The Hours of Folly

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Summary

Written for iheartgibbs on NFA for the 2010 Secret Santa fic exchange.

A Marine is attacked following his grandfather's funeral, leading Team Gibbs to a decades-old FBI cold case. Meanwhile, the team's Secret Santa exchange is approaching...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

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“The hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom no clock can measure.” ~ William Blake

The thunder of a three-volley salute echoed across the grounds at Arlington National Cemetery, bearing witness to the passing of a noble man, as snow fell from the sky like the frozen tears of angels. With solemn ceremony, the flag that had graced the hero’s casket was folded and delivered into the arms of a young man in blue dress uniform. Mourners in the back rows whispered of the strong resemblance between the young man saluting the casket and the old man who lay inside – tall, handsome, loyal, brave – Marines to the core.
Later, as they walked among the headstones, the young man’s fiancée squeezed his arm and smiled at him. “Have you opened the letter your grandfather gave you?”

The young man stopped walking and turned to her. “I’d almost forgotten.” He slipped his hand inside the jacket of his uniform, pulled out a worn envelope.

“You don’t have to open it right away,” the young woman said. She was short but slender, with long brown hair and blue eyes.

“It seems like a good time,” the man countered, fingers working the flap open. “One last goodbye before we go home.”

He pulled a folded piece of paper from the envelope. Opening the letter, he began to read. The woman waited, watching her companion’s dark brown eyes trace down the page, then dart back to the top and start again. Seeing the lines on his forehead deepen, she ventured, “What does it say? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean.”

The young man shook his head and slipped the letter back into the envelope. “I’m not sure if this is true or if Grandpa decided to play one last practical joke,” he told his fiancé. He tucked the envelope back into his pocket and held out his arm for the brunette to take. “I need to go back to his house before we leave. Need to check something out.”

His fiancé raised her eyebrows. “What is it?”

The man lifted one corner of his mouth in a wry grin. “If what he wrote is true, I’ll be able to show you. And if it’s not… well, I’d rather not be humiliated in front of witnesses.”

“Ooh, this ought to be good…”

Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo cautiously stuck his head out of the elevator and looked around. The bullpen was empty; for once, he was the first one in. He moved quickly across the floor, stopping at his desk only to drop his bag before approaching the desk next to him, hand slipping into his pocket to pull out his lockpicks…

“Good morning, Tony!”

Tony whirled around and hopped up to sit on Tim McGee’s desk, trying to make the movement look planned. “Good morning, Special Agent David. And how are you on this fine December day?”

“Surprised,” came the dry response as Ziva stepped around her desk and slid into her chair. “This is the third day you’ve been here before me. You are not usually so punctual.” She eyed him suspiciously. “What are you up to?”

Tony swung his legs, his heels tapping the desk. “What makes you think I’m up to something?” he asked innocently.

“You’re breathing, DiNozzo,” came Leroy Jethro Gibbs’ voice from around the corner. The team leader breezed past both agents on his way to his desk, ever-present coffee cup in hand.

Tony toyed with the picks in his pocket, cursing his luck. If that jerk on the freeway hadn’t cut him off, he would have made it with time to spare. Only two days left to execute his plan…
“Tony, get off my desk.” Tim McGee sounded perfectly normal for 0650 on a Monday morning. That is, he sounded annoyed at Tony for whatever prank he was sure the older man had pulled this time.

“Make me.” This time, though, Tony hadn’t managed to complete his mission. Not yet. But the absence of embarrassing cards, super glue, whoopee cushions, or any other props of the perpetual prankster might clue Tim in to the fact that Tony was his Secret Santa this year. Therefore, he needed to act obnoxious – okay, more obnoxious than normal – to steer Tim away from the real reason he was sitting on the probie’s desk.

“I’ll make you.” Gibbs had only stopped at his desk long enough to grab his bag and sling it over his shoulder. “Gear up. We’ve got a case.”

Tony quickly scooted his behind off the desk, but not fast enough to avoid the head slap aimed in his direction.

Ziva stood in the living room of a modest house in the suburbs, reading from a tapestry that had been hung on the wall.

“’Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.’ Well, I should hope not,” she continued, looking around. “Who would want a mouse in their house on Christmas Eve? Is this something to do with the cookies you leave out?”

Tony rolled his eyes from where he was taking pictures of the fireplace – which did, indeed, have stockings hanging from it, presumably with care. “Zee-vah,” he complained. “You’ve been in America how long, and you don’t remember? The cookies are for the reindeer!”

Tim snorted from over by the brightly decorated Christmas tree.

Ziva returned to her crime scene sketch. “Ah, of course,” she followed along, struggling to keep the grin off her face. “And they get the milk, too?”

“Well, yeah, you can’t have cookies without milk!”

“What does Santa Claus get, then?”

She was impressed by the completely serious expression that Tim managed as he replied, “He stops by Gibbs’ basement for the bourbon.”

Tony just managed to turn his bark of laughter into a more-or-less decent impression of a cough.

In the kitchen, where thankfully the chatter of his agents was muffled by the hum of the refrigerator, Gibbs sat at the kitchen table with a young, dark-haired woman – the woman from the cemetery. She dabbed at her red-rimmed eyes with a tissue.

“When he was first diagnosed with cancer, Mark’s grandfather gave him a sealed envelope and told him to open it after he died,” she told the NCIS agent. “Mark put it in his safe deposit box and left it there until yesterday morning. He went and got it before the funeral, but he didn’t open it until after.”

“What did it say?” Gibbs questioned gently.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “He read it, but he didn’t show it to me. He said he didn’t know if it
was serious or a joke. His grandfather could be a bit of a clown sometimes, especially with the grandkids.”

“And after he read the letter?”

“He said he needed to come here to check something out. He said if it wasn’t a joke, he’d be able to show me… something.” She shrugged her shoulders. “And if it was a joke, he didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of anyone else.”

Gibbs nodded. “When did you see him last, before you came here?”

The woman closed her eyes. “He left early this morning, around four o’clock. We were supposed to be on our way back to Chesapeake – he was due back by noon today. He said he’d only be gone about an hour. After an hour and a half, I called him to see how much longer he’d be. He didn’t answer, and I got worried. I called a cab and came here, and” – fresh tears cascaded down her cheeks – “I found him on the floor…”

“Did you see anyone else? On the street, or driving by?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It was still dark out, and I really wasn’t looking around. I saw that Mark’s car was here, so all I was thinking about was getting in here and finding out what was going on.”

“And when you found Mark, you called 9-1-1? From which phone?”

“That one.” She pointed to an older, corded phone hanging on the kitchen wall. “The cord was long enough so I could sit with Mark until the ambulance got here.”

“Have you been to this house before today, Miss Miller?”

She nodded. “Yes, we were here Monday morning. Mark was looking for pictures that we could display at the wake.”

“Does it look like anything has been moved or taken since you were here?”

“No, nothing major, anyway. If it was something smaller, I probably wouldn’t notice it.” She shrugged again. “I’m sorry.”

“How about the letter that Mark’s grandfather left him? Do you still have it?”

She shook her head. “No, Mark brought it with him. I didn’t see it here, so he must have had it in his pocket. I can get it from him at the hospital.” She glanced at her watch. “Could we finish this later? The police wanted me to stay, but I really want to get to the hospital and find out how Mark is doing.”

“Of course. Special Agent McGee can drive you there. We’ll need to examine Mark’s car for evidence.” Gibbs was careful not to change the sympathetic tone of his voice as he informed her, “We’ll also need to get your fingerprints so that we can exclude your prints from the others at the crime scene.”

“Sure, anything to help,” the woman agreed as she stood up and slipped her arm through the strap of a black purse. “I can get the letter for Agent McGee while he’s there, too.”

A few minutes later, Gibbs watched out the front window as Tim escorted Stephanie Miller to the sedan. Despite his kind words and sympathetic manner, he had an ulterior motive for having one of
his agents take her to the hospital. Until they’d had a chance to examine the evidence, he wanted to make sure she didn’t leave town.

An hour later, they were just finishing up at the crime scene when Gibbs’ phone rang. He stepped into the kitchen to take the call while Tony and Ziva finished packing the evidence boxes.

Ziva was looking at the mantle over the fireplace, still evidently intrigued by the man’s holiday decorations. “Look, Tony, even the picture frames have a Christmas theme.” She stepped closer and examined them more closely. “And the pictures, too. These must be from Christmases all through his life.”

Tony glanced up. Indeed, some of the pictures were in black and white, while others were in color. One in particular caught his eye. “There’s the fiancé, so I’m assuming that’s the grandson.” In the picture, a young man in a Navy uniform stood next to the short brunette who had been there earlier, posing in front of the fireplace.

Ziva looked over the pictures a moment longer, then returned to her box to finish sealing it. “It will not be long before everything in this room will be packed away in boxes,” she commented idly. “I wonder if his grandchildren will decorate their homes with his pictures and ornaments next year, or will they just get rid of it all?”

“Depends on the family. If they’re anything like my grandmother DiNozzo, they’ll keep it all and insist that it be passed down as family heirlooms.”

“Do you have holiday decorations from your family?” Ziva looked questioningly at Tony.

“Yep.” Tony grinned. “All packed away in boxes.”

“Well, I hope this man’s family doesn’t just leave all this in boxes. It would be a pity to let all these memories fade away.” She waved her hand at the pictures.

Tony finished with his box and climbed to his feet. “Just so long as they pass those clocks on to different people.” He pointed to the matching clocks on either side of the mantle. “I mean, the perfectly placed decorations are one thing, but how long do you think it took him to synchronize the pendulums like that?”

Ziva watched the pendulums on the clocks in question swing from left to right and back again in perfect time with each other. “Perhaps he was a little COD?”

“That’s OCD, Ziva.”

“Same thing, is it not?”

Tony was saved from a long explanation by Gibbs’ return to the living room. “That everything?” he asked, pointing to the boxes. They nodded. “Then let’s go.”

Ziva nodded at the cell phone in Gibbs’ hand as she lifted her box. “Do we have a lead?”

“Yes and no.” Gibbs returned the phone to his belt. “That was McGee. The grandson is still unconscious, and the hospital didn’t have the letter from Matthews’ grandfather among his personal possessions.”

“So we don’t know why he came here,” Tony filled in the blank.
“But if the fiancé is telling the truth, neither does anyone else,” Ziva commented.

“So either someone followed him here,” Tony continued, “or they were already here and he surprised them. Which means –”

“Tony, you take the grandson. Ziva, you look at the grandfather. McGee can check out the fiancé –”

“Probie gets all the luck,” Tony couldn’t help but interject. Ziva rolled her eyes, while Gibbs delivered a stinging smack that made Tony shake his head. “Sorry, Boss.”

“One of the Matthews men is the reason that the attacker was here. We need to find out why,” Gibbs reached out and snagged the keys to the van from Tony’s belt. “I’m driving.”

Tony and Ziva walked into Abby’s lab with the evidence boxes. Tony was still whistling “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer.”

“I don’t understand why you complain about my driving,” Ziva was arguing. “Surely I am not as bad as that!”

“Only because most other drivers don’t understand when you curse in Hebrew.” Tony set down his box and looked around the strangely-silent lab. “Hey, Abby, you here?”

He was answered by a sudden burst of – Christmas music? He listened for a moment. Perhaps it was – if classical Christmas music and death metal had a one-night stand, Tony supposed, perhaps this would be the result.

“Abby? Where are – oh, wow…”

Tony’s voice trailed off as Abby Scuito, forensic scientist extraordinaire, bounced into view. Even Ziva blinked twice. Abby had foregone her usual black Goth attire and added some color to her clothing for the upcoming holiday. Okay, so the color in question might be blood red, rather than the brighter Christmas shade, but Tony wasn’t going to argue – not when the dark, white fur-trimmed dress clung to her curves and turned her into the sexiest Mrs. Claus he’d ever seen.

“Like what you see?” Abby twirled around on her black platform boots.

“I – uh…”

“You look lovely, Abby,” Ziva complimented her, hoping that Tony would snap out of it quickly.

Abby decided to show Tony some mercy. “Whatcha got for me?” she asked, taking the box from Tony’s arms – not incidentally blocking his view of a good deal of her figure.

