If the King had run off with Prince Charming...

by C_C

Summary

Mention of a "Hot date" leaves several Gibbs family secrets exposed. And Tony trying to hide in plain sight. AU is a divergence from cannon around hiatus.

Notes

The title is a throw away line from chapter 2. There are no dragons, no castles, no fantasy elements. Though there are a few evil step mothers.
The alternate universe is a simple break with cannon. Tony does not do the undercover job for Jenny.
Also the timelines are a little... fast and loose.
Signs of things to come

“No can do Abbs. Got a hot date tonight. It’s a fourth date, we’re at a critical stage here, and I’ve been trying to catch this one too long to postpone.”

“That’s what Gibbs sa- If you’re playing games with him Anthony Michael DiNozzo I will kill you and I’ll get away with it.”

“What?! Abby, what just happened?”

“You know Gibbs is like a father to me Tony. And I know when you date it’s about having a good time. There’s nothing wrong with that but it just… isn’t who he is.”

“I promise I know what I’m doing here Abby. He wouldn’t risk his career- or mine- for a fling, I know that. And neither would I. And I meant what I just said, I’ve been after him a long time. Years. I wouldn’t put that sort of effort into a few weeks of fun.”

“Don’t let him hurt you either.” Abby warns softly, as if in penance for her earlier outburst.

“I have no illusions about who I’m involved with. Yes he’s a grumpy bastard- that’s why making him smile is so much damn fun. Now can we please change the subject before he walks in here and head slaps me for telling you?”

“I shouldn’t have said I had a hot date. Besides I gave it another week at most before Abby knew.” He switches to signing with a contrived neutral expression, “Stop meddling young lady.”

“But I like Tony so much better than either of the wicked stepmothers and I worry about you,” Abby signs back.—

“Couldn’t you at least wait until I leave the room to talk about me?”

“What makes you think we were talking about you?” Abby asks wondering if Tony’s learned to sign.

“I know my own name when I see it Abbs,” He makes the signs for t and smile, their idiomatic sign for Tony. “And isn’t,” He demonstrates another sign, “stepmother?”

“Abby was just saying she thinks you’re more fun than my exes. Of course she only really knew one of them.”

“I met number two more than a few times. She called me Tabby and insulted my tattoos.”

“I’m sorry Diane was rude to you Abbs, she thought I was not so discreetly seeing you on the side. She never really bought the ‘one of my co-workers’ introduction. Something about government agencies having dress codes,” Gibbs explains with a hint of a smile. “If you happened to meet her again I wouldn’t be surprised if she offered you an apology.”

“Little did she know,” Abby teases eyeing Tony. “Okay but that doesn’t explain why number three was rude to me every time you left the room. She knew I wasn’t your mistress or anything.”

“Later Abby,” Gibbs tone is a warning. “Make sure you copy the director on the tox report for Sanderson, you know how they get all touchy about us determining a PFC on active duty was a drug addict. Always have to give ‘em proof.”
“Already taken care of bossman. I’m out of here as soon as I sign this report.”

Gibbs kisses her cheek, “Sorry we’re missing your dinner party, Abbs.”

“Go forth, have fun, do all sorts of things you won’t tell me about later. Just remember what I said.”

“Anything on your desk DiNozzo?” Gibbs asks firmly rooted in his ‘boss’ persona.

“Nope boss. Was checking in with Abby to see if the trace on the boots gave us anything- it didn’t.”

“Head on out then. I’m going to send McGee and Ziva home. Pick you up in an hour?”

“Sure thing boss. Should I dress for the range or for dinner?”

“Dinner.” He leans in and drops his voice, “And pack a bag, just in case.”

The promise of that makes Tony shiver visibly. He takes the stairs up to the bullpen to get his things just to burn off a little of the energy it gives him.

Abby chuckles and Gibbs just makes his way to the elevator with a wry grin. “This one’s a keeper Pop,” Abby whispers after the retreating back.

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After showering and shaving Tony finds himself wavering uncertainly over his bag. He’s thrown a set of work clothes, including a turtleneck, and extra underwear in it but he can’t seem to decide what to take with the idea of spending tomorrow at Gibbs’ house in mind. In the end he settles on jeans and two shirts, a nice one he could wear out to dinner or a movie, and a comfortable one he could say, help sand the boat in. After adding his shaving kit and sneakers he gives the whole thing one more once over before hauling ass down to the street to wait. He doesn’t have to wait long.

Tony casually tosses his bag in the back seat and is surprised to receive a quick but warm kiss on the lips as he takes his seat. Right there, out in the open, parked on a fairly busy public street.

Gibbs laughs at his expression, “Careful Tony, not paranoid.” He glances toward Tony’s building and finds an older woman glaring at them, “Unless she’s what you’re afraid of.”

“Not afraid of anything, least of all Mrs. Jacobs,” Tony assures him with a cheeky grin. “Just surprised at how easy this is. It seemed impossible for so long, for so many reasons… I guess I’m just floored by the notion of you leaning over and kissing me right out in the open where anyone at all could be passing by and see us.”

“But the world implodes if Tony DiNozzo knowingly kisses a guy in public?”

“Nope. The world imploding is saved for the day Jethro Gibbs gets a decent haircut.” Which earns him a swat that is more of a caress than a slap. He settles contentedly as Gibbs merges into traffic. “So what advice did Abbs have for you before she knew I was your ‘hot date’ for the evening?”

“To lighten up and have a little fun. She said, and this is a quote, ‘serious doesn’t have to mean boring and uptight.’ Then she suggested I start a game of footsie for starters.”

“Funny, once she knew it was me she threatened to kill me if I was just having fun with you.”

“The key word there being ‘just’ Tony. She’s wanted me to settle down with somebody who makes me laugh for about a year now. I think you’re exactly who she had in mind.”
“Who’d you have in mind?” Tony asks seriously.

“You’re definitely who I’d pick Tony, don’t doubt that. I’m just…” He sighs.

“You’re a marrying man. You like waking up next to someone and knowing when it comes time to fall back into bed they’ll be there. Sharing a comfortable silence. Arguing over the chores.” Tony smiles, “You like taking care of someone and maybe- just maybe- letting them take care of you. What part of that exactly is supposed to prevent you and I being together?”

“You flirt like you breathe Tony. You… chatter. You get so damn mad when I try to protect you…”

“What happens when I flirt Jethro?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, “Either I get rebuffed pretty damn hard or I get information useful to an investigation. Have I even once flirted with someone else during our personal time?”

Gibbs thinks about it- really thinks about it- and smiles, “No, you haven’t.”

“Like the chatter, as you put it, the flirting is a sort of slight of hand. It keeps people looking where I want them to look. As for being upset when you protect me, only when it’s at your own expense. Keeping me safe isn’t good enough if you aren’t safe too. After all Boss I’ve got your six. Hopefully in all senses. You want to investigate strange noises at night? Fine, so long as you take your weapon.” His tone stays light but his expression becomes serious, “What we’re talking about here Jethro is the honest prospect of a long term relationship between us. You know, months, years, maybe forever. I’ve really thought about it and I want it. The question is do you?”

“So much Tony. Or we wouldn’t be here at all.”

Tony glances at where exactly they are, not that he thinks for a second that it’s what Gibbs means. Still, now that they’ve established what this relationship is and that they both want it there’s no need for this date to be quite so intense. “You must want to protect me. I didn’t have to grab the ‘oh shit’ handle once.”

Gibbs laughs, “You’re just used to my driving.” He kisses Tony again, “Thank you.”

“For what Jethro?”

“For knowing when to lighten the mood.”

“I’m good for you because I’m fun, remember?”

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About halfway through dinner a lull settles in the conversation and Tony weighs each of the two… impertinent questions on his mind before posing the safer one. “So who is the redhead in the gold convertible anyway?”

“Been saving that one a while haven’t you?” Gibbs asks with a chuckle. “Right after I joined NIS I bumped into an old friend from my first unit. We had a drink, talked about old times and what our buddies were doing. It became kind of a regular thing. Thursday nights at Bernhart’s. Anyway, after a while his girlfriend, a pretty little senator’s aide, started making noises about wanting to set me up with her sister, and in the age old tradition of men trying to keep a woman he started pushing me to do it. So after a month of that I caved. I went on the damn date. And Elizabeth, the sister, was just exactly my type as my unit knew it. Tall, redhead, feisty, and down to earth. She took one look at me and said ‘thank god.’ Turned out she was just as in the closet as I was and we made great friends. She’s out now and I’m… comfortable with who I am but we’re still good friends.”
“Will I ever get to meet her?” Tony prods with humor in his eyes.

“Eventually. We don’t exactly see each other often.” Gibbs gives Tony’s hand a quick squeeze, “You’ll like Liz. She’s got a wicked sense of humor. As evidenced by the fact that she was deliberately teasing the lot of you right around the time when McGee joined the team. She’d purposely bring over coffee just so she could drop me at a scene.”

“I knew she wasn’t a girlfriend right from the start you know.”

“Is that so?”

“You kissed her cheek like you do Abby’s. It’s your trademark sign of nonsexual affection for a female. Saw you drop one on Madame Director once. She looked ready to spit nails. She knows what it means.”

“Jenny is certainly… persistent.” He smiles just the slightest little bit, “And I knew what I was doing that night. I wanted her to feel like her cousin just escorted her to the senior prom and everybody knew it. She practically blackmailed me into going.”

“And I appreciated being gang pressed into escorting Ziva.”

“Kept you from bringing a date I’d have to pretend to be nice to.”

“She almost broke my ankle for trying to lead and then she had the gall to grope my ass Jethro. Which goes to show actually staking a claim works better than setting me up on a date with a woman who thinks I’m a sex fiend and wants to take a no strings bite.”

“She hasn’t touched you since that night.”

“I told her you’d fire me and then Abbs and I would have to exact revenge. I think Abby scares her.”

“One more thing I have to thank Abby for then. At this rate I’ll have to think of something better than caf-pow!”

“I’ll pick her out some new boots if you want.”

“Now that I might have to see. Especially the expression on the clerk’s face when you ask to see them in a size seven.”

Tony grins, “Last time she just asked me if they were for my wife or girlfriend. Blushed like a schoolgirl when I told her ‘best friend’ instead, but then maybe she assumed a guy’s best friend must be male.”

“Abby’s your best friend?” Gibbs asks with genuine surprise.

“Not exactly. It’s just easier than trying to explain what Abby is. She’s the little sister I never had. The shoulder to cry on I always needed. The defender of virtue that I don’t really need. The partner in crime all of us need. You know how Abby is, how do you define that?”

“She’s indefinable. That’s for sure.” Gibbs doesn’t bother to hide his pride in that statement.

“Were you ever going to tell me you’re her father?” Tony asks without censure.

“Caught that did you?”

“You knew I was learning to sign Jethro. And I’d always sort of wondered. You do treat her like
Daddy’s little girl sometimes. Particularly when she’s in danger.”

“She’s the one that decided no one at work should know—outside of human resources. She doesn’t want other people to treat her differently because she’s my daughter. As you might have noticed I hadn’t told her about us yet.”

“I can respect that. Except she seemed pretty intent on telling me earlier.”

“As I said, she likes the idea of you and I together. A lot. As in she’s been hounding me to take you out for that year I mentioned earlier. Personally I wanted you a whole other kind of distracted tonight.”

“Not right away. I mean clearly, this is a nice place and you made reservations. You did plan to finish wining and dining me first, didn’t you?” His tone is teasing.

“Wining and dining sure. Answering a whole slew of mood killing questions about my relationship with my grown child? Not so much. If I promise to answer any questions you have some other time can we drop the subject?”

“Sure thing Jethro. I just wanted you to know I figured it out. And that it’s not nearly enough to run me off. So what do you think of the Skins’ chances against the Cowboys this week?”

“Pretty damn good, seeing as Dallas sucks this season. Having fun?”

“Kind of a lot yeah. Do you honestly think there is a single topic that could come up that would put me off after five years of waiting? If you’re trying to seduce me there’s no need. And if you’re trying to woo me… Well all things considered dinner was a good effort. But frankly Jethro I know you well enough that if you still had to win me I can assure you that you never would.”

“So you’re mine DiNozzo?”

“So long as you’re mine too, sure am. Now what do you say we go have dessert at your place?”

“I was thinking more… breakfast but I suppose we could fit a little dessert in between now and then.”

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Upon waking Tony decides the first thing he’ll have to do to ensure his own long term happiness is get Gibbs to replace this mattress. He stretches and is glad to discover that the sheets are still warm beside him, Gibbs hasn’t been out of bed long. When he goes to pull some clothes out of his bag he finds a pair of grey sweat pants on top of it and smiles. They’re a bit too short but soft enough to make up for it. After donning the loaned pants he makes his way down to the kitchen and grins stupidly. Gibbs is cooking breakfast.

“You could have stayed in bed,” Gibbs calls over his shoulder.

“I rate breakfast in bed? Forget what I said last night Jethro, woo away.”

“Thought I was. Have a seat.” Within five minutes he sets a plate of French toast, hash browns and bacon in front of Tony and another across the table before retrieving two cups of coffee and taking his seat.

“Hazelnut creamer? In a cup of your beloved Jamaican Blue Mountain? You do love me.”
Gibbs laughs, “Because I know how you like your coffee? I would have thought the clue was not letting you move more than an inch during the night.”

Tony shakes his head, “You could just say it you know.”

“And have you strut around like a satisfied tomcat all day? Not likely.”

“You don’t want me satisfied?” Tony asks with a wounded expression.

“Don’t want you strutting,” Gibbs corrects with a little half smile.

“Better keep me occupied then.”

“What’d you have in mind?”

“We could work on the boat… Go for a run… Head back to bed…”

“You really want to spend the whole weekend in bed?” Gibbs isn’t disapproving, just skeptical.

“Maybe not all weekend, but a few more hours sounds good to me. If it makes you feel better I promise I’ll drag you to the movies later and then when I reference it at work you can act all clueless like usual. Besides are you really surprised that I am highly in favor of sex?”

“Just so long as you know that we don’t have to get to everything this weekend. It’s not like when Monday comes this is over.”

