressed him tonight. He’s still trying to get used to seeing you as more than an overgrown frat boy. Told me he wants you to consider taking some courses in diplomacy.”

Tony’s head popped through his t-shirt as he tugged it on. “Why would I want to do that?”
“Cause the director of a federal agency needs to have some skills beyond investigating and straight shooting.”

Tony snorted. “Vance is more likely to groom someone like McGee for the position.”

“I’m serious, Tony. You’re definitely on his radar these days.”

“Huh. We’ll see.”

Jethro accepted the comment for what it was and changed the subject. “You were great with the kids.”

“Thanks… it wasn’t easy.”

“Often isn’t. Kids appreciate being talked to like adults, and you did that.”

Tony gathered up their discarded clothes and put them away. “You really think I should talk at their school?”

“If you want to. You’d do a great job, Tony.”

Tony stood there for a moment, thinking, then yawned again. “Maybe I will ask Ziva to go too. She’d probably enjoy it.”

They took turns in the bathroom, then Tony collapsed onto the bed. “Dunno why I’m so tired.”

“You’re settling in again after being away. Took me a few days after I’d get back from deployment, then all of a sudden I’d crash. Shannon always thought it was kind of funny.”

Tony sighed and reached out for Jethro’s hand, then pulled him down onto the bed next to him. “Have you talked to her lately?”

Jethro shook his head. “Nope.”

Tony yawned again. “Damn. I’m sorry, Jeth. I’m not going to be much fun tonight.”

Jethro reached over and ruffled Tony’s hair again. “We don’t have to have sex every night, you know. It’s nice to just be together too.”

They got rid of the t-shirts and sweats, with some grumbling on Tony’s part, wondering why they’d bothered. Then they made their way under the covers, and Tony turned out the light, then settled in, reaching for Jethro’s hand. Their fingers laced together and they lay there for a few minutes, thinking.

“Kelly would have loved you, you know,” Jethro said quietly.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Tony squeezed Jethro’s hand. “You think you’ll ever get to talk to her the way you talk to Shannon?” His voice was quiet, a little tentative.

Jethro sighed. “I hope so.” He was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat. “I miss her.”

Tony rolled over and pulled Jethro into a hug. They hung onto each other for a moment, and then
Tony spoke quietly. “If I could give them back to you, Jeth, I would. In a heartbeat.”

Jethro placed a kiss on Tony’s shoulder. “I know you would. But I’ve got you now, and you make me happy, Tony. Don’t doubt that for a second.”

Tony buried his face in Jethro’s neck and they stayed like that for a while, until they finally fell asleep.
Electronic Communication

*Email from Eddie Wright to Tony DiNozzo, T minus 21 days*

DiNozzo!

Hey, hope you and your ‘girl’ are doing well and that you’re happy back home in D.C. Thought you might want an update on how things are going here on the better coast.

Michaela resigned from NCIS rather than accept reassignment. We all thought it would take longer for Franklin and the Director to make a decision about her and Ryan, but I guess they didn’t want to leave anything in limbo. I think a lot of the agents here are glad to put it all behind us. They offered her a desk position, on international threat assessment, and I guess she had a few choice words in Franklin’s office. Scuttlebutt says she didn’t realize Vance was there on speaker phone; apparently he didn’t like her attitude and told her it was that or leave the agency. I’m hoping I don’t end up having to team up with her if she goes FBI or something.

Ryan fared better; he’s not really suited to threat assessment, so they offered him a position at FLETC, with some of the training classes. We’re all betting that’s temporary, that he’ll be a field agent again somewhere else. No one doubts he’s more likely to learn from the whole thing than Burrows.

Your guy Segel is working out well, so far, anyway. Turns out he and Julie know each other from somewhere… not sure where, but that doesn’t really matter. They get along well and they’re both hard workers. I was expecting a bit of an attitude from him, based on some of the evaluations in his file, but I’m not seeing any of that at all. Guessing I have your team to thank for that… especially your ‘girl’ if ‘her’ reputation is anything close to the truth.

Franklin wants me to choose a more experienced agent to be my SFA, and I’m looking through some files. Don’t suppose you’re available, huh? J/k. We’re restricted to relatively minor cases until I fill that spot, so I’m trying to do it as quickly as possible.