“Evidence from the Matthews house.” Tony gladly accepted the change of topic before anyone could accuse him of yellow-light behavior. “Probie should be bringing you the vic’s clothes from the hospital soon.”

“Already got ‘em.” Abby pointed toward the table where a blood-stained shirt was carefully laid out on a plastic sheet. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

They nodded and turned to leave, but something caught Ziva’s eye and prompted her to look back. There, next to Abby’s computer monitor, was a tall, slender vase filled with black and red roses.
Ribbons in the same colors were tied around the vase.

“Oh, very nice,” Ziva said to Abby, stepping closer to smell the flowers. “From your Secret Santa Claus?” When Abby nodded, Ziva continued, “They clearly know your tastes.”

“It’s not like she hides it or anything,” Tony interjected, a grin on his face.

“I still love them,” Abby stated, picking up the vase and holding the flowers close. “And that’s the point of Secret Santa – to give the person something they like without letting them know who you are, right up til the last moment.” She smiled at Ziva. “I’m glad you’re participating this year.”

“You all celebrated Hanukkah this year with me, so I thought I’d return the gesture.”

“I thought Vance was going to crack down on us, though,” Tony commented. “There were an awful lot of candles burning towards the end there. Can you imagine if we’d had a safety inspection?”

Abby looked toward her office, where several of her aromatherapy candles were cheerfully blazing away. “You saying something, Tony?”

“Uh… of course not.” Tony looked quickly at his watch. “Oh, look at the time! Come on, Ziva, we’d better get digging before Gibbs catches us standing around.” He beat a hasty retreat for the elevator.

Ziva and Abby shared an exasperated look before the former Mossad officer followed him out the door.

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Tim sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “Any luck so far, Tony?” he asked.

“None.” Tony leaned back in his chair, still reading the screen. “Grandson’s got a squeaky-clean record as far back as I can go. You?”

“The same. She’s got quite a bit of credit card debt, but she stopped using the cards a while ago and has been paying it down.” Tim smiled faintly. “At the rate she’s going, it ought to be all paid off before the wedding.”

“Where’s she getting the money?” Tony asked.

“Legitimately.” Tim pointed to the financial statements pulled up on his monitor. “She seems to have cut way back on expenditures and is channeling that towards her debt.”

Tony sighed. “Damn. Why couldn’t she… oh, I don’t know… cheat on him, or have suspicious transactions or something? Or why couldn’t he? You know, something to give us a lead.”

From her desk, Ziva cleared her throat. “And what am I? Chop suey?”

“Chopped liver,” Tony muttered.

Tim, however, was excited enough to let the Ziva-ism go. “What do you have, Ziva?”

“Look at this.” Ziva held out a file folder. “It seems that Jonah Matthews made some enemies at one point in his life.”

Tony snagged the file from her and flipped it open, Tim coming to stand behind him and read over
his shoulder. According to the file, the old lieutenant was the epitome of the heroic Marine… except for an incident early in his career. “Huh. A Code Red.” Tony quickly skimmed the official report. “Wonder what he did to piss his unit off?” The report itself did not use the term Code Red, as the Marine Corps did not officially recognize the disciplinary action. But when several members of a unit attacked one of their own, and afterward none of them, not even the victim, would confess the reason why… well, what else could it be?

“Wait – that name…” Tim darted back to his desk, then returned a moment later with the legal pad he had been making notes on. He held it up for the others to see. “He helped beat the crap out of Lieutenant Matthews way back when, and now attended his visitation? Does that sound fishy to anyone else?”

“Perhaps they served together later and forgot their differences?” Ziva suggested.

“I suppose it’s possible…” But Tim didn’t really sound convinced, and Tony could guess why. The younger agent was likely reviewing all of the bullies he’d put up with when he was a kid, and not finding a single one who would come to his funeral – unless they were there to gloat…

Now that was an idea. “Okay, you two pull the files on” – Tony checked Tim’s list again – “Steve Patterson and see if he had any other connections to Matthews. Might as well check the rest of the guys who were in on the Code Red, too, see if any of them are still alive and in the area. I’ll have Abby compare their prints to the ones in the house, see if any of them decided to stop by for a visit.”

Ziva and Tim nodded. Tony left them to split the list between themselves and headed for the elevator. Finding it stuck between floors, he shook his head and went for the stairs.

At the same time that the team was discussing Matthews’ service record, Gibbs stopped by Autopsy to see about the deceased’s medical history.

“Ah, Jethro, so good to see you,” Dr. Donald Mallard, “Ducky” to his friends, greeted the agent. “And what can I do for you today?” Ducky was just finishing his final report on the autopsy of a petty officer who had apparently upset his girlfriend one too many times – at least, that was how her confession read. Gibbs wished his current case could be resolved so easily.

In response, Gibbs held out a sealed file. “Lieutenant Jonah Matthews was buried yesterday at Arlington. Today, his grandson was attacked while following up on a letter Matthews gave him before he died, to be read upon his death.”

“What was in the letter?”


“Bethesda Naval Hospital? The young man was following a family tradition?”

Gibbs nodded. “Grandfather and father were both Marines. Grandson was just made a lance corporal.”

Ducky sighed. “Well, let’s hope the young man doesn’t become a guest of mine.” He finally glanced at the label on the file. “I take it you are suspicious of the grandfather’s cause of death?”

“Just checking all the angles, Duck.”
“Of course. I’ve got to get this report to Agent Ryan, and then I’ve got those blasted requisition forms to discuss with Director Vance.” Ducky raised his voice to carry across the room to his assistant. “Perhaps Mr. Palmer can take a look at your file while I’m gone.”

Jimmy Palmer looked up from the autopsy table that he had been cleaning. Despite the distance, he’d heard every word of the conversation. A huge smile spread across his face when he realized that his mentor was going to let him make the initial evaluation. “I’d be happy to, Dr. Mallard.” He stripped off his gloves and tossed them in the disposal bin as he hurried to take the file from his boss. “But wouldn’t we get a more definitive answer if we exhumed the body?”

“Yes, we would,” Ducky agreed, “but do consider the timing, Mr. Palmer.”

“Well, if he was just buried yesterday –”

“That’s precisely what I mean, Mr. Palmer.” Ducky shook his head. “The poor soul was just buried yesterday, and Christmas is in three days. I’d like to avoid an exhumation if at all possible, especially with the grandson’s condition being so uncertain.”

Jimmy’s face turned red. “Oh, of course, Dr. Mallard. You’re right. We shouldn’t do that to the family just to follow a hunch.” Then he considered whom he was talking about, and his face paled. “Not that you don’t have good hunches, Agent Gibbs,” he quickly added. “You usually have very good hunches, and – and I’m going to go read this now.” He waved the file at them, then turned and fled to his desk.

Gibbs waited until they were out in the hallway, Ducky following him on his way to deliver his report, before asking his friend, “Is he always like that, or is it just around me?”

Ducky chuckled, but declined to answer. Instead, as they waited for the elevator, he changed the subject. “So, Jethro, have you found a gift for the Secret Santa exchange yet?”

Gibbs gave Ducky a grin that the older man always considered quite cheeky. “I thought that was supposed to be a secret, Duck,” he teased.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped in. “You all put me in charge of coordinating the festivities this year, Jethro,” Ducky pointed out as the elevator began to rise. Taking a page from his friend’s book, Ducky reached out and flipped the emergency stop switch. The elevator jerked to a halt. “That means making sure that everyone does their part. Including you.”

“What makes you think –?”

“I asked everyone to write down their name and a few suggestions for gifts. You gave me a blank piece of paper,” Ducky complained.

“Whoever drew mine doesn’t have to get me anything. I can’t make it any easier than that,” Gibbs pointed out.

Ducky sighed and flipped the switch. The elevator began to move again. “Just make sure you have something for your recipient,” he warned his friend.

“Are you auditioning to be my fifth wife?” The smile on his face took the sting out of Gibbs’ words. He knew Ducky was taking his responsibilities for the holiday party very seriously, so he could forgive the mother-henning. But Gibbs was a Marine – and a Marine never shirked his duty, especially one as important as this.
"Oh, Tony! You shouldn’t have!” Abby dramatically clasped her hands under her chin when she saw the enormous Caf-Pow Tony carried in his hands. He’d even put a bow on it.

“Well, if you don’t want it…” Tony teased, beginning to turn away.

“Okay, okay, you should have, you definitely should have.” Abby reached greedily for her favorite drink and took a long pull. “Oh, that’s so much better…”

“Your Secret Santa didn’t leave you a Caf-Pow?”

“Oh, he did – or she did – but that was hours ago, Tony!” Abby slurped more liquid through the straw. “You can’t expect that to last me all morning. Unless… unless you’re my Secret Santa, and this is how you plan to keep me in Caf-Pows all day!” She eyed him suspiciously.

Tony held his hands up. “It’s not me this year, Abs. I just brought that to you out of the goodness of my heart.” At her disbelieving snort of laughter, he amended, “And to bribe you to check on those prints from the crime scene for me.”

“Well, I suppose I could do that for you…” Since I was working on it anyway, she thought with an internal laugh. “McGee brought me the fiancé’s print card. She already said she was at the house, so I checked to see where her prints showed up.”

Not surprisingly, Stephanie Miller had touched the table, chairs, refrigerator, and her prints were present in the bathroom as well. Like Ziva, she had also apparently been intrigued by the pictures on the mantle; several of them had been picked up.

“I’ve got several sets of prints to run through AFIS.” With a wave of her mouse, Abby pulled up four print sets on her monitor. “One of them is likely to be the grandson and one our vic, so I was going to check Naval records first so I can exclude those prints from the crime scene analysis.”

Tony nodded. “I’ve got a few names for you to check specifically against those prints. Would you mind running those first?”

“No problemo!” Abby took the slip of paper Tony offered her, then danced her fingers across the keyboard. In a few moments, she had an answer for him. “No such luck, Tony. None of them touched anything you guys checked for prints – oh, but we’ve got something!”

A window had popped up on the monitor, displaying three results. “There’s Grandpa and kid, as expected – but we’ve got an ID on a third print. Former Marine Sergeant Mitchell Collins.”

Tony leaned closer to look at the sergeant’s profile. He was about the right age… “Abby, can you check his service record for me? See if he ever served with Matthews?”

Abby was already typing away. “I assume you mean the elder, since there’s no way he was still active when the younger joined up.” She pulled up his file and Jonah Matthews’ side by side and skimmed through them. “Yep, they both served at Camp Lejeune from ’54 to ’55. Same unit.”

“So either he didn’t participate in the Code Red, or he didn’t get caught,” Gibbs’ voice came from behind them, making Abby and Tony both jump.

“Hey, Bossman!” Abby threw her arms around her favorite special agent. “Perfect timing, as usual.”

Gibbs returned the hug one-armed, then handed Abby the Caf-Pow in his other hand. “Don’t drink it all at once,” he warned her, only half joking. One this morning, and two now – she was going to
be bouncing off walls by day’s end.

“I take it Ziva and McGee filled you in on our lieutenant’s ass-kicking early in his career?” Tony asked.

Gibbs nodded. “Ziva and I will pay Sergeant Collins a visit. You and McGee see who else from Matthews’ old unit is still in the area, see who you can talk to. Until the lance corporal wakes up, this is the best lead we’ve got.”

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Taking the stairs back to the squad room just for the heck of it, Tony ran into Jimmy in the stairwell.

“Hey, Palmer,” he greeted the autopsy assistant as he started to climb. “What’s up?”

Jimmy put out a hand to stop Tony before he reached the first landing. “Tony, I really need your help. Can I ask you something?”

Tony frowned. Jimmy looked nervous; he was chewing his lower lip, and his hair looked as if he’d been pulling at it. “What’s wrong? Need help hiding a body?” he joked to lighten the mood a little.

“What? No!” Jimmy glanced around, as if to make sure they were alone in the stairwell. “It’s – we give our Secret Santa gifts in two days, and I have no idea what to get for my person!”

Tony laughed; now he knew what the problem was. “You drew Gibbs’ name, didn’t you?”

Jimmy pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. “He didn’t write anything down. Nothing! He didn’t even write his name – I recognized Dr. Mallard’s handwriting. What am I supposed to get him?”

“Uh… well, he could probably use an ink pen…”

“Tony! I’m serious!”