“I know. Long term relationship, remember? But you can’t even promise me a whole weekend. One phone call and we’re back to stolen kisses and head slaps for the duration. And as I keep saying I waited a long time with my overactive imagination. Now if the issue is that you’re not in favor of sex you really do need to tell me here Jethro.”

“Oh I’m in favor of sex. Also cuddling and making out like there’s no other purpose in the world. And if anyone, even Abby, ever hears those last two about me you’ll be going without sex for as long as I can stand it. I just… There has to be more to us than that Tony.”

“I thought we’d already been down that road. There is. I love you. We’re just on a little sex break at the moment. I meant it about helping with the boat or going for a run. Or drinking with your old Marine buddies. Or whatever it is you want to share with me. Unless you secretly knit or something. Just… Not until at least lunch time, ok?”

“Lunch time?”

“I like a nap after fantastic sex.”

Gibbs laughs as he puts the dishes in the sink and they head back upstairs.

Around midday Tony awakens when a delicious smell rises from the kitchen and he’s momentarily confused to find Gibbs still holding him close. Last night’s dinner conversation combined with the fact that the smell is that of Abby’s jambalaya suggests it’s her in the kitchen. Gibbs huffs a soft sigh, “Let me talk to her alone for a few minutes, okay?”

“Sure, I’ll just get cleaned up a little before I come down.”

“Can’t let you be seen with bed head,” Gibbs agrees with a little kiss to the back of Tony’s neck.
“What are you doing here Abbs?”

“We always have lunch together on Saturdays Pop,” Abby reminds him easily.

“Unless I’m having company that doesn’t know about my daughter. You knew Tony was spending the weekend with me.”

“No, I knew you two had a date last night. Didn’t know he’d still be here.”

“You heard me telling him to pack a bag.”

She gives in. “And I saw his coat and shoes so I made enough for all three of us. He should know Pop.”

“He does. Asked me outright last night.”

“Then why?” Abby waves a hand, indicating the whole display up to this point.

“I’m not as ready to share this as I should be,” He admits quietly. He pulls Abby into a hug, “Scared to loose him, baby.”

“You won’t,” Abby assures just as softly. “He loves you. It’s why I was pushing you so hard to tell him how you feel.”

“And here I was thinking you just wanted to regale him with wicked step mother jokes and make me blush in public.”

“Never. Ever consider that I just want you both to be happy?” She shakes her head, “How much did you tell him last night?”

“Almost nothing. He was afraid it’d jeopardize his chances of having his wicked way with me,” Tony teases from the doorway.

“No fair ganging up on me,” Gibbs protests. He kisses Abby on the cheek. “You can tell the story. I know you love to.”

“You’ve gotta tell the beginning, it’s weird when I do.”

Gibbs motions for Tony to take a seat. “Senior year of high school Jolene Lerner and I dated for six months. I took her to the prom and things progressed as they normally do with teenagers. And then I started actually paying attention to her attitudes and plans for the future. She was something of an idealist with an eye on college and changing the world. I had already signed up for my first hitch in the Marines. We both decided it was best if when I left for Paris Island and she left for Tulane we just let it go. What I didn’t know, but she must have, was that when she left she was almost three months pregnant. If Abbs hadn’t knocked on my door one day I never would have known.”

Abby smiles at them as she brings lunch to the table and takes over the storytelling. “First off let me make it very clear I had a great childhood. I love my dad and my little brother to bits. I never would have known that he’s actually my step dad if his mother hadn’t resented me.

“Mom and Dad met a year after I was born. It was love at first sight. They were married before my third birthday came around. Dad always treated me as his own. But Grandma Scuito was always just a little bit cold to me. When she asked to see me after they told her there was nothing else they could
do for her emphysema I admit I sort of expected an apology. What I got was a copy of my birth certificate. Which lists Leroy Jethro Gibbs, not Victor Scuito, as my father.

“It took almost six months for me to ask my mother about it. She said they were too different to make it work and that Gibbs was too old fashioned to have let her walk away if he’d known. I thought about it awhile and when spring semester ended I set out in search of my real father.”

“I thought you were a process server that first time you rang my doorbell you know,” Gibbs adds contemplatively.

“The shout of ‘I signed the damn things already!’ through the door was a clue,” Abby offers with a chuckle. “Over the next three years we saw each other a dozen times. It was… nice. It didn’t really change anything about my life as I’d lived it. That is until somebody casually mentioned there might be a job opening in my field here in DC.”

“You got Abbs her job?” Tony asks Gibbs surprised.

“No. Just told her there was an opening.”

“And I didn’t tell anyone we were related until after I got the job. And then only personnel. Didn’t want people treating me like I was made of glass just because Gibbs is my father.”

“I was glad to find her settled in when Diane and I got back from Moscow. Of course Diane wasn’t happy to find me with an armful of twenty-something lab tech…”

“She was cheating on you, of course she was paranoid.”

“You are kinda… affectionate Abbs,” Tony offers a little shrug. “I was sort of jealous before I figured out it was more of a family thing. Which happened about the time you started hugging me.”

“Good, cause you are family Tony.” She grins at the glare her father levels on her, “We’re all family. Us, Ducky, Tim, Jimmy, Kate. Haven’t decided about Ziva yet. And I still say Madame Director counts as a wicked stepmother even if you never married her.”

“Jen would probably be alright if I hadn’t started a pissing contest over Ari right out of the starting gate. You really want to mess with her Abbs? Let it slip that you’re my baby girl. She’ll implode.”

Abby grins evilly at that, “She wanted to have your babies didn’t she?”

With a look that promises retribution if necessary Gibbs offers a quiet, “She mentioned it several times while we were… together in Paris. It seemed to upset her that I was firmly against having children.”

Tony makes an inquisitive noise, “But you love kids.”

“I do love kids. And finding out I was Abby’s father was one of the best days of my life. But after Kelly… I failed her Tony. I didn’t protect her. And I couldn’t go through that again. And the thought of trying to somehow replace her… No. I can be a friend, a mentor, but the only one to ever call me daddy again will be Abby and that’s the way it should be. My girls mean the world to me, and I’ll never let them go.”

“I’d never want you to. If you could see your face when you talk about Kelly and Shannon, Jethro… I can see the man you used to be in that expression. Before the world fell on your shoulders… I just want you to know you’re not Atlas, you don’t have to carry that burden alone,” Tony’s fingers trail down his lover’s cheek before he remembers Abby’s presence and blushes.
When the silence stretches a beat too long Abby purposely bounces and asks, “So, your turn. Spill. Who caved first?”

“I did, Abbs,” Gibbs admits, glad of the topic change. “Ziva asked him about the appeal of clubbing. And just as he gets to the phrase ‘You’re not gonna meet your soul mate there’ he looks up and meets my eyes. I figured you were right, only so much of that kind of thing can go on before you have to label it hinting.”

“Hinting? I thought I was clearly stating my position. Even I’m not dumb enough to just outright ask ‘Hey boss what do you say we buy a house in the suburbs and make like rabbits for the next twenty or thirty years?’ Especially considering rule twelve.”

Abby beams, “You said this was a fourth date?”

“It’s been about six weeks. And yes dinner last night was the fourth time we went out,” Gibbs confirms.

“Are you going to tell anybody?”

“Maybe Ducky. Probably Mrs. Macalister from across the hall in my building. She’s always telling me I need to settle down. You Jethro?”

“As Abby said my family is at NCIS and I don’t think it’s a good idea. Not right away. At least not McGee and Ziva. I’m fine with telling Ducky. And I’ll tell your mother if that’s what you were hinting at baby. Not that I think she’ll care.”

“She worries about you. Especially because you’re taking care of me.”

“And she’d approve of me?” Tony asks with a little huff of a laugh.

“As long as Pop is really happy this time, sure.”

“Having second thoughts about signing up to join the most bizarre family in the world there Tony?” Gibbs asks, humor clearly masking honest concern.

“Do we really need to get into my family history here? My own damn father forgot me at a hotel like a disposable razor. You don’t have anything near cornering the market on family issues.” Tony offers a genuine smile, “Besides it’s too late now. It’s a done deal, remember?”

Gibbs’ cell phone begins to ring up stairs. With an annoyed sigh and a wary glance he goes to answer it.

“So you two clearly had fun last night.”

Tony blushes, “I don’t know what you’re getting at here Abby. You know I don’t really kiss and tell and even if I did I wouldn’t.”

Abby makes a face, “I wouldn’t want to know Tony, he’s my father. You just have one hell of a hickey there.”

“Got a mirror?” Tony asks unwilling to leave the table before he knows whether or not the call Gibbs has just received is summoning them to the office.

Abby produces a compact from her bag and grins as Tony lightly probes at the bruise on his neck, “Guess I’ll be wearing that turtleneck to work on Monday then.” He tilts his head and the mirror to
get a clearer look.

“You could just lie about how you got it,” Abby teases.

“I’m doubting anyone would believe a ‘Melinda’ or a ‘Hannah’ gave me this one Abbs. Just a bit too far back.” He hands back her mirror with a lopsided grin, “I might as well wear a sign that says ‘My boyfriend’s more than a little possessive’ if I were to walk in with this showing. Hell I won’t have to tell Mrs. Macalister anything she’ll take one look and know.

“What’s the verdict Jethro?” Tony asks as Gibbs reenters the kitchen.

“Just Jenny using the excuse of us deciding that PFC Sanderson did in fact die of an overdose of drugs but that he bought it in port to check up and see if she could ferret out who I’m seeing and how serious it is.” He turns to Abby, “I’m beginning to think you were right, I should have told her Liz and I were getting married. Maybe started talking about having kids.”

“Just so you know I’m nobody’s mistress Jethro,” Tony warns playfully.

“Good thing I’d never go through with it then.”

“Madame Director knows you’re seeing someone?” Tony asks more seriously.

“She asked me to dinner last Saturday. I told her the truth, that I had a date. Just not who with.”

Tony groans theatrically, “She’s going to gut me when she finds out.”

“We’ll protect you Tony,” Abby promises hugging him. She moves to Gibbs’ side and hugs him, holding her cheek out expectantly for a kiss, “Have fun Pop, Tony. See you Monday at work.”

Granting the kiss Gibbs smiles at her, “Make sure you call me when you know what day you need my help for Habit, baby.”

“Will do, only so many damn good plumbers out there after all.”

Gibbs sees her out and returns hugging Tony as the younger man washes the dishes, “She threaten you again?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The look on your face when I came back in here.”

“No, she was teasing me about the fact that my boyfriend mauled me like a tiger loose at the zoo.”

“You seemed to like it just fine while I was doing it.”

“I like it now Jethro. It’s just going to affect my work wardrobe for a week. Ziva is going to notice.”

“You could tell her you’re really competitive and I’m an absolute master at gay chicken.”

“I can just see her asking McGee what that means now. But seriously Jethro if one of them sees it they’ll add two and two and get at least one half. There’s just no plausible way a woman left that mark. So what do I tell them? Do I make up a boyfriend? Jean Paul the beautiful and mysterious French Canadian steward… Do we let slip about us on pain of death? Or do I just tell Ziva to take a flying leap?”

“What do you want to do Tony? Not what do you think is best or what do you think I want, what do
“I’m a little conflicted. On one hand I want to tell Jenny Sheppard to keep her damn hands off you and Ziva that flirt and lecher are not synonyms. On the other hand we’ve got a great team that I love working with. I don’t want to break that up, not if we don’t have to. Forced to make the decision I’d choose this over the job but that’s a choice I don’t want to have to make.”

Pulling Tony back against his chest a bit more firmly he makes an understanding noise before speaking. “Okay, here’s my plan: When the bruise starts to fade you let Abby cover it with make-up. She’s good at it, can have you fixed up and on your way inside three minutes. And you start to let your at work persona mature a little. Let them get curious. Eventually they’ll guess you’re in a serious relationship. You won’t even have to confirm or deny, they’ll assume they know. Then you can start casually dropping subtle hints that your special someone might not be female. If they take it well we tell them the truth. Then I pull them aside individually and impress upon them the vital importance of discretion.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a while now haven’t you Jethro? That was too well thought out and long term to be off the cuff.”

“Since about the time you called us soul mates and I backed you into a wall and took inventory of your tonsils. I couldn’t have had a fling with you Tony. I knew from the moment I touched you we only had so much time before we were going to have to get you your own team or find a way to protect our team. And I’m a selfish bastard Tony, I don’t want to let you go even though it’d be a better move for you, career wise.”

“I don’t give a damn about my career. It’s not about becoming director someday. It’s about what I can bring to an investigation. I did the job, headed the team, was even pretty good at it, but I don’t want it long term. I’m… of more use when I don’t have to concentrate on what five other people are doing. It’s nice to know you see me like that though, on equal footing I mean Jethro.”

“If you were still in need of training or hands on supervision I would transfer you Tony. Otherwise what we have would be taking advantage and I couldn’t do that to you. Hell if Tom Morrow was still director instead of Jenny I’d have made a request for you to technically report directly to him and we wouldn’t have a problem. But Jenny’d make waves. Big ones.”

“Okay then, now that we’ve settled that and Abby’s had her fun it’s time to get dressed. If we leave in the next twenty minutes we can make the 2:40 show.”

“And what cinematic masterpiece are you dragging me to?” Gibbs asks as they make their way upstairs.

“Flyboys. It’s a World War I movie with a pretty enough cast to cover any plot holes and if that isn’t enough I figure we can just make out like a couple of over eager teenagers.” He grins, “And when Abbs sees it she and I can play ‘inadvertently suggestive moments bingo’ which is a hell of a lot of fun.”

“Inadvertently suggestive moments?”

“Moments where the writers or actors just didn’t think about the implications or double meanings of a scene or piece of dialog. Like two guys trash talking about how they’re gonna take each other down. The writers and actors want to express that they really want to fight. But sometimes, if there’s some latent chemistry between the two, it seems like they’re offering to do some else entirely,” Tony leers and leaves no question as to what he means. Gibbs just shakes his head.
“I guess I better head home,” Tony murmurs as they reenter the house.

“Why? Got something you need to do?”

“No, I just don’t want to wear out my welcome.”

“You couldn’t Tony. I like having you for company, no matter what we’re doing. And besides I expected you to stay until we left for work on Monday. If that’s not what you want that’s fine but don’t go on my account.”

“If I stay will you teach me to work on the boat?”