Pretty sure I didn’t thank you enough for recommending me for this team lead. Working with Ryan definitely helped me get ready for it – I think I was doing half his job as well as all of mine. I know I still have to prove myself, but without your recommendation I wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity. So, next time you’re out here, drinks are on me.

A bunch of us are going out tonight, sort of an impromptu wake for Fitzy. Brooke stopped by yesterday, wanted to thank everyone for all the support and everything. Said she got a letter from Director Vance that NCIS is going to help her out with some death benefits, even though they weren’t married yet. Pretty cool, huh? He’s missed here, man… I know it’ll get easier over time, but I keep seeing him everywhere. Must be short on sleep or something.

Hang in there, enjoy being home. Say hi to your ‘girl’ for me – on second thought, maybe not. I’ve heard stories.

Eddie
Email from Tony DiNozzo to Eddie Wright, T minus 19 days

Hey Eddie,

Sorry it’s taken me so long to get back to you – we caught one hell of a case on Thursday, haven’t done much of anything else. Still haven’t gotten it solved, but we’re getting closer… need our resident computer McGeek to do his magic and confirm that we’re on the right track, then we’ll be off to make an arrest. So I may have to cut this short. Can pretty much guarantee Gibbs is gonna catch me at this and give me one heck of a head slap, although being team co-leader means I can reciprocate… although I’d have to do that in private or end up in major trouble.

Moving on before this gets into TMI territory.

Drop it with the ‘girl’, will ya? I don’t need two head slaps! I will say, though, that things are going really well – we’re actually moving in together in 19 days. Not that I’m counting or anything.

Ok, gotta go… McGeek just gave Gibbs the bat signal. That’s good news about Brooke, btw. Sure as hell hope Burrows doesn’t end up in our neck of the woods… FBI has a habit of taking in our cast offs. Yikes – gotta run, I’m getting the glare.

T

Email from Eddie Wright to Tony DiNozzo, T minus 19 days

You guys have the weirdest relationship.

Excerpts from an email from Jimmy Palmer to Kevin Segel, T minus 18 days

… so are you really sure that you guys are just friends? Cause the way you’re talking about her, it just seems as though maybe there’s something more there. It kind of reminds me of some friends I had in college…

… There’s not really all that much going on here. Everything’s pretty much as it was before you left, except for Tony being back. Dr. Mallard says the team will probably get a new rookie soon. Oh, you know, there’s one strange thing going on. Agent Gibbs isn’t bringing Abby her Caf-Pows anymore. That’s huge. She’s making McGee get them. I asked her why, and she just glared at me and ordered me out of her lab. So then I asked McGee what was going on, and he said I definitely did not want to know. I asked Tony and he just grinned at me and made another gremlin joke. I actually missed those while he was gone.

Email from Tony DiNozzo to Jackson Gibbs, T minus 7 days

Hey, Jack!

It was great to get that email from you. For some reason I’m always surprised there’s a Gibbs who actually likes to use modern technology.

Thanks for that invitation - I’ll work on Jethro, see if we can make it back to Stillwater for Thanksgiving. I’d love to be there – never done a small town for the holidays. I guess it’ll depend on whether we’re on call that weekend.

And thanks so much for your kind words about my moving in with Jethro. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’re so ready to welcome me to the family. I know I can never replace Shannon and Kelly, but I do think I can make him happy. You said you see a change in him since you were here around Christmas – that’s great to know. I’ve always had his six, ever since he
recruited me to NCIS. Now I just get to do it outside of work too.

You asked about my family… there’s just my dad now. And, well, no, I don’t think you’ll get a chance to meet him anytime soon. He’s what I guess you’d call a jet-setter – flies all over the world, looking for investments in his latest business project. We don’t really talk all that often; he’s just a busy man, you know?

*IM Conversation between Jethro Gibbs and Tobias Fornell, T minus 5 days*

*lj_gibbs:* Tobias.

*T_fornell:* What the hell? Gibbs? Since when do you IM?

*lj_gibbs:* Is that really important?

*T_fornell:* It is if the universe is going to implode or something.

*lj_gibbs:* According to Abby, we’re safe now.

*T_fornell:* I don’t get it.

*lj_gibbs:* You don’t need to.

*T_fornell:* Is there a purpose to this, or do you just like making my life difficult?

*lj_gibbs:* You busy Saturday?

*T_fornell:* Depends. Why are you asking?

*lj_gibbs:* Could use some help with moving.

*T_fornell:* Are you going back to Mexico?