“So am I.” Tony put his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “Well, okay, maybe not a pen. But get him something practical, something he’ll use. If you get him some decorative little knickknack, it’ll just sit in a drawer somewhere, trust me.” As the guy whose drawer is filled with the Boss’ service awards, I should know, he added to himself.

“Something practical…” Jimmy nodded. “Okay, I can do that. I think. Maybe…” He started back down the stairs to Autopsy, lost in thought. Halfway down, he remembered to call out, “Hey, thanks, Tony!” before continuing on his way.

Chuckling to himself, Tony continued on his way to the second floor. Man, I lucked out this year, Probie’s almost too easy to buy for. Poor Palmer…

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I still do not see why anyone complains about my driving, Ziva thought as she opened the passenger side door of the sedan. Although… if I had been driving my car, I would have made it here ten minutes ago. I could have easily driven a smaller car into that gap between the pickup and the tractor-trailer…

She gave a mental shrug and let her internal monologue go as she followed Gibbs up the sidewalk to the small yellow house. Unlike the Matthews home, this house had no bright Christmas lights or
cheery decorations in the windows. The only personal touch that showed from outside was a small piece of paper taped to the inside of the glass outer door, next to the doorbell. It read, *Please ring doorbell and wait patiently. Someone will be with you shortly.*

“Sounds like a shopkeeper,” Ziva commented as Gibbs pressed the button for the doorbell.

“Just don’t buy anything until we’ve cleared him as a suspect.”

But when the door was finally opened, Ziva saw the reason for the sign. An elderly man, his white hair sticking up in all directions, leaned heavily on a sturdy wooden cane with one hand. The other hand had clearly been pulling a portable oxygen machine behind him. Despite the assistance of the machine, the old man was visibly winded from his trip to the door; but he greeted his callers with a friendly smile.

“Yes? May I help you youngsters?” The gleam in his eye told Ziva he was deliberately teasing.

“Sergeant Mitchell Collins?” When the old man nodded, Gibbs held up his ID, Ziva following his lead. “I’m Special Agent Gibbs, NCIS. This is Special Agent Ziva David. May we come in?”

“Of course.” Collins pushed the door open wider and moved back to allow Gibbs and Ziva inside. He waved them toward a well-padded couch in the living room, but saved his breath while he slowly made his way to a recliner located at right angles to the couch. The agents stood respectfully until Collins was seated, then sat down themselves.

“What can I do for you, Agent Gibbs?” Collins asked once his breathing returned to normal.

Gibbs led with a question. “You attended the funeral of Lieutenant Jonah Matthews yesterday, Sergeant Collins?”

Collins nodded. “Yes, I did. A fine Marine, Matthews was. A fine man.” The old man spoke emphatically, as if daring them to dispute his claim.

Ziva took her turn. “You served with him early in your career, did you not?”

“Yes, we were both stationed at Camp Lejeune in the mid-‘50s.” Collins coughed, then reached for a glass of water on an end table to his right. Taking a sip, he continued, “Lost track of each other when we went to Korea, but we met up again about a year ago. Support group. Who knew we’d both end up with cancer at the same time?” The old man shook his head sadly.

“What’s this about? Mark isn’t in some kind of trouble, is he?”

“Sergeant, Mark was attacked this morning at his grandfather’s home. He’s currently in critical condition at Bethesda.” Gibbs watched the other man closely. He no longer suspected Collins of being the attacker, not after seeing the old man’s deteriorating physical condition; but his gut was still telling him there was something hinky going on. From the way Ziva leaned forward, he knew that she thought so, too.

Collins gasped; his face grew pale. “Attacked? By who? What happened?” The older man was clearly agitated; his breaths were fast and shallow, and his hands trembled where they rested on his cane.
“That’s what we’re trying to find out, Sergeant.” Gibbs reached for the glass of water and handed it to Collins, helping to steady the older man’s hands as he took a drink. “Mark’s fiancé said that he went to his grandfather’s house yesterday to check something out. Lieutenant Matthews had left him a letter –”

“Of course,” Collins interrupted Gibbs softly, but he almost seemed to be speaking to himself. “That had to be it. Of course.” He was no longer looking at the agents, but stared with eyes unfocused toward the far wall.

“Sergeant Collins?” Ziva spoke quietly, not wanting to startle him. “Do you know what Lieutenant Matthews wrote to his grandson?”

Collins sighed and bowed his head, closing his eyes. After a long, silent moment, he nodded to himself and looked up again at his two visitors. “I do.” He smiled, but his expression seemed rather melancholy. “Can I offer you anything to drink? It may take a while to tell the story.”

“Please, do not trouble yourself. We are fine,” Ziva assured the man. Gibbs nodded in agreement.

“Well, then.” Collins leaned back in his chair and eyed them cautiously. “Before I get into ancient history here, I want to tell you this. I have been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The doctors tell me I have maybe another year, probably less. Now I don’t much care what happens to me for my own sake, but I’ve got a great-granddaughter, five years old, and I promised her we’d go to Disneyland this year. I want to give her something special to remember before I go.”

Ziva frowned, not seeing what this had to do with Matthews, but she remained silent.

Collins leaned his head back against the chair, his gaze once again wandering to the far wall as he began his story. “Jonah and I were bunkmates at Lejeune back in ’54. I was there first; he transferred in a few months later. We got to be pretty good friends, pretty quickly. Jonah was a good man, like I said. A very good man.

“After a while, we got to know the other guys in the barracks pretty well. There was a group of about six of us that stuck together pretty tight. We caused our share of trouble, I have to admit, but nothing serious, at least I didn’t think so.”

Collins let out his breath in a long sigh. “That is, until we found out we were heading for Korea. A couple guys had families started already, and the rest of us all wanted to, soon as we could find the right girl. We were all worried about what would happen if we went over there and got killed, or not even that, just if we got hit, lost an arm or a leg or something. How’d we take care of a family then? Sure, the government’ll help some, but we all knew it wouldn’t be enough. So we started talking, trying to figure out what we could do to set aside some money for our families, the ones we had and the ones we hoped to have.”

He looked at Ziva, at Gibbs, and laughed bitterly. “We’d have been a lot smarter to just buy a life insurance policy. If I knew then… But no, it didn’t even occur to me back then, and if anyone else thought about it, they must have had their own reasons to do what we did.

“There was a rich family living in Wilmington, the Suttons. There was an article in the paper a few years before about them having one of the largest collections of diamonds in the state, and one of our buddies got the idea that if we stole those and split them up… We’d need to wait to sell them, or have our family members wait if we got killed, but it’d set them up pretty nicely. And, to make a long story short… we went and did it. Idiots, we were complete idiots.”

Collins caught Ziva looking around his living room and laughed – and then started coughing. He
“Wondering if I pissed away all the money, Agent David?” He took another sip of water. “Now that’s where the story gets interesting. See, we all worked together to steal the diamonds, and we split them up fair and square – and then Jonah went and stole them all from us behind our backs, the sneaky little bastard!” Despite the harsh words, Collins still had a broad grin on his weathered face.

Gibbs had been quietly listening to the old man’s story. Now he jumped in. “You don’t seem too upset for someone whose friend stole thousands of dollars worth of diamonds from him,” he pointed out.

“Oh, I was pissed as hell when it happened, Agent Gibbs,” Collins assured him. “Especially when Jonah hid them where we couldn’t find them, and then gave us this cock-and-bull story about how what we did was wrong and he was going to find a way to return them to the family. None of us believed that for a second!”

Ziva’s mind flashed back to the file she’d been reading earlier that day. “Is that why the Code Red happened? But I didn’t see your name in the report…”

Collins shook his head, the grin fading somewhat. “The blanket party? No, I wasn’t part of that,” he said. “By that point, I was ready to just cut my losses. I mean, we stole the diamonds and didn’t get caught, but the problem with stealing is that you have to keep not getting caught. I was getting a bit worried about it, frankly. Once I calmed down a bit, I decided I wanted out. Jonah could have the diamonds and the problems that went with them. I was done with it, and that’s what I told the other guys when they told me what they were going to do.”

For a moment, Collins seemed lost in thought; then he laughed again, softly this time. “So they beat him up, and got caught, and did time for it. A couple of them got discharged, and I lost track of them. And then I got transferred to Korea, and didn’t really think much about it after that. Until I got the cancer, and started going to the support group – and guess who I ran into there?”

“Did you talk to him about the diamonds?” Ziva asked.

“Oh, yeah, I did. I wanted to know if they were as much trouble as I thought they would be. I wanted to hear him say that he was wrong, I admit it. But he said he still had them, that he was going to make sure that they got back to the Sutton family – or their descendants, rather – after he was gone; and you know what? This time, I believed him.”

Ziva nodded; they hadn’t seen any signs of unexplained wealth in Matthews’ financials or displayed in his home. “Did he say how he was going to have the diamonds returned? Was that what the letter to his grandson was about?”

“Yes.” Now Collins grew serious; no trace of the smile showed on his face. “Jonah didn’t want to face his family and tell them what he had done, so he said he was going to leave Mark a letter for after he was gone.” His gaze flicked from one agent to the other. “You said Mark was attacked in Jonah’s house?”

Gibbs nodded. “You think Mark was attacked because of the stolen diamonds?” he asked in order to keep the old man talking. His gut was already telling him the answer – no such thing as a coincidence.

Collins shrugged. “Why else? I can’t imagine Mark getting into trouble like that on his own. He idolized Jonah, you see, wanted to be just like him. ‘Course he didn’t know about the diamonds then. But as far as I know, that’s the only black mark against Jonah. And maybe not so black, after
“Why didn’t Lieutenant Matthews just return the diamonds back when he took them away from you?” Ziva was curious to hear the answer.

“I said he was a good man, Agent David,” Collins replied, “but I never said he was perfect. He wanted to return the diamonds, but he didn’t want to do time for the theft or get kicked out of the Corps. He didn’t want any of us to pay for it, either.” The old Marine shook his head and sighed. “If you’d have caught me back when I was younger, Agent Gibbs, I would have done the time. But I’m an old man now, and” – he gestured to the oxygen machine, to the tubes running from it to his nostrils – “I can’t imagine I’ll even live long enough to see the trial, much less serve the sentence.”

Gibbs had come to the same conclusion; and while the NCIS agent in him wanted to see justice done, the Marine – and the man – knew there would be no justice in imprisoning Collins for the few months he had left, for a theft decades ago that he didn’t even profit from. He didn’t need to look at Ziva to know that she would think the same way.

They took down the names of Collins’ fellow diamond thieves and left him with a warning not to leave town – the proposed Disneyland trip still being a month away. Once in the car, Gibbs had Ziva call back to the office. “Tell Tony and McGee I want to know everything about these guys when we get back. And have McGee look into the original diamond heist.”

“Do you think Lieutenant Matthews really did intend to return the diamonds?” Ziva asked as she dialed.

“We don’t know if he even had them,” Gibbs reminded her as he pulled away from the curb. “But it looks like someone thought he did and went looking. It’s the best lead we’ve got, anyway.”

Ziva’s attention was diverted when her call was picked up. “McGee, we need you to look into a diamond theft about fifty-five years ago. And tell Tony that if he even starts to mention a movie that sounds like this, I will break his arm…”

"Well, this just got a lot more complicated," Tim announced as he hung up the phone.

Tony looked up from his computer screen. “They find something?”

Tim explained about the diamond theft and Lieutenant Matthews’ supposedly altruistic intentions, remembering also to pass along Ziva’s threat about the movie references. Tony initially brushed it off as unlikely; but on second thought, he realized, Ziva probably wouldn’t understand his counter-threat regarding coal in her stocking. Or more likely, she just wouldn’t care.

“Damn,” he sighed when Tim was finished. “And here I was thinking we wouldn’t need to do quite so much digging. Two of our four attackers are dead.”

“Well, they clearly weren’t in on this morning’s attack –”

“Ya think, McObvious?”

“– But if the theft had anything to do with the attack on Lance Corporal Matthews, we’ll need to know more about Collins’ buddies.” Tim refused to let Tony’s jibe faze him. “Besides, wouldn’t it be great to solve a cold case that old?”

Tony had to admit that Tim was right. “Bet the local PD won’t be happy though, having to dredge
up a file that old," he speculated.

