Wrong at the Top of my Voice

by cyndrarae

Summary

DiNozzo has always looked up to Gibbs as a father figure. But after the Frog debacle and a year full of lies and deception, Tony realizes the grave error he’s made all these years – he never asked if Gibbs wanted the job in the first place. Enter disgraced marine Damon Werth, the man who couldn’t be more Gibbs-Junior if he tried. And it’s like Tony is eleven again, teetering on the edge of abandonment, fighting to hold on even though he knows he’ll lose again. Except 'abandoned' isn’t all that Tony is feeling. How screwed up must he be to feel both jealous of and attracted to one guy at the same time? AU set after S5E10 (Corporal Punishment)

Notes

I’ve very recently started writing in NCIS so apologies if I’m stepping on any proverbial fandom toes with this. I just had a huge craving to read Damon/Tony which I didn’t find enough of, and am hoping you guys would give this a try too. Some creative liberties – Tony is 33 not 37. Damon’s background is slightly re-invented. Quotes in the beginning of each chapter are from Breakfast at Tiffany’s. More author notes and references at the end including a refresher for S5E10.

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Eleven-year old Tony ran as hard as he could.

It was a late summer evening. The boy had been perched on top of his favorite pine tree when he spotted his father’s limousine two hills away. Without a care for life or limb, he climbed down swiftly and recklessly like only kids could. The DiNozzo estate stretched across acres and acres and his pre-teen legs could only carry him so fast. But he wouldn’t give up, adamant to not miss this rare opportunity to see his father.

By the time he reached the house, his baby blue t-shirt stuck to his back and he was panting so hard he could barely speak. He didn’t stop though and barged right through the doors of the mansion, looking around fervently for his dad. He finally found him in the library.

“Ah, Junior! There you are!” His father called out with a smile. Tony’s face broke into a wide grin mirroring his dad’s. But before he could find the breath to respond, Senior turned away.

“That’s when Tony noticed the presence of two strangers in his home. One was a stern looking woman sitting in one of their antique straight-backed armchairs. She looked older than his mom. Actually, she looked older than his dad too. She had black hair pulled up into a tight bun, and blood red lipstick lined her thin, pursed lips. She was dressed in an elegant black dress that went all the way down to her ankles and split open mid-thigh, giving Tony a glimpse of a black lace garter that he found more interesting than the woman herself.

So this was the woman his father had married. Sure he’d been told about it, by the housekeeping staff, but he hadn’t been invited to the wedding so it was his first time meeting her. He’d figured (after getting over the shock of it all) if Senior needed another wife to get over the loss of his first wife, then so be it. Maybe if Senior was happy again, he’d be willing to spend some time with Tony again.

“This is Baroness Jannelli, all the way from Sicily. Can you tell us where Sicily is, Junior?”

Tony blinked, still processing everything that was going on. “Uh, Italy?”

Senior grinned proudly, although mostly he looked relieved that Tony hadn’t given the wrong answer. “Atta boy, come here, give your mother a kiss.”

All Tony wanted was to do was jump up into Senior’s arms and cling to him with all his might. Instead, the moment he walked into his father’s reach, Senior shoved him towards the Baroness, who scanned the unkempt little boy drenched in sweat from head to toe and did not look too happy at the prospect of being touched by him. They got through the formality and Tony stepped back quickly, looking up at his dad with hopeful eyes. Maybe he could get a hug now?

“Come here,” Senior ushered him towards the other end of the room where stood another tall individual, a young boy, way older than Tony but way younger than the grown-ups. “This is Sebastian Jannelli. He is nineteen years old, and he’s your new big brother. Didn’t you always want
a big brother, Junior?”

“Not really.”

Senior ignored that and pushed Tony closer to the other boy, who looked down the length of his
ox at Tony with a strange, crooked smile. It was the way Ethan, that jerk in seventh grade, would
smile just before ramming Tony hard against the lockers. Sebastian had the same jet black hair as the
Baroness. And he was dressed in an equally formal black tux with white shirt and a black bow tie.
He stood buck straight with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Pleasure to meet you, Junior.” He drawled in a slightly foreign accent and held out a hand. Tony
didn’t like being called Junior by anyone other than Dad, and scrunched up his nose. Senior cleared
his throat reminding Tony of his manners. Reluctantly, he put his smaller hand in Sebastian’s larger
one, allowing it to be shaken lightly.

Sebastian smirked again. “I see the boy has been climbing some trees in your absence, Father.”

Tony scowled harder. No one called his father ‘Father’ except him. No one! At least, they were not
supposed to.

Senior chuckled again. “Ah yes, I’m afraid my various enterprises have kept me too busy to see to
the boy’s discipline. But we’ll be fixing that pretty soon, don’t you worry, S-Sebastian.”

At least his father hadn’t called the rascal ‘son’, although for a second, it’d seemed like he was going
to.

“The Livorno Naval Academy has been an absolute blessing for my Sebastian over the years,” the
Baroness spoke for the first time, addressing Senior directly. “Surely, Anthony should have the same
privilege and opportunity, don’t you think, darling?”

If Tony looked alarmed, he didn’t know it. He did see a flicker of hesitation cross his dad’s face, but
Senior suppressed it immediately. “Excellent idea, darling! This country has some very prestigious
military academies of its own. I’ll have someone put together a list of options tomorrow.”

“You mean, like a boarding school?” Tony asked, not sure he was following.

Everyone laughed, except him, but no one bothered to explain or even answer his question.
Sebastian interrupted with a question about one of the paintings on the wall and everyone started
yapping about some guy called Rembrandt that Tony couldn’t care less about.

The child felt dizzy. He couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. First his dad brings home a new wife
and a new…son. And now he was thinking of sending Tony away?

Gingerly he walked up to his dad, who by now had one arm around Sebastian’s shoulder and was
laughing very loudly about something the teenager had just said. Tony bit his lip and raised a
trembling hand to tug at his dad’s sleeve.

Senior turned, looking a little annoyed. “Junior? You look like a street rat! Why don’t you go wash
up and get ready for dinner?”

Tony swallowed. “Dad, I-I don’t want to go to military school.”

Senior’s face hardened, prompting Tony to rush to explain. What could he say to make that furious
look go away? What could he do to make dad not send him away?
“I-I just think Mommy wouldn’t like it. She was always talking about how the military was bad and guns were bad and…”

His father’s eyes softened at first, but then quickly turned to stone. “Enough, Junior. Do as you’re told.”

With that he turned his back to Tony once again, calling for Betsy, the nanny, to come and take the boy away. Tony was dismissed.

The eleven-year old bit his lip hard to keep the sobs at bay. He knew how much his dad hated it when Tony cried in his presence. He couldn’t stop the tears from rolling down his eyes though. Fortunately, Senior wasn’t looking at him anymore so it wasn’t a problem.

As he was led out, Tony caught the threads of a new conversation between the Baroness, who would never be his mother, and his dad. “Darling, is this how it’s going to be? Living with constant reminders of your first wife in this house so stiflingly full of her memories?”

“Oh n-no, no, we don’t have to stay here, darling! I’ll take you to Long Island tomorrow to show you my other estate. I’m sure you’ll love it – it’s bigger.”

Tony felt helpless and angry and would have very much liked to throw a fit, except, those things stopped working long time ago when mom died. His tummy felt weird and his eyes wouldn’t stop tearing up and it wasn’t pain like from a scraped knee or a broken arm. But it hurt, very, very much. He didn’t know what it was called, or why he couldn’t explain it or even express how he felt to anyone. Who’d listen anyway? There was no one.

In the decades that followed, many stepmothers (and step-siblings) came and went, but Tony never returned to that house in the Hamptons he grew up in, ever again.

Years later, Anthony DiNozzo would look back at that moment and know the exact words to describe what he’d felt that late summer evening. He would know that was the moment he had been truly abandoned by the one person who was supposed to love him forever.

He would also remember craning his neck back one last time, one last hope brimming in his eyes, to seek out his dad. Instead he’d found Sebastian, staring back at him with a spiteful and triumphant sneer curling around his lips.

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Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs donned his coat and glanced around the bullpen. The lights were out, and he was the only one left in the building, other than security. He’d allowed his team to leave early to recover from a long injurious week, for once letting reports be pending for another day or two.

He smiled as he looked over at Timothy McGee’s desk – the tech expert on his team had been striving so hard to work around (or despite) his dislocated shoulder. Good thing McGee wasn’t a slave to his mouse like the rest of them; he’d figured out all those… whatever the hell he called it, oh right, keyboard shortcuts. But it had to be annoying – that one-handed typing. Hell, two-hand typing wasn’t all that appealing to Gibbs to begin with.

Officer David, over at the diagonally opposite end of the squad room, had fared better, which of course she ought to. Gibbs thought back to events of the day before inside the hospital room, how she’d stopped a delirious and rampaging Werth in his tracks with just a look. Gibbs smiled; guess
there were a few tricks he could still teach Ziva after all. And she was learning fast, he mused proudly.

On his way out, he crossed his senior field agent’s desk and paused. “DiNozzo”, he muttered under his breath with exasperation, as always. That dislocated nose would do nothing to abate the kid’s vanity, but it sure would be cause for hell for the rest of them. DiNozzo on painkillers… Gibbs shook his head again and then remembered something.

Coming around to behind DiNozzo’s desk, he tried the lowest drawer. It was unlocked. Half-drugged as he’d been, the younger agent probably forgot how zealously he usually guarded the contents inside. Pulling it open, Gibbs scattered the neatly stacked boxes around until he found the one he wanted. His Silver Star, the third highest military award designated solely for heroism in combat. He shut the drawer carelessly and stalked out, mentally planning the shortest route to Maryland at this hour of the night.

Gibbs knew it’d be awhile before DiNozzo discovered the missing medal, and so what if he did? They were his winnings after all; he could do whatever the hell he wanted with them. And right then, all he could think of was a wounded marine, a fallen hero, someone who deserved that medal more than a file cabinet did.

Gibbs convinced himself DiNozzo wouldn’t care.

Twenty-five minutes later, he was at Bethesda Naval hospital, walking into Corporal Damon Werth’s room with stealth and purpose. The latter he had plenty of, the former he thought he’d have no issues with. Served him right to try and sneak up on a marine, even a barely conscious one.

Damon stirred and looked up at him just as Gibbs was placing the medal on his bedside table. Their eyes met and no words were needed. The NCIS agent knew a kindred spirit when he met one, and he hadn’t met one for decades, not since Franks. The young marine had struck a chord closer to home than Mike ever did. He was driven and focused, rebellious and patriotic. Loyal to a fault. Desperate to the point of self-destruction.

Gibbs saw in his eyes the same fire that had once fueled him as a youth. Sure they may have both started out wanting nothing more than to prove themselves to their fathers. But that was not why they stayed with the Corps. That was not why they put their lives and limbs, their very sanities at risk, over and over again.

“Agent Gibbs,” the soft husk of a voice stopped him before he could turn to leave. “I-I… need to hear you say it.”

“What?”

Damon’s eyes watered. “No such thing as an ex-marine, right?”

Gibbs swallowed, hard. “That’s right, son.”

With a rare suppression of his usual anti-social instincts, he settled into the chair next to Damon’s bed. “No such thing.”

Gibbs knew what it felt like to have the ground snatched away from under one’s feet, which is what the Corps was to a marine. He stayed by Werth’s side all night, unwilling to let him wake up alone to a world he was not going to like very much.

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Tony shouldn’t have been driving, he knew that. Gibbs would know it too, and probably head-slap him all the way into next week and back for it. But that was perfectly okay, the head-slapping, it was more than his own dad ever did for him, no matter how reckless he got trying to catch his attention.

No wonder Tony grew up to be such a pest, he thought sardonically. He tried to snigger through the haze of pain surrounding his face, neck and head, but quickly gave it up. It hurt too much.

DiNozzo on painkillers was never a good idea. They made him loopy and light-headed and swoon-ready, which might be a good look on women but surely not on a ‘manly’ man like him. He was never sure of where he was, or what he was doing, or saying to whom. Just yesterday, he’d walked up to Madame Director and told her how alluring she looked despite her uncanny resemblance to Peter Pan. He didn’t even want to think of what he might have said (admitted? promised?) to Ziva to make her smile so very sinisterly at him all day.

For all he knew it might even be genetic, considering that’s what his mom died of: a prescription drug overdose. The vodka did her no favors either. He could see how feeling so… disjointed from reality might have appealed to his poor hippie mother, stuck among the nouveau-rich snobs in the Hamptons instead of some organic flower-farming, vampire-worshipping cult in Oregon or wherever the hell else she’d longed to be.

At least he was smart enough to not take the damn pills before he got behind the wheel of his rental car, an imperial blue 2008 Chevy Impala. He hadn’t found his new dream car yet. His 1966 Mustang was a tough act to follow, and she wasn’t exactly the wisest decision he’d ever made either. But no one ever accused DiNozzo of being rational.

Hey, if anything it was Gibbs’ fault! He knew what a fucked up little shit Tony was inside (and out, sometimes). He wasn’t fooled by Tony’s always-in-control smart-aleck front, and he’d hired him still. Nothing ever escaped Gibbs’ astute powers of observation, much like Tony’s, if he could say so himself. The boss clearly noticed how his subordinate would hang onto his every word. Every scarce look, be it in affection or irritation. Every rare word, be it of praise or admonishment. And every fleeting touch, be it to reprimand or to comfort…

Gibbs knew the effect he had on Tony, knew Tony looked up to him as a father figure. And Tony knew that Gibbs knew.

“Which is why Gibbs would be expecting me,” Tony assured himself, as he turned the last corner towards his boss’ house. “Can’t disappoint the old man now, can we?”

It wasn’t easy parallel-parking when his neck protested being turned so much as an inch in either direction. Once he finally managed it, he closed his eyes and rested the back of his pounding head against the leather seat.

Something was off.

Tony blinked his eyes open and looked at the familiar house. A second later, he realized what was different about it tonight.

“Why do you always leave the porch light on, Boss?” Tony asked, stepping down the stairs into Gibbs’ basement with a six-pack in one hand and his jacket in another.

The older man suppressed a smile, though not quite all the way as he looked up at his visitor. Gibbs’ house was never locked, and no one had made more use of the fact than Tony in the short span of time he’d been at NCIS. It was almost a year to the day Gibbs practically pushed DiNozzo into the Recruitments center with a gentle pat on his face, and a fatherly one to his butt.
“To keep unwanted visitors away, not that it works,” he grumbled jokingly. Gibbs was sitting at his desk, peering down at what looked like blueprints for a boat.

“Ooh, unwanted? Ex-wife number two making booty calls again?”

Gibbs glared and Tony backtracked. “That’s none of my business of course, but usually it’s the other way around, right. Porch light ON means you’re at home, and taking visitors.”

“Maybe I keep it on so next time you come by blind drunk, you don’t stumble into the neighbor’s house again.”

Tony’s goofy grin stretched from ear to ear. “So it’s for me, then?”

Gibbs simply harrumphed and turned away to study his notes again. Tony did not need any more confirmation than that, and continued to grin until Gibbs walked past him and deftly whacked the back of his head.

Tony sighed, dejected, as he looked away from the house shrouded in darkness. It was two in the morning, and he had a pretty good idea where his boss might be. He winced at the burning agony in his battered face, remembering the way Gibbs had looked at Corporal Damon Werth, called him ‘son’ at the end of the interrogation.

The two had so much in common. He bet when Gibbs was younger, he was just like that super-intense, super-enigmatic, super-powered steroid junkie, minus the steroids of course.

Tony wondered if he should go in, maybe grab a couple hours of sleep in that second bedroom upstairs like he used to, and leave before Gibbs returned. A year ago, before Gibbs went away on his ‘hiatus’ he might have even done it. Hell, Tony used to crash here almost every second night while Gibbs was in Mexico. He told everyone it was so he could keep an eye on the place. Would have been so utterly pathetic to admit he only did it because he missed the old man so much.

But things had changed in the past year. Too much had happened, too much deception and distrust…

Tony sighed again, turned on the engine and pulled onto the road to head back to his apartment.

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“He's all right, I suppose, if you like dark, handsome, rich-looking men with passionate natures and too many teeth.”

January 8, 2008. Bethesda, Maryland

The next time Damon woke up in his hospital bed, his temporary guardian was no longer by his side. Not that he expected Gibbs to stick around forever. Whatever empathy he might have held for the young man, Damon knew it wouldn’t be enough to stand in the way of Gibbs doing his job.

In other words, Corporal (for however long it lasted) Damon Werth was going to have to find a new day job for himself.

They kept him in the hospital for another two days before he finally won his battle of wits with Doctor De La Casa and earned his release. Of course, the real battle was just about to start.

Returning to the barracks was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, but Damon was no coward. He waived the pre-trial investigation and opted to go straight to general court-martial where he chose to represent himself. No point dragging it out. He’d made a conscious choice and he wasn’t going to deny it. All he’d ever wanted was to be a marine, and God knew he would have done anything for it.

He arrived thirty minutes before the military court was due to convene, which was at o-nine hundred. Dressed in his best Alphas, his spine stiff as a rod and his cover tucked under an arm, Damon sat on a backless bench outside the court hall, waiting for his fate to be decided. He knew he was going to get kicked out. It was simply the nature of the discharge that needed to be determined.

At least there was a chance he’d see Gibbs again at the trial. NCIS had an obligation to report their investigative findings, even if it was just a formality in this case. Damon was somehow comforted by the thought of having Gibbs present at his court-martial, just as he was able to sleep easier knowing the veteran had his six at the hospital. He thought back to the conversation he’d had with his mother on his last night in Bethesda.

“Damon? You okay, son?” His mom’s voice quivered over the phone.

Damon bit his lip and rested his head back against the bed he lay in. “I’m fine, mom. Getting out tomorrow. How’s he holding up?”

She sniveled a little. “We’re… um, heading to Scotland for awhile. Ever since your uncle died, there’s been no one there to really look after the estate and…”

And it would give his father time to come to terms with the spectacular disappointment his only son turned out to be. Damon swallowed his emotions down and watched helplessly as his hands started to shake again. Times like these, he was reminded of how tenuous his grip on reality still could be.

“It’s okay, mom, I understand.”

His mother sighed wistfully. “Take care of yourself, Damon.” And she hung up without her usual goodbye, one in which she told him how much she and Dad loved him, and how proud they were of
His father had been informed of his… shameful conduct by one of his closest friends, the Sergeant Major of the Corps himself. He refused to speak to his son, let alone visit him in the hospital. Damon wouldn’t be surprised if he wished his son had returned from Iraq in a body bag, or that dealer slash orderly, Jenkins, had succeeded in poisoning Damon in his sleep.

For the first time in a decade, Damon lowered his head in public, fighting to keep the traitorous tears at bay.

“Corporal Werth?”

Damon blinked and slowly looked up towards the voice calling his name. He suspected that someone had been trying to get his attention for awhile now.

“Hey, are you okay? You don’t need to go back to the hospital, do you?”

A man stood before him, looking down at Damon with sharp, suspicious, green eyes. He was tall, about six-one, and well-dressed, too well-dressed for a civilian actually. His shoes shined, his jacket and shirt were undoubtedly Armani, his hair perfectly spiked with gel, the uber-expensive kind. But it was the look of grudging concern on the perfectly chiseled face that struck Damon out of his reverie. Like he’d really rather not care, but he did anyway.

“Do I know you?”

“We met at Walter Reed last week. I can understand if you don’t remember, actually I might prefer it that way.”

Last week? Most of last week was nothing but a thick, white haze encapsulated in sand and gunfire residue. Or at least that’s how he remembered it, until he reminded himself there was no sand in DC. Last week… the Walter Reed Army hospital where he thought they were keeping his men hostage…

“You’re… you were with Gibbs.”

The face briefly melted into a curt smile that Damon found oddly entrancing. He watched as the man raised a hand to his bruised (but healing) nose, tentatively touching the bridge as if to check it was still in one piece. Damon could see it had been seriously smashed into recently. It didn’t look broken but something told him that long, Roman nose had had its share of fractures in the past.

“Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, NCIS. I am testifying at your trial today.”

If there was a mild apology in the words, Damon didn’t think it was warranted. The man was only doing his job after all. He shrugged. “I was hoping to see Gibbs.”

The smile faltered and DiNozzo looked away. “Yeah well, the boss couldn’t make it. He has other – more important things to take care of.”

Damon narrowed his eyes at the agent. The concern and the apology were long gone. He didn’t know what the guy’s deal was, and technically he had no reason to care, but he was curious nonetheless.

“Sorry about your… um, I suppose I did that?” He pointed at DiNozzo’s face and couldn’t help but smirk a little insolently.

Which the NCIS agent of course did not take very kindly to. “You were about to surrender, I was
caught unawares.”

“I’m sure that’s it.” And Damon smirked again.

Sufficiently riled, Agent DiNozzo stalked off leaving Corporal Werth behind to chuckle softly. The pressure behind his pupils was gone. It occurred to him then that he hadn’t smiled, let alone laughed, since his capture and eventual return from Baghdad. Until just now.

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Damon Werth, no longer Corporal, packed his trash into a rucksack, said his goodbyes to his unit refusing one last offer to go out and get shit-faced, then hailed a cab to head to Reagan airport. Werth Senior was still in no mood to forgive his son. But he did convey through Damon’s mother that the now empty house in Michigan was his to use, if he wished.

Was he supposed to feel grateful? Well, he didn’t. But he had no place else to go at the moment. And yes he did need some peace and quiet to re-group, re-strategize. Come to grips with life outside the Corps, if there was one to be had at all…

Damon ran a trembling hand down the middle of his head. “Look at the bright side, Werth,” he mumbled to himself, careful not to startle the cab driver in front of him. “At least you can grow your hair out again.”

His high school dreadlocks always did fiercely rankle with his dad. But the memory just wasn’t strong enough to cheer him up. His father was Royal Navy for God’s sake. Why didn’t he understand why Damon did what he did? What he had to do, because there was simply no other way? Why couldn’t he just get it, like Gibbs did?

“Gibbs…”

At least, he thought Gibbs understood. But did he, really? Why didn’t he show up at the trial? Would he have done what Damon did to get into the Corps? Suddenly, Damon needed to know more than he needed his peace and quiet. He bit his lip, noticing the sign for the airport looming overhead.

“Hey man, I changed my mind, sorry. Can you turn around, please?”

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Ziva leaned back in her chair, put her hands behind her head and yawned with what Ducky might call ‘barefaced inelegance completely unbecoming a lady.’ Of course Ziva, being Ziva, couldn’t possibly care less. She was just so… bored.

She looked over at her teammates, both completely immersed in their respective computer screens. They both had a similar look of deep concentration etched across their faces.

“McGee? What are you doing?”

McGee didn’t look up and his fingers kept flying across his keyboard at top speed, now that he had both his hands back. “Hacking into the ICE database as a favor to Agent Dunham.”

“Live case?”

“And kicking.”
Ziva pouted. “That is unfair. Why does the Director allow you to work on an actual case but make us go through cold cases for rest of the week? I do not need so long to regenerate!”

“I think you mean ‘recuperate’ Zee-vah,” Tony corrected without looking away from his own monitor. “Of course it might actually work in your case. I’ve always suspected you were a cybernetic organism, living tissue over metal endoskeleton.”

Ziva’s eyes lit up. “Ooh! I know this one. Star Trek, yes?”

“You fail me again, Ziva,” Tony made a face. “Terminator. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, who makes such a hot ass-kicking momma by the way…”

Ziva interrupted him before he could launch into another of his nonsensical movie diatribes. “And what exactly are you doing, Tony?”

“Research.”

“On what?”

“What else?” McGee cut in with a smirk before Tony could reply. “His next set of wheels, a worthy successor to his dearly departed Stang.”

“How time, Di-broken-Nozzo.”

“Oh, ha-ha, you think you’re so funny,” Tony drawled offhandedly.

Ziva went over to Tony’s desk and stood behind him so she could peer at his screen from over his shoulder. He had several windows open like Auto Trader Classics in one and the Washington DC classifieds in another. She leaned in and promptly started telling him where to go and what to click… until she heard Tony huff in frustration and cautiously crane his still-stiff neck towards her.

“I know you think I’m a complete idiot but I do know how to work a mouse, Ziva.”

She started, her eyes flickering over the fading bruise across the bridge of her partner’s nose. Ziva wasn’t doing it on purpose (guess being in charge just came to her naturally) but now that she saw how her back-seat browsing was bugging Tony, her lips curved into a wicked smile.

Tony turned back to his computer. “And you know I hate it when you stand crowding me like that from behind, so will you please just…”

“What is the matter, Tony? Afraid I would use my little ninja skills and ruin your hair do?”

“Men don’t have hair dos, women do. You would know that if you actually were one…”

She tousled his spiked hair in retaliation. Tony immediately raised a hand to bat hers away and ended up slapping himself in the head. Ziva laughed and Tony glowered. He pushed his chair back against her only to have her push him forward into his table. They were still bantering and roughhousing like old friends less than half their ages, when someone interrupted them with a purposeful clearing of their throat.

Ziva looked up first and her heart jumped. Once again she felt herself entranced by the larger-than-life presence of a troubled super-marine in their midst.

A very hot, troubled, super-marine in their midst.

“Damon!” Ziva exclaimed, straightening up.
The man smiled at her widely. “Officer David.”

“Ziva, please.”

She extended a hand and he took it. She watched, mesmerized, as her regular-sized appendage disappeared in his larger one. The grip was warm and plush, but also cautious.

“Nice to see you guys, again.” Damon nodded at McGee who awkwardly nodded back before going back to his screen.

Then he looked down at Tony. Ziva realized she was still standing behind Tony with both her hands on his shoulders. She felt her partner go absolutely still under her touch, and frowned. Tony didn’t exactly like the guy, but he’d never projected such standoffishness towards anyone so bluntly before.

“What can we do for you, Corporal Werth?” Tony asked shortly.

Damon smiled at him. “It’s just Damon now, Agent DiNozzo. I’m no longer with the USMC. You should know; you were there.”

Tony didn’t respond. He’d attended the trial the day before when Gibbs had to pull out at the last minute, came back and told everyone in his team, loudly, that Werth had been dishonorably discharged.

Ziva bit her lip, “I am sorry about…”

“Don’t be! I knew the risks when I first took ‘em.” Damon shrugged and put both his hands in his leather jacket pockets.

“Was it worth it?” Tony asked.

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t give back a single minute of these last six years for the world.”

“Too bad the Corps doesn’t see it that way.”

Ziva got the distinct impression Tony was baiting Damon. But the marine wasn’t biting, instead he met Tony’s green gaze squarely with his own hazel one and grinned some more. “Yeah, too bad.”

And then as Ziva watched – Damon Werth, continuing to look right at Tony, licked his lips. 

Oh. My. God.

A bright fluorescent light bulb went off somewhere inside her head. Off? On. Maybe on. Ziva turned to look at Tony but her partner’s face was completely impassive. She couldn’t tell if he’d seen what she’d seen, and if so, how he felt about it.

“You didn’t answer the question. What can we do for you?”

Damon looked over at the only empty desk in the pen. “I wanted to speak to Gibbs before…”

“Going somewhere?”

Ziva frowned, now utterly confused. She could have sworn she heard both relief and disappointment in Tony’s voice. How was that possible?

Damon shrugged, “Nothing keeping me in DC anymore, is there?”
Another awkward split-second of silence followed. Ziva slowly turned away from Tony’s desk, heading back to her own. “Gibbs is up in the Director’s office and he’s been there for awhile,” she said sliding into her chair. “Not sure when he’ll be free.”

Damon nodded gratefully at her. “Would it be okay if I waited?”

“Or you can leave a message and number, and Gibbs will get back to you. We wouldn’t want you missing your flight of course, or bus, whatever.” Tony said snarkily. Anyone who knew Gibbs well, knew he couldn’t be relied on to return messages. You just had to keep calling until you got through to the man.

“I think I’ll wait.” Damon let his rucksack slip to the floor and walked over to lean against Gibbs’ desk. He fixed his gaze right back at Tony, who looked decidedly miffed at his suggestion being rebuffed.

Ziva wondered what Tony would do next, but neither of them had to wait long. Gibbs chose that moment to stride back into the squad room. He didn’t pause at the sight of Werth (as if he was expecting him) and simply went around the youth to take his chair. Damon turned eagerly to face him, standing nearly at attention.

“What’re you doing here?” Gibbs asked, gruffly. From the corner of her eye, Ziva caught Tony smirking briefly.

“I had a question to ask you, Sir.”

“Shoot.”

“I-I was hoping to shoot somewhere in private, Sir.”

Ziva wanted to snort, a dirty double entendre jumping to her mind which no doubt Tony would find funny, if he was himself. But Tony seemed to have gone back to his car-hunting and pretended he didn’t see or hear a thing.

For a second, she thought Gibbs would refuse. The team leader leaned back in his chair and looked up at Damon. Steel-blue gaze met hazel, and two seconds later his mind was made. He stood up and started to walk to the elevator. With a finger-crooking gesture he asked Damon to follow, who grabbed his rucksack and marched after him, but not before throwing a quick glance at Tony. It was not returned.

After deliberately waiting for a whole minute, Ziva stood up. “I shall go… see what Abby is up to.” She announced and ran, not that anyone was listening.

***

“Abby? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Outside of work, family, friends and bowling partners, forensic scientist Abigail Sciuto often got mistaken for a certifiable Goth child-woman. But the people who knew her well, knew she was neither Goth nor childish, and she made crazy look so hot they didn’t really mind. Sure she was always hyper thanks to her caffeine addiction, and she spoke fast, and reacted instinctively and emotionally to everything good or bad or in between. But only a chosen few knew that these traits were just a part of her coping mechanism, something she’d cultivated over the years to deal with the horrors she encountered on the job every day.

One of these people was sitting in her lab right now – Ziva David, battle-hardened Mossad officer
with a soft, gooey, vulnerable core that she fiercely guarded and hoped no one noticed was there.

“First of all,” Abby started, coming over to cup her friend’s face in both hands. “You know I love you, right?”

Ziva frowned suspiciously. “Abby, I just told you – I am not that attracted to him.”

Abby folded her arms and narrowed her eyes, making Ziva roll hers. “Okay, so I did find him attractive at first, very, very attractive. And strong, and powerful, and… hot and incredibly lickable but trust me, I am not exactly heartbroken here! Can we please just stay on point?”

“I will, as soon as you convince me that this is not about you, and that you’re really okay,” Abby insisted, genuinely concerned.

“I am here with you, actually talking to you about this. What does that tell you?”

“Good point,” Abby conceded. Ziva, like Gibbs, came from the ‘hide the pain, never admit weakness’ school of thought. If this was bothering her at any level, she would've bottled it up long ago.

Abby started pacing, her four-inch platforms clacking loudly in her wake. “So you think Damon has a thing for Tony?”

“Oh, yes. You should have seen the way he was looking at Tony. It was subtle and yet, quiet intense and…” Ziva exhaled deeply, “… suffice it to say he was not looking at me and still I was flustered.”

“So I see,” Abby smirked but turned away before Ziva called her on it.

“Anyway, first Damon took me by surprise but what really shocked me was the way Tony reacted to him. I know he is straight, but that does not mean he should be so immature and insensitive. Frankly, I never thought he would be homophobic.”

“Oh, Ziva,” Abby sighed. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Which part?”

“All of it!”

“Huh??”

“Ziva, that’s our Tony up there. If he finds out someone, anyone, has a crush on him, he goes flaunting himself all over the place, telling complete strangers about it at the top of his lungs!”

Ziva opened her mouth but no sound came out as she considered it. Abby used the pause to mentally deliberate if now was the time to pull Ziva into the innermost circle (the only one she hadn’t crossed into yet). Eventually Abby decided she’d rather help Ziva build a better understanding of her partner than go assuming the worst of him. She came over and sat next to Ziva, putting an arm around her shoulder.

“Ziva, Tony is not homophobic, hell, far from it. Tony has had his share of experimental flings too you know. I know because I set one up myself.”

Ziva blinked repeatedly. “With men?”

Abby rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s usually what ‘experimental’ means. Unless it means like horses or something… hope not.” she shuddered.
“Why did he not tell me? Why did I never see this before?”

“Come on, you guys weren’t exactly getting along famously for a long time after you joined us. And all of last year has been… well, you know how it was with Jeanne.”

Ziva conceded. “You are correct. I am just… wow, but… he is always acting like such a frat boy, you know?”

“That’s because he was one! Imagine a virile young eighteen-year old boy forced to spend seven years in military school, living under rules stricter than a supermax, and then suddenly let loose into a world of other virile young eighteen-year olds, co-ed dorms and frat parties!”

Ziva gave her a lopsided grin. “Next you will say Tony’s continued juvenile behavior is his way of trying to re-capture his lost childhood.”

Abby smirked. “Now you’re catching on. Anyway, about the way he’s been acting, or reacting in this case… Ziva, for all his street-smarts and general insight into human relations, Tony doesn’t always get it when men hit on him.”

“I think you are right! The other night at the bar, the bartender was clearly coming on to him and Tony just thought he was really friendly.”

“Exactly, subtlety is not our boy’s strong suit. Mostly because he’s really, well, inexperienced with men.”

“Okay. So the question is: why was he being such a… um, sour juice?”

Abby crossed her arms and just looked at her.

“I did not say that right, did I?”

“Never mind. There is something about Werth that is putting Tony off. What could that be?”

Ziva described the expression she’d seen on Tony’s face. “It is not hatred, or dislike, or even disrespect. I know how Tony looks at people he thinks of as scum versus how he looks at, say, McGee or Gibbs. There is definitely a, grudging, degree of admiration.”

“Guess I’ll just have to take your word for it,” Abby shrugged.

After a second of thoughtful silence, Ziva meekly suggested, “Tony is too… smug and self-assured to be jealous, is he not?”

“What would Tony be jealous of?”

“You mean aside from the obvious?”

Abby snorted. “The obvious things don’t bother him, Ziva. You’re right, he is too self-assured for that. Bordering on the occasional narcissism, even…”

The girls giggled but it was in good jest. Abby adored Tony just the way he was. Like Ziva, her adopted big brother wore a mask too, except his was inside out. He wrapped himself in a goofy, kinda clumsy and clownish, Jack Sparrow-ish persona, pretending he didn’t know what he was doing, or acting like he was trying too hard. But inside, Tony was rock solid, driven by a personal code of honor and integrity comparable to Gibbs’. Tony just didn’t like to make a big show of it. Being a guy who was frequently underestimated or not taken seriously meant the element of surprise
was always in his favor. And the sneaky little bastard that he was, Tony would get a total kick out of shocking his opponents and critics.

So no, whatever Ziva saw in Tony’s face may have been a pretense of envy, but not real envy. It just couldn’t be.

_Could it?_

“Ziva, tell me everything that happened on the Werth case.”

Ten minutes later, after recounting every single contact Tony had with Damon, which was close to nothing, Ziva looked at Abby as she took it all in.

“So Werth hardly spoke to Tony, fact they didn’t speak a word all week, except maybe yesterday briefly at Werth’s hearing?”

“Yes.”

“The only people Werth did speak at length to, were you and… Gibbs. You said he came looking for the Boss-man? What did he want from him?”

“I do not know. But seeing how much Damon has in common with Gibbs, maybe he is just looking for someone to talk to? I know Gibbs is quite fond of him too. Maybe he sees Damon as a kindred–”

Ziva paused to look up at her friend. “Abby, are you thinking what I am thinking?”

Abby bit her lip. “I’m afraid so. You just solved the mystery of Tony’s behavior, Ziva. It’s his one and only Achilles’ heel, that silver fox of mine.”

They were both silent for a moment before Ziva ventured again. “So have you noticed it too? The strain in the… ‘father-son’ relationship these past few months?”

How could Abby not? It’d been brutal to watch Tony struggle with his boss’ obvious aloofness, which was more pronounced than usual. But if there was one thing she’d learnt from all her years at NCIS, it was to not try and tell Gibbs how to do his job, or his relationships.

“I do not understand it,” Ziva muttered. “Gibbs is not a vindictive man. And he knows Tony was only doing his job on the Le Grenouille operation. He told Tony just as much.”

Abby grimaced. “This isn’t just a job for the two of them. They aren’t just boss and subordinate. And when a professional relationship crosses over into personal life, it’s really hard to forgive and forget.”

Ziva nodded. “You are right, again. Look at Gibbs and the Director. They have not spoken a cordial word to each other in months! Jenny is constantly asking me how he is, what he is up to, who he is dating…”

When it came to the Director, Abby sided with Gibbs. But she knew Ziva and Jenny were close so kept her thoughts to herself. She just exhaled loudly and crossed her arms.

“So – Damon has a thing for Tony but isn’t doing anything about it. Tony has no idea, he’s too busy feeling insecure about where he stands with Gibbs, and is too afraid to do anything about it. And Gibbs… no one knows what Gibbs is thinking or doing about anything.”

“That about sums it on.”

“Up. Sums it up.”
Ziva huffed impatiently. “So what do we do?”

Abby raised one eyebrow. “Well, common sense dictates we do nothing. But seeing how Tony is so irked by the idea of Damon ‘getting close to Gibbs’ we could just support our boy and be equally juvenile about it.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, we could find ways to make Werth leave the country – he’s apparently half Scottish, and one-twenty-fourth royal or something.”

“And how do you know that?”

“What, you think you’re the only one who finds him lickable?”

Ziva grinned and wagged a knowing finger at her. “You know I am all for getting rid of whoever is making Tony miserable, unintentionally or otherwise. But something tells me, this Werth could actually make Tony very, very happy. Pull him out of his Jeanne-induced misery, you know. If Tony would just give him a chance…”

Abby grinned, relieved she didn’t have to convince Ziva about this. “My thoughts exactly, sister!”

They high-fived. “Oh,” Ziva continued, “it looked like Damon was already on his way out of DC though. He is packed and has a cab waiting downstairs to take him to the airport after he gets done talking to Gibbs.”

Abby frowned. “Then, maybe that’s what we should do – find a way to stop him, keep him in DC, at least for awhile. The boys will just have to work the rest out on their own. Especially Damon, it all depends on how he plays his cards, both with Gibbs and Tony. And if it doesn’t work out it doesn’t work out, too bad. At least he’d have had a chance, right?”

Ziva shrugged. “I agree. Anyway, how bad can it possibly get, right?”

“Right!”

They both looked away from each other abruptly. Abby crossed her fingers behind her back, and wondered if Ziva was doing something similar too.

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Chapter 3

“Suddenly you're afraid and you don't know what you're afraid of. Do you ever get that feeling?”

January 11, 2008. Washington DC

Gibbs leaned against a wall inside the stalled elevator, and waited. Damon looked nervous. A part of Gibbs wanted to forget that the second B stood for bastard and help the poor kid out. But that wasn’t how he was brought up, nor was it how he trained the boys in his unit. They needed to make their own way, face their fears, and find their own words to say whatever it is that needed to be said.

“The judge, he… looked me in the eye and thanked me for an impeccable service to my country. He even called me a hero. Then he looked down at his papers, issued a dishonorable discharge, and didn’t look back at me again.”

Gibbs didn’t respond but his cell phone buzzed. He looked at who was calling, saw that it was Abby’s lab, and flipped it shut, hoping she could wait. Damon gave no indication he minded the interruption and Gibbs didn’t apologize either, naturally.

“I was hoping you’d be at the trial, Sir.”

“Was planning to. Got called away.”

Damon nodded. Gibbs was glad he didn’t demand any further explanation. DiNozzo would have practically thrown a tantrum and talked his ears off to get more words out of Gibbs’ mouth. Or a head-slap, or two.

“That’s not what I came here to ask. I understand you have responsibilities and I don’t want to take up too much of your time so, I’ll just get right to it.”

“Okay.”

Damon shifted his weight from one foot to the next. “I just wanted to know, Gunny, would… would you have done what I did? If it were the only possible way you could be a marine, would you do it?”

“Why does it matter?”

Damon shrugged. “I don’t know. Personally I have no regrets, Sir. My friends would be dead if I weren’t such a freakazoid, so in a way…”

“You didn’t take the steroids for your friends, Werth,” Gibbs interrupted him. Damon looked a little more contrite and tried again.

“You’re right, Sir. I did it for me. It was all I could think of all through high school, all I ever wanted to do with my life. I wanted so desperately to make my father proud, find some common ground with him. He was a Royal Navy officer in the UK.”

Gibbs didn’t bother to tell him he already knew everything there was to know about Damon Werth through his file. Only kid, American mother, Scottish father, brought up in a giant Neocolonial home
in Ann Arbor, Michigan…

“But he never thought much of me growing up, you know? He wasn’t around all that much, and when he was… I guess he never saw anything worth sticking around for in a puny little kid who didn’t even make it to his high school football team.”

Gibbs studied the young man’s face. “You think my approval will make up for your father’s disappointment?”

He detected a slight shudder go through Damon’s form and almost didn’t expect an answer. But he was surprised. “I think I moved past my need for a father’s approval sometime during my first tour of Afghanistan, Sir. What I want… what I need now is…”

“Someone to tell you that it’s okay to not feel regret for your actions?”

Damon looked down at his shoelaces. “Not just anyone.”

Gibbs was no hypocrite. He hadn’t exactly lived his life by the rules either. And if anyone knew anything about extenuating circumstances that drove a man to what the law would call heinous or illegal acts of desperation, it was Gibbs. He knew what it felt like to be obsessed with one cause, and not give a damn about anything else. To not care if he had to spend the rest of his life behind bars or get put down by lethal injection. And somehow this young man had sensed it in him – a kindred spirit, in ways more than one.

Gibbs’ phone buzzed again. “What is it, Abs?”

“Gibbs! I heard Damon Werth’s in the building. Is he still with you?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I thought I’d let you know, the cocktail of drugs in Werth’s bloodstream – you know the anabolic steroids and the multiple masking agents? The hospital flushed his system but the after-effects will take time to subside.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Damon might have convinced the hospital to let him out early, but he’s probably still in treatment to keep his withdrawal symptoms under control. He’d been taking them for so long a sudden discontinuation could be fatal, more for others than him if he has another psychotic breakdown! That’s why his doctor must have prescribed him a low dose of Oxymethalone or Nandrolone or something for at least a month to slowly wean him off. All I’m saying is, maybe you should advise him to not go off by himself, or God forbid, discontinue his treatment with Doctor De La Casa. Something tells me he will listen to you, Gibbs.”

“Is he –?”

“Dangerous? God, no! Trust me if he was, I wouldn’t be calling. But he should complete the treatment or the withdrawal symptoms might prompt him to fall off the wagon.”

Gibbs hung up and glared at Damon who was now leaning against the wall, suddenly looking very tired. “Why didn’t you stop taking them once you got in?”

“I didn’t know how. Every time I tried quitting, I’d get the shakes, anxiety, paranoia – I couldn’t function! There was no one I could turn to for advice. My dealers would never tell me how to stop, and money was no object so… Besides, I was afraid if I did stop, the blood anomaly would start
showing up again in my physicals so…”

Damon swallowed nervously and trailed off. Gibbs decided he was telling the truth.

“You going somewhere?” He gestured with a nod towards the rucksack.

Damon looked down at it as well. “Yeah but, I don’t know where.”

“What about your family?”

“Edinburgh’s great this time of the year, or so they told me.”

Gibbs nodded. “You can stay at my place until you figure things out.”

“That’s a generous offer, Sir, but you don’t have to…”

“Life outside the Corps is hard the first few weeks, son. Harder when you realize not many folks out here are willing to hire the dishonorably discharged. If you hang around, maybe I can help you find something you actually like.”

Damon looked into the older man’s eyes, searching for something. Whatever he found seemed to satisfy him and he nodded. “If it’s not too much trouble…”

“It’s not.” Gibbs let the elevator doors open. “Meet me downstairs in the garage, I gotta grab my gear. And Werth?”

Damon looked up at him in question.

“For the record, I don’t condone any kind of drug abuse. Ever.”

“Understood, Sir.”

“Don’t call me Sir.”

“Understood, Gunny.”

***

Tony sat in his car tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. The last time he was inside Gibbs’ place was five weeks ago when he dropped in to check on his boss. After his near-drowning the old man had mellowed a bit, like the experience had brought him an element of peace. But that didn’t last for long. At least he’d smiled and offered Tony dinner. That was good. Before that night they hadn’t broken bread together since… well, in a very long time.

So here he was again, at ten minutes to ten PM. The porch light was on, as was the living room light inside. He pushed through the always unlocked door and headed straight down to the basement, knowing that’s where Gibbs spent most of his time after hours. He donned his usual mask of nonchalance somewhere between the first and second stair, listening to the sound of sanding coming from below.

“Someone left work early today. Could it be the famous Gibbs work ethic is starting to finally chill the hell out?”

He grinned as he caught his boss sitting on his usual chair next to a half-done wooden frame for a boat, probably the port-side. Gibbs looked up at him briefly before going back to his blueprints.
“Boat-building emergency, bo–?” Tony stopped mid-word when another head popped up from behind the wooden frame. The sanding noises stopped, that’s when he realized Gibbs was not the one sanding. *Duh.*

Werth.

“Oh hey, Tony!” Gigantor flashed him a huge smile. What the fuck was he so happy about?

Tony bit back a petulant scowl and looked at Gibbs, who couldn’t care less and was still studying his papers, a jar of bourbon in one hand. “Sorry Boss, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Company? *Him*?” Gibbs looked up at Werth and smiled, actually smiled, before going back to his notes. Damon smiled back too. The camaraderie between the two of them was easy and obvious. They were both dressed in sweats, Gibbs in his NIS set and Damon in a green muscle tee with beige pants, while Tony was still in his Gucci blue shirt and gray slacks, jacket slung on one arm.

“Gunny’s teaching me how to build a boat. Might come in handy to have some vocational skills other than *kicking ass.*” Werth grinned cheekily at Tony at the last two words and it instantly had the intended effect.

“Thought you were headed out of DC.” Tony ground out, barely masking his annoyance.

“Guess I found something to stay for, kinda.” The tall man bit his lip and his eyes roved all over Tony’s face. It was a strange look, like he was sizing the agent up, like… competition, or something.

It made Tony uncomfortable, so he chose to ignore Werth and spoke to Gibbs directly. “Madame Director was asking for you. Mentioned something…” Werth went back to his sanding, causing the noise levels in the basement to escalate, so Tony raised his voice, “Something about Agent Dunham’s recon data from Libya she could use your eyes on?”

“I’m sure she can handle it,” Gibbs panned offhandedly, tilting sideways to look at what Werth was up to.

“Well, Jenny seemed…” Tony stopped as he spotted his boss’ jaw hardening. Clearly his using the Director’s first name was a reminder of how close he’d gotten to her this past year, and how far from Gibbs as a direct consequence.

“S-She seemed miffed because apparently you accepted the planner for a meeting in MTAC?”

Gibbs scoffed, “You ever seen me using that planner whatsitsname thingie, DiNozzo?”

Tony made a wry face. “Microsoft Outlook, and good point, Boss.”

Werth let out a short laugh, and Gibbs seemed to enjoy the hilarity of the moment too even if Tony didn’t see what was so funny about his boss being a technologically challenged dinosaur. He watched as Werth held up his own nail jar for Gibbs who filled it half-way with bourbon and put the bottle down on the floor next to himself. He didn’t offer any to Tony.

“No, no, lift it up once you reach the end. Don’t sand upwards, one direction only,” Gibbs instructed Werth.

“Gotcha.”

Tony swallowed the strange lump forming in his throat. “Common mistake, right, boss? I used to do that all the time.”
“Which is why you don’t get to ruin my boats anymore.”

Damon grinned at him again. And Tony chose to ignore him again, resorting to vocal self-derision like he always did when his stomach churned like this. “Sorry, boss. You know I’m not very good with my hands.”

“No worries, Tony,” Damon looked right at him when he drawled, “I am very good with my hands.”

Sonofabitch. Tony crossed his arms tightly against his chest. “Good for you. The blue collar job market can’t wait to welcome you with open arms, I’m sure.”

It was a malicious jibe. Tony knew how hard it was going to be for Damon to be hired by any respectable establishments in the country.

“You got a problem with blue collar workers, Tony?” Damon stood up, facing Tony with an undecipherable glint in his eyes.

“Au contraire! For one, they don’t care if you got kicked out of the armed forces for being a traitor or for just being an idiot.”

“Alright,” Gibbs hissed and stood up as well. Tony wondered how his boss could put up with this guy, he was such an arrogant, obnoxious jackass…

“DiNozzo, you should probably go get some rest.”

“What?” Gibbs was kicking him out?

“Don’t you have a physical at o-six hundred? You can’t show up tired and hung over if you want that field clearance.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open but before he could utter a word, Werth jumped in to pour more salt into his wounds. “And that’s my fault, isn’t it? Man, I’m really sorry, Tony.”

“That’s my boss just being polite and telling us to leave him alone. That means you too.”

“He’s staying here,” Gibbs threw out and took one last swig from his jar, completely missing the momentarily stunned look on his agent’s face.

Gibbs offered Werth a place to stay in DC? In his house?

“It’s only for a while,” Werth rushed to explain. Why he bothered at all, Tony didn’t know or care.

“For as long as you need.” Gibbs said as he picked up the bottle of booze and turned to put it away. At least Tony had the sense to school his expression before Gibbs turned back towards him.

Something… broke, inside. Tony couldn’t think of an appropriate last word that was customary for him to have. He nodded stiffly and turned to make a swift exit. Someone behind him shuffled as if intending to follow, but no one did.

***

Tony wasn’t sure how he managed to drive all the way to his apartment without hitting something. Or maybe he did but was too out of it to notice.

He jumped into the shower and stayed there for the longest time, talking to himself. It was nothing. It didn’t matter. So not cool to be jealous. DiNozzos didn’t do jealous. Why the fuck should he be
Jealous?