“Not much to learn per se, but if that’s what you want.”

“I’m betting you’re overestimating my general knowledge here Jethro.”

Gibbs laughs, “I’m down to sanding and shellacking the outer hull. At least for the moment. If you can’t manage sandpaper or a paint brush without intensive instruction you can’t touch my boat.”

“Long even strokes using steady pressure with the grain for both of them,” Tony leers a little.

“Maybe I should test your technique first. Just to be sure you’ve got the pressure right.”

“What if I prefer to show my technique with a different type of tool instead?”

“We’ve got all night and all day tomorrow, why don’t you show me both?”

“Now who wants to spend all day in bed?”

“Sunday is meant to be a day of rest.”

“Something tells me the church would frown on that definition of rest.”

“Shut up and come to bed Tony.”

“What if I’m not tired?”

“I can fix that.”

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“It seems as though you have had a most enjoyable weekend Tony,” Ziva comments as she enters the bullpen.

Resisting the urge to adjust his collar Tony smirks at her, “What makes you say that Zee-va?”

“You are grinning even more foolishly than normal and humming. My guess would be that you got lucky last night.”

“Whatever I did or didn’t do last night is none of your business,” His tone neither confirms nor denies. “I enjoyed my weekend. I’m in a good mood. End of story.”

Ziva settles in at her desk before she speaks again, “Why are you being so secretive?”
“Why do you care?”

McGee walks in just then, “Care about what?”

“Tony is in a very good mood and refuses to talk about it.”

“What’s wrong Tony, dating one of the girls from legal after Gibbs told you not to?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Ziva snorts at that, “You are not a gentleman Tony.”

Tony considers giving them an accurate but vague description- six foot, great legs, perfect ass and piercing blue eyes- but decides that beyond it not being in keeping with the plan he doesn’t want to objectify Jethro, especially not for Ziva and McGee’s amusement. “Then there must not be anything to tell.”

Gibbs passes through the bullpen with Abby’s first caf-pow! of the day without a word. Tony just catches his knowing smirk as the doors close and inwardly shakes his head.

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“You two are going to get caught,” Abby declares as Gibbs enters her lab.

“Why do you say that Abbs?”

“You’re smiling and Tony’s been humming Etta James’ At Last all morning. Listen,” She gestures toward her phone from which the activity in the bullpen can be heard loud and clear. Including Tony once again absentmindedly humming as he types.

“Got my extension on speaker phone again?”

“I like listening in. Besides I keep hoping Tony’ll actually start singing it, he’s got such a nice voice.”

Gibbs laughs at that, “Probably not gonna happen baby. Do me a favor?”

“Sure thing Bossman.”

“Find a local florist and send Tony some flowers for me, whatever you think is best with this note,” He pulls over a sheet of paper and writes ‘Tony, Thanks for the great time. I hope we can do it again soon, it’s so hard to find a real gentleman these days. XO, J.’

“Laying it on a little thick there aren’t you Pop?”

“Part of the plan is to make Ziva and McGee see Tony as growing up. Seems to me he’s done a little too good of a job convincing them the opposite is true so I’m lending a bit of a hand.”

Abby shoots him a knowing smile, “In other words they insulted your Tony and since you can’t just grind them into dust for it you intend to show them how wrong they are. And the fact that you get to tease Tony just a little at the same time probably doesn’t hurt.”

“Maybe,” He concedes evenly. He kisses her cheek, “Don’t go overboard with the flowers baby.”

“Half dozen red roses in a tasteful square vase?” She asks hitting a few keys and bringing up an offering from her favorite florist on her computer.
“Looks just right to me Abbs. You’ve got my credit card number right?”

“You know I do. They should arrive around noon. Remember to scare Tim or make Ziva jump or they’ll start to question your mood.”

He laughs at that, “Will do. Call me when you need a refill. If we don’t have a case yet I’ll bring you another.”

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Ziva and McGee beat Tony back from lunch and both immediately make a beeline for Tony’s desk after spotting the roses. “I knew he had a date this weekend!” Ziva nearly crows.

“Why wouldn’t he tell us about her?” McGee wonders aloud.

Ziva ignores him, plucking the card from the arrangement instead. “Thanks for the great time. I hope we can do it again soon, it’s hard to find a real gentlemen these days. X O J.” She looks up at McGee, “What does X O J mean?”

“XO means hugs and kisses, and J must be her first initial,” McGee explains. “You think maybe he really is just being polite to her?”

“Or there is something about her that would cause us to ridicule him.”

“I’ll take that if you don’t mind,” Tony smoothly relieves her of the card, reads it and slips it into his pocket.

“So who is J?”

“Someone who enjoys my company,” Just saying it makes him smile.

Before either of them can press him further Gibbs interrupts, “We’ve got a dead Marine in Fort Davis Park. Ziva gas up the truck, I’m driving. McGee call Ducky, and make sure Palmer can find it this time.”

As planned Ziva is already gone and McGee is lingering so Tony and Gibbs wind up alone in the elevator. “I had a great time too, J. Thanks, for the flowers and the assist.” After a moment’s consideration Tony gives him a quick peck and tucks the petal he pulled from one of the roses into Gibbs jacket pocket. “Wanna bet she starts guessing J names on the way to the scene?”

“I will smack her, and then I might just be forced to smack you.”

“Because she’s acting like a child?”

“More force of habit and a desire to touch you. By the way, you spent the entire morning humming. Just so you know.”

“Somebody showed me the benefits of getting up at 0600.”

Gibbs laughs as they exit the elevator.

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Tony breathes a sigh of relief as he slips into Abby’s lab unseen. She’s at her desk in the ballistics lab with her back to him so as the door opens he calls “Cinderella!”
“My but you’ve changed stepmother. You’ve become so… butch.”

Tony chuckles and kisses her cheek, “A mutual friend tells me you can cover their handy work for me.”

“If you’ll sing me the first verse of at last while I do it.”

“I mentioned you wanted me to sing for you.”

“You saw him again last night?”

“Just for dinner. For right now at least we’ve agreed to no sleepovers during the week.”

“That’s probably for the best. Now get singing.”

“Lock the door and I will.”

“Afraid someone will hear?” Abby teases.

“Yes. Because it just wouldn’t do to have people thinking you’re my mystery woman. No offense Abbs.”

She locks the door, “None taken Tony. I know you’ve got me firmly parked in no man’s land these days, because even if you weren’t dating Pop now that you know for sure that he’s my father you wouldn’t dare touch me.”

“Something like that sweetheart,” He kisses her cheek again, “Now could we get moving here?”

“Get singing then.”

He does as he’s bid, low slow and sultry.

Abby finishes first and sighs contentedly at the rest of the serenade. “I noticed the roses are still on your desk.”

“They’re very pretty without being overly feminine. You did a good job. And yes I know anytime I get flowers from Jethro you picked them out. It just so happens I like flowers.”

“Okay, if you guys end up on a case and it looks like it’s going to be a long night make an excuse and come see me around five and we’ll touch that up.”

“Thanks sweetheart. See you after my mid-morning coffee run if we don’t get a case.”

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Tony returns at ten o’clock with a caf-pow! and a frown.

“No case?”

“We got a case while I was out actually. Sheppard wants Gibbs to go undercover as a small arms buyer. It’s going to take almost a week and she rejected the idea of me going in as his right hand man. She’s gonna send McGee down to computer crimes and Ziva is going home for a visit. I get to spend the whole mission with the tech guys in the van trying to think up one good reason not to strangle him for letting that harpy manipulate him into doing this stupid, stupid thing.” Abby starts to speak and he raises a hand to cut her off, “And if it’s that protectiveness thing I’ll break both his damn legs.”
“Done DiNozzo?”

“I take it you heard most of that?” Tony asks as he rounds on his boss.

“From ‘one good reason’ anyway.”

“Good, ‘cause I mean it.”

Gibbs deliberately steps over to the door and locks it. “Tony, I know you’re worried. I understand that. I’d be worried if it were you. But I can’t take you in with me on this for a reason, and it’s not that I need to prove anything to ‘that harpy’. The DEA arrested Maynard in a drug raid this morning. In order to get a better deal he gave up the details of an arms buy he’s in town to make. The only thing he says he knows about the sellers is that they’re navy. They’re expecting him, alone, tonight. He inspects the product on Thursday and if he approves of what he sees he sends word for the money to be brought in by one of his lieutenants, a Jeff Dunaway, who is also in custody. It just so happens I look enough like him to pass for him so I’m going in. The seller has no idea what so ever what Dunaway looks like. So when the time comes you’ll be joining me.”

“So if you make it through their initial checks it’s all sunshine and roses.”

“If it’s not you’ll be the one listening. Watching my six. I promise you Tony this is no more dangerous than any other undercover operation.”

“I know. And I’m not really pissed. Not exactly. I’m just scared. You act like you’ve got nothing to loose and you might not, but I do. Jethro, god dammit this isn’t the time or the place and I know it. I really do. But if you go out there and get yourself shot in the head I lose a lot more than I’ve ever had before. Can you understand that?”

“I get it Tony. I promise. And I will be careful. Now come over here for a second,” Gibbs instructs stepping into the far corner of the room. One of the few spots not covered by the security cameras. Tony does as he’s bid and Gibbs kisses him to within an inch of his life. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too Jethro. I take it this means you’re leaving now?”

“Soon.”

Tony nods and leans back against the wall as Gibbs heads back over to his daughter and hugs her tight. “Stay out of trouble baby.”

“I always do my best Pop. And if I don’t manage I promise I’ll call prince charming to protect me.”

“Abbs,” Tony growls with feigned annoyance.

“You do that,” Gibbs agrees shooting Tony a look that Tony imagines means ‘you look after my little girl.’ “For now I need you to do a little work for me Abbs. I need an ID in Maynard’s name.” He hands her the real one.

In almost no time at all she’s done and with a last kiss of her cheek he’s back in the elevator. He knows they’re watching as the doors close and signs to them “love you both.”

“He says-”

Tony cuts her off, “I know what he said. So how’d I go from being the wicked stepmother to being prince charming?”
“You’re my not-so-wicked stepfather. You’re his prince charming.”

“I guess that makes sense. It certainly would have saved Cinderella a lot of grief if her dad had shacked up with Prince Charming rather than marrying the money grubbing shrew…”

“Especially because then she could continue to play with the stable boys.”

“Okay Abbs I officially cannot know things like that anymore. Technically I should have broken McGee’s knees.”

“You’re cute when you’re trying to be protective Tony. But you really want to protect me? Go make sure my father doesn’t get himself shot. Again.”

“I love you Abbs, and I’ll keep him safe. For you and for me since he’s too dense to see what he means to us.”

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Despite both Tony and Abby’s trepidation the initial meet goes off without a hitch. The only problem is that they leave an overnight guard, named Chester with Gibbs making direct contact difficult. A quick mental review of Maynard’s background gives him the answer.

“The wife likes me to call while I’m away.” When Chester nods his acceptance Gibbs dials Tony’s cell. “Hi Honey,” His drawl is a perfect fit for South Carolina militia leader, but Tony has to bite back a laugh just the same.

“Honey?”

“No, nothing too interesting just yet. Just some meet and greets today, haven’t even seen any of the new tractors yet.”

“We knew they wouldn’t tip their hand till they checked you out.”

“Yes I know. I promise I’ll bring you something nice.”

“Presents? Besides the dirt bags? I’m not a cheap date Boss.”

“Only the best for my honey buns.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Ok Honey. I should get to sleep, early presentation tomorrow. Love you.”

“Be safe J,” Tony offers knowing it will get his message across without outing them.

When the relief shift comes to cover the overnight hours Tony can’t bring himself to stay home. He winds up instead packing a bag and heading to Gibbs’. He’s starting to pick the lock on the front door when Abby startles him by opening it from the inside. “You’re worried too, huh?” She asks as she motions him inside.

“Want to stick close to him anyway I can,” Tony murmurs embarrassedly.

“I know the feeling. Why do you think I’m staying here?”

Tony hugs her. “No offense Abbs but I’m beat. I’m gonna go up to bed. I’ll make you breakfast in the morning, okay?”
“Sure thing Tony. Just...Does he know you’re here?”

“No,” Tony admits sheepishly.

“Oh don’t worry he’s got his share of stalker-ish tendencies himself. When they were first dating #3 used to complain about missing shirts. I’m betting he’s got one of yours under his pillow right now.”

“You’re right I suddenly don’t feel so clingy. Night Sweetheart.”

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Tony wakes up wrapped around a pillow to the soothing scents of sawdust and coffee, once again lamenting the quality of the mattress. He hasn’t slept well or long enough but he has a breakfast to prepare and a surveillance detail to get back to. And as much as he knows he had to get some rest and food he doesn’t really trust anyone else to guard Gibbs’ six. A quick inventory in the kitchen leaves him with limited options. He ends up making pancakes and bacon and almost burning himself a number of times because he keeps concentrating on his cell phone, half expecting to get that dreaded call.

Abby comes into the kitchen wearing skull and crossbones patterned pajamas and a frown. “It’s too early Tony. You can’t have picked up his horrible sleeping habits this quick.”

“Sorry Sweetheart, I’ve got to get back before he gets shot because one of those amateurs on the other surveillance team doesn’t know when they’ve made him.”

“I would have taken an I Owe You for breakfast.”

“You can sleep while he’s out there risking his neck like this?”

“It keeps me from worrying about him for awhile.”

“Sorry Abbs. Next time I’ll remember that. In the meantime eat your breakfast young lady.”

“Nice try Tony. You remember to update me. I worry.”

“Will do. Now really, have breakfast with me. I could use the company.”

She walks over and hugs him, “You’ve got me Tony. No matter what I’m here for you. And he’s not suicidal enough to piss you off by doing something stupid.”

“If only that were true,” Tony laments softly before they both dig into breakfast.

When he’s done he heads back upstairs and bypasses his bag. He pulls a plain white undershirt out of Gibbs’ dresser, after all he did find one of his own shirts in the bed and turnabout is fair play. He finishes dressing in his own clothes and goes to Abby to get his make up done. He takes his backpack but leaves his overnight bag, figuring he’ll just be back tonight.

Abby’s waiting for him outside the upstairs bathroom, make up kit in hand. “I thought this was just to keep McGee and Ziva from asking questions.”