Tim was already searching online for newspaper articles about the theft. “Probably have dust all over it – my allergies can’t wait.” He clicked on a link, then grunted in surprise. “Huh. It’s actually an FBI case.”

“Wonderful.” Tony’s working relationship with the FBI was a little rocky, to say the least. “I’m glad Gibbs told you to make that call.”

“Better than the local PD,” Tim reminded him. “At least the FBI has heard of us.” He’d heard enough variations on “Who? Don’t you mean CSI?” to last his entire career.

The FBI may have heard of them, but unfortunately it didn’t seem to speed the process any. Tim went through five transfers, twenty-five minutes of hold time, and one accidental hang-up before finally finding someone who could locate the file and arrange to have it delivered. When he finally disconnected the call, he was surprised to find Tony approaching his desk with two coffee cups in his hands.

“We should have it sometime tomorrow,” he reported, taking a hot cup from Tony and breathing in the steam. “Thanks, Tony. I really needed that.”

Tony took a sip of his own drink. “We’ve still got to dig up the dirt on our two surviving blanket partiers before Gibbs and Ziva get back,” he pointed out. “Fifty-some years of background – I don’t know about you, but I could really use the caffeine right about now…”

Back in Autopsy, Jimmy had gladly set aside the puzzle of what to get Gibbs for Christmas, and was working on another – examining Jonah Matthews’ medical file, searching for any evidence of foul play.

“How’s it coming, Mr. Palmer?” Ducky called from the autopsy table where he was wrist-deep in the remains of a rather unfortunate sailor who’d gone hunting while home for the holidays and had become the hunted instead.

Jimmy shook his head. “Well, it’s impossible to say for sure without an autopsy, Dr. Mallard,” he replied, “but I don’t see anything just from the file that screams ‘murder.’” He flipped to the end of the file. “Looking at the labs from his last doctor’s visit, though, I do feel pretty confident in saying that he had at most a month to live from that visit, and the appointment was two and a half weeks before his death.”

Ducky nodded. “I’ll review the file before we present our conclusions to Jethro, but I trust your judgment, Mr. Palmer.” He allowed a small smile to show in return as he watched Jimmy’s face beam from the praise.

Jimmy closed the file and laid it carefully on Ducky’s desk. The beeping of the computer announcing new email caught his attention, and he wandered over to see what was coming in.

_The lad will make a fine doctor someday_, Ducky mused, _as long as we can keep building his confidence in himself. Perhaps I should encourage him to work with the cold cases team when we’re not busy here. It would allow him to develop his analytical skills, and may benefit the team at the same time._ Ducky then looked at the sailor under his hands, and thought of the long row of autopsy drawers, filling up all too quickly. _Unfortunately, we’re rather busier here than one would hope for – especially around the holidays…_
“Dr. Mallard!” Jimmy’s shout startled Ducky from his thoughts. “Look at this!” He pushed his chair back from the computer, pointing excitedly at the monitor.

“Good heavens, lad, what is it?” Ducky stepped away from the autopsy table, flipping up the plastic shield from in front of his face before pulling his gloves off and dropping them in the biohazard bin on his way over.

“We just got the report on Mark Matthews from Bethesda.” Jimmy paged through the electronic file and pulled up an x-ray of the young man’s head. “He suffered blunt force trauma to the back of his head, and is still unconscious. But look at the point of impact, here –” Jimmy flipped open the older file – “and now look at this, here.” The young man pointed to a similar x-ray in the file, showing an almost identical impact site. The incident report was dated September 9th, 1955.

“Hmm.” Ducky looked from one to the other. “The back of the head is rather a popular place to hit people,” he reminded his assistant. “But still, you may be on to something. Perhaps one of the lieutenant’s former acquaintances held a grudge, and took it out on the grandson?”

Jimmy shrugged, but his eyes sparkled. “Maybe Abby can use these to reconstruct the attack – you know, figure out how tall the guy would have to be, or whatever.”

“Why don’t you take copies to her and let her work on it?” Ducky suggested as he went to get a fresh pair of gloves – the body on the table wasn’t going to autopsy itself, and he needed to get back to it. He watched Jimmy forward the email, then dash for the door, file in hand. “Copies, please, Mr. Palmer!” he called out. “I’d like a chance to look them over a little more carefully, once I’ve had a chance to finish here.” He flipped the face shield down once more and gestured to the table.

“Of course, Dr. Mallard.” Jimmy made the copies, then left the file on the desk and headed for the forensics lab.

“He’s quite a bright lad,” Ducky spoke to his guest as he resumed his work. “He just gets a little over-excited now and again. As do we all, I suppose.” He picked up a scalpel and began to cut. “Now, let’s see about retrieving that bullet, shall we?”

The team congregated at the bullpen’s plasma screen to review what they had so far.

“So back in the day, Gramps and some buddies supposedly steal some diamonds from a wealthy family.” Tony pulled up the few newspaper articles that he and Tim had managed to find online. “Then Gramps claims to have a change of heart and steals his buddies’ shares back, but never turns them over to the police or the FBI.”

“The friends clearly don’t believe him.” Tim picked up the thread of the story. “They beat the crap out of him – except for Collins, who also claims to have had a change of heart – but get caught in the act. Two get discharged, and all serve time for assault. Meanwhile, Collins and Matthews get shipped off to Korea, but in different units.”

“We checked the service records or work addresses of all six men, but none of them served or lived at the same location as any of the others after the theft,” Tony continued. “There’s no indication that any of them ever crossed paths again, until Collins and Matthews showed up at the same cancer center.”

Gibbs looked at the six photos displayed on the screen. He knew from personal experience that a Marine didn’t have to be stationed with another Marine in order to keep in close contact; that had to
be true fifty-plus years ago, too, even without cell phones and computers. Unfortunately, that very lack of modern equipment made such contacts harder to trace, especially after so long.

“We know that Steve Patterson attended the visitation the night before the funeral, and didn’t bother to hide it,” Ziva pointed out. “He signed the guest book.”

“He could have seen the obituary in the paper and decided to pay his respects…” But even Tim, as he voiced the hypothesis, didn’t sound like he believed it.

“Look for any connections between these men after 1955,” Gibbs ordered. “I doubt these guys did their time and then just walked away from it. Talk to the families of the deceased, too.”

Three voices echoed on the theme of “On it, Boss,” and three agents scattered to their desks.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent making phone calls and interviewing family members of the three deceased Marines – Matthews and two of the alleged accomplices. No one seemed to remember any mention of their loved ones’ days at Camp Lejeune – not surprising after five and a half decades, but disappointing all the same.

While preparing to start again Thursday morning, the team was surprised to see FBI Agent Tobias Fornell exit the elevator and head in their direction, a large file box in his arms.

Gibbs raised his eyebrows. “What are you doing here?”

Fornell passed right by Gibbs and set the box down carefully on Tim’s desk. “I understand you requested the case files on the Sutton diamond heist?” he asked the young agent. “And good morning to you too, Gibbs,” he added over his shoulder.

“You’re delivering cold case files now, Fornell?” Tony asked, unable to resist the opportunity to harass his favorite FBI agent. “Who’d you piss off?”

Fornell turned to glare at Tony. “No one, DiNutso,” he countered, laying one hand protectively on the box lid. “The Sutton case has been… something of a hobby of mine. When I heard that NCIS requested the file, I wanted to know why.”

Ziva frowned at him. “The diamond theft was in 1955. I did not think you were that old, Agent Fornell.”

“I’ll choose to take that as a compliment.” Fornell looked at the agents gathered around him, then shrugged. “My second partner at the Bureau was a rookie agent back when the diamonds were stolen. It was the first case that went cold on him, and he never forgot it. When things were really slow, he’d review the case, see if anything new would occur to him. I’d look at it with him if I didn’t have anything better to do. Got so I knew the case almost as well as he did.”

He crossed his arms and leaned against Tim’s desk. “So now it’s my turn to ask the questions. What do you want with the Sutton file?”

Gibbs grinned; this was going to be good. “We’ve got a lead on your diamond thieves, Tobias.”

The stunned look on Fornell’s face was priceless. If only Jimmy were here, Tony thought. Take a picture of that and frame it – not exactly practical, but I think it’d work!
“Once Fornell had been brought up to speed on the case, he had only one question – ‘But you don’t have them in custody yet?’

“Not yet,” Gibbs answered, stressing the last word just a little. “We’re putting BOLOs out on Watkins and Patterson. Collins isn’t going anywhere.” The look he gave Fornell indicated that this wasn’t just an observation – it was a suggestion. A suggestion that Fornell would be wise to take.

And Fornell wasn’t stupid, by any means. “I’m sure the DA would be more than willing to cut a deal with him in exchange for his testimony, should he be well enough to testify if this goes to trial,” he said carefully.

Gibbs nodded. “My main concern is finding whoever attacked Lance Corporal Matthews. Closing a fifty-five year old FBI case would be a nice bonus” – he smirked at his friend – “but the assault case takes priority.”

Fornell nodded. He knew better than to argue, but that didn’t mean he was going to give in entirely. “You won’t mind if I stick around a while, will you? Maybe I can be of some assistance.”

Gibbs grinned. “Knock yourself out, Tobias.”

Tim shook his head in frustration. “I’ve gone through Lieutenant Matthews’ financials again,” he announced, “but I still don’t see anything hinky. If he ever did anything with the diamonds, he hid it very carefully.”

Fornell was sitting at Tony’s desk, reading Ziva’s report of their interview with Collins. “We don’t even know for sure that Matthews had the diamonds,” he pointed out. “Or if he did, maybe one of his buddies finally managed to convince him to hand them over.”

“True.” Tim frowned as he contemplated his next step. “I’ll check the others again, see if any of them have or had anything suspicious in their financial records.”

“Start with Collins,” Fornell suggested. “Those cancer treatments are expensive, I’m sure.”

“I’ll check, but he’s the one that gave us the connection to the diamond case in the first place. Why tell us if we didn’t know – unless he’s feeling guilty.” Tim answered his own question.

Tony walked into the bullpen as the two men spoke, with cardboard drink carriers in hand. Fornell could see that the cups inside were from the coffee shop down the street.

“Are you supposed to be focusing on the assault, Probie?” he asked, setting the carriers down on his desk. He looked pointedly at Fornell. “And shouldn’t you be sitting somewhere else?”

“I am able to multi-task,” Tim asserted, as Fornell rolled his eyes and moved to Ziva’s desk to sit. “And the two cases are connected. Gibbs doesn’t believe in coincidences.”

Fornell’s eyes followed Tony as the other man handed out the steaming coffee cups. “Any chance one of those is for me?”

“Dream on, Fornell.” Tony left Gibbs’ cup on his desk – the Boss would be back momentarily, he was sure – and looked around. “Where’s Ziva?”

“Gone to interview the fiancé about her engagement ring,” Tim answered, sipping carefully at the hot liquid. “It’s a long shot, but you never know.”
“Well, what do you know, Toby? You’re in luck.” Tony handed the last cup to Fornell, and waited until the agent was just taking a drink before he commented casually, “Hope you like green tea.”

“Got something for me, Abs?” Gibbs announced himself as he entered the lab. He held a Caf-Pow in one hand and a coffee cup in the other.

Abby turned from the computer to greet him, lips still around the straw of another enormous cup. The slurping sounds told him that her Caf-Pow tank had just hit ‘E.’

“Okay, Gibbs, that’s just creepy the way you do that.” She set the empty cup on the table, at the end of a row of similar cups, and took the new one. “Not only do you appear bearing caffeinated goodness just when I need it, but you also manage to show up just as I finished my reconstruction.” She motioned to her monitor, where an animated model had been paused.

“Show me what you’ve got.” Gibbs moved to the plasma screen, taking a sip of his coffee as he went.

“Okay.” She transferred the image to the larger screen and started the animation. “This is our young lance corporal. According to the x-rays, he sustained a blow to the back of the head.” The impact site was highlighted on the computerized dummy. “We can only estimate the force of the impact, but I’m basing it on the fact that he remains unconscious, but his skull was not fractured.”

Abby advanced the animation. A model of a bent old man appeared behind the victim, holding a cane. “We can probably rule out Collins as the attacker, unless Junior wanted to be whacked in the head. Not only is it doubtful that he has the necessary strength, but with that oxygen machine, he’d totally lose the element of surprise.” The old man raised his cane as if to hit the victim, but the taller man turned around, jumped in cartoonish surprise, then dodged the cane. The animation stopped.