*lj_gibbs:* Don’t be an idiot. Tony’s moving in with me.

*T_fornell:* You’re joking.

*lj_gibbs:* Nope.

*T_fornell:* You do know he’s not a redhead.

*lj_gibbs:* Funny man. You gonna help or not?

*T_fornell:* I’ll think it over.

*lj_gibbs:* Bring beer.

*T_fornell:* I said I’ll think it over.

*lj_gibbs:* Good beer, not that crap you drink.

*T_fornell:* Yeah, that’s incentive. Hey, what can you tell me about a former NCIS agent, Michaela Burrows?

*lj_gibbs:* Very little. Talk to DiNozzo if you want first hand info. What is it with you fibbies taking our left overs?
T_fornell: Was that a personal dig? Cause if it was, you can expect crappy beer on Saturday.

**Moving Day**

*At the House*

Gibbs clapped Palmer on the shoulder as the two men stepped back from the couch they’d just moved from the living room to the basement. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

Palmer pushed his glasses back up on his nose and smiled. “No problem, Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs sighed. “Just Gibbs, Jimmy.”

“Oh, yeah… Gibbs. Um, I’ll work on that.”

Ducky had suggested moving the couch downstairs when it was clear that Tony’s huge leather piece was going to have to go in the living room. Gibbs hadn’t been too sure about that, thinking of sawdust, but Tony loved the idea, and his enthusiasm was infectious. It also helped that Tony promised to vacuum it regularly.

Gibbs led the way back upstairs and into the kitchen, grabbing a water bottle from the fridge as he looked around. Some of his older furniture was going to Goodwill; he and Tony had moved most of it out into the driveway for pickup later that morning. Tony’s couch, armchair, and coffee table were replacing the living room furniture. They’d agreed to go shopping for a couple more chairs later on.

Tony’s bed was also taking over, joined by the comfortable chair Gibbs liked from Tony’s apartment bedroom. Gibbs’ handmade dresser was staying, as was the rest of the furniture he’d made over the years. Tony’s new DVD cabinet, that they’d finished together just the past week, had a place of honor in the living room; his large flat-screen TV and DVD player were already in place and hooked up. His clothes had made their way over from the apartment in bits and pieces over the past several weeks, as had the massive DVD collection.

Ducky looked up from his position at the kitchen counter, where he was working on sandwiches for lunch. “Where are the others, Jethro?”

Gibbs had some more water, then set the bottle on the counter. “McGee drove Tony over to the rental place to get the truck. Abby and Ziva were meeting them at the apartment; they’ll get the truck loaded, then the guys will head back here while the others do the last minute cleaning.”

Ducky nodded. “Highly efficient. I commend you on your organization.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Wasn’t me. Abby assigned roles.”

Ducky chuckled. “That girl never ceases to amaze me.” He peered at Gibbs over the rim of his glasses. “When are you going to let her know you forgive her?”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow and looked at him.

Ducky shook his head. “Please, Jethro. When you stopped bringing the poor thing her beverage of choice, she came to me in absolute despair.”

Gibbs sighed. “I’ll bring her a Caf-Pow on Monday.”

Ducky reached over and patted Gibbs on the hand. “Good man.”

They heard the front door open and shut, then Fornell’s voice calling Gibbs name. Gibbs pushed off
the counter and walked to the entryway. Fornell stood there, looking around, six-pack of beer dangling from one hand.

“Tobias.”

“Jethro.”

Fornell extended the arm with the beer; Gibbs took it and frowned. “This is your crap beer.”

“Yeah. That’s for you. Good stuff is in the car in a cooler.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes and went back to the kitchen to put the beer in the fridge. Fornell walked into the living room, looking at the TV, the cabinet, and the empty space where the couch and chairs used to be. He shook his head. “Can’t believe this is for real.”

Gibbs moved to stand next to him. “It is.”

“Guess I’ll have to knock from now on.”

“Good idea.”

Fornell shook his head. “It really is hard to believe, Jethro. I mean, come on… at your age?”

Gibbs shot him a half-hearted glare, then raised his eyebrows. “Just ‘cause you’re not getting any…”

Fornell snorted. “I’ll stick to women, thanks.”

Gibbs’ lips twitched. “Your loss.”

Fornell gave him an incredulous look. “You’ve got what, one data point?”

Gibbs turned to look at him. “One guy. Lots more than just one data point.”