Forty minutes later, he dried himself carelessly and got into bed naked. He curled up on one side under the covers, shivering a little because he’d used up all the hot water and ended up standing under ice cold water to wash the conditioner out. He tossed and turned, struggling to go to sleep. He couldn’t believe Gibbs had kicked him out, actually kicked him out.

Didn’t matter none that Gibbs was right, he did have an appointment and he did need that medical clearance. It would have been completely unnecessary last year. But Jenny, in her need to overcompensate or whatever, had taken it upon herself to show how much she cared for Team Gibbs, and was going the extra mile to make everyone’s lives fucking miserable. Where was all this concern last year when she was putting Tony on dangerous undercover assignments every week?

None of that mattered though. All he could think of right then was that Gibbs wanted Tony gone, and Damon to stay. He curled up tighter and kept talking to himself, nonsensically, to appease the painfully twisted knots in his gut.

“So what if he’s perfect in every fucking way, so what if he’s the son Gibbs always wanted. He’ll be gone soon. He’ll move on. So what if he’s using my room, my bed, my cupboard… which technically aren’t my room, my bed, my cupboard to begin with. And so what if maybe they once were? So what if they’re not anymore? So what, so what, SO WHAT!!?”

They were probably better off with each other anyway. “Stupid fucking jarheads with their stupid language nobody else understands and their stupid rules and stupid oo-rahs…”

Damon was probably a better house-guest than Tony – neater. And he’d be much better at building that stupid boat too. He wouldn’t mess up that stupid wood grain with his perfect sanding skills and wouldn’t hammer in the nails crooked with his perfect hand-eye coordination and damn it who sands by hand anymore anyway?

Completely against his will, his mind kept wandering back to the basement. What Damon must be doing to make Gibbs smile again, the way he hadn’t smiled at Tony in decades. One thing was for sure, they weren’t discussing any movies. Nobody in that basement was enriching anyone’s world-view with the intricate realities of life reflected through the amazing art of cinema. No Sir. Nor were they busy drowning the silence with mindless yapping and endless repertoires of pop culture references.

Tony sighed, and turned to lie on his back. Werth and Gibbs – they had too much in common for silence to be a problem. Eventually, his tired eyes drifted shut, but his psyche continued to wonder what the two Marines were talking about.

***

Damon couldn’t stop talking about Tony, and he was acutely conscious of it. He just prayed Gibbs didn’t notice or mind, too much.

“DiNozzo doesn’t like me very much, does he?” He’d wondered out loud, not long after the sound of said agent’s footsteps dissipated.

Gibbs just waved it off. “He’s a good man. Don’t worry about it.”

Damon bit his lip. How could he explain to his benefactor why Tony’s disapproval bothered him so much without giving away his developing crush? All he knew was he wanted to get to know the ‘good man’ better. Things felt… easier, lighter, more manageable somewhat when he was around
Tony, and he wasn’t even sure why. After all he’d barely spoken to the guy the four times he’d met him.

“Time out, we’ll get to the rest of it tomorrow.” Without waiting for an answer, Gunny started putting the tools away. Damon had no choice but to follow suit.

“What time do you normally start your day, Gunny?”

“O-five hundred. Get to work at six.”

Damon whistled. “Bet Tony’s not looking forward to waking up at o-dark-thirty tomorrow.”

“He starts early too, seven hundred, hour before everyone else comes in. Booked him for that time to get it out of the way first thing or he’ll keep fretting about it.”

“Why’s that?” That seemed more like Damon’s thing back in the Corps. He’d lived in constant fear of getting caught every physical.

Gibbs started striding up the stairs and Damon trailed behind him. He waited for an answer but soon realized none was forthcoming.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry –”

“Don’t apologize. It’s a sign of weakness.”

Damon laughed. “John Wayne! ‘She wore a yellow ribbon’, right?”

Gibbs halted and glared back at him. “Rule number six. My rule.”

He nodded quickly. “Gotcha. I just love the Duke, you know. Couldn’t help myself.”

Gibbs huffed and started back up the stairs. “Guess one day without a damn movie reference is too much to ask.”

Damon didn’t get it but sensed that Gibbs was more amused than annoyed. They turned left past the kitchen and through the living area, towards the guestroom Gibbs had instructed Damon to dump his trash in.

“The blankets are in here,” Gibbs walked to a small wardrobe in a corner and opened it, only to find it empty. He sighed and turned to go further upstairs. “Tony, he gets colder than usual ever since the damn plague…”

Damon followed him out, startled by the words. “Wait, did you say plague?”

At first Gibbs seemed sorry he’d mentioned it, but then launched into a quick and dirty rundown. “A very sick person sent a strain of pneumonic plague to NCIS by slow mail. Tony opened it.”

That was all he revealed, voice dropping several notches at the end letting Damon know how bad it must’ve been, and that he must not pry for more.

They climbed up the stairs to the second floor where Damon spotted two doors on opposite ends of the landing. One was open and obviously looked like the master bedroom. He followed Gibbs to the other one, waited as Gibbs opened the door and switched a light on.

This room looked a little more lived-in than the guestroom downstairs, hell it had more life and character than the rest of the house, basement being the sole exception. Not that the rest of the house
didn’t have character – the word ‘stoic’ sprang to mind.

Damon noticed a stack of DVDs in a wall shelf, an iPod and a couple of business cards (bent out of shape) on the bedside table. Clearly, neither of those things belonged to Gibbs. Gibbs opened the cupboard and out tumbled a messy bundle of blankets that he made no effort to pick up.

“There they are,” he gestured with a nod and Damon immediately bent down to gather them. As he stood up he was distracted by a small stack of designer men’s clothes and a bottle of cologne inside the cupboard, and almost tripped over a pair of running shoes.

“Tony’s,” Gibbs explained again, exasperated. “He likes to run. A lot.”

“Cool. Didn’t you say he majored in Phys. Ed in college?”

Gibbs crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame, watching Damon very carefully. “You’ve been asking about DiNozzo all night. Why the sudden curiosity in my agent?”

Busted. If he were honest it wasn’t sudden by any means, but Damon couldn’t tell him that. “Like I said, I got the sense he doesn’t like me and… I guess I’m curious to know why.”

For a moment Damon feared his bluff would get called out. Then Gibbs sighed again and turned away. “It’s not you, it’s me.”

That didn’t make any sense. But Damon realized he’d used up his quota of DiNozzo-questions for the night and he’d just have to wait until another time. He followed Gibbs out the room but paused at the door, something else catching his eye. There was a baseball glove nailed to the outside of the door. He frowned and freed up one hand from under the load of blankets to touch it. It looked at least two decades old, give or take a few years. The inside seam had a small insignia stitched into it – letters ‘A.D.D’ and ‘RIMA’ with what looked like an anchor between them. Damon knew what RIMA meant – Rhode Island Military Academy. And if the business cards he’d spotted were any indication, the letters A.D.D did not stand for Attention Deficit Disorder.

The glove could twist around on its nail and Damon noticed something else underneath it. It was a small name tag carved in mahogany, with tulips and butterflies decorating the edges, and letters that spelled ‘Kelly’ in running script in the middle. Definitely handmade, and beautiful. Damon suddenly felt guilty, like he’d been unintentionally granted a glimpse into the private world of one L.J. Gibbs.

“You comin’ or what?” Gibbs called out from the top of the stairs where he was waiting. Patience was definitely not the old man’s virtue.

“Yeah, sorry. I mean… coming.”

In the days that followed, Damon often absentmindedly referred to that bedroom as the kids’ room. He got the death glare the first time he said it, but after that, no reaction whatsoever.

***
Chapter 4

“I suppose you think I’m very brazen, or tres fou or something.”

January 14, 2008. Washington DC

Timothy McGee walked in at eight the next morning to find Tony already at his desk, as always. Now he might not be able to boast the same astute powers of observation or nose for the suspicious and sneaky as his ‘esteemed’ colleague could. But this hour of the day, he was usually on high alert for whatever new prank Tony might have in store for him today.

Tim narrowed his eyes and walked surreptitiously to his desk. Tony didn’t send up his usual ‘good morning’, in fact he was so engrossed in his screen he hardly noticed Tim’s arrival. Tim checked for traces of toilet paper, confetti, anonymous phallic-shaped gifts, dirty pin-ups on his cubicle that weren’t supposed to be there. He didn’t find any fart bags on his chair, or superglue on his keyboard or mouse or the monitor switch button (remembered to check it this time). Tentatively he moved his mouse to check if Tony had managed to somehow hack into his system and change his screensaver again.

Nothing. Tim frowned, and crept up to Tony’s desk. Tony was still completely engrossed in his screen but didn’t seem to be reading it as much as just… staring at it emptily.

“DINOZZO!”

Tony nearly jumped and fell off his chair. Tim guffawed, for once getting to be the pranker and not the prankee. He caught a quick glimpse of Tony’s screen before the senior agent scrambled to minimize his window.

“What are you up to today?”

“Nothin’!”

“Is Damon Werth a person of interest in another case? I thought we wrapped that one good.”

Tony glared at him before turning away, “Go away, McNosy.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. “You smell something fishy, don’t you? If you want any records uncovered or unsealed, you know who to ask.”

And he started to walk back to his desk.

“Alright fine, since you want in so badly,” Tony grumbled, acting like he was doing Tim a favor. Tim grinned and pulled his chair next to Tony’s.

“What’s up?”

“Something fishy. Did you know the guy’s like Scottish royalty?”

“Yeah, so?”
“So what the hell is he doing staying at Gibbs’ house? Surely he can afford his own place and doesn’t need to be mooching off of an old man on federal wages.”

Tim frowned. “You’re thinking he has other motives to stick around? Maybe he just likes to hang out with Gibbs, you know like you –” Tim caught the rising glower on Tony’s face and corrected, “– you have good instincts and if you say he’s dirty, he probably is.”

“That’s right, Probie. Now can you find out his financial net worth or what?”

“Alright, move.” Tim pushed Tony aside and took over the PC controls.

Mentally he ran through every interaction Tony had had with Werth to try and identify what might have triggered Tony’s suspicions. He wasn’t joking when he admitted Tony did have sharper investigative instincts. Maybe it was his years as a cop, maybe it was just his naturally curious nature.

“Here we are…” Both heads leaned in close to the monitor (and to each other) to read the small print. Seconds later, both heads leaned back in their chairs with matching bewildered looks on their faces.

“He owns nothing. No house, no offshore bank accounts, no yachts, not even a car,” Tony seemed surprised.

“All he has is six years of savings from the Corps.” Tim scrolled through Werth’s bank statements as he spoke. “Not much of a spender either. No vacations, no luxury purchases, just the one trip to Scotland last summer, only because he was already there for his stint with the British SAS.”

“But no inheritance at all? How can that be, McGee? Maybe he has a secret identity, a Scottish alias in Gaelic!”

“There’s no unusual activity in the last eight years to suggest that. No unexplained time-offs, no unexplained expenses… maybe he was disowned?”

Tim watched as Tony’s face melted for just a second. Surely he could empathize. Tony had also been disowned by his father at a young age. All said and done, Tim was genuinely befuddled. Nothing about Werth or his records was ringing any bells for him but Tony was clearly more than disturbed by the very existence of this man in their lives.

“What’s on your mind, Tony?”

Tony blinked and refused to meet Tim’s eyes. “Something I can’t quite put a finger on, I guess. Maybe he wants revenge! Gibbs is responsible for getting him kicked out of the Corps, the only place he’s ever called home, the only place he felt he belonged… maybe, maybe he’s working some kind of angle to discredit the whole investigation and get him reinstated?”

“That’s impossible, Tony.”

“Rule forty, McCynic!”

Tim squinted, “I don’t know that one.”

“If it seems like someone is out to get you, they are.”

“You just made that up right now, didn’t you?”

Tony stood up in a huff and started to pace. Tim started to get worried, something was wrong with his partner but he didn’t know what and he didn’t know how to help Tony either. Something told
“Alright fine, let’s assume you’re right. But if he wanted back in, why did he fess up at his trial?”

“Maybe it was the drugs in his system. Maybe he’s thinking more clearly now, or not, either. I don’t know, McGee! All I know is the guy is dangerous and volatile and… I don’t trust him! And he’s shacked up in Gibbs’ house where the boss gets drunk and passes out under his boat in the basement without his weapon. Why is he still here? Why not go back to Scotland and be a super-sailor like his dad? Why… just, why?”

DiNozzo could be an obnoxious, over-the-top annoying jack-ass, but Tim knew he was never malicious. Tony was the one who showed Tim the ropes when he first started as field agent, assured him Gibbs was just as much a bastard to everyone as to Tim. Tony as his wingman had helped Tim pick girls he’d never dare approach on his own. Tony was the one who helped him through tough times like when Tim thought he’d killed an innocent cop, or when his sister Sara was suspected for murder.

But this whole deal with Werth… it felt more personal for Tony than professional. Maybe it was concern for Gibbs, maybe it was something else. Maybe it was the fact that Gibbs had pulled away from Tony but connected to Damon, even called him ‘son’ in interrogation with Tony watching from observation?

It didn’t matter what Tony’s reasons were. He was Tim’s best friend, that’s all Tim needed to know. He let the older man ramble on for awhile and once Tony ran out of steam, he stood up.

“Tony, I can see this is important to you. So let me help, okay?” he gestured for Tony to take his chair again and took his own seat beside him. “What do you want to do?”

Tony bit his lip. His face was flushed and his breathing was faster than usual. “Pre-emptive action instead of damage control. Dig up all the dirt you can on this man and get him to leave. Not just Gibbs’ house, we need him to leave period, preferably the country, but I’ll take DC too.”

Tim nodded. “I’ll start digging.”

Tony smiled (at last) and clapped him on the back so hard it made Tim wince. Ziva chose that moment to walk in, late as usual.

“What are you guys up to?”

The men responded in unison, “Nothin’.”

***

Abby smirked as she prepped an evidence sample to be analyzed by Major Mass-Spec. “So, while the two of us are plotting to keep Damon in, the boys are scheming to get him out? Interesting.”

Ziva smirked too, “Yes, the two of them were so deeply engaged in conversation about Damon, they did not even notice I was there.” Then she frowned. “Tony did not seem himself, though. Did something happen we do not know about?”

Abby bit her lip sheepishly, “It seems our ruse worked a little better than expected. Not that it was a ruse ruse, because technically a ruse is a lie and what I told Gibbs wasn’t false, even though the HIPAA regulations say I shouldn’t have access to nor can I credibly divulge medical information about a complete stranger to another complete stranger, well… not stranger because Gibbs is no
stranger and technically Damon isn’t completely strange –“

“ABBY!”

“I told Gibbs about Damon’s ongoing treatment and Gibbs asked Damon if he had a place to stay in DC and when he said he didn’t, Gibbs offered Damon his guest room.”

Ziva grimaced. “Oh, leazazel. And Tony knows?”

“That would explain the scheming, wouldn’t it?”

Ziva looked down at her PDA. “I texted Damon last night from film class, he did not mention he was staying with Gibbs.”

Abby turned back from her evidence towards Ziva. “Film class?”

Ziva grinned. “Yes, well, American pop culture references continue to baffle me and Tony thinks the movies are the best way to learn them. But there are so many movies to watch so I thought maybe a crash course might help speed things up? That way I will also understand what Tony is talking about most of the time!”

Abby was impressed and told her friend so. She turned around, only to gracefully swivel back on her feet again. “Do they still do those classic movie screenings at the amphitheater every Thursday?”

“I believe they do.”

“Good! Tony loves classics.” Abby put one hand on her waist and squinted. “Can Damon stand the classics?”

***

January 16, 2008. Washington DC

“Anthony, my boy! You’ve the heart of a jester, you really do!”

When Ducky laughed, he laughed long and hard. It was one of Tony’s favorite sounds in the world.

They were sitting in Ducky’s office inside Autopsy across his table, sharing a bottle of twelve year old Scotch. Tony knew the ME had had a tough time with their last case. That’s why he was here, to keep him company before he left for the day. Marine Lance Corporal Abdul Bakr and his father’s religious appeal to not perform an autopsy had pitted Ducky squarely against both the Director and Gibbs. And while in the end, he did find a workaround to keep both the Imam and his colleagues happy, Ducky was left exhausted, drowning in sordid memories, and partially resentful of the stoic stance his friend had taken during the investigation.

“Pardon my candor, I know how much you revere Gibbs but some days I wonder if his extreme objectivity and lack of faith in any theological institution doesn’t hamper his abilities as an investigator instead of enhancing them.”

Tony had his elbows resting on the table and his face leaned into one of his hands, already feeling the pleasant buzz of alcohol relaxing his tired muscles to the point of sleepiness. But at Ducky’s words, he frowned with curiosity.

“How so?”

“Well, look at you. Despite your own lack of any particularly social or religious associations, your
ability to empathize is what makes you such a brilliant investigator. Gibbs on the other hand…”

Ducky exhaled tiredly. “I suppose that’s why he chose you to be his right-hand man.”

The doctor smiled, reached out and kindly patted Tony’s cheek. It made Tony smile and feel comforted, even though the mention of Gibbs caused his stomach to churn again. “I don’t know, Ducky. Some days I think he probably regrets hiring me at all.”

Damn Scotch. Tony bit his lip and hoped Ducky didn’t quite hear what he’d said. He didn’t notice Ducky peering at him knowingly.

“Ah, my dear boy. One of the unfortunate symptoms of being an only child is that one often finds it hard to share a parent’s love with someone else. Even an adoptive parent, especially an adoptive parent.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Kate once told me how you’d reacted to Agent Afloat Stan Burley and his past relationship with Gibbs.”

Tony laughed uncomfortably, still stunned by how perceptive Ducky could be. How the hell did he figure it out? Or more likely, who the hell told him? McGee? Nah, Probie couldn’t have guessed… could he? Did he?

“Ducky, really, it’s nothing. Whatever you’ve heard is a gross exaggeration, I can assure you…”

“All I heard was that Agent Langer was liaising with NCIS for this case and I put the rest of it together myself. But really, Anthony, he was here for not more than a year. No other agent has managed to stick with Gibbs as long as you have. You know that, right?”

Tony started. What the hell was Ducky talking about?

“Sure Brent and Jethro got along like a house on fire back in the day. Like Jethro likes to say, he taught him everything he’s forgotten! They even had their own secret code language that nobody else understood, much like him and Abby with their signing back and forth.Personally, I always chalked it up more to the fact that Brent was his very first agent after Franks retired and Jethro became team leader. He’d inherited the lovely Ms Vivian Blackadder from the previous team but didn’t exactly hold her mental faculties in high regard to begin with…”

“Wait… Agent Langer used to work here? For Gibbs? Before Burley?”

“You didn’t know?” Ducky narrowed his eyes in equal confusion. “What are we talking about then?”

Tony palmed his face. “I don’t know, Ducky. You were talking, I was listening.”

After a few seconds of mutual bewilderment, Ducky chuckled. “My apologies, dear boy. I just thought you looked a little troubled and you usually get this look when it’s got something to do with Gibbs. Forgive me, my circuits must be fried extra crispy today. Perhaps it’s time to call it a day?”

Tony went home even more befuddled and dejected than before. Burley, Langer, now Werth… clearly Tony never stood a chance. Why did he ever think he would? With every passing day, he was beginning to realize how much of an ass he’d made of himself.

“What you get for assuming too much, DiNozzo.”
Lesson learnt. Just because you thrust yourself in someone else’s life and they’re too polite to ask you to leave, doesn’t mean you’re welcome to stay. Never take anything for granted. Hell, there was even a rule or something about that.

***

January 17, 2008. Washington DC

“Rule number eight!” McGee called out to Tony as he walked in with a giant coffee mug (if you could call it that) from Pottery Barn. It was his new thing.

Tony looked up, slightly annoyed at the cheerful expression on his partner’s face as he walked into the squad room that morning. He was finishing his report on the murder of Lance Corporal Bakr and Ziva wasn’t in yet, as usual.

“Never take anything for granted.” Right, that’s what that rule was. “And why are you quoting the rulebook at me this morning, Probie?”

McGee grinned at him cheekily. “You’ll never guess what I found out about Werth back from his high school years.”

“What?” Tony waited with bated breath.

“He was a band geek.”

Tony started to frown in disappointment that was promptly discarded for disbelief. “No way.”

“I know, right? I’d assumed he’d have been a jock too. Turns out he was thin and wiry and out sick most of the time, so he never could pursue sports. Instead, he played the cello.”

Tony snorted coffee through his nose. “Cello?” Despite McGee glaring at him disapprovingly, he sniggered like the obnoxious sixteen year old jock he’d been himself.

“Pardon me for ridiculing your kind, McGeek. Figures that’s why Werth started taking the dope. No way could he make it to the Corps without them, and he must have wanted in desperately. Why do you think that was, by the way?” Tony was genuinely curious.

McGee shrugged as he took off his overcoat. “Werth Senior was Royal Navy. But he wasn’t around all that much. I looked up his service records. He was on tour a lot, didn’t cross the pond to visit his wife and son very often.”

Tony chewed on the end of a pencil, lost in thought. Another thing he seemed to have in common with the guy. Daddy issues.

He leaned back in his chair and put his legs up on the table. Gibbs was nowhere in sight, he could get away with it. “So riddle me this, McCryptic. Why is this piece of intel relevant?”

McGee shrugged again. “It isn’t. Just thought it was a surprising and interesting piece of trivia is all.”

Tony squinted as he mentally connected a few dots together. “Trivia are facts, details, considerations or pieces of information of little to no value and by definition, trivial.” Abruptly he straightened up in his chair and reached for the phone. “But it isn’t trivial if it serves the purpose, directly or indirectly. Thanks, Probie.”

“Uh, you’re welcome? Who’re you calling?”
“A cousin of mine in Long Island is looking for a personal bodyguard for his fifteen-year old
daughter who performs with the Westchester Philharmonic. Apparently she’s getting famous and has
already landed herself a couple of obsessive fans with stalking tendencies.”

McGee raised his eyebrows. “And you think you could convince him to hire Werth for the job?”

“If he’s still looking. Cello’s the same family of instruments as a violin, right?”

Ziva chose that very moment to walk in. “Good morning!!”

Startled again, Tony immediately banged the phone down and blurted, “Nothin’!”

Ziva sneered. “Yes, you said that the last time.”

***

Ziva didn’t catch much of the boys’ conversation this time. But it didn’t take a federal agent to
deduce they were up to something, again. Didn’t matter, she and Abby were up to something of their
own as well.

The timing couldn’t be more perfect – the Bakr case had been wrapped up with only a few legal
formalities left to finish. Other MCRTs were first in line to pick up new cases and Gibbs was busy
with another of Agent Dunham and Jenny’s covert ops in Africa all day. And it was Thursday.

Ziva took a few minutes to check her email, then got up and ambled over to McGee first. She caught
his attention by bending over his table seductively. “So what are you doing tonight, McGee?”

Two years ago, the young agent would have turned beetroot red and stuttered his way through a
cringe-worthy response. Now, he just hiked up an eyebrow suspiciously. “Why?”

Ziva smiled and straightened up. “The film school screens great American classics every Thursday
night. Want to come?”

“I don’t know. What are they playing?”

“It is a romantic comedy –”

“Yeah, I’m out,” Tony interrupted from his desk, making both McGee and Ziva turn to look at him.
“You lost me at rom.”

“I didn’t even ask you,” Ziva sneered, mentally getting nervous about her plan falling apart already.

“Yet.” Tony retorted with a self-assured grin.

“Alright.” Ziva huffed. “But are you sure you don’t want to come, Tony? Abby is in and I bet
McGee will be too. And I have it on good authority that the movie playing tonight is one of your all-
time favorites.”

Tony scoffed loudly. “Nice try, Zee-vah. But anyone who knows me knows I don’t do chick flicks,
ever.”

Ziva thought about it briefly then tried a different tactic, “McGee? Do you think Tony’s talented?
Deeply and importantly talented?”

McGee blinked, lost. “Huh?”
Tony blinked too, in recognition, and answered Ziva’s slightly altered movie quote with the right response. “No, amusingly and superficially talented, yes. But deeply and importantly, no!”

Ziva giggled when a second later Tony realized how Ziva just played him into insulting himself, and made a grumpy face. “Very funny. Breakfast at Tiffany’s, 1961. Audrey Hepburn in the role of a lifetime. I do love that movie.”

“So you’ll come?”

Tony squinted, and again they went at it, the back and forth lasting the better part of the afternoon until Tony admitted he would have shown up even without an invitation. Ziva squealed uncharacteristically and hugged him, then managed to rope in McGee as well.

That done, she texted Abby to put the second part of their plan in motion.

***

Abby was nervous. Usually she enjoyed playing match-maker for her friends, but this time she wasn’t so sure.

There were too many complications, too many conflicting undercurrents. Mostly she wasn’t sure either man was in the right frame of mind to be dating anyone, let alone each other. Werth, undergoing medical treatment, recently kicked out of the Corps. And Tony, still coping with the aftermath of Jeanne Benoit’s less than amicable exit from his life. On the other hand, the fact that they’d been sparking off of each other despite their respective histories meant there was something worthwhile there, right?

Still, it was with a bit of trepidation that she called Damon just before noon. “Hey Damon, this is Abby Sciuto. I work at NCIS with Ziva David and…”

“Gibbs, I know! Hi, Abby. Gunny talks about you a lot.”

Abby frowned even as she smiled. Her ‘words are poison to me’ silver fox talks?

“That’s great! Saves me the trouble of introducing myself. Hey, listen, we’re planning to catch a movie tonight at the DC Film School and we were wondering if you wanted to get out of the boss’ basement for awhile and, you know, hang?”

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“Yeah, uh, that’s really kind of you, Abby, but… I don’t know…”

Abby laughed, “Hey, nothing weird going on here, promise! We just thought you might like some company. Not that Gibbs isn’t company, even though he doesn’t talk much, which usually just leaves you to do all the talking, which is almost like you’re giving yourself company. We just thought you might wanna let someone else do the talking, for a change?”

There was laughter on the other end, and Abby joined in. “Sorry, that’s me, no censorship! But in my defense it’s not just me, wait till you meet Tony. He can talk your ears off if you let him.”

Another heavy pause. “Is, um, Tony going to be there too?”

Gotcha.
“Uh-huh, Ziva and McGee too. It’s all of us Gibblets’ mid-week night out. It’ll be fun, you should come!”

A strong exhale of breath, and then, “I guess I could use the fresh air. What time do I show up?”

So here she was. At fifteen minutes to eight PM, Abby stood outside the amphitheater waiting for her friends and Damon to show up. She thought back to the phone conversation again. Having been around Gibbs for nearly a decade, one learns to read people’s silences… they often reveal a lot more than words can. Abby knew there was a chance this could all still go straight to hell. But something in Damon’s voice (and silence) had comforted her.

Abby smiled. Tonight was going to be a good night, she was sure of that.

***
Chapter 5

“Talky as a jaybird she was, with something smart to say on every subject. Better than the radio.”

January 17, 2008. Washington DC

Tony was eagerly looking forward to the night. For one, it was good to not have to go to his cold and lonely apartment so soon. And two, he just loved, LOVED Breakfast at Tiffany’s.

The show didn’t start until eight, so they had time to go home, grab a shower and change into more comfortable attires. Tony was the last one to arrive, wearing his Abercrombie distressed jeans, a white pullover and his favorite black jacket with its bright red hood turned inside out at the back of his neck. He met McGee in the parking lot, who was also dressed casually in blue jeans and a red sweater with a thick black overcoat that flattered his tall frame and made him look slimmer. Together they walked in and reached with ten minutes to spare.

They spotted the girls from a distance: Abby wore a long black ankle-length dress with matching boots and a Bordeaux red overcoat. And Ziva sported skinny blue jeans with a purple blouse and black leather jacket. Obviously it was rare for the team to meet in such a casual setting in the middle of the week. So engrossed was Tony in checking his favorite girls out that he almost didn’t notice the tall, burly fellow standing behind them with his arms loosely crossed behind his back, and his feet set slightly apart in the classic military ‘at ease’ position.

Damon Werth.

Tony halted mid-step as he felt his breath catch in his throat for a second. The man was dressed in frighteningly faded and tattered jeans (probably looted a thrift store in Baghdad), along with a black t-shirt, and denim jacket that couldn’t possibly be warm enough for this time of the year. And he looked so… clean… freshly scrubbed, recently shaved razor-sharp jaw line, close-cropped hair…

Tony grimaced, chided himself for paying so much attention to the man and looked away.

McGee caught sight of Damon at about the same time Tony did and he almost halted too. He turned towards Tony. “I swear I didn’t know he was going to be here.”

“I know, Probie. Whatever, guess it’s my cue to let him know about the job interview I got him in New York.”

Damon hadn’t noticed their arrival yet. He had his head bent towards the girls due to his insane height advantage, smiling softly as he spoke, making them laugh. The ugly green monster rose up through Tony’s gut and into his throat again.

“Oh, hey guys!” Abby greeted them happily. “You know Damon, of course. Damon you’ve met the boys?”

“Of course. Hey, man.” Damon held out a hand to McGee who had no choice but to take it, didn’t matter how much Tony glared at him, discreetly of course.

Then the marine turned to Tony. “Tony…” and that’s all he said, looking straight into the agent’s eyes, a slightly amused smile playing across his handsome face.
Tony grinned, a little too widely. “Well, since you’re here and all, welcome to the gang!”

_Not enough you took my boss, now you want my friends too? Bastard…_

“I’m actually really glad you came tonight, Werth. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Damon smiled so happily it took Tony aback for a second. And he hadn’t even brought up the job interview yet.

“Hey, guys,” Ziva interrupted, “Why don’t you carry on, find our seats inside? Abby and I need to go to the little girls’ room.”

Tony scoffed. “Seriously, why do you insist on calling it that?”

Ziva made a face and took Abby by the arm as they strutted away. “Um, McGee? Would you mind grabbing us some popcorn, please?”

McGee shrugged and left in the opposite direction, leaving Tony and Damon alone. Damon was still grinning off and on like a loon. What the hell was up with him?

***

“**Damon** Werth. Bet you never took the time to watch this magnificent piece of Hollywood history, did ya?” Tony drawled lazily.

Five minutes alone in the semi-dark amphitheater with Tony (well, technically not alone since they were surrounded by a bunch of strangers) and Damon knew: it was not a fluke. It was not a one-off thing, this feeling that had rushed over him the first time Tony turned his eyes on him outside the court hall. Something about this guy had… _fixed_ Damon, like an energy that infected him with hope and positivity, even as he walked into his court-martial proceedings.

“So, Annaleigh will be interviewing you too. I know it’s kind of weird, a teenager deciding your fate and all. But she’s actually quite mature beyond her years. And she’ll appreciate your own background in music, you know, with the, um… cello playing…”

“Mm-hmm.” Was all Damon could muster, completely absorbed in the soft husk of Tony’s voice that he hadn’t noticed before. Maybe because they’d never been sitting this close before, and there’d been no need for Tony to drop his volume two notches and whisper right into Damon’s ear (oh fuck) before.

Obviously, because they went in together, it would have been weird to not sit in seats right next to each other. Good thing Damon had pulled off his jacket earlier. He used it now to cover his groin, thankful for the dimness of the theater around them.

“Aren’t you going to ask how I know about your… um, cello… experience?”

Damon tried to focus away from the heady mix of musk and ivory and possibly gunpowder emanating from the man beside him. “You must’ve pulled up my life history as part of your investigation.”

Tony shifted a little. Damon longed to reach out and pull him closer, not let him shift away too much. Maybe he’d even manage to touch his skin again in the process, feel the same electricity that coursed through him the first time he’d shaken Tony’s hand.

“Well, yeah. It’s why you were the first person I thought of when my cousin called and asked for
recommendations. And I know you’re looking for a job in your area of specialization. But if I were you I’d wanna start over in a brand new city, and Long Island is… uh… it’s great! So posh and clean and… posh.”

“Sounds nice,” Damon responded, hearing the words but not really processing them, given that all his faculties were busy with something else.

Tony leaned forward in his chair and faced him fully. Even in the dim light, he could spot the green eyes sparkling with excitement. “Cool! I’ll set it up then. Tomorrow’s too early, right? How about Saturday? Can you do Saturday?”

Damon blinked. What was he talking about? Oh, a job interview. Personal bodyguard to a teenager – yeah, he didn’t think so. But Tony seemed so eager to want to help his cousin out that Damon figured, what the hell, he could give it a go. Later, he could let them know that he’d changed his mind, but at least Tony would have kept his promise. In truth, there was no way Damon was leaving DC. Not until he’d figured out what this… this thing was between him and this green-eyed beauty. Because it was… not nothing.

He could sense it in the way Tony’s breath hitched every time Damon got close to him, every time Damon smiled and Tony’s eyes immediately dropped down to his lips.

Yep, it was something alright.

“I can do Saturday. And thank you, Tony. I didn’t think you’d be so thoughtful and remember me, especially since we didn’t exactly hit it off before…” He tried to soften it with a chuckle and Tony fidgeted again.

“It’s no big deal, really. A-and now’s as good a time as any to start over, right?”

“I’d love that.” Damon sighed deeply, and held out his right hand. “Hi, I’m Damon Werth.”

Tony seemed to hesitate, but then put his own hand out and let Damon clasp it firmly. “Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo.”

Damon chuckled again as he rotated his hand until he could clasp Tony’s thumb and the agent did the same. The sensation was just as he’d expected… a pleasant jolt, an intoxicating relief.

Damon wished desperately for the day when he wouldn’t have to let go of Tony’s hand ever again.

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Tim was paying for the popcorn at the snack bar when the girls caught up with him.

“Why don’t you go on inside, I’ll take just another minute.”

“It’s quite alright, McGee,” Ziva smiled. “We will help you carry this stuff inside. And no rush, take all the time you need.”

“Why don’t we get some sodas too?” Abby suggested.

Tim rolled his eyes and placed a second order. The movie was about to start and he got that old fluttering in his gut protesting the fact that he was running late, to anywhere, didn’t matter. But the girls didn’t seem too worried. From the corner of his eye, he even spied a conspiratorial look being exchanged.
He frowned. “And what are you two up to now?”

They just smirked and started yakking about clothes and shoes in the sixties, ignoring him completely.

They walked into the theater just after the opening credits rolled past. Tim sat next to Abby who sat next to Ziva who sat next to Tony. Tony was flanked by Ziva on one side and… Damon on the other. That couldn’t possibly be good, could it?

Five minutes into the movie and Tim remembered why he was supposed to avoid going to the movies with Tony. Two words: running commentary.

“Does anyone else find it weird that she’s attracted to a guy who looks like her brother? Seriously, she’s even calling him Fred. Am I alone in this? Granted she’s a babe and babes can get away with a lot in this world even if they’re a couple screws short. Or maybe because of it? I never can make up my mind about that…”

And on and on it went. Abby and Ziva laughed heartily, enjoying his lame jokes, and Damon didn’t look too perturbed either. Tim just winced.

Then Tony started mouthing the dialogues, word for word. Good thing half the theater was empty and the other half was probably doing it themselves. “You know those days when you get the mean reds?”

Tim started when a new voice interjected, and with the right tone inflection and everything. It was Damon. “The mean reds? You mean, like the blues?”

“Whoa! Duuuude!!” Tony seemed tickled by the fact that not only had Damon seen the movie but had probably seen it just as many times as Tony to be able to remember the words.

Damon didn’t speak much but Tim occasionally heard him laugh, which had the unfortunate side-effect of encouraging Tony to keep going. Tony clearly knew this movie by heart. How he chose his favorite quotes, Tim wouldn’t presume to know. But he noticed Tony mostly stuck to Hepburn’s character, possibly because Holly had the most to say, very much like Tony in real life. Also the fact that she was the most neurotic, enough said.

“I love you, Lula Mae,” Doc Golightly pleaded up on the big screen.

“I know you do, and that's just the trouble.” Tony replied. “It's the mistake you always made, Doc, trying to love a wild thing. You mustn’t give your heart to a wild thing. The more you do, the stronger they get, until they're strong enough to run into the woods or fly into a tree. And then to a higher tree and then to the sky…”

Aargh. Even the girls thought it was cute. Tim found it nauseating.

After a while, Tony fell silent, completely engrossed in the emotional scene playing out on the screen. Tim looked to his right towards Tony and found Damon leaning way back in his chair with his neck surreptitiously craned towards Tony as well. Tim and Damon caught each other’s eyes and looked away at the same time.

In all, it was a strangely fun night. McGee admitted the movie wasn’t half bad, and it was refreshing to have his friends for company mid-week for a change. But he suspected the ones who’d had the best time were Damon and Tony, laughing and quoting off and jabbering throughout. He wondered what that meant – had Tony bonded with Damon? Was Tony going to give up trying to kick Werth out of Gibbs’ life after all?
Or was it possible Tony was undercover, cozying up to his mark to discover what his real intentions were? If that was true, McGee thought raising an eyebrow in admiration, Tony sure was one hell of an actor.

Anyone watching him would think there was nowhere Tony would rather be than right here, in the company of one Damon Werth.

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**Damon** sat with his arms crossed tightly against his chest, staring out the passenger seat window of Ziva’s fiery red Cooper. She had picked him up earlier and was now driving him back to Gibbs’ place. He realized he wasn’t being great company, maybe even downright rude. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t stop thinking about Tony.

His mind kept flashing back to the two hours he’d just spent sitting next to Tony – two hours of bittersweet agony. God, how he’d ached to touch Tony, trembled every time the happily oblivious agent’s arm had brushed accidentally against his. It took every last strand of grit he possessed to not reach out and pull Tony into his arms, onto his lap, kiss that teasing mouth and every inch of his face, run his calloused battle-hardened hands down the lithe body, pull his hair back and bare the long column of his throat to Damon’s hungry mouth…

“So did you have a good time?” Ziva asked after a few minutes.

Damon turned to her and smiled, happily, much to his own surprise. “I did. Thanks again Ziva. Your friends are totally awesome.”

She grinned. “They most definitely are. Who did you like the most?”

Damon started, the question felt a little out of left field to him. “Well, they’re all such unique personalities…”

“Oh, I know. I am not asking you to compare and contrast, it would be like comparing apples to lemons.”

Damon squinted. “You mean oranges?”

“Ugh! Yes, oranges. I just could not help but notice that you really hit it off with DiNozzo.”

Damon bit his lip. “You two have an interesting relationship.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, here you are asking me about Tony. And Tony kept asking me about you. I think he was under the impression that you and I…” he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Really?” Ziva laughed and shook her head. “Tony has, over the years, become an integral part of my life here in America. We are both fiercely protective of each other. Which is why, Tony was probably asking you about your intentions as they relate to me. And I… am asking you about your intentions… as they relate to Tony.”

There was no mistaking the words, or the knowing look in her eyes. “That obvious, huh?”

“No,” she assured him with another smile. “But I am Mossad, you know.”

She didn’t disapprove, nor did she care that Damon Werth, the disgraced steroid-addicted ‘hero that
never was’ happened also to be a flaming homosexual. He wondered if this was his opportunity to find out what he couldn’t from Gibbs.

“Is, uh, Tony…?”

“Apparently he is bisexual.”

“Apparently?”

Ziva shrugged. “I have not seen him date a guy in the two and a half years I have known him. But Abby says he used to. Off and on. Nothing serious. Experimental, mostly.”

“I get the drift, Ziva, thanks,” Damon winced, even as he let out a quiet sigh of relief. At least he wasn’t in danger of getting decked in the face the day he did find the courage to make his move. On the other hand, Tony’s slim track record with men sounded like he was going to have to work doubly hard to make a longer-lasting impression.

“I would not presume to speak on behalf of Tony. But I do believe he is intrigued by you.”

“Intrigued?”


Damon chuckled. “No, you said it right. I was just… wow, intrigued, really?”

Ziva smirked. “You have seen the way he looks at you, have you not?”

Damon couldn’t help but blush a little. “I don’t know, Ziva. I keep getting these mixed signals. One minute he’s smiling, goofing off like we’re old buddies and the next he… it’s like he remembers he’s not supposed to, and pulls away. I’ve seen… glimpses, of possibilities. But they’re so rare and so short that, honestly I wonder if I’m just reading too much into it or something.”

Ziva nodded. Damon noticed she had dropped to about half her usual speed. “One thing you should probably know about Tony, in Abby’s words: our boy does not do subtle. He probably has no idea that you are onto, sorry, into him. You will have to be a little more obvious than you are right now, Damon.”

“I would, except…” Damon pauses, not sure how to finish the sentence. Ziva looked at him questioningly before she was forced to focus on the road again.

How could he explain his rabid fear of rejection to her? How could he describe the intense adrenaline rush every time those green eyes landed on him, like the sun coming out shining in the middle of a Michigan winter? And how could he possibly describe the despair that gripped his heart when those same eyes suddenly turned cold and distant, like he was all alone in his bunker in Iraq in the middle of the night, not a friend left alive?

“You need to find out, Damon. For both your sakes.”

Damon looked out his window again, signaling an end to the conversation.

After six years in the Corps and surviving four warzone deployments, he felt he’d accomplished what he set out to do. But now what? Maybe this constant obsessing over Tony was a rebound sort of thing, like replacing one gargantuan challenge with another. But even if it was, Damon didn’t care. His thoughts and dreams of Tony were the only thing these days (and nights) strong enough to distract him from the complete mess he’d made of his life.
He was lost, uncertain of his identity as a civilian. The only thing that held any promise whatsoever was the possibility of being with this guy, this, incredible person with the incredible smile, who could help him forget everything he’d lost, and make him feel alive again.

But Ziva was right. He couldn’t torture himself like this anymore. Either he found out if there was something here worth sticking around for, something more than just another experiment for Tony. Or he moved on to someplace far, far away from DC, from the Corps, and especially from one Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo.

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Chapter 6

“No longer will I play the field. The field stinks, both economically and socially, and I'm giving it up.”

January 18, 2008, Washington DC

Tony twiddled a pen in one hand nervously as he looked up at his boss across the bullpen. It was eight PM. Everyone else left long ago for some Friday night engagement or another. Gibbs was still at his desk with his reading glasses on, holding the phone to his left ear.

“This is Agent Gibbs, NCIS. I’m calling to check on PFC Jaquon Banks?”

They’d caught a case this morning – an open-and-shut road accident that left a young private in a coma and a very drunk civilian driver in jail. Until about an hour ago, no one had shown from the kid’s family at the hospital yet. Tony’s heart ached with empathy. For a second, he even extended that empathy to Werth – his folks hadn’t come to see him when he was in Bethesda fighting for his life and sanity either.

Tony looked back at the boss who was waiting to be patched through to Banks’ attending doctor. Trust Gibbs to always gravitate to the poor strays. He was like a fucking stray-magnet.

A minute later, when it seemed that Gibbs was finally done for the day, Tony perked up. “Big plans tonight, Boss?”

Gibbs stood up to don his jacket. “Got a date with a boat.”

Tony stood up too. “Great! I’ll get the beer?”

He’d been hoping for it to come out casual, instead it came out hesitant and ended with a question mark. Gibbs looked, for a second, not too happy with the suggestion. But Tony had already invited himself over, and he had no choice but to be polite. When he nodded, Tony’s face split into a wide grin and he quickly grabbed his own gear to follow Gibbs into the elevator.

They drove separately, Gibbs in his car and Tony in his rented Impala. Damon had taken the evening Chinatown bus to New York. The job interview had been set up for next morning. So this was Tony’s small window of opportunity to… to – do what, he wasn’t sure yet. All he knew was he needed to talk to Gibbs; see if he could fix whatever it was that’d broken between them.

He reached Gibbs’ place fifteen minutes after the boss did, having stopped to buy a six-pack on the way. But once there, Tony sat in his car for several more minutes, gathering his wits and courage and everything at his disposal to prepare for the upcoming confrontation.

“We need to talk… there’s this great white elephant in the room and I can’t ignore it anymore…” he mumbled, practicing his speech. Then, with an “Aw hell,” he got out of the car before he completely lost his nerve.

“Hey,” he called out as he descended the basement stairs. Gibbs hey’d him back and resumed sanding the starboard, or whatever it was called, Tony could never keep the terminology straight.
Why didn’t they just keep it simple and call it left and right, front and back?

“Do you need a hand?”

“Nope.”

Tony took his jacket off and popped open a can of beer, then went to stand besides Gibbs and watched the man at work. Considerable progress had been made on the boat, thanks to Damon. Tony’s jaw hardened.

“You sure? I could start with sanding over at this side…”

“I actually like building boats,” Gibbs grumbled without even looking up. “I don’t think of it as work like you boys do.”

Us boys? Tony wondered if he meant Tony and McGee, or Tony and Damon. Oh well, he’d offered.

“Boss, I-I wanted to…” We need to talk… “…there’s this thing…” elephant, white elephant in the room…

“Spit it out, DiNozzo.”

Tony gulped nervously. “I’m sorry,” he blurted, immediately cursing himself.

Gibbs just glared at him. Whether it was for breaking his rule or something else, Tony didn’t know.

“I know I said this before, but… I wanted to say it again. I am sorry, for all of last year, for not reading you into the Frog mission…”

“You had no authority. You were given a direct order, you followed it. Nothing to apologize for.”

The words should have appeased Tony, except they were delivered with a dull tone and a face turned away. All he saw was a stiff spine and proud, unrelenting shoulders.

“Then why do I get the feeling you’re still mad at me for it?”

“I’m not.”

“Okay, if not that, then what?”

Gibbs didn’t care enough to respond. Something inside Tony wanted to scream, maybe even stomp his feet like a child and throw stuff around. Why couldn’t the man just be human, for a change?

“I-I feel… it’s been weird between us. D-don’t you feel it?”

The marine shrugged nonchalantly, no words came out to accompany the extremely offending gesture.

“It’s just…” Tony wheezed tiredly, his choked emotions in combination with his weakened lungs doing him no favors. But he folded his arms and tried again. He was a DiNozzo. He wasn’t giving up without a fight. “I know I’d be upset if someone I thought of as a-a-…”

Gibbs kept working at his boat. Tony’s wheezing got harder and he struggled to finish the sentence he’d started. “…as a close f-friend was keeping secrets from me. Just a little upset, not too much.”

“I don’t mind that you have secrets, DiNozzo. You are entitled to them, don’t let anybody tell you
different,” Gibbs declared as he looked up at last. “I have a few of my own that no one knows about. Not even Ducky.”

Tony frowned at that, but he didn’t get a chance to respond.

“Every friendship has its limits. It’s best to know what they are and respect them.” Gibbs said, picking up his bottle of bourbon and pouring himself a drink.

Tony watched him pour the golden liquid into a nail jar before quickly pouring it down his throat. “I thought our f-friendship ran a little… deeper than that.”

“Yes, so did I,” Gibbs whispered, and it stung. He spoke louder when he continued. “But like I said, I don’t hold it against you. Like right now, if I ask you a question and you lie to my face, to keep your cover or whatever, I will understand.”

Tony took another deep, noisy breath in. Damn the plague and its fucking chronic consequences. “Gibbs, I’m not undercover anymore.”

“You’re not?”

“No! A-ask me anything.”

“Yes?” Gibbs advanced towards Tony. His one step forward made Tony retreat one step back. “Let’s start with an easy one. What’s keeping you busy these days, huh? Life after the Benoits. How’s it going?”

That’s an easy one? Tony swallowed and attempted his usual defense: nonsensically ramble his way out of the question without giving away too much. But what could he possibly say? Where to even start?

How about how embarrassed he was by how easily he’d fallen in love like a chump, with a target at that? How she’d asked him to choose between his family and herself and he’d chosen Gibbs, which incidentally wasn’t working out so well for him either because Gibbs kept fucking freezing him out?

Or how about that ‘special bond’ he’d always thought he had with the older man but turned out it wasn’t so special after all and that in fact the boss preferred the Damon Werths of the world over him? How could Tony disclose his feelings of envy and the lengths he’d been going to, to get Damon out of Gibbs’ house and life? Heck he’d even roped McGee into it.

Which, by the way, brought him to a whole another can of worms: How was he supposed to talk to Gibbs about the weird encounters he’d had with Werth these past few days? The strange vibes that left his heart racing and his gut in knots, the accidental touching that messed with his head… how was he supposed to tell Gibbs after all these years that he might be bisexual? And how screwed up must he be to feel both jealous of and attracted to the same guy at the same fucking time?

“I’m waiting,” Gibbs cut through his whirlwind of thoughts. Tony realized, to his dismay, that his usually reliant gift of the gab had abandoned him completely.

“It’s… going… just fine. It’s all good.”

The slight smile that flickered across Gibbs’ lips was both victorious and bitter. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

It was the finality in his tone that did it, did Tony in. The boss knew he’d just lied again, had even expected him to. Feeling guilty, his eyes dropped and without intent landed on the bottle of bourbon
in Gibbs’ hand. “Stick to beer,” Gibbs said offhandedly, catching Tony’s line of sight. “You’re driving.”

Of course. No reason to hope Gibbs would offer Tony his old bedroom to crash in ever again. Gotta admit, Gibbs had style. What a subtle but brilliantly cruel way to dismiss an unwanted guest from the house, so very reminiscent of DiNozzo Senior himself.

Tony caught himself inhaling deeply, fighting to keep the wheezing down. He grabbed his jacket, left the six-pack by the stairs and left. He got behind the wheel of his car and just sat there, staring at the porch light, knowing who it was left turned on for. Werth.

Couldn’t say he was surprised. He’d been expecting to fuck it up from the beginning, hell, since October 2001. Gibbs was a stray-magnet alright. But only Tony was foolish enough to believe that even Gibbs could keep a wretched thing like him around forever.

Tony bit through his lower lip in an attempt to keep the tide at bay. Grow up, DiNozzo. Just fucking grow up. But that was easier said than done. The voices inside his head continued to laugh and jeer at the history of his pathetic life repeating itself. Tony had been abandoned once again.