Gibbs nodded in agreement. It would have taken a lot of background noise to mask the sound of the old man’s oxygen machine. And Gibbs had gotten a very good look at Collins, had watched how he moved, listened to how he talked. It wasn’t an act; the former Marine needed that machine. Gibbs doubted he could have taken more than a handful of steps without it; it was highly unlikely that Collins could have managed to switch it off to attack the much younger man, not without ending up collapsed on the floor himself.

“Next, let’s look at the fiancé.” The old man disappeared from the screen, replaced by a short, slender form holding a generic stick-like object. “Matthews would have to have been down on his knees for her to get the right angle of attack. Or she would have had to stand on a chair or something.” The attacker on the screen swung her object several times, at different angles, but failed to strike the victim’s head in a manner consistent with his injuries.

“So we know who probably didn’t do it. Do we know who did?”

“Oh, Gibbs, have patience!” Abby tapped away at her keyboard. “I don’t have enough data to be specific, but I can give you an idea. Your suspect was likely 5’10” or taller, male or a well-built female. It would help if I knew for sure what kind of weapon was used. The hospital didn’t find anything left behind in his hair, but it did break the skin, so there should be blood evidence on the weapon to match to the victim.”

“Good work, Abs.” Gibbs turned to go, already trying to plan his next move.

“Wait, Gibbs, there’s more!”
Gibbs stopped and turned back to see that Abby had started her computer animation once again. Two figures appeared on the screen behind the victim, both holding the same generic object as the female figure had. One was approximately the same height as Matthews; the other was a tad shorter.

“I checked the physical stats on both Patterson and Watkins,” Abby said. The two figures on the screen suddenly had names, Patterson being the shorter of the two. “People do tend to shrink a little as they get older, but even accounting for that, both Patterson and Watkins fit the physical profile.” The Patterson figure took a swing at the victim and connected at the impact site; he stepped back, and Watkins took his own shot, also hitting the target. “And…” Abby cleared the animation, then started it again; only this time, the victim was slightly shorter and was surrounded by four attackers, three of whom held weapons. “Grandpa Matthews also took a whack to the head when his buddies ganged up on him, way back when. Whoever did that also fit the same physical profile.”

“So do a lot of other people, Abby,” Gibbs pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s what Palmer said.” At Gibbs quizzical look, Abby explained, “He’s the one that first noticed the similarities between the two attacks.”

Gibbs looked back at the screen. “Could the same type of weapon have been used both times?”

“It’s possible,” she admitted. “Grandpa’s pals were caught in the act, and there was a broom handle and a couple of flashlights involved in that one. They didn’t bother to get prints off the weapons because the guys were caught red-handed, so I don’t know who was using what. And fifty-five years later—”

“— The evidence will have long been destroyed,” Gibbs finished for her. “Okay, I want you to review the forensic evidence from the Sutton diamond theft. I’ll have Fornell send the file down to you. We still don’t have anything other than an old man’s confession linking that case to this one.”

“Do you think we’ll really find the diamonds after this long?” Abby asked, an excited gleam in her eyes.

Gibbs smiled – the indulgent smile he only showed around Abby. “If you want something sparkly for Christmas, Abs, you should write a letter to Santa,” he teased as he turned to head out the door.

“Gibbs!” Abby’s jaw dropped in surprise. “Are you Santa Claus?” she called after him.

Without turning around or stopping, Gibbs yelled back, “Do I look like a bearded fat guy, Abby?” The door to the lab closed behind him, perfectly timed after the last word.

Abby moved to her computer, picking up the vase of roses and inhaling their scent. “No,” she answered quietly, a mischievous smile spreading across her features. “But Santa’s beginning to look like a silver fox…”

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Gibbs’ cell phone rang as he was stepping into the elevator. A glance showed that the call was coming from Tim’s desk. Rather than answer, he opted to silence the ringer and continue on his way to the squad room, entering the bullpen just as Tim was hanging up the phone.

“You rang?” he asked as he rounded the corner. Tim, Tony, and Fornell all looked up from where they were crowded around Tim’s monitor.

“Steve Patterson just used his credit card at a children’s store at the Montgomery Mall in Bethesda,” Tim reported.
Gibbs stopped only to grab his coat and the cup of coffee from his desk.  “DiNozzo, with me.  Let’s go pick him up.”

“Right, Boss.”

Gibbs half expected Fornell to insist on coming along, but the FBI agent just saluted them with his cup before taking a sip and returning to Ziva’s desk.  He thought it was a good sign that Fornell wasn’t encroaching on Tony’s territory again; but why did Fornell have that smirk on his face, and why was Tony rolling his eyes?

Ziva was walking quickly down a crowded hallway when she felt her phone begin to vibrate; she’d turned off the ringer in deference to her surroundings.  She stepped close to the wall, as far out of the way as she could get, and answered the call.

“David.”

“Ziva.”  She turned up the volume; she could barely hear Tony’s voice.  “We’ve got a hit on Patterson’s credit card.  He’s right in your area.  Have you finished with the fiancé yet?”

“Yes, she claims she and Mark picked out the ring together at a jewelry store, and he paid for it.”

“Okay, meet us at the Montgomery Mall.  I’ll check the parking lot for his car while you and Gibbs look through the mall for him.”

Ziva looked at the throng of people around her.  “I’m already there,” she informed Tony.

“What?”

In the background, she could hear Gibbs say, “I told her no shopping with suspects until they’ve been ruled out!”

“They bought the ring from a Kay Jewelers near home,” Ziva explained, flattening herself against the wall as a large group of teenagers barged past, walking four abreast and not willing to step aside for anyone.  “There was another store here, and they were willing to contact the Chesapeake store and provide me with information on the ring.  It looks like the diamond in her ring is not one of the stones from the Sutton heist.”

“Oh, good work, Ziva.  Keep an eye out for Patterson.  We’ll call when we get there and arrange a place to meet up.”

“Will do,” Ziva responded, and was answered with silence as the call was disconnected.

She looked around the busy mall, full of last-minute Christmas shoppers.  Finding one man here was going to be like hearing a pin drop into a haystack, so the sooner she started looking, the better.  She just hoped Gibbs would choose to overlook the shopping bag slung over her shoulder…

Finding Patterson proved to be much easier than expected, thanks in part to Tim’s discovery that the man had a bad leg and was entitled to handicapped parking.  They located his car and parked nearby; then Tony waited outside to keep an eye out for him while Ziva and Gibbs swept through the mall.  Gibbs even appeared to accept Ziva’s claim that the shopping bag was intended to help her keep a low profile; at least he didn’t chew on her for it, which was the best she could have reasonably hoped
When they finally spotted Patterson, Ziva realized quickly that they were going to have to modify their usual approach somewhat. The older man had a young girl with him, who was carrying a large bag decorated with Mickey Mouse ears.

“I thought Patterson’s children and grandchildren lived in Seattle,” Ziva commented quietly to Gibbs.

“They must have come to visit for the holidays.”

They followed behind while Patterson limped down the hallway, the girl at his side. She seemed very excited about whatever was in the bag; she would stop to open it and peek inside, then close it again and skip a few steps to catch up with him. When the two passed close to a pair of empty benches, Ziva caught Gibbs’ eye and bent her head toward them. He nodded in agreement, and they picked up their pace.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Patterson?” Ziva called out. The old man turned around in surprise. “May we have a word?”

Patterson looked from Ziva to Gibbs. “Of course,” he answered, “but how do you know who I am?”

They pulled out their IDs and introduced themselves. “We’d like to ask you a few questions regarding Lieutenant Jonah Matthews,” Ziva explained.

“Oh, no, honey.” Patterson laughed; but the flicker of his eyes toward the two agents told Ziva that it was for the girl’s benefit – he didn’t believe it himself. “They just want to talk to me about an old friend of mine, that’s all.”

The girl seemed to buy his explanation. “From back when you were in Korea?” she asked innocently.

He chuckled. “No, even earlier than that. Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth.” Patterson winked, and the little girl giggled.

Gibbs gestured toward the benches. He and Patterson sat on one, while Ziva convinced the little girl – Hannah, as she introduced herself – to sit with her on the other bench and show her what was in her bag.

“So what’s this about, Agent Gibbs?” Patterson asked once he was sure his granddaughter’s attention was focused elsewhere.

“Where were you yesterday morning, Lieutenant?”

“Yesterday? We all went to the Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian. Got there when they opened up at 1000, left around 1500, I think. It was me, my wife, our daughter, her husband, and Hannah and her older sister Claire.” Patterson looked suspiciously at Gibbs. “What does this have to do with Lieutenant Matthews?”

Gibbs briefly explained about the attack on Mark Matthews. He noted that Patterson, while more wary of the NCIS agents than Collins was, seemed genuinely surprised that the young man was attacked. But when Gibbs mentioned that it happened in Jonah Matthews’ home, he caught
Patterson nodding almost imperceptibly.

“You attended Lieutenant Matthews’ visitation Monday night?” he asked the older man. When Patterson nodded, Gibbs continued, “You weren’t always on the best of terms with him, though, were you.” It wasn’t a question.

Patterson looked nervous. “That was more than fifty years ago, Agent Gibbs. Maybe dinosaurs weren’t really roaming the earth back then” – he glanced over at his granddaughter, who was enthusiastically babbling away at Ziva – “but it’s still ancient history.”

“Well, history is repeating itself.” Gibbs glared hard at Patterson. “And I want to know why.”

“I told you, I was at the Smithsonian —”

“At 1000, yes. But Lance Corporal Matthews was attacked sometime between 0400 and 0600.”

Patterson shook his head. “My family will tell you I was at home until we left for the museum. My car’s got one of those GPS things, too, and I know you can check those things to see where it’s gone.”

“We’ll do that, Lieutenant. But do you have an alibi for the night of September 7, 1955?”

“What?”

But Gibbs saw the telltale flicker of the man’s eyes, and knew he’d hit paydirt. He waited a moment, letting Patterson squirm under his gaze, before quietly informing him, “We know about the diamonds, Lieutenant.”

Patterson’s eyes darted to the other bench, where Hannah was still oblivious to the tension between the two men. Ziva, for all that she appeared to be completely engrossed in the little girl’s chatter, kept them in her peripheral vision at all times, ready to react at the slightest provocation; and Gibbs himself was only an arm’s length away. But Gibbs knew that it was the presence of the little girl that would dictate Patterson’s actions; he’d seen right away that Hannah was the light of the old man’s life. Patterson wouldn’t run, and he wouldn’t make a scene; but beyond that, Gibbs couldn’t predict what the former Marine would do.

When he realized that Patterson wasn’t going to respond, Gibbs deliberately turned his head to watch the two “girls.” Ziva was now showing Hannah what was hidden in her own shopping bag; the conspiratorial look between the two confirmed Gibbs’ initial guess that Ziva had done her Secret Santa shopping while running down the lead on the engagement ring. If it didn’t interfere with her job – and especially if it helped keep the little girl occupied – what did he care?

He figured that he’d let Patterson stew long enough. Casually, Gibbs turned back to the man.

“Personally, I’m not too concerned about a fifty-five year old theft,” he confided. “But when an innocent Marine is attacked because of it, on my watch, then I have to be concerned about it. Mark Matthews is in intensive care because someone decided to dredge up ‘ancient history.’ If you help me find out who” – and Gibbs glanced back at the granddaughter again – “I’ll do what I can to see that the charges against you are reduced.”

As with Collins, the reminder that he could spend the last years of his life in prison for a rash act undertaken decades ago seemed to weigh heavily on Patterson’s mind. He smiled for Hannah when the little girl looked his way; but the expression on his face when he looked back at Gibbs was one of resignation.
“I’d like to speak with a lawyer, Agent Gibbs,” Patterson said – but the slight nod told Gibbs that he’d get what he wanted.

Ziva crossed her arms as she watched Gibbs and Fornell enter the interrogation room on the other side of the glass. Steve Patterson was already there, seated next to his lawyer.

“You know what they were there to buy?” she said to Tim. “They got a stuffed donkey to give to a little girl whose name they picked off of a tree.”

“Oh, an Angel Tree. Or a Giving Tree, or whatever they call it.” Tim grinned at Ziva. “It’s a way to make sure that less fortunate kids still get something special for Christmas.”