Fornell held up a hand, palm out. “I don’t want to know.”

Coming Home

Tony tilted his head from side to side, stretching his neck as he drove. He was following McGee’s car, but wasn’t really seeing it. His mind was more occupied with what this trip represented, and his driving was on autopilot. This is crazy. Is this crazy? I’m moving in with Jethro. Half my stuff is already at his place. Hard to believe this is my life. Who’d a thunk it, back in Baltimore, that day I tackled the Navy guy. ‘Let me catch him’ my ass. I wasn’t kidding about those tube socks. Should’ve known something was up, didn’t argue for jurisdiction as much as I normally would have. Me, share a case? Ha. Wonder what Danny’s doing these days. Stop. Happy thoughts. I hope my couch fits in the living room. Of course it fits. Jethro measured it himself. No way he screwed that up. Screwing up… I hope I don’t screw this up. I shouldn’t… no question we’re compatible. I wonder if this was all meant to be. What would Abby say? Better not ask, I’ll get a really long explanation that I can’t understand. Wonder if Jethro ever thought this was possible. We’ve never said we ever thought about us seriously before that night in the basement… that was around three months ago. Damn. Are we doing this too fast?

Tony’s phone rang with McGee’s ringtone, startling him out of his thoughts. He picked up. “What’s going on?”

“I was going to ask you that. You’re drifting out of your lane.”
“Oops. Thanks, Tim.”

Tony hung up and focused on driving for the rest of trip.

He backed the truck into the driveway; it was clear, so the Goodwill pick up must have happened. *Either that or Jethro changed his mind and brought the furniture back in*, he though with a grin on his face. He hopped down from the cab and headed into the house, following McGee.

Gibbs came out of the kitchen, followed by Fornell. Tony raised an eyebrow at him, then grinned at Gibbs and leaned in to drop a quick kiss on his lips. “Honey, I’m home.”

Gibbs returned the smile. “Good.”

Tony turned to Fornell. “Did you bring good beer?”

Fornell rolled his eyes. “You guys share some sort of group mind?”

Tony and Gibbs looked at each other, then at Fornell. “No,” they said, in perfect unison.

Fornell gave an exaggerated shudder. “That’s creepy. I need more alcohol.” He headed back into the kitchen.

Gibbs watched him go, then turned back to Tony, pulling him close and into a hug. “Glad you’re here, Tony.”

Tony buried his face in Gibbs’ neck, then nipped lightly at his skin before stepping back. “Me too. Can we sneak away for a quickie?”

Gibbs let loose with a surprised laugh. “No, we can’t. Let’s get that furniture moved, people fed, and then after they leave we can think about it.”

Tony reached out and gripped the back of Gibbs’ head. “I won’t be wanting a quickie after they all leave.”

The sound of a throat clearing off to the side prompted them to turn and look. McGee stood there, a smile on his face. “You know, you guys should have gotten together years ago.”

Tony slung and arm around Gibbs’ shoulders. “Why’s that?”

“Gibbs would have been so much easier to deal with.”

They worked on unloading the truck; Fornell helped Gibbs, Tony, McGee, and Palmer, while Ducky observed and made suggestions.

Ziva and Abby arrived after all the big pieces were situated. Abby conferred with Tony for a moment about the apartment, then greeted everyone else while Ziva immediately jumped into the back of the truck to help finish the unloading. Gibbs jumped down out of the truck and approached Abby, who gave him a tentative smile. Gibbs pulled her into a hug and whispered n her ear; Abby’s smile grew and she hugged him back fiercely. Tony saw them as he handed a box down to McGee and paused for a moment to watch, smiling broadly. McGee followed his gaze.

“He’s finally forgiven her?”

Tony shook his head. “He was never really angry with her. Just wanted to make a point.”

Abby looked up into Gibbs’ face as she pulled back. “Caf-Pows are so much better when you bring
them.”

Gibbs reached out and tapped her on the nose. “Don’t let it happen again and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“I won’t! It will never happen again, Gibbs, I promise.”

Gibbs kissed her hair. “Don’t make promises you’re gonna break, Abs.”

“Keep your door locked and I won’t have to,” Abby replied, grinning at him.

He reached out and gave her a gentle tap on the head, which made her smile even wider.