“ Doesn’t help if the general rumor mill starts questioning my sexuality right away Abbs. Frankly dropping the cover at all is giving me the creeps. I’ve spent almost six years developing it. Instinct keeps telling me to hit on the female member of the surveillance team, and I think I’m giving her a little bit of a complex.”

“She’ll get over it.”
“I know. Get some more sleep. Don’t worry about coming in until nine. I’ll call if we’ve got something for you before then.” He kisses her cheek.

“What will the wicked witch have to say about that?”

“I don’t give a damn Sweetheart. She’s the one who made sure you wouldn’t have any work today she can deal with the team leader giving you a little comp time.”

“You’re the team leader now?”

“While Batman’s away Robin is going to play with his toys, it’s a function of human nature. Besides I am second in command and our fearless leader is incommunicado.”

“As long as you’ll go to the mat with the dragon lady I’ll take you up on that.”

“I promise I will Abbs, no worries.”

“Okay. See you later,” She kisses his cheek and walks him to the door. Gibbs only locks the door when he’s away but Abby keeps it locked whenever he’s not here.

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“Starting a little early today aren’t you Agent DiNozzo?” Agent Stanek, the female member of the surveillance team, asks when Tony arrives gesturing toward his cheek.

He wipes his cheek and comes away with cherry red lipstick, “Just a friend’s daughter saying goodbye.”

“And hold old is she?” Stanek asks laughing.

“Too young for me.”

“Kissing up to the kid to get to the mom DiNozzo? That’s dangerous territory,” Paulson, one of the other agents, warns.

“Did I say it was a lady friend? Maybe I bumped into an old frat buddy taking his kid to school at my coffee shop.”

“Sure,” Paulson drawls disbelieving.

“Sit rep,” Tony growls with just a hint of annoyance.

“They’re leaving the guard on him until the meet tomorrow but they’re not really restricting his movements. He’s going shopping for the gift he promised his wife and doing some sight seeing. We’re set to follow them when they head out.”

“Did night shift go quietly?”

“Apparently Agent Gibbs snores sir.”

Tony chuckles, “At least they had someway of knowing the equipment was working. Okay so what do we have the van disguised as today?”

“We’re a floral delivery van today,” Stanek provides holding up a vase as if to prove the claim.

“If I miss my cell ringing give me a good shake,” Tony instructs pulling on his head phones to listen
to the audio broadcast coming from a pen in Gibbs’ pocket.

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“What’d you have in mind for your wife?”

“Joanna’s a hard one to shop for. She’s not what you’d call a girlie girl but she likes nice things. I was thinking I’d bring her some of those expensive chocolates you can only get in the big cities. Maybe a nice pair of boots.” He almost smirks at his own quick thinking. A gift for Tony and one for Abby will certainly begin to smooth the friction taking this assignment’s caused. And perhaps something touristy from the national gallery of art, which Tony had insisted they visit after dinner on their first date, just the sort of sentimental touch that always wins you points in this sort of situation.

“Union Station it is,” Chester grumbles slightly and leads him to a car in the hotel’s lot.

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As they start moving Tony keeps half an ear on the inane chatter in the other vehicle as he casually observes the other agents, trying to reason out their complete silence. Most teams chatter during the low points of a surveillance detail. Mostly standard bluster, the weather, local sports, what the subject’s going to do next. These two, he discounts the driver as focusing elsewhere, aren’t saying a word. Not even to ask Tony who Gibbs is really shopping for, and that is truly surprising as info on Gibbs is gold in the scuttlebutt hierarchy at NCIS.

Before he can do more than casually note Paulson’s focus on the task at hand his cell rings.

“What’s up?”

“How’s the bossman doing?”

“He’s fine. The immediate agenda consists of shopping at Union Station.”

“Is he bringing home presents?”

“Says so. Owes you one anyway. She give you any trouble?”

“I don’t think anyone even noticed I was in late. I’m just re-running prints from cold cases, you know filling time.”

“That’s something at least. Don’t worry, I’ve got this. If anything happens I’ll call, okay?”

“Watch your own back too Tony. You’re less charming when you’re bleeding.”

“I promise. Though I contend that I’m always charming, sometimes you just don’t see it.”

Abby laughs, “Whatever you say Tony.”

Tony hangs up shaking his head and it finally clicks. The reason they’re not chattering is because when they’re quiet he ignores them and they get things like that call. He mentally reviews his side of that call to make sure he didn’t give either of the very large secrets he’s now keeping away. When the conclusion is reassuring he decides to let them wonder, or ask.

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The sun is setting as they return to the hotel room and Gibbs feels as though he has just spent days trekking through a middle eastern desert rather than hours shopping in his metaphorical back yard.
“Hi Honey.”

“Hey there sweet cheeks.”

“How are things at home?”

“Cinderella called to check on you. She and the prince have been staying in the castle. The tail on yesterday’s contact proved him to be a little fish. Both back up teams are standing by. We’re a go.”

“Good. I did a little sight seeing, bought you some things.”

“Anything I’ll like?”

“We’ll see. Most of the meetings I need to attend are tomorrow. I’ll call again when we’ve finished with those.”

“Okay, if they push up the meeting the code word is French Roast.”

Gibbs chuckles, “I promise Honey buns. Love you.”

“Night boss.”

“You miss her, don’t you?” Chester asks as he hangs up.

“Whenever we’re apart,” It’s honest, no matter if they’re discussing Tony or Abby.

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Tony lingers when the night shift arrives. It’s not that he doesn’t trust them so much as he doesn’t trust anyone, not with Gibbs’ safety. Finally his cell rings again.

After a quick glance at the caller id he answers it, “Hello Princess.” He moves to his car with the casualness the setting requires.

“Come home Tony. There’s nothing you can do tonight. Come have dinner and get some sleep.”

He waits to answer until the car door is shut securely behind him. “Not my home.”

“Yes it is Tony. You don’t live here, and you probably won’t for a long time yet, but it is your home. Or did you forget I don’t live here either? We’re a family, and when times are tough family sticks together. Come home. Eat. Bury your face in his pillow and try to decide if it’s more compelling to hit him upside the head or kiss him when he gets home. As long as the answer is the latter everything is basically ok.”

“He’s bringing presents and I really do love him. I think the answer is always going to be kiss him no matter how stupid he’s acting.” He shakes his head, “I get the point though. I’m on my way.

“Need anything in the kitchen? I noticed when I tried to cook that the cupboards were a little bare.”

“Nope. If all goes to plan we’ll be out of here by tomorrow night.”

“Okay Sweetheart, I should be there in thirty.”

“I’ll have dinner on the table.”

“You’re taking this Cinderella thing a little too seriously Hon.”
“You made breakfast. It’s my turn.”

“Fair enough.”
Phone calls, arrests, and take out

Chester leads Gibbs out to the car for the meet at midday, a full six hours before the agreed upon time. “Can we stop for coffee? I could really use a cup of French Roast.”

“I’m afraid not Sir. Mr. Halleran gave strict orders.”

“We’re gettin’ down to business then?”

“You know how it works Mr. Maynard. One must be careful that they know their business associates in Mr. Halleran’s line of work.”

The way he says careful sets Gibbs’ teeth on edge but he doesn’t react. The location is a warehouse a few blocks off base, supporting Maynard’s claims about his supplier being Naval personnel. Halleran exits the building to meet the car with a tight smile, “I’ve received some most unsettling news that regards you Mr. Maynard.”

“Is that right Mr. Hallern? What’d ya hear?”

“That you arrived in town without my money.”

“I did indeed. My man Dunaway handles the cause’s money, does a real good job too. He can be here within four hours of my call. Once I see the merchandise I’ll give him a ring.”

“That was not what we discussed.”

“That’s how I conduct my business.”

“So I’ve been told.” He glares at Gibbs, “If there are anymore surprises I will kill you.”

“So long as you keep your end of the deal there won’t be an issue.”

“You’re hardly in a position to dictate terms here Mr. Maynard.”

“I’ve had a good run. Dunaway’s ready to take over. Can you say the same? I need a supplier. You need a buyer. I’m just protecting my investment on this deal. Now are we going to do business or try to kill each other?”

“Follow me,” Halleran instructs irritably leading the way inside.

Most of the weapons are still in the government marked and addressed shipping containers and Gibbs suddenly wishes they’d wired him with a camera instead of just a mic. Which he manages to discretely turn off just before they scan for it. He turns it back on as Halleran picks up a P-90.

Like any good soldier Gibbs thoroughly inspects the weapon before handing it back with an approving nod, “Should suit the cause nicely. If you’ll give me access to a phone I’ll call my man now.”

Halleran motions to the muscle behind him and Gibbs is handed a cell phone.

He dials Tony’s cell again. “Hi Honey.”

“Wrong number sweet cheeks.”
“I can’t exactly chat Honey buns. Is Jeffery there? Could you put him on?”

“Good play boss.”

“Jeff my boy, we’re a go. How soon can you be here?”

“According to the information I’ve got the earliest he could be in is 5:40.”

“My temporary chauffeur and I will pick you up at the airport. Before you leave tell Joanna I love her.”

“I’ll be there Boss. Gotta leave the secondary team on you until then so don’t piss off the nice arms dealer in the meantime. I don’t exactly look the part of a good old boy just now.”

“My Joanna is a lady of taste and charm, she’d never run off with the like of you Jeffery Dunaway.”

“Quit while you’re ahead here boss.”

Gibbs hangs up. “You’ll have your money by six thirty.”

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Tony’s first stop is Abby’s lab. “Ah Prince Charming returns.”

“Hey Abbs. Got my new credentials?”

“You are now Jeffery Dunaway, good ole boy. Or you will be when you wash the gel out of your hair and put on some flannel.”

“I know. I’ve got to make a walmart run and shower. But first I have a new assignment for you.”

Abby giggles, “Taking this team leader thing really serious, aren’t you?”

“It’s not so much that as the only person I really trust beside myself to take care of our good king is the fair princess.”

“In that case assign away Prince Charming.”

“The suspects he’s in with now believe this to be Maynard’s home number, where the phone should be answered by his wife- Joanna. If anyone not in my phonebook calls I need you to answer it and pretend to be Joanna. Your husband is away at a farming equipment show as far as you know and may have made a large purchase as he called here to get Jeff Dunaway to come help him out. Jeff’s a flirt. Carl -that’s Maynard’s first name- calls you Honey or Honey buns and has been promising to bring you presents from the big city. Got it?”

“He’s been calling you honeybuns? Honestly?”

“Over an open line with other agents listening.”

“Is there a tape?” Abby asks gleefully.

“Of course there is. But you don’t get a copy until it goes into evidence. It would raise too many questions if I made you a copy now.”

“Okay. I know my part. Make sure you watch your back, okay? I want you both at my place for dinner on Monday.”
“If we don’t make it take it up with your old man, ok?”

“Already speaking for Pop?” Abby teases.

“Make any little wife jokes and I’ll post pictures of you dressed as career girl Barbie all over the office and the internet. I’m taking the wicked step mother thing in stride because it seems to be a long term joke with you two. That doesn’t give you the right to tease me just because I picked the ultimate alpha-male to settle down with.”

“So you really do plan to settle down with him? I mean you know…For real? Long term?”

“Did he give you some other impression?” Tony asks with a certain amount of dread.

“No Tony, nothing like that. But Gibbs can only tell me what he wants, that’s all he knows. And no offense you just never quite struck me as the ‘settling down’ type. You clearly love him. I’ve known you did for a long time, not from the start I don’t think, but it’s been more than a year since I noticed it. But that didn’t mean you wouldn’t eventually… stifle.”

“This gets out- gets back to Jethro- and I will kill you in your sleep with CO2. I’d marry the idiot if it were possible. I meant what I said about making like rabbits for the next twenty or thirty years. And after that… well they make drugs for that these days.”

“TMI Tony,” Abby protests making a face.

Tony just chuckles, “Not sorry sweetheart, you asked after my intentions. I just told you the truth.”

“Then go dress like a militia lieutenant and save him.”

“You think he needs saving?”

“From himself at the very least.”

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Gibbs has to forcibly school his expression as Tony crosses the threshold of the arrivals gate. He hadn’t realized he’d actually missed Tony until the younger man appeared in front of him. Evidently now that they’d shared a bed phone conversations alone are not enough. Which validates rule twelve but he just can’t make himself give a damn.

“Jeff. No… complications I trust?” Gibbs drawls easily.

“Like taking candy from a bitty little baby as always boss,” Tony answers back in a reasonable north Texas twang, having taken the cue from his background search on Dunaway.

“Gentlemen?” Chester interrupts from beside the town car. “Mr. Halleran isn’t a patient man.”

Gibbs laughs, “That’s an understatement.”

“Usual business man, boss?”

“Impatient and excitable,” Gibbs confirms. “Just like all the others.”

Tony slides across the backseat and waits patiently for Gibbs to join him. As Chester rounds the vehicle he bumps Gibbs’ leg with his knee. When he makes eye contact Tony signs, “Bust at meet.”

Gibbs nods. “How’s Jenny doing Jeff?”
“You know Jenny, boss, always up on the latest gossip. She and Joanna are getting along, as well as they ever do anyhow.”

“That’s something at least.”

“Joanna made me promise to have you home by dinnertime Monday.”

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Tony’s phone rings for the first time around an hour and a half after he leaves it. The caller ID reads “Tammy”.

“Tony’s phone,” Abby chirps lightly.

“Um, hello? I was trying to reach Tony DiNozzo.”

“This is his phone, can I take a message?”

“Is this his wife?” The caller demands rather abruptly.

“His stepdaughter. Can I help you?”

“Could you please have him call his father’s secretary?”

“Will do. It may be a day or two, but I will have him call you as soon as possible.”

She writes out “Call your Dad’s secretary. I sort of told her I’m your stepdaughter, Sorry Tony! I love you” on a post-it.

Thankfully the only other call Tony gets is the one she’s waiting to answer. It comes in minutes before Tony “lands.”

“Maynard residence?”

“Is this Mrs. Joanna Maynard?”

“Yes sir, how can I help you?”

“I’d like to speak to your husband Ma’am.”

“Carl’s out of town this week.”

“Might you know how I could contact Jeff Dunaway then?”

“Jeffery left to join Carl just today actually.”