“Yes, I know.” Despite the long-suffering tone to her voice, Ziva smiled fondly. “Hannah told me all about it.”

At the table in the other room, they were just getting down to business. Ziva and Tim focused on the former Marine’s story.

“It was Summers and Watkins who planned it all,” Patterson explained, naming one of the deceased Marines and the one whom they hadn’t yet located. “But we all did it, we all shared responsibility for it.”

He went on to explain in detail how they’d cased the estate on their liberty days, broke in when the family was gone, and blew open the safe where the diamonds were kept. Fornell seemed particularly intent during this part; occasionally he would nod his head when Patterson revealed a detail that filled in one of the many holes in the FBI case file.

Ziva leaned closer to Tim, though she hardly needed to worry that they’d hear her. “Did you ever locate Watkins?”

Tim blew out his breath in frustration. “No. The guy doesn’t own a cell phone or a GPS. He has a checking account, but no debit card; he has one credit card, which he uses once a year and pays off right away so he can keep the account active. I drove out to Sterling, and he wasn’t home. Local LEOs are keeping an eye out for him, but nothing yet. The guy must hate modern technology even more than Gibbs.”

Ziva smothered a laugh with her hand; she doubted that Tim shared that last bit with Gibbs when he gave his status report!

She tuned back in to the confession as Patterson began to describe the beating that he and his co-conspirators – minus one – gave to Matthews after their shares of the stolen diamonds were stolen again.

“Watkins was pissed that Collins wasn’t going to help, but Summers, he just said ‘hey, more for the rest of us’.” Patterson shook his head. “So one night after lights out, we wrapped Matthews up in his blankets and took him to one of the warehouses. We thought we were going to teach him a lesson, and then he’d have to tell us where he hid the diamonds.”

He snorted in derision. “I should have listened to Collins. One of the MPs must have heard the noise and went for help. All I knew was, one minute we were kicking and hitting him, and the next minute, we were surrounded.”

“According to the incident report, there were some makeshift weapons found,” Gibbs prompted the
man.

Patterson held up his hands and shook his head. “That wasn’t me,” he insisted. “The point was to hurt him a little, not kill him or hurt him enough so he couldn’t report for duty. I don’t know who had the broomstick, but Watkins was one of the guys using a flashlight, I know that. He caught me on the arm with it, gave me a bruise this big.” Patterson made a circle with his thumb and middle finger to indicate the size.

“So you got caught, and served your time.” Fornell asked the next question. “What did you do when you were released?”

“Well, I didn’t use a weapon, so I didn’t get a big chicken dinner,” Patterson explained, using the Marine slang for a bad conduct discharge. “I got sent to Camp Pendleton in California.”

“And you never wondered what happened to Jonah Matthews and the diamonds?” Fornell’s voice had a disbelieving tone.

“Of course I wondered,” Patterson replied. “But he went to Korea, and after that he was stationed on the East Coast again. I had a chance, once, to transfer back, but by then I was married, and Emma didn’t want to move here if she could help it.” He chuckled, despite the seriousness of the situation. “And then, about ten years ago, she got transferred out here for her job. I was out of the Corps by then – got discharged after the car accident that wrecked my leg – so we moved here.”

Gibbs reiterated Fornell’s question. “Did you ever run into Matthews once you moved back?”

“Once, about eight or so years ago.” Patterson smirked. “Ran into him in a grocery store, of all places. I meet the most interesting people when I’m out shopping.” He caught Gibbs’ expression and wiped the grin off his face. “I was curious, so I followed him home. He’s got a nice house, but not what I would have bought if I’d had all that money. Made me wonder if maybe he didn’t tell the truth about wanting to give the diamonds back.”

“But you didn’t speak to him?”

“No.” Patterson shook his head. “I didn’t want to go there. Collins was right, like I said. It was better to just walk away, pretend like it never happened.” He sighed then, and gestured at his surroundings. “But I guess sticking your head in the sand doesn’t work forever, does it?”

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Christmas Eve started off with a snowfall, just to get everyone into the holiday spirit. That was what Tim told himself, anyway, as he shook the snow off his shoes and pulled off his winter coat.

“Morning, Tony,” he greeted the senior field agent when he entered the bullpen.

“Merry Christmas, Probalicious,” Tony responded. “Hey, that kind of rhymes!”

Tim dropped his gear behind his desk, then booted up his computer. Unlocking his desk, he opened the top drawer to stow his gun away – and shouted out with glee –

“Nutter Butter bars! Someone put Nutter Butter bars in my drawer!” Tim looked around and saw that Ziva was just sitting down at her desk. “It had to be one of you two. Come on, ‘fess up. One of you picked the lock on my desk.”

Ziva smiled slyly. “That doesn’t mean one of us left the bars for you,” she pointed out. “We could have picked the lock to help out one of the others. Or Gibbs could have done it.” She didn’t know
for sure, but she suspected that this was the reason for Tony’s early arrivals all week. Still, the point of the game was to keep the recipients guessing, right?

“Well, thank you, Santa Claus, whoever you are.” Tim pulled out the box and started to open it… but his phone began to ring, so he set the box aside to take the call.

“All ready for tonight, Ziva?” Tony asked, tossing a pencil eraser in her direction.

“I believe I’ve found something my gift recipient will like,” Ziva answered, although truthfully she wasn’t 100% certain of this. She’d done the best she could, and was hoping that it would be enough.

Tim dropped the handset back onto the cradle and jumped up. “Kyle Watkins’ E-ZPass unit just registered on the Dulles Toll Road. Looks like he’s headed home.”

“Then let’s go!” Gibbs cruised through the bullpen, coffee in one hand, car keys in the other. Tim briefly entertained the idea of Leroy Jethro Gibbs in a sleigh pulled by reindeer – only Gibbs and Santa Claus could be everywhere they needed to be at one time. Or perhaps they were one and the same…?

“Now, McGee!”

“Right, Boss!” Tim hurriedly ripped open the box and grabbed a bar to take along. He was last into the elevator, and was the recipient of a head slap for his trouble – but it was Christmas Eve and he had a Nutter Butter bar, so everything was good.

Four inches of snow had accumulated by the time they made it to Watkins’ house and back. Kyle Watkins had hardly said a word since they announced themselves at his door, but the aggravated expression on his face when they told him they’d tracked his E-ZPass transponder warmed Tim’s heart and made Ziva smile. Darn modern conveniences – it wasn’t impossible to live completely off the grid, but it wasn’t a lifestyle for the careless, that was for certain.

Tony had a feeling in his gut from the moment he saw Watkins. On the surface, he seemed as much the friendly old grandfather as Patterson had, or as Gibbs and Ziva had described Collins. But there was something in his eyes that triggered Tony’s suspicions. It was as if the man was watching them very carefully, waiting to see what they would reveal so that he would know how much they knew – and what kind of reactions he should show them.

Ziva also felt that something was not right. Watkins had also expressed shock and dismay when told about the attack on Mark Matthews, but where Collins and Patterson had seemed genuinely worried about the young man – who, after all, had played no part whatsoever in their schemes – Watkins’s eyes seemed cold and hard. He did ask how the lance corporal was doing, but something – a slight relaxation in his shoulders when told that Mark was still unconscious in the ICU – made Ziva watch his body language even closer. This was a man who had learned how to appear concerned, but whom Ziva suspected had rarely actually felt the emotion.

Once they returned to the office, Tim headed straight for his desk. He had thought to use the E-ZPass system to find Watkins’ current whereabouts, but he could also use it to track the car’s recent toll road use. A few minutes allowed Tim to find that Watkins had arrived in the area Tuesday afternoon and hadn’t left – at least by toll road – until Friday morning. This was the first piece of evidence – circumstantial, true, but more solid than gut feelings – that placed Watkins in the area at the time of the attack. Now to see if Watkins had any kind of alibi… well, maybe right after a Nutter Butter bar…
I don’t understand why I’m here, Agent Gibbs,” Watkins complained as soon as Gibbs entered the interrogation room. “I haven’t seen Matthews since Lejeune. Surely you don’t think I held a grudge this long and then took it out on his grandson?”

“No, I don’t,” Gibbs admitted, taking a seat. “I think you held a grudge this long and then went looking for the diamonds after Matthews died. His grandson just got in the way.”

Watkins held Gibbs’ gaze. “What diamonds are these?” he asked levelly.

In response, Gibbs pulled out copies of the original newspaper articles and spread them out on the table. “The diamonds you and your friends stole from the Sutton family back in 1955.”

Watching behind the glass, Tony had to give the man credit. He spent just the right amount of time examining the articles before looking back up at Gibbs. “I don’t know anything about this,” he told the agent. “I admit that we went a little too far disciplining Jonah Matthews, but we took the punishment we were given. By the time I was released with my walking papers, he was already transferred out. I never saw him again after that night.”

“What did Matthews do?”

Watkins seemed puzzled. “Pardon?”

“To earn a blanket party. What did Matthews do?” Gibbs didn’t like repeating himself, and didn’t bother to disguise the fact.

“He disrespected his unit.” The response was instantaneous; it was the first thing out of Watkins’ mouth that Tony had no trouble believing.

“And how did he do that?”

The answer this time was a little slower. “He stole from his bunkmates. Little things, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that he stole from his brothers.”

“Little things like diamonds?” Gibbs persisted.

Watkins shook his head. “I told you, I don’t know anything about that,” he said. He crossed his arms stubbornly. “And if you’re going to keep on about it, I’d like my lawyer present.”

Abby was pouring over the crime scene photos from the Matthews’ home when Fornell walked through her door. He seemed rather embarrassed to be carrying such an enormous cup of Caf-Pow; clearly someone had shared her caffeine weakness with him.

“Agent Fornell, what can I do for you?” She met him halfway across the floor. “Let me help you with that,” she offered, taking the heavy cup from his hands and immediately working on making it lighter.

Fornell turned his most charming smile on her. “Miss Scuito, I was hoping you could help me with something.”

“Is it something Gibbs would approve of?” she asked in a teasing tone, although she wasn’t really joking.
“I believe he would,” Fornell reassured her. “I was at the Matthews’ house this morning –”

“Did you find the diamonds?” Abby interrupted excitedly.

He shook his head. “No, but I’m hoping you could help me with that,” he said, convinced now that he would gain her support. Apparently the idea of finding hidden jewels appealed to the Goth scientist. “Can you access the original blueprints? I’ve looked everywhere, including up the chimney and behind the vent screens, and I haven’t found anything. Matthews and his wife had the place built on an existing foundation in 1962, and I wondered –”

“I’m on it.” Abby tapped quickly away at her keyboard. While she worked, she thought of every ‘hidden treasure’ mystery she’d read as a child. “Did you find any loose boards? Maybe a loose brick in the fireplace?”

“No. I looked all around that fireplace. I even opened the presents under the tree –”

“Tobias!”

“Don’t worry, I wrapped them up again. No one will ever know.”

Abby turned to Fornell and winked. “Santa Claus knows,” she reminded him. “You’re going to get coal in your stocking…”

“No, I’ve already been punished for it,” Fornell said dourly. “I had to listen to those damn clocks all morning. Tick-tick… tock-tock… tick-tick… drove me insane.”

“Huh,” Abby commented absent-mindedly as she pulled up the blueprint. “Tony said they were in sync when he was there on Wednesday…” She paused. Something hinky was going on…

“The guy must have reset them every day, then.” Fornell moved to stand behind Abby, looking at the monitor over her shoulder.

Abby stared, unseeing, at the floor plan for the Matthews’ home. Something was weird. Something she’d recently seen…

“That’s it! That’s it!” she shouted, turning to explain to Fornell, and plowing straight into him. They overbalanced and fell to the floor together, just as Tony and Tim came in the door.

“Whoa!” Tony called out as they rushed to rescue the FBI agent. “Red light! Red light!”

Tim helped Abby to her feet. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Abby regained her balance, then grabbed on to Tony and pulled him right up to her face. “The clocks! Tony, which way did they swing?”

“What?”

“The pendulums,” Abby said slowly, as if talking to a small child. “Show me how they were swinging when you were there.”

Eying her warily, Tony raised his hands and used his index fingers to demonstrate the pendulums swinging together: left, right, left, right…

Tim hit on it quickly and joined Abby in chorusing, “Coupled oscillators!”