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January 20, 2008. Washington DC

Tim was kicked that he got to choose the restaurant this weekend. Usually, when he met Tony for Sunday brunch, the older agent would always bully him into one of his own favorite places to eat. This time though, Tony didn’t seem quite as persistent. So Tim decided to try Level One at Dupont Circle. It was a nice, sunny day and the place had great patio seating.

Half past ten, he spotted Tony walking towards him and the excellent table he’d grabbed. But before he could brag about how he’d negotiated for it, Tony started griping.

“Disco brunch with bottomless mimosas, McGoo? Seriously? Could we possibly be any gayer right now?” Tony grumbled as he sat down opposite his friend.

Tim scowled, at least he’d said ‘we’ and not ‘you’. “Be nice, Tony. You’ll be thanking me after you try their crab cake sandwiches and chocolate chip pancakes. They’re to–”

He stopped but not in time. Tony grinned cheekily. “You were going to say ‘to die for’ weren’t you?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Was too.”

“Was not!”

Tony laughed. “Relax, McTedAllen, and to be clear I got no issues with disco.” He inflected a nasal Louisiana accent as he intoned, “I think it’s the most democratic floor show in town!”

It made Tim laugh. “Let me guess, Gloria Gaynor? Bee Gees? Prince? Although I doubt he was ever interested in democracy.”

“Nope, nope and nope. Truman Capote.”

“You and your obsession with Breakfast at Tiffany’s, who woulda thought?”
“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Probie,” Tony said with a silly smile that was probably meant to be enigmatic.

A waiter came over and greeted them warmly. They placed their orders, including the bottomless mimosas of course. When he left, Tim looked across the table at his friend still reading the menu card with intense concentration. He’d known Tony long enough to know when the jokes were forced, the smile just a little less bright than usual. It was the eyes, mostly – they were a dead giveaway. And of late, Tony had been sporting that look way too often.

“So what did you do yesterday?”

Tony looked up at him briefly then pretended to go back to reading the menu, “Not much, me and Magnum, mostly. What about you? How was your date with that temp in MTAC?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve had more riveting conversations with a floppy disk,” he huffed.

“Of course you have, you server whisperer, you…”

Tim bit his lip. He could have sworn Tony had waited around at work on Friday night to catch Gibbs alone. There was a good chance he’d tried speaking to the boss. Going by the dark circles forming under the tired green eyes and his less than animated countenance, Tim guessed it didn’t go so well.

Tim pursed his lips. He wasn’t sure before coming today if he wanted to share what he’d recently discovered about Werth with Tony. But looking at his best friend sitting here, practically fading away as they spoke (or not), he made up his mind.

“I think I found something we can use,” he said. Tony looked up at him, and he didn’t need to be told what McGee was talking about. Strangely enough though, he didn’t seem enthused.

“What’s the point, Tim, let’s just…” he sighed and looked away. Then biting his lip he turned back to Tim, curiosity taking over like it always did with DiNozzo. “Alright, let’s hear it.”

“I managed to hack into Werth’s high school network and through that to their SAN disk that still holds all their data going back fifteen years. I also hacked his old email account, which is now defunct, but the archive still has all his emails. A few threads stand out, going back and forth with a Michael Manning. He was a freshman when Werth was a junior.”

“What about him?”

“Michael and Damon were lovers. Damon is gay!”

Tony blinked, and his Adam’s apple bobbed, hard. But he did not react otherwise. Something occurred to Tim then. This guy had taught Tim half of everything he knew about being a field agent. Hell even Gibbs swore by Tony’s near clairvoyant instincts when it came to reading people. Tim leaned back in his chair and frowned.

“Tony, you knew, didn’t you?”

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Tony gulped as the jigsaw pieces of a mental puzzle started to fall in place.

“I didn’t know exactly; had a feeling, but wasn’t sure.”
McGee nodded and continued. “Werth had a clandestine affair that lasted two years until he graduated and applied to the Corps. The exchange gets kind of nasty after that.”

“How do you mean?”

“It sounds like when Damon first got rejected because of his blood anomaly, he went into a funk and started avoiding everybody, including Manning. The emails get desperate at some point after that. Manning writes about how he’s scared for Damon, the way he’s changing, the man he is changing into. That’s followed by a six-month long breakup saga – mostly Manning venting about being used and betrayed and cursing Werth for being chicken-shit like everyone else…”

“And what is Werth’s reaction to all of it?”

“He mostly ignored the emails. Didn’t delete them, but didn’t respond to them either. Or maybe he chose to respond in person.”

Tony nodded, the timeline of events starting to automatically form itself in his head. “So Werth chose the steroids over love, and the Corps over his boyfriend?”

“Looks like it.”

“How does it end?”

McGee thought back to the last email he found from Manning. “It ends a year later with Manning offering reconciliation. He congratulates Werth for making his dream come true and wishes him all the luck. And get this – he ended his last email with the words – your secret will always be safe with me.”

Tony squinted. “Probie, you’re not suggesting we blackmail the guy for being gay, are you?”

McGee shrugged. “I’m just telling you what I found, man. Clearly the guy’s still in the closet. And clearly he’s still recovering from his testosterone-doused hangover. I personally couldn’t care less if he’s gay or not. But if he’s not ready to come out, the question is – how badly does he want to keep his secret a secret?”

Tony did not like this, and it wasn’t just the morality of it all. He was acutely uncomfortable with this entire subject. It was simply too close to home. “Maybe he’s changed or something… it’s been what, ten years?”

McGee looked like he was expecting the question and couldn’t wait to answer it. “Eleven months ago before his last deployment to Iraq, Damon got written up for a misdemeanor – he punched another guy in the mess hall, broke his nose in two places. It’s in his file with some suggestion that the guy he assaulted might have provoked Werth by calling him a derogatory name.”

“I don’t know, man, it’d be a reach.”

“I think he’s so deep in the closet he’s practically the back wall! For God’s sakes, you saw him, right? Flirting with both Abby and Ziva so exaggeratedly the other night?”

Poor McOblivious, Tony swallowed again, wishing the waiter would come with their food already, not because he was hungry but he could really use a change of subject. McGee seemed to notice his discomfort and put his hands up in placation.
“Look, it is wrong. I know. But I thought you wanted him gone. And we don’t have to, like, blackmail him! Even a slight, deliberate suggestion that we know, might be enough to make him run.”

“Still reaching, Probie.”

“But worth a try?”

McGee didn’t know of Tony’s bi-curious tendencies or he would have never suggested this. Far as he was concerned, he was a straight guy talking to another straight guy. Tony knew McGee was no homophobe, but he could be downright devious if the situation called for it.

“Tony?” Tim’s voice broke him out of his thoughts. “I even got pictures, man. Would you believe it, this Manning kid looked a lot like you – green eyes, brown hair, tall…”

Tony felt the wheezing surge to his lips again, but firmly composed himself. This was so not the time to spaz out…

His cell phone buzzed loudly, startling both men. Tony sent up a mental ‘thank God’ before flipping it open. It was Gibbs.

“Hey, bo–”

“Grab your gear, got a call from dispatch. No one else can take it.”

Despite events of Friday night (or because of them), Gibbs was all business and so was Tony. What else could they possibly do? He gestured to McGee that it was time to go, who nodded and immediately pulled out his wallet.

“Sure. I’ll grab McGee and call Ziva. What is it?”

Gibbs’ reply was drowned out by the deafening gunfire in the background. Tony stood up in a panicked rush. “Boss? BOSS!?!?”

“Relax, DiNozzo,” the words came back with a tinge of amusement. “We’re at the shooting range. Damon is killing it out there.”

Tony’s heart dropped to his stomach just as he dropped back into his seat. McGee frowned but Tony didn’t have the energy to answer his wordless question just yet. More sounds followed in the background of a guy laughing and hooting and declaring victory over someone called Gunny while his boss briefly described the case to Tony.

*Dead navy veteran, breaking and entering gone bad in Falls Church.* Those were the words he said to Tony.

“Quit showing off, son! Let’s go!” were the words Gibbs said to Damon, just before he hung up.

Tony flipped his own phone shut, gut clenching once again with a deadly sin so familiar it felt like home.

McGee didn’t say a word. Tony looked up at him and said three: “Let’s do it.”

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“I have this strange feeling that the blueprints and my knitting instructions got switched. I may be knitting a ranch house.”

January 20, 2008. Washington DC

Tony started to summarize the victim’s background for the benefit of the team.

“Chief Petty Officer Stefan Alvarez, 46, joined the Navy at the age of 22 in 1984, two deployments – Gulf War in 91-92 and South Korea after that until he took early retirement in 98. Divorced amicably, two sons aged fourteen and sixteen, wife has full custody; he had visitation rights. Owned a modest-sized dry cleaning business in Falls Church, the proceeds of which according to his will, should go to the kids. Squeaky-clean service and civilian record, no misdemeanors, not even a parking ticket. Current relationship was with a thirty-nine year divorcee who lives across the street, Angela Cruz, nothing serious, or so she says.”

Everyone stood beside him watching the big screen where he scrolled through the victim’s profile and background history. It was nearly three in the afternoon. The team had visited the veteran’s house where he was murdered, retrieved the body and all the evidence they could find, before returning to base camp about an hour ago.

Ziva went on to describe the attack as she’d simulated it. “Two assailants broke into his home at two AM last night. No security alarm. He heard noises, woke up, and grabbed the Glock he kept by the bed. He managed to overpower one guy just outside the bedroom by hitting him in the head with the butt of the gun. He then proceeded to the living room where he took cover behind the bookshelf, must have spotted a weapon. Was taken by surprise from behind when the first assailant recovered. First bullet in the back severed the spine, Alvarez fell to the ground. They turned him over, put another through the heart, point blank. Instant death. No witnesses. Angela Cruz was first on the scene at ten AM. They had a movie date, she called – he did not answer. So she went over to the house, discovered the body in a pool of blood and called 911.”

Gibbs crossed his arms. “Local LEOs have been calling it a ‘breaking and entering’. Does this feel like ‘breaking and entering’ to you?’

“No fingerprints, hardly any DNA, shots are too clean, too professional,” Ziva noted.

Tony concurred. “Car was parked outside, they had to know Alvarez was home. Plus nothing seems missing, not that there was much in there worth stealing to begin with.”

“It was premeditated.” Gibbs turned to go back to his desk. “DiNozzo –“

“Track down Alvarez’s CO and unit to find out if he made any enemies during his time served. On it.”

Ziva added before Gibbs could call on her, “And I shall work the civilian angle, see if anyone had any motives for murder here.”
Gibbs approved then turned to McGee. “McGee, work with Abby to locate the gunmen. They couldn’t have gone too far. Someone has to have seen something.”

“Someone did!” McGee spoke at last, making everyone turn back toward him. He took the clicker from Tony, smirking at the squinty-eyed expression on his friend’s face. “Figured it was too clean to be a ‘breaking and entering’ so if it was premeditated, it had to have been planned. I hacked into traffic cam surveillance of the surrounding area for the past month. Found a gray SUV with Delaware plates, stolen, trailing Alvarez’s car on three different occasions in the last week.”

“BOLO out on the SUV?” Gibbs pressed.

“Yep. And…” McGee zoomed in on one of the surveillance videos. It was a close-up of the SUV from the front, close enough to make out the driver. “We have a face. Sent it to Abby, she’s running face recognition as we speak.”

Gibbs smiled. “Good job, McGee,” and he walked out to check in with Ducky and Abby.

Tony turned to McGee and pretended to be irked. It was, after all, what was expected of him.

“Nicely done, McGoo! Teacher’s pet who even dresses like the teacher! Why didn’t you tell us you were already two steps ahead?”

McGee scowled back haughtily and went to his desk. Coincidentally, both Gibbs and McGee were dressed in khaki pants and semi-formal checked shirts. Even their sports jackets were exactly the same cut and style, only Gibbs’ was brown and McGee’s was beige. Tony noticed these things – he loved how different everyone looked once they discarded the formalities of a regular work-week.

Ziva looked hot in a form-fitting black velvet sweat suit with orange-and-black sneakers. Her hair was slicked back into a tight pony. At least she didn’t show up with blood-spattered bandages on her hands and feet this time. Tony himself was dressed in a cashmere deep blue pullover with faded-to-white jeans hanging off his hips a little lower than usual. The first thing Ziva had done when they met that morning was throw him a couple of dirty winks. Tony had simply smirked, not bothering to tell her how very much like Kate she looked winking like that.

Everyone got on with their individual assignments. Tony didn’t move from his seat until his worst, okay, one of his worst nightmares walked into the squad room.

***

Gibbs hated it when kids were involved. He loved kids, sure, but he hated that so many were orphaned or left without loved ones and he especially hated having to be the one to explain why someone’s daddy wasn’t coming home.

Around five, the Alvarez boys showed up in the squad room, unescorted. They wanted to speak to the lead agent on their dad’s case.

Gibbs sighed and took off his glasses. “Does your mother know you’re here?” He asked, as calmly as he could. He wasn’t angry at the kids, just the men who’d done this to these kids, now more than ever before.

The older one, Leo, had his arm around his younger brother, Adrian, and he nodded too quickly, clearly lying. “We just want to know what happened, Sir.”

The younger one had obviously been crying his eyes out. But the older one was the type who’d wait until he was all alone before he let it out.
Ziva was busy interrogating Sebastian Cruz, Angela Cruz’s not so ex-husband. Turned out her divorce wasn’t exactly complete, and the husband was borderline psychotic and crazy-jealous of everyone Angela had ever dated since they separated. McGee was down in Abby’s lab still chasing his digital leads. And DiNozzo had stood up and walked out the second the kids arrived. That was his MO. He hated it when kids were involved too.

“Would you like a tour?”

By the time he had assured the kids enough and sent them off with their mother, it was seven PM and dark out. He waved goodbye and headed down to the lab.

“Abs, what do you got?” He asked, fully expecting the very enthusiastic squealing of his name in return.

“Gibbs! You are, as always, right on time. I got a hit on our traffic cam mug-shot in the FBI database.” Abby hit a key to bring up the profile of their platinum blond, highly ordinary looking, suspected gunman. “Meet Vittorio Trask. Standard sized rap sheet for a gun-for-hire suspected of two murders but never convicted due to insufficient evidence. You can actually find him on craigslist.”

“Last known whereabouts?”

“Delaware, three years ago. Fell off the grid after that. No known associates.”

“What else?”

“How do you know there’s something else?”

Gibbs just hiked an eyebrow at her. She smiled and gracefully trotted over to another workstation. “So we’ve already established this was a professional hit. But then, how come only one of the guys policed their brass?”

Gibbs had thought about that. “To leave a message. A signature.”

“And a unique one at that.” Abby held up a finger for emphasis, then turned back to her computer and pulled up images of a bullet and the recovered cartridge casings.

“According to Ducky, this .45 ACP bullet was lodged in the right ventricle, kill-shot. The striated action marks are quite unique, in fact this is only the second time I’ve come across them. The gun this bullet was fired from has what’s called a very unconventional fast-action trigger mechanism with a delayed blowback. It’s a patented action where you hinge the hammer and it reduces trigger pressure from the standard double action 5.44 kilos to about 2.27 kilos, making it lighter and smoother than any other—”

Gibbs interrupted, latching onto the one thing he thought was important. “Patented to who?”

Abby pulled up another picture, this time of a small semi-automatic pistol. “I give you, the elusive DH45. Designed and patented by Daewoo, it’s banned for import to the US of A, but continues to be the sidearm of choice for the proud officers of the R.O.K.”

Gibbs did not need to be told. “The Republic of Korea.”

“Uh-huh. Someone went to a lot of trouble to smuggle this handgun into the country, just to make a statement.”
“Gun might not be the only thing smuggled in.” Gibbs walked out, leaving Abby to ponder his parting words.

Alvarez’s service record was starting to look a little too clean. Gibbs wondered what he could have done to merit a contract on his life from across two continents. Maybe even have an assassin flown in especially to kill him.

***

**Ziva** stood staring at the big screen waiting for Tony to get off the phone.

“I cleaned out on the civilian angle.”

“Washed out,” Tony corrected.

“Sorry. That.” Ziva muttered and turned to him. “The ex-wife had nothing to gain and she seemed suitably torn up, but not too much. The Cruz husband is clearly zonkers—”

“Bonkers.”

“Whatever! But he has a watertight alibi for the time of death Ducky estimated.”

She started to pace and continued to talk with Tony still on the phone, trusting his multi-tasking multi-listening capabilities to keep up with her. “No bad blood with any neighbors, colleagues or clients, no signs of illicit behavior, no debts. He did have in his possession a diamond solitaire ring that once belonged to his wife, worth six thousand dollars. That is not enough to warrant a motive for murder, is it?”

Tony put the phone down at last and stood up. “Doubt it. I finally got a hold of his ex-CO – he’s an instructor in Annapolis now. You wanna come with me to talk to him?”

“Are we going to Annapolis now?” Ziva asked, looking at her watch.

“MTAC, Ziva!” Tony rolled his eyes and ran up the stairs.

“That makes sense,” Ziva followed.

They were patched through to Lieutenant Commander Nathan Portman, who seemed rather inconvenienced at being pulled out of whatever social engagement he had planned for a Sunday night. Tony introduced himself and Ziva, who stood back and simply observed, while Tony led the conversation and got right down to the point.

“Commander, I have some bad news. Chief Petty Officer Stefan Alvarez is dead.”

There was a brief silence. “What happened?”

The man on the monitor was clearly taken aback, but was trying his best to not let it show. At least Tony had his full attention now.

“He was murdered by unidentified gunmen who broke into his house last night and shot him. We’d like your cooperation with the murder investigation.”

“Y-yes, whatever you need.”

“Thanks Commander. Alvarez was part of your unit for almost a decade. You served in the Gulf War and in South Korea together, is that correct?”
“Yes it is.”

“But you weren’t just colleagues, you were friends too. Your wives were friends before the Alvarezes got divorced. You guys even took family vacations together.”

“Well, yeah, we were good friends. About the same age, both from Texas…”

“So it’s safe to say you two were close?”

“It was a decade ago, Agent DiNozzo. What bearing does it have on your investigation?”

“Just trying to plug some gaps, Commander. Alvarez led a good clean life after the Navy. I’m guessing there’s something about his time during, that led to his violent demise.”

“Alvarez was a good officer. I doubt you will find anything untoward in his service record.”

“See, I’m curious about that, considering his best friend was in a position to doctor his records?”

Commander Portman was expectedly displeased. “You better have a damn good reason to be making that allegation, boy.”

And now he’d done it. Ziva knew how much Tony hated being called ‘boy’ by military men who looked down their noses at civilians like Tony. The fact that Tony was dressed in faded, tattered jeans wasn’t doing him any favors either.

Tony kept his cool and held up his clipboard. “February 1998. Alvarez’s record says he applied for a week’s leave which you approved. But there is no record of Alvarez taking any commercial flight or military transporter out of South Korea in that month. Now I am not a military man, Commander, but I’d expect someone who’s been cooped up on a secluded base in Chinhae, would long to get out of the country for some R&R. A loving husband and father to two little boys, yet there’s no record of him having entered the States either. How do you explain that?”

Portman’s jaw hardened but his face remained blank otherwise. “What my men did or did not do in their free time was none of my concern.”

“But Alvarez was different, right, Commander?” Tony continued almost cheerfully. “You guys were like best buds!”

“You’re making a big assumption here, Agent DiNozzo. We were friends, sure, but –”

“So would you ask just about anyone to be your best man, then?”

Portman looked annoyed. “Look, I married my Korean girlfriend in Korea. And Stefan was the closest friend I had at the base.”

“How about godfather to your first daughter?”

Ziva smiled as the Commander was rendered speechless. Tony had obviously perused the photo albums and stack of Christmas cards in Alvarez’s closet very closely.

Portman shifted in his chair. “Stefan never told me where he went, what he did with that week off. Maybe he just wanted to get away for awhile.”

“Whatever it was must have been serious, because six weeks later, Alvarez resigned and was back in the States in March ’98, just months before his next promotion. And it clearly soured your friendship because we couldn’t find any Christmas cards from the Portmans to the Alvarezes for that year or
any other year after that."

“Look, I’m sorry but I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Someone wanted Alvarez dead, Commander. This was a professional hit, premeditated and clean, no prints, no DNA, no eyewitnesses. We know it was planned for weeks in advance. Now the longer I look at you on this giant screen the more I’m convinced you know something, and you aren’t telling.”

The big vein in the Commander’s neck twitched a little.

Tony sighed audibly, “Come on, Commander. Do it for the kids. Leo and Adrian are sixteen and fourteen now. They came to NCIS headquarters today, on their own, looking for answers.”

Ziva shook her head amusedly. Tony’s interrogation style always befuddled her. He led with the slightly lost puppy dog-eyed amateur, morphed into an obnoxious douche bag somewhere in the middle to turn the screws, but softened the very last blow with his sympathetic ‘I don’t want to do this anymore than you do’ face. It was very effective.

Portman looked away for a second then back. “It was Friday night. Alvarez and a couple others took the ferry to Kojedo Island for a night out. It was, back then, and still is, a thriving tourist spot full of beach resorts and night clubs and such.”

Ziva stood holding her breath. She always felt the urge to turn to stone when the subject under interrogation started to sing (so to speak), wary of somehow making him or her retreat to silence. Tony, from what she could see from the corner of her eye, was standing just as still.

“As I heard it later,” the Commander shifted in his seat. “Alvarez got into an altercation with a Korean gentleman, over a lady.”

So much for a loving husband.

“As I heard it later,” the Commander shifted in his seat. “Alvarez got into an altercation with a Korean gentleman, over a lady.”

So much for a loving husband.

Tony, from what she could see from the corner of her eye, was standing just as still.

“An hour later, the guy cornered Stefan when he was alone and pulled out a gun. There was a struggle, the gun went off; the Korean took a bullet in the heart and died. Stefan fled the scene, came back and told me what’d happened and I shared it with the base commander. We were worried it’d turn into an international crisis with severe implications to the base. We were taking constant fire already for still existing in South Korea. So we kept it quiet, didn’t do anything.”

Portman lowered his head for awhile, and Tony politely urged him to go on.

“So that’s when you fudged his leave dates, and instructed Alvarez to not leave his quarters or show his face in the city during that time?”

“So that’s when you fudged his leave dates, and instructed Alvarez to not leave his quarters or show his face in the city during that time?”

“Something like that.”

“And he was never suspected?”

Portman shook his head. “The US navy base enjoyed a few privileges that I think in this case kept us off the cops’ radars. But we couldn’t take any chances. Base commander ordered Stefan to apply for early retirement and get out of there ASAP. After that he and I, we couldn’t look each other in the
eye. I felt like he’d betrayed my trust and his wife’s too, she was a good friend. But Stefan maintained he did nothing wrong, and believed I didn’t do enough to help save his career.”

Tony gave the Commander a moment, who looked clearly disturbed and at the same time, a little relieved to finally have this off his chest.

“What can you tell us about the man who was killed?”

“Next to nothing. The papers claimed he was a small-time thug originally from Busan. I don’t think anyone paid too much attention to his death, even the cops.”

Tony and Ziva looked at each other. It wasn’t much, but it was the closest thing they’d found to a motive.

“Thanks for your time, Commander.”

After they signed out, she turned to Tony, “This could still be nothing, you know.”

“Maybe, but my gut’s telling me we’re on the right track here.”

That was good enough for Ziva, “So now what?”

Tony pulled off his communication headset and handed it back to the MTAC technician, “Now we find someone who knows someone on the South Korean police force.”


“Whatever, I don’t care what they’re called so long as they have a damn good filing archive!” He grinned excitedly and ran up the stairs towards the exit. Ziva shook her head fondly at her partner so rampantly abuzz with energy.

“He gets like that when he knows he’s had a breakthrough,” someone remarked, coming up on her other side, emerging from the shadows.

“Gibbs! How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough. How did you two find out so quickly about the gun?”

Ziva blinked in confusion. “What gun?”

Gibbs squinted in thought for a second, and then smiled. Ziva saw pride on his face but she wasn’t entirely sure what it was for.

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Chapter 8

“Anyone who ever gave you confidence, you owe them a lot.”

January 21, 2008. Washington DC

Tony was lying on his back, looking up at the stars. He was completely and utterly relaxed. No heartrending unsolved cases, no humiliating memories haunting his mind, no one shaking their head at him in disappointment. It was a peaceful night, clear skies above him, soft, dew-damp grass beneath, a cool breeze gently gliding over his bare skin… Tony closed his eyes and wished he could stay in this place forever.

“You’re smiling,” a deep, slightly amused voice beside him whispered.

“Am I?” Tony replied, smiling just a bit wider.

Someone shifted closer to Tony, pressing the warmth of their body against his side. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“What a coincidence, I know what I’m thinking too.”

The voice chuckled, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

“Really, of all things…?”

“It’s better to look at the sky than live there,” the soothing voice interrupted, quoting Tony’s favorite neurotic New York socialite. “Such an empty place; so vague…”

Tony sighed, picking up where the voice left off. “Just a country where the thunder goes and things disappear.”

He breathed in deeply, folded his hands under his head but kept his eyes closed. “Alright, how did you know?”

“Because it’s what you always do, Tony, run away and hide inside one of your favorite movies when you don’t want to deal with something real.”

Tony opened his eyes at that, and turned to look into a perfectly chiseled face. He licked his lips. “And what don’t I want to deal with, exactly?”

Damon smiled gently, caressed the side of Tony’s face with his knuckles. He leaned in closer, slowly, as if about to kiss Tony’s lips.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“DINOZZO!!!”

Tony woke up with a start and promptly fell of his chair.

Gibbs towered over his desk and waited impatiently for Tony to pull himself upright. “Get changed. Can’t have you looking like a street rat on a Monday.”
“Getting changed, Boss!”

With that, Gibbs stalked off for coffee. He looked angry, again.

Ziva and McGee had left sometime after midnight, but Tony had stayed to chase up his contacts on the Korean side. He’d stretched out on his chair for a little nap somewhere around four AM, but got pulled under and it was after seven now. Gibbs must have gone home after Tony dozed off to catch a few hours of sleep and shower and change himself.

Tony picked his overcoat off the floor and frowned at it. He couldn’t remember how it got there, unless he’d dragged it over to cover himself in his sleep. He shrugged, then pulling out his shampoo, toothbrush, and the spare set of clothes he kept in his drawer, headed for the showers. When he came back, his hair was slicked up in the right direction, and he was dressed in a black suit with a crisp white Versace shirt. He’d had to shine his shoes by hand but they would do for the day.

He was contemplating a doughnut run when he walked into the squad room and halted in his tracks. Ziva was at his desk, and on his phone. Fuming, he stalked up to her but she just shushed him with a finger, as she continued to listen to whoever was on the other line and make notes.

“Mm-hmm, okay…”

Tony went around and tried to take the phone from her, but she wouldn’t let go. It soon turned into a tussle and had it not been for Ziva’s creepy little ninja skills, he would have succeeded.

“And how do you spell that? … Thank you so much. Yeah, you too.” Ziva hung up and smirked at him really annoyingly.

Tony put his hands on his hips. “What was that?”

“Intel on Tom Heung Park, the man Alvarez killed.”

He glared at her. “So? Are you going to tell me or what?”

Ziva acted like she was giving it deep thought, then coyly ambled over to her desk with her notes. “Or what.”

“Just my luck, I keep waiting on the guy all night and he calls when I’m not here!”

“Your phone rang three times before I picked up. You should be thanking me, you know. The guy wouldn’t have called again. International dialing rates in South Korea are going through the terrace, or so he said.”

Tony snorted. “Through the terrace, is that what he said, through the terrace?”

“I might be paraphrasing a little,” she threw back defensively. “Why?”

Tony tried to grab the paper in her hand but failed. “It’s through the roof, not terrace.”

“What’s the difference?”

“One’s right and the other’s wrong! Now give me that!!” But Ziva ducked again and guffawed at his expense.

“Seriously, Ziva? I haven’t had coffee and I haven’t had anything to eat in ten hours so it’s really not a good time to be screwing with me right now.” He dove toward the notes again, and this time she let him.
He continued to glare at her and went to his desk, while Ziva pulled something out from behind hers and came over to his again. Before he could huff or roll his eyes or come up with an appropriately biting tell-off, she placed a large Starbucks vanilla latte and a Krispy Kreme doughnut in front of him. And before he could close his gaping mouth, she curtsied delicately and walked away.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, truly gratefully.

“Oh, do not thank me,” clearly Ziva was in a chipper mood today. She started to smirk again when Gibbs strode into the bull pen with a Starbucks cup of his own.

“Stop stealing his food and his notes, Ziver, and tell me what you got.”

Tony marveled at how she never let Gibbs’ gruffness get to her, just carried on like he’d asked her what her weekend plans were. “BOLO came back on the gray SUV. It was found abandoned at a pier in Georgetown fifteen minutes ago.”

“Alright, grab your gear, and call McGee. Ask him to meet us there.”

Tony didn’t move, as he should have, as he usually did at the words ‘grab your gear’. He was so intently reading the notes Ziva had made and connecting the dots to the information he’d collected earlier in the night, that he didn’t notice Gibbs towering over him, again.

“What do you got?” Gibbs’ voice was… normal. He wasn’t yelling at him this time.

Tony showed Gibbs the piece of paper. “Tom Heung Park was not just a small-time thug. He was a protection fee collector for the largest mob syndicate in Korea, called the Ssang-Yong-Pa. He is survived by an illegitimate son who must be, like, twenty-nine years old now.”

“And…?”

Tony stood up. “The son’s name is James Heung Park. According to the Interpol, he is responsible for multiple homicides in Busan and Seoul, and… he recently took over as the new kingpin of the Ssang-Yong-Pa. Interpol has been monitoring his activities and don’t believe he’s left the country himself. But they are sending over a list of his known associates who might not be in Korea right now.”

Gibbs simply nodded. Tony didn’t expect a ‘good job’ and he didn’t get one.

“Grab your gear.”

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McGee was running late, again.

He never could do what Tony did almost on a weekly basis – stay up all night and still get to work on time, in Tony’s case an hour before time. He suspected it was because more often than not, Tony never actually went home at all. Tim, on the other hand, always ran back home because he couldn’t get enough sleep if he wasn’t in his own bed.

Tony won’t quit ragging on him all morning. Bracing himself, Tim got out of his car and ran towards the ‘crime scene’.

“Two sets of tire tracks, made at about the same time,” Gibbs was saying as he crouched besides the said tracks. Lucky for them, it’d rained a little two nights ago and the muddy area was damp enough to preserve the tracks.
Tony stood behind him, also studying the tracks. “One incoming here, looks like our SUV. These are pulling out, and judging from the distance between the tires, looks like a sedan.”

“Hair strand!” Ziva called out from inside the van as she scanned the interiors. “Black, not platinum blond.”

“We still don’t know who that second guy is, so that could help,” Tim noted, announcing his presence. All three of his teammates stopped what they were doing and turned to glare at him.

“Good morning, McObvious!” Tony drawled, while everyone else went back to what they were doing without a greeting. Tim decided it was safer, for now, to help Ziva and stay as far away from Gibbs as possible.

Back at NCIS, he took the tire marks and hair strand to Abby’s lab and waited with her for the results. If nothing panned out from them, she planned to go down to the sub-basement and do her own thorough investigation of the van. Fortunately, it didn’t come to that.

“The sedan’s a Hyundai Genesis,” Abby declared, tilting her head to one side in that adorable manner that always made Tim smile. “That’s a Korean car…”

And what Tim and Abby were thinking, they verbalized in unison. “No such thing as a coincidence.”

Gibbs walked in a second later, immediately spotting an image of the car on the monitor and needing no further explanation. Tony and Ziva followed close behind.

“DNA?”

“Still processing, might take a few hours.”

“We don’t have a few hours, Abby. The second man has probably left the country by now.”

“Yes, but Trask should not get past customs after the BOLO we sent them,” Tim explained. “If he tries to fly anywhere, we got him and if we get him, he can lead us to the second man.”

Tony cleared his throat, and at Gibbs’ nod he spoke up. Tim had never seen him wait for permission this demurely before. “Interpol came through. Well, actually, Ziva pulled a few strings but we got it.”

He opened his mailbox on Abby’s screen and clicked on an attached image in one of his newest emails. It was a long-lens shot of a handsome man turned slightly to his right, black hair, black sunglasses and a perfectly cut black suit that looked really expensive.

“Eric Wan, forty-four, loyal henchman to the last mob boss for twelve years before he allegedly betrayed him and helped James Park ascend the throne. He chartered a Robinson R44 to DC four days ago. Your DNA analysis won’t return anything, Abs. No one has this guy on any database.”

“At least we know what he looks like. McGee, update the BOLO.”

“On it, Boss.”

The next couple of hours were spent tracking down every missing Hyundai Genesis in the DC area as well as surrounding states. Funnily enough, they couldn’t find any.

“There are no more than two thousand of these cars in the country, it shouldn’t be so hard! Maybe it hasn’t been reported stolen yet?” Tim asked.
“Or maybe, unlike the SUV, this car was not stolen at all,” Tony pondered. “Can you search all rentals and sales for past two weeks?”

“On it,” Tim started pulling the multi-system hacking program together. Fifteen minutes later, during which Abby, Ziva and Tony played a game of who could throw the most number of popcorns in each other’s mouths from a distance of twelve feet or more, he had an answer.

“One Genesis, bought at the Fairfax Hyundai, paid for in full by down-payment, cash.”

They ran for their gear, leaving Abby to eat the rest of the popcorn alone.

An hour later, Tony drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove back towards the headquarters. “What’s taking so long, McTardy?”

“That’s one late joke too many, DiNozzo,” Tim grumbled, his own fingers working his laptop keyboard frantically. Ziva and Gibbs were ahead of them in another car.

Tim was well aware of the urgency and he didn’t need Tony to keep prodding him, but he also understood why Tony couldn’t help it. With every passing minute, the assassins were getting farther and farther away.

The trip to Fairfax had been a productive one. The sales executive was a bit of a smooth talker, especially once he spotted Ziva. But one look at Gibbs, and he got right down to business. Yes, he remembered the bleached blond guy who made the purchase. He also remembered how the man kept looking over at an SUV parked outside, specifically, at the man sitting inside.

Ziva pulled out Eric Wan’s mug shot for verification and indeed, he was the one waiting in the SUV. Question was: where did they go from here?

“Sorry, I couldn’t tell you. There wasn’t a lot of small talk, you know. The guy just waltzed in, pointed at the one he wanted, pulled out the money in hard cash, and boom.”

“Okay, anything else you remember?” Ziva pressed on.

“Mm, not really. We were processing as fast as we could ’cause he was in a hurry. The Asian dude even called up his friend from the van.” The salesman snorted, “It was weird; they were looking at each other from the distance and talking on the phone to each other. Surfer Dude was assuring Bruce Lee that he’d be done in two minutes, something like that.”

Tim’s ears perked up, “What time was the purchase made exactly?”

So here he was, trying to triangulate all calls that originated from and came to the cell tower nearest to the dealership within the thirty-minute window during which the car sale was closed yesterday evening.

“Got two hits… tracking GPS on all four phones…”

Tony’s drumming got a little more intense.

“One pair of phones is exactly in the same spot as they were yesterday.”

“Discard.”

“Third phone is either switched off, or it’s no longer in DC or the surrounding states. Tony, this phone’s log shows multiple international calls made to country code 82. That’s South Korea.”
“It’s Wan, we lost him. What about the last one?”

“It’s still on and somewhere in Baltimore.”

Tony swerved violently around towards the location, leaving Tim to keep his laptop, his cell phone and himself from toppling over. “Let Gibbs know.”

Things happened at supersonic speed after that. Tim narrowed the GPS location to a highway motel just outside of Baltimore. Together the four of them raided the place, causing a bit of a stir in broad daylight. Trask saw them coming and tried to shoot his way out. But four to one he didn’t stand a chance, especially with Ziva, who was covering the back door and was just waiting for Trask to try and make a run for it.

Seconds later, when Tim and Tony caught up with Ziva and Gibbs, they found Trask on the floor, writhing on his stomach, Ziva digging a thick block heel into the middle of his back.

Ziva hissed with a quiet fervor. “Be still and I might return your spine in one piece.”

Tim tilted his head, “Ziva’s kind of chipper today, huh?”

Tony shook his head, “Tell me about it.”

Couple hours of interrogation later, Gibbs had a full confession from Trask and enough evidence to incriminate Eric Wan in the murder of CPO Stefan Alvarez. Wan hired Trask to plan the assault, then flew in to supervise and execute the hit himself. Unfortunately, Trask knew nothing about the whereabouts of Wan or what his plans were. For all they knew, he was halfway back to South Korea by now.

They were too late.

“You mean, I was too late,” Tony deadpanned, refusing to meet Tim’s eyes.

Tim frowned. It was just the two of them in the bull pen. Ziva was escorting Trask to a civilian penitentiary, and Gibbs was up in the Director’s office updating her on the case.

“Tony, you’re the one who reminds me over and over again that there’s no ‘I’ in team.” Tim quipped casually.

He noticed Tony straightening up in his chair. The older agent’s knee was popping nervously and he briefly looked up at Gibbs’ empty desk before looking away. “I was responsible for ID-ing the gunmen, Probie. I should’ve moved faster.”

“How, pray tell, could you possibly coordinate with the US Navy, the South Korean consulate, the KNPA, and the Interpol any faster than you did?”

Tony stood up. “I don’t know, maybe I lost too many hours sleeping. I just know I fucked up.”

Tim just laughed, brushing his friend’s whining off. Attention-whore that Tony was, this was probably just another ploy of his to glean a couple of compliments out of Tim. Well, tough luck, DiNozzo. McEasy was not going to be so easy this time.

“Sure, Tony. Eric Wan waited for just the right moment for you to fall asleep to make his perfect getaway. That makes sense.”

“We have to keep tracking the Genesis. Check the BOLO, Probie.”
“I checked ten minutes ag—“

“Check it again!!”

Tim rolled his eyes but did as told, only for said eyes to suddenly open wide. “Uh, Tony…”

The senior field agent came running towards him and leaned in to look at his screen. “They just found it abandoned in Dulles airport parking. According to the security logs, it was brought in at five AM yesterday morning. Long before we even got called in for the case. So you see, it’s not your fault…”

Tony didn’t respond, just stood up straight and pursed his lips.

“Besides, we would have had to extradite him anyway.” Tim stood up, speaking in hushed tones so only his friend could hear what he had to say, which wasn’t much really. “Tony, it’s okay. You did really good.”

Without a response, Tony turned to go back to his desk. He collapsed heavily into his chair and rubbed his tired eyes with one hand. A minute passed, or maybe several hundred, Tim couldn’t tell. He was shocked into complete speechlessness by the raw vulnerability in DiNozzo’s eyes, words, and body language. He’d never seen him so… so defeated before.

“Last night…” he began tentatively, still not looking at Tim. “After you guys left and I was waiting on our Interpol contact to call me back, I started organizing my filing cabinet. All the medals and stuff Gibbs keeps getting, and I collect ‘em and keep ‘em safe because if it were up to him he’d throw them all in the trash, you know?”

“Yeah…”

Tony smiled sadly, his eyelids fluttering as he stared off into empty space. “I found one of the medals missing – the Silver Star.”

Tim gulped, remembering Damon Werth was supposed to receive the Silver Star, but it’d been rescinded after revelation of his drug use. “You think… would Gibbs really…? To Werth?”

No response from Tony was all the response Tim needed. Truth was he didn’t know Gibbs as well as Tony did, so if Tony believed it was true, then it probably was.

“He must think I’m really pathetic, huh, Probie? Hoarding all of his medals, knowing I’d never ever get my hands on one otherwise, one with my own name on it…”

Tim didn’t know what to say. He remembered Kate’s words back from three years ago when he’d just made field agent and Tony was acting like a spoilt little toddler jealous of a new baby in the house.

“When it comes to Gibbs and Tony, let me give you a word of advice, McGee. Don’t be deceived by all the head-slaps and barking. It’s all a front.”

“A front for what?”

“To disguise the fact that Tony is actually, and always will be, the boss’ favorite.”

“I thought Abby was his favorite.”

“Sure he loves her too but who doesn’t? Tony on the other hand… do you really think you and I
could get away with half the crap DiNozzo pulls?"

“I-I don’t know, guess I don’t know either of them so well, yet.”

“The day you do, and I’m sure you will soon, let’s pull up and compare notes.”

That day, unfortunately, never came. If it had, Tim would have probably told Kate that she was right. Tony did hold a special place in Gibbs’ eyes and his life, at least he did once. Hell, Tim admitted to even feeling a bit jealous of Tony because of it. But seeing Tony silently struggling these last few months, standing by helplessly as his friend’s self-esteem slowly waned, Tim wasn’t so sure anymore.

If the fall from Gibbs’ grace was supposed to be this hard, Tim was glad he never had it in the first place.

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“Promise me one thing: don't take me home until I'm drunk – very drunk indeed.”

January 25, 2008. Washington DC

Tony finished his report at exactly seven thirteen PM, but pretended to keep working until well after eight. Wasn’t much to update since the last draft he’d typed up on Monday anyway.

They’d spent four more days looking for Wan in vain. It hadn’t been easy going through every piece of security footage from every airport in and around the District for the past week. But it was like the guy had disappeared without a trace.

It was Friday night, and everyone else had left an hour ago. McGee got roped in (and happily so) by Abby to go to a Goth poetry recital somewhere in Georgetown. They’d asked Tony too, no, thank you, and the report excuse came in handy as a polite way to get out of it. Ziva had a date, Jimbo had a date, not with Ziva, obviously, and Ducky had a lovely night planned with his mother and her nurses along with their gazillion pet Corgis.

Gibbs was up in MTAC with the Director, working on another one of Agent Dunham’s covert ops in the Horn of Africa. From everything he’d gathered (snooping outside of MTAC pretending to be waiting for the boss to get his signatures on a new Kevlar jacket requisition form) Gibbs was going to be busy for another hour at least. Long enough for Tony to make a quick pit-stop at Gibbs’ place and have a little tête-à-tête with ex-Corporal Werth – the bane of this stupid, pathetic existence Tony called life.

But what was he going to say? Tony pondered and rehearsed all the way to Gibbs’ house. By the time he parked, he still had no idea what he was supposed to say to Damon. Get out of my life? Stop replacing me? Stop… stop confusing me?

Sitting inside his car, he figured it might actually be easier to do it over the phone. The idea of facing the guy, being anywhere near the guy, had a way of making Tony throw all his priorities out the window.

He didn’t have Damon’s cell-phone number, so he tried Gibbs’ landline instead. Damon picked up after five rings. “Gibbs’ residence?”

Tony cleared his throat. “Hi, this is, uh…” he ran out of words.

“Tony!” Damon’s voice was loud and excited as he recognized Tony right away.

“Uh, Damon, hi.”

“How’re you doing, man?”

“Um, good! And, you?”

“Gibbs isn’t back yet, did you want to speak to him?”
“Uh, yeah, actually… I wanted to speak to you too.”

“Well, why don’t you come on inside then?”

Tony blinked, looked at his cell phone then back up at the house. Damon was standing at a window waving at him, grinning from ear to ear.

Inside, Damon explained that he’d heard Tony pull up without being prompted. Tony smiled as politely as he could and stood there with his hands in his pockets, trying not to notice the way Damon looked. The taller man was not dressed in his usual black tee and camouflage pants. Instead he had on a pair of nice blue jeans and a crisp white shirt hanging loose but still doing a great job of flattering his broad, muscled chest. It looked like Damon had just shaved, and stepped out of the shower because his cropped hair was glistening with moisture. And he smelled so...

Nope, Tony wasn’t noticing any of those things at all.

“So what did you wanna talk to me about?”

“Uhh,” now was his chance, and yet… “I was wondering h-how… your interview went, with my cousin?”

“Oh right,” Damon briefly looked down at his shoes. “I think it went well but… I decided to stick around in DC for awhile.”

_of course you did._ Tony nodded curtly.

“I really am grateful, Tony, to you and George, and Annaleigh is a really sweet girl, but… you know how it is. Going from protecting your country to babysitting a teenager isn’t the most appealing transition to make. I’ll do it if I’m desperate but… you know.”

“Sure! But, something tells me that’s not the only reason.”

Gibbs’ approval wasn’t just Tony’s drug of choice, apparently.

Damon threw him a strangely contemplative look. “No, it’s not.”

Tony fidgeted. He came here with a clear agenda, to test out McGee’s theory that Werth was deep enough in the closet that he wouldn’t want himself exposed to the world, least of all to Gibbs. But standing here, with Damon’s eyes so keenly trained on him it made his face burn, Tony couldn’t for the life of him think of anything to say. So much for his mad people skills.

“You look different. In a _good_ way, of course…”

Tony was startled out of his thoughts, and caught Damon’s eyes surreptitiously moving down his body and back up. It was a Friday, and after having spent practically three days and three nights in the bull-pen trying to locate Wan (trying and failing), Tony had wanted a break from his designer formal wear. Sure, he’d happily go back to them come Monday, but this morning he couldn’t imagine sitting at his desk all day long in anything but his oldest, most comfortable pair of Levis, and a black button-down shirt with the sleeves folded up. He also had a maroon pashmina scarf wrapped around his neck, and carried his black overcoat in the crook of one arm.

Tony’s first reaction to Damon’s words was bewilderment, followed by a strong surge of warmth that rose to his face and neck. It almost made him smile even as his heart slightly sank: Damon had just checked him out, pretty obviously at that. Maybe he wasn’t so deep in the closet after all?
“Hey, I was about to go meet some friends at this club on U-street for drinks. Why don’t you come with?”

Crap, that answered Tony’s question. Werth’s lack of fear or hesitation meant Tony had no Hail Mary left to play anymore. He felt disappointed, with, weirdly enough, a side of delight.

“I-I don’t know, I should…”

“You have other plans?”

“I was really looking forward to a Magnum Season Five marathon, actually.”

Damon laughed; he probably assumed Tony was being sarcastic.

“Come on, let me thank you properly for getting me my first job interview. Gibbs says you’re too young to be turning into a hermit anyway.”

Tony crossed his arms defensively, “I’m not turning into a hermit.” And definitely not if Gibbs said it.

“Alright then!” Damon grinned and picked up his coat. Before Tony could protest, the man strode over and spun him around by one arm. Damon’s hands rested on both his shoulders as he firmly propelled Tony towards the door. It was a friendly move and yet, the touch felt more intimate than Tony had experienced in a long time.

“Let’s go buddy, you’re driving.”

Tony should have protested, really he should have. He was in no mood to go drinking and clubbing with complete strangers, even though that’d been the norm before he met Jeanne. But the damn hands and the deep gravelly voice tickling the back of his hair were very insistent and doggedly persuasive.

Maybe he should just chill the hell out. Damon wasn’t a bad guy; Tony knew that beyond the shadow of a doubt. Not to mention real easy on the eyes too. Maybe he could put the whole Gibbs thing aside just for tonight and see what this thing with Damon really was? Had to admit, the dude was kind of… intriguing.

Or maybe he was reading too much into Werth’s gestures, influenced by McGee’s theories and alleged back-stories. Maybe Werth really just wanted to hang out like two straight guys, be his wingman, pick up girls or something…

Maybe he could even strike a friendship with Werth, and then politely explain to him the whole situation, and maybe Werth would understand and just leave on his own?

Yeah right. Tony rolled his eyes, careful to keep his back to Damon as he did so.

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Damon was not a clubbing guy. Hell, for all his machismo and marine bravado, he actually had a rabid fear of large unruly crowds. And he especially hated standing in line like a chump waiting to be allowed into a club. But none of that seemed to matter tonight. He had Tony by his side.

It took a few minutes but eventually they were shown in and met up with Damon’s friends. Everyone knew everyone except Tony, so they did a quick lightning round of introductions for the agent’s benefit. When his friends started to throw him knowing looks Damon blushed, grabbed Tony
by the arm and tugged him towards the bar. He needed some liquid courage, now.

He wondered if Tony understood that Damon had actually asked him out, like out, out. He’d spotted a flicker of surprise in the sea-green eyes, maybe a fleeting smile on the gorgeous face, but he couldn’t be sure. Didn’t matter though, so long as he got to spend this time with Tony, he’d make do with whatever he got.

It was nine-thirty at night and they’d been drinking and chatting for about an hour. Damon’s friends, three men from his unit, were delighted to finally be able to drag him out of his self-imposed social exile. But they were perceptive enough to see that Damon favored Tony’s company tonight and gave the two men their space.

Damon was so grateful to these guys. They were the best friends he’d ever made – they knew he was gay and didn’t care. They also knew (now) that he’d been a steroid junkie and did not judge him for what’d had to do. Which could not be said for a lot of other people, but Damon had expected that and made his peace with it.

“So I screamed ‘freeze dirtbag!’ which – if you think about it, were the first words I ever said to the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs,” Tony found that funny and sniggered, and Damon laughed along.

They sat next to each other on a couple of bar stools, leaning close to talk over the loud techno-trance music, shoulders bumping each other. They were both on their fourth beers but it showed more evidently on Tony than it did on Damon. The marine was acutely conscious of the way Tony’s thigh brushed against his now and then, depending on his level of animation as he yakked non-stop, regaling Damon with stories of how he came to be with NCIS seven years ago.

Damon couldn’t help but notice how Tony’s eyes sparkled when he talked of his job and his team, and especially Gibbs. He shook his head slightly and chuckled.

Tony squinted at him, “What?”

“Nothin’ – it’s just cool that you’re so passionate about your work.”

“Well, you don’t exactly become a federal agent for the money.”

Damon laughed again. “Of course not. Besides, money isn’t exactly a problem for you, right?”