“I’m sorry to have bothered you Ma’am.”

“It’s no bother,” Abby offers brightly before taking a play from Gibbs’ book and just hanging up.

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The bust goes surprisingly smooth. Halleran, whose real name turns out to be First Lieutenant Harold Marcum, takes one look at the blocked exits and puts his hands up. He asks a calm but bitter “ATF or NCIS?”

“There’s your solid proof that he’s navy boss,” Tony quips good naturedly.
“I’m going to call the princess and let her know we’re okay. Make sure someone books him.”

“Princess what that pretty redhead y’all work for likes to be called?”

“She prefers ‘Sir’.” Tony leads Marcum to the NCIS sedan Gibbs commandeered from one of the second wave back-up teams. He leans against the driver’s door and watches Special Agent Rennie’s team processing the scene. For once he has no desire whatsoever to be in on it.

Gibbs returns smiling slightly, then frowns at the sight of Marcum in the back of the sedan. “I thought I told you to hand off Halleran.”

“You’ve never let me hand off a booking before Jethro,” Tony explains patiently.

“When you or I made the arrest. Who cuffed him and read him his article 13s Tony?”

“Rennie.”

“Then hand him over to Rennie. It’s not a school night and the princess is going to leave your cell at my place.”

“Three day weekend?” Tony asks hopefully.

“In theory. We’re on call Saturday and Sunday. But one of my terms for taking this assignment was that we got Friday off. Good thing too. I think I made Jenny’s head implode.”

“What happened?”

“Hand Halleran off. I’ll tell you on our way home.”

Tony escorts Marcum back over to Special Agent Rennie with a smile. “Change of plans. Your case, your bust. Cheers.”

“Thanks so much Tony,” Special Agent Coulson comments from beside Rennie. As Rennie’s right hand the booking will now fall to him.

“’Night!” He jogs back to the sedan. “Okay, so what happened?”

“I was talking to Abbs and suddenly Jenny’s on the line demanding to know why I called Abby before her. I told her that while she was in direct contact with the team handling the bust and scene, my daughter wouldn’t be contacted unless I did it directly. She stuttered for a minute or so until Abby took the phone back.”

“And I missed it. Damn it.”

“There’s no pleasing you two. Abbs complained that she wanted to be the one to tell Jenny.”

“You did tell her she could do it,” Tony reminds him before yawning spectacularly. “Could we stay at my place tonight?”

“I thought you’d been staying at mine?”

“I have. But just to be, well, close to you. Your mattress sucks Jethro.”

“The hotel they had me in is on the way, I guess we could swing by, pick up my bag and the presents…”
“And start shopping for a decent mattress come morning, yes.”

“Moving yourself in?” The tone is indecipherable.

“Not unless you want me to. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to push to make your place livable. Just the basics. A mattress that won’t eat me for breakfast. Maybe a little liquid hand soap. A blanket on the sofa.”

“And if I don’t want to make changes?”

“Then I spend more than just school nights at home. I know better than to make demands, but I deserve a little compromise.”

“We were supposed to be taking this slow…” Gibbs murmurs uneasily.

“Three years seems pretty slow to me.”

“Three? Not five?”

“The first two there was chemistry but not much else. About three years ago I could see you start to size me up as someone who might be worth your time. It’s why I started openly flirting. I wanted to be what you were looking for. To take you up on the offer you didn’t seem to know you were making.”

Gibbs nods and hands Tony his cell, “See if Abbs will bring your phone to your place.”

“Thank you. Once you’ve slept in my bed you won’t regret it.” Tony grins as he calls Abby. “Hi Sweetheart, how are you?”

“I’m good, after all my boys are both okay. I’m leaving now, see you in a little while.”

“That’s why I’m calling. We’re going to stay at my place, unfortunately I have to have my cell… Sorry to impose but can you come to my place instead of Jethro’s?”

“No problem Tony. Your place is closer to mine anyway. Will you guys be there in an hour?”

“With Gibbs behind the wheel? We should be. Just depends on if we hit traffic.” Tony glances over at Gibbs, and asks both of them, “We still on for lunch on Saturday and dinner Monday?”

“As far as I’m concerned,” Abby’s tone is clearly confused.

“Dinner Monday?” Gibbs asks.

“Hold on a sec Abbs.” He turns to Gibbs. “Abby demands our presence at dinner on Monday.”

“As long as we don’t catch a case.”

“You know the stipulations, Abby.”

“I know work overshadows everything for Pop. See you in a bit.”

“Bye Sweetheart.”

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With a little creative navigation they make excellent time, arriving well before Abby is due.
Unfortunately her impending arrival limits their options as to activities for the time being. Tony orders take out and they settle in to make out until she arrives. Tony has to take several deep breaths and buttons his pants when there’s a knock on the door. Thankfully it’s the Chinese food, giving them another moment or two to prepare before having to provide Abby with hugs. Tony especially needs the time.

He retreats to the kitchen and breathes deep as he retrieves beers and sets the table. When Abby knocks he calls over his shoulder “Let her in Jethro, we’re eating in here.”

Gibbs shakes his head when he realizes he’s already halfway to the door on Tony’s say so. Not that he minds exactly. At least keeping Tony happy is a relatively straight forward proposition. No trying to decipher what the hell he wants based on esoteric clues.

“Hi baby girl,” He greets Abby pulling her into a tight hug.

“Hi Pop, heard you guys got tomorrow off. Madame Director taking classes in alternative compensation?”

“Something like that.” He tows her into the kitchen, “Tony requests your presence at dinner.”

“He might change his mind when I give him his messages,” Abby laments evenly.

“What’s wrong Abbs?” Tony asks as they enter the kitchen.

Abby hangs her head and hands Tony his phone, note and all.

Tony reads the note, chuckles, and asks “How did that happen?”

“She was really snotty from like the second I answered your phone and when I asked if I could take a message she just snapped ‘is this his wife?’ I didn’t even think. I just told her I was your stepdaughter. I know it was stupid, especially as I had no idea who it was…”

“Abbs! Abby calm down. Tammy is a busybody who thinks a birthday card and a Christmas gift a year earns the father who disowned me the right to every detail of my life. It’ll be fun dealing with her. In fact…” He hits her speed dial, puts it on speaker and sets the phone down. “Have a seat. Eat. Just try to keep kinda quiet.”

“Harcourt Manufacturing, you’ve reached Mr. DiNozzo’s office.”

“Hi Tammy, it’s Tony. I got a message that you needed to speak to me?”

“Your father wanted me to make sure you were personally invited to Jessica’s birthday gala.”

Tony signs “wicked stepmother 4” before verbally responding, “I received the invitation but I’m afraid I have a prior engagement.”

“With the young lady that answered your phone earlier?”

“As a matter of fact she will be in attendance yes.”

“So she isn’t your stepdaughter then?”

“No. At least not technically.”

“How old is this woman you’re seeing that she has a daughter your age?”
Tony suppresses a chuckle. “Well Abby is actually ten years younger than I am. And her father, who is the one I’m seeing, is eight years older, no where near old enough for the impropriety your tone implies.”

“Her father?” Tammy gulps in clear surprise.

At that Tony does chuckle, “His name is Jethro. Though it might be best for all involved if he and my father don’t meet. I’m not sure my father would survive the encounter.” He takes the Chow Mien from Gibbs’ unresponsive fingers and dishes some onto his own plate. “You can tell my father that you did personally extend the invitation but that I had to decline. Now if you don’t mind we’ve had a long day.” Before she can respond he hangs up.

Abby succumbs to her giggles after a moment but forces words through them, “Won’t that cause trouble with your dad?”

“Who cares? If my comments thus far haven’t made it clear the man’s an ass. He disowned me years ago, if he stops speaking to me again it’s not exactly a loss.”

“So you’re ‘seeing’ me?”

“What did you want me to call it? Dating? Going steady with? Sleeping with? Any of them are accurate but in context I think seeing was optimal to achieve the two goals: telling her I was indeed involved with one of Abby’s parents and not giving her details my father can track down.”

“No need to get defensive, it just seemed like an awfully casual statement coming from the guy who’s inviting himself to move into my place.”

“If you keep saying that, I’m going to take it as a hint and give my landlord notice.”

Abby’s eyes go wide, “Are you serious? You’re already talking about moving in together?”

“No, we are not moving in together yet,” Gibbs tone makes it clear he is speaking as much to Tony as to Abby.

Tony chooses to ignore that. “I’m just talking about making Jethro’s place a little more livable.” He grins at them, “Dinner’s getting cold.”

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“So Tony said something about presents?” Abby asks brightly once the dishes are finished.

Gibbs chuckles, “I brought you a little something, yes. A thank you for the things you’ve done for me lately- especially helping Tony scare Ziva off last November.” With that he hands over the bag and braces himself.

Abby, not one to disappoint, squeals excitedly as she opens the box within. Rows of short square spikes adorn the side seams of the new boots, and a small metal skull is affixed to the toe of each, “These are perfect Pop. Totally cute, thank you.” She sets them aside and hugs him tight. “So what’d you bring honey buns?”

“I wish I hadn’t mentioned that,” Tony groans blushing.

“You didn’t just mention, you offered me a tape,” Abby reminds him delightedly.

Deciding to look on the bright side Tony turns to Gibbs instead, “So what did you bring me?”
“You weren’t listening?”

“Oh I know you brought me some Godiva chocolates. But there was something else. I was on the line with Rennie arranging the schedule for the back up teams.”

Gibbs chuckles, “Then I guess I can just hand it over and hope I’ve done as well as I did with Abby’s boots.”

The bag proclaims itself as being from the National Gallery of Art gift shop. Tony pulls the book out and grins, “You remembered.”

Gibbs claims a kiss, “The smile on your face as you explained it made it memorable.”

Tony, remembering their audience turns to Abby, “It’s The Americans by Robert Frank. On our first date I gave… a bit of a lecture about how artists like Frank who cared more about the content of their work than the technique got me interested in photography in college. It’s why I’m so good with my camera no matter what I let people think. I spent four semesters in photography classes…” He colors slightly at Abby’s fascinated look.

“So why no photographs on your walls?” Abby asks curiously.

“I’ve never had a chance to take good photographs of the only people I’d want on my walls.”

“You’ll have to make the opportunities,” Abby instructs fondly. “It’s getting late and I’m betting you two want to be alone so I’m going to head home.” She kisses each of them on the cheek, “Lunch is still at the house on Saturday, isn’t it?”

“Noonish. No earlier,” Tony instructs fondly. “And you will find the door locked. I’ll cook this week.”

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“It’s not that I don’t want you at my place,” Gibbs murmurs hours later as they’re sitting in the glow of the TV on the sofa.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me Jethro. You asked me for slow and I said I could do it.”

“On this you need to understand. Keeping us quiet at work is going to be something of a balancing acting and we have almost no practice. Moving in together now would just make it harder. We need to maintain separate space a while longer. Not because I need to take this slow, but because we can’t afford to slip up. You want to change things at my place, we’ll talk about it. You want me to spend the night here, I’ll come. And for the record you’re right, your bed is much better than mine.”

“And when I do move in it’s going into the guest bedroom. I can’t believe you’ve got Abbs staying on a full.”

“Abby doesn’t stay with me very often and when she does it isn’t like she’s sharing the bed Tony.”

“Why do I even bother. After all I’m talking to the man that thinks it’s perfectly acceptable to sleep in a bed that sags in the middle.”

“I already said I’d replace it Tony.”

That makes Tony laugh, “And I’m grateful. I’ll even buy your new sheets. For now are we going to watch the rest of the movie or go back to bed?”
“Let’s head back to bed. I think I can wear you out properly this time.”

“Sounds like fun.”
“Just pick the one you want and I’ll buy it already Tony,” Gibbs groans as he’s pulled down to ‘test’ yet another mattress. When they’d arrived, almost three hours ago, strict discretion was being practiced. Not that there was any plausible reason for Tony to accompany him mattress shopping if they weren’t sharing a bed. As time dragged on, and Tony became more frustrated, deniability began to fall by the wayside.

“I’ve picked two perfectly good alternatives here Jethro, you just have to pick between them.”

“I can’t tell the difference Tony.” He drops his voice, “A bed is a place to sleep. To have sex. For me who I share it with is the most important factor. Now if it takes an extra deep memory foam pillow top to keep you happy so be it. Just tell me which one so the sales girl can stop giggling in the corner and set up the delivery for us.”

“It’s this one. Definitely.”

Gibbs nods and climbs off the display model as casually as possible and waves the sales girl, who is actually suppressing a grin, over. As she takes down the details and arranges for the delivery they both watch Tony as he bounces slightly on the mattress. Gibbs shakes his head and smiles at her, “I don’t suppose there’s any chance of getting it delivered today.”

“Give me a moment to see if we can get it on the afternoon truck,” She moves to the computer in the corner to input his information and make the call.

Tony saunters over to Gibbs grinning, “You made her week you know.”

“By bringing you in to test your sexual compatibility with the merchandise?”

“They work on commission. The others,” He points to three men lounging near the door to the shop, “handed us to her because they took one look and decided you weren’t going to spend much.” He moves in just a bit closer, “They’ve taken a closer look at me and decided you’re my sugar daddy.”

“There are two major obstacles to my being your sugar daddy DiNozzo.” Tony tilts his head inquisitively. “First I’m still paying two alimonies and second I’m only two pay grades above you.”

“So I’d have to face down three of your exes to be a kept man? I guess we’ll just have to go on as equals then.”

“This from he man who brags about the price of his clothes.”

“One of the things Tammy is useful for. She always ‘forgets’ to keep the receipts out of my gifts. I figure a shallow playboy would want it known that he can afford the finer things in life. Forgetting of course that my actual reaction is usually a lament about how many more useful garments that money could have bought.”
“And you don’t have a taste for the finer things?”

“That depends on your definition. Four hundred dollar shoes? Not really. Four hundred thread count sheets? Absolutely.”

The sales girl returns grinning brightly, “If you’ll step over here Mr. Gibbs, they can indeed have it out to you tonight between the hours of three and six.”

“Thank you Marie, you’ve been quiet helpful.” Gibbs offers handing over his credit card.

When she’s finished Tony shakes her hand and takes Gibbs’ elbow. “Next stop, Sears.” Gibbs chuckles but allows Tony to lead him out.