Tony and Fornell looked at each other and added their own verse to the song. “Huh?”
Abby hurried back to her computer and pulled up several crime scene photos to display on the plasma screen.

“Okay, check this out,” she said, moving to the display. “In the pictures that Ziva took on Wednesday, the pendulums on the two clocks are swinging left to right together.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Tony reminded her.

“But look at the pictures in the pictures,” Abby instructed. She zoomed in on the photo of the grandson and his fiancé standing in front of the fireplace. In that picture, the pendulums of the clocks were exactly opposite each other; one went to the left, while the other went to the right.

“They’re different,” Fornell pointed out the obvious. “So…”

Tim went into lecture mode. “Back in the 1600s, it was discovered that two clocks, placed on a mantle or other common surface, will eventually come to swing exactly 180 degrees out of phase. Lots of things affect the motion of a pendulum and thus the accuracy of a clock; air pressure, temperature, vibrations from vehicles passing in the street, even.”

“The two clocks cause the mantle to vibrate, very slightly,” Abby continued. “Experiments have been done starting the pendulums at different positions. No matter where you start them, they’ll eventually return to swinging in opposite directions like this.”

The forensics specialist began zooming in on other photos on the mantle. Every family photo that included the clocks illustrated the phenomenon.

“So what you’re saying,” Fornell said slowly, “is that the clocks have been tampered with.”

“And probably not too long before Ziva’s pictures were taken,” Abby agreed. She turned to Tim and Tony. “Tobias says that they’re already out of sync.”

“Wow…” Tim commented. “This sounds like a Nancy Drew novel.”

Tony’s head whipped around. “You read Nancy Drew, Probie? Really?”

“And the Hardy Boys,” Tim answered defensively.

“And Trixie Belden? Encyclopedia Brown?”

“Who?”

“What is this, a book club?” Gibbs’ voice from the doorway interrupted them. He and Ziva stepped into the room, looking curiously at the gathering of agents before them.

Fornell cleared his throat. “Abby and McGee were just explaining to us that the clocks on Matthews’ mantle have been tampered with recently.”

“There could be something hidden inside,” Abby speculated excitedly.

Tim nodded. “Like in The Secret of the Old Clock. Only in that story, it was a will hidden in the case of the clock.” He looked around at his teammates. “It’s like the first book in the series. They’ve even made a computer game out of it.”

“But if the clocks have been tampered with –” Tony started.

“Then whatever was hidden in there is already gone.” Abby’s disappointment showed plainly on
her face.

“Watkins wants a lawyer,” Gibbs updated the team plus one. “We can’t get a warrant for his car or house until we have something more concrete linking him to either of the Matthews men.” He pointed to Tony and Tim. “Go back to the house and bring in those clocks. We didn’t find his prints, but he’s got a scrape on the back of his wrist. Maybe he left some DNA behind.”

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The left-hand clock, when Abby examined it, proved to have nothing more than dust inside the casing. But the right-hand clock was far more interesting.

“There’s a section of the frame where the wood wasn’t sanded down well,” Abby told them, pointing it out on the back of the clock. “That wouldn’t have happened if the Bossman had made it, of course –”

Gibbs cleared his throat. “And what about the frame?” he prompted her, steering her back on track.

“Watkins must have scraped his wrist while reaching inside the clock. There’s a small amount of blood on the splinters. We can match the blood to him, and if there were any splinters left in the scrape, we can use that to tie him to the clock as well.”

Fornell craned his neck to look inside. “But was there anything in there for him to find?”

“That’s the fun part, Tobias!” Abby shined a penlight into the clock’s casing. “See up there on the left-hand side? That’s adhesive that’s been recently exposed. Something was taped inside the clock, and was ripped out recently enough that there was hardly any time for dust to start settling on the adhesive.”

“How long until you can get a DNA profile from the blood on the clock?” Fornell asked.

“DNA takes time, but I can get a type for you pretty quickly. Watkins’ blood type will be in his record, so if they match, that might give you enough to get a warrant.” Abby was swabbing her sample from the clock as she spoke.

“Good work, Abby,” Fornell complimented her, then saw the look on Gibbs’ face. “Sorry, Jethro, didn’t mean to steal your line.”

“You can steal my lines, Tobias, but don’t even think about trying to steal my scientist,” Gibbs threatened. He put his arm around Abby and leaned in to kiss her forehead briefly.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

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Tony managed to get a search warrant by a judicious application of DiNozzo charm on Stacey from Legal, who conceded that she might know a sympathetic judge. Thus, the early afternoon of Christmas Eve found one FBI and four NCIS agents combing through the property of former Marine Kyle Watkins, looking for a weapon, a letter, and – just possibly – a small fortune in diamonds.

“Who wants to go through his car?” Tim asked, looking out the window at the beat-up Ford Escort in the driveway.

Gibbs glanced up from where he was flipping through a pile of papers on the coffee table. “Don’t you want to, McGee?”
“Well, no,” Tim responded, “it’s cold out there!”

“Nancy Drew wouldn’t let a little thing like sub-zero temperatures stop her, would she?” Tony teased as he headed for the master bedroom.

“I should have just kept my mouth shut,” Tim grumbled as he pulled his gloves back on.

But twenty minutes later he was back inside, all traces of grouchesiness vanished. “I’ve got what we’re looking for, Boss!”

Fornell reached Tim first and looked at what was held in the younger man’s hands. “No diamonds, McGee?”

“You’re as bad as Abby, Tobias,” Gibbs chided him as he reached for the evidence bags that Tim held.

Tim pulled off his gloves and blew on his fingers to warm them. “No diamonds, but I found a potential weapon and the letter from Lieutenant Matthews to his grandson.”

Gibbs handed the bag containing the heavy Maglight to Tony so that he could hold the plastic-shrouded letter at a better angle to read.

Fornell waited patiently for as long as he could – which was about fifteen seconds – before he demanded, “Well? What does it say?”

Gibbs passed the letter to him. “He documented every aspect of the robbery, for one thing. That ought to corroborate Collins’ and Patterson’s accounts. He also confessed to stealing the diamonds back from the others and hiding them away.”

“Did he say where?” Ziva asked.

“No,” Fornell answered for him, “but he left his grandson a clue. A quote from William Blake – ‘The hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom no clock can measure.’”

“Which led Watkins to the creepy clocks,” Tony deduced. “But were the diamonds in the clock, or did he find another clue?”

Gibbs zipped up his coat and pulled his gloves out of his pockets. “Tobias, why don’t you and I go talk to Watkins again and find out?” he suggested. A smirk appeared briefly on his face. “Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys can stay here and look for secret hiding places.”

“Right, Boss,” Tony responded. “Hey, McKeene! Let’s get to work!”

Tim groaned. Guess it could be worse, he thought as he went into the kitchen to start checking cabinets. At least the Bobbsey Twins never came up...

Gibbs stalked into the interrogation room where Watkins and his lawyer had been kept waiting for the last ten minutes.

“Agent Gibbs,” the lawyer, whose name Gibbs hadn’t yet bothered to learn, spoke up as soon as the door closed. “It’s Christmas Eve. Surely you don’t intend to keep my client from his family any longer than...”

“Let’s not waste any time, then.” Gibbs dropped a file box on the table with a loud thump. “What
did you find in the clock, Kyle?”

Watkins glared silently at him. The lawyer looked puzzled.

Gibbs opened the box. One at a time, he pulled out a photo of the back of the clock, showing the bloodstain; the letter from Jonah Matthews, still sealed in an evidence bag; and the Maglight flashlight, also in its evidence bag. Then he sat down across from Watkins and leaned forward.

“The blood on the clock puts you at Matthews’ house, Kyle. The flashlight and the letter were found in your car. My forensics expert says there are still traces of blood on the flashlight. When she matches that blood to Mark Matthews, Kyle, it’ll all be over for you. You’ll spend the rest of your life, however long that is, looking out through the bars of a prison cell.”

Gibbs watched Watkins’ face carefully. To the casual observer, there was no reaction; but Gibbs saw the nervous flicker that gave him away. Glancing at the lawyer, Gibbs got to his feet and packed away the evidence, then picked it up and headed for the door.

“Wait!”

His hand on the doorknob, Gibbs turned his head. “You have something you want to say?”

The lawyer put his hand on Watkins’ arm. “May I have a moment to confer with my client, Agent Gibbs?”

“Confer all you like,” Gibbs offered generously, if somewhat sarcastically. “I’m going for coffee.”

He slipped out of the room, sure now that he was going to get a confession when he came back. Now, if he could just talk Fornell into buying the coffee…

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After a brief bargaining session in which reduced prison time was offered for a full confession to both crimes, Watkins described how he had grabbed the note from the clock and fled the scene, intending to come back after he’d had time to puzzle out the clue. For that was what was in the clock – not diamonds, but another clue to their location.

“’It’s the menace that everyone loves to hate but can’t seem to live without.’ Paddy Chayevsky.” Abby read from the scrap of paper, sealed inside yet another evidence bag, that she held in her hand. “Any guesses?”

She looked around the room. Tony, Tim, and Ziva had been recalled from the Watkins home and now lounged at their desks, hands wrapped around hot cups of coffee, or tea in Ziva’s case. Gibbs and Fornell stood together at the plasma screen, scrolling through photos of the Matthews home. Ducky and Jimmy, who had come up from Autopsy to begin decorating the bullpen for the holiday gathering planned for later in the evening, wrapped tinsel around the file cabinets and computer monitors.

Tony scooped up a round plastic ornament and began tossing it up in the air. “I don’t know… politics?” he hazarded.

“How would that indicate a hiding place for stolen diamonds?” Ziva shot down Tony’s attempt.

Ducky paused from where he was stringing lights behind the desks. “You know, that quote does sound familiar,” he mused. “It reminds me of a literature class I once took. It sounds like something my old professor would have said, but I’m afraid I no longer recall the context.”
Tony tossed the ornament at Tim, who fielded it easily. “Hey, McGoogle,” he suggested, “try looking it up online.”

Gibbs and Fornell, engrossed in their own speculations, were startled when Tim suddenly shouted out, “TV! That’s it!”

“TV?” Tony sounded hurt. “Who loves to hate TV?”

“Paddy Chayevsky, apparently,” Jimmy pointed out.

Ziva looked up sharply. “There was an old television set in Matthews’ bedroom,” she reminded them. “I remember wondering if something that old could still possibly work –”

“Let’s go!” Gibbs had to dodge around Jimmy to get his bag, then again to get out from behind his desk.

“Jethro, don’t forget –” Ducky started to call out after them.

“Seven o’clock, Ducky, we’ll remember,” Tony assured the doctor as they dashed toward the elevator.

“And don’t be late!” Ducky shook his head as the elevator door closed behind them, then turned back to his decorating.

Tim’s cell phone rang as the agents piled into two cars – with Gibbs and Ziva both driving, it was anyone’s guess who would get there first. “Special Agent McGee,” he answered as he slid into the back seat and grabbed for his seat belt.

Up front, Tony started whistling, but Ziva smacked his arm before he got more than a few notes into his song. “Hey! What was that for?”

“I do not want to hear any comments about my driving,” Ziva warned him. “Musical or otherwise.”

“Hey, guys.” Tim interrupted them as he disconnected his call. “That was Stephanie Miller. Mark Matthews is waking up, and she says he keeps asking her to go check the clocks in his grandfather’s house.”

“Did you tell her we’re way ahead of him?”

“I told her we’d handle it. It’s Christmas Eve, you know? She should spend it with Mark and his family, not running around on a wild goose chase.”

“I thought you usually ate turkey or ham on Christmas,” Ziva commented as she slid up to – but fortunately not into – an intersection. “I never hear about anyone eating goose, yet you insist on chasing them.”

“A wild goose chase is a waste of time, Ziva,” Tony tried to explain.

“Obviously,” Ziva agreed. “It makes more sense to chase the turkey.”

The five agents crowded into the late Jonah Matthews’ bedroom. An ancient console television sat in one corner of the room, rabbit ears sticking out from the top.
“It’s not even plugged in,” Ziva noted. “I didn’t see that before.”

Gibbs pulled out a pair of latex gloves and handed them to Fornell. “The diamond theft is an FBI case,” he observed. “Tobias, why don’t you do the honors?”