“And why would you go assuming that of me, Corporal? Just ‘cause I have filthy rich cousins living in Long Island doesn’t mean I’m filthy rich too.” Tony’s smile dimmed a little and he leaned over his beer. “My dad cut me off when I chose Ohio State over Yale.”

“Yale? Why did you do that?”

Tony shrugged. “Yale was his doing, not mine. He pulled some strings to get me there and wanted me to major in business, which I wasn’t interested in. I cracked Ohio State and Dukes on my own, fair and square, and all I had to do was play ball!”

He grinned like the spunky freewheeling teenager he must have been, and Damon squashed a sudden urge to reach out and kiss the man’s upturned lips.

“Couldn’t afford Dukes, being disowned and all, but the Buckeyes gave me a full ride. Been on my own ever since. What about you? You come from money too. How come you’re living in Gibbs’ house and can’t afford a car?”

Damon laughed. “My father and I – let’s just say I wasn’t the son he wanted until I got into the
Corps. But it was too late by then. I guess I disowned him, in a manner of speaking. And now with this new… scandal, the feeling’s finally mutual.”

“Good on ya,” Tony clinked his beer bottle against Damon’s clumsily and winked at him. It amused Damon to no end that Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo was such a lightweight.

“Can I ask you something?” Tony squinted at him. Damon nodded eagerly.

“Is… is this a date? Are we on a date?”

Damon couldn’t help but smile. There was no sarcasm, no humor in the question, just plain wide-eyed innocence. He leaned in cautiously, afraid he might spook his beautiful companion away.

“Do you want it to be, Tony?”

Tony gulped visibly. His face went through a hundred different shades of emotions until it seemed to settle on amazement, pure and simple. Damon wondered if it was now or never… if he could lean in a few more inches and touch Tony’s beer-wet lips with his…

The music changed, got louder and well, bouncier. Olga, one of the girlfriends showed up just then, and the moment was lost.

“Come on you guys, on the dance floor, now!”

Tony grinned at her, looking almost relieved as she pulled him up by the hand and led him to the dance floor. He turned to look at Damon and the marine sighed, left with no choice but to follow them into the big, scary swarm of people.

Soft alcohol buzz rushed up to his head as Damon stood up and he felt mildly woozy. Eyes on Tony. Eyes on Tony. He kept repeating the mantra as he followed the agent into the crowd. In the darkness, Tony seemed to glow, like Damon’s very own personal beacon made of champagne gold and pearly whites and more gold… and soon the chanting in his head changed.

Tony. Tony. Tony.

Sometime later, Olga let Tony go and turned to her own boyfriend to dance with. Tony continued to groove softly, digging his hands into his jeans pockets. Damon plucked up the courage to move closer, and closer, until his front was lightly pressed up against Tony’s back.

Maybe it was his imagination, maybe not. Tony stiffened one moment, and in the next, he leaned back into Damon’s broad frame, letting the man behind him bear some of his weight. Eventually everyone around them melted into the background. Together they moved, side to side, Tony’s eyes gazing away into nothingness, Damon’s transfixed at Tony.

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McGee paced back and forth in Abby’s living room.

“Abby! We’re not gonna get good seats if we don’t leave right now!”

The forensic scientist had been held back at work and now they were running late. They’d planned to have a nice sit-down dinner for two before the Gothic poetry recital (those things started usually around midnight) but seeing how it was already after ten, take-away would just have to do.

“Patience, Timmy!” Abby called from her bedroom. “Call Tony, see if he’d like to come with.”
“I asked him. He laughed in my face,” Tim might have pouted, not like anyone saw it.

“He better not be sitting alone at home, moping. Can you see what he’s up to?”

Tim texted his partner, not expecting a response back because that’s what Tony did – pretended he didn’t get any messages when he was alone, watching one of his old DVDs. This time though, he got a response right away.

“What?” he blurted, just as Abby walked out. She looked ravishing, dressed in a flattering little black dress, backless with a halter neck, and four-inch platform boots that came to her knees. Her hair was bunched up on top of her head, accentuating the long lines of her neck.

“Thank you, Tim,” she smiled. To which Tim looked up at her, eyes dropping all the way down and back up, and he grinned. She squinted. “I take it the ‘whoa’ was not for me?”

“Uh, this one is – WHOA.”

Abby chuckled. “And what was the first one for?”

Tim looked down at his phone. “Tony’s out with Damon Werth and his friends.”

“Whoa!” Abby echoed. “Finally!!”

Tim narrowed his eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Abby just strutted away, looking extremely pleased with herself.

The first thing that went through Tim’s mind after reading the message was concern. He figured Tony went to talk to Damon and see if he could subtly pursue, okay, blackmail the guy into beating a swift retreat from their lives. Now while he had the utmost faith in Tony’s people skills, it wasn’t exactly going to be easy (or even right) threatening to out someone if they didn’t do exactly as they were told. But mostly he was worried that Werth might go ballistic, like ‘steroid haze’ ballistic, and end up hurting Tony somehow.

Right then though, looking at Abby’s Cheshire cat-like smile, he started to think he was missing something very crucial. “Abby? Do you know something I don’t?”

Abby bit her lip as if in deliberation. Then she shrugged, putting her hands on his hips. “If you haven’t seen the way the two of them look at each other, Timmy, you don’t deserve to know,” she said teasingly.

What the – Tim frowned hard. She couldn’t mean… well, he knew Werth was gay but Tony? Their Tony? His best friend Tony?

“No way! Abby… please tell me you don’t mean what I think you mean.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No, no-no-no, you’ve got it all wrong! Tony hates Damon. He hates the fact that Damon exists! But if you think Damon is into him then, then… what Tony is about to do tonight can seriously blow up in his face.”

Abby frowned. “Why? What is he about to do?”

There was no choice left. This was way too confusing and there was too much at stake, including Tony’s safety and Werth’s feelings. To be honest, Tim had nothing against the man, aside from the
fact that he made his best friend uncomfortable and more insecure than he already was. Tim decided to tell her.

And she decided to explode and punch him in the arm.

“Oww!!”

“How can Tony try to blackmail him for being gay? That is so stupid and so wrong! Not to mention so very hypocritical!”

“But Tony is not gay! Is he??”

“Bi-curious would be more accurate.”

Tim was shocked into speechlessness which lasted all of… twenty seconds give or take, before he squinted. “Actually that explains a lot. Like the perfectly coiffed hair and the designer label obsession and his neat manicured fingers…”

Abby smiled, “I just hope Tony forgives me, now that I’ve told two people without his permission.”

“Me and Ziva?”

“Yep,” she sighed. “As good an investigator that Tony is, sometimes he needs a GPS to find his way through his own emotions. I’ve been that GPS for him for years. But it looks like he’s found a new confidant in you now, Timmy.”

Tim bit his lip. He could understand the hint of sadness in Abby’s words, but also knew her enough to know she wasn’t all that broken up about it.

“And Damon just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“You knew this and you didn’t say anything?” She punched his arm again.

“Oww! I tried, I swear. He’s just… he’s miserable, Abby! Besides, doesn’t that tell you Tony has no interest in him? It’s probably for the best if Damon leaves, save himself a lot of heartbreak.”

Abby grabbed her coat and keys. “We need to stop him. Call him, Tim, tell him not to do it.”

Tim grimaced, not ready to have that conversation, especially since it’d been his brilliant idea to begin with. “God, didn’t you hear a word I said, Abby? Why? Why should we stop him?”

“Because Tony likes Damon back, Tim, didn’t you hear a word of what I said?”

“How can you tell?”

“You’re an idiot. Give me the phone!”

Abby tried calling Tony but he didn’t pick up. “Did he say where he was?”

“U-hall.”

“Let’s go.”
“What about the recital?”

She didn’t bother to reply and rushed out of her apartment, leaving him no choice but to follow. He could already tell this was going to be a long night.

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Chapter 10

“How could I say no? It was so wildly romantic!”

January 26, 2008. Washington DC

“Tony, come on, we’re heading out. Tony!”

Tony felt that voice, that familiar gravelly voice break through his pleasantly intoxicated stupor. It came from right behind him, from the big pillar of muscle he’d been comfortably leaning against all night. He opened his eyes and suspected he might have been grinning stupidly for awhile. Turning towards Damon, he couldn’t help but smile again and was met by a bright flash of teeth in return.

“Lightweight,” Damon teased, whispering right into his ear, before getting behind Tony once more and gently ushering him out of the club that was noisier and more crowded than he remembered. Tony felt himself swaying dangerously and was grateful for Damon’s arms that kept him upright and walking a reasonably straight line.

“What time is it?” He asked, his speech slurred.

“Just after midnight.”

“Dude, the night’s still young! Why are we leaving… you Marines can’t function without a bedtime curfew, or what?”

Damon chuckled. “Don’t worry – we’re not calling it a night yet. Some friends of mine are having a house party and I haven’t seen them in a while so, we’re gonna go get ourselves some free booze and nourishment, you and me.”

“Olga’s not coming?” Tony craned to look around, and realized they’d broken away from the pack.

“Aww, now you’re just breaking my heart, Tonio. Come on, I promise it’ll be fun.”

Tony didn’t admit it, but he kind of liked the nickname Damon had picked up sometime during the night. Maybe it was right after Tony told him that’s what his mom used to call him. Maybe it was after Damon had leaned close, kissed his cheek and whispered, “I love the way you move… Tonio.”

It had been his way to ask for permission to use the endearment, but Tony had been too busy shuddering with glee to either confirm or deny.

Tony laughed as he watched Damon struggle to hail a cab down. Damon scowled. “What? It’s a busy night.”

Tony licked his lips, then raised two fingers to his mouth and whistled – sharp and screeching loudly. A cab immediately swerved towards them and came to a halt.

Damon smirked. “Alright, Holly Golightly, let’s go.”

Tony giggled and stumbled his way into the cab and Damon followed right after. He was high, that much was obvious, and it was a happy high. Not an ‘I’ve had too much to drink and don’t feel so
good’ high, just a ‘Life’s good and one more tequila would be just golden’ high. He’d not felt so relaxed in a really long time. And he sure didn’t remember ever feeling like someone had his back and he could drink and party as much as he wanted to, all night. Usually he’d be the one looking out for the girl, or even for his frat brothers. For the first time in his life, Tony was the one being looked out for, and he liked it, even as he found himself mildly disturbed by it.

“Everything’s upside down,” he mumbled as he stared out of his window at the scenery flying past.

“What do you mean?” Damon asked. He was sitting beside him, practically glued to Tony’s side from shoulders all the way down to their feet.

When Tony turned towards him, he realized his lips were barely inches away from Damon’s. And all he had to do was lean in… lick those luscious red lips that’d been teasing him with their breathy whispering all damn night.

“What’s upside down again?”

Tony blinked, remembering what he’d been thinking of before. “Oh, you know. You start with house parties then move it to the club, not the other way round. And I usually carry the drunken deadweight out of a club not the other way round.”

He chuckled and Damon joined in, with that magical heartwarming laugh of his.

“And I’m supposed to hate you, not…” Even through his drunkenness, Tony realized he mustn’t finish that thought. He bit his lip, as Damon frowned.

“What was that?”

“Nothing!” Tony looked away and spotted a random movie billboard on the street. Before Damon could prod, he started waxing philosophical about the evolution of Hollywood movie posters over the years. Damon seemed to let it slide and go with the flow of Tony’s chaotic rambling.

“And so, in summation –” Tony continued after pausing for breath, but was interrupted.

“In summation, you missed your calling, DiNozzo. You really should have been a professor at the Film School, not a federal agent.”

Damon chuckled again, but Tony couldn’t find it in himself to join in. Memories of Jeanne and all the lies he’d told her flooded his mind, threatening to undo all the good work Damon had done to help him forget. He needed a distraction, now.

Before he knew it, he was leaning in, craving desperately to recapture the happiness he’d felt all night. He was not disappointed when Damon met him half-way. And then they were kissing, clinging to each other, breathing in the scent of the other and letting it ride all the way up to their brains, tasting each other for the very first time…

The cab swerved rather violently towards the curb and stopped, throwing the two men apart.

“This is as far as I go,” the cab driver grunted.

It took a few seconds to realize what was happening. And when he did, Tony threw his head back and snorted while Damon furiously rammed a hand against the glass panel that protected the cabbie from him.

“Sonofabitch!” Damon shouted, but before he could do anything else, Tony reached for his shoulder
and squeezed. He felt the younger man instantly still under his touch.

“It’s quite alright, darling,” Tony drawled, channeling the first diva that sprang to mind. “The poor man’s just upset he married the three-hundred pound cow waiting for him at home instead of eloping with the sexy transvestite he fell in love with years ago.”

“Get out, both of you!” The cabbie practically shrieked.

Laughing, Damon and Tony got out and nearly doubled over as the sedan pulled away as fast as it possibly could. A minute later, Damon composed himself but Tony was still laughing and simultaneously groaning for the ache in his belly.

“You done?” Damon asked him, one eyebrow hiked up in amusement.

Tony bit his lip and exhaled deeply, no longer feeling as drunk as he’d been before. He straightened up and dug his hands in his coat pockets. “You were going to deck the guy, weren’t you?”

Damon shrugged noncommittally. “Come on, the house isn’t that far from here. We can walk.”

Tony was hit by a strong sense of déjà vu – how very Gibbs-like Damon was when he tried to change the subject. The same sharp squinting of the eyes, the same bossy dismissive way of turning his back on Tony to signal an end to the discussion. And just like that, he was reminded of why he’d come looking for Damon that night.

“Just like you broke Corporal Miles’ nose, last year?”

Damon stopped, and slowly turned towards Tony, his face a picture of surprise and suspicion.

“What’d he do? Call you a fag?”

“How do you –? It’s in my file, of course.” Damon shook his head, and looked down at his boots momentarily. “When I was on the… the drugs, I wasn’t exactly myself. I’d have these fits of rage, like black-outs. Couldn’t remember anything afterwards.”

Tony watched as Damon tentatively stepped closer to him. “I haven’t felt that way since they flushed my system. And I’m not going back there again, Tony. So to answer your question… no, I wouldn’t have hit him, even though the asshole totally deserved it.”

Tony nodded briefly and started walking. Damon jogged to catch up and walk beside him.

A minute later, Tony prodded again. He just couldn’t help himself. “Are you out?”

“Define out.”

Tony shrugged. “Do people know?”

“Close friends do. I don’t think it’s anybody else’s business. Don’t ask don’t tell and shit.” Damon’s tone seemed clipped, like he wasn’t digging this line of questioning Tony had subjected him to.

And then he flipped it back at Tony. “What about you? Are you out?”

Tony’s heart raced. “I’m… I’m not sure if… I don’t know what I am, yet. I-I mean I’ve never actually done anything… nothing beyond w-what we’ve done tonight.”

He felt his face burn. When he gathered the courage to look back at Damon, he spotted the marine’s smile lines deepening even as his gaze stayed glued to the sidewalk. Tony rolled his eyes. “That’s
right, I am a virgin. I said it! Happy now?”

Damon whispered back heavily. “You say it like it’s a bad thing, Tony.”

The gentle but blatantly salacious tone of voice sent all the blood in his body rushing up to Tony’s face and he looked away. Whatever the hell possessed him to lay himself bare open like that, to Damon of all people?

But now that he’d confessed his own novice status, Tony was curious to know about Damon too. “So, what about you, Marine?”

Damon smirked. “Let’s just say I’m not a virgin.”

A stab of jealousy went through Tony and he didn’t even quite understand it. “So all the way?”

“Yes, Tony, all the way.”

“With Michael Manning?”

For a second time that night, he felt Damon tense up, no longer amused. “Funny you should ask me that, tonight, of all nights. Exactly how far back do you go digging for dirt on your suspects?”

Tony steeled himself. His brain seemed muddled, and hazy, and he was no longer sure what his agenda was, or should be. This man, this… disgraced marine… was confusing the big Jesus out of him. Sure there was attraction – an insane amount of attraction. But Damon was also the reason why Tony was so damn miserable. The job he’d professed to love so much – was making him miserable and there was only one thing left to do.

The guy was in Tony’s spot, and he wanted it back. As much as he liked Damon, Tony didn’t know what he was supposed to do, where his place was, without that spot.

“Tony, are you alright?” Damon was coming closer, and closer. Tony knew what would happen next – he’d succumb to the sensual scent of Damon Werth, his resolve would crumble under the weight of Damon’s hands on his body and… no, he couldn’t let it happen. Not this time.

Tony stepped back, just out of reach. “We found pictures. You and Manning. We also found email correspondence – love letters you wrote to Manning that might have even ruined your chances with the Corps, steroids or not.”

Damon’s jaw hardened. “And what of them? What are you getting at?”

Tony shrugged. “Nothing, just curious I guess. I’m wondering what you’d do if those things came out.”

Damon looked away, and it seemed he was giving it some serious thought. “I guess, I wouldn’t want them to come out, Tony.”

Damn. McGee was right.

A rational part of his brain still remembered that this was the original plan – this was supposed to be good news. This was the ammo he needed to drive Werth out of their lives, his and Gibbs’ forever! And yet, the thought brought Tony no elation, no relief, nothing. Just a strange sense of… disappointment.

Damon stopped walking at some point, forcing Tony to stop too. For the first time in his life, Tony
had paid absolutely no attention to where they were going or where they were at. Until now.

Damon tilted his head slightly towards the right. “Shall we?”

Tony followed his signal and turned to see that they’d halted outside a grand townhouse. He was still looking at it, taking in the gorgeous colonial architecture that may as well have qualified it as a Renaissance property, when Damon took his hand. Tony started, not realizing the other man had sneaked in so close to him. The proximity started to mess with his head again and he forgot why he was thinking of begging off, jumping into a cab and running away as far from Damon as possible.

“Come on, Tony, you’re getting cold.”

Tony felt obliged to protest on behalf of his manhood. But Damon hooked his arm with Tony’s and was already leading him through the gates and inside into the welcoming warmth of a magnificent high-ceilinged foyer.

“Oh wow, that does feel good,” Tony exhaled in relief. He let Damon take his coat and continued to look around.

Inside, the party was in full swing and had clearly been swinging for awhile. There were at least fifty people spread across the ballroom-sized living area, the second floor landing and the lawns outside. Lounge music played on a superb quality surround-sound system that was not too loud nor too low – just perfect. And as Damon promised, there was free food and booze and lots of it, especially champagne.

Before he knew it, Tony was drunk again. He never did do well with champagne, and tried to explain as much to Damon. But he suspected the marine only pretended to understand, and was trying really hard not to laugh to Tony’s face.

“Damon!!” Someone yelled from across the hall, making them both turn to the source.

Damon grinned widely as the man who’d called out to him rushed over. He was tall but not as tall as Damon, slender but nicely built. He had longish dark blond hair that curled at the base of his neck, light green eyes, and a big wide smile that stretched from ear to ear. Tony squinted, wondering why the stranger seemed familiar.

“Mikey!!” Damon called out, solving the mystery for Tony.

The agent watched, a little stunned, a little petrified, at the thought of coming face to face with the man he’d threatened to expose just minutes ago. Manning and Werth hugged each other like old friends (not lovers), joking and laughing and hugging again. Then Manning turned to his side and let in a third person into the embrace – a young woman, blond, attractive, and obviously pregnant.

“Sarah!!! Wow, look at you! How far along are you?”

“Six months! You’ve been gone a long time, Marine.” She responded with such familiarity, Tony was left in no doubts that her friendship with Damon was just as long as his friendship with Manning.

He felt like an outsider. Tony turned away, wondering what in hell he was doing. He didn’t know a single person here, except Damon, and he hardly even knew him either.

Someone grabbed him just as he started to tilt towards the buffet table for much-needed support. His head spun but Damon steadied him, keeping one arm around Tony’s waist and leading him towards the circle of his friends. Tony thought for a moment to dig his heels, but he knew it’d be useless.
“Michael, I want you to meet Special Agent Tony DiNozzo. Tony – this is my best friend, Michael Manning.”

Michael and Sarah exchanged another knowing look, the same one Damon’s friends had been throwing each other all night, before turning to Tony with bright smiles on their faces. It occurred to Tony that none of Damon’s friends had seemed surprised that Damon’s date was, well, a guy. Sarah even hugged him like she’d known him all her life, before quickly returning him to be ensconced back in Damon’s arms.

“So glad you could come! Tony, you look like you haven’t eaten anything all night.” Sarah chided, and Tony immediately decided he liked her.

“Looks like your wife’s starting to practice her mothering skills already, Mike,” Damon quipped.

“You have no idea, man,” Michael complained and got an elbow to his ribs in return. They chatted for a while about things Tony knew nothing about but still Damon wouldn’t let him go, holding him close as if he knew that if he let go, Tony would pitch face first into the carpet.

Sometime during the conversation, Tony thought he heard Damon asking Michael if he could use the guest bedroom. And then without needing any directions, which probably meant Damon had been there before, he started leading Tony upstairs.

Tony panicked for a moment. “Wh-where…?”

“Shh, it’s okay. You need to lie down. Come on…”

At the door, Damon reached inside the room and flicked on a floor lamp just bright enough to illuminate the lay of the room. Then he waited for Tony to step inside. Tony snorted sharply and threw his head back towards Damon. “You better not be getting any ideas, Werth. I don’t put out on the first date.”

Damon bit back a smirk again; that annoying expression that Tony found so very… annoying. “No ideas. Just let me show you something…”

“A-ha! Nice try, bucko!”

Damon laughed. “Shut up and get over here.”

He went in first and started walking towards a far wall of the bedroom. He lightly tugged at Tony’s hand before letting it go, willing the agent to come on his own. He did stay at arm’s length though, afraid Tony would stumble or keel over, and at the moment either seemed a likely possibility. Tony went where he was led, until he was standing inches away from Damon, facing the handsome man. At this distance, in this glamorously dim, yellow light, Damon looked absolutely irresistible.

“So, what did you want to show me?” Tony asked, lasciviously letting his eyes trail down and back up Damon’s perfect body.

Damon put a hand on Tony’s cheek and made him turn his neck until his eyes fell on a section of wall above the dresser. It was adorned with photos, of family and friends – the Manning album.

“This is why I wouldn’t want those high school pictures to come out,” Damon said, his voice calm and all-business. “It was a very, very long time ago. We’ve both moved on. Michael’s found Sarah and they have this perfect life together. Sara’s always been a little insecure about Mike’s bisexuality. But I know him, and he will never cheat on her. Even so, I don’t want her to be reminded of his past, that’s all.”
Tony’s smile faltered and he started to sway. Damon caught him about his waist again, holding him close as they continued to look at the pictures. Michael and Sarah’s wedding, Michael and Sarah skiing in the Alps, Michael and Sarah with a set of parents, the Mannings probably, seeing the resemblance. Michael and Damon and Sarah at Thanksgiving…

“I get it. Military men do tend to be way deep in the closet, because that’s just how they’re expected to act. You’re worried I might still be like that, that I might treat you like some dirty little secret. But you’ve got nothing to worry about, Tony. Hell, I’ve been flaunting you all over town all night, doesn’t that tell you something?”

Tony felt his throat clog up again. He felt wretched, guilty, conflicted. He felt sick.

“That the bathroom?” He managed to ask, spotting a door not too far from where they stood and hoping like hell he was right.

“What? Oh!” It was a second before Damon realized what was happening.

Tony ran, slammed through the door and straight to the porcelain bowl, Damon tailing right after him. A decade passed, maybe more, before Tony reached the dry-retching stage. And all that time, Damon sat behind him, rubbing his back, not leaving his side.

“Dude, leave me alone…” he grumbled, trying to shrug off the hands on his hair and back. Damon immediately backed off, only for Tony to wheeze tiredly and lean back against the warm presence that he knew was there. Still there.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered. All he got in response was a soft shushing sound, and a soaked washcloth to the side of his temple.

Before long, Tony relaxed and let Damon run the washcloth dipped in warm water all over his face and neck. He brought Tony a glass of water and mouthwash, then left Tony to freshen up and pull himself together as best as he could.

Alone in the bathroom, alone for the first time that night, Tony looked at his reflection in the mirror and hated himself. He closed his eyes and thought back to earlier that night, how it felt so right to be held by Damon, the very brief but electrifying first kiss in the back of a homophobe’s cab. The way Damon seemed utterly bemused by Tony’s long nonsensical rants but not once had he told Tony to shut up. Not once.

“Damn you, Gibbs,” he hissed quietly. “I’m not letting you ruin this for me.”

***
Chapter 11

“You know, you're sweet. You really are. And you look a little like my brother Fred. Do you mind if I call you Fred?”

January 26, 2008. Washington DC

When **Tony** finally emerged from the bathroom, he found Damon sprawled across the bed on his side, his head propped up on one elbow. He was looking at Tony and he was grinning.

“Shut up,” Tony grumbled. Now that he’d evicted the excess alcohol from his system, he felt a little more lucid and in control.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“Thinking what?”

“Oh please! You were thinking I barf like a girl!” Damon guffawed, falling back to the bed on his back even as Tony continued to make outraged noises. “Let me remind you, I happen to be a federal agent, and I usually don’t drink this much. And I definitely do not mix my drinks like you’ve been making me do all night. It’s against… federal agent protocol.”

Damon laughed again and Tony scowled but barely so. He’d rather have the marine assume it was the alcohol that made him sick, and not the terrible guilt of what Tony had set out to do. What he’d almost done. Question was – what was he supposed to do now?

His phone beeped. *Where are you? Everything ok?*

Tony blinked. Good old McGee probably wanted to know how it went – their big bad master plan. He shook his head and texted back, *At a friend’s. A.O.K. Good night.*

“Hey you,” Damon called. “I’m feeling a little left out here.”

Tony chuckled to hide his nervousness. Damon, stretched out on the bed, was a sight to behold, one that took Tony’s breath away. God knew he wanted Damon, but his lack of experience implied he didn’t exactly know what that meant.

“Come on, don’t be nervous,” Damon held a hand out for Tony to take. As he’d done all night, he had managed to read Tony’s mind again. The agent bit his lip and ignored the butterflies in his stomach, then took Damon’s offered hand and let the marine pull him onto the bed.

“Relax, just relax,” Damon laid Tony down on his back, and draped himself over him without crushing him. His hands caressed Tony – his chest, his stomach, his flanks, but he waited for permission before lowering his lips to Tony’s.

“You sure you wanna kiss this mouth? I just threw up, you know.”

“Shut up and kiss me.” Tony did as he was told.
It was their second kiss, one that was not about to be interrupted because Tony had heard Damon lock the door. It started slow, teasing, testing, and Tony realized Damon was not going to be the one to kick it up, so he did. He parted his lips and pulled Damon in, even as his tongue sought its own way into Damon’s mouth. The taste of mouthwash mixed with beer and champagne and a hint of mint that Damon had probably popped into his mouth sometime while Tony was in the bathroom.

It was deep and beautiful and all-consuming. It was everything Tony had imagined it would be. But he wanted more, more than this gentle, handle-with-care pace Damon had going, damn it he wanted so much more.

Tony wrapped his arms around Damon’s chest, squeezing hard to express his need for urgency and speed, and Damon obliged, leaning down heavily on Tony and putting more power behind his tongue. Tony let his head fall back and allowed Damon to conquer his mouth with everything he’d got. Music floated up through the open windows into their bedroom with the occasional jingle of laughter. The knowledge that they weren’t exactly alone fueled the eroticism of the moment. Soon enough, Tony felt a hardness starting to rub against his own. He gasped, pulling out of the kiss just as Damon pulled up to study his flushed face.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry, keep going...” Tony rasped. Damon once again started to thrust against him, over and over again until all of Tony’s senses were on fire.

Tony had pulled his scarf off sometime before he got sick, allowing Damon to mouth the crook of Tony’s neck. It was all too much – the pleasure of Damon’s hardness humping against his, combined with the sucking-biting pain and a hickey being born into existence. Tony moaned loudly, his spine arching up against Damon’s as he came in his pants.

“Ah, fuck...” he moaned and grunted loudly, whiting out for a second. When he came to, Damon was still leaning over him, planting soft innocent kisses all over his face.

“Did you...?”

Damon licked his lips, “Apparently I need a little more help.”

Tony blushed a little and it made Damon laugh. “You’re so cute when you blush.”

“Shut up, don’t ever say that again!”

“Why not?”

“DiNozzos don’t blush!” Tony declared vehemently and rolled Damon over so he was the one on top and Damon on his back. “So do you want my help or not?”

Damon shut up immediately, but couldn’t get rid of that annoying little smirk.

“W-what do you want me to do?” Tony asked, a little anxious.

Damon looked up into his eyes. “Have you ever touched another guy, Tony?”

“Uh, I never actually got that far.”

“It’s okay, do you want to try now?”

Tony swallowed, and let his hand travel down Damon’s chest to his belly and finally to his groin. He
felt the stiff bulge through the denim of his jeans and reflexively pulled back.

“Sorry, not so good with my hands.”

“It’s alright,” Damon’s voice was strained, like even the brief caress of Tony’s hand had done a number on him. “It gets better. Besides, I told you I’m very good with my hands, remember?”

Tony blinked, remembering their ‘altercation’ in Gibbs’ basement. “That was… for me?”

Damon rolled his eyes, “No, for Gibbs. Duh! I’ve been hitting on you since the moment I laid eyes on you, Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. You had no idea, did you?”

Tony blushed again, “Very Special Agent, and the first time you laid eyes on me you were literally hitting me.”

“Close your eyes,” Damon ordered and Tony complied. Damon rolled him over so they were on their sides facing each other. Tony heard a zipper being pulled down, not his, and his heart started to race. He took Tony’s hand and placed it on his shaft. Tony gasped.

He’d never held another man’s dick in his hands before. It was… hard, obviously, and thick and really heavy and long, and searing hot in his hands. Its throbbing felt like nothing Tony had ever felt before. He felt Damon’s breaths get rapid and erratic and it made him smile. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked down. God, it was a monstrosity. It was beautiful.

“Tony, please… do something,” Damon hissed, clearly in agony.

Tony started to move his hand up and down the shaft, squeezing towards the end and loosening his grip as moved back up towards the base, just as he liked it done to himself. Damon kept his own hand over Tony’s but let the agent lead. Slowly and steadily, his touch got bolder and firmer until the marine couldn’t hold out any longer. He climaxed in Tony’s hands with a loud grunt, burying his face into Tony’s neck as he did so.

“Holy… wow,” Tony declared, feeling his own erection stirring again. “W-was that okay?”

“Okay?” Damon asked incredulously, his speech slurred like it hadn’t been after all the beers and shots of whiskey and vodka he’d poured down his throat. “That was awesome! Fucking brilliant!”

Tony grinned before reaching out for a box of tissues beside the bed to clean himself and Damon up. That done he rolled over, pulling Damon back on top of himself. This time he initiated the kiss, letting Damon languorously explore the depths of Tony’s mouth to his complete satisfaction.

“Tony,” Damon whispered a few minutes later. “I wanna see you, all of you.”

Tony shivered. Part of him longed to get rid of his soiled clothes (he’d just come in his pants!) but the rest of him felt hesitant and, well, shy. He was a psychoanalyst’s dream come true – a shining example of how a person could be both narcissistic and suffer an inferiority complex at the same time. In the end, the choice was made for him by the stark longing and adoration in Damon’s eyes. He decided he’d do just about anything to have those eyes stay on him, just like that.

“Well,” Tony smiled coyly, “Usually I charge for stuff like this, but since you asked nicely…” he slithered off the bed and stood besides Damon who sat up himself. Another bout of raucous laughter filtered through their windows and Tony shivered again.

“Listen, if you don’t want to…”
“I want to,” Tony retorted, breathing deeply. “Question is can you handle the full-frontal force of Anthony D. DiNozzo in all his naked glory…”

Damon sneered mockingly. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Okay,” Tony stalled again. “Of course I should let you know I don’t really hit the gym as often as I once used to. Work pressures and all that…”

“Get on with it,” Damon chided folding his arms, and waited.

Tony unbuttoned his shirt slowly and shrugged out of it, letting it drop to the floor. Then he toed his shoes and socks off, undoing his leather belt. Damon followed every moment with his eyes, looking hungrier by the minute. Tony swallowed as he let his jeans drop and kicked them aside. He awkwardly stuck his thumbs in the waistband and pulled them down, hurriedly stepping out of them before he changed his mind. And there he stood, buck naked, watching as Damon’s mouth fell open and his eyes practically feasted on Tony’s body from head to toe.

Tony tried to laugh the nerves off, feeling his skin starting to heat up again. And just as Damon started to smirk again, Tony glared. “If you say ‘blush’ one more time, I will walk out right now and you’ll never see me again.”

“But you’d be walking out naked.”

“And wouldn’t you like that?”

“Not at all,” Damon replied without missing a beat. “I don’t want anyone else laying their eyes on you.” Shifting to lean back against the headboard, he spread an arm out and patted the bed by his side, “Come on up here.”

Tony nervously approached the bed and did as he was told, falling into Damon’s arms and letting the man envelope him in an unbelievable blanket of body heat. It was sensuous, and sort of exhilarating, being naked while Damon was still clothed. It was also really frightening.

“Hey listen, seeing as you’re the one with all the… uh, experience here, I’m letting you lead, for a change, but I-I don’t think I’m ready to –”

“Shh,” Damon made Tony lie on his back, and gently pulled the covers up around him. He kissed the agent’s lips gently, chastely, a couple more times. “We don’t have to do anything tonight. I can take you home now if you want… or we could just, you know… sleep here; stay the night.”

“You sure your friends won’t mind?”

Damon simply shook his head. Tony wondered if the reason why his friends didn’t mind was because Damon had done this before, and they were used to it. Of course, he kept his thoughts to himself, surprised by how bothered he was with the idea of Damon dating other people.

He was startled out of his thoughts when Damon left his side to stand at the same spot Tony had occupied minutes ago, and started stripping down himself. He was more confident and more than happy to put on a show. Tony stared just as blatantly, expecting but still blown by the perfection of Damon’s body. Godly chest-to-stomach proportions, every inch solid, rippling muscle – an aerodynamic masterpiece. Tony had a spattering of body hair himself, even though it was scant and such a pale shade of gold to be barely visible. But Damon was smooth and hairless everywhere. In short, he was hot.
“Well?” Damon winked at him, reaching over with a hand to lift up Tony’s dropped jaw.

Tony just gulped, wondering what in hell’s name a guy like Damon saw in someone like him.

Damon scoffed. “Seriously?”

Did he just say that out loud?

“Yes you did, sweetheart.”

Tony’s face turned a beetroot red and cursed the free booze for his ineptitude.

“Tony,” Damon cupped Tony’s face in his gargantuan hands and forced the agent to look up into his eyes. “You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever laid eyes on. God, sometimes when I look at you, naked or not… it’s hard to breathe, I have no words to describe how, how exquisite you are.”

Tony scoffed, not believing Damon for a second. “Exquisite. That’s an adjective I never thought would ever apply to me. That’s just so, um… gay!”

He pulled his face out of Damon’s hands and started to chortle. Damon shook his head. “There it is – the notorious deflecting powers of DiNozzo humor.”

“Okay, if we’re doing this, you gotta stop talking to Ziva ‘cause see she used to have this insane crush on me and she never really got over it so…”

“She told me you’d say that.”

Tony scoffed again (this time really incensed) and Damon chuckled as he moved away from the bed, giving Tony a glimpse of his toned back and gloriously tight butt. Tony would have whistled, if he could remember how, and if his head wasn’t still pounding from all the alcohol.

Damon switched off all the lights except a little night lamp, then returned and got under the covers behind Tony, spooning the agent as casually and nonchalantly as if they’d been married for years and years. Tony stiffened at first. But Damon made no attempts at small-talk nor did he try to put the moves on. Apparently, he really did just want to sleep.

It was a couple minutes before Tony allowed himself to relax into the arms wrapped around him, another few before he found himself actively snuggling back into the body behind.

“Jeez,” he mumbled absently, “you’re like a furnace.” Not that he was complaining.

“Sleep, Tonio, I’ll watch over you.”

Tony almost sneered; such a cheesy yet ridiculously heartwarming thing to say. Damon kissed the top of Tony’s head and held him close, until the pull of exhaustion and intoxication became too strong to resist, and Tony drifted away.

***

McGee was not happy. First Abby dragged him to the club on U-street looking for Tony. When they couldn’t find him there, she made him go all the way to his apartment for his laptop so he could track Tony and Damon by the GPS on their phones. Then she dragged him all the way to Columbia Heights to this townhouse that belonged to Michael Manning – the Michael Manning – Werth’s high school lover who’d come very close to a psychotic breakdown when Werth broke up with him to join the Corps.
“What could they possibly be doing here?” He asked out loud, not expecting an answer because Abby knew nothing about Manning and Werth’s history.

“It’s a house party and they’re on a date! And if Tony is somewhere in there, we’re going in to make sure he’s okay. Preferably without letting him know.”

“Know what, that we’re snooping on him?”

“It’s what he would do for either of us, McGee.” Abby was adamant as she parked her hearse and got out, Tim close on her heels.

“Abby, seriously, we’re not going to gatecrash a party, are we?”

“What, like it’s hard?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s wrong! Besides, I’m sure Tony’s fine. He’s a big boy much as he acts to the contrary. He can take care of himself.” Tim grimaced, even as he said that. They’d all seen first-hand what Werth was capable of in one of his rampant fits of rage.

“Physically, he’s safe. Damon will take care of him, I know that. But mentally… I just wanna be sure,” Abby sounded serious.

Tim decided to shut up for now and follow her lead.

It was nearly two AM and the party was still going strong. Good thing the property had tons of open space that separated the house from the neighbors. Otherwise the noise would have surely invited a visit or two from the cops.

“Hey you! Long time!!” Abby was seriously a pro at this. She pretended she knew random people as she walked through the crowd, starting at one end of the living area until she reached the other. Tim trailed her obediently, laptop gripped in one hand.

“Check again, Timmy. He’s here, right?”

Tim looked at the red blips shining on his screen. “They’re together, and they are definitely here somewhere.”

“There’s another floor, come on.”

There were three bedrooms upstairs – one was the master bedroom where they found two couples making out, one on the bed and another on the floor. The second room looked like a brand new nursery still under construction which thankfully was not being desecrated by any orgies. And the third bedroom was locked.

“There’s a night light on in there,” Abby said as she kneeled and peeked through the keyhole. “Tim, do you think Tony and Damon are… you know?”

“Oh?” Tim was confused, until he was not. “Oh!!” And then he was kind of weirded out. “Oh God, that’s an image I could’ve done without. Thanks, Abby.”

Abby was peeking back through the keyhole. “How about we just knock and see who opens the door? But if it is Tony inside he’ll be so pissed off. Bad idea. Think Abigail, think!”

She stood up and paced while Tim leaned against the wall, tired and sleepy. He wouldn’t admit it, but he really had been looking forward to that recital.
“Ah, hell, I’m over-thinking it,” Abby declared, then pulled out her phone and dialed a number, then stuck her ear right against the keyhole. She waited, and Tim waited. And waited.

She huffed. “Tony must have his ringer off. Okay, let’s try Damon.”

Again she stuck her ear to the keyhole and waited. Suddenly she perked up. “Damon! Hi! Um… sorry, is this a bad time?”

Tim rushed to kneel beside her and listen, not that he could hear much.

“I was trying to reach Tony and he’s not picking up his phone and … Oh? … Oh! … Great! I mean, um, if he’s sleeping that’s fine … No, don’t wake him. I’ll catch up with him tomorrow… you have a good night! … Bye.”

She hung up with a huge grin on her face. Tim just slumped against the wall again, relieved the hunt was over and his friend was satisfied at last.

Later in the car, on their way to an all-night diner, Abby was about to turn to Tim to say “I told you so” for the fifteenth time.

“Stop!” He begged tiredly. “Okay, you were right. You know Tony better than I do. Just give me a minute to process this, alright?”

Abby usually never got this hyper until after her third CafPow. “Whatever happened between them, I hope it makes Tony stop blaming Damon and realize his issues with Gibbs have nothing to do with Damon at all.”

“And what if he doesn’t? What if that ugly green monster surfaces again the next time he sees Gibbs bonding with Damon while treating Tony like an unwanted step-child?”

She huffed. “Well, he’ll just have to take it up with Gibbs, not Damon.”

“Just because you can say whatever you want to Gibbs doesn’t mean everyone else can too.”

“Trust me, McGee. Even I have my limits when it comes to the boss.” She recounted the last time she’d tried speaking to Gibbs about Tony.

“Permission to speak freely, Boss-man?”

“You always speak freely, Abs.”

“Yes, but I really need your permission this time.”

That caught Gibbs’ attention and he turned to face her. “What is it?”

Abby bit her lip and went for it. “Why are you punishing Tony?”

Gibbs’ eyes didn’t waver once. “I’m not.”

“Then what is it? He was only doing his job, a job given to him by the Director in your absence.”

Gibbs exhaled and started to walk out of her lab. “Let me know when you have something.”

“What I have is a question and you’re not answering it!”

He turned then, his eyes squinted dangerously. “I permitted you to speak, not to question me about
how I run my damn team.”

Before she could recover from the rebuke, he turned around and walked away.

“We all assume Gibbs is perfect but he’s not,” she mumbled sadly. “It’s a common mistake.”

Tim nodded. “I thought the two of them will work it out eventually. But that was over six months ago.”

He noticed Abby white-knuckling the steering wheel, but kept his mouth shut.

“I’m hoping the whole Gibbs situation wouldn’t matter now that Tony has Damon. Maybe the reason he’s been obsessing over Gibbs is because it’s coming right after his break-up with Jeanne, and he is feeling lonely and vulnerable? Maybe Damon can fix that.”

McGee looked out of his window. “You’re making one huge assumption, Abs.”

“What’s that?”

“That Tony is capable of choosing anyone over Gibbs.”

After a long drawn out sigh, Abby finally conceded. “Good point.”

They drove in silence after that.

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Chapter 12

“I'm like cat here, a no-name slob. We belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to us. We don't even belong to each other.”

January 26, 2008. Washington DC

Damon wanted the night to never end. He wished he could reach out and grab hold of those damn clock hands ticking away and stop time forever. He had Tony DiNozzo in his arms, at last. And he never wanted to let go.

The night had started out pretty innocently. Damon had honestly not expected this; he hadn’t even dared to hope. But the opportunities kept presenting themselves, and he took them. More than anything, it was Tony who surprised him. He’d feared the inexperienced agent would be easily spooked and bolt at the first sign of intimacy. But Tony had been just as willing to give Damon a chance, several in fact. Even in moments where he didn’t seem too sure, Tony hadn’t pushed Damon away, and that’s how one thing led to another until here they were – wrapped in each other’s arms, naked.

In Sarah and Michael’s guest bedroom.

Damon bit a yawn back as he stirred himself fully awake. As a marine, he’d conditioned his body clock to keep track of time internally. That’s how he knew they’d been sleeping for about three hours. It was o-five hundred, and everything was quiet downstairs. The party must have wrapped up sometime by four; that was usually the norm at the Mannings.

Damon also had the unique ability to wake up whenever he chose to. No boot-up time required, all senses a-go, raring to face another day of combat with grit and dignity. But this was the first time in years that Damon found himself wishing to go right back to sleep. He was warm and comfortable, and he was trapped under the deadweight of a very special agent sprawled all over him.

Limbs were askew and in several different stages of paresthesia, fingers digging into strange unmentionable places, and a head full of spiked golden hair was tickling his neck and chin without mercy. Damon woke up smiling and stayed that way, happy to be his lover’s pillow for a little while longer. But the call of the bladder could not be ignored forever. Damon gently gathered Tony’s sleep-warmed body to himself and turned over, flipping Tony onto his back on the bed. It took another couple of minutes to untangle the arms from around him. Tony was a cuddler, hell, more like a naughty little vine hell-bent on growing himself all over Damon’s body. He found that utterly adorable. But then he found pretty much everything about Tony adorable.

He studied the gorgeous face, features relaxed in sleep, and tried to decipher why Tony looked so different when he was awake. Guess awake, Tony DiNozzo was always on his guard, much like Damon, except Damon was trained to be on high alert even in his sleep.

After returning from the bathroom, Damon got dressed quietly, wanting to give Tony as much uninterrupted sleep as he could. It was a Saturday, and far as he knew, Gibbs’ team was not on call. He stepped out of the room to find the house deserted with the exception of a couple of guys downstairs, one stretched out on a couch and another on the dining table. Michael and Sarah had
retired to the nursery for the night, while another couple seemed to have passed out in the master bedroom. Damon shook his head – the Mannings sure loved their house parties.

But the mornings after were not so pretty – first there’d be all the cleaning up Sarah would make him help with, then all the questions that he wasn’t quite ready to answer. Determined to get out of here stat, Damon headed to the kitchen and found the number of a local cab service tacked to the fridge. After making the call, he went back upstairs and shook Tony awake.

“Hey, rise and shine sleepy-head. Let’s get you home, okay?”

Tony was in no mood to cooperate. He did make a valiant effort though, sitting up groggily and striving to blink his eyes open. But he didn’t quite make it and started to topple to one side, already asleep on his way down.

“Damn,” Damon smiled even as he caught Tony before he could hit the bed or slip to the floor. “You’re a spoilt one, aren’t you, baby. Gonna make me do all the work, huh?”

Damon couldn’t help but enjoy himself as he took his time to re-dress the practically passed-out agent. He pulled on Tony’s knee-length black overcoat last and absently stuffed the scarf in his own pocket, choosing not to bother with it. Scarves were such a safety hazard anyway. He stole another soft kiss from Tony’s lips, and decided gold was officially his favorite color.

The cab arrived and Damon half carried, half dragged Tony down to it. Finding a driver’s license in Tony’s wallet, he gave the address to Tony’s apartment. His car was still parked somewhere on U-street, but they’d just have to worry about it later.

“No elevator?!?” Damon groaned, standing in the staircase lobby of Tony’s seedy old apartment building with the unconscious man stuck to one side. But he didn’t keep them there long. It was cold, colder than Januarys in DC typically should be, and he remembered what Gibbs had once said about Tony.

“He gets colder than usual ever since the damn plague…”

Someday he was going to get the complete back-story of what really happened, but that would have to wait. Bending down and heaving Tony up on one shoulder, Damon carried his precious cargo up three flights of stairs to the agent’s apartment. Unlocking the door, he went straight to the bedroom and gently situated Tony on what looked like the favored side of an unmade bed. Then pulling his coat and shoes off, he guided the man to lie down. Tony didn’t resist, he seemed to have never woken up at all. But just as Damon started to get up, the Italian’s hand caught him by the sleeve.

“Don’t go,” he murmured, it made Damon smile.

“Okay, be right back. Sleep, baby.” Damon brushed the hair off Tony’s forehead before dashing back down to pay the cabbie and thanked him for waiting, then ran back upstairs.

Taking his coat off in the living room, Damon got his first good look at Tony’s place. It was a simple one-bedroom, minimally furnished but cluttered with lots of knick-knacks that gave the place a homey look. An entire wall comprised of nothing but shelves, filled with basketball and football collectibles, DVDs, music CDs, a whole stack of airplane magazines and another stack of Playboy and GSM behind it, an XBOX and most of its game CDs, a big bunch of books of the crime and spy thriller genre… but no pictures. No photos of family or friends anywhere. Damon was no shrink but even he could tell this was a bachelor pad designed for the sole purpose of escapism – packed with all sorts of ways to drown oneself in fantasy, run away from one’s memories.
Damon had no intention of trying to change the man that he, hopefully, would see a lot of in the days to come. But a part of him wished that someday there’d be a modest little photo frame somewhere on that wall of shelves of just the two of them – Tony and Damon.

He walked back into the bedroom and kicking his boots off, got under the covers behind Tony, watching him as he slept. Damon held Tony’s elegant fingers in his own, gently stroking the skin between the knuckles over and over again. Fuck, he could do this forever.

This time last week, he’d been moping about an identity crisis, unsure of his place in the world. Now all he wanted to be was this man’s partner. And as to his place, Damon’s place was right here, beside Tony.

He let his eyes droop, drifting off despite himself. It was a lazy Saturday morning, and they had nowhere to be.

Wait, that wasn’t right.

His eyes shot open and looked at the time. It was seven-thirty already. How the hell did he manage to forget? Damon did have somewhere to be.

“I got a gig,” Damon announced happily as he hung up his phone and turned back to Gibbs.

It was Thursday evening. They were having dinner in the kitchen, sitting across each other on the granite counter. Gibbs kept digging into his rib eye as he nodded.

“What is it?”

“I’m coaching a self-defense class at a school for autistic people.”

“Sounds good. When do you start?”

“This Saturday. It’s just weekends – a half-day thing. And it’s voluntary, so not a paying job.”

Gibbs nodded. “It’s a good use of your time. Just be gentle, don’t forget your strength with civilians.”

Damon laughed. “That’s good advice. Hey they’re looking for two more volunteers if you’re interested? It’s not a permanent thing, just for as long you can manage it?”

Gibbs looked up at him and smiled. “Count me in.”

Damon ran out but not before scribbling a short note and dropping a quick kiss on Tony’s forehead. He had to change and be there in an hour. Praying he hadn’t missed Gibbs, he gave him a call.

“Hey … yeah, I’m sorry! … You haven’t left, have you? … Great! I’ll be there in fifteen…. Alright, bye.”

***

Tony came to three hours later, still groggy and his head felt like it was full of lead. And yet for some reason he woke up with a smile. Took him a few seconds to remember how he got home.

Damon.

The name brought another shy smile to his face. He got out of bed, and was starting to wonder when Damon left when he saw the note.
Tony smiled even as he shook his head. He had almost expected a love note, something mushy and romantic and... ridiculous. But really, this one was so much better. It sounded like a note an old couple in a relationship would leave one another. It was... nice. Aw hell, Tony kicked himself for going from hesitant bi-curiosity to full-on domestication in one night.