Three hours, and several shopping bags, later they return to Gibbs’ house. “Just one more change and I’ll be content for a good long time.”

“And what’s that?” Gibbs asks pulling Tony close.

“Let me get cable installed? We can’t spend every waking minute in bed and I can only spend so much time working on the boat before the smell of sawdust makes me want to jump you.”

“Working on the boat makes you want to jump me?” Gibbs chuckles.

“Not exactly. Watching you work with your hands makes me think of your hands on me and that really lights my fire.”

Gibbs smiles, “Call the cable company on Monday.”

“You do love me.”

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Sunday at 0900 Tony awakens to fingers carding through his hair for a second time, this time accompanied by a quiet “Rise and shine Tone.”

“You do realize I’m not a puppy, right?” He nuzzles into the caress just the same.

“I’d be more inclined to say cat at the moment actually. You’re purring. Grab a shower while I pack our bags.”

“Where we headed Boss?”

“Everett, Washington. Three sailors on the Abraham Lincoln have turned up unconscious, drugged, at or near their duty stations. The agent afloat asked for our help.”

“Another of your former protégés?” Tony’s tone is tight and unpleasant.

“I’m going to explain this once Tony. Before you I only ever worked with one agent at a time because no one else was capable of standing up to me or doing his own job without constant supervision. Stan was terrified of me. He had panic attacks when I so much as entered the room. Jen was a good agent but a slipshod investigator. The others generally had backbone issues. Professionally you’re the most well rounded agent I’ve ever worked with. Personally, yes I slept with Jen. As part of a deep cover assignment. The fact that she couldn’t speak to me for a long time after she found out there was nothing real between us was the reason for rule 12. What you and I have is real. I love you. Now that being said, the agent afloat asked for ‘our’ as in the main office’s help. Not us specifically. We happen to be on call. Now go shower, you reek of sex.”
Tony deliberately sniffs himself, “I dunno, I like it.”

Gibbs nuzzles Tony’s neck, “I like it too but if we turn up in the same car with you smelling like that we might as well put an announcement in the society page.”

“That a proposal Jethro?” Tony teases as he gets out of bed. “You aren’t joining me?”

“I showered before I woke you. After I arranged the team’s flight.”


“Don’t get used to it. I’m not going to do it at the office.”

“Good thing Boss. I wouldn’t know how to react to it,” Tony quips on his way to the bathroom.

In the car Tony is awake and alert but tense as he tries to switch gears. He knows today there will be no thinly veiled conversations. No commiseration with Abby. Not even any stolen kisses on the Lincoln. “Can we stop for coffee?”

Gibbs chuckles, “You’re asking me to stop for coffee?”

“I’m not good with priority rides, more so on an empty stomach. And my date kicked me out without breakfast when my boss called.”

“Not sympathetic to your demanding job?”

“I don’t think that’s it. But the fact remains I am unnourished.”

Gibbs pulls into a Panera drive through and orders coffee and bagels for the whole team. “Quit claiming I neglect you. Abby would hound me to within an inch of my life.”

“Thanks Jethro,” Tony offers with a grin and a kiss on the cheek. “How ‘bout I barely had time to kiss my date goodbye because the bossman was on his way over to pick me up?”

“You call that a goodbye kiss?” Gibbs challenges as he stops at a red light.

Contorting himself slightly to compensate for the gearshift Tony leans in for a deep, slow proper kiss. The car behind them honking draws them apart. Tony murmurs, “Sorry to cut our weekend short Jethro.”

Silence reigns for several blocks. Then something occurs to Tony, “You tell Abby we’re going to miss dinner on Monday?”

“Not yet. Didn’t want to wake her.”

“You are such a pushover with her.”

“She’s my baby girl.”

Tony nods his understanding. “We have anything else on the case? Are they being hurt or just knocked out?”

“All they said was drugged but stable. I get the impression the agent is a little green.”

“Oh joy. Is it too late to call in dead? Ducky’ll back me up.”
“I let you sleep in Tony, that’s the best I can do.”

“I do appreciate that, no matter how much I might whine from here on out.”

Once they pass base security Gibbs glances over at him, “If they ask, you bought breakfast.”

Upon their approach McGee turns to Ziva with an outstretched hand, “Told you so.”

“I do not think so,” Ziva returns smirking.

Tony checks his hair in the car window, then his fly. “What?”

“Ziva bet me $20 that the reason you had to be picked up is that you were at your mystery woman’s. Dressed like that? I don’t think so.” The last is directed at Ziva.

“There is no mystery woman,” Tony objects genuinely, crossing his arms protectively over his OSU sweatshirt. “And there’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing.”

“Really?” Ziva raises an eyebrow.

“Washington state is cold. I put on a sweatshirt. I still look hot.”

“If you say so. I was questioning your assertion that there is no mystery woman.”

As they board the cargo jet Tony is pleased to note this particular plane must host passengers more than most as there are a few real seats just aft of the cockpit. “What makes you so sure there is?” He challenges while waiting for Gibbs to take the window seat.

“You have a picky on your neck.”

Tony forces himself to drop down beside Gibbs without reacting, “The word is hickey and no I don’t.”

“You do actually,” Gibbs throws in with just a hint of dark satisfaction. Tony resists the urge to whisper dire threats.

Instead he challenges, “Where?”

“Just here,” She touches his throat just under his chin before taking her seat.

“That doesn’t mean he was with her this morning though,” McGee defends, on behalf of his money of course.

“You know I’m eating the breakfast I brought you. Want another bagel Boss?”

“You brought us breakfast?” McGee asks, clearly surprised.

“I was in a good mood,” He pulls out one for himself and one for Gibbs.

McGee hands Ziva $20.

“Traitor,” Tony mutters but throws the bag of bagels to McGee.

“Toss me some cream cheese McGee,” Gibbs instructs and catches the tossed tub easily.

“Why is she such a secret, I wonder,” Ziva muses accepting her breakfast. “Is it perhaps because she matters?”
“If you ladies are finished gossiping I’d like to catch some shut eye,” Gibbs growls in his usual gruff
fashion.

“Want me to see if they’ll sling up a canvass seat in back for you Boss?” Gibbs smacks Tony on the
back of the head, rather lightly but a smack none the less. “Shutting up Boss.”

Within minutes Gibbs has dropped off to sleep and not long after, resisting the urge to cuddle
manfully, Tony joins him.

Tony awakens slowly to the murmur of quiet voices nearby. He keeps his eyes shut and listens as if
still asleep.

“But why wouldn’t he tell us? He tells me whenever a girl remembers his name,” McGee is insisting.

“Perhaps we know her. He and Abby seem awfully cozy lately.”

Tony forgets himself and splutters “Abby?! You think I’m dating Abbs? First of all, she’s like my
little sister or maybe my niece. Second I’m not her type either. Third the bossman would kill me if I
touched his little girl.”

“Which reminds me,” McGee puts in, to break the tension, “Did you hear the rumor that she really is
his daughter?”

“You know better than to listen to rumors McGeek,” Tony scolds more to amuse himself than to
keep the secret.

“Normally I wouldn’t but Friday Cynthia told me that the director had her pull Abby’s personnel file
on Thursday and when she got it she canceled all her afternoon appointments.”

“Well Boss, is it true?” Tony asks knowing full well Gibbs is awake despite outward appearances.

“Have I ever given any of you any other impression?”

“I knew,” Tony reports evenly.

“No you didn’t,” McGee objects instantly.

“Oh come on McGee, you never noticed all the ‘I just tell him I love him’ and ‘I am his favorite’
comments? The fact that once she knows for sure she’s in trouble she runs right to the boss. And you
call yourself an investigator.”

“It was not in your dossier,” Ziva directs toward Gibbs.

“It wouldn’t be. Both the primary paper records on the subject come up when vetting Abbs but they
have no bearing on my files and I like it that way. The fewer people know she’s my little girl the
lesser her degree of danger is. Despite her taste in men.”

“You’re never going to let her forget that she should have just let you break that freak’s legs are
you?”

“Not until she gets it, no.” He opens his eyes and glares at them, “Don’t you three have something
better to do? Like review the case file?”

“It’s a one page report Boss, we’ve all read it three times. No cell reception or wi-fi. For once we
really don’t have anything better to do.”
“Then catch some shut eye or discuss someone else,” Gibbs growls and Tony bites back a laugh because he can tell it’s all for show, no real annoyance or impatience.

The others fall silent so Tony pulls the book he’s been reading from his bag. It’s only as he’s settling in that he realizes how far from his cover the image of him reading a book, a biography none the less, is. He hopes to hell Ziva has no idea who Charles Butler McVey III is. McGee might buy that it was work related but he’d made a big deal about preferring movies to books to Ziva on more than one occasion.

“Am I correct, is it that we know her?” Ziva asks after a short silence.

“There is no her,” Tony doesn’t even look up.

“Then why was your phone off all day Friday?”

“I had the day off. I hadn’t been sleeping. If the boss needed me he knows how to find me. If I’d been on call I would have answered the phone.”

Their landing cuts the conversation off and Tony can’t help but be relieved. That is until he switches his phone back on and the voicemail indicator starts flashing.

“Forget something at her place?” Ziva probes.

Tony ignores her and plays his messages.

“Hey Tony. I guess you and Pop are busy. I just had a question about tomorrow night’s menu. Call me.”

He calls her back. “Hey Princess.”

“Hi Tony.”

“I got called in on a case. Can you tell your dad we’ll have to reschedule our dinner together?”

“You with McGee and Ziva?”

“Got it in one.”

“Where are you?”

“Washington state. I gotta go Princess, duty calls.”

“Bye Tony. Make him call me later.”

“Princess?” McGee questions incredulously.

“Daughter of a friend. I was supposed to have dinner with him tomorrow. As we’re a little far from Georgetown I don’t see that happening.” Ziva gives him an appraising look but doesn’t comment.

“Tony, contact the Lincoln. Get us an update.”

“On it Boss.”

“Okay this is a weird one. All three were drugged, they think it was Rohypnol in their coffee. When they passed out they were stripped naked and left where they lay with all their clothing and belongings stacked neatly nearby. No signs of any sort of physical assault. None of them had access
to anything sensitive or strategic. Two of them knew each other casually. The third had no connection. They didn’t go to the same places while in port. That’s all they’ve got for us so far.”

“When we reach the Lincoln, McGee you check their racks. Ziva you interview their direct supervisors. Tony you’re with me interviewing the victims.”

The agent afloat meets them at the infirmary. “What have you got so far?” Gibbs asks relatively patiently.

“J-just what I reported to Agent DiNozzo, Sir.”

“Don’t call me sir. Any of the other crew members unaccounted for?”

“I um, I don’t know si- Special Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs just glares at him and heads into the infirmary.

Tony glances after his boss and takes pity on the young man, “Harper right? Find out. And just call him Gibbs.”

“Thanks,” Harper murmurs as he hurries off.

Gibbs is talking to the first young man, Seaman Reynolds according to the chart hanging from his bed, and Tony takes a moment to glance at the others. He’s taken aback by the similarities between the three. Clearly their assailant has a type.

“Did you do anything differently yesterday?”

“No. I got up, had breakfast in the mess. I reported to my duty station, after that I just don’t remember.”

“Was anything missing when they gave you the inventory of what was found on the scene?”

“Just my St. Christopher’s medal.” Tony makes a note.

“You always wear it?”

“Since my father gave it to me ten years ago.”

Gibbs nods. “Anything else? Did you see anyone acting strangely in the mess?”

“Just Wilkes making an ass of himself over some piece of base tail.”

“Any enemies?” Tony throws in.

“No. I don’t have anything to be jealous over. No girl, no money, no plumb assignment. Might be a guy or two out there that’d want to take a swing at me but nothing like this.”

“Why would somebody want to take a swing at you?”

“Cause I won a game of ball or a hand of cards they thought they shoulda won.”

“Any pissed off exes?” Tony tries curiously.

“Nope. They usually leave me.” He grimaces just a little, “Not much help am I?”

“Don’t worry about that, it’s our job to catch him, not yours,” Gibbs assures the stricken young man.
The second and third interviews go much the same, minor troubles and some odd happenings but no real leads from any of the victims.

Harper catches up with them as they’re headed to speak to the base commander. “We’ve got three men unaccounted for. Two are off duty and may just be out of contact. The third never reported for duty yesterday. I didn’t make the connection…”

Gibbs ignores the apology, “Get us their files. And the files of three in the infirmary.”

“Right away Gibbs.”

“I trust you’ve received an appropriate level of cooperation Special Agent Gibbs?” The commander asks as they emerge onto the dock.

“So far,” Gibbs allows.

“We’ve set aside a house in off base housing for you. I’m afraid it’s only a three bedroom, it’s all we had available.”

“I’m sure we’ll make due, Sir. I trust my other Agents will be escorted to the house once they’re finished here?”

“Absolutely.”

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“So I guess I’m sleeping on the sofa then,” Tony bitches without any vigor upon inspecting their home away from home.

“Or you could make McGee do it,” Gibbs throws back with half a smile.

“Thought I was supposed to be maturing,” Tony teases.

“It can be a slow process. Glacially slow.”

“And I do owe him for that bet bullshit.”

“She did win fair and square you know. I did have to drive you in because you were with a date.”

“Doesn’t count if it’s your bed you pulled me out of,” Tony counters evenly. “Which reminds me. I really didn’t appreciate that stunt with the hickey.”

“I’m still the same old bastard Tony,” Gibbs warns seriously.

“I know that Jethro. I meant giving me another one so damn soon on my neck. Can’t you mark my collar bones for awhile instead?”

“I might be persuaded to.” A knock sounds on the front door. “Duty calls.”

Tony examines the living room as Gibbs answers the door. The cursory inspection is enough to tell him that they won’t be using the TV as a monitor. Instead he shifts things to free up some wall space. “Files?” He asks as Gibbs re-enters the living room.

“And some supplies. Redecorating?”

“Just clearing some space for us to compile and compare information with less than state of the art
Gibbs chuckles but hands over the pictures of their three known victims.

In the box of office supplies that Harper dropped off Tony finds tape and a roll of banner paper, as if someone anticipated the tech issue.

He quickly tapes up the pictures and a sheet for each victim.