Fornell accepted the screwdriver that Tim handed to him, then pulled the television away from the wall. A few moments’ work allowed him to unscrew the back of the wooden frame that encased the cathode ray tube; then he held his hand up.

“Camera, please?” He borrowed Ziva’s camera to take a few photos, then reached in and carefully withdrew a small, black velvet bag.

Ziva took the camera back to allow Fornell to untie the drawstring that held the bag closed. He tipped the contents into his hand. A dozen glittery gems spilled out, their facets catching the light.

“These were worth some serious money back in those days,” Fornell commented as Ziva took pictures of the diamonds in his hand.

“They’re worth some serious money now,” Tony replied. “Is this all of them?”

Fornell counted again, just to make sure. “Yes. We’ll have the lab test them to make sure they’re genuine... but I think your Marine lieutenant told the truth. It might have taken him forever to do it, but he finally did the right thing.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Gibbs and Fornell made a detour to Bethesda on the way back, so that Gibbs could inform Lance Corporal Matthews and Stephanie Miller about what they had found. When they returned to the office, Gibbs started for the elevator, but Fornell headed for his car.

“I’d stay,” the FBI agent said in response to Gibbs’ offer to stick around for eggnog and holiday treats. “But I’ve got a stop to make, and then… I get to play Santa Claus tonight.”

Gibbs smiled and slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Give Emily a hug from me.”

“Will do.”

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“Okay, it’s 1900!” Abby called out as she strode through the bullpen. “If you’re working, put it away. It’s time for presents!”

“Abigail, do calm down,” Ducky admonished. “I’m sure your present isn’t going anywhere.”

Abby spun around and hugged the medical examiner. “How do you know, Ducky? Are you my Secret Santa?”

Tim couldn’t help but smile at his excitable friend. “She’s been asking everyone that all week,” he told Ducky, “which I’m pretty sure was against the rules.” He winked at the older man.

“Yes, Timothy, you are correct. Perhaps Abigail should get her present last,” Ducky teased with a gleam in his eye.

Tony leaped to Abby’s defense before she could even begin to pout. “Oh, you can’t blame her, Duck,” he said. “Not when her Secret Santa has been leaving her stuff for days. The flowers, Caf-Pows…”
Ducky relented. “Oh, very well,” he sighed. “Perhaps Abigail should go first, then, before she explodes from the suspense!”

Abby clapped her hands and threw her arms around Ducky… and then whirled around at a tap on her shoulder.

“Gibbs! It was you! I knew it!” She took the small box from him, but stopped to kiss his cheek before unwrapping it.

“What is it, Abby?” Ziva asked.

“It’s – ooh, Gibbs, it’s perfect!” Abby held up a tiny coffin, carved in wood and painted black, with a hook attached so it could be hung as an ornament.

“Wow, Boss, you really nailed that one – no pun intended.” Tony admired the ornament from a distance, but then something caught his eye. “It’s even got tiny hinges!” he exclaimed. “Open it, Abby!”

Abby undid the little clasp that held the coffin lid shut, then opened it and squealed in delight. As the team crowded around, she lifted out a pair of silver ankh earrings.

“Gibbs, I love it!” She tried to hug him and bounce on her feet at the same time, which might have worked if Gibbs had bounced with her. But Gibbs was most certainly not the bouncing type, so Abby had to settle for hugging him, then bouncing around.

“I think the person who receives a gift should be the next one to give,” Ducky ruled as festivities coordinator for the evening. “Abigail, whose name did you draw?”

Abby bunny-hopped her way to Tim’s desk, where she had stashed her wrapped gift. Picking it up, she assumed a slightly more serious demeanor – that is, she stopped bouncing, presumably for the safety of the item she carried. Her face still beamed, though, as she presented the gift, with a flourish, to Ziva.

“Abby, thank you!” Ziva carefully took the package and started to unwrap it. “Are you the one who left the chocolate muffin on my desk this morning?”

“That was me!” Abby was all but vibrating in excitement. The group watched as Ziva pulled a plain white box free of the wrapping paper and opened it slowly.

“It’s beautiful!” Ziva lifted out a small jewelry box with a Star of David inscribed in gold on the top. The box itself was a deep, dark red, with swirls of lighter shades making an appearance here and there. She set it carefully on her desk, then hugged the other woman, the slightest trace of tears appearing in the corners of her eyes.

Ziva’s gift for Jimmy – picked up yesterday at the mall, inspired by a conversation she’d overheard in the jewelry store – was a travel-sized Scrabble game, with magnetic tiles. “I can’t play Scrabble now without thinking of you,” she said teasingly. “And I thought, perhaps when we all go out for drinks, we could take it along and play.”

Jimmy was touched. “Thank you, Ziva,” he said as he hugged her lightly. “When I see anyone playing Scrabble, it always reminds me of you throwing me on your desk.” The sudden silence that fell made him review his words, and his face turned bright red. “Uh, that sounded a lot worse out loud than it did in my head,” he explained, as everyone began laughing.

“Why don’t you pass on your gift now, Mr. Palmer?” Ducky suggested before the young man could
start digging himself into a metaphorical hole.

“Okay. Er…” Jimmy picked up a small gift bag and held it out to Gibbs. “I wasn’t really sure what to get you, so I went with this. I hope you like it, but if you don’t I can mphh mmph mmph…” Jimmy finally stopped trying to talk past the hand that Tony had used to cover his mouth, and gestured for Gibbs to open his gift.

A small amount of red and green tissue paper was all that hid his present from view. Gibbs reached into the bag and withdrew a gift card for a local tool retailer.

“See, I knew if I tried to pick something out, I’d get the wrong one,” Jimmy explained, now that Tony had – possibly unwisely – removed his hand. “But this way you can get something you’ll actually want to use.”

When he was sure that Jimmy was finally done talking, Gibbs stepped forward and offered his hand. “Thank you, Jimmy.” He pretended not to notice the younger man’s sigh of relief.

“Looks like we’ve hit a dead end,” Ziva pointed out. “Gibbs has already given Abby her gift.”

“I’ll start us up again, if no one objects,” Tim offered. When everyone nodded, he pulled out a box slightly smaller than a department store shirt box and handed it to Ducky.

Once the paper was removed, the box was revealed… “File folders?” Ducky asked, looking quizzically at Tim.

“Oh! No, that’s just the only box I could find that was the right size,” Tim reassured him. “Open the box.”

Ducky pulled the top off the box to reveal a loose stack of typewriter paper, about an inch thick, resting inside. The top sheet read:

Deep Six:

Signs of Life

A short story by

Thom E. Gemcity

“This is the only copy in existence,” Tim told them. “It’s a story about Ducky’s character – that is, the character based on Ducky,” he corrected quickly.

“Why, Timothy!” Ducky looked at the manuscript in awe. “This is literally priceless. I – I can’t remember ever receiving such a personalized gift before.”

The team exchanged glances. Ducky had a story for every occasion – did he really not have one now?

“You gave me quite a difficult act to follow, Timothy,” Ducky went on as he carefully fitted the cover over the box and set it aside, then picked up an elegantly wrapped package.

"You’ve got me beat on packaging, that’s for sure,” Tim admitted as he admired the older man’s handiwork.

The ribbon-bedecked gift was handed to Tony, who unwrapped it carefully to review two DVDs. “The Lion in Winter!” he exclaimed. “And… The Lion in Winter!”
“I didn’t know if you would prefer Peter O’Toole and Katharine Hepburn, or Patrick Stewart and Glenn Close,” Ducky explained. “So, I thought you should have the opportunity to choose.”

“Thanks, Ducky!” Tony looked around the room. “Movie night for New Year’s?”

“You think we won’t catch a case at the end of the year, DiNozzo?”

“Well, Boss, that’s why we’ll have the viewing in MTAC!”

Gibbs rolled his eyes at the antics of his senior agent – but he didn’t disagree.

“And, last but certainly not least” – Tony scooped up a gift bag from behind his desk and handed it to Tim – “from me to you, Probie!”

“So you’re the one who broke into my drawer and left the Nutter Butter bars!” Tim exclaimed as he reached into the bag.

“Of course,” Tony teased. “Gotta keep that big brain of yours fueled and ready to go!”

Tim’s hand found several slim volumes and pulled out – “Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective?”

“I could not believe it when you didn’t know who he was,” Tony told him. “So I thought you and Leroy Brown should be introduced. I ran out after we got back from the Matthews house, and –”

“Leroy Brown? Really?” Abby’s grin could have lit up Autopsy during a power outage. “You have to let me borrow those when you’re done, McGee!”

“But don’t start reading now, Timothy,” Ducky admonished him. “Mr. Palmer, the eggnog, if you would be so kind…”

NCIS Director Leon Vance laughed to himself as he slipped unseen from his vantage point on the balcony and continued on to his office. He’d known about the MCRT’s Secret Santa exchange and holiday plans, and was slightly envious. Oh, he’d been invited to participate, of course; but he’d known that he would be out of town and didn’t think it fair to make someone wait until after Christmas for their gift. It was sheer luck that his trip had ended early; he wished he could have known ahead of time. Still, he was almost as happy just getting to observe his agents’ moments of levity. Their work didn’t always allow for such relaxed moments…

Vance flipped on the light switch and was halfway to his desk before he noticed the slim, book-sized object covered in wrapping paper that sat squarely in the middle of the work surface. Curious, he set down his briefcase and picked up the package, recognizing Ducky’s hand in the ribbons that decorated the unexpected gift.

Opening it, he discovered that the wrapping paper had concealed a black, leather bound executive planner. He flipped it open and noticed that someone – several someones, judging by the handwriting – had already filled in a few appointments for him.

“Monday, 0800,” Vance read aloud. “Meeting with FBI director re: 55 year old cold case that NCIS solved with FBI’s assistance.” He glanced down at the preliminary report that had been left underneath the planner. Looks like I’ve got some reading to do on Sunday…

“Friday, 2100 – New Year’s Eve party in MTAC. Screening of The Lion in Winter.” That was in Ducky’s neat handwriting. Apparently the medical examiner had anticipated Tony’s reaction to his
gift – not that it was all that difficult, really.

Vance skimmed through the rest of the planner, noting where birthdays and anniversaries had been added. He wondered who thought it was necessary to highlight and double underline Jackie’s birthday and their anniversary; did they really think he could run a federal investigative agency and not be capable of remembering a couple of dates?

Chuckling to himself, Vance sat down at his desk and picked up a pen. The planner had a pad of blank paper for notes in the back, and it would be a shame to not use it for its intended purpose. Humming quietly to himself, he began to make a list.

“For Friday: popcorn, coffee, Caf-Pows, cookies…”

This wasn’t Arlington. It was just a small, uncelebrated cemetery in a small, nondescript town in Virginia. Fornell stepped out of his car, shoes crunching on the new snow, and followed the directions he’d been given until he found what he was looking for – an unassuming stone marking the grave of an unrecognized hero.

John Meier

December 24, 1932 ~ April 1, 2000

Loving Husband and

Devoted Father

“Huh. You never told me you were a Christmas Eve baby, John,” Fornell addressed the unseen spirit of his former partner. “Leave it to you to go on April Fool’s Day, though.”

He carefully laid the wreath he carried on the ground in front of the stone, then turned to go. But he found himself seized by a strange impulse, and turned back.

“Gibbs must be rubbing off on me,” he muttered as he pulled his notebook and pen out of his coat pocket. “What a horrible thought.” He wrote quickly but carefully, then tore the sheet off and placed it in the center of the wreath, sliding it partway under a sprig of pine to hold it in place.

Straightening up, he nodded one last time to the memory of his partner, then walked away, leaving behind a token of friendship and the words amending the tombstone:

And a damn good

FBI Agent

Case 62-CE-5875

CLOSED

“Christmas is the day that holds all time together.” ~ Alexander Smith

End Notes
Thank you for reading! I decided to unearth a few older stories from the depths of my hard drive and post them here (they're also posted on ff.net and/or the NFA Community Storyboard). It's a good time for a holiday fic (and it lets me procrastinate on all those holiday chores!).

This was inspired by iheartgibbs' prompt "pendulum" and by the Nancy Drew mystery "The Secret of the Old Clock" by Carolyn Keene.

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