Lunchtime Conversation

Furniture and boxes unloaded, truck returned, the whole group sat around the coffee table in the living room, eating the sandwiches Ducky had prepared, along with salad from Ziva and Abby. Gibbs sat at the end of the couch, with Abby curled into his side and Ducky on the couch at the other end. Tony sat on the floor at the end of the coffee table, near the fireplace, with McGee and Palmer on the floor along the long end of the table. Fornell had taken over Tony’s armchair. He’d eaten quickly, and now sat back with another beer, watching the rest of them interact.

The conversation turned to Stillwater and Jack; Abby had hoped he would be there for the move. Gibbs shook his head. “He prefers a quieter visit.”

Tony looked at him. “Jack wants us to go back for Thanksgiving.”

“If we’re not on call.”

“Maybe he can come here for Christmas again?” Abby asked.

Tony nodded. “Sounds good, although I’m still hoping to get Jethro to Hawaii.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes, but reached out over the arm of the couch to take Tony’s hand.

“Will we be off rotation this year?” Ziva asked. “I would not mind going somewhere tropical.”

Gibbs tilted his head. “I’ll talk to Vance. We’ve worked the holidays the past few years; we’re entitled to a break.”

Fornell looked at their joined hands, shook his head and took another sip of his beer. “Hey, DiNutzo.”

Tony turned to look at him, still holding on to Gibbs.

“What do you think of Michaela Burrows? Should we take her on?”

Tony snorted. “Sure, if you want someone who puts her own ambitions over her team’s safety.”

Fornell shot a look at Gibbs, who met his gaze squarely. “Only agent we lost in the bombing was on her team.”

The FBI agent shook his head. “Her negligence?”

“In part, yeah,” Tony replied.
“Thanks for the heads up.”

Gibbs saluted Fornell with his beer. Fornell returned the gesture, settling back again to watch the group as they all talked and laughed. He finally had one last sip of his beer, then stood. “Gonna head out; I’ve got Emily tonight.”

Gibbs moved to get up, but Fornell waved him down. “I know where the door is.” He looked between his friend and Tony. “Gotta say, I never thought this would go anywhere… but now I think you guys’ll make it work. I also think you’re crazy – but you’ll make it work.”

Gibbs grinned at him. “Thanks, Tobias.”

Fornell shrugged. “Don’t mention it. Everyone…” He tossed a wave at the room, then headed for the door.

Abby smiled, looking at the smile on Gibbs’ face. She turned to Ducky and whispered, “6.8.”

Ducky’s smile broadened significantly when Gibbs looked at her and snorted. “That was a 7.3. Don’t shortchange me, Abs.”

Abby gaped at him, then shot Tony an accusing glare. “Tony! I can’t believe you betrayed the op!”

Tony shook his head vigorously. “No way, Abs. I never said anything to him.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but Gibbs leaned over and laid his finger over her lips. “He didn’t. I’ve known about the GSS since not long after I came back from Mexico.”

“What gave it away, Boss?” McGee asked.

“ Heard Duck talking to Palmer… ‘it will be much easier to collect data for the GSS now that Agent Gibbs has shaved off that infernal moustache.’” There were giggles all around at Gibbs’ truly wretched imitation of Ducky’s accent. “After that, it wasn’t hard to listen carefully and figure out what the GSS was.”

“Listen carefully, huh? That means you used your Marine superpowers to sneak around and spy on them,” Tony said, laughing.

“You don’t mind?” Abby asked.

Gibbs shook his head. “Nope. Was kind of nice knowing you guys were glad to have me back.”

Abby threw her arms around him and hugged him hard. “How could you doubt it?”

Gibbs glanced over at Tony, who squeezed the hand he was still holding. Tony smiled at him, and then Ziva spoke up.

“I have a question for you, Tony.”

He looked at her warily. “What?”

“Would you still want to kiss Gibbs if he grew that moustache back?”

Everyone looked at Tony, who stared at her, then at Gibbs, than back at her. “I plead the Fifth,” he declared.

“That’s a no,” McGee said, earning laughs from everyone in the room.
Together

Jethro watched Tony as he sat on the living room floor, organizing his books into the shelves that had been cleared out for him. Tony was humming to himself as he worked; Jethro didn’t recognize the tune but he thought it might be some Broadway thing.

The humming stopped. “I can feel you watching me, you know.” Tony turned around and smiled at Jethro, who was leaning against the edge of the wall separating the living room from the hallway.

Jethro smiled back. “You look happy.”

“I am.” Tony looked around at the transformed room. “It sort of feels like home already. And our friends helped, which was awesome. Why’d you invite Fornell?”