A nice long shower was usually his cure for a brutal hangover, so Tony did just that. Standing under the warm deluge, he imagined what it'd be like to have Damon here with him, those magic fingers of his scratching his scalp as they shampooed his hair. He couldn’t believe how easily he’d given in to this man, how naturally he’d allowed himself to be led into a whole new world of feelings and sensations.

Tony had known for awhile that he was attracted to men, but all his past attempts at exploring that attraction had ended disastrously. Mostly he’d freak out at something the other guy would say or do (or touch) and Tony would run, burying his urges until the time he’d gathered enough courage to try again. In fact, he hadn’t even bothered to try in a very, very long time. Not since... wow, not in three years.

He almost giggled at the thought of Damon carrying Tony up three flights of stairs this morning (he sure didn’t remember climbing) like George Peppard carried Audrey Hepburn in – goddamnit, Probie was right: Tony was really obsessed with Breakfast at Tiffany’s.

After the shower, Tony wrapped a towel around his waist and came out to make himself some coffee. He flipped open his laptop and looked up the school Damon had mentioned in his note. He told himself it was just out of curiosity, that he wasn’t actually going to follow the man around like some love-struck puppy so soon after their first date! Of course he’d also claimed he didn’t put out on the first date but look how that panned out.

“Admit it, you fool,” Tony chided himself as he pulled up Google maps for directions. “You can’t wait to see that big damn lug again, and you know it.”

Every weekend the school held a bunch of fun camps over the weekend like self-defense, cooking and belly dancing, to name a few. Tony guessed Damon must have volunteered his services as a self-defense instructor; the other two didn’t exactly seem his style. A visual of Damon belly-dancing made him chortle as he walked into his closet to find something suitable to wear. The workshop would probably be over by the time he got there so maybe he’d volunteer for another time. He could get there just in time to drag Damon out for a nice lunch.

He collected his car from U-street, and at exactly noon by his watch he parked it at the school in Maryland. Drumming his fingers a little nervously, he fixed his hair in his rear-view mirror. Maybe Damon was just being polite, and leaving that note was just his way to explain why he left so abruptly, not an actual invitation to meet again. Maybe Tony should have called ahead to check if he was still welcome?

“Man up, DiNozzo!” Tony murmured to himself. “If you want that boy, go get him.”

Exhaling purposely, Tony put on his brown Aviator shades and stepped out of the car. He wore dark blue jeans and a steel gray pullover along with the same black coat from last night. His hair was slicked back, and he carried his cup of Starbucks triple espresso in one hand, cell phone in the other. He’d tried his best not to look conspicuous. So unless everyone inside was like dressed in red and yellow Gi’s or something, he should be fine.

The gymnasium was where the self-defense workshop was being held, so he headed in there. The
place was abuzz with activity. There were some information stalls with a bunch of chairs set out for people to sit in and listen to theoretical talks on safety and the art of self-defense. There were also several make-shift boxing rings for practical training constructed across the indoor basketball arena.

He spotted Damon standing in the middle of one of those dojos, flanked on one side by a small group of students. Tony smiled, and an unexplainable giddiness fluttered in his empty stomach. He took off his shades and stopped a short distance away, content to watch this gorgeous perfection of a man. The marine was dressed in black sweatpants and a gray hooded sweatshirt that was maybe one size small because it kept riding up, exposing a titillating strip of skin around his navel. Tony licked his lips and watched as Damon moved gracefully through a set of kicks for demonstration to the group beside him.

“Okay, people! Now for the real show, a practical demonstration. I’d like to call my friend up here to show you how it’s really done!”

The kids clapped and so did Tony, until he saw who’d just climbed up into the dojo to join Damon. Gibbs.

Tony froze. Something clenched inside his gut with vehemence, reminding him of everything he thought he’d forgotten, everything he’d managed to let go of last night in Damon’s arms. Gibbs stood next to Damon, completely relaxed and at ease. Somehow the sight reminded Tony of all the times he’d been ignored, abandoned, sidelined. And it didn’t matter if the incidents he was recalling were with his biological father or his surrogate one. They all left him feeling exactly one thing – unwanted.

He took one step back, then another, and another until he was right back at the gym door where the two men wouldn’t notice him. But masochist that he was, Tony kept watching. Gibbs was smiling, an expression he didn’t see too often on his boss’ face in the workplace. It was the kind of smile that could brighten up a room, bolster sagging team spirit, and make everything okay in the face of everything going to hell. The veteran did seem a little embarrassed to be in the spotlight, as always. But he wasn’t scowling, nor was he standing there against his will. No. Gibbs wanted to be there, beside Damon.

Once Damon was done talking, he turned to his partner, and then he and Gibbs started sparring like Tony and Gibbs used to. Damon made a big show and dance about how he was going to kick Gibbs’ ass (much like Tony used to do to try and make his grumpy boss laugh). Then with much fanfare and cheering, Damon mock-lunged at Gibbs and let the older man easily knock him down on his back. The kids laughed and clapped and Damon groaned overdramatically, very much like Tony would do, or would have done in his place. Humor was his style, it was, as he considered it, his unique forte. Apparently, it was Damon’s too.

Gibbs was laughing too, carefree and genuinely, in a way he hadn’t with Tony in a very long time.

Why couldn’t he just get past this jealousy? Why couldn’t he let Damon find the same solace in Gibbs that Tony once did? Why was he acting like a spoilt little only child? Especially considering he never got any attention even when he was an only child.

Tony leaned heavily against the door frame, suddenly too tired to bear his own weight. His forehead broke out in cold sweat and the hand clasped around his coffee shook. He watched as Gibbs offered Damon a hand and pulled him up and off the floor. He watched as together the duo bowed at their audience. He watched as his boss then turned towards Damon and they shook hands, warmly. And suddenly they were opening their arms to each other and Gibbs was pulling Damon into a giant embrace.
He’d never done that with Tony. Never.

Tony had seen enough. He turned, put his sunglasses back on and walked back out to the parking lot. Lunch was clearly out of the question, least of all with Werth. Images of the night before flashed before his eyes, trying to force their way back into the forefront of his mind but Tony was having none of it.

He sat in his car for the longest time, blank and numb. He had no clue where to go.

***
“It should take you exactly four seconds to cross from here to that door. I'll give you two.”

January 26, 2008. Shenandoah National Park, VA

“Tony, man! This is my fourth message to you. Where are you? You’re scaring me now. Please just call me back? Please?”

The agent heard the message from Damon a couple times before deleting it. He switched his phone off after that and threw it inside his car through an open window. He sat perched up on the trunk of his rental, facing the twilight sun. He’d been sitting there for well over an hour now, not that time mattered all that much anymore. Tony took another swig of his beer.

It was about six in the evening, and he was parked on a mountain edge inside Shenandoah National Park. He’d driven aimlessly from Maryland until he just, sort of found himself here, at this spot.

It was peaceful here.

Couple hours ago, Abby had called too. She left a message bubbling over with barely contained CafPow-induced excitement, as usual.

“Hey you, I know what you did last night! Call me if you wanna know how I know, and be prepared to dish. I’m dying to hear everything!”

Tony didn’t know what she knew or how she knew it. If he had to make an educated guess, she’d spoken to McGee who must have told her about Tony clubbing with Damon, and Abby wouldn’t have been able to control her curiosity (and stifling sense of protectiveness) so she probably found a way to tail Tony, likely by tracking his cell phone’s GPS. The concept of personal space and boundaries was completely lost on her. On any other day, Tony might have indulged in a tiny bout of annoyance about it. But right then, he couldn’t care less.

Ziva had called too, wondering if he wanted to grab some lunch. Her message had been short and carefully worded attempting to sound totally casual. Obviously she’d gotten the full download from Abby as well. Tony didn’t respond to her either.

He knew he couldn’t ignore them all forever. They were, after all, his colleagues and friends, and they meant well. And he would have to face them all come Monday at work. Gibbs too.

Part of him didn’t think he could. Part of him wanted to get into the car and just keep driving, not look back. Cancun was great this time of the year. But he also knew from past experience that he couldn’t just run away from this… this stupid predicament. Truth was, whatever this was, it was inside him. It was a part of him.

“Because no matter where you run, you just end up running into yourself,” he quoted Paul Varjak from his favorite movie bitterly.

Tony took another long gulp to let the liquid soothe his parched throat, and his growling stomach. He should have never opened himself up and let anyone in. Most of all, he should have never let himself start to depend on them, take them for granted, trust that they would always be there. Classic
DiNozzo mistake, one he kept making over and over again. It always worked against him, always fucked him up, and still he never learned.

He’d trusted his parents, although to be fair, he was just a kid and didn’t know any better. He’d trusted his frat brothers but realistically speaking, how could they always be there for someone as needy as Tony? They had their own families and girlfriends and wives to take care of. In Baltimore, he’d given his heart to Wendy, his fiancée for all of three weeks. She’d stomped on it and left him for another guy when she realized he’d been cut off from his family estate (for real), won’t go back groveling to his Dad, and chose to follow Gibbs to DC instead.

And then he’d dared to open himself up to Gibbs – look how that turned out. The man he loved more than his own father couldn’t even stand to look at him. He’d let his guard down around Jeanne and she’d left him with nothing more than a four-word ultimatum. And his most recent mistake – he had let Damon Werth in and that sonofabitch… he… he…

Tony grimaced as if in physical pain. That was the fuck-all problem wasn’t it? Damon didn’t actually do anything wrong! How was it his fault if Gibbs saw a son in him and not Tony? How could he be held responsible for Tony’s pathetic-ness?

Fault or not, the thought of Damon kept carving his insides up like nothing else. Fate was doing it again – making him choose between the one he loved and… and Gibbs. And if common sense prevailed, he would not fuck it up this time. He would choose Damon because clearly Gibbs did not want him anymore.

Maybe he could quit NCIS and go with Damon wherever he decided to go. He had enough saved that they could live off of for awhile. Blue sky, open road… no jobs, no responsibilities – it’d be like Butch and Sundance, Tango and Cash, Bonnie and Clyde in which he was most definitely not Bonnie…

Tony sighed, who was he kidding? Damon himself would constantly remind Tony of his own failings. Earlier that day, it had taken all of twelve seconds for Damon to go from Tristan Ludlow, the tortured but rugged and oh-so-handsome but not-so-blond Brad Pitt in ‘Legends of the Fall’, to Caine 607, the genetically enhanced marine played by Jason Scott Lee who rendered Kurt Russell obsolete and dumped him as garbage on waste disposal planet ‘Arcadia 234’ in the 1998 classic, ‘Soldier’.

Tony lay back on the windshield, exposing the column of his throat to the biting wind but he didn’t care.

Besides, how long would Damon want him either? It’d been proven time and time again. How could anyone love someone like him, when his own biological parents never did?

Tony brushed his tears away and got back into the car. It was starting to get dark and DC was two and half hours away. He was not going to sit around here and brood like a miserable little wimp. He was going to do what he’d learnt from Gibbs – swallow it all down, carry on like nothing was wrong. He had a great job. He had great friends in Abby and Timmy and now Ziva too. And he had… he had his Magnum and McQueen and Coltrane. They would just have to be enough, for now. And when they weren’t, well, he’d know it was time to move on.

He’d probably over-stayed his welcome at NCIS anyway.

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Tony reached his apartment sometime after ten. Walking up the three flights of stairs he was already
getting drowsy and tired, aching to lie his body down on the bed and never get up again. The alcohol from last night and the lack of proper food all day was starting to take its toll as well.

And while a part of him never actually stopped thinking about Damon, nothing could have prepared him for the sight of said man before him.

The marine sat reclined against his door, his endless legs stretched out so they nearly touched the opposite wall of the narrow corridor. He’d probably heard Tony’s heavy footsteps dragging themselves up the stairs because his neck was turned and he stared right into Tony’s eyes as the agent appeared round the corner.

Tony wondered how long Damon had been waiting for him to return, but didn’t dare ask.

“Where’ve you been?” Damon asked, softly, his voice blank and devoid of any emotion whatsoever.

Tony stopped a few feet away. Even if the marine’s voice was tempered, his eyes spoke volumes. They were practically brimming with anxiety and something else that Tony recognized but refused to put a name to. Something intense, something that threatened to melt his resolve and return him back to the pure bliss he’d experienced last night. But he couldn’t go back, only to be evicted out of there kicking and screaming come morning. He couldn’t go through that again.

“Answer me, Tonio. Where were you?”

“Around.”

“Why didn’t you return any of my calls or messages?”

“Excuse me,” Tony scoffed coldly, put one hand in his coat pocket and fished for his keys. “I didn’t realize I was answerable to you. Must have missed the memo.”

Damon seemed taken aback, hurt even. “Sorry, I was worried. Abby tried to reach you too. Didn’t know if I could ask Ziva or Gibbs, if you’d be comfortable letting them know about us…”

Tony didn’t bother telling Damon that everyone on his team already knew about the two of them having spent last night together (except Gibbs, ’cause his friends won’t do that to him). Instead he pursed his lips and looked off somewhere behind Damon’s left ear, green eyes dull and staring emptily.

Damon stood up and stretched to his full towering height. The black t-shirt he wore so often (or maybe he’d bought a whole pack of them together at Sears – something else he had in fucking common with Gibbs) stretched across his chest and bulging biceps. The camouflage pants and military boots added to the look of dangerous intensity he projected.

“Look, it’s cool. Sorry I went all ape on you. I just, I just need to know what’s going on in your head, okay? If you’ve changed your mind about us…”

This was Tony’s chance. He decided to take it. “There is no us, Werth. It was a one-time deal only. I was drunk. I do this a lot you know. Ask anyone. ‘One-night-stand DiNozzo’ they call me.”

Damon stared at him, hard, his hands closed into fists by his sides, his shoulders heaving visibly. “No,” he suddenly declared, after a few seconds of excruciating silence. “You don’t mean that.”

Tony shrugged and started towards his door. “Believe what you want to, man. It is what it is.”

Damon shook his head. “I don’t believe you. Something happened this morning after I left, didn’t it?
What was it?"

Tony kept his back to Damon as he unlocked his door.

“Baby, look at me, please, I need to know!”

For some reason, Damon calling him ‘baby’ just irked him to hell and back. “You can go ahead and need all you want, Werth. Please just do it back at your place and leave me alone.”

He had his door open by this time. He strode in with an arrogant flourish and spun around to face Damon, almost challenging him to do something, stop Tony if he dared, lash out even, hell, preferably so. Instead, Damon got this pained look on his face that nearly made Tony take everything back.

Damon stepped away briskly. “Sorry, my bad,” he said looking straight into Tony’s eyes. “I thought my place was with you.”

Tony couldn’t hold his gaze anymore. He pretended to study his keys and his fingers trembled around his doorknob. A second later, Damon turned and walked away from him, possibly for the last time. Something screamed inside him, urging him to run after Damon and call him back, fall into his arms and just wail his heart out. Tony shut that stupid little girl inside him up, and once again tried to do what Gibbs did best – hide the pain; pretend it didn’t hurt.

Guess that was one way to get rid of the big lug – break his heart and hope he had the self-preserving instinct to get the hell out of Dodge.

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January 28, 2008. Washington DC

Ziva was having a moment of bittersweet victory. Of course, where she came from, there rarely was another kind. But here in America, in this eclectic group of people she’d come to know and trust as her friends, it was not a victory she wanted, never again.

She’d been watching Tony all morning. He’d come in earlier than everyone, as usual, every bit the self-assured prick strangers assumed him to be. And he’d done everything one expected DiNozzo to do. He bought Timmy a giant tumbler of coffee with whipped cream and marshmallows that turned out to be Styrofoam balls. He poured a whole cup-full of Styrofoam confetti over Ziva’s head that she spent an hour picking out of her hair. God knew what he said to Jimmy to make him stammer so hard and run to the safety of his Autopsy room, only to repeat the same feat minutes later when he made Agent Lee cry.

The act was pretty convincing – juvenile and annoying and meticulously planned – but an act. That was Ziva’s victory – the fact that she could see right through the mask her dear friend had so painfully donned this morning. And it was breaking her heart.

Her phone rang and she picked it up, eyes still following Tony as he practically hop-skipped his way up to the Director’s office to wreck havoc with Cynthia’s planner.

“Anything?”

“I have not had able to speak with him yet.”

“Why not?”
“He would not let me, Abby. Every time I try to talk, he remembers a new person to prank and takes off running.”

Ziva and Abby sighed at the same time.

“He was AWOL all weekend and Damon hasn’t been answering his phone either. Maybe my spider-sense is wrong this time, Ziva. Maybe they’re fine and I’m being paranoid just because no one is willing to share any of the steamy hot details with me.”

“No, something is definitely up, Abby. You would know it if you saw Tony right now. But knowing him, he is probably avoiding you and your lab like the plague.”

Abby huffed. “If memory serves me well, and it always does, the plague did catch up with Tony and so will I. Meeting, my lab, o-twelve hundred.”

And she hung up. Ziva noticed McGee never did stop grimacing since he bit into that luscious piece of thermal insulation about an hour ago, and she smirked. “Would you like to try my extra strength mouthwash, McGee?”

McGee looked at her gratefully. “I wouldn’t mind. Thank you, Ziva.”

He came over and took the bottle of Listerine, then headed to the men’s room. Ziva followed a minute later. He turned to her, no longer startled by her presence in there anymore, and sneered.

“Let me guess, you lured me in here to ask about what happened between Tony and Damon.” he turned to face her. “Fine, let me tell you what I know: exactly nothing!”

“Come on, McGee, I saw you two talking when you stepped out of the elevator together. He must have said something?”

McGee grimaced. “You know, I really wish you and Abby would just butt out of Tony’s business. He can take care of himself, and you have no right meddling with his personal matters like this.”

Ziva narrowed her eyes. “He threw you the bird, didn’t he?”

“Flipped me the bird, and… yeah, in a manner of speaking.” He pouted a little, before coming to stand beside Ziva.

“Abby told you what he was… planning to do the other night?”

“Yes, and yet somehow the two of them ended up on a date and even spent the night together. So it is safe to say Tony did not mess it up?”

“Well, maybe not that night, and maybe he wasn’t the one to mess it up. But something did go south, Ziva. I could see it in the way Tony froze the moment I said Damon’s name.”

“Did he say anything? Anything at all?”

McGee shrugged. “I don’t know what to make of it. All he said was that he took care of it.”

“Let’s just say I took care of it, Probie. Now stop probing.”

Ziva didn’t like the sound of that. It almost implied that Tony had slept with Damon with the express purpose of breaking his heart and that way forcing him out of their lives. But try as she might, she simply couldn’t reconcile that theory with the Tony DiNozzo she knew. It just wasn’t him.
They hadn’t caught a case so far so there was nothing holding her back at noon when she made her way down to Abby’s lab. She found the forensic scientist curled up under one of her tables with a CafPow clutched in both hands, rocking back and forth to the morose funeral music playing in the background.

“Look what we’ve done, Ziva,” she cried. “Now he’s more miserable than ever!”

Ziva sat on the floor in front of her, crossing her legs Indian-style, her hands entwined together. “Do not be so hard on yourself, Abby. Your actions were well-intentioned.”

Abby squinted dangerously. “My actions? What about you? I didn’t do this alone, missy!”

“I did not call Gibbs and inappropriately divulge Damon’s medical information to make him stop Damon from leaving!”

“I didn’t set Tony on a blind date with Damon under the pretense of watching Breakfast at Tiffany’s!”

Ziva’s volume rose just as high as Abby’s. “I was not the one spilling the peas on the phone about Tony’s history with men!”

“No!! You were the one who told Damon in person that Tony was frikkin’ intrigued by him and damn it, Ziva!”

“What?”

“Spilling the peas!??! You botched that one on purpose.”

Abby laughed and slid out from under the table. The girls held each other’s hands and pulled themselves up to their feet.

Ziva winked and kept holding Abby’s hands in hers. “Okay, maybe I did, although I honestly did mix up the two until last year.” She then smiled sheepishly. “And I am sorry, Abby. I was the one who planted this whole idea in your head to begin with. It is indeed my fault.”

“No, I’m sorry too,” Abby hugged her friend tightly. When they parted, they looked at each other with sadness.

“Timmy was right,” Abby continued. “We should have minded our own business. Let’s just try and put this behind us, okay? What’s done is done.”

Ziva nodded. “Let’s make a pact, never to interfere in anyone’s love lives from now on. It only ends badly and we only end up feeling like fools.”

“Done!” Abby spit into her hand and held it out. Ziva grimaced, but Abby seemed eager to go through with this… disgusting version of the gentleman’s handshake, so she spit into her own hand and shook it.

“We resolve never to try and play match-maker to anyone, especially our friends!”

“And even if someone asks us to play match-maker, we categorically refuse and simply look the other way.”

“Deal!”

A phone rang. It was Abby’s cell. She turned to pick it up from the table and held it close enough
that Ziva could read (upside down) who it was. The two women looked at each other, then back at the caller’s name flashing on the display.

“So it’s not like spit-handshakes are legally binding or anything, right?” Abby asked.

“I doubt it,” Ziva grinned, and together they answered Damon’s call.

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McGee rolled his chair up to Tony’s desk and huffed.

“He didn’t look up from his notes and his computer until well after lunchtime.

Tim had been reviewing the case notes too. It didn’t bode well with him either that a South Korean assassin had sauntered into the country, killed a Navy veteran in cold blood, and escaped just hours, possibly minutes, before they cracked the case wide open. None of the airport customs authorities had spotted the man leaving the country – which meant he might still be here, which meant there was still a possibility they could apprehend him, which meant the case wasn’t closed yet.

So far though, he’d turned up jack-shit. But it looked like Tony was having a bit more luck. When Tim couldn’t stand the suspense anymore, he slid up beside the senior agent.

“Come on, DiNozzo. Use my brains. Leverage my strengths…” Tim started to grin, only for it to be cut short by Tony’s not-amused glowering.

He pushed a print-out lying on the table towards McGee. “That is Wan’s alleged flight itinerary over the last few weeks, sent over by our friends at Interpol.”

Tim skimmed through it. “He took a trip to Australia before coming to the States?”

Tony urged him to read on. It’s what DiNozzo always did – instead of just feeding him the info, he’d prompt Tim to discover the facts for himself.
“December 19, took a chartered flight to Sydney, just like he did to DC. The trip lasted five days, approximately the same time he spent in DC. You’re thinking he went there for the same reason he came to the States?”

“That was my hunch. I cross-referenced his stay in Sydney against any untoward incidences in and around the area. Took me awhile but as it turns out, I didn’t have to look too far.”

Tony picked up the clicker to pull something onto the big screen. It was the profile of another navy officer, blond, blue-eyed. “This is Petty Officer Drake Simmons, 38, single, no known living relatives. He retired eight years ago, and moved to Sydney four years ago. On December 21, Simmons took his boat ‘Sheila’ out to the Tasman Sea. He never returned.”

“How come NCIS wasn’t called in on this?”

“We were. It was picked up by a team in Rota, Spain. The only thing they managed to find was the wrecked Sheila a hundred klicks away off a coast in Port Kembla. They also found a bullet hole in the stern but no brass or bullets to identify its origins. I’ll bet you a hundred Aussie dollars it comes from the same gun Wan used to kill Alvarez.”

“Let me guess, Simmons and Alvarez knew each other?”

Tony smirked, and the wheels in Tim’s brain kept spinning.

“Simmons and Alvarez served together at Chinhae?”

“Go on, McSherlock.”

Tim frowned, “I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say Alvarez was not alone in the bar brawl that night. Was he?”

“Portman told us Alvarez and a couple others from his unit went to Kojedo Island that night. What if Simmons was one of those men? It fits, right? Maybe he was part of the fight, maybe he tried to defend Alvarez, maybe he was involved in the shooting, maybe not. Obviously James Heung Park believes he was, and wanted him dead. And from the looks of it, he succeeded.”

“But how does Park know these things? Portman said there was only one sketch – that of Alvarez?”

Tony punched in the number for Abby’s lab on the speaker phone. It was engaged. They frowned at each other before trying again. He was able to get through on the third attempt.

“Abby! Who were you chatting up for so long?”

“Um, Ziva. What’s up?” She sounded guilty to Tim’s ears, but hell, what did he know.

Tony got to the point. “That KNPA report from ten years ago… mind emailing me your exact translation script?”

“Now?”

“YES, now!”

“Alright, alright, I’m sending it, don’t be such a pootsie.”

The boys heard a female voice in the background asking, “What’s a pootsie?”

Tim frowned. “Isn’t that Ziva?”
Tony shook his head. “Abby, are you talking to Ziva on the phone with her right there in the room again?”

“What can I say, I had a lonely childhood.” And she hung up.

After a couple seconds of not-sure-what-just-happened-ness, Tony refreshed his mailbox and showed Tim the English version of the police report. It contained an eyewitness’ account describing three white men running away from the scene of the crime, talking in Americanese and heading towards the pier from where the ferries to Chinhae used to leave.

“The eyewitness was later deemed ‘not credible’ but doesn’t say why.”

“Someone put all this together for Park, right after he came into power,” Tony groused.

Tim squinted. “So does that mean he’s two down, and one to go? What if there were actually more than three? Portman said ‘a couple’. I hate it when people say ‘couple’ when actually they mean more than a couple because a couple by definition means two and —”

Tony leaned forward and whacked the back of his head, making him stop mid-rant. “Ow! Okay, I needed that.”

At least it made Tony grin, Tim thought happily. “So what do we do now? How do we find out who the other men were, whose lives might be in danger, if they aren’t dead already?”

“We go back to the source.” A loud voice boomed behind them. It was Gibbs. How long had he been standing there exactly? Damn, no wonder he’d made such a good spook in his time.

Gibbs headed towards MTAC, and Tony and Tim followed. Within minutes, they were online with Commander Portman, who once again looked miffed at being pulled out of a cadet training session. But considering he had falsified a report and if it weren’t for NCIS keeping it quiet (for now), he’d be court-martialed for it, Portman had no choice but to cooperate.

“Did you find Stefan’s killer, Agent DiNozzo?” The man shot skeptically.

Tony looked at Gibbs standing beside him, waiting for permission to react or see if Gibbs wanted to take it himself. When nothing was forthcoming, he stepped up and took the lead. Tim sat in the shadows, watching the interaction from a safe distance.

“Actually, I have more bad news, Commander. Another man from your unit, Petty Officer Drake Simmons is missing. We believe he was murdered at sea sometime last month. His body has not been recovered yet.”

The color faded from Portman’s face so fast it was almost comical.

Gibbs didn’t give the man any respite. “Who was the third man?”

Portman struggled to find the words, and Tony pressed him again, although he was infinitely gentler. “We just want to save as many as we can, Commander.”

Portman sighed heavily and looked down at his hands folded into his lap. Gibbs tilted his head to one side, then his shoulders heaved and Tim realized what his boss had just deduced.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

Verbally, Portman neither confirmed nor denied.
“You were involved in both the brawl and the shooting, with Alvarez and Simmons.”

“It was an accident, Agent Gibbs,” Portman confessed miserably. “You must believe me.”

“The son you accidentally orphaned does not think so, Commander.”

Gibbs informed the Commander that NCIS would be sending a protection detail to Annapolis within the hour, and that he was to stay put until they got there, no matter what. Tim noted how Park had his assassin target his victims in ascending order of their naval ranks – Petty Officer, Chief Petty Officer, and finally Commander.

Once the line disconnected, Gibbs looked at the man standing beside him, and nodded subtly. “Good job, DiNozzo.”

Without waiting for an answer, the boss strode out of MTAC. Tim stood up and watched Tony’s features harden instead of melt into the happiness Tim was used to seeing (and hating) until a couple months ago. And by a couple he meant six.

“Cheer up, Tony,” he tried. “You love it when he says that.”

Tony spun to glare at Tim so darkly it forced the younger agent back a step. Without a word, he stalked off, not looking back at Tim who stood in his spot and sighed. “Not anymore, obviously.”

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29th January, 2008. Washington DC

Damon rubbed the back of his neck tiredly as he loosened his tie and collapsed onto the couch in Gibbs’ living room. He hated wearing monkey suits with a vengeance, but they were a must for certain kinds of establishments, one of which he’d interviewed with today.

He’d barely just closed his eyes when the main door swung open and Gibbs walked in. Damon stood up immediately.

Gibbs huffed. “Stop doing that.”

Standing on attention every time the Gunny walked in on him? Yeah, a rather pointless gesture, considering Damon was no longer enlisted. Damon sat back down but did not slouch this time.

“How’d the interview go?”

Damon simply shrugged. So Gibbs tried again. “How’d the doctor’s appointment go?”

Damon frowned at that. “Fine, why do you ask?”

“You’ve been distracted, kinda long-faced, and cranky…”

Damon pursed his lips with indignation. “It’s not a withdrawal thing if that’s what you’re thinking. In fact, Doctor De la Casa is very happy with my progress. Don’t even have to take the low dosage anymore. I’m successfully weaned.”

“Good, keep it that way.” Gibbs nodded but he wasn’t appeased yet. “So what is it, then?”

Damon blinked, thinking fast. “I guess… uh, I’m starting to miss the gym? Used to spend every free hour working out, but now…”
“You can use the NCIS gym until you figure things out.”

“Are you sure? Won’t that be a problem?”

“Open to employees and their families. Come in tomorrow, I’ll take care of it.”

Damon’s eyes widened, mostly with surprise and gratitude. It had nothing to do with how petrified he was by the prospect of being under the same roof as Tony, or even ‘accidentally’ running into Tony. Nope, nothing at all.

Without waiting for a response, Gibbs turned toward the kitchen. “Prime rib okay?”

“Always!” Damon rushed after the older man to help start dinner.

They worked together in easy silence, preparing the steaks and a side of salad. It was mostly Damon’s idea – the salad – which Gibbs had warmed up to after the first couple of dinners, so long as he didn’t have to do any cutting or peeling or tossing.

When they sat down to eat Damon realized Gunny was like a German Shepherd with a bone caught in his jaw. “So how’d the interview go?”

Damon swallowed a particularly large piece of meat down quickly. “I think it was okay. It was long. These people, they… it’s a private military security firm based out of Langley, and they didn’t seem all that concerned about my… history.”

“They usually don’t,” Gibbs added, without looking away from his plate.

“And I know it’s probably a good thing for me, but I didn’t like the way one of the guys said – ‘the more dishonorable, the better’. I don’t know, maybe he was joking, maybe I’m reading too much into it.”

“Maybe you’re a marine.”

Damon smiled. How did the man do it? How could he say so much in so few words?

He felt fortunate and deeply indebted for Gunny’s unconditional support. But words and emotions were taboo in this house, and to be honest he preferred it that way himself.

“So, anyway, the offer is very lucrative. Other than the creepy smart-ass, the other folks I met seemed professional and cool. Might involve long-term international deployments, that part I’m not too thrilled about. I was kind of hoping to stick around closer to DC for awhile, you know… put some roots down for a change. Find a house, a car, a gym membership…”

Gunny smirked like he knew something Damon didn’t. “Who’s the girl?”

Damon’s heart jumped up into his throat. “Wh-what?”

“You wanna stick around here, you ain’t doing it for me.” He prodded, but after Damon spent the next few seconds on flustered and forced laughter, he seemed to let it go.

Damon went on to admit he didn’t think he would get it anyway, so it might be pointless by next week. He was acutely conscious of his self-doubts starting to surface again. And he was also acutely aware why that was.

He hadn’t gone a single minute all week without thinking of Tony, not even in his sleep.
“Gunny?” Damon ventured hesitantly, half hour later when they were down in the basement, working on the boat together. “Hypothetically speaking, if you had a daughter, w-would you let her date someone like me?”

“Someone like you?”

Damon licked his lips nervously. “Well, me. Would you be okay if she was seeing me?”

Gibbs narrowed his eyes dangerously, but Damon was braced. Hell, he’d come to expect that sort of intimidation tactic from the old man. “I’d have given you a very hard time. But knowing what I know of you now… who knows, maybe. Maybe not.”

“That’s neither here nor there.”

Gibbs scoffed, his proud shoulders drooping a bit. “I know you’ve figured it out. I had a daughter, once. She had her mother’s temper and my stubbornness. I knew I’d be a nightmare of a dad once she got old enough to date.”

Damon hadn’t intended to stir up old wounds for the man, and bit his lip guiltily. “No offence, Gunny, but any guy willing to take you on for your daughter, would be A-OK in my book.”

That did make Gibbs smile. A minute later he’d picked up a medium hammer and was ready to go back to the boat (not split Damon’s head open with it, thankfully).

“To answer your hypothetical question, I used to think the steroids made you dangerous ‘cause they took away your self-control. Now I see that even without them, you’re still dangerous. But then so was I. Shannon, Kelly’s mom, she taught me how to contain and channel my intensity into the right places. I guess what I’m trying to say is… it’s not just a question of you being right for my daughter, or anyone’s daughter for that matter. It’s also about whether the girl is right for you.”

Damon nodded, his thoughts promptly flying back to Tony and his uncanny ability to make Damon feel like all was right with his world, until Tony chose to walk out of it himself.

“Kelly would have been twenty-three years old today.” Gibbs continued morosely. “That’s five years younger to you, and I think that might have been the only reason why I’d object.”

Damon smiled at his mentor, almost embarrassed by the man’s continued faith in him. Tony was thirty-three, five years older to Damon. So Gibbs should have no reason to disapprove his ‘hypothetical’ relationship with Tony, right?

Wait, could Gibbs be the reason why Tony had backed off so abruptly? In the few weeks that Damon had known the two men, it was obvious they had some sort of unspoken father-son vibe going on. Was Tony afraid to lose Gibbs’ favor if it came out that he was gay? Gunny obviously didn’t know that Damon was gay. Would he kick Damon out if he did? Would all the faith and unconditional support turn to disgust and disappointment? He could understand Tony’s need for Gunny’s approval after having tasted it firsthand; it was addictive, and the fear of losing it very palpable.

Damon cursed internally for not being able to keep Tony out of his thoughts for longer than a few minutes. He’d called Abby two days ago to return her messages, all twenty-six of them, but the last thing he wanted to do was talk about Tony to Abby and Ziva. Sure they were his… uh… friends, but he’d only known them for like a month. As it turned out, they didn’t have much to offer by way of explanation either.

“You’re not giving up, are you, Marine?”
Damon rolled his eyes. “Abby, I just told you everything that happened. We had a great time but come morning, he was done. Tony is not interested in anything more and we have to respect that. And by ‘we’ I mean you!”

“What if I told you that I know why Tony freaked, but I’m not at liberty to say because it’s sort of personal and really Tony should be the one telling you about it himself?”

“I’d say that you’re a good friend to keep Tony’s secret, Abby. As you should.”

“Ugh, damn it! How about you try guessing what it is and I could give you like signs if you’re heading in the right direction?”

Damon lost it. “Abby please, just stop! Haven’t I been humiliated enough? I can’t go through this again, okay?”

There was dead silence on the phone, like Abby was realizing for the very first time that Damon had a heart too, that he’d been hurt too.

“I’m so sorry, Damon. I really am. And God knows I’ve meddled enough. I just want you to know that… it takes awhile to get through to the real Tony beneath all his masks but, if you have the time and patience, you will see that… he is totally worth it.”

Damon had hung up, not sure how to respond. He still wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. If Tony had identity issues of his own then, was Damon really equipped to help him with them? It’d be sort of like the blind leading the blind, wouldn’t it?

Damon was distracted from his thoughts and bemused when he spied Gibbs caressing with a gentle, almost loving hand, a series of crooked nails at the base of the hull. A hammering job this bad, it could only be the handiwork of a very special agent they both knew.

“Do you want me to fix those, Gunny?”

“Mm, nah.”

Damon smiled. Instincts told him Gunny was no homophobe, that he would accept Tony (and Damon) just the way they were. Question was, did Tony have reason to believe otherwise, and was that why he was so afraid to give Damon a chance?

“Gunny?”

“Hmm.”

“What if… what if your daughter brought a girl home?”

“Same rules apply, even if you were a girl, Werth.”

Gibbs didn’t even look up when he spoke, didn’t miss a beat.

Later that night, Damon crawled into bed tired but content with a long, hard day’s work. He pulled the blankets that still smelled faintly of Tony all the way up to his forehead, surrendering happily to dreams that came in hues of green and gold.

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Chapter 15

“I don’t want to put you in a cage, I want to love you!”

30th January, 2008. Washington DC

Tony always chose the very last steel table to stretch out on. It was farthest from the door, closest to Ducky’s office and the darkest corner of the Autopsy if he switched off all the lights.

It was after nine and most everyone had left the building. But Tony lingered on, afraid of the loneliness that awaited him at his apartment. More than that, he was afraid to once again find a disgraced marine reclining against his door with pain-filled eyes. Nope, Tony was fine right here. His phone was sitting upstairs at his desk, so there was nothing and no one left to disturb his much-needed sleep tonight.

But his peace and quiet didn’t last too long. Jimmy Palmer walked in making more noise than was humanly possible but totally gremlin-appropriate, so Tony couldn’t complain. He just sat up rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“Hey, Jimbo.”

Jim looked up at him, startled. “Tony? What’re you doing here?”

“I was trying to sleep before you bulldozed in. What about you? Another rendezvous with the lovely Ms Lee?”

Tony wiggled his eyebrows and smirked when Jim’s face turned a crimson red. The assistant ME adjusted his glasses and grinned before realizing his clandestine affair with Agent Lee was supposed to be just that – clandestine.

He cleared his throat and sobered up. “Uh, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I-I just forgot my personal laptop and came to get it be-because I’ll need it at night and…”

“Alright, Palmer, whatever you say.”

On any other day, Tony would have teased the young ME until either he confessed or cried. But right then he didn’t have the energy, so he let it go.

This time last year, Tony and Jimmy had managed to strike an uncanny friendship over a particularly tough case. Ducky was still in a funk about Gibbs leaving the way he did. And sometimes when he’d spot Tony trying to act like Gibbs, he’d only get more upset and stalk off for a minute or two. Tony would sigh and turn to the only other friendly face in the Autopsy. And they’d end up discussing details about the case that were beyond the purview of the ME’s responsibilities simply because Tony was talkative and Jim, as it turned out, an avid listener.

The friendship had persisted since, but in a sort of clandestine way, just like Jimmy’s affair with Agent Lee. Tony grimaced at the analogy, even as he found the idea of being Jimmy’s dirty little secret super-hilarious.

“Tony, are you alright?”
Tony rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I’m not dead if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then what are you doing here in Autopsy?”

Tony chuckled when he realized Jim had just made a joke, a good one.

“You’re having that dream again, aren’t you?”

Very few people knew how perceptive Palmer could be.

“How have you talked to Gibbs about it?”

Tony scowled. “You want me to tell Gibbs I’ve been dreaming of his almost-drowning himself to death every third night? And then what?”

“M-maybe you guys could figure out why you’re having that dream and on such a recurring basis.”

Tony rolled his eyes, maybe Palmer wasn’t that perceptive after all. “In case you haven’t noticed, Jimbo, Gibbs doesn’t do talking.”

“Oh I’ve noticed,” Jim laughed nervously, leaning against a table and crossing his ankles together. “Glaring, glowering, menacing – yes. Talking – not so much. But Tony there is a reason why you keep dreaming of that incident over and over again. It’s your subconscious trying to tell you something.”

“And what’s that?”

Jim shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe you’re scared something could happen to Gibbs again? And that you might not be able to save him next time? Or maybe… maybe you’re just afraid of almost losing him…”

“I have lost him, Jimmy,” Tony rued, so quietly that Jim asked him to repeat himself, which he didn’t.

He brushed it all aside. “All it means is I’m not getting enough sleep and being cranky all day, man. So hey, if you have any sleeping pills lying around I could borrow, that’d be awesome!”

Jim made a face and walked over to Ducky’s office, which is where apparently his laptop was. “I’m not giving you pills, Tony. But maybe you should try wearing yourself down so your body can get some undisturbed sleep?” He called out from inside. “A long, hard work-out always helps me.”

Tony sneered. “You think I’m putting on weight, Jimbo?”

“What?” Jim came out of the office in a panicked rush. “No, no, that’s not what I –” he stopped when Tony just grinned and clapped his back, propelling him a step forward.

“Relax, gremlin. I think it’s a great idea, thanks.”

Tony meant it. A little physical self-punishment didn’t sound like a bad idea at all. He looked at his watch – the NCIS gym was going to be open for another two hours.

“Give my regards to Agent Lee!” He called out as he turned to the door, and didn’t wait for Palmer to stammer his way through another embarrassingly lame denial.

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Damon parked his rental truck in the visitor parking lot. At the entrance, he flashed the access card he’d been issued and was let into the ground floor lobby of the NCIS headquarters. He was amazed Gibbs had come through and he actually could use the gym as a ‘family member’. That gesture, more than anything, meant the world to him.

Nine at night was late enough that he shouldn’t run into anyone he knew. He didn’t want to see Ziva or Abby because he knew what they’d want to talk about. He didn’t want to run into McGee because he got the feeling the agent didn’t like him much. And the last person in the world he’d want to run into was – well, Tony.

As much as he missed Tony, as much as he longed to see that face again, Damon knew he couldn’t go back there. He had to try and move on with his life, even if he had to do so without Tony in it. As it turned out, fate had more heartbreak in store for him.

When Damon walked into the gym, the first thing he saw was a vision of gold, dressed in all white, whaling away at a punching bag like his life depended on it.

Tony paused with one lightly wrapped fist mid-swing and turned towards the sound of the door opening. Clearly he wasn’t expecting company. And he most definitely was not expecting ex-Corporal Damon Werth, formerly of the United States Marine Corps.

Damon halted and Tony froze, and the two just… stood there, staring at each other for the longest time. Guess there was no such thing as a free gym after all.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here,” he managed to spit out after a year or so.

Tony didn’t look like he believed Damon and smirked. “Of all the gym joints, in all the towns, in all the world, he walks into mine.”

He picked up a small towel from the floor beside him and wiped the copious amounts of sweat off his face. “How’d you get in?”

“Gunny got me temporary membership, just u-until I figure things out.”

Tony’s jaw clenched and he looked away, nodding stiffly in response. His skin was flushed red and his breaths seemed rapid and heavy. His chest heaved visibly under the completely soaked white t-shirt that stuck to all the right dips and curves on his toned torso. It was a short t-shirt that rode up when Tony raised the towel to wipe the top of his head, giving Damon a tempting little glimpse of his stomach. Damon figured he must have been at it for an hour already.

God, he looked ravishable.

Damon quickly looked away, struggling to get his thundering heart under control and wondering what he should do. Maybe he should just turn about and leave, come later after Tony’s gone. That way he could pretend this encounter never happened and go back to denying his irrepressible feelings for the other man.

Or maybe, maybe he’d be an idiot to let this opportunity pass him by.

Tony was gathering his stuff and about to make his way to the showers, when Damon intercepted him. “Wait! Uh… I, I swear I didn’t plan this but maybe it’s a good thing. C-can we talk?”

Tony looked miffed, and in no mood to talk. “There is nothing to talk about, Werth. I really wish you’d stop making such a big deal about a one-night stand. You’re a guy, for crying out loud!”
Tony tried to walk past Damon again. This time the marine was pissed too, and deliberately shifted to stand in his way. “You’re right! I pushed too hard, and I’m sorry about that. I can’t say I understand what happened. I honestly thought it was going well, but… whatever, I’ve made my peace with it.”

Tony looked up at him and a myriad of emotions crossed his face ranging from shock to what looked curiously like – disappointment. Damon felt his heart skip a beat but realized a change of subject was urgently needed.

“So, I’m, uh, looking for a sparring partner and seeing as you’re the only one around, do you think you’re up for it?”

He’d uttered the first thing that came to mind to try and keep Tony from leaving and realized a second too late that his suggestion could be misconstrued in so many unintentionally dirty ways.

Which of course happened, and Tony smirked cynically, “Sorry, I’ve completed my quota of being groped for today.”

Damon couldn’t help but smirk. “You afraid you might like it?”

“Don’t bet on it.”

“Afraid I might kick your ass then? Break that proud nose of yours again?” Damon said, louder than before as he walked towards the boxing ring. He dumped his bag on one side and took off his jacket and shoes. “Come on, Agent DiNozzo. Don’t be chicken. I’ll be gentle, I promise.”

Tony looked away and laughed shortly, without humor. For a second, Damon thought the Italian might walk out on him anyway, despite all his goading. But then Tony wouldn’t be Tony if he did that. When he looked back at Damon, the heat in his eyes was unmistakable.

A minute later, they were both in the ring with their boxing gloves on, facing each other.

“Don’t worry,” Damon prodded, “I’m not amped up on the juice anymore.”

Tony scoffed. “What makes you think I’m worried?” And he suddenly lunged and took the first jab, which Damon just barely managed to evade.

It was on. Damon found himself under increasingly vicious attack with every new tactic Tony applied. What he’d intended to be playful sparring was anything but for his opponent. He blocked and evaded for awhile, but he was a marine after all. The next time Tony aimed a body jab, leaving himself open to a counterpunch, Damon went for it. Of course the hit only angered Tony more.

They circled each other, left hooking and upper cutting and jabbing until they’d both taken enough hits to the face and upper body to make them lose their breaths.

Eventually Tony leaned against the ropes struggling to catch his breath while Damon paced at the center, struggling with his conflicted feelings of both regret and competitiveness.

“What’s the matter, DiNozzo? Giving up so soon?”

He knew Tony had already exhausted himself long before Damon walked into the gym. And the wheezing sounds coming from Tony were starting to worry him a little. He approached the agent and bent himself at the middle to look into Tony’s lowered face. “Hey, you okay?”

Two strong hands were planted against Damon’s chest and pushed with all their might. Damon
stumbled back a couple of steps, stunned and suddenly incensed. All rules of boxing went out of the window when Tony tackled Damon to the ground. The blows fell and Damon defended but he couldn’t keep it up forever.

Losing his patience, he let loose a loud growl, grabbed Tony’s wrists and put all his body weight into an upward thrust. Then before Tony could gather his wits, Damon flipped them over until Tony was flat on his back and Damon was on top of him, holding him down. Tony struggled and grunted and cursed but Damon wouldn’t let him go.

“Sonofabitch! What the fuck do you want from me?!!?” Tony screamed one last time before going lax, his head hitting the mattress with a loud thud. He refused to look into Damon’s eyes, choosing instead to stare away at nothingness.

Damon resisted the intense urge to close the distance of mere inches and crush those blood-red lips with his. “Tell me the truth, Tony. After I left that morning, what made you change your mind about us? Tell me and I’ll let you go.”

Tony winced and started to struggle anew to free himself, but Damon was still not letting go. All of the agent’s reserves were completely exhausted by now. “Alright, fine. You are a disgraced defective jarhead kicked out of the Corps like a piece of trash. Sorry Damon but, you don’t exactly make for respectable arm-candy in polite company, you just don’t.”

“You’re lying,” Damon hissed, the ugly words cutting him even though he knew it was a lie. “Try again.”

Tony glowered. “Okay. You can go psycho on me at any second, like you’re doing right now. Every minute I spend with you is putting my life at risk!”

Damon shook his head again, even as the words caused another stab of guilt through his system. “Nice try, but you know that’s not true either. I’m clean through and through.”

“What do you want to hear, Damon? What can I say to satisfy that giant narcissistic ego of yours, huh? How about: ‘It’s not you, it’s me’. Maybe I’m not ready to come out. I’m not ready to give up the great American dream yet – wife, kids, white picket fucking fence. Happy now?”

“What – was it something I said or did? Was it the note? You did get my note, didn’t you?”

Tony rolled his eyes, “What is this, The Notebook re-enactment? Yes, Noah, I got your fucking note.”

“What was it?” Damon sounded desperate, but his gut was telling him something was seriously wrong and he needed to fix it. “Please… what happened to you, baby?”

Suddenly Tony looked away, not struggling anymore but looking more miserable than ever. That crumpled look around Tony’s eyes made Damon feel like he’d been slapped right across his face, bringing him back to his senses.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and very slowly relaxed his hold. He pulled his body weight away, setting Tony free. “God, I’m so sorry…”

Damon expected the other man to get away from him as fast as he could. Instead, Tony just lay there, worn out, physically and emotionally. He kept his face turned away, refusing to look at Damon again.

Damon exhaled deeply and collapsed onto his back besides Tony. He kept his gaze fixed at the
ceiling, his ears keenly attuned to the wheezing of Tony’s lungs that he was getting more and more concerned with by the minute.

“What do you want me to do, Tony? What can I do to make this right?”

“…”

Damon bit his lip, warring with himself on whether he should say it. In the end he decided it might be his last chance and he owed it to himself (and to Tony) to take it. “Tony, if you’re worried that… that Gunny won’t approve… I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

He felt Tony freeze at that, the wheezing coming to an abrupt halt indicating that Tony was holding his breath. In the next instant, the agent pulled himself up and off the floor. He stood up and looked down at Damon who sat up as well.

“Next time you want a sparring partner – just stick with Gibbs, will ya?”

Tony climbed out of the ring and went to gather his stuff. “I’m going to hit the showers. Don’t even think about coming after me, I’m always packin’, and I mean always.”

Damon stared at him open-mouthed and couldn’t help but chuckle once he was sure Tony was out of hearing range. Looking down at himself, he realized he could use a cold shower himself, really cold, but it would just have to wait. He stood up and headed to the cardio machines instead, the next best cure.

It was on the treadmill that he started to ponder Tony’s words. Was he there at Ivymount School on Saturday where Damon had called on Gibbs to be his sparring partner? If yes, why didn’t he stay or let Damon know? Why did he leave?

Is that what happened that morning after Damon left?