Seaman Gregory Reynolds  
6’1” 184lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB- 5-29-1986  
Tat on Ass “Helen” (recent)  
Found at 0624

Petty Officer 3rd Class Emil James  
6’ 1’ 182lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB 10-8-1982  
Missing St. Christopher’s Medal  
Found at 0718

Corporal Kevin Evans USMC  
6’1’ 189lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB 1-11-1982  
Appendectomy scar  
Found at 0840

“I miss anything from the interviews Boss?” Tony asks as he steps back from the wall.

Gibbs reads each list before responding. “No but it seems like I did. When did Reynolds mention a tat? Or were you checking out his ass while I was working?”

“None of the above. I guess the doc was a little surprised by it, there was a note right there on the front of his chart.” He smirks, “You ever consider a tat boss?”

“Not really. Abbs tries to convince me once a year but I just don’t see the appeal.”

“She keeps telling me I need one too. We’ve walked by her tattoo parlor a couple times and she always puts a hand between my shoulder blades and says I need to let Ginger put something there.”

“Don’t.” Gibbs’ tone shocks Tony. It is unmistakably a request. Not so much as a speck of command.

“Not that I want to or anything but why are you so against it?”

“On me? Because it gives too much away. On you? Because you’ve got enough scars. Enough pain and marks to last a lifetime. And for the record? Things like this conversation are why we need some distance.”

“Guess I shouldn’t pin you to the sofa and suck your tonsils out then, huh Boss?”

“Had my tonsils out when I was fourteen DiNozzo.”

“An NCIS agent always verifies his facts Boss.”

“You’ve checked three times already just this morning. What’s next for your charts?”
“The files.” He kicks off his shoes and flops down on the sofa, “Which means I need to start reading.” He glances up at Gibbs before opening the first file, “Call your daughter.”

“Yes dear,” Gibbs quips easily, having been informed by same said daughter about Tony’s unease at being seen as his little wife.

“You’re not funny,” Tony tosses out without looking up.

Ziva and McGee arrive bickering over something half an hour later.

“I take it this relates to our case,” Gibbs growls at them.

“She tried to convince Special Agent Harper to let her drive.”

Gibbs’ glare is eloquent enough in its own right to get them reporting.

Tony puts the file down and takes notes discreetly.

Ziva flips open a notebook, “James is evidently an unremarkable worker. Competent and efficient but not overly so. His superior described him as friendly and able. No recent changes in behavior or work ethic. Reynolds works hard and was described as a good sailor. He had recently taken a real interest in some of the machines he was working on and his supervisor says he is going to recommend additional training at the end of this deployment. Says the Petty Officer has an aptitude. Evans is a member of the Marine unit onboard. His supervisor says he, and the rest of the unit, was chaffing a bit at being so long in port. Evidently the mix of four days training and three days liberty each week was something none of them were able to become acclimated to.”

“Did Major Castor tell you what that meant exactly?” Tony questions absently.

“The Marines were evidently becoming increasingly troublesome in town during their liberty periods. Including a few minor run-ins with local law enforcement. Sand-ups and bothering women mostly.”

“Dust ups,” Tony corrects unthinkingly as he considers that.

“McGee, what’ve you got?” Gibbs prod when the silence stretches.

“Just your normal stuff mostly. Evans had a few pictures of a woman, and about seventy dollars tucked under the edge of his mattress. James had a stack of cocktail napkins with phone numbers on them an inch thick. Most were from a bar called Hawk’s. Reynolds has a computer in his foot locker but it’s not even password protected. No need to assault him to gain access.”

Tony moves back to his charts silently.
Seaman Gregory Reynolds  
6’1’ 184lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB- 5-29-1986  
Tat on Ass “Helen” (recent)  
Missing St. Christopher’s Medal  
Found at 0624  
Hard worker, up for specialization  
Gambles a little  

Petty Officer 3rd Class Emil James  
6’1’ 182lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB 10-8-1982  
Fight with Petty Office 3rd Class Carter two days ago  
Found at 0718  
Numerous women’s numbers on napkins  
Regular at “Hawks”

Corporal Kevin Evans  USMC  
6’1’ 189lbs (per med staff)  
Brunette, brown eyes  
DOB 1-11-1983  
Appendectomy scar (old)  
Girlfriend dumped him for hitting on a girl in a bar  
Found at 0840  
Bothering women and picking fights in town  
Had pictures of unknown female  
$70, gambling?

“What are you doing?” McGee asks watching him.

“Since we can’t really figure out what’s being done to them I decided to compile some basic profile information to see if we can’t figure out why these particular men have been chosen.” He steps away from the charts, “The fact that they are very similar in appearance seems important to me but I just can’t place what it means.”

“No injuries?” Ziva questions studying the charts.

“No, and only the Rohypnol on the tox screens. The only missing item is Reynolds’ St. Christopher’s medal. They were just drugged, stripped naked and left.”

“The folding and stacking of the clothes might be an obsessive thing. Is there something about these men that he might see as dirty or disorderly?” McGee chimes in.

“It would have to have been something about their attitudes or behavior. And they weren’t all that similar,” Tony ponders aloud. “Reynolds was a little shy. Self-depreciating. James was… cocky, brash, a little self-serving. Evans was more your stoic tough guy. These guys were nothing alike. Aside from all being stationed on the Lincoln and looking more similar than the Ryan brothers there is no connection between these three guys.”

“You finish with those files Tony?” Gibbs asks hoping Tony hears the unspoken, ‘You’re on the right track, keep going.’

“On it Boss,” Tony flashes a quick hint of a smile as he lays on the sofa again.

“McGee, pull and crosscheck their phone records. Ziva, find out what Harper did with the physical evidence.”

“I’ll get right on that Boss,” McGee hurries into the other room to get his laptop.

Gibbs makes himself comfortable beside Tony’s outstretched feet and after noting that Ziva is facing
out the front window strokes a thumb over the inside of Tony’s left ankle. Tony manages to stifle the

gasp but glares at Gibbs. “What are you working on Boss?” The tone makes it clear he’s trying to

steer both of them back to the business at hand.

Gibbs smiles, unrepentantly stroking that sensitive inch of skin once again before answering, “The

files on the other possible victims.” He tosses aside the first file after only a few seconds, “Blonde.”

Ziva turns back to them upon hanging up her phone, “Harper took the evidence to the bases’ lab, I

am meeting him there in half an hour.”

“Let me know if their tech isn’t up to par,” Gibbs instructs absently.

McGee hurries into the room, “I got something Boss. All three of them have called the same number,

A Mary Anne Marsden, several times in the last three weeks.”

“Address?”

“Got it Boss.”

Gibbs deliberately rests his hand on Tony’s leg as he gets up, “Call if you get a break. And ask

around about a decent Chinese place if you get a chance.”

“Sure thing Boss,” Tony offers up evenly, “Want me to order?”

“Not until we see how this plays out.”
Suspects and Holiday plans

Tony’s studying his charts again when Ziva returns. “Did you discover something?” Ziva questions as she stands beside him.

“No. I know I’m missing something, I just can’t see what it is.”

“Perhaps the forensics results may be of assistance then. It seems our assailant is a woman. The trace on the clothes turned out to be Paul Mitchell conditioner and Avon sheer French pink nail polish.”

Tony raises a speculative eyebrow, “Doesn’t conclusively prove it’s a woman.”

“But it is more likely that it is a woman given that the incidents took place on a naval vessel where a man in make up would likely stand out.”

“I doubt conditioner and sheer nail polish would stand out on anyone but you’re right that it’s most likely a woman. Was it the same on all three sets of clothes?”

“Yes. Their lab technician was very… through.”

“Bored the snot out of you?” Tony quirks a smile at her. “Okay, so a woman drugs three sailors, strips them naked and leaves them there. The question remains, why?”

“Perhaps it was retaliation for something they had done to her.”

“Possible. See if any of the female crew reported an assault during their last deployment.” Tony tilts his head again, “But it doesn’t seem quite right either. I mean there’s no real retaliation in what’s being done to them. Still, it’s the best we’ve got so far.”

Tony tapes up another sheet of paper and heads it “Suspect”. The list is a quick one at the moment, “Trace: Conditioner and nail polish” followed by “Female?” “Possible victim of assault or harassment” and “off duty at time of assaults, but onboard ship.”

As he boots the laptop up his cell rings. A quick glance makes him smile, “Hullo again Princess.”

“Hi Tony. How’s the case going?”

“Strange to say the least.”

“But you’re all okay?”

“I could break into a song from a Judy Garland film if it would help.”

“If you only had a break?”

“Got it in one.” He shifts the phone so he can type. “You bored there?”

“A little. I was supposed to be working over at the habitat site today but there was a gas leak on site so they sent us all home. And to be fair I did call Mom first.”

“I don’t mind you calling me, I’m just surprised you don’t have other things to do.”

“All my toys were busy.”
“TMI Princess.”

“Don’t let Pop work too hard and remind him I mean it about him calling me.”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Nope. Take care of yourself too.”

“Go have some fun. I’ll see you when I get back.”

Ziva slips back out of the dining room silently.

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Half an hour later as Tony’s highlighting the duty roster Gibbs calls to have him order dinner after a terse “Dead end.” Tony chuckles for a short while before calling in their dinner order. When he’s done that he returns to his new chart to list the 37 names he’s found. Not as good a start as he’d hoped. Ziva returns to the living room with the files Harper’s just delivered scowling thoroughly.

“How many?” Tony ask warily.

“26 during the Lincoln’s last deployment, and 15 during the previous deployment.”

“What, is the entire command staff and Harper asleep? 41 sexual assaults on board ship in 18 months!” Tony is clearly outraged.

“It is highly disturbing, though two thirds of these reports are for incidents of harassment, not assaults.”

“That’s still an awfully high number of assaults.” He reaches out a hand, “Give me half, we’ll start by looking for ones that mention our victims but if anything strikes you speak up.”

Tony is slightly comforted by the percentage of case files that are solved, most with adequate punishments handed out. Ziva seems less impressed. “How are any of these men not caught? They are within a contained space, their time fairly regimented, surely it can not be that difficult to identify who had opportunity.”

“Some times the only witness is the victim and they can’t identify their attacker. And opportunity can leave you with dozens of suspects on a ship the size of the Lincoln.”

A sudden light comes to Ziva’s eyes, “Perhaps that explains the odd attacks. She is looking for some mark she saw during the attack. A birthmark or tattoo perhaps.”

“Good thinking, let’s check the unsolved cases first.”

A short while later Tony stands up and moves to his suspect chart, still reading. After a moment he begins a new note, “Possible suspect: Tara Levitt, molested by man she could only identify by tat on ass, a koi.”

Ziva glances at the new entry, “What do you mean by molested?”

“She was fondled but not assaulted. I think molested is an appropriate term.”

Ziva nods absently and goes on to her next file. Two files later Ziva goes to the chart herself, and adds “Possible suspect: Laurel Bowen, drugged and raped during weekend liberty. Got ‘fuzzy’ look at assailant, 6’ 180lbs dark hair and eyes, oval shaped birthmark on hip.”
When Gibbs and McGee arrive the Chinese food has recently arrived and there are five suspects listed on the chart. Tony’s on the phone with Harper. “They’ve all checked in? No, the whole crew, or at least those who aren’t on extended leaves.” Tony’s expression tightens as he listens. “Check on it. And why don’t you do a follow up with our three victims? Just ask the doc if they’re okay and the men themselves if they’ve remembered anything. You can call your report in to Officer David.”

Ziva growls softly and Gibbs has to suppress a chuckle. When Tony hangs up Gibbs grabs the Chow Mien. “What’ve you got for me?”

“All three of our additional possible victims are accounted for. Harper wasn’t able to tell me if everyone was accounted for tonight, but he’s checking. Ziva and I have figured out a possible angle. There was trace on the victims’ clothing. Conditioner and nail polish, so the natural conclusion is the suspect might be female. That being the case we think she may be looking for an identifying mark not visible when they’re clothed. So we had Harper get us all the reports of assaults on female crew members and narrowed it down to five possibilities.”

Gibbs nods, “That’s good work.”

“What was the deal with Marsden, Boss?”

Gibbs just glares. McGee answers instead, “She was a ‘hired date’ and is doing rather well on word of mouth advertising.”

“So you chased down a local hooker?” Tony snickers. The smack he receives is harder than normal. He ignores it in favor of a text message. “Your phone off Boss?”

“Nope.”

“Abbs wants you to call her. Says it wasn’t nice for all of us not to tell her we left town.”

“I’ll call her after dinner.”

“We calling it quits for the night?” Tony asks highly surprised.

“Nope but I figure we could all do with an hour just not staring at this, maybe it’ll give us some perspective.”

“Ducky and Abbs ganged up on you about down time, didn’t they?” Tony throws out there, knowing for sure that he did.

“Something like that. Got a favorite suspect?”

“Corporal Fuentes seems most likely. She was drugged and dragged into a store room, stripped in preparation for an assault but ultimately just left there as her attacker got spooked. She described the guy she was drinking with as tall, dark hair and eyes, offering to show her a bullet scar on his right thigh. She could be acting out what was done to her on men who fit the description of her attacker.”

“You and I will talk to her. Ziva, you take McGee and interview your pick for most likely of the remaining.” He finishes his dinner and heads for his claimed bedroom calling out, “Be ready to head out in thirty Tony.”
“Hi Pop! Can you talk?”

“What do you need sweetheart?”

“I was talking with Mom today… She says it’s your turn to host Thanksgiving.”

“And you had nothing to do with this decision?”

“I may have mentioned how unlikely it is that you’d bring Tony to Louisiana.”

“And my boyfriend’s whereabouts matter to your mother why Abigail?”

“I’ve been telling her how good you are for each other. How happy he makes you.”

“And it never occurred to you how unfair this is to Tony?”

“How so?”

“He’s fairly good at signing but not good enough to keep put with Jolene and Victor. So you’re throwing him not only into a meet the prospective extended family situation but one that leaves him at a disadvantage.”

“So you’re never going to introduce him to Grandpa Jack…”

“Abby, if your mother hadn’t given you his name and address you’d never have met your Grandpa Jack.”

“Daddy,” Abby cajoles, “You have good reason to be mad, he hurt you, I get that. But he’s your father. You don’t have to forgive him to speak to him.”