Jethro shrugged. “He’s a friend. Didn’t want to leave him out… figure if we include him, he’ll go to bat for us someday if we need it.”

Tony nodded, leaning back on his hands and looking at Jethro thoughtfully. “Know what I want to do?”

Jethro shook his head.

Tony got to his feet and walked over to his partner, reaching out to take his hand, then led him toward the basement. Jethro followed, smiling.

The younger man turned on the lights for the stairs, but left the rest of the room in relative darkness. He tugged Jethro down the stairs and around the corner to the old couch’s new resting place, then sat down and pulled Jethro down next to him. Jethro put his arm around Tony’s shoulders and they sat there for a moment, looking at the work table. “What do you think you’ll build next?”

Jethro shook his head. “Not sure. Thought maybe we could build a boat together… go sailing when it’s done.”

“Would be tough to sail it before it’s done.”

Jethro reached up and gave Tony a light head smack. Tony laughed and took hold of the front of Jethro’s shirt, pulling him in for a kiss. Jethro shifted over, turning to face Tony and reached up with both hands, placing one on the back of Tony’s neck while the other went to his hair, stroking the back of Tony’s head and running his fingers through it. Tony sighed and into the kiss, then moved forward a bit, pressing against his lover while deepening the kiss, running his tongue over Jethro’s lips before exploring his mouth.

Jethro growled low in his throat and moved one hand down to Tony’s shirt, pulling it out of his jeans and dipping underneath it feel the skin of Tony’s abdomen, then running his fingers up to his chest, playing with his hair. Tony pulled back after a moment and pulled his shirt off over his head, then helped Jethro do the same with his own clothes.

They stayed like that for a while, kissing and nipping at mouths, necks, faces. There were no words, just light sounds of appreciation mixed in with their breathing. Jethro leaned in to nip at Tony’s earlobe, then licked and kissed his way down to Tony’s chest, playing with his nipples until Tony was writhing and pushing against him, wordlessly asking for more. Jethro then went to work on Tony’s jeans, unfastening them and reaching in to palm his buttocks, earning a gasp and hum of pleasure. Tony shifted forward to return the favor; they worked their way out of the rest of their clothes until they sat naked on the couch, looking at each other.
Jethro pulled Tony close, one arm around his waist while the other went to the back of his head, and just held him, reveling in the feel of skin on skin. “Welcome home, Tony,” he whispered in his ear.

A small sound escaped Tony’s lips; he gripped Jethro tightly. “Home… this is real, isn’t it?”

“It’s real.”

Tony pulled back and kissed Jethro deeply, then moved to lie back on the couch. “Make love to me, Jethro?” He reached between the cushion and the arm of the couch, pulling out a small tube and handing it to him.

Jethro grinned as he took the lube. “Always prepared.”

“For this? Absolutely.”

Jethro took his time prepping Tony, making it as sensual an experience as he could… light, gentle strokes over Tony’s anus and into the passage, stretching him while driving him almost senseless with slow, passionate kisses. When he finally entered Tony, his lover inhaled a shuddering breath, and Jethro blinked back the tears in his own eyes. He leaned down to gently kiss Tony’s lips. “How do you want this?”

Tony looked up at him, forcing Jethro to blink rapidly again with the look of absolute devotion on his face. “Slow. Make it last, Jeth.”

Jethro nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and went into a rhythm of deep, slow thrusts, sliding as far in as he could, holding himself in place for a second, then pulling almost all the way back out, then back in again… repeating it over and over until it became something he almost couldn’t change. Tony held on to him tightly, murmuring words of love in between gasps of pleasure and small cries of passion.

Eventually Jethro’s entire body was trembling with the effort to draw it out, and both men were gasping for breath. Tony reached up and pulled Jethro’s face next to his, whispering in his ear. “Just like this, Jeth… come just like this, don’t change a thing, just let it happen.”

Jethro could feel Tony’s own body shaking, his erection hot and heavy, trapped between them. He kept moving at the same slow pace, gasping with each thrust, feeling his release building up, craving it yet trying to hold it at bay for just a little longer.

Sounds were escaping from each of them with every breath: cries of ‘oh, god’ mixed in with their names and expressions of passion. Finally Jethro couldn’t hold back any longer, and with a low sound that was a cross between a growl and a roar he climaxed deep into Tony’s body, feeling his lover contracting around him as he released between them, half-screaming Jethro’s name.