The pieces of the jigsaw he lovingly called Tonio were slowly starting to fit. And apparently, Gibbs played a much, much bigger role in this puzzle than he realized.

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January 31, 2008. Washington DC

Ziva looked at herself in the mirror. She was in the women’s bathroom, for a change, and wondering for the nth time how she kept getting herself into these situations.

Trouble-maker. That’s what Ari used to call her as a kid. She smiled, allowing herself a rare and private moment of nostalgia. It had to be a synonym for match-maker in at least one human language in existence, if not more. She looked down at the bunch of movie tickets in her hand and sighed.

It hadn’t gone well. Not well at all.

"Oh come on, Tony, I thought you loved Westerns!” Ziva exclaimed when Tony passed on the classic movie screening tonight.

She narrowed her eyes. “My Darling Clementine is a Western, right? Title sounds more like a romance.”

Tony scoffed. ”My Darling Clementine is an old American folk song, Ziva. It’s about a father lamenting his dead daughter.”
“See, how am I supposed to know these things? Tony, this is why you should come with me! Please?!?”

Tony leaned back in his chair crossing his arms. He looked up at her with a dead serious expression on his face. “I know what you’re doing, but it’s really not necessary, Ziva.”

Before she could even attempt to feign ignorance, Tony stood up and grabbed his jacket. “Besides, I volunteered McGee and myself to relieve Agents Braun and Andover in Annapolis for the next two days. Grab your gear, Probie!”

McGee looked up at Ziva guiltily before grabbing his own coat and backpack, ready to leave.

“W-what am I supposed to do with all these tickets?” She tried one last time.

Tony smiled eerily, came over and held Ziva by her shoulders. “This is your chance, Zee-va, don’t you see? A chance to spend some ‘quality alone time’ with the guy.”

“What?”

“We all saw the chemistry between you two that day at Bethesda. All that unresolved sexual tension is not good for you, you know? You have my blessings, Ziva. I say go for it!”

Before Ziva could recover from the shock, Tony grinned at her impishly and strode away. McGee could only shrug before he ran out after him, leaving Ziva standing alone in the squad room, her mouth still agape wondering what the hell just happened.

Ziva couldn’t help but feel offended by Tony’s insinuations. Did he really think so little of her? How could he believe she’d want to get in the way when there was a strong possibility of Tony still being head over feet in love with Damon?

Ziva frowned. “Head over feet? Or head over heels?”

It didn’t matter. She dialed Damon’s phone number and the call was picked up after just half a ring. “How’d it go?”

“He turned us down.”

She heard a dull thud in the background, like Damon had kicked something. “I am sorry, Damon. But I consider you a friend too and, maybe it is time for you to move on, save yourself all this trouble. Clearly, Tony has. And maybe…” she stopped, not sure if it was her place to opine so truthfully.

“What is it, Ziva?” the voice asked, making Ziva regret having broached the subject at all.

She sighed. “Maybe we have been reading too much into this. Maybe Tony does not feel so strongly about you after all.”

Damon didn’t respond, and Ziva felt the urgent need to explain herself. “H-he kept saying I should use the opportunity to try my luck with you, for crying out loud!”

There was soft laughter at the other end, “I thought you knew Tony better than most people, Officer David. Surely you recognize a classic DiNozzo deflection tactic when you see one.”

Ziva huffed, still upset about the exchange with Tony, maybe because it hit a little too close to home.
She’d gotten used to being the third wheel in every significant relationship in her life – like between her brother Ari and sister Tali, they’d clearly loved each other more. She felt like an outsider between her father and his country, Eli clearly loved his country more. She even felt like the odd one out between DiNozzo and McGee – two men who’d shared a full year of adventures as well as the harrowing memories of Kate’s death. Tragedies like that bonded people together stronger than all the time in the world could. She was third wheel between Abby and McGee who, most of the time, would have eyes only for each other, third wheel between Abby and Tony who were closer than biological brother and sister. Heck even Gibbs and his damn boat made her feel like the outsider in that basement.

Once again, in this non-relationship between Tony and Damon, she was being pulled into the mix against her will. Worse, the third wheel often got blamed when a relationship soured. She knew that from first-hand experience.

“Ziva, you still there?”

She blinked, pulling herself back into the moment. “Yes, sorry. What were you saying?”

Damon sighed. “You’ve been a great help and a wonderful friend, Ziva. If you could just bear with me a little longer, I can prove to you that I’m not wrong about Tony. Whatever his reason is to pull away from me, it’s got nothing to do with me.”

Ziva bit her lip. Damon didn’t need to prove it to her; she knew it for a fact. But like Abby had said earlier – Tony’s issues with Gibbs were Tony’s business. They had no right to divulge any more than what they already had to Damon who, after all said and done, was still just an outsider.

And it really, really sucked to be an outsider.

But he didn’t have to remain on the outside forever, did he? Ziva exhaled deeply and made up her mind. “One last time, I will help you. What did you have in mind?”

***
“As far as I'm concerned, he's the future president of nowhere.”

February 1, 2008, Washington DC

Tony and McGee stayed on Commander Portman’s protection detail in Annapolis all of Thursday. Portman was possibly their last lead – Park or Wan would want to finish their trifecta of revenge killings sooner or later. While it didn’t sit well with either of them to be using him as bait, they basically had no choice left.

So far though, neither Wan nor Park had surfaced to bite.

They were called back late Thursday night to start work on another case, handing Portman’s charge back to Agents Braun and Andover. Tony was not too happy about that, but it was Gibbs’ orders. And no matter how pissed off or disillusioned he might be, he simply wasn’t capable of refusing the boss’ orders.

Tony walked into the squad room next morning to find Gibbs standing in front of the big screen, staring at the image of some kind of electronic equipment. He trotted over after dumping his bag behind his desk.

“What do we got?” he threw out, not looking Gibbs at all.

“A hi-tech naval radar. Stolen while in transit from an M3 Inc. facility to the Navy Yard.”

“Let me guess, multi-million dollar radar?”

“Uh-huh.”

You called me back to retrieve this piece of junk instead of protecting a man in mortal danger?

“Is there a problem, DiNozzo?”

“No Sir.”

Gibbs turned to him then, but Tony kept his gaze fixed at the screen, acutely conscious of his little slip-up: he hadn’t addressed Gibbs as ‘Sir’ in a very, very long time. Fortunately, he was saved from any more awkwardness when McGee and Ziva walked in, and they started discussing the new case.

Tony seethed quietly, missing the good old days when he could speak his mind even if it earned him a head-slap, even if he ended up doing what Gibbs ordered him to do anyway.

Maybe that was the difference between faith and trust – faith was usually one-way and hardly ever reciprocated but one kept it anyway, like in God. Trust on the other hand had to be mutual, or it was basically pointless. Tony still had faith in Gibbs as their leader. But knowing Gibbs trusted him back was what once gave him his strength, made him believe he could do anything. But that was before. Now he wasn’t so sure his one-sided faith was ever going to be enough.
Everyone got busy with their individual tasks tracking the radar down. Hour later, a young delivery boy entered the squad room.

“Delivery from a… Damon Werth?” He called out, looking around curiously. He was carrying a large bunch of flowers – purple tulips and blue orchids.

Tony immediately felt his face heat up, either with outrage or exhilaration or both, he wasn’t sure. For God’s sake, Gibbs was right fucking there!

But before he could start his mental diatribe about stalking psychos completely uneducated about prevalent gender stereotypes, the delivery boy read off the card once again. “For Officer David?”

He pronounced David the way most Americans did until she corrected them. Tony’s mouth was still open, agape with astonishment, and rapidly escalating embarrassment.

Ziva practically jumped out of her seat to go and collect the flowers. “It’s ‘dah-veed’. And that would be me, thank you!”

She grinned stupidly and buried her nose in the bunch inhaling deeply. Looking up, she suddenly realized Tony was right there. She turned to him, looking both sheepish and really, really proud of herself.

“I guess I took your advice. And it was worth it!”

Tony swiftly glanced at Gibbs, who seemed to be still immersed in his work. When he looked at McGee the tech expert turned a bright pink and refused to look back at Tony. The poor guy had still not been able to broach the subject of Tony’s bisexuality directly. But Tony didn’t mind, he knew his best friend just needed some time.

He turned back to Ziva and kept his voice as even as he could. “So, you and Damon…?”

Ziva laughed. “Oh no, well, not yet,” she pushed a strand of hair behind one ear coyly. “He’s just thanking me for last night. He loved the movie, as did I.”

Tony rolled his eyes, unable to control the sharp pangs of jealousy clenching his gut. “It’s not that great,” he grumbled petulantly and buried his nose behind an old file from the archive about past robberies of sensitive defense equipment.

“What are you saying?” Ziva dug out her pamphlet from the previous night and started reading. “It says here this movie was deemed culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant by the Library of Congress and selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry!”

“Oh, well, sure!” Tony threw his hands up in frustration, unable to come up with a good comeback, so just settled for a lame one. “If he really liked it SO much, maybe he should have like, sent some chocolates along too, huh?”

Right on cue, the delivery boy came running back in. “Um sorry, Officer David,” he pronounced her name right this time and held out a square box of… damn… chocolates to Ziva. “These came along with the flowers too.”

Ziva smiled oh-so-smugly at Tony, who just glowered dangerously. Before he could make a bigger fool out of himself, he got up and trudged away to the bathroom. He needed to get it together, and this was so not the place to be losing it in the first damn place.

He’d lost it two nights ago too, in the gym. All his pent-up frustrations had erupted in the form of
violence and even Tony had been caught off-guard. Poor Damon had no idea what he’d gotten himself into when he asked to be his sparring partner. Although once he figured it out, he’d easily subdued Tony, annoyingly easily.

“Sonofabitch,” Tony grinded his teeth, furious at himself for being weaker than Damon, slower than Damon, and fucking more… asthmatic and plague-prone than Damon.

Tony washed his hands vigorously, over and over again. This was just stupid. For one, there was a very strong possibility Damon and Ziva were doing this on purpose, trying to provoke Tony but there was nothing going on really. On the other hand, maybe Ziva wasn’t lying. Maybe the two had hit it off after all. And why should that come as a surprise?

“That’s just what you are, Anthony DiNozzo Junior,” Tony hissed at himself in the mirror, “Easily replaceable.”

“No, you are not.” The firm voice startled Tony and he knocked his side into the granite top, wincing painfully.

“Seriously, Ziva, you gotta stop doing this!”

The Mossad officer stood at the door with her arms crossed, unfazed by Tony’s yelling. A second later, the door opened again and McGee walked in.

“What is this? A fucking intervention? Why don’t you call Gibbs and Abby and Ducky in too?”

McGee locked the door behind him. “We’d call Abby but she has a slightly different stand than us. That’s why Ziva and I – we wanted to talk to you separately.”

Tony exhaled his annoyance pretty obviously, leaning back against the counter and digging his hands into his slacks pockets. His friends were trying so hard he wanted to laugh. Their faces wore similar expressions of compassion that Tony tried his best to ignore. He didn’t want their pity; or anyone else’s for that matter.

“Okay, so what do you wanna talk about? My newfound gayness? Why’d I suddenly switch teams on you, McPrude, is that it?” Tony threw out, challenging them head on.

They looked at each other, and McGee was elected to answer silently. “I’ll admit I was surprised when I found out but – that’s not why we’re here, Tony.”

Tony crossed his arms. “Okay, so if none of you is homophobic, and I’m sure you aren’t, what’s the dealio?”

McGee continued. “When you went AWOL over the weekend, we asked Damon what happened. We know you basically dumped him after that night.”

“Yeah well, that’s pretty much standard DiNozzo MO, and you two have known me long enough to know it. So again I ask, what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that you’re miserable, Tony!” Ouch, he wasn’t expecting Probie to go for the jugular so soon. “We’ve never seen you like this before. Not even when Jeanne… let’s just say we get that there’s a lot going on here and… and we want you to know you don’t have to deal with it alone.”

“I’m fine,” he ground his teeth, seething.

His friends looked at each other guiltily, and Ziva responded this time. “Tony, those flowers and
chocolates really are for you. Not me.”

Tony frowned, “For me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Tony erupted like a volcano. “And why, pray tell, is that idiot sending me flowers? Flowers? Seriously? Guy sending a guy flowers? When the hell did that become okay and in the workplace in a federal agency for fuck’s sake?! Damon’s lost it. He’s just completely off his meds! And in his case, that was supposed to be a good thing!!”

He paused for breath, by no means done, but his train of thought (or six) got completely derailed when he looked at his friends again. Ziva was smiling.

“I ordered those flowers and chocolates, Tony, in Damon’s name.”

Tony blinked, realizing he’d been played. “You wanted to see how I’d react.”

“I wanted to know if Damon was right, if you actually do have feelings for him or if he is holding on to an illusion of something that does not exist.”

Tony looked away suddenly feeling exposed, and trapped with both Ziva and McGee blocking the exit.

Ziva walked up to him and leaned against the counter. “We let ourselves get caught in the middle of the two of you, Tony, and for that I am sorry.”

“Me too,” McGee added and he seemed to mean it, even though, technically, Tony was the one who’d gotten him embroiled in the first place.

Ziva continued, “Let me just say one last thing and we will get out of your hair – whatever you decide, McGee and I will stand by you one hundred percent. Abby might try to change your mind, but we will not. Even if we do not like it, even if we think you are possibly robbing yourself of another chance at happiness…”

Tony scoffed lightly. “There’s a ‘but’ coming, isn’t it?”

“But,” Ziva nodded and exhaled deeply. “I do think you owe Damon an explanation. It does not have to be anything you are uncomfortable telling but… he is struggling too, you know.”

Tony bit his trembling lip and looked away. Of course he knew; he’d seen it first-hand at the gym the other night.

Ziva put her hands up and slowly backed away, as if dealing with a skittish horse. “So I am just going to trust that you can take care of this by yourself and… next time Damon asks me for a favor, I am going to blow him up.”

“Off,” McGee corrected her blandly.

“Off, sorry, blow him off.”

Tony glanced at his partners’ reflection in the mirror as they both started for the door. Probie caught his eye first and attempted a brief smile. Tony didn’t smile back.

“Oh, by the way!” Ziva popped her head back in through the door a second later, startling Tony again. “You know Damon is going to be using our gym for a few days, right?”
“Yeah,” he appreciated Ziva trying to give him a heads up but he’d already made up his mind to avoid the place as long as Damon was frequenting it.

“Good,” she said. “Just wanted to let you know I have agreed to be his sparring partner.”

What? Tony swiveled around to face her, the ugly green monster starting to unfurl its hood again.

“Strictly platonic, of course,” Ziva offered immediately, probably in response to the dark look on Tony’s face. She tried brushing it off, which just made things worse. Awkward silence followed. Then, without another word, she popped back out of the door, leaving Tony alone with his swirling thoughts.

Why couldn’t he just make up his damn mind?

***

**Damon** waited inside the gym for his new sparring partner to show. He didn’t mind that she was running late. It gave him time to think, something he’d been doing a whole lot of recently. He sat down with his legs folded under him in the middle of the boxing ring and stared at his cell phone.

Earlier that day, he’d gathered the courage to text Tony: *I miss you.* He received no response.

An hour later, he tried again: *Why won’t you give us a chance, what are you afraid of?* Once again, he got no response.

It took him another couple hours to put aside his very last shreds of dignity and try one more time: *Fine, maybe not us. But I wish you’d give yourself a chance, Tony. You deserve to be cherished and taken care of for a change. You deserve to be loved.*

He got a response seconds later: *You sure about that?*

Damon felt a cold shiver slither down his spine. What could have possibly happened to make a gorgeous, intelligent and competent cop like Tony DiNozzo so insecure and reclusive?

*Of course I’m sure. Why do you even ask that?*

Tony did not write back after that, no matter how much Damon tried. It was as if Tony realized he’d said too much and the rest was radio silence.

“I am late! Apologies!” Ziva called out as she walked in. “I shall go change and be out in a flash.”

But before she could, her phone rang. Damon stood up sighing, used to the ways of the NCIS by now and prepared to re-schedule for another time.

Ziva looked at the caller ID and frowned. “Tony! I was just about to … what? … Where? … No, Tony, do not go in there without backup! I am on my way, wait for me! ... Yes I will call McGee.”

She hung up and turned back the way she came. At the door she remembered Damon and paused for exactly half a second. “Sorry, Damon. Another time.”

Through the full-length glass windows he watched her dash to the parking lot instead of back inside the headquarters. Damon stared after her, not sure what was going on but whatever he’d heard had sent his hackles rising. Something was going down, something very, very dreadful and wrong. And it involved Tony.

He grabbed his own gear and ran out after Ziva.
“You know what's going to happen to you? I'm going to march you to the zoo and feed you to the yak.”

February 1, 2008. Alexandria, VA

Tony pulled out of the parking lot at eight that night. He had no intentions of giving Werth any more chances to run into him. He was actually looking forward to spending some time alone in his apartment tonight, with pizza and beer and The Thomas Crown Affair, the original. Although, Pierce Brosnan’s version wasn’t half-bad, and Rene Russo naked was never bad.

He tried not to think about how similar Damon looked in his black leather jacket to a young Steve McQueen. And that definitely was not the reason behind his choice of DVD tonight. Not at all.

Two minutes away from his destination, his phone rang. The caller ID said Andover.

“Agent DiNozzo, w-we have a problem. Park’s in DC, and he just kidnapped Portman’s daughters from their school play.”

“Shit. What about their protection detail? Everyone okay?”

“They’re fine, just pissed and… embarrassed.”

“Where’s Portman?”

“Oh, Sir, that would be the other problem.”

“You lost him?!” Tony swerved to the side and stopped. “Where’s he heading?”

“Our Tech hacked into his cell phone – Portman received a voice message an hour ago. Park asked him to come alone to an abandoned industrial warehouse in Alexandria. We’re headed there now but we figured you’re only ten minutes out, a-and he already has a forty minute head start on us.”

“Forty minutes?? What the hell were you guys doing for forty minutes?”

The voice on the phone wavered. “He said he had an upset stomach, Sir. We gave him a wide berth.”

Tony barked at Andover to text him as well as his team the warehouse address. Then hung up and took the first U-turn towards Alexandria. If Park was in DC then his lackey Wan was no doubt with him. Tony looked at the address he’d just received and called Gibbs. He picked up in two rings.

“Park is here and has the Portman daughters. Commander just broke out of his protection detail and is going after them alone. Am on my way.”

“Tony, wait for backup. Where’s Ziva?”

“Calling her next. You have the address.”
“I’ll be there in ten. Don’t do anything stupid, Tony. Wait for me.”

He could hear Gibbs running until his voice started to echo which meant he was either in the elevator or the stairs. Tony shook his head, not surprised that Gibbs had once again just assumed Tony would do something stupid.

“Rule number 38, Boss.” *My case, my lead.* Considering he’d done most of the legwork on this one while Gibbs had moved on to the infinitely more important radar robbery.

Tony hung up before Gibbs could growl another word. He reached Ziva who in turn promised to call McGee and the local LEOs. But he couldn’t wait for either of them to catch up. Portman had two Korean-American daughters – one was eight and the other six. Alvarez was survived by two sons. How could James Park, a son deprived of his own father, not realize or care about the pain he was inflicting on other kids?

Tony reached in exactly seven minutes and was the first on the scene as expected. Ziva couldn’t be far behind with the way she drove. But he couldn’t just sit in his car until backup arrived. He got out, having parked far enough that the car engine wouldn’t be heard, and crept as close to the perimeter of the warehouse as he could, taking cover behind some bushes.

The warehouse looked like a standard-sized construction with a loading dock and drive-in bay in the front, with most likely another pair at the back. It looked to be either abandoned or temporarily vacant. The neighborhood was commercial and deserted, naturally for this time of the night. There wasn’t a soul in sight, except for two armed guards in the front.

“Goddamnit,” Ziva would have been so much better at taking them down. But if there was the slightest chance that Park had the Portmans in there, Tony couldn’t risk waiting.

“Sorry, Boss, guess you were right. I am about to do something stupid.”

At least he had the sense to put on his Kevlar jacket. Maintaining his cover behind the bushes and the dark of the night, Tony crept up along the perimeter to get to the south side of the warehouse. He ran a good ten yards with his gun drawn until he hit the warehouse wall with his back and held his breath. Creeping up alongside the wall towards the back of the warehouse, he found another two guards manning the second dock and bay. He decided to creep back to the front, the guards there were smaller, and that’s when he heard a little child’s wail coming from inside.

“That’s it.” Tony gritted his teeth. He picked up a little pebble and very subtly scratched against the surface of the wall. It made just enough sound to attract one of the guards’ attention, who then started to walk towards Tony.

Tony waited, his back to the side wall and his safety off, until just the right moment when the guard came within his reach. He grabbed the man from behind, muffling his mouth with one hand and hitting the back of his neck hard enough to knock him out.

A minute later when the first guard did not return, the second one called for him. “Blaine?”

He approached, drawing his own gun. And even though he was a bit more careful, Tony grabbed him in the same stranglehold from behind and rammed his head into the brick wall, rendering him unconscious. He waited a few seconds to see if the guards at the back had been alerted somehow. Once he was sure he was in the clear, he grabbed the keys hanging out of the second guard’s pockets and headed back to the front.

“He’s not alone. There’s a little girl in there.” Tony mumbled, sorely missing the security of his team at his back.
Quietly he unlocked the entrance and crept in, scanning each direction with his Sig clasped in both hands. There were stacks of crates all over the place which provided for ample cover, using which he kept moving inwards, led by the cries of a frightened child. With every step, his fury grew.

There was a clearing up ahead and stark white lights illuminated the area. Tony counted twelve armed men, two of them were standing in front of what looked like a metal pen used to hold large dogs. The two little girls were locked inside.

To the right was Commander Portman, tied to a chair and looking like he’d just gone three rounds with Tyson. His face was swollen and bloody but his eyes kept seeking his daughters. His lips were split open and panting but every time he spoke, he spoke to his daughters.

“It’s gonna be okay, Tara, Nessa, it’s okay, daddy’s okay…”

He looked at his watch, Ziva and the others should be here any minute. All he had to do was bide his time until they got here. He figured that’s what Portman had been doing too, hoping the agents would have hacked his phone by now and were sending help. Well, all he had was Tony, for now.

A tall Asian man emerged from the shadows behind Portman. He was dressed in an expensive black suit and fur-lined overcoat. He had his arms folded behind him. James Heung Park. The pictures Interpol sent over did him no justice. This man was evil to his core and completely heartless.

“We will not harm your children, Commander”, he spoke in a tone so soft it took Tony by surprise. “You know what you must do.”

“I will, as soon as you let them go,” Portman rasped painfully.

Tony wondered what Park wanted. He didn’t have to wait too long. Portman looked up at James who’d now come around to stand before him. He looked scared, but not for himself, only for the fate of his daughters once he was dead.

He panted for awhile and finally lowered his head. “Yes,” he rasped. “Yes, I was there, when Alvarez picked the fight with your father. And I defended my friend when your father attacked him. B-but we did not set out to kill –”

Another man’s hand swiped down from the shadows behind Portman and smacked him right across the cheek, knocking his head to one side. Eric Wan.

“Stop lying!” He screamed, but shut up when Park held a hand up to order silence.

Park bent closer to Portman. He spoke slowly and carefully in his thick foreign accent. “You, and Alvarez, and Simmons together killed my father. You Americans, you thought nobody saw you, that you were invincible. I don’t care who started the fight, or who shot who with whose gun. All I know, Commander, is that you and your men are responsible for my father’s dishonorable death. And you must confess your sins, to me.”

Portman glared back at him. “After you set my girls free. Once they’re home with their mother, I will say whatever the hell you want me to say, and let you avenge your father’s death.”

Park straightened up but did not respond. Instead, he turned to nod at one of the bad guys standing closest to the cage. The man pulled out his own gun and pointed it through the bars right at the younger one’s head.

“No!!! Wait, please!!” Portman screamed in panic, and Tony winced, praying the commander would somehow find it in him to stall a little longer. Unfortunately, the father could only hold out for so
“Okay, okay! I confess! I’m responsible! I should have controlled my men and I didn’t and you lost your father because of it. Please!! Just let them go, please!!”

Fuck. Tony pulled out his backup weapon and found a strategic spot behind the crates, one where he could stay behind cover and still hold both his guns out at the same time. He spread his feet to stabilize his stance, looked left then right to make sure he had the most strategic targets in sight, namely the guy pointing the gun at the girls on the left, and Wan on the right. He drew a deep breath, preparing for what he must do next.

“Oh, DiNozzo, this has got to be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done.”

Meanwhile, Park’s face had melted into an evil smile. He waxed on about justice and redemption for awhile. Then he fell quiet and nodded at Wan, who pulled out his own gun, no doubt the DH45, and aimed it at Portman’s head.

“NCIS!” Tony screamed at the top of his lungs. Every felon in the room spun around towards the sound of his voice. “You’ve been surrounded. Put your weapons down and get away from the hostages, now!!”

There was a second’s pause, and then all hell broke loose.

***

Ziva drove faster and rougher than she’d ever driven before.

Being as pissed as she was, it wasn’t hard to do. Portman broke protocol and endangered not just himself but also his daughters, and now maybe Tony too. Alas, he wasn’t the first father to do so and he wouldn’t be the last.

When she got there, the front entrance was open and Tony was nowhere to be seen. He wasn’t picking up his phone either.

“Ah-brookh!” she grunted and barged in, following the sound of the gunfire knowing it would lead her to him.

When she came in, the first thing she noticed was Tony practically surrounded on three sides and taking fire from eight, no, nine assailants taking cover behind metal crates and wooden boxes just like Tony had. Three men lay dead or injured in the clearing up ahead. Commander Portman was still tied to the chair, looking bloody and hurt but miraculously alive. And he was struggling hard to break free, screaming as he craned to look back at someone in the shadows.

She pulled out her own gun and joined in, felling a couple men right away just before one of them could take advantage of Tony’s blind spot. Tony turned to look at her, smiling in relief briefly before ducking a bullet that almost blew the back of his head open.

“Ziva! The girls!” He screamed at her the moment she managed to run and join him behind the cover of the same crate. “Park and Wan have them and they just took off for the backdoor.”

He’d clearly scoped the place out and knew the lay of the warehouse better than her. She nodded. “Go! I will take care of these bastards and get Portman.”

Tony took off running, and Ziva turned around just in time to avoid a flying kick from a bad guy who’d managed to creep up to her.
Good, close combat was more her style anyway.

***

**Gibbs** had a very, very bad feeling about this. He’d known the moment Tony uttered the words ‘Rule 38’ that this was not going to go well. It was Tony’s way to let Gibbs know that he absolved his boss of all responsibility for whatever happened tonight. But Goddamnit, Gibbs would not stand for being pushed to the curb like that.

_Not again._

He and McGee reached at about the same time, which was probably about ten minutes after Ziva, give or take. McGee went in the front to back up Ziva, and he headed around to the back. That’s where he saw something that made the blood in his veins run cold.

Park and Wan came storming out the back and they held a little girl each in one arm, holding them up for cover with a gun stuck into their sides, threatening their lives. They looked back and ordered the two armed men standing guard at the dock to kill whoever came out of the warehouse after them. They were planning to make a run for the Robinson R44 parked in the open space behind the warehouse.

Before he or even the Korean mob bosses could make another move, the door burst open again and the two guards turned to shoot. Gibbs took one guy out, and the other one was taken out by whoever was pushing through that door.

DiNozzo.

“Stop right there!!” Tony yelled as he held his gun up, standing completely exposed and in the open. The only reason they hadn’t shot him down yet was because they’d just spotted Gibbs charging towards them from behind.

A quick glance alerted Gibbs to the bullet hole in his agent’s left thigh and the bright red trail of blood in his wake. Tony was pale and losing blood fast, but he was still standing.

Gibbs ran towards him, unable to shoot at the two hostiles because of the children. Unfortunately, the thugs were more interested in snuffing the life out of Tony who’d clearly done a hell of a job ruining their day.

“Let the girls go,” Tony demanded again.

Park laughed. “Are you really in a position to make any demands, officer?”

“Agent, did you not hear me announce myself?”

Gibbs would have rolled his eyes if he could without taking them away from his targets.

“You’re not taking them with you,” Gibbs interrupted, letting Tony know he was there, that he had his back. DiNozzo must have heard him loud and clear, but did not let his attention waver.

“Looks like we’re at an impasse,” Park said, holding six year old Tara high enough to have to peep from behind her head, despicable coward that he was.

Gibbs did not have a shot, and even if he did, he couldn’t possibly risk it with Park and Wan both holding guns to the little girls. The kids were crying, and the smaller one was screaming her lungs out. If she kept that up, Gibbs feared Park might lose his temper and hurt her anyway. He didn’t...
know if Commander Portman was alive, but if he was, Gibbs didn’t want to face him without his daughters safe and sound. And Gibbs knew for a fact Tony shared that sentiment.

“Take me,” Tony said. “You need a hostage, take me.”

Park and Wan looked at each other. Gibbs ground his teeth, suppressing the tremor of fear creeping up his spine to support Tony’s plan.

“The girls for me, and we’ll let you get into your helicopter. You can drop me anywhere over the Potomac, if you’d be so generous.”

Park and Wan were already backing up towards their transport. Both Tony and Gibbs charged forward, getting ready to take extreme measures if necessary. If Gibbs could just get close enough, maybe he could shoot Wan’s leg off and grab the girl out of his hands before he recovered…

“You’re not our problem. We’d have to extradite you anyway. But if anything happens to the girls?” Tony tilted his head cockily, “The American government and all its agencies are going to make it their personal mission to hunt you down and kill you.”

Gibbs detected a flicker of hesitation in Park’s face, Atta boy, Tony.

“Wherever you go, we will find you and you will die, like fucking dogs in an alley, like your father,” Tony hissed coldly, looking straight at Park. “And we’ll make it so no one will be left to miss you, or mourn you, or avenge you.”

Gibbs held his breath. Park scowled dangerously at Tony. “I’m going to enjoy killing you, Agent, slowly.”

Tony and Gibbs just waited as the kingpin made up his mind. “Put your gun down and take off your Kevlar.”

“Tony,” Gibbs warned, not liking this plan one bit.

Tony on the other hand, didn’t hesitate. He looked at Gibbs, his eyes conveying ‘cover me’ like they had a thousand times before, and gently placed his gun on the ground. Then ripped off the bulletproof jacket and dropped it to the ground as well.

“The little one first,” he ordered, looking at the girl in Park’s arms.

While Wan moved his gun to Nessa’s temple, Park set Tara down on the ground. The little girl promptly ran as fast as she could into Tony’s waiting arms. He hugged her close for a second then gently pried her away from himself.

“Go stand behind the nice old man there. Stand behind him and grab on tight to his leg, okay?”

Tara did as she was told, running over to Gibbs, who made quiet shushing sounds only she could hear to assure her a bit. They couldn’t take the risk of leaving the girls alone only for another gunman to find them and use them as leverage again.

“Walk over with your hands in the air,” Park ordered and Tony, keeping his eyes on Nessa, did as told. The moment he came within two feet of Park, the Korean grabbed him, swinging him around so he could hold Tony in a stranglehold from behind. Before Tony could react, Park pressed his gun’s nozzle into the back of Tony’s right shoulder and fired. Tony screamed and would have fallen forward with the bullet’s momentum but Park held him up.
“Tony!!” Gibbs saw red but held his ground, what choice did he have? With his jacket off, Tony was an even more effective human shield for Park than little Tara.

“Now, start moving.” Park ordered.


The assassin looked at his own boss and at his nod, he put the eight-year old down. She came running to Gibbs and without waiting for instruction, quickly got behind him and grabbed his other leg. Gibbs was relieved he had the girls, but now he was unable to do anything to help Tony.

“Say your good-byes, Agents. If you cooperate, you might still get to see this one again, or at least, some of him.” Park sneered as he and Wan pedaled backwards to the helicopter.

If help didn’t arrive soon, Gibbs was going to lose Tony. His heart raced and the big vein in his temple started to throb painfully.

The sound of gunfire coming from the warehouse started to wane. It sounded like Ziva and McGee were either gaining the upper hand or were down. Gibbs wondered what the hell was keeping the local LEOs. It felt like they’d been stuck in this nightmare for hours but in truth it’d only been a few minutes.

As soon as Wan reached the chopper he jumped up into the cockpit and started the engine. The growling sound of the rotating blades suddenly brought it all home for Gibbs: They were taking Tony. They were taking him away and there wasn’t a damn thing Gibbs could do about it. His hands trembled as he looked into Tony’s eyes. His boy seemed calm, almost resigned, showing incredible faith in his boss like he always did, had for the past seven years. Even as he continued to lose more blood and could barely support his own weight.

Things happened too fast after that. The backdoors burst open a second time, and out walked the last person Gibbs would have ever expected to see at the warehouse.

Damon Werth?

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Chapter 18

“Just a minute. Do I have a nightgown on? No, I don’t.”

February 1, 2008. Alexandria, VA

**Gibbs** watched as Damon charged towards the hostiles with an assault rifle in his hands, no doubt grabbed from one of the men inside. And suddenly the equation was skewed in their favor. From two to one, it had become one to two… Park was the only one holding a gun on that side, with Gibbs and Damon pointing their weapons at him on this side.

“It’s over. Let him go, Park!” Gibbs yelled, bolstered by Damon’s support.

Park started to panic and dragged Tony further backwards. As he started to pull the uncooperative agent up into the helicopter after him, Damon aimed for the spinning blades and kept shooting until they were disabled. He took out the tail rotor next, before aiming back at Park who now had no escape options left.

Simultaneously, Gibbs also found a shot. Before taking it, he spoke to the girls, “Close your eyes.”

Not checking if they did but trusting that they would have, Gibbs fired. A bullet ripped through the chopper’s glass window and straight into Wan’s head. He died instantly, his body toppling over sideways where he sat.

Park was incensed and humiliated, but still acutely aware that if he shot Tony now he was a dead man for sure. Instead, the mafia boss of Busan shoved Tony out of the disabled chopper to the ground in an effort to distract his opponents and made a run for it. Damon ran to catch Tony who was pitching forward without attempting to break his fall. He was starting to lose consciousness.

Meanwhile Park jumped off to the other side of the chopper and fired a few parting shots back at Gibbs as he ran. Gibbs ducked along with the girls, scared for them more than his own self. When he stood up after making sure they were okay, he shushed the girls gently and pried himself away from them. Nessa, the older one, grabbed her sister and led her to take cover behind Gibbs.

Gibbs turned back to the fleeing Park. He watched Tony, hanging limp as a ragdoll in Damon’s arms, covered in his own blood. Then he looked back at Park and without another thought, took aim. Park was hit twice, first in the neck, second in the back of his head. He was dead before his body hit the ground.

Gibbs ran to where Damon was holding Tony in his arms, putting pressure on the bullet hole in Tony’s shoulder to stem the free flow of blood.

“Tony? Hold on, it’s not so bad, baby, just hold on…”

**Baby?** Gibbs frowned.

There was something… intimate, and familiar, about the way Damon touched Tony, and in the way he spoke to him. Before he could make sense of any of it, the warehouse doors opened again and Ziva and McGee burst out. Ziva immediately sized up the situation and ran towards the children, making sure they were alright.

“How is he?” She asked, turning to look at Tony, but no one replied.
The distant sound of sirens was like music to everyone’s ears. “I’ll go get the paramedics here,” McGee said and took off running.

Gibbs just stood there, watching his unconscious agent. Tony was not permitted to die yet, and as far as Gibbs was concerned he will never ever be. So yeah, he was not worried. He wouldn’t allow himself to be. Tony was going to be just fine. He had to be.

He decided to focus on his source of confusion instead. Damon took off his jacket and wrapped it around Tony’s thigh tightly to control the bleeding. Gibbs watched as Damon pulled the agent back into his hefty arms, whispering words of comfort into his ear, even rocking him gently.

When did this happen? Why did Gibbs not see this?

Of course Gibbs already knew the answer to the last one. He didn’t see it because he’d closed his eyes, shut Tony out months ago.

Gibbs swallowed the lump of emotion lodged in his throat and looked away. That’s when he smelled gasoline. The chopper’s busted up fuel tank was leaking.

“Get away,” he ordered hurriedly, coming towards the duo.

For a second, Damon looked up at him with astonishment and even disappointment in his eyes. Gibbs squinted back, not understanding the look thrown his way but prioritizing for the danger of the situation. “This thing’s about to blow. Get away from it!”

“Oh!” Damon exclaimed and promptly stood up. He gathered Tony into his arms and together they ran for the cover of warehouse’s side wall fast as they could. Ziva herded the girls and with them, ran ahead of the men.

Sure enough, the helicopter burst into flames, with Wan’s body still inside. A violent explosion followed that sent pieces of wreckage and body parts flying everywhere. Through the smoke and the echoing boom still ringing in his ears, Gibbs watched Damon hold on to Tony like he was the most precious thing in his world, shielding him with his own body from the debris. Gibbs felt like he was intruding on a private moment and looked away.

“Ziver!” He ran to the woman whose maternal instincts were now in full force, and helped her shield the little girls with their larger bodies.

Minutes later, McGee and the paramedics met with Gibbs and party half-way. Two of them took the children from Ziva but she continued to linger, talking to them gently. Damon laid Tony out on a stretcher and stepped away, letting the professionals do their work.

“What’s his name?” A paramedic asked.

“Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo,” Damon responded clearly.

The paramedic nodded and turned to Tony, opening his eyelids and shining a light into his pupils. “Agent DiNozzo? Can you hear me? Yeah, he’s definitely out.”

Gibbs turned to Ziva and McGee. “You okay?” he asked, attempting to distract himself from the disturbing sight of Tony’s inanimate form surrounded by medics.

Ziva and McGee nodded, they looked mostly uninjured. Ziva had bruises on her knuckles and sprinkles of ash in her hair from the explosion, but other than that she seemed fine.
“Commander?” Gibbs asked.

“Stable. Another team of paramedics has him.” McGee replied.

“Let him know his girls are safe.”

McGee nodded and headed inside, just as they spotted Agents Andover and Braun escorting some of the henchmen still left alive out of the warehouse.

Gibbs spotted Ziva watching Damon and Tony carefully, but she didn’t look surprised. He raised an eyebrow at her, at which she shrugged. “He must have followed me from the gym.”

Something told Gibbs it wasn’t Ziva that Damon came after, and he could tell she knew it too.

Meanwhile the paramedics strapped Tony and loaded him into the waiting ambulance. One of the paramedics turned to Damon, “Are you related to him, Sir?”

“Uh, no,” came the despondent response.

Gibbs came forward, “I’m his medical next of kin.”

“Alright, Sir, we’re taking him to Bethesda. Agent DiNozzo’s vitals are stable but he’s lost a lot of blood. He will need surgery immediately. Would you like to come along or follow us there?”

“I’m coming with,” Gibbs said, instructing Agent Braun to bring his car.

He climbed in beside Tony, habit prompting him to instantly clasp his hand, cold and insensate as it was. As the doors closed, he caught a glimpse of the tall figure standing outside, eyes transfixed at Tony. Damon looked pale and tired, and distressed beyond belief.

He didn’t take his eyes off Tony until the very last second.

***

Tony drifted in and out of consciousness for an eternity. He could feel the drugs coursing through his system, keeping him sedated but not quite. Now and again he’d black out completely, not remembering where he was, what was going on.

He could have sworn he saw Damon, at the warehouse, their crime scene. But what could he possibly be doing there? He remembered his indignation at being picked up like a child and manhandled by the big lug, even as he’d felt relief course through him for exactly the same reasons.

_Open your eyes, baby, please… you’re okay, you’re okay…_

Tony followed the sound of those remembered words through a long and dark tunnel until he broke out into the light. His eyes hurt at the brightness of a stark white lamp overhead. Damn, that looked awfully familiar.

“Tony? Can you hear me?”

That voice was not Damon’s, it was Gibbs’. A hand came to rest on his sternum when he tried to turn towards it.

Tony’s eyes felt heavy and he was forced to close them again. Couldn’t be Gibbs, could it? His hand was held by another, a warm one, as warm as the furnace that Werth was. Maybe it was him. That big lug really didn’t know how to accept rejection… he rejected rejection?
“It’s okay, son, you’re okay.”

Son. Gibbs then. Poor guy was listed as his medical guardian on Tony’s forms, he’d have to be here pretending he was related somewhat. Tony stirred himself awake, not sure what had happened with the operation.

“It’s all taken care of, the bad guys are gone.”

“The girls?” He asked, his voice barely recognizable to himself.

“Safe, thanks to you.”

Tony relaxed as the voice continued to whisper praise and encouragement into his ear. The warm hand caressed his cheek and lightly scratched his hair. Goddamnit, this was so weird. Couldn’t be Gibbs; this was simply not his MO. Tony chalked it up to drug-induced hallucinations and let himself be pulled under once again.

At some point he figured he was being jostled and moved, and forced his eyes open again. He was being wheeled into the ER, people running alongside his gurney, none of them he recognized. That’s when he remembered – needles.

Funny how bullets didn’t bother him but those prickly little shits scared the bejeezus out of him. Tony panicked, struggling to get up and walk away even if the rational part of his brain knew he wasn’t going to make it two steps on his own. But surely he didn’t need to be in the hospital. The bullets had gone through clean. Flesh wounds healed on their own, didn’t they?

Before he knew it, more strangers were hovering above him, holding him down and he couldn’t move. He panicked even more, really, really not wanting to do this again. That’s when a new voice echoed through his subconscious, barking orders in that familiarly authoritative tone that had the strange ability to both bully him and make him feel safe all at once.

“Calm down, DiNozzo, it’ll be over in a minute.”

Tony wheezed violently but quit struggling, compelled to obey that voice even in his condition. The world started to spin and fast, it was a good thing he was already flat on his back.

“He’s going into shock,” someone shouted.

More hyperactivity broke out around him. Once again Gibbs faded into the background leaving Tony to drown in a sea of masked faces and frantic voices. Someone punched in one of those damn needles into his arm and Tony could do nothing but lie there. Another pair of hands was busy cutting open his expensive Versace shirt and Salvatore Ferragamo slacks. Hospitals made him feel helpless, more than he felt on a usual basis. He finally went completely under, and didn’t surface until after the surgery.

***

Abby was with McGee down in her lab when Ziva called. She heard the urgency in his voice, saw the anxiety in his face as he rushed out without saying goodbye. She counted the seconds and minutes pacing in her lab until he finally called back.

So here she was, with Ziva and Tim in Bethesda’s waiting room, waiting for news on Tony’s condition. Ducky was on his way, and Gibbs was already with Tony somewhere inside.

Abby remembered the time, as a young girl, when she hated the stench of hospitals – that repellent
mix of chemicals and bodily fluids and disinfectants everywhere. It’d make her nauseous and she hated herself for being weak and unable to stand her ground whenever she visited one of her grandparents. That was when Abby, being Abby, decided she was going to beat this damn thing. As it turned out she not only beat it, she joined it, in a manner of speaking.

Today, forensic scientist Abby Sciuto lived her days surrounded by chemicals and dealt with all sorts of objectionable stenches without batting an eyelid. And she did it for a very good cause. But dealing with death and sickness still didn’t come easy when it involved one of her own.

It was after ten in the night and she’d been sitting here quietly, calmly, for an hour.

Gibbs came out at last, looking haggard and older beyond his years. She didn’t need him to tell her how much he hated this part. Tony had nearly died on them on twelve different occasions (that’s right – she kept counts. Ziva was on six, McGee four). Most days he’d walk out of it on his own two feet, but some days he didn’t. Those were the days that she dreaded the most.

“How is he?” She asked him, and Ziva and McGee joined her.

“In surgery. Shouldn’t be too long, two hours max.”

Ducky walked in and Gibbs went to him to bring him up to speed. That’s when everyone noticed Damon waiting a few feet away, leaning against the corridor wall.

Gibbs frowned and turned towards the trio – Abby, Ziva, Tim – who all threw him identically nonchalant looks, one that said ‘it is what it is’ and hopefully also conveyed their full acceptance. He looked irritated but mostly because he was the only one who didn’t know. He walked past Ducky and went to Damon instead.

“You shouldn’t have.”

Damon straightened up at his approach. “Shouldn’t have what, Gunny?”

Gibbs growled. “It was an agency operation, and you are a civilian now! You had no business entering that warehouse and meddling with a crime scene.”

Damon looked straight ahead at nothing and nobody, and did not respond to Gibbs’ scolding. Abby couldn’t stand it.

These past few days, everyone on this team including Tony and herself had done Damon wrong somehow. And despite it all, Damon had risked his life to save Tony’s. Everyone knew the chain of events by now. Were it not for Damon, Park and Wan would have definitely taken Tony and she didn’t want to think of what might have happened next.

She rushed forward, refusing to let Gibbs join the ranks of all of them wrongdoers, but Ducky stopped her. The ME didn’t know the whole story but his years of wisdom told him this was not the right moment to intervene.

“Spying on Ziva’s conversation, following her to the warehouse, going in unarmed? Exactly what were you trying to prove out there, Marine?”

“Nothing, Gunny.”

“Help me understand then! What the hell did you think you were –?”

“I love him.”
Abby blinked, and everyone froze. Even Gibbs was taken aback. “What did you say?”

“You heard me, Sir.”

More awkward silence followed. Damon looked right into Gibbs’ eyes and the Marines stared off, each refusing to be the first to blink or look away.

Abby squeezed Ducky’s hand on her arm and gently pulled away. Her silver fox may be oblivious, pig-headed and not exactly her favorite person right now. But he cared more for Tony than DiNozzo Senior ever did, even if he’d never admit it out loud. He deserved an explanation too.

“Gibbs,” she tried. “Tony and Damon dated briefly, about a week ago. We all knew about it.”

“Well did I never see you two together?” Gibbs asked Damon directly. What he really wanted to know was why nobody bothered to tell him. Was he not supposed to be the alpha of this pack?

For the first time, Damon’s gaze wavered. “I wanted to, but… things never really, we weren’t like… it was…” he sighed and gave up at last. “It’s complicated.”

“Un-complicate it. Are you two together or not?”

Abby winced, feeling great sympathy for what Damon must be going through.

“I don’t know, Sir.”

“In my experience, that’s a yes-or-no question, Marine.”

Damon lowered his eyes. “I guess, no.”

Gibbs nodded curtly. “Thanks for your help today. But seeing as Tony doesn’t actually want you around, you better leave.”

He turned and started to walk away. Abby looked at Damon, and their eyes met. She had his back, and if he wanted to stay here and fight for Tony, she would support him no matter what.

Damon straightened up to his full height. “I’d like to hear that from Tony, Sir.”

Gibbs stopped, turned back around to glare at him. “I’m telling you… leave Tony alone.”

“Why?”

“Because you are out of control, you don’t play by the rules, and you are dangerous! I don’t want you anywhere near him!”

Damon was stunned into momentary silence and so was everyone else. Anyone else in his position might have given up by then, possibly peed their pants even because Gibbs yelling into one’s face was a terrifying ordeal to live through. But the marine held his ground. Nervous as he must have been, he met Gibbs’ steel gaze with one of his own.

“With all due respect, Sir, what gives you the right to speak for Tony?”

“What gives me the right? What gives me the right? I’m his… He’s my…”

But Gibbs was unable to finish that sentence. Seconds passed, or maybe years. Without another word, the veteran turned away and stalked off, back into the OR where no one had the courage to refute him.
Abby looked at Ducky, who nodded reassuringly before going in after Gibbs. Then she turned to Damon who crossed his arms and went back to leaning against the wall, intent on staying right there at that same spot, waiting to hear that Tony was okay. She walked up to him, and mimicked his posture as she stood beside him.

Tony might never forgive her for this. But after what had happened tonight, Abby couldn’t in good conscience leave Damon hanging any longer. He deserved to know why Tony led him on the other night only to break his heart come morning. He deserved to be able to sleep in peace instead of torturing himself with thoughts of what he should or shouldn’t have done. He deserved to know it was not his fault.

“Damon, I think it’s time you and I had a little talk.”

***

February 2, 2008. Bethesda, MD

Gibbs ordered McGee and Ziva to go home sometime after midnight once they heard the surgery had been successful and Tony was being moved into the ICU. Ducky left too, needing to go home and tend to his sick mother. But Abby had outright refused despite all his huffing and puffing. Couldn’t say he was surprised.

Werth stayed where he was, concentrating on the tips of his boots intensely.

Two hours later, Doctor Perkins came out and Gibbs and Abby stood up to meet him. Tony was awake, barely.

“He’s still weak because he lost a lot of blood, and a little loopy thanks to the morphine, but okay otherwise. One of you can go see him if you like.”

Abby looked at Gibbs, who looked at Damon. Damon had stepped up closer when he heard Doctor Perkins come out. His face wore a look of hope and relief and such desperation, Gibbs did not have the heart to tell him off again.

“You should go,” Abby suggested and a second later, Damon nodded his agreement.

Gibbs walked into the room that Tony was now situated in. He was dressed in a light green hospital gown and swathed in post-op bandages. And he was fidgeting because he was now keenly aware of the IV needle stuck in his hand.

“Hey, hey,” Gibbs trotted up and pushed Tony’s arm down on the bed before he could wrench it out.

“Boss!” Tony exclaimed, and he probably meant it to be loud but it just came out weak.

“How’re you feeling?”

“I got shot,” Tony declared ruefully.

Gibbs smiled and sat down on the chair beside him. “I know, Tony, I was there, remember?”

Tony frowned, really trying to. “Portmans okay?”

“They’re all fine,” Gibbs squeezed his arm. “What you did tonight, Tony? It was foolish and reckless, and very brave.”
Tony grinned drowsily. “Not bravery, Boss. Knew you had my six all the time.”

Gibbs winced regretfully, since it was actually Damon who’d saved the day. “Tony, what do you remember? About how things went down?”