Neither man was sure how long it was before they were aware of anything except each other. They lay there for a while, stroking and kissing, until Tony finally stretched and reached for his shirt to wipe himself off. Jethro sat up and watched him for a moment, leaning in to kiss Tony again when he was done.

Tony reached up and laid his hand on the side of Jethro’s face. “That was perfect, Jeth. Thanks.”

Jethro smiled. “I don’t know about perfect… but we can keep trying until I’m sure.”

Tony gave him a brilliant smile. “I’m all for that.” He sat back against the couch and looked around the basement. Jethro saw his expression change, his eyes widening, before Tony turned to look at him. “Um… you don’t suppose Shannon just watched us, do you.”
Jethro blinked. “Good question.” He looked around the room. “I don’t think she’d do that… would you, Shan?”

They held their breath, waiting for an answer, but none came. Tony exhaled, looking relieved. Jethro gave him a half-smile. “Would it bother you if she did?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.” Tony looked at him thoughtfully. “I know she’s still in here –“ he reached out to lay his hand on Jethro’s chest, over his heart, “and always will be. I hadn’t really thought about it in this context, though.”

For your information, I would never spy on you like that… at least not intentionally. However… if you boys are going to insist on sitting around with no clothes on, eventually a girl is going to give in to temptation.

A high-pitched ‘eep’ came out of Tony’s mouth, and he grabbed a cushion to cover his groin. Jethro laughed, feeling only happiness at having Shannon included in this homecoming, however bizarre it might really be.

Don’t worry, Tony, I’m not looking.

“Promise?” Tony’s face was turning red.

I promise. I won’t ever spy on you two, I swear. I’m only here because I could feel how happy you both were, and I wanted to welcome you home too, Tony.


I know you will, and I’m glad Jethro has a reason to take better care of himself now.

“I am sitting right here, you know.”

Believe me, I noticed. You look wonderful, Jethro.

Jethro smiled. “You’re going to make Tony jealous.”

Tony shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I can make an exception. I think.”

Shannon laughed. I’ll leave you two alone. Be happy… I’ll try to stay away until you call me.

“Love you, Shannon,” Jethro called out, taking Tony’s hand and squeezing it as he did.

Shannon’s voice sounded very quiet in his ear. I love you too, Jethro.

Tony and Jethro were both silent for a few minutes, then Jethro turned and looked at Tony. “You okay with what just happened?”

Tony nodded. “Strangely enough, yeah. It’s like… like we’re a family.”

Jethro smiled and pulled Tony in for a kiss. “Yeah.”

“As you okay with it? You don’t feel, I dunno, like you’re betraying her or something?”

Jethro shook his head. “She encouraged me to pursue this with you, remember?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I do.” He smiled and leaned in to gently nip Jethro’s neck. “Okay, time to get up.” He stood, tossing the cushion back on the couch and reaching out to give Jethro a hand up.
They gathered up their clothes and headed upstairs, making their way to the bedroom, where Jethro gave Beaker the obligatory head slap as they entered.

The clothes went into the hamper in the bathroom, and both men headed for the bed, curling up together with legs entwined, Jethro once again using Tony as a body pillow.

Tony absently ran his hand along Jethro’s arm. “What do you want to do tomorrow?” he asked, his voice loud in the darkness. He could feel Jethro shrug.

“Hang out here. Finish unpacking your stuff. Make love a few times. Sleep in and listen to the birds singing in the morning.”

Jethro didn’t have to wait long for Tony’s response.

“That’s what the bird singing thing was about! I meant to ask you, but kept forgetting. You’ve been thinking about me moving in for a while, haven’t you?”

“Yup. Figured we know each other well enough already, why wait?”

Tony grinned. “Jethro, you never cease to amaze me.”

It was silent in the room for a while; Jethro would have thought Tony fell asleep, except for the fact that his lover was still caressing his arm.

“You know,” Tony said, “I still think we should take a trip to Hawaii.”

End

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder that this series went AU after the seventh season episode Obsession... so what might seem like an inconsistency in Tony's thoughts in this chapter isn't. The events after that episode either haven't happened yet in this 'verse or never will.

This second epic on the FIOverse is done... it was tough to let it go. There's more to come in this series; it's not over by a long shot! Thanks to everyone who's read it, enjoyed it, and reviewed it.

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