Tony squinted at first, then his eyes widened. “Damon.”

“Yeah, he was there.”

Tony suddenly looked a bit more lucid than before. “I guess I should thank him. My frikkin’ hero.”

Gibbs leaned forward. “Way I see it – you risked your life for Portman and his two daughters. That makes you the bigger hero, DiNozzo.”

Tony looked away, the animation from seconds ago long gone. Gibbs sat back and bit his lip, wondering what was going on in his agent’s head.

That night Tony came over and found Damon and Gibbs working together on the boat, he’d seemed upset by it. Gibbs had figured he was just feeling territorial towards this new presence in their lives. So obviously, it came as a huge surprise to hear that Tony and Damon had been seeing each other. How the hell did that happen again? Now that he was thinking back to the past few days, Damon sure did like to ask questions about NCIS and the team, including Tony. Especially Tony.

Gibbs closed his eyes and cursed himself for the hundredth time. He didn’t need Abby to tell him how far off the reservation he’d strayed over the last few months.

“DiNozzo,” he started, hesitantly. “You were right, it has been weird between us for awhile, but I want you to know that… I’m still here. I may not be able to show it often but, I’m so very proud of you, kiddo… you listening? … Tony?”

Gibbs sighed and rubbed his jaw tiredly. Just his luck that the one time he managed to truly speak his heart was the time Tony chose to fall back to sleep.

He leaned back and made himself as comfortable as was possible in a hospital chair, watching over Tony.

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“You were always lugging home wild things. Once it was a hawk with a broken wing, and another time it was a full-grown wildcat with a broken leg…”

February 2, 2008. Bethesda, MD

Damon rubbed his eyes tiredly and sank into a waiting room chair next to Abby. The moment his ass hit the cushion, Gibbs came marching in with coffee. Damon got back up and stood at attention, even as he mentally chided himself for doing so. Why the hell couldn’t he stop doing that?

Gibbs smirked, probably thinking the same thing. He was carrying a tray with two Grandes and a CafPow. Abby smiled gratefully and grabbed her drink, but Damon had to be prodded to take his. Once he had it in his hand, he didn’t resist and took a big sip of super strong black coffee, no cream or sugar. It was heavenly.

“Have you seen him yet?” Gibbs asked.

Abby had urged Damon to go in the moment Gibbs left for his coffee run. But something about sneaking in behind Gunny’s back hadn’t seemed right. Damon just shrugged and Gibbs shook his head like he’d been expecting it.

“Come on,” he turned and Damon eagerly followed. Abby grinned as she watched the two men enter Tony’s room.

“Thanks, Gunny.” Gibbs didn’t reply, didn’t even look at him.

Inside, Tony was fast asleep under the heavy sedation. He looked pale, the usually golden tinge of his skin dull in the unflattering white light of the room. Wires and tubes tethered various parts of his body to all the medical equipment surrounding him, including a breathing tube taped under his nostrils. Damon frowned when he noticed the leather restraints around Tony’s wrists.

Gibbs sensed his discomfort. “Tony has an aversion to needles. Trust me, those things are needed or he’ll just hurt himself.”

Damon nodded, connecting the dots to a brief memory from weeks ago. “That’s why the o-dark thirty physical appointment?”

“Yes.”

Damon couldn’t get his eyes off the sleeping agent. His gut clenched tightly and his hands trembled. He felt a fervent need to reach out and touch Tony, gather him into his arms again and never let him go. But he was too afraid to get any closer, no thanks to Gunny’s presence in the room.

“Take a seat.” He ordered gruffly, pointing to a second chair in the room. Damon pulled it up to the other side of the bed and sat facing Gibbs who was seated closer to Tony, close enough that the veteran could take Tony’s hand in his.
“When you asked me if I’d let you date my daughter…”

Damon swallowed. “You told me I was dangerous, b-but that… you were dangerous too.”

Gibbs glared, not amused with his back-talk at all. “Start from the beginning.”

And Damon did. Starting with their encounter at the court, to the one in the squad room, to the altercation in the basement followed by the movie then the club… he omitted details about that night for obvious reasons, until he finally got to his run-in with Tony in the gym. He left the details of that meeting out too, for obvious reasons.

Gibbs gave him the evil eye, that mean look fathers save for their daughters’ prom dates.

“I-I know what you’re thinking. Why am I stalking Tony when he clearly wants nothing to do with me?”

Gibbs didn’t respond.

Damon exhaled. “I don’t know, I just… was so sure we had something. I didn’t want him throwing us away for nothing. I just wanted to know why, what was scaring him off…”

“Tony doesn’t scare easily.”

“You’re right. I’ve come to realize that it’s not exactly fear. There’s something else going on. Something completely out of my hands.”

Abby had helped piece the rest of the puzzle together. At least now he knew, even if he was still pretty helpless to do much about it.

He was just going to respect Tony’s wishes, and get the hell out of Dodge.

“Tony isn’t some girl you can woo over with flowers and chocolates.” Gibbs muttered, and Damon frowned, wondering if the man was referring to their little ploy earlier.

“I realize that. And that’s why I’m not going to bother him anymore,” Damon whispered. “I just accepted that job offer with the PMC in Langley.”

Gibbs looked at him with genuine surprise. “When are you leaving?”

“In the morning. First assignment’s in Uruguay. I’m kind of excited about it.” Damon lied, even though he knew Gunny was not going to be fooled.

“I-I also wanted to thank you. For your support, for letting me in your home, for… giving me the strength to see that there is life outside the Corps. The Corps will always be a part of who I am, no matter where I go, no matter how many vet benefits I don’t get,” he smiled, a real smile, if slightly sardonic. “But I am more. I can be more, I see that now.”

Damon looked at Tony and willed his eyes to not brim with tears, at least not yet. He stood up, smoothing over the blanket that covered Tony’s frail, unconscious body as a way to buy some more time.

“Can I ask you a question, Gunny?”

“Shoot.”

“Were you aware that Tony was… that he swung both ways?”
Gibbs stared at him blankly. “I’ve known for years.”

Damon nodded, keeping his eyes on Tony. “Good, that’s good.”

“Why?”

“Tony doesn’t know you know. I think he’s worried you won’t approve.”

“Are you saying that’s why he broke up with you? Is that what you’re choosing to believe to make this easy on yourself?”

Damon scoffed. “Trust me, Gunny. That’s a very, very tiny part of it.”

“Why would it even matter? Even if I didn’t like it, Tony wouldn’t care.”

Damon turned towards Gibbs and just looked at him. He could do condescending too. “Do you really not know the answer to that question, Gunny?”

Gibbs didn’t reply, and he was starting to look a little uncomfortable with this conversation.

“Everything Tony ever does, it’s for your approval. It’s to make you proud. You know that, don’t you?”

Gibbs looked away, but Damon pressed on. “There is something between the two of you, something unspoken, but it’s painfully obvious. Anyone who’s been a father or a son sees it, recognizes it. It’s in the way Tony hangs on to your every word, how he jumps into freezing waters after you without a care for his own life.”

He noticed Gunny’s hand squeeze harder around his agent’s on the bed. “And you think you’re doing such a bang-up job hiding your feelings, Gunny, but I saw it in the way you touched that baseball glove on the kids’ bedroom door every time you walked past it. I felt it wrapped inside all your exasperation and annoyance when you talked about him.”

“It’s time you left, Werth.” Gibbs tried to dismiss him, but Damon didn’t budge. He acted like he hadn’t been interrupted at all.

“Just because you don’t say it out loud doesn’t make it any less real, Gunny. You think if you don’t show it, if you don’t put it in words, it will just go away. Or it won’t matter so much and the pain that you feel every time Tony gets hurt will be any lesser. But ask yourself, tonight when those guys were dragging Tony away, was it possible for you to be any more scared and worried than you were?”

Gibbs turned away from Damon, choosing to look into Tony’s face instead. But Damon refused to back down. “Do you think you’d care more for Tony if he were your son by blood?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then by all means, enlighten me, Gunny! Please, will one of you just level with me here?” Damon knew he sounded desperate and needy, but he couldn’t help it. He put his hands on the bed and bent his upper body so he could look right into Gibbs’ eyes.

“Tell me why you’re shutting him out and making him so insanely insecure that he’s throwing away a perfectly good relationship? Healthy or not, appropriate or not, you know how much he depends on you! So why is your selfish, stubborn stonewall of self-preservation ruining my damn life?!”
Gibbs stood up suddenly. “That’s where you’re wrong. He does not need me. NOT ANYMORE!”

The decibel level was so high that even Tony stirred in his sleep, and it brought the attending nurse running into the room. The marines glared at her, and she swiftly turned on her heels and left.

Seconds ticked away in silence broken only by the sound of panting breaths and the systems beeping around Tony.

Damon sighed tiredly. “You know, Gunny, sometimes, you’re wrong too.”

Gibbs fixed him with a stone cold glare but did not react. Soon though, Damon began to regret his outburst because there was one last thing he wanted to do, and now he wasn’t sure if Gunny would allow it.

“Mind if I… have a minute?” He wanted to say goodbye to Tony in private.

Gibbs did not hesitate; he might have even welcomed the opportunity to step out for a bit. He left Damon alone with Tony for the first time that night.

Damon took Gibbs’ chair and gently reached for Tony’s hand. He could no longer keep up his brave façade and leaned in to desperately kiss the cold forehead. His lips traveled down to very lightly brush against Tony’s, but that was all he allowed himself.

“I love you,” he whispered, his voice wet with tears. “You hear me, Tonio? I will always love you. Be happy, okay?”

He stood up in a hurry, knowing he needed to walk away now before he lost his nerve, before the reality of what he was about to walk away from set in.

Calling all his determination and grit as a marine to bear, Damon turned abruptly and strode out of Tony’s room and Tony’s life forever. All arrangements had been made, and he had a plane to catch in six hours. There was nothing left for Damon Werth to do here anymore.

Maybe, just maybe, taking a leaf out of Gunny’s book of self-preservation wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all.

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When Tony finally came to, it was just starting to lighten up outside. He kept his face turned toward the window and watched the day break, feeling too lethargic to do much else. But the uneasy peace could only last for so long.

He turned to his other side to find Abby sleeping in a chair with her head on the bed beside him. He smiled; trust his little sister to not leave his side come hell or high water. But when he tried to reach for her, he realized his old friends were back – fucking restraints.

Tony sighed even as he tried to laugh. Of course. That pointy thing that shall not ever be named was obviously still in his hand, and just thinking about it was making Tony wheeze. He forced himself to do his deep breathing exercises to calm himself down. After a couple of minutes, he felt a little better, and looked down at Abby again. He wondered how long she’d been here. Maybe it was time she got some real rest in her own bed, er… coffin.

The restraints had some give and Tony stretched until his long fingers could reach Abby’s pigtail. Grinning with mischief, he tugged at it with all his might.
“Oww! Tonyyyyyy…” Abby groaned without even opening her eyes.

Tony chuckled as Abby pulled herself up to look into his face. While she checked on him, he studied the lines on her face. Her black liner was smudged, and her pigtails were now uneven thanks to his efforts. She was obviously tired and caffeine-deprived for longer than was safer for anyone in the immediate vicinity. But she was smiling as warmly as she always did for Tony. It made him want to cry.

“How’re you feeling?”

It hurt to so much as breathe, but Tony wasn’t about to tell her that. “And good morning to you too, sunshine.” he said attempting a perky deflection his weak throat didn’t quite manage to deliver.

“That bad, huh?” She narrowed her eyes and reached for the call button.

“No, don’t do that,” Tony grimaced. “No more sedatives.”

His head felt like it didn’t actually belong on his neck, and moving it even a little made him all the more disoriented. The pain was actually helping him focus better, so it wasn’t entirely unwelcome, at least not yet.

“You look like crap,” he said.

Abby scowled, “Look who’s talking.”

“Why don’t you go on home? Get some rest.”

“Go? I just got here, sweetie. Like,” Abby glanced at her watch. “An hour ago. Gibbs kicked me out; he was the one who stayed the night.”

Oh. “What time is it?”

“O-seven hundred.”

Tony nodded. Gibbs must already be at his desk by now. McGee and Ziva won’t show up for another hour there. At least he didn’t have to spend the day writing reports, now that the case was truly wrapped up.

“No need to stay, really, Abs. I’m fine.”

Abby rolled her eyes. “When has that line ever worked for you, Tony? I’m staying till lunch and Ziva will take over after that. Ice chips?”

Tony started to shake his head but stopped ‘cause it made him dizzy. “I’d just like to get these damn cuffs off me, please.”

“Okay, but just this one,” Abby pointed to his left hand with the IV in it. Freeing his other hand was dangerous because Tony would be tempted to rip his IV out the moment her back turned.

"Yeah, yeah." Tony wasn't too happy obviously, but far as he was concerned, this was just the start of a longer negotiation.

Abby undid the buckles and picked up Tony's hand to gently massage his wrist. Tony sighed as Abby lowered her lips to his knuckles and kissed his hand almost reverently.

“Anything else?”
As sensation started to return to his extremities, Tony became more and more aware of all the unmentionables that made every trip to the hospital such a horrific affair.

“I want to go to the bathroom,” he grunted uncomfortably.

Abby frowned. “But, sweetie, you have a catheter.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t want!”

Tony started to wheeze. He hated those damn things so, so damn much! “Call the nurse and get it out of me.”

“But Tony…”

Tony tried to reach the ringer himself but only ended up straining his injured shoulder and groaned, even as Abby rushed over to his side.

“Tony, calm down, okay, I’ll call. Just take it easy…”

“Call now!!! NOW damn it!!!”

Through a red-colored haze of panic and frustration that blanketed his senses, a new voice broke through. “What happened?”

Gibbs was back.

Tony froze, although his wheeze still didn’t take the hint. He collapsed against his pillow and looked at the older man briefly before looking away. Abby turned to Gibbs and they probably used their stupid sign language to communicate because no words were spoken for the next few seconds. What could possibly be the sign for a Foley catheter, Tony wondered.

Gibbs walked over to his bed as Abby stepped away from it. Tony caught some more furious signing in his peripheral vision – he guessed Abby was being asked to leave and she wasn’t too happy about it. But she finally relented, to Tony’s dismay. He really, really didn’t want to be alone with Gibbs, not with his wheeze giving away the state of panic he was in at the moment.

“So what’s all this fuss about, DiNozzo?” the boss asked casually.

Tony swallowed heavily but pasted a plastic grin to his face. “Nothing, Boss. I was just messing with Abby.”

His hands continued to tremble as he tried hard not to think about that thing inside his dick.

Gibbs sat next to him. “You lost a ton of blood, DiNozzo. And you have a bullet hole in your left leg. They’re gonna keep you here a couple days at least and you’re not going to be doing much walking during this time. I say we leave it in for now, okay?”

As if he had a choice. For the millionth time he cursed his inability to refuse Gibbs anything. Tony closed his eyes for a bit, forcing his body to be still and impassive like his face. It was show time.

“Yes, Boss.”

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Gibbs sat back in his chair and studied his agent’s face. The mask had fallen back in place, and Tony was busy playing the part of a comatose person with his eyes wide open.
Was this what he’d done to this once spirited young man? Reduced him to suffering in quiet agony for absolutely no fault of his own?

Gibbs gulped hard, fighting to keep his emotions at bay. Part of him was just plain angry – why would Tony do this at all? What the hell had Gibbs ever done for him to deserve such blind, unyielding loyalty? This wasn’t about a job. They weren’t on some mission with the question of life or death hanging over their heads. And Gibbs was so not the boss in here. This was a hospital, for fuck’s sake. And Tony was lying here, hurt, and vulnerable and scared to the point of hyperventilation. How could he possibly still be trying so hard to obey an eccentric old man’s pointless orders he had no business barking in the first place?

Gibbs put a hand on Tony’s arm and felt it reflexively shudder. “Tony, look at me.”

Of course, Tony complied again.

“How badly do you want it out?”

Tony tried to shrug but his body was painfully taut. “It’s okay.”

He squeezed the boy’s arm, gently. “Don’t do it for me, kiddo. If you want it out, just say you want it out.”

Tony’s face started to crumple, before he schooled it back to blankness. Once he realized Gibbs was still waiting for an answer, he looked down at his hands and whispered meekly. “I want it out.”

“Okay,” Gibbs retorted immediately, making Tony look back up. “On one condition – you will accept my help or McGee’s help or anyone who’s here with you to go the bathroom, without complaint.”

Tony’s eyes momentarily sparked with rebellion, but he nodded. Gibbs hit the switch and called the nurse on duty to the room, then told her to get rid of Tony’s catheter. The tone of his voice warranted no argument and she got to work at once. Gibbs stood by with his back turned, but within earshot in case he was needed. He turned when he heard the rustle of Tony’s gown being pulled back in place which meant the nurse was done.

“I got it,” he told her, taking the covers right out of her hands.

Tony was so pale, and he’d lost so much blood, still he managed to color up a little when his boss fixed the blankets around the boy’s supine form, tucking him in not so tightly.

“Better?”

Tony bit his lip. “I will be if we can also get rid of this…” he held up his hand with the IV needle taped to it.

Gibbs just smirked, and for the first time that day he spotted the beginnings of a hesitant smile on his agent’s face.

“Worth a try,” Tony quipped, while a big yawn muffled the last word out of his mouth.

“Sleep, kiddo,” Gibbs whispered, watching Tony’s eyelids droop, drained more emotionally than physically. “You’re okay now. You’re okay.”

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Chapter 20

“Do I detect a look of disapproval in your eye? Well, tough beans buddy, ‘cause that’s the way it’s gonna be.”

February 3, 2008. Washington DC

Director Jenny Shepard knew what it was like to be scared for one’s family.

It was a fear she’d lived with her entire life. Colonel Jasper Shepard wasn’t the world’s best dad, but he was her only dad. Her worst and most recurring nightmare growing up was an army messenger showing up at their doorstep one day with news that the Colonel (or whatever he’d be ranked at the time) had been killed in action. Not once did she imagine the old man would be accused of accepting a bribe, murdered inside his own home and have it look like he’d committed suicide.

That’s when the fear was quelled, only to be replaced by insurmountable pain. The pain turned into rage, and rage fueled her quest for vengeance. As days turned into weeks and months and years, vengeance took over everything. Love, friends, family… nothing came before it. Vengeance became her whole and sole reason for existence.

Obsession, Ducky called it. An extremely unhealthy one, as if there was another kind.

So yeah, Jenny knew what fear of losing a loved one did to a person, what lengths it could take them to, places they might never be able to return from. Short of actually losing the loved one in question, that fear was the worst state of mind possible, mostly because it was so constant and never-ending. Civilians thought military folks and their families were so brave, this fear wasn’t really a problem for them. But Jenny knew from first-hand experience that wasn’t true. They just did a better job of hiding it.

Case in point – Jethro, and his team that he’d groomed so expertly to hide their true emotions behind a variety of masks (or maybe that’s why he chose them in the first place). McGee took refuge in his gadgets and fantasy avatars. Ziva covered up her feminine side with a tough Mossad-trained exterior. DiNozzo hid behind the face of a clown, laughing in the face of adversity no matter how… well, adverse. And then there was the team leader himself – as Churchill once said – a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; with a bunch of encryption ciphers thrown in for good measure.

Most folks didn’t see it, this fear, but Director Shepard could sense it from a mile away. She’d sensed it immediately the other night Jethro was in her office, going over performance reviews for the foreign analyst staff, when he got the call.

“I’ll be there in ten. Don’t do anything stupid, Tony. Wait for me.”

Jenny had frowned. “What’s going on?”

But Jethro was too busy flying out of her office to respond. As Director, she could have ordered him to stop and explain first. Instead, she waited patiently by the phone for an hour before Ducky remembered to call her back with a sit-rep. Every instinct in her body yearned to go to Bethesda and check on Tony herself. But after Ducky informed her that Tony was going to be fine, she’d deemed it necessary to not reveal her obvious favoritism towards Gibbs’ MCRT.
That was two nights ago.

Jenny looked down at the Alvarez report once again. Everything seemed to be in order. Everyone played by the book except for Tony who’d stepped into the warehouse swarming with eighteen armed hostiles without backup. It’s possible he’d had to make that call under extenuating circumstances but still, what was he thinking? Had he always been recklessly endangering his life on the job, or was this something new?

There was a knock on the door and a second later, Ducky popped his head in.

“Ducky!” she greeted him with a smile. “Do come in. I wanted to ask you about –”

“Tony’s condition, I know,” Ducky said matter-of-factly as he closed the door behind him and took a seat across from her. He looked tired and strangely contemplative.

“How is he?”

“Physically? Fine. Just a couple of flesh wounds. No major organs were hit. The brachial artery in his right shoulder was nicked resulting in severe blood loss, but they managed to prevent serious nerve damage in time. I expect Tony to recover full operation of his right arm and left leg in about three weeks.”

“And mentally?” She asked, knowing the ME had hoped she wouldn’t pick up on what he’d absently given away.

Ducky sighed. “Mentally, the boy seems to be under some stress which, I believe, precedes the events of this particular case.”

“We cannot have agents jumping headlong into danger without adequate backup just because they haven’t been thinking clearly, Ducky. Do you know what it’s about?”

The wise old doctor fixed her with a blank stare, at a loss for words for a change. But Jenny understood, and lowered her eyes back to the report. “So Gibbs is still being a jack-ass?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way but, essentially, yes, that’s one aspect. A big one.” She could tell Ducky wasn’t telling her everything, but decided not to pry.

Director Shepard had a history with Gibbs. Granted it was a short one and possibly occurred only because she’d been sporting red hair for the op in Paris. The point was that she knew him. She knew how his mind worked, the people and things he cared for and others he couldn’t give a damn about. She also knew how stubborn and rigid he could be, and it was high time she did something about it.

She closed the file before her with deliberation. “When is he getting out of the hospital?”

“Couple more days. He should take a week off to regain his strength, and I would recommend another two weeks of desk duty after that before he’d be fully fit for the field.”

“Nice little alliteration there, Ducky.”

“Why, thank you. I’ve also been throwing around a fair share of American pop culture references all morning.”

“You miss Tony so much already, huh?”

Ducky smiled sadly. “We all do, and have, actually, for quite awhile now.”
She nodded, her mind made up. “I’m ordering a full psychological evaluation for DiNozzo when he comes back first thing next week.”

Ducky winced. “You know he’s not going to like it.”

Of course she knew, just as she knew they weren’t talking about Tony anymore.

“I know, Ducky,” she said, smiling shrewdly. “I’m counting on it.”

Forty minutes later, Gibbs stormed into her office with Cynthia close on his heels nearing hysteria. She really should be used to it by now. Jenny subtly nodded to assure her that it was okay.

“Stop screwing with my team.” He declared. Straight to the point, blunt as always. And he wasn’t yelling either. Gibbs’ way of dealing with people managed to both worry and impress her at the same time.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Jenny drawled innocently.

“Don’t bullshit me! You had my team sit on their asses for two weeks in January, and now this? Tony does not need another assessment.”

“It’s for his own good, Gibbs.”

“And how will another psych eval in less than a month do him any good? Only thing the quacks manage to do is annoy the hell out of him.”

She rolled her eyes. Of course Tony didn’t talk to the shrinks. Having a functional mute like Gibbs for a role model, what self-respecting kid would?

“Well, he needs to talk to someone. As Director of this agency, I must do whatever is necessary to ensure my agents’ well be–

Gibbs slammed his hands on her desk. Now he was yelling. “MY agent! Not yours!”

Jenny simply shrugged, “Could have fooled me.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean, Jethro,” she answered calmly. “You think I don’t see how cold it’s been down in your bull pen since the Frog operation?”

Gibbs glared at her venomously, but she held her ground. She did lean back in her chair though, subconsciously putting some space between herself and the pissed off marine.

“You believe I went after Benoit for personal reasons, and that’s fine. You’re entitled to your opinions.” Jenny felt a familiar stab of guilt but suppressed it, like always. “You resent me for pulling Tony into the op while you were gone, and keeping you out of the loop after you came back, and that’s fine too. I can live with your resentment and your disappointment. But none of this was Tony’s fault, Jethro.”

Gibbs straightened up, looking at her like she was a suspect in his interrogation room. “I never blamed Tony. He was under cover, and he had a job to do. You on the other hand…?”

The venom in his eyes returned. “You put my agent in danger for a personal vendetta. Worse, you led him into a situation he could not extricate himself out of without getting someone hurt. And they both got hurt.”
He was referring to Tony and Jeanne Benoit, of course. Jenny nodded, acknowledging the part she inadvertently played in Tony getting his heart broken on the job. She honestly never saw it coming. Jenny Shepard had been so thoroughly taken by the playboy mask DiNozzo wore so proficiently, she never thought he’d be the kind to fall in love at all.

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re holding something against him too.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Maybe because you’ve been punishing him for months, ever since the op went south?”

“For fuck’s sake!! You claim to know me, Jen. Did you not know that Tony is more than just an agent to me? That keeping him safe is not just a job for me? How the hell am I supposed to protect him when I don’t even know where he is, who he’s with, what he’s up against? How the hell was I supposed to protect him from YOU?!”

Jenny was stunned into silence. While she knew Gibbs was fond of Tony, and Tony looked up to Gibbs too, she’d had no idea how intense this bond was.

“Oh, Jethro,” she tried, but didn’t know what else to say.

Gibbs was the toughest guy she’d known all her life. But in that moment, she saw him as nothing but Kelly’s dad, still mourning the loss of his daughter. And Tony’s sort-of dad, grieving the separation from his sort-of son.

Gibbs collapsed in the chair that Ducky had occupied less than an hour ago.

“I’ve been keeping my distance, but not to punish him. God, I didn’t think he’d be affected so much. I thought he’d get over it soon enough. But that was six months ago.”

“I’ve never seen you so scared before,” Jenny whispered. On any other day, Gibbs would have taken offence to her choice of words. Today he just sat there, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“I… I can’t do it, can’t watch his car explode on a screen from miles away, standing by helplessly. I’ve visualized Shannon and Kelly the day they died so many times.” Gibbs shuddered. “It just… hit too close to home.”

Of course, the car explosion must have brought back memories for Gibbs too painful to describe. He’d lost his family once, and he’d come perilously close to losing Tony, and this wasn’t even the first time.

“He’s a field agent, Jethro,” she whispered. “He was a cop. And I bet he will continue to be in law enforcement wherever he goes next.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

Jenny ignored the bitterness in his voice. “So… you figured since you couldn’t make him quit, or keep him safe, you might as well save yourself the pain of having to go through it again by suppressing the ‘father’ in you? If he’s no longer your son, then you no longer have to worry about burying another kid, is that it, Jethro? Is that your solution to this problem?”

Gibbs smiled cynically. “It was, until yesterday. Part of me thought – what kind of a father am I to put my son in danger mission after mission? I can’t transfer him because then I really can’t watch him, and I can’t be biased towards him. So maybe it’s better to start treating him like everyone else. Should’ve known the little brat couldn’t stand not being the special one anymore…”
Jenny smiled, listening to Gibbs grumble affectionately. “So what do you plan to do now?”

Gibbs sighed in resignation. “Now, I’ve decided to accept the inevitable. Even when I’m completely read in, it doesn’t matter. He’ll always find his way into trouble no matter what I do. Like with this case… I tried to pull him off it when it got too hot, move him to the radar thing. He looked at me like I’d just asked him to betray his country to Al Qaeda.”

Jenny smiled despite herself. That was Agent DiNozzo, with more integrity than he ever wanted others to know about.

“Can’t watch him all the time, can’t always make him do what he doesn’t wanna do. But I can be there for him, protect him on the rare occasions when he actually lets me.”

Jenny watched Gibbs stare away into nothingness for a few silent moments. The man had not spoken so much at length all year.

“Sounds like you’ve had an epiphany. And something tells me you had it before you came into my office today.”

He shook his head in what looked like exasperation. “You’re not the only one hell-bent on talking my ears off about this.”

She grinned and opened the file with the psych evaluation orders, picked up the one with Tony’s name on it. “I’ll tear this up on one condition: someone has to talk to him, Jethro. And I think we both know who that should be.”

Jethro winced. Venting his frustrations in front of Jenny was one thing. But expressing what had been an unspoken sentiment for seven years couldn’t be easy for anyone. Some things even the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs was simply too chicken-shit to attempt. And talking about his feelings topped that list.

“Jethro, please…” she prodded gently. “Your silence is hurting that boy in ways you haven’t even thought of yet.”

He looked up at her in confusion.

“He’s constantly learning things and behaviors from you. You use your silence to push people away, like you did to him. He’s only going to pay it forward, push everyone else away from himself, like he did with Jeanne.”

“And Damon,” he whispered and frowned, harder than he had all day.

Before Jenny could ask who Damon was, he abruptly stood up and left. Jenny shredded the evaluation form as promised, and tapped her fingers on the table. She was right, fear of losing a loved one made people act in the strangest ways. And Jethro’s paranoia had driven him to a point where he ended up hurting his loved one himself.

She swiveled towards the cabinets behind her and the collection of pictures on top of them. Colonel Jasper Shepard smiled back at her out of a 5-by-7 gold-plated frame. No one knew, but she’d had her vengeance. And all it did was leave her feeling emptier and more purposeless than ever before.

Jenny Shepard would have happily lived in the shadow of that fear all her life.

***
Gibbs with a little help from Jenny, made sure the team got a few days off from active cases, what with them being one man down. McGee was loaned to another team for his technical expertise though, and he wasn’t exactly thrilled about it. He’d wanted to go see Tony too. As planned, Abby took the morning shifts, Ziva did afternoons and Gibbs spent nights watching over Tony in the hospital.

“Seriously guys, you know I only act like I’m twelve, don’t you?”

Gibbs chuckled as he thought back to Tony’s token protest earlier. The boy knew it would fall on deaf ears, and it had.

By five in the evening, Gibbs couldn’t look at any more reports. He left work to head straight to Bethesda and relieve Ziva early. She’d been injured in the operation too. Bruised knuckles hurt, really they do. Mostly he wanted to see if he could bring himself to, well, talk to Tony while he was still awake enough to listen.

He stopped outside Tony’s room when he found his liaison officer sitting beside Tony’s bed, practically force-feeding him. Tony had been pretty much out of it all day yesterday thanks to the painkillers and the blood loss. But it looked like he’d finally started to gain some color and strength back.

“This stuff is vile, Zee-vah. Get it away from me.”

“Do not be such a baby, DiNozzo. Why don’t you try the jello?”

“Why don’t you give me that chocolate and granola bar you always carry in your backpack?”

Ziva glared at him. “You went through my backpack?”

Tony did his version of grinning cutely. “I needed an outlet for my highly investigative instincts, now gimme…”

Ziva huffed and didn’t look sure, but Gibbs could see she’d been had at ‘vile’. She reached for her bag and pulled out the breakfast bar, only to hold it back from Tony’s grabby hand at the last second.

“Are you sure you can –”

“Oh come on, Ziva, it’s a couple of bullet holes not bubonic plague.”

She laughed and handed it over. “One man living through two plagues would be just too cruel.”

Tony took a bite of the bar and made happy munching noises, then spoke with his mouth full. “You know back in Baltimore, before NCIS, but right after meeting the boss for the first time, I told my partner I’d never be a navy cop, that I’d rather have the plague.”

They sniggered like a couple of teenagers. Even Gibbs couldn’t help but smile. His agents still had no idea he was there. He turned around to go get coffee, not wishing to intrude on their privacy anymore.


Tony snorted. “Nah, let’s just say I grew up with a weirdly strong aversion to the military.”

“But… you went to Rhode Island?”
Tony shrugged lightly, studying the wrapper in his hands like it was incriminating evidence in a murder investigation. Gibbs closed his eyes, coming to the same disconcerting conclusion that Ziva did a second later. “You didn’t want to.”

Gibbs leaned against the wall, suddenly very tired. He finally had something common with DiNozzo Senior – they’d both abandoned Tony when he needed them the most.

Tony was resilient – he never doubted that. But some traumatic episodes left indelible marks on a man’s life, no matter how thick-skinned they were. Gibbs should know.

“Ziva?” Tony’s voice was timid, almost child-like. “Was he here?”

Gibbs strained to hear thanks to a drastic dip in volume. No points for guessing who Tony was asking about.

“Yes. He stayed practically all night. Then… he left for Montevideo in the morning, got himself a job with a PMC.”

Gibbs and Ziva could both see through the impassive mask that instantly fell to place on Tony’s face. He seemed… not shocked, just heartbroken. He leaned back against his pillow and looked away.

Ziva climbed onto the bed beside her partner, stretching on her left side facing Tony. With excruciating tenderness no one knew she was capable of, Ziva pulled Tony to herself, resting his head on her sternum. He went without complaint and stayed still as she engulfed him within her arms, stroking his hair gently.

“I’m fine, Ziva,” he protested weakly, making no attempts to move away.

“I know, yakiri. You’re fine. Everything’s fine.”

Seeing his agent was in good hands, Gibbs headed out for much needed coffee – preferably with a shot of whiskey in it, or three.

***
February 5, 2008. Washington DC

Tony put one foot out of Gibbs’ car and paused. He hadn’t been here since… that night with Damon.

He flicked open his brand new (but temporary) collapsible white cane, and leaning on it he stepped out on both feet. His right shoulder was still in a sling, and his left hand was occupied. He calmly stood there, waiting to be told what to do next. Which, of course, Gibbs did.

The older man got out of the driver’s side and grabbed Tony’s bags from the backseat. Then he nodded at Tony wordlessly, ordering him to start walking. Tony sighed and looked up at the house, then back at his boss one more time with questioning eyes.

“Are you sure, Boss? We don’t have to do this every time I visit the ER, you know.”

Gibbs just glared at him menacingly.

“Shutting up now, Boss.”

Anxious and unsure like never before, Tony followed Gibbs into the house. It was going to be a very long week.

Once inside, Gibbs put Tony’s stuff down by the couch and turned to him. “Can you make it upstairs?”

Tony looked up the said stairs, at the door to what once used to be his bedroom in this house. Of course, it was Damon’s now. Suddenly he felt like an intruder in Gibbs’ home, and his hand clasped around the cane handle started to shake. “Uh, I can take the guestroom.”

Gibbs slightly tilted his head in that appraising manner of his, like he could look into Tony’s thoughts.

“Tony, that’s not what I asked.”

“C-can you repeat the question, Boss?”

Gibbs stepped closer. “I asked if you could make it upstairs with the cane, or if you needed my help.”

Tony blinked, feeling the blood rush up to his face. “Oh.”

Gibbs shook his head and walked over, taking the choice back because Tony apparently wasn’t capable of making one. “Come on.”

He put one hand in the small of Tony’s back and started slowly walking him up the stairs. It turned
out not to be so hard. While Tony’s mind was still apprehensive, his body remembered how easily it
could just lean into Gibbs whenever his step faltered. The old man was in no hurry either. His hand
stayed on Tony’s back, warm and firm and reassuring.

Gibbs pushed open the bedroom door and let Tony walk in on his own. He looked around the old
place and a soft smile automatically curled his lips.

“Wow, it looks… exactly the same… hey, my iPod!” Tony spotted it on the bedside table and his
smile got brighter. “I thought I lost it.” Abby had gifted this to him.

“Alright, you’ve got your entertainment. Bed, now. No arguments.”

Tony pouted but did as he was told. He folded his cane and stepped out of one sneaker as he
continued to look around. Someone had been cleaning up on a regular basis, but it looked like none
of his stuff had been moved at all. How was that possible?

Soon as he sat down, Gibbs knelt by him to take off his second sneaker (the one on his injured leg)
and socks as well. Tony felt the blood rushing to his face and he held as still as he could.

Gibbs stood up, ran a hand through his hair and gazed at Tony with a strange, undecipherable look
on his face. Tony swallowed just as nervously as he looked back up at him.

“I… uh, y-your extra blankets are in the guest room. Damon was using them when he was here. So,
I-I’ll just go get them.” The veteran stayed another second, looking near-frustrated with the words
that had just tumbled out of his mouth, then abruptly turned and left.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut in mortification. He remembered being so upset at the idea of Damon
using this bedroom. In retrospect, he was ashamed of himself for being so petty and immature, and
no, it hadn’t been an act at all.

He chided himself for thinking about Damon again. Everything he said or did, everything anyone
else said or did reminded him of the big damn lug. It didn’t matter that he’d finally got what he
wanted – Damon was out of DC, hell he was out of the country and Gibbs’ life. He should feel
happy, redeemed, victorious. Instead he felt shattered, lost, defeated, because Damon was out of
Tony’s life too.

And what about Gibbs? Didn’t he miss Damon? He must, maybe that was why he’d been acting so
weird and uncharacteristically available to Tony. Maybe Tony was his rebound thing.

Gibbs walked back in with a load of neatly folded blankets in his arms. Tony frowned – who’d have
thought all that damn fabric was capable of looking so compact? Had to be Damon’s doing, of
course.

“Boss?”

“Hmm,” Gibbs said gruffly as he got busy spreading the blankets open to drape over Tony.

“Are you really, really sure you’re okay with me staying here?”

One hand flew out of left field towards Tony and whacked his head unceremoniously before
returning to its original task of tucking the blankets around his legs.

“Oww,” Tony winced. He’d forgotten how much those head-slaps hurt. The tension seeped out of
his body and he relaxed against his pillows.
“Gotcha, Boss. Loud and clear.”

***

**Gibbs** took the next couple of days off to watch over Tony. He didn’t actually need to, seeing the steady stream of visitors to his house, all for Tony. He could’ve easily had Abby or Ziva or even McGee do the babysitting. But he wanted to do it himself.

He’d lost too much time, and nearly lost Tony too. Now was his chance to make up for it.

In the mornings, they got a private nurse to come over. She changed Tony’s dressings and told him it won’t be long before he’d be rid of the sling, which made him happy. But when she suggested a sponge bath, Tony glowered hard enough to make her re-evaluate her line of work. Unfortunately for the agent, his boss was right there, standing by the door.

“It’s either her or me, DiNozzo.”

Tony didn’t protest to anything the nurse suggested after that.

The gang from work dropped in for lunch, bearing gifts. McGee got a wireless router to set up Wi-Fi for Tony so he could surf the internet on his laptop. Jimmy brought over Tony’s 40-inch LCD screen from his apartment. A big debate followed about where to hook it up – downstairs or in Tony’s bedroom. Gibbs broke the tie and ordered it be downstairs since that’s where Tony would be spending most of his time. Even Ducky saw no reason why Tony should be bedridden, and in fact, his leg could use the exercise.

Ziva and Abby picked up Italian takeaway for lunch mostly so they could get pizza that Tony could grab with his left hand easily, but also so they could get him some Tiramisu, Tony’s favorite dessert.

Gibbs rolled his eyes, knowing very well that all the spoiling and pampering would stop the instant Tony bounced back to his usual self and annoyed all sympathy right out of his co-workers.

“So how’s the radar hunt going?” Tony asked after his second helping of dessert.

“Slow,” Ziva answered honestly. “We tracked the equipment out of DC all the way to Ottawa. And we’re pretty sure it has been routed right back into the country but…”

“But we lost the trail at the Canadian border,” Abby finished.

“Huh,” Tony squinted, studying the pointy ends of his fork with keen interest. “Doesn’t make sense. Defense equipment is always high-profile. You’d have to have a buyer ready to move the moment you pluck something like that, usually an international one. So what’s this thing doing back in the country?”

McGee continued the brainstorming. “We’ve asked Jardine to track any chatter on the international circuit about this. Will know more tomorrow.”

“Maybe the buyer is domestic, like a competing vendor.” Ziva theorized.

“Maybe the buyer backed out,” Abby suggested.

“Maybe there is no buyer,” Tony added. Everyone else turned to look at him.

It would take another few weeks to crack the case. Gibbs would look back at this moment and remember how Tony was the one who’d called it long before anyone else. But right then, under
everyone’s scrutiny, the agent suddenly seemed to wither.

“Which would of course, be completely stupid! Why would I even say that?” He tried, laughing to cover up his alleged ‘stupidity’.

Gibbs had not seen Tony so unsure in a very, very long time. And he wasn’t the only one who noticed. After cleaning up, Gibbs lingered on in the kitchen and Ducky joined him. The two friends stood side by side, watching the youngsters in the living area squabble over which DVD to watch.

“Tell me you’re doing something about this.” Ducky commanded softly.

Gibbs swallowed hard. He couldn’t bear the sadness behind Tony’s fake smiles anymore either.

“He’s regressed, Jethro. That is the Tony from seven years ago, when he first came to work for NCIS. You fixed him before, you can do it again.”

Gibbs shifted from one foot to the next. “I didn’t know how to then, Duck. And I still don’t.”

Ducky sighed. They’d both known the boy was broken long before Gibbs found him. “I know it’s not something you planned to do. But somehow, somewhere down the line, you unwittingly ended up playing an important role in his growth and healing.”

Gibbs scoffed lightly. All he’d ever wanted to do was spend time with Tony like he would have with his own son, teach Tony everything he knew, like building a boat, which the boy had conveniently ignored.

“You both have had a rough year that much is obvious. But it’s nothing you can’t bounce back from. He needs you Jethro, now more than anything.”

Gibbs took a deep breath. He watched Tony flex his injured shoulder and grimace in pain, thinking nobody was paying attention. He put a hand on his old friend’s shoulder and squeezed it gratefully. “I’m on it, Duck.”

Then he walked over to the group of youngsters and asked everyone (except Tony of course) to go back to work. Lunch time was over.

***

Around four PM after Tony had napped for a couple of hours, a couple of his frat brothers dropped in for a visit. Gibbs had met them before and he’d liked the two men. One was in the business of yachts, and actually knew a little something about building boats. The other was a technical consultant or something, Gibbs never actually bothered to look up what e-Commerce meant but it sounded computer-y.

Later that evening, Ducky sent a physical therapist to the house to work with Tony. That took up the better part of an hour. Gibbs sat watching Tony go through the motions, completely ignoring the tall, intelligent, exotic, and extremely attractive young woman leaning over him in close proximity. He knew Tony’s type, and she was it. At least, used to be.

They still hadn’t found the right opportunity to talk, and Gibbs was starting to get restless. He didn’t like the way Tony never met his gaze anymore, or the sadness in his face when Tony thought he wasn’t being watched. At least he could find some reprieve in the fact that this wasn’t all Gibbs’ doing. Damon had a role to play in there somewhere too, right.

Right?
Night fell and dinner was a quick affair, seeing how Tony wasn’t very hungry. Gibbs helped him up the stairs again, and into his room.

“You’re beat,” he whispered, not unkindly.

“No argument there.” Tony mumbled, already starting to topple sideways onto the bed.

Gibbs caught him before he could hit his head against the headboard and helped him get under the covers. Tony didn’t resist when Gibbs fussied around him, taking off his shoes and tucking the blankets around him again. Once he was settled, Gibbs hesitantly took a seat beside Tony on the bed.

He felt this urgent need to brush the hair back from his agent’s forehead. It wasn’t gelled into stiffness, for a change. Instead it was soft and curling around Tony’s face, making him look ten years younger. Gibbs smiled, he just couldn’t help it. But when he reached out to touch it, Tony flinched. His hand froze mid-air.

“Sorry, I-I don’t know why I did that.” Tony whispered, sounding utterly terrified and confused.

Gibbs gulped around the giant ball of emotion lodged in his throat and got up from the bed. He dug his hands in his jeans pockets and nodded briefly. “It’s okay. Sleep tight.”

He switched off the lights, leaving a bedside lamp on that Tony liked, and quietly left the room. Once outside he practically ran into his own bedroom, closing the door and leaning against it heavily. The last time Tony had flinched away from him was the night Kate died.

He’d felt tremendously guilty, even though there was nothing he could have done. And he’d wanted Gibbs to validate his guilt by being furious with him, vent his anger on him with physical blows and kicks and punches, something, anything.

“Sonofabitch,” he gritted his teeth. Just like Tony to direct all the blame towards himself for everything.

“What did I ever do to deserve you, Tony?”

***

Sometime after midnight, Gibbs sat up buck-straight in bed, his Sig drawn in one hand the moment the noises began. It took him half a second to remember where he was, and that he wasn’t alone in his house tonight.

Tony was in the bedroom next door. That’s where the noises were coming from.

Gibbs instantly jumped out of bed, discarding the gun because he’d already figured the noises out for what they really were – thrashing.

He practically pulled his own door off its hinges in his hurry to reach Tony. The other bedroom door was slightly ajar but received the same treatment. Gibbs flicked on a light and spotted a form writhing violently in the confines of multiple blankets.

“Tony? Wake up, son, just a dream, Tony!” Gibbs leaned on one knee on the mattress to reach Tony and the bed dipped.

In hindsight, he should have expected it. DiNozzo was a federal agent after all, trained by the best agencies and police departments in the world, with an aim that could be lethal even on his worst day.
Tony had placed his gun and badge on a bedside table to his left, considering his right hand was out of commission. Before Gibbs realized they were there, Tony had his own Sig drawn and pointed right at Gibbs, his eyes barely open.

Gibbs put his hands up in placation. “It’s okay, it’s just me.”

Tony blinked rapidly before he could shirk off the residual REM and focus on what was real. One moment he was squinting at Gibbs, and in the next his eyes went wide with panic.

“Fuck,” he rasped, and lowered his gun. He looked around himself, thoroughly disoriented, trying to separate the nightmare from reality.

Tony was sweating and wheezing abnormally. This time Gibbs moved slowly, reaching for the gun and calmly taking it out of Tony’s hand before placing it inside a drawer.

“Shh, it’s okay, Tony, you’re okay,” he whispered gently.

“Sorry, Boss,” Tony muttered, clearly devastated, biting his lip trying to control his erratic breathing.

Gibbs couldn’t care less that this man had flinched away from him earlier that night. He didn’t care the same man had held a gun to his head with the safety off, not two seconds ago.

“Move,” he ordered, in a tone of voice that never failed to get through.

For a second Tony looked up in surprise but did as told, shifting in the bed until he’d made space for Gibbs to get in beside him. He stayed frozen in his spot with shock as Gibbs arranged himself around Tony, until the younger man was leaning against Gibbs’ chest. The blond head was also gently pulled back to rest on his mentor’s shoulder.

“B-boss…”

“Shut up, DiNozzo,” was all Gibbs could offer, pushing the sweat-soaked hair back from his forehead.

Gibbs found himself smiling as he held Tony the way he hadn’t in… ah, hell, ever. The realization made Gibbs’ eyes water. He wrapped his arms around Tony tightly, refusing to let him go even as Tony sat there petrified, unsure how to react.

“Relax son,” the older man whispered. “Tell me what it was about.”

Tony shuddered at the memory of his nightmare. “H-he… was drowning. I couldn’t reach him.”

Gibbs frowned. “Tony, were you at the pier again?”

The pier that Gibbs had driven off of? The pier that Tony had jumped off of to rescue him and Madison? In thirty degrees water, knowing his scarred lungs won’t be able to take the strain and they didn’t, and his wheezing had gotten worse ever since? That pier?

Tony softly nodded, letting Gibbs infer an answer from the movement of the agent’s head under his chin.

“How have you dreamt about that day before?”

The answer came after a really long pause. “Off and on.”

“How have you been dreaming of me drowning?”
Tony nodded again, and Gibbs sighed, kissing the side of his boy’s forehead before he could even think about it. He had no idea how Tony would take it, but at this point he didn’t much care. “I take it I wasn’t the one drowning today?”

“N-No…”

Then who was? The question was right there on the tip of his tongue, but Gibbs already knew the answer.

Tony’s wheezing subsided as Gibbs continued to gently rub Tony’s chest over his t-shirt. After awhile, the stiffness in his body dissipated, and he was completely deadweight in Gibbs’ arms. The marine kissed his temple again and held him tight, making up his mind. He was going to talk to Tony tomorrow… about everything.

Including what happened between him and Damon.

***
Chapter 22

“If this is going to be a serious discussion, and suddenly I'm terribly afraid it is, you're going to have to take off that ridiculous mask.”

February 6, 2008. Washington DC

Everywhere Tony turned, or limped, he found trace evidences of himself in Gibbs’ house. Traces that he’d inserted on purpose into Gibbs’ life and the man had kept.

The old baseball glove on the door, the DVD player that was now a permanent fixture in the living room, the movies and music strewn all over the place, goofy magnets on the fridge, cracks in the wine glasses Gibbs never replaced, skid-marks out on the porch from that time he’d borrowed the neighbor’s kid’s dirt bike…

In comparison, it was like Damon had never been in this house. Not even in the basement where he’d spent so much time helping with the boat. The guestroom, as he’d predicted, was spic-and-span – the bed was made like a sailor’s rack, the cupboard empty, not even a frayed shoe lace anywhere. There was no sign anyone had ever used the room in years. The only exception was a lingering scent of the man himself on the blankets. At night when he was alone in his bed, Tony buried his nose in those blankets, stemming the rush of tears at what could have been.

He was starting to see things clearly. Maybe Gibbs did see a son in Damon. But that wasn’t the reason why Gibbs pushed Tony away. Why he did it, Tony still wasn’t sure. But they’d been drifting apart long before Damon entered stage left. He’d just been in denial about it until Damon’s presence jolted him into action, and an irrational one at that.

Being with Damon… it’d been so easy, so comfortable and right. The first time Tony felt that way was during the movie, Breakfast at Tiffany’s. For a hundred-and-twenty magical minutes, he’d put all his troubles aside, he’d forgotten who Jeanne Benoit was… and he’d been well and truly, happy.

Nice going, DiNozzo. You ruined your chances at something great for absolutely nothing.

That evening, Tony woke up on the living room couch after napping for three hours and cursed his painkillers for knocking him out again.

“At least I’m not going around acting like a total lunatic,” he groused to himself.

“Relax, DiNozzo,” Gibbs sniggered from somewhere in the kitchen, making Tony jump and twist towards him. “Sleep is good. It gives your body the time it needs to heal, recharge your batteries.”

“I don’t run on batteries,” Tony grumbled petulantly.

He pulled off his red woolen Buckeye jacket, feeling too warm thanks to the blankets Gibbs had draped over him while he was asleep. He wore a sky blue t-shirt and black sweatpants underneath. Gibbs was dressed in his usual gray NIS sweatshirt and blue work jeans.

He brought over a mug of what Tony hoped was coffee but turned out to be plain warm milk, again.
Tony scowled. “Seriously? Would it kill you to spoon in a little Folgers Classic Roast in there?”

Gibbs took a shamelessly loud sip of his own strong smelling coffee. “Doctor’s orders: No caffeine with meds. Now drink up.”

Still sulking, Tony took the mug and waited for Gibbs to stalk off, which he did but not before tousling Tony’s hair, again. It made Tony smile as much as it freaked him out. Gibbs being so affectionate was new and just plain weird. He wondered if it was a permanent thing or something Gibbs might grow out of once Tony got better and back to work.

“I’ll be downstairs. Come on over if you can keep your eyes open,” Gibbs teased, making Tony glare at him again. “And bring your jacket.”

Twenty minutes later, Tony was wearing said jacket and comfortably situated at Gibbs’ study table in the basement with his laptop, while Gibbs worked on his boat. It seemed to be eighty percent done, thanks to Damon, probably.

Tony kept his eyes glued to his laptop, still hell-bent on not thinking of Damon and still failing miserably. He tried to focus on his car search – high time he stopped driving that rental (even though the agency paid for it) and find his own ride, one with class and pizzazz and other head-turning qualities.

“Boss? Do you miss Damon?” Alright, so he couldn’t help himself.

Gibbs turned towards him, eyes flickering with amusement. “I don’t miss that smart-assed mouth of his.” Tony was confused, until Gibbs smiled. “He never stopped talking about you.”


“Same reason you’ve been looking for evidence of his stay in this house.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gibbs stood up to go to his liquor cabinet. He pulled something out of there, which was not shaped like a bottle but a box. And a note along with it. “He left this for you.”

“For me?” Tony took the things from Gibbs, but he didn’t need to open the box to know what it was. It was Gibbs’ Silver Star, the one he’d given to Damon.

“Uh, this is… not mine.”

“Open the note.”

Tony sighed and with shaking hands did as he was told.

Gunny,

I’m not returning this. I could never disrespect you and everything you’ve done for me like that. Just hoping maybe Tony could hold on to this for me.

Damon

Tony closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, not sure what to make of it. His mind was a mess of conflicted thoughts and feelings. On one hand, he was flattered that both Damon and Gibbs trusted him enough with their prized possessions. On the other, he wondered if that’s what they thought of him – a hoarder of other people’s medals because he didn’t have any of his own?
“Ordinary people will kill to have one of these. And you jarheads don’t even care. I don’t get it.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes, and knelt before Tony despite his bad knee. “The medals I got for time served with the Corps remind me that I survived, when so many of my men didn’t.”

Tony blinked. He’d never thought of it like that. “What about all your NCIS commendations?”

Gibbs smirked and looked away for a second. “Tell me something, Tony. Why did you go inside that warehouse full of armed men without backup?”

Tony frowned. “They were going to blow Portman’s head off.”

“And later, why did you trade yourself for the girls as hostage?”

“You were there! You know why.”

“At what point did you decide your foolish bravado was worth a medal from the agency?”

“What?! I never even… oh…”

The marine put a hand on Tony’s knee and squeezed. “You do your job because it’s your job. And because it’s the right thing to do, not because you’re gonna get a medal or a promotion for it.”

“Point taken,” Tony nodded. Gibbs stood up and walked back to his boat, leaving Tony to shrug a little petulantly. “I could use a raise though. And I’ve always wanted to do an acceptance speech in front of like, not-imaginary people.”

Gibbs snorted and sorted through his tools unhurriedly. After a while, Tony resumed his surfing, sipping from his bottle of water occasionally.

“So when were you going to tell me about Damon?”

Tony sputtered and coughed and almost sprayed water all over his laptop. He was really hoping he’d dodged that bullet.

Gibbs’ ice blue eyes bored into his, daring Tony to try and fib again. “Tony, I’ve known for years that you were bi-sexual, at least, in the process of discovering you were.”

Tony felt his skin flush and his head felt light. He tried to adjust himself in the chair but absently managed to lean too much to the left side. With his weakened leg unable to set his balance right, Tony started to fall. But Gibbs was already running towards him, and caught both Tony and his chair before either could hit the floor.

“Sorry,” Tony gasped as he tried to get his traitorous body under control, even as he let Gibbs manhandle him back into the now upright chair. The older man pulled another chair for himself but kept one arm wrapped around Tony’s waist and the other patting the side of his face comfortingly.

“Take it easy, son. It’s alright. It’s okay.”

“You keep saying that and yet…” Tony rambled, embarrassed and unable to meet Gibbs’ eyes.

“Hey, look at me.” Gibbs commanded and Tony obeyed. “You had no obligation to tell me, you still don’t.”

“I-I’ve been keeping too many things from you, Boss, about Jenny and the Frog, Jeanne, Damon…”
“It’s my fault, I shut you out.”

Tony felt like a ragdoll, limp and lifeless. Those seven words sent such incredible relief coursing through his being he could hardly breathe. Gibbs sensed it, pulled him into a strong embrace and held him there. One large hand cupped the back of Tony’s head as the younger agent buried his face in Gibbs’ neck. They stayed that way for a few minutes, until the bittersweet moment of weakness passed, and was replaced with plain old awkwardness. Then Tony fidgeted weakly. Gibbs chuckled and let him go, before standing up and going back to his boat.

“So do you mind if I ask what happened?”

Gibbs seemed to be on a mission to get all the talking done and out of the way once and for all by end of the night.

“What happened, you mean… like, i-in the beginning, or the end? Or the middle? Although, technically speaking, there was no middle. It just kind of… started and stopped.”

“Damon told me how it started. You tell me why it stopped.”

Tony bit his lip. How was he supposed to tell Gibbs that Damon had, in a way, become a constant reminder of his own insecurities? Because Damon’s easy camaraderie with Gibbs made Tony believe he could never hope to have the same place in Gibbs’ life, because he simply wasn’t worth it?

Add to that his biggest fear of all: Gibbs had thrown Tony out of his life for one mistake. And Damon being a carbon copy of Gibbs and all, he would have done the same thing eventually because sooner or later, Tony would have slipped up.

It’s what he did – he messed up. And people abandoned him because of it.

“Damon said he loved you.” Gibbs remarked casually, like he was talking about the frikkin’ weather. Tony didn’t respond, he didn’t know how to.

“Did he ever tell you that?”

Tony had a flash of a vague memory, of him in the hospital, and Damon holding his hand, hot liquid splashing over his skin, Damon’s soft voice whispering the three most beautiful words in the world.

“I think he did,” he whispered brokenly.

“But you didn’t feel the same way?”

Still not going there, no. Not yet. “It was never going to work.”

“Why?”

“He wanted too much.”

“Like a relationship?”

“I don’t do relationships.”

“Is it because of what happened with Jeanne?”

“No. Y-yeah, maybe, I don’t know.” Tony grimaced, already tired of being interrogated. “It’s not
just her. It’s just… everything, everyone. Me and relationships… it just doesn’t work. Never has.”

Tony tried to go back to his car hunt but Gibbs wouldn’t let it go. He grabbed the bourbon he’d been eyeing all evening, and returned to the second chair beside Tony. No glasses, he definitely wasn’t intending to share. Gibbs patted Tony’s knee again to draw his attention and keep it with him.

“Tony, I’m the last guy to be giving advice on relationships, you know that. But I know you. You’ve a big heart, a heart of gold. If anybody can do relationships, if anybody wants relationships more than anything else, it’s you.”

Tony laughed bitterly, “Maybe. But it’s supposed to be a two-way street, Boss.”

“But Damon obviously loves you.”

“Yeah, but for how long?” Tony exclaimed louder than he’d intended to and stood up, limping away determinedly from Gibbs. “Nothing lasts forever. You know that better than anyone!”

That must have stung, it had to. Tony marveled at how Gibbs didn’t even react, just leaned back in his chair and drank from the bottle lazily.

“You’re right. Nothing lasts forever. But I’ll tell you this – even if I knew I was gonna lose Shannon and Kelly, even if I knew how much it was gonna fucking hurt… I still wouldn’t give them up for the world. However long I had them for, they were the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Tony felt really guilty now and lowered his head. He toed at a little dent in the floor absently.

“But they didn’t leave you, Gibbs. They would have stayed with you forever, if they had a choice. Nobody ever wants to stay with me. Not… not without conditions. And most of the time, not even then.”

“How would you know if you won’t give anybody a chance?”

“Am fresh out of chances, I guess.” he murmured softly, eyes still stuck to the ground.

Gibbs sighed and perched himself on the edge of his chair. “I suppose we’re not talking about Jeanne or Damon anymore.”

***

Gibbs felt his heart sink to the pit of his stomach at Tony’s barely audible words.

Am fresh out of chances, I guess.

It was the first time Tony had voiced his disappointment in Gibbs, even if indirectly. He was almost relieved to hear it. It meant the boy was starting to find his confidence again. He was beginning to trust Gibbs enough to speak his mind again, and not be afraid that one wrong turn or wrong choice of words would have him voted off the island again.

Sweet Jesus, a TV reference. Gibbs bit back the smile that threatened to break out on his face. This was no time to be frivolous, no matter how happy he was at the amount of progress he and Tony had made. There were still miles to go before he could head-slap his boy and have it be perfectly normal between them.

“I suppose we’re not talking about Jeanne or Damon anymore.”

Tony didn’t respond and just studied his toes. Gibbs rubbed his forehead and struggled. Words never
came easy to him, apologies even less so. He got up again, and chose to lean against the side of the boat not too far from Tony.

“You know, I… I know this guy… he’s a marine and, see he has a son… and obviously he loves his son very much. He watched him grow, he nurtured him, kept him safe, showed him how to make his own way in this world.”

Tony seemed to be listening, but he wasn’t quite sure.

“One day this guy, he… botched up a mission and had to go to ground for awhile. When he came back, he found that his son, this little monster of a kid… he’d grown up. He’d… moved on and found other people to be with and things to do and… he didn’t need his old man to keep him safe anymore.”

Gibbs felt his voice break, and hoped to God Tony didn’t hear it. The boy was looking at him. But now to continue with this… story, Gibbs had to look away. He stretched sideways to reach a couple of nail jars resting on top of the boat’s hull, picked one up and poured himself a drink.

“This one time when… when the kid did get into trouble, my friend, h-he couldn’t do anything for his son ‘cause he didn’t know. He didn’t know where the kid was, who he was with, how to reach him or help him, and… in the end he didn’t need to. It killed him to feel like he was obsolete in his boy’s life. He was redundant.”

“That’s not true,” Tony whispered.

Gibbs looked up at his limpid eyes and cleared his throat to continue.

“Yeah well, that’s how he felt at the time. Anyway, basically he… then went into this funk and tried to put some distance between himself and the kid, so he wouldn’t care next time the kid went off and did his own thing and… lived his own life… ‘cause hey, that’s the circle of life, right? The old make way for the young, and all that.”

Tony didn’t respond, just watched Gibbs cautiously.

“He tried to act like it didn’t matter, like it didn’t hurt because he’s a marine, right? Can’t show weakness, no matter what.” Gibbs drank from his jar, relishing the burn of the alcohol down his throat.

“What happened then?”

Gibbs sighed, thinking back to the big showdown with Damon in the hospital over Tony’s bed. “He got whacked upside the head and showed the light by another loud-mouthed marine, who showed him what his selfishness was doing to the kid, how he was passing on his baggage in inheritance to this kid… robbing him of his own chances at happiness.”

Tony stared at Gibbs in complete silence.

“So let me get this straight. First this… friend of yours abandons his kid, forcing him to grow up fast. And then comes back and resents him for having grown up fast?”

Gibbs squinted unhappily. “I resent your use of the word resent.”

“What would you use then?”

What was that thing Damon said? “Self-preservation, maybe?”
“That doesn’t fit in the sentence.”

Gibbs could only shrug in response.

Tony closed his eyes, stemming the flow of tears behind it. Gibbs waited, giving his boy all the time he’d need.

“So what, he figured if he d-disowned the kid, then it would hurt less?”

Gibbs could only express how deeply he regretted his actions through his eyes. “Sounds really lame, I know.”

Tony snorted. “Tell that to DiNozzo Senior.”

Gibbs sighed. He couldn’t use this hypothetical marine story any longer. He needed to come clean, now. “For the record, I never abandoned you, Tony. I just…”

“What? Amped up the B that stands for bastard to push me away, except you didn’t think I’d be so juvenile about it?”

“You weren’t demanding anything that’s not already yours, son. And always will be.”

Tony stared at Gibbs for a few moments, then limped over to stand closer to Gibbs. With his good left hand he reached for the bourbon. Gibbs eyed him dangerously. He’d denied him caffeine not an hour ago. Did Tony really think he’d be allowed any alcohol?

Tony made a wry face. “One swig. You owe it to me.”

How much could a swig hurt? Gibbs relented and handed the bottle over to Tony. He drank straight from the bottle and gave it back as promised. Gibbs picked up the water from the table and shoved it in Tony’s hands, just to be sure.

“That’s quite an apology, Boss.”

Gibbs harrumphed. “Rule number six, DiNozzo.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony grinned, flashing his big wide smile at Gibbs at last. It was like the sun came out shining after a long, dark winter.

And Gibbs couldn’t help but smile back.

“You will always be irreplaceable to me, Tony,” Gibbs felt like it needed to be said. “Damon and I have stuff in common. I see some of me in him, but I never actually saw him as a son.”

The younger man bit his lip, looking sheepish and regretful. He twisted open his water and drank from it for want of something to do.

“I don’t have a problem seeing him as a son-in-law, though…”

Tony choked and sputtered again, spraying the floor with water from his mouth and Gibbs laughed. He put a hand on Tony’s back and rubbed it lovingly, promising himself (and Tony) never to let his boy flounder in loneliness again.

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Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Warning: explicit m/m slash

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Cross your heart and kiss your elbow!”

February 20, 2008. Montevideo, Uruguay

Damon stood guard at the halfway line of the Jardines del Hipódromo soccer stadium.

It was the home stadium of Danubio, a soccer club based here in Montevideo, capital city of Uruguay. Danubio were the reigning champions. But some players had received death threats from the mafia amid gambling controversies surrounding the national league. Damon wasn’t told much else about it. He and his unit of four, three grunts and a squid, were given one standing order – keep your mouth shut and don’t ask too many questions. They were bodies standing in the line of fire, not detectives out to fight crime in a foreign country.

So that’s what they did. They safeguarded the team of fourteen players currently busy practicing their penalty kicks over on one end of the field. Together, the five Americans formed a perimeter around them. They were dressed more or less the same way, suited to the hot summer weather here south of the equator. Damon was in a black short-sleeved t-shirt and green camouflage pants along with black boots and dark brown shades. At least they weren’t required to wear monkey suits and douchey black sunglasses that made them look like the idiots from Men in Black.

Damon chuckled to himself. Tony would have taken serious offence to that, no one called Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones idiots on his watch. Just as the thought occurred to him, Damon cursed under his breath. He’d done it again. He just couldn’t stop thinking about Tony.

It’d been three weeks since he left DC to come to Uruguay for this assignment. Three weeks of an exciting new country, new culture, new food, new friends, of trying so very enthusiastically to grow his hair out. Three weeks of doing what he’d always done best and loved: to serve and protect, and strut about like the big tough marine he once was.

No such thing as an ex-marine, son.

Three weeks of missing Gibbs and the rest of the gang, of getting drunk and pining miserably for Tony, then getting drunk some more and grieving for the relationship that never was. Three weeks of sleeplessness because he couldn’t catch a wink without his dreams being colored in gold and green and even more Tony…

Damon was distracted (thankfully) when another loud cheer went up on the field behind him. He spoke a little Spanish and could understand some of what they said. But the language here was a different version, called Riverplate Spanish. It had influences from many different languages, some
dead and others not, had a bit of Italian in there somewhere too. Damon kicked empty air in frustration, once again reminded of the half-Italian agent.

“Hey, big guy!” Bruno, the youngest player and center forward for his team, came running up to Damon. He’d taken a liking to the American over the past couple weeks and Damon didn’t mind him too much either.

“Come on, Werth! I show you how to take penalty shot, dale!!”

Damon shook his head apologetically. He really wasn’t in the mood. Besides, he had an M16 slung around his neck, what was he supposed to do with that?

“No, no, um… Ni a palos!”

His foreign accent entertained the kid and made him laugh, and after awhile he gave up on him but managed to rope in the squid to play. Damon watched his fellow American kick the ball straight into the goalie’s hands and sniggered. The impromptu USA versus Uruguay game was still on when Damon sensed the presence of a stranger in their midst. He turned back towards the perimeter just in time to spot someone coming up the far end of the stadium.

It was a tall, slender Caucasian man with golden skin and honey-brown hair. He wore a pair of fashionable blue jeans, a white shirt loosely tucked in, with sleeves folded to his elbows, and light brown Aviator glasses. He gripped a white cane with his left hand, using it for support as he slowly limped his way onto the field.

Damon squinted against the bright sun to get a better look, and froze.

The outsider looked around surveying the place and abruptly stopped when his eyes landed on Damon. He had no idea how long he stood there, watching the man with the cane just as the man stared back, glued to his own spot. Bruno’s loud voice boomed somewhere behind him, breaking Damon out of his trance. Then the stranger lifted his free hand up to wave at him.

Damon didn’t wave back.

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Tony felt his heart sink when Damon didn’t respond to his greeting. Maybe he’d blown it after all. Wouldn’t be the first time, definitely wouldn’t be the last.

He was contemplating turning on his heels and running away before he ended up humiliating himself more, when Damon moved. The marine was walking towards him, his strides long and sure and… yep, definitely headed towards Tony. He forced one foot ahead of the other and closed the gap until Damon was standing right there, before him, four feet away. The marine looked gorgeous and hot and so very unattainable, as always.

The damn sunglasses made it harder to read him. Tony got rid of his own glasses, hoping to prompt Damon to do the same. But the big lug refused to take a hint. At least he’d dropped the scary rifle to the ground, within reach, but still…

“What’re you doing here?” The voice wasn’t cold, and it didn’t seem angry, just confused.

“Uh…”

Tony had thought of at least a hundred different answers to that question. They ranged from “I had this dream – you were in danger and I’m psychic so I came to warn you” to “I was in the
neighborhood, in like, Bolivia, and thought I’d drop in and say hi!” to “Alright, I was a jerk. Please just take me back, please, pretty please?” In that moment though, he couldn’t think of anything.

Finally, he just shrugged and hoped his world-famous smile might do the trick. “You look good.”

Damon’s voice was calm and steady, unlike his. “You too.”

His eyes lingered at the cane in question and Tony just waved it off, “Ah, it’s nothing.”

“Tony, what are you doing here?”

Damn, just like Gibbs, completely immune to his powers of deflection. Tony looked down at his shoes before gathering the courage to look back up. “You saved my life. I wanted to say thanks.”

“Could have sent me an email. Abby has my phone number too.” Damon’s face stayed stoic and expressionless. He did cross his ludicrously bulging arms though. That was progress, sort of.

Tony bit his lip. “I-I wanted to do it in person, and a-also say that… I’m sorry.”

The armor looked like it was cracking when the Adam’s apple on Damon’s neck bobbed. “Doesn’t Gibbs have like a rule against it? That John Wayne rule?”

“Yeah, well, as you allegedly pointed out to him few days ago, and I still can’t believe you’re alive by the way… sometimes, even the almighty Gibbs is wrong.”

Damon smiled at last, and took off his own shades, allowing Tony a glimpse of his own deep and frighteningly mesmerizing eyes.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, Tony. I, I get it… I’m just glad you didn’t take out a restraining order on me after that night in the gym.” He paused. “You didn’t, right?”

Tony chuckled and took another step closer. “I am sorry, Damon. Please just let me say this, I need to,” he whispered.

Damon nodded, and he continued. “I’m sorry for taking my personal frustrations out on you, blaming my insecurities on you. I know now how pathetic and… and wrong that was, and I can’t believe I threw away a great… um, friendship because of it.”

Damon looked at him for a few seconds in total silence. Then he took a step forward, closer to Tony. “Just friendship?”

“I couldn’t dare dream of anything more after what happened…”

Damon exhaled slowly, and pulled something out of his left pocket – a maroon scarf. The one Tony thought he'd left at Michael Manning’s house. “I never stopped dreaming, Tony.”

That was all it took. Tony practically jumped up into Damon’s arms, straddling him with his arms and legs while Damon held him up tightly. Lips crashed against each other and Tony lost himself inside Damon’s mouth, closed his eyes and couldn’t give a flying fuck about anything else. He tasted mint and coffee and tears, possibly his own and maybe Damon’s too. He tasted Damon, and all the warmth and safety and comfort this guy personified for him. The relief he felt was indescribable. He knew he’d been given a second chance, and he wasn’t going to let it slip out of his hands again.

They kissed for the longest time as Tony continued to cling to the taller man like he never wanted to let go.
“Whoa, wait, how did you do that?” Damon said, pulling out of the kiss when he remembered Tony’s hurt leg. He looked down at the cane lying discarded on the ground.

“Oh, that’s just for show.” Tony grinned. “I was hoping for the sympathy vote if nothing else worked.”

Damon laughed and they kissed again. The soccer team behind them started to hoot and howl and make vulgar but good-humored jokes. Suddenly realizing they had an audience, Tony blushed, hard. Damon bit his lip in time, but Tony fixed him with his deadliest glower. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it!”

Damon laughed and didn’t deny it, adjusting his grip around Tony’s waist. He refused to let him down and started carrying his lover inside to the team’s locker room.

“Come home, Damon. Please come back with me?”

“I will, as soon as I can. We’re almost done here. I’ll be stationed in DC when not on an active missions anyway.”

Tony looked relieved and Damon grinned. “I never gave up on us, Tony.”

Damon walked into the locker room and kicked the door close behind them. He sat straddling a narrow bench, still kissing Tony, before gently laying him down along the length of the bench, Tony’s legs sprawled across his own.

Tony looked nervous. “Are we… do you w-want to…?”

“Shh,” Damon breathed right into his mouth. “Your first time will be in a bed in a place you’re comfortable in and it’ll be when you want it to be. Right now, let me just get a taste of you, okay?”

Tony’s eyes widened and he nodded eagerly, his head flopping back against the bench with a resounding thud. His erection was straining against its denim restrictions painfully. Damon unzipped the jeans and deftly pushed the white boxers aside. Tony closed his eyes and moaned when Damon touched him, fondling him with both hands.

“So beautiful, I missed you so much, Tonio. Now relax and let me take care of you.”

Then he bent down and took all of Tony in his mouth. Tony gasped and if it weren’t for Damon’s expert hand clasping him around the base of his cock, he would have come already. He kissed and sucked and caressed and worshipped Tony until the thirty-three year old couldn’t remember his own name. His eyes blinked rapidly but they saw nothing. His mouth was open but no sound fell from it. Time came to a standstill and stayed that way long after Tony spurted his pent-up release. Damon lapped it all up hungrily, leaving Tony spit-slick but otherwise clean.

Once Tony recovered some of his senses, he grinned like a loon enjoying the bliss and his lover’s fervent kisses all over his face and neck. Damon pulled Tony up from the bench and hugged him to his chest tightly again.

This time Tony was the one who refused to let go.

***
Damon missed the Corps less and less with each passing day. He could honestly say he hadn’t missed it at all these last few days. The Corps wouldn’t let him slack off on his duties just so he could go do the touristy thing with his new boyfriend, would it?

Tony spent five days in Montevideo with him, five magical days of no work, no dangers lurking in the shadows, and no unspoken fears or agendas. Hell, with Tony around and in his element, nothing could possibly go unspoken period. Every day Damon discovered something new and quirky and utterly endearing about his man. Every day he was reminded of how fortunate he was to be in love with this gorgeous little motor-mouth.

They were chilling at an outdoor café somewhere downtown one evening when Tony stopped mid-rant and squinted at Damon. “Are you starting to get sick of hearing me talk?”

Damon sputtered. “What? N-No! I could never ever tire of hearing your sexy voice, baby. Why would you even say that?”

“Because you’ve been staring at me and nodding away but you’re totally spaced out and you haven’t heard a word of what I said in the last…” Tony looked at his watch, “nine minutes.”

“That’s… not true.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it!”

Damon cleared his throat. “Y-you were telling me about the time you walked into poison ivy, and how Gibbs laughed and laughed before he sent you down to Ducky.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “That was nine minutes ago. I’ve been telling you about the time McGee walked into poison ivy after that!”

Oh, brother. Damon grimaced and leaned forward, and took the glaring agent’s hand in his. “Okay, you’re right. Sorry, I did kinda space out. I started… um, never mind.” Damon bit his lip coyly. And that piqued Tony’s curiosity enough to make him squint.

“Started to what?”

“I started to… uh, daydream? I wished I’d been there when you came home all red and itching from the ivy. I… pictured myself taking care of you, stripping your clothes and watching you sigh in relief to finally be rid of them, running you a nice cool baking soda bath…”

“Okay! Stop, you made your point.” Tony chuckled loudly to cover up his obvious arousal. His eyes were dilated and his cheeks were flushed, God, Damon loved that look on his lover’s face.

“But I haven’t even gotten to the good part!” Damon exclaimed, feeling mischievous.

Tony sniggered. “You’re crafty, you big lug. I think I may have finally met my match.”

“And is that a good thing?”

“That’s a very good thing.”

Damon grinned happily. “I really did want to get to the good part…”

“Well, maybe you can, tonight…” Tony murmured, eyes glimmering with a suggestion that was unmistakable.
Damon’s heart skipped a beat. These past four days, Tony had had a lot of firsts... both relationship-wise and sex-wise. They had talked for hours about what they expected from each other, things they liked or wanted to try, things they didn’t. But they still hadn’t gone all the way. Now it was Tony’s last night in Montevideo. They wouldn’t see each other for the rest of the month, not until the games ended and Damon’s unit was let off the hook for Danubio’s security.

“Are you sure? If you’re feeling pressured at all, please don’t. I can wait till I get back…”

Tony put his own hand over Damon’s. “I’m sure. I don’t wanna wait…”

Damon could only blink, dazed, and Tony’s smile spread from ear to ear. He still hadn’t found his voice back when Tony laughed and called the waiter for their tab. “Cheque, por favor?”

***

Tony could hear his heart thudding inside his chest.

He was staying at the Radisson, close enough so they could walk to it, hand in hand, sides brushing up against each other teasingly. They didn’t say a word the whole way. But silence with Damon didn’t feel awkward or uncomfortable. Tony felt no urgency to constantly be saying something witty or funny to keep the man interested.

Huh, so this is what being secure felt like, he mused.

Every time he looked up into Damon’s face, he found the brandy eyes looking right back at him. Every time he looked away to focus on the way (someone had to), Tony could still feel Damon’s heated gaze on him. He felt wanted, and treasured, the center of someone’s universe. Tony had never felt that way before either.

They walked into his room on the twelfth floor half hour later with a bottle of champagne. Soon as the door closed, Damon pulled Tony into an embrace and kissed him, hard. Tony whimpered his approval, caught by surprise but not minding in the least. He could feel himself stirring in his pants and was just about to hook one leg up and around Damon when the marine pulled away.

“Hey, not nice,” he whined.

Damon chuckled. “Look at the time, baby. It’s eight.”

“So?” He tugged Damon back to himself and kissed him again.

Damon gave in for a few seconds, before pulling apart and breathing his apology into Tony’s ear. “So... you gotta do that Skype thing with your people, remember? Go let them know you’re okay and not to send the CIA looking for you.”

“My people might be nosy and overzealous, but they know I can take care of myself.”

“Fine, just let them know I haven’t grown horns yet and am still treating you like a princess.”

“Fuck you!” Tony shoved at Damon’s chest.

Damon chuckled, “Soon enough!” He turned Tony around, pointed him toward the mahogany desk by the window, and smacked his butt to send him on his way.

“Oww,” Tony glared at him but went to his laptop anyway.

“I’ll wait for you in the shower,” Damon winked before heading into the bathroom. Tony longed to
follow his sexy stud-muffin of a boyfriend in there right now. But Damon had a point. He had to make this call or risk Abby and Ziva’s overprotective natures causing an international incident.

McGee logged on first. It was Sunday and he was still in his PJs, looking like he’d just spent ten hours non-stop playing one of his fantasy RPG games.

“So what’s the score today, Elf Lord?”

McGee yawned shamelessly. “Five thousand and counting. What’s up with you?”

“Just wrapping up. Vacation over, back to work tomorrow.”

“Mm-hm. So what utterly humiliating episode of mine did you regale Damon with today?”

Abby logged on right then. “Let me guess – poison ivy.”

“Bingo!” Tony grinned at her, wiggling his fingers at the screen just as Abby did the same on her end.

McGee looked annoyed. “You really should find other sources of entertainment for yourselves.”

“I can think of a few ‘fun things to do’, Tony, if you’re open to advice.” Ziva’s face came into focus and she smiled rakishly, winking just the way Kate used to.

Tony started to blush but quickly covered it up with a scowl. “You’ve been telling all my embarrassing stories to the whole world in your books, McSourPuss, so shut up. And Zee-vah seriously, you need to find yourself a boyfriend and stop fantasizing about mine.”

Abby grinned. “Aw, he said boyfriend!”

“Tony has a boyfriend, Tony has a boyfriend!” McGee did the sing-song thing that irked the hell out of him.

“Sour puss!” Ziva exclaimed. “That is what that idiom is!”

Tony shook his head. “Why am I friends with you three again?”

The bantering went on for another few minutes before they composed themselves.

“So we have some good news…” Abby began. “You’re going to be commended for your work on the Alvarez case, Tony. Congratulations!”

The trio clapped and waited for Tony to say something. Surprisingly, Tony didn’t have the reaction that anyone expected. He just scratched his head and shrugged. “Cool, I guess.”

No one prodded, and Tony was grateful for it. He was starting to see why Gibbs didn’t like bragging about his medals or even bother to keep them. In the grander scheme of things, he was just glad that the Portmans were okay. But he was also sad that two good men were dead, two teenage boys might grow up without a dad, and two little girls might need years of therapy to overcome the trauma of one terrifying night.

The conversation moved to their latest case. Team Gibbs had finally managed to track down the radar but they still didn’t know who the culprits were. So instead of retrieving it, they intended to monitor it for awhile to see who showed up to claim it.

“Come home soon, Tony!” Ziva implored. “Stakeouts are no fun without you.”
Tony smiled. “Hear that, Probie?” To which McGee just scoffed loudly but Tony ignored him. “Don’t worry, Ziva, am on the o-seven hundred flight tomorrow morning. I’ll be there to take the second shift. And what news of our fearless leader, compatriots?”

Ziva and McGee stayed quiet knowing Abby should be fielding this one. The forensic scientist crossed her arms. “He’s getting more and more agitated every day that you’re not here, Tony.”

“Agitated how?”

“Well, you know how Jardine sanitizes the hand sanitizer before using it?”

“Yeah?”

“Friday evening in my lab, he glared at her so hard, she forgot.”

“Forgot to sanitize the sanitizer or to use–? Ugh, doesn’t, matter. Just let him know I’m fine, Abs.”

Tony tried to sound casual, even as warmth spread through his insides at the thought of Gibbs missing him.

They hung up soon after. Unconsciously, Tony sent a hand caressing across his laptop screen where the images of his three best friends had been. Then he remembered someone else waiting for him inside the bathroom. The door was open and he could hear the shower running, the sounds of water pelting a hard body situated directly under it.

Tony stripped, strewing individual pieces of clothing on the floor all the way to the bathroom. Damon’s clothes were, of course, folded and placed in a neat little stack on the drawer chest. Finally naked and only slightly (okay, a lot) nervous, he opened the shower stall and walked in behind Damon under the warm deluge.

Damon turned, his eyes squinted against the water and landing on Tony with such want, it took the agent’s breath away. Before he knew it, he was enveloped in strong muscled arms.

“What took you so long?”

“Got stuck in traffic,” Tony grinned, and Damon laughed, capturing that wisecracking mouth with his.

They washed each other, running loofahs down each other’s backs and necks and every spot that elicited those special sounds they loved to hear from each other. Dying to move things along, Tony grabbed Damon’s roaming right hand and poured a generous dollop of shower gel onto his long, powerful fingers.

Damon smirked as he pecked at Tony’s grinning lips. They had done this before, so Tony knew what was expected of him. He hooked his foot into a soap hold built into the wall and wrapped his arms around Damon’s neck, biting into the juicy flesh at the crest of his shoulder. Damon grunted softly, and guided his soapy fingers to Tony’s waiting orifice.

Tony moaned and shuddered as the first digit wiggled its way inside him, pulling in and out in a motion that was too much and not enough all at once. “More, Damon… please…”

A second finger and then a third one entered him, thrusting in languorously, scrambling around the silken walls until they found what they were looking for. Tony whimpered as sparks ignited in his line of sight and traveled all the way down to his groin. His erection bloomed and rutted against Damon’s as Tony continued to cling to him for dear life. Damon continued to massage his sweet spot, practically lifting Tony up to his toes every time he plunged in.
Tony felt like the world had collapsed to just the two of them, nothing but emptiness outside the fogged up walls of their shower stall. Nothing mattered but the delicious sensations of fingers dipping in and out, tapping that astonishingly sensitive and potent source of mind-melding pleasure, over and over and over again. If it weren’t for his body already screaming for mercy, Tony wouldn’t want the sweet agony to stop, ever.

As it turned out, Damon managed to keep it up for only a few minutes, until Tony’s thrusts against his own hardness became harder and faster and more insistent. The opening quaked and contracted around his three digits when Tony came, and Damon followed right after.

Tony buried his face in Damon’s neck and panted, happy to rest his entire weight against him even as Damon struggled to catch his own breath. He smiled when Damon’s hands cupped the curves of his butt and squeezed. That was his way of showing his appreciation, and by the way he continued to fondle Tony’s ass, it seemed Damon was feeling very, very thankful indeed. But they’d only just begun.

“We’re not done, Marine. You better not have worn yourself out just yet,” Tony whispered into his lover’s ear, grinning when he felt Damon shiver in response.

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Damon was in heaven. No doubts about it. To be in love and to have the object of your love return your affections – what could possibly be more heavenly than that?

After their little tryst in the shower, the men focused on actually washing and cleaning while their bodies recovered from their respective releases. Damon lingered at the scar on Tony’s shoulder a little too long, so the agent distracted him by demanding he shampoo Tony’s hair.

“Do I always have to do everything?!?”

“I’m sorry did I not make that clear? Fine print’s a bitch, now get to work, bucko!”

Damon mock-scowled, then twisted Tony around to do his bidding.

“This is why I love hotels,” Tony drawled as he leaned back against Damon’s chest, feeling the fingers working his scalp. “The hot water never runs out.”

Damon smiled. “Someday, I’ll take you to my family’s castle outside Inverness. They’re still quite old-fashioned up there and sometimes they will drag a giant metal bathtub into your bedroom and put it right next to the fireplace. I don’t know how they do it; the water doesn’t get cold for hours.”

Tony turned around to face him, eyes twinkling with mischief again. “You really wanna see me in a bathtub don’t you?”

Damon blinked; he hadn’t realized there was a pattern. But now that he thought about it, it wasn’t a bad fantasy to have at all. “Only because I know it’ll make you blush so prettily, and I wanna see if it goes all the way down to your toes.”

Tony snorted, pretending to punch Damon in the stomach but starting to color already.

Afterwards, they collapsed onto the king-sized bed, naked and dripping. They lay on their sides, facing each other. The lights in the room were dimmed, and the temperature was just right so they didn’t need the covers. The television was on but on mute, re-running one of last year’s soccer matches, the English Premier League or something.
“Let’s do it,” Tony whispered, after a couple of minutes.

Damon licked his lips, and this time he didn’t ask Tony if he was sure. Damon saw in those gold-flecked sea green eyes all that he needed to see.

They started with gentle kissing, caressing each other’s bodies like they were discovering them for the first time. Damon moved Tony to his back and climbed on top of him. Tony loved to be kissed like he’d never been kissed again, this much Damon knew. He could tell Tony was a pushy little bottom, or was going to be. And while usually he was perfectly fine with the agent’s need for speed and rabid passion, Damon was in the mood to take it slow tonight, relish it.

Tony fidgeted under him, craning to take more of Damon’s tongue into his mouth but the marine kept holding back just a nudge. He tugged the back of Tony’s hair to hold his head down on the pillow, while with the other hand, he pinched and bothered Tony’s nipples, making him mewl into the kiss helplessly.

“Da-Damon…” Tony rasped, eyes blown wide open as he pushed his chest upwards into Damon’s adept fingers. At the same time he spread his legs and pushed up his groin, seeking contact with Damon’s body for his much ignored but already awakening erection.

“Don’t make me beg, Marine…”

“Shh, what’s the rush? We got all night.”

Tony groaned. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Damon smiled, leaving a trail of kisses all the way from his forehead to his neck and chest where he stopped to suck the nipples. He moved on just as Tony’s pleas got more urgent, and licked a line of saliva down to the navel. Tony almost let loose a giggle because it tickled. But soon the sensations got erotic and he switched to cursing instead. Before Tony could hit the edge and teeter off it, Damon moved downwards, completely ignored the stiffening shaft and mouthed the pair of balls tightening fast.

“Ungghhh, Damon!! Stop teasing, man…” Tony tugged at the short cropped hair, whatever he could get hold of, and Damon chuckled. “Okay, okay…”

Damon sat back on his haunches. He reached for the lube and pack of condoms on the bedside table, letting Tony know clearly what was about to happen next.

“Turn around, Tonio. It’ll be easier the first time.”

He didn’t have to ask twice. Tony rose elegantly and twisted until he was on his hands and knees. Damon put a hand in the middle of Tony’s back and applied a bit of pressure until Tony got the hint and lowered his upper body onto the bed, leaving just his ass up in the air, ready and willing to be taken.

“Ready?” He asked finally, after getting Tony stretched with his fingers for another few minutes.

Tony could only gasp wordlessly in response, hands fist into bed-sheets tearing the Egyptian cotton to shreds. Damon rolled on a condom and coated himself generously with lube. Then positioning himself right, he pushed the head into Tony. Tony gasped and twisted to try and look, but of course he couldn’t.

“Just relax, don’t clam up, baby. Relax…”
Damon kept stroking his flanks until Tony visibly settled and he was able to push himself further in. Little by little, he moved until he was completely sheathed and then he went still, letting Tony adjust to the alien sensation inside him. The agent held still too, unsure what to do with himself.

“Okay, Tony?”

Tony nodded, still panting, to show he was alright. Damon pressed a quick kiss onto Tony’s back as he pulled out in one swift move, before plunging right back in. Tony grunted loudly, but kept his back arched perfectly to accept Damon back into himself.

He started slow, yearning to do this for as long as possible, settling into a steady rhythmic pace. Damon held Tony’s hips in both hands effortlessly pushing and pulling the lithe body in tune to his thrusts. In time, Tony started to move too like a total pro. Damon tried to hit Tony’s prostate on every other thrust, making him squeak and curse and moan without inhibition.

He’d fuck Tony all night if he could, but Damon was human after all. His breaths hitched as the sensations compounded, and his famous endurance started to give out. One hand joined Tony’s in pumping the other weeping erection in tune with the erratic thrusts. A final mammoth jerk later, he surrendered and a fantastic climax hit him like a freight train. Damon whited out just as he heard Tony vocalize his own release.

Once Damon regained his wits, he gently slipped out of Tony and cleaned them up before collapsing on the bed beside the other man. Tony stayed on his stomach, his shoulders heaving and his face turned away. His skin glistened with sweat enhancing the golden tinge that Damon so completely obsessed over. But when he didn’t move or speak for a long time, Damon pulled himself up on one elbow, his heart thudding anxiously. “Hey… say something.”

Slowly, Tony turned towards him, looked up into Damon’s eyes, and allowed his face to melt into a lopsided grin. “I see now what all the fuss is about.”

Damon laughed out loud. “Come here, you.”

He cradled Tony in his arms and kissed every inch of his face within reach. The agent was boneless and compliant in his arms, barely moving, just letting his deep, steamy breaths tickle Damon’s neck.

They talked; mostly Tony talked and Damon listened. And two hours later, Damon hoisted his lover’s ankles up on his shoulders and made love to Tony again, this time facing each other. He rutted slowly and leisurely, folding the sinewy form in two, making Tony gasp and quake and whimper little ‘oh’s and ‘ah’s with every thrust.

“Damon? You awake?” Tony whispered, sometime before dawn.

Well, now he was. “Mm-hmm…”

He was too comfortable to move though, wrapped around his partner, his chin resting on top of Tony’s head.

“What you said… what I-I think you said, back at the hospital?”

Damon squeezed his eyes tight, and held his breath.

“I do too, you know. A-and before you ask, no it did not just occur to me after all the mind-blowing sex, I swear.” Tony chortled nervously. “Cross my heart and kiss my elbow.”

A fervid burn of tears viciously stung his eyelids. Damon didn’t trust himself to attempt words just
yet. He buried his nose in Tony’s hair instead, inhaling him in deeply, and shuddered hard under the weight of his exploding emotions. Next thing he knew, Tony was pulling away from him. Before he could worry or outright panic, Tony slid upwards on the bed and calmly pulled Damon to himself, making the marine rest his weary head on the agent’s shoulder instead.

“Sleep, Damon, I’ll watch over you.”

The marine smiled. Such a cheesy yet ridiculously heartwarming thing to say, he mused, even as he suspected he’d heard it somewhere before. Damon closed his eyes and let Tony wrap his arms around him, holding him. Within seconds, he drifted away.

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February 24, 2008. Washington DC

Gibbs dipped a paintbrush into a freshly opened can of paint and left it there. Vermillion, Abby had called it, when she dropped in last night with a casserole. Gibbs thought it was supposed to be red.

It was after ten on Sunday night and he was in his basement, putting the final finishing touches on his boat. This was his third one so far, and all it was missing now was a name.

Gibbs lifted his jar of bourbon to his lips, taking in a generous amount and rolling it around his tongue before downing it. Mentally, he pictured the type of calligraphy that would suit this boat the best. Each boat had its own character, one that comprised of all the different people who’d help build it, all the different conversations he’d have around it, all the memories and unvoiced sentiments that would seep into it.

The first boat he’d built had soaked in months of guilt and misery and marital frustrations from her maker. He’d named her Stephanie, after his third and last ex-wife. And he’d taken great pleasure in burning her. Of course, in a way, he was extremely grateful to Stephanie too – the ex-wife not the boat, for encouraging him to pick up his old boat-building hobby again. It had kept him sane through his extremely messy divorce and even better, it kept him from marrying again.

The second boat was tougher: a more complex design, with more intricate detailing on American cedar wood. She received a lot of help from Tony, more than Gibbs had wanted, actually. She was witness to a lot of significant events and celebrations too, like both Tim’s and Kate’s first cases as NCIS field agents, Tony’s first time jumping out of a plane, his first night out of the hospital after he nearly succumbed to that damn plague and finally, Ziva killing her brother Ari to protect Gibbs. That second boat – she was strong, resilient, and perfect. She’d been there for him through a lot of thick and thin, in fact still did. He called her ‘Shannon & Kelly’, and she was parked at the James Creek marina half an hour away.

The third boat, this one, was unique in its own right too. For one, she didn’t get as much attention as she’d deserved from Gibbs, what with him losing the plot and running away to Mexico, leaving her stalled and incomplete for months. Then she got a little too much air time with Abby’s drunkenness and Fornell’s sarcasm, even Ziva had an emotional meltdown in this basement. Poor thing would have bitched and whined if she could. But then Damon Werth came to her rescue, reviving Gibbs’ own interest in finishing her, adding jazzy new features that he’d once thought he was too old-school for.

The cell phone rang, echoing loudly through the basement and breaking Gibbs out of his thoughts. He thought to ignore it but looking at the caller ID, picked it up right away.

“Gibbs! Gibbs! Gibbs! You weren’t sleeping, were you? Did I wake you?”
Gibbs smiled at his favorite girl’s hyper-activeness, even at this hour. “I’m up, Abs.”

“Oh, good! We just got off the video call with Tony. He said to tell you not to be such a worrywart and that he’ll be home tomorrow morning! Yayyy!!”

Gibbs didn’t react, not that she expected him to. Abby knew him better than that. “He looked good, Gibbs. The shoulder isn’t bothering him anymore. I haven’t seen him so relaxed in a long time.”

“Uh-huh.”

There was a second’s pause, before Abby tsked softly.

“Oh, Gibbs. It’s not just the Damon effect, you know, although that does play a phenomenally huge part. But mostly it’s you, Boss-man. Now don’t you go feeling all jealous of Damon! Just his luck to be stuck between the two of you emotional simpletons, he can’t get a break at all! God!!”

“Abby,” Gibbs said warningly, but that’s all he managed or even needed to say. Even after ten years, he continued to be both stunned and impressed by how easily she could see (and hear) through his silences.

“Alright, I’ll hang up now, let you get back to your regularly scheduled boat-building. Just wanted to let you know that Tony’s fine, and he says hi.”

“Get some sleep, Abs,” he said, before disconnecting the call.

Abs was the only one he ever said goodbye to, everyone else he just hung up on abruptly. He remembered how Kate used to hate that about him, and it made him chuckle. He could really be a bastard, with a capital ‘b’. Abby on the other hand – she weaseled her way into his heart and his life, and insisted he change his set old ways to adapt to her. And he had. Tony, on the other hand, he never got over his years of parental neglect to ask Gibbs for anything. Instead he let himself be bullied and ordered around, adapting himself to the ways of the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs. And he’d done it without a word of complaint.

Gibbs sighed, once again resolving to make up for it all somehow. He donned his glasses before picking his paintbrush up. He still felt a deep well of regret for having shut Tony out and losing two whole years in the process. And it felt like he’d just found him, only to have lost him again to that… to Damon Werth. All too soon.

“Look at you, all maudlin…”

Gibbs grumbled as he drank from his jar deeply again. “He’s okay. They’re both okay…” he continued talking to himself, reassuring himself that Tony was in safe arms, and will be home soon enough into his, metaphorically speaking of course.

Gibbs had no intention of spoiling the kid with too much attention. Besides, it would only freak Tony out.

He painted the last letter in running script on one side of the hull, and carefully blew at it. Finally he stepped back to admire his artwork with affection.

Anthony Okay, so maybe this boat was a ‘he’.

And ‘he’ may not be completely ready, or willing, to float on his own just yet, but he sure as hell was getting there.
In a way, Gibbs had had seven years to re-build Tony, restore his confidence and his ability to trust in people again. He’d almost wrecked all his good work towards the end, almost. But that’s the thing about good families: they pick up your slack when you’re off gallivanting in Mexico or being a brooding, selfish sonofabitch. Grudgingly, he conceded that family now included Werth too.

Gibbs caressed the one crooked line of unevenly hammered nails and smiled. He knew he had great many reasons to be both grateful and proud, and he was.

He was the proudest father alive.

** THE END **

Chapter End Notes

- **Corporal Punishment (S05E10):** This is the first time we met Corporal Damon Werth, and he appeared later in two other episodes.

- **Breakfast at Tiffany’s:** This classic needs no introduction. Audrey Hepburn starred as the slightly neurotic and talkative Holly Golightly, George Peppard as the quiet but hopelessly in love writer, Paul Varjak. It was written by the infamous Truman Capote.

- **Livorno Naval Academy:** It’s the Italian military academy situated in the port city of Livorno.

- **Level One:** Restaurant in Dupont Circle. It used to do disco brunches back then when I wrote this story.

- **U-Street Music hall:** My American friends call it U-hall in short, not sure if that’s the common terminology. But it’s a great place so if you’re ever in DC…

- **DH45:** The Daewoo DH45 Mark II pistol is a very rare piece indeed, very little information is available about it online.

- **Korean naval base:** Yes there is still a US navy base in South Korea.

- **Ssang-Yong Pa:** This mafia outfit was an actual gang, oldest of the top three mob families in South Korea. They are known to mysteriously appear and disappear, and no one is really sure if they exist anymore. Obviously my use of them in this story is entirely fictional.

- **Ivymount School, Rockville MD:** The school is real and much respected. Their tagline is ‘exceptional programs for exceptional students’. But all other details described in the story about their voluntary programs are completely fictitious.

- **My Darling Clementine:** Classic Western from 1946. Another Wyatt Earp movie, but I imagine Tony would be a huge Wyatt Earp fan, he might even liken Earp to Gibbs.

- **Robinson R44:** Two-bladed single-engine light helicopter. An assault rifle if correctly aimed can definitely do some serious damage.

- **Danubio:** is an actual soccer club in Uruguay. The Jardines del Hipódromo is their home stadium. But all other details about the club and its players are fictitious.

- **Hebrew words:** ‘yakiri’ means darling (male), ‘leazazel’ is, I believe, hell. ‘Ah-brookh’ is like ‘Damn it!’ but more so. I'm aware they never showed Ziva talking or cursing in her native language much after maybe S3, but I don't see why she'd suddenly stop.

- **Uruguayan Spanish words:** So to the best of my ability to use Google Translate, I
believe ‘dale’ is like ‘come on!’, ‘ni a palos’ is like ‘no frikkin way’ and ‘cheque, por favor’ is ‘check please’. If these are wrong, do let me know and I'll fix it.

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