“Baby, I’m not going all the way to Stillwater to tell Jackson I don’t forgive him.”

“I could invite him to Thanksgiving.”

“I’ll think about it. But I’m warning Tony and giving him a chance to back out well in advance if I agree to this.”

“Don’t run him off Gibbs,” Abby’s warning is stern, and honest.

“From my life, my bed, my team? Never. From your grandfather? I can’t promise you that. Jack would tell him every story of me getting into some stupid fight over some girl, just to watch Tony react.”

“He doesn’t mean to hurt you. Not then, and not now. I could talk to him about Tony.”

“When did it become your job to be the buffer between me and the rest of the family?”

“The day I was born?” Abby rejoins smartly. “Or at least the day we met.”

“What about Brian and his family?”

“Going to Bethany’s parents’ this year.” He can hear the puppy dog eyes, “Please Daddy? I’ll help with the cooking, and there would only be the six of us. I’ll do all the inviting, and even smooth ruffled feathers.”

Knowing sooner or later he’ll give in he sighs, “Once I’ve asked Tony I’ll let you know. But if we
do this make sure your grandfather knows not to bring a date.”

Abby chuckles, clearly sure she’s won. “Will do. How is ‘operation out Tony’ going?”

“Faster than planned, I think. They keep pushing about his clearly serious relationship. And just so you know Ziva suggested it might be you earlier.”

Abby laughs, “He would never touch me, especially because I’m your daughter. Bet he told her so too.”

“Said you were like his niece or little sister.”

“Guess he couldn’t very well tell them he’s my step dad, huh?”

“I want to tell you to stop that, but I just can’t.”

“Because you and I both know that even if he isn’t now he will be.”

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“It is a dangerous business, pursuing a woman with a child,” Ziva comments after Gibbs is gone.

Tony groans, “I’ve told you time and again there is no mystery woman.”

“Ziva’s right Tony, if she’s got a kid you have to be careful.”

“I am not dating her mother! I have never even met the woman. As I said earlier her father and I are friends, no big mystery. And no mysterious woman either.” He hopes desperately that they both missed the stress on the word woman.

“You can’t deny that you were with someone last night,” Ziva smirks.

“You do have a fresh hickey,” McGee throws in with a snicker.

“And who says it wasn’t just another date?” Just saying it stings Tony a bit but he refuses to show it.

“The fact that you once again will not speak about it.”

“Maybe I just enjoy watching you two scrambling about trying to ferret out the information.”

McGee looks thoughtful, “That does seem more likely than Tony being serious about someone…”

“DiNozzo, let’s go.”

“On it Boss,” Tony calls retrieving the pertinent file from the living room.

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After a couple of blocks Tony decides to break the silence, “Is this a ‘there’s no case details to go over’ silence, or an ‘Abby upset you and we’re not talking about it because it’s personal’ silence?”

“It’s an I don’t know how to broach the subject silence.”

“Unless you’re dumping me, just say it.”

“Abby wants to host Thanksgiving at my place.”
“So I need to make other plans,” Tony guesses sadly.

“Not unless you want to. The problem is she’s basically trying to force you to meet my dad, not to mention her parents.”

“Your dad? I thought he was dead.”

“He’s dead to me. We haven’t spoken since Shannon and Kelly’s funeral. Jolene gave Abby his name and address. They’re friendly. I promised her I’d speak to him again as long as he understood I’m not forgiving him.”

“Is the reason you’re estranged something I should know?”

“Should? I don’t know. I will tell you. Just not until we’re home. You don’t have to decide about Thanksgiving right now either, and if you don’t want to spend it with the family we’ll lend Abby the house and have our own meal at your place.”

“I’d love to meet Abby’s folks. And as far as your dad goes, as long as I don’t get hit with flying food I’d love to meet your dad. I have questions.”

“I still haven’t agreed to this, you’re not encouraging me to do so.”

Tony ignores him. “Thanksgiving with family… Haven’t had one of those in a long time. Think I still know where Aunt Heloise’s sweet potato pie recipe is…”

Too close to the naval station to risk a kiss Gibbs merely caresses the back of the head in a swat like gesture, “Tell Abbs we’re on.”

Knowing they haven’t really got time to talk he texts her instead, “Sounds like I’m making a sweet potato pie. You’d better defend me if a food fight breaks out.”

“I’m not your knight in shining armor Tony. But you’ll love my green bean casserole, and Grandpa Jack.”

“My knight in shining armor requires my attention questioning a suspect. TTYL.”

Gibbs is already at the door when Tony gets out of the car. “Remember she’s a victim too and we don’t have any solid evidence, so don’t come at her too strong Boss.”

“Got my armor all shined up and a clean handkerchief in my pocket,” Gibbs assures him with a smirk.

“Next time you do that ‘my eyesight isn’t what it used to be’ thing I’m calling you on it. In public.”

“My eyesight really isn’t what it used to be. I had 20/10 vision once upon a time.”

“And it’s what now, 20/15? You read my crossword clues from the other side of the damn kitchen before I can. And evidently read my cell phone without even really focusing on it.”

“I was focusing. Just not for long.”

“Some days you are damn lucky you’re good looking Jethro.”

Gibbs gives Tony one of his full, openly happy smiles before ringing the doorbell and slipping back into his concerned professional mask. And suddenly an old comment of Ducky’s comes to mind. A laughing, teasing, clearly happy Jethro Gibbs does seem rather a lot like Tony’s public persona.
Quickly schooling his expression to one of professional concern Tony takes up his accustomed, and
rightful, place beside and just behind Gibbs.

“Corporal Fuentes? I’m Special Agent Gibbs of NCIS, this is Special Agent DiNozzo we’d like to
speak to you concerning an incident you reported during your last deployment.”

‘Incident’ is an amusing way to put it,” Corporal Fuentes scoffs angrily.

“Special Agent Gibbs was just trying to be sensitive to the nature of the situation Corporal,” Tony
smoothes over automatically. “We think the attempted assault on you and yesterday’s attacks might
be related.”

“I thought all of the recent attacks were on men sir.”

Gibbs tries again. “They have been, but the behavior of their assailant is very similar to what
happened to you and given that your assailant is as yet still undetermined we consider it a viable
avenue of investigation.”

“And our questions are mostly about the investigation, not the attack itself,” Tony throws in with a
reassuring smile.

The corporal nods so Gibbs goes on. “You gave a description of the man you suspect poisoned your
drink. Was there any indication that he was a member of the Lincoln’s crew?”

“No. He was probably a civilian. Hair was too long to be regulation, sir.”

Recognizing the necessity of a soft touch here Gibbs ignores that hated little word. “But Harper
handled the investigation in house?”

“No sir. He did have me give a statement and view a photo array of a few men who fit the
description but after two days time he turned it over to the local authorities. I’ve yet to hear back from
them.”

Now that she knew she wasn’t being belittled, discounted or trivialized she seemed calm and a little
detached about the whole thing. Taking rule 8 into account Tony still asks the most difficult question
on the agenda. “Where were you yesterday between 0600 and 1000?”

“Are you implying I’m a suspect?” If looks could kill Tony would be a smoking pile of ash. “I was
having brunch with my mother in Seattle.”

“We’ll need her contact information,” Gibbs deflects her attention.

“We’re just following procedure Corporal,” Tony attempts to reassure.

She stays silent as she writes out the requested information, “Is that all Sir?”

“For now. Thank you Corporal Fuentes.”

“That went well,” Tony comments as they get back into the car.

“That’s the last time we trust Harper’s reports. Have him meet us at the house.”

“On it Boss.”
“I stand by my suspect list Boss.”

“I know Tony. You were onto something. I could see that almost from the start. But I’m not walking into another interview with incomplete background.”

“And you’ve wanted to rip Harper a new one since we arrived to almost no information.”

“There is that,” Gibbs concedes. “When’s Harper due?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“And McGee and Ziva?”

“Fifteen.”

Gibbs nods and pulls Tony away from the windows. “Then it sounds like we have about ten minutes to relax…”

“And how do you suggest we relax exactly?” Gibbs answers by way of an enthusiastic kiss. When Gibbs releases him beside the sofa Tony grins, “I think this method of relaxation has real potential Boss. Why don’t you show me the technique a bit more?”

They’ve been making out less then ten minutes when the sound of a car stopping on the street in front of the house separates them.

Gibbs growls as he straightens his clothes.

“So much for relaxing,” Tony mutters heading for the bathroom to fix his hair. He doesn’t bother to hurry. Gibbs can get a sit rep from Ziva or rip Harper a new one just fine without him. Instead he goes in search of a bottle of water and a fortune cookie.

“How can you actually eat those?” McGee asks as he enters the dinning room.

Tony holds up the fortune, “You will be asked many inane repetitive questions. Rise above them.”

“That’s not what it says.”

“No it’s not. It says ‘If you do not live your life now, when will you?’ Not as topical as mine though.” He smiles as he eats the other half of the cookie, “Dead end?”

“Looks like it. Still have to check her alibi but it seems the local PD took good care of her.”

“Which suspect did Ziva pick?”

“Seaman Florence Mitchum.”

Tony goes back into the living room and puts an X beside Mitchum’s name with the notation “upon confirmation of alibi” then does the same to Fuentes’ listing.

“Hey Probie, Fuentes was supposed to be having brunch with her mother. Here’s the number.”

McGee glances at Gibbs, probably in preparation for a protest but in the end he doesn’t say anything. Possibly because Gibbs looks ready to shoot someone. Which makes Tony smirk, if only for a split second. Harper arrives as McGee is making the alibi calls.

Tony re-examines his suspect files while Gibbs scares Harper half to death. When the tone of voice
tells him Gibbs is winding down he joins them. “Now tell me about the Howard investigation.”

“Petty Officer Howard was convinced it was one of the men she worked with in the engine room but they all had solid alibis, as I noted in the file. I promised to keep the investigation open but after about three months she confronted one of the men and seemed to finally accept his assertion that none of the engine room crew was responsible. Without a specific subject I couldn’t get a search authorization for anyone’s DNA.”

Tony nods, “And Corporal Levitt?”

“Unfortunately the tattoo she described is not listed on anyone’s service record. I have the medical staff on alert about it but he hasn’t turned up.”

Tony considers that a moment before asking at last “Chief Warrant Officer Bowen?”

“That was a sad one. All the witness reports conflicted with Bowen’s statement. Again we’ve kept an eye out for the mark but as yet it hasn’t been spotted.”

Tony gives his charts one more measuring look before turning to Gibbs. “It’s Bowen, Boss. Nobody believed her. Nobody did a proper investigation. So she took matters into her own hands.”

“Let’s go.”

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It’s almost four AM by the time Bowen is safely in custody, as is her fourth victim, Petty Officer Second Class Nesting. Nesting is sporting an oval shaped birthmark as well as multiple abrasions and contusions. Bowen is confident he was her rapist. Either way their work is done and Tony wants nothing more than to attempt to sleep. Unfortunately Ziva seems to have no such inclination.

“I do not understand why she waited three months before implementing her plan.”

“Ziva, Ziva, Ziva. You do not just walk up to a man with a drugged cup of coffee right out of the gate. Not if you plan to get away with it anyway. You have to establish a routine first. If you bring me coffee when you never have before half the people in the room will remember that. If every few days you bring me a cup it becomes such a nonevent even I don’t necessarily remember you brought it to me afterwards.” He shrugs, “Besides she needed a suspect list to work from, and as you know that takes time.”

Ziva’s quiet long enough Tony considers out right telling her to leave him alone and go to bed. When she fidgets slightly and turns to face him he decides against it, figuring she’s finally coming to the point of the whole exercise. “Were the women always a cover?”

“A cover for what?” Tony asks innocently.

“Tony, you and I both know the person you have been secretly, and I suspect seriously, seeing is the little girl’s father.”

He fights the instinctive panic in favor of sticking to the plan. “And if that’s true?”

“I simply do not understand why you make such a show of chasing women.”

“Gay cops don’t live long. And if you talk a good game most people take you at your word.”

“How is it that Americans are so obsessed with sex and yet you manage to be such prudes about it?”
“I don’t know what to tell you Ziva. Except maybe that guys tend to think that anyone who’s interested in men must be interested in them specifically.”

Ziva nods, “Does the little girl understand the situation?”

Tony checks that they are indeed still alone before answering, “She tells me I make her dad happy so I think so.”

“You seem very fond of her.”

“She’s a sweetheart.” A brilliant smile graces his face, “She’s my princess. And like any good knight of the realm I’d defend her honor as my own.”

Ziva laughs pleasantly, “She is lucky to have you.”

“I take it you aren’t bothered by the prospect then.”

“Of you finding someone, of course not. Of you helping to raise a child? A bit. Do you stare at every shapely behind in front of her as well?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about Zee-va. Head on off to bed.”

“Goodnight Tony.”

“Night.”
Fathers and Sons

Despite sleeping on the sofa Tony is the last to wake up and finds himself a little disappointed not to find his coffee already doctored to his preference. Still he takes a seat and stifles a yawn.

“You with us now DiNozzo?”

“Present and accounted for Boss.”

“Our flight out doesn’t leave until three so I’ve arranged for some office space so we can all get our reports done. Pack up and we’ll head over.”

“Reports. Oh joy.” The head slap is an honest reprimand.

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Abby waits until she knows her grandfather will have the shop closed for lunch to call as she wants his full attention. She knows his reaction is important and she refuses to mess this up. He answers on the third ring. “Hi Grandpa Jack.”

“Sweetheart, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“T...
that going to be a problem for you Jack?”

“That my boy has taken up with a man? No, it’s not a problem. That he’s taking advantage of his position? That’s a bit of a problem.”

“He’s not taking advantage of Tony. Tony pursued Pop. And it doesn’t effect them at work. Well Daddy smiles more, but he doesn’t treat Tony any differently. And Tony never tries to trade on their relationship.”

“Okay Sweetheart, I get it.”

“You won’t cause them any trouble? Or purposely embarrass Pop?”

“But it’s my job as a father to tell all the embarrassing stories from his childhood to his new squeeze baby girl.”

“Stay away from the ones about old girlfriends at least.”

“Fair enough. Where exactly are you holding this feast?”

“Pop’s. It’s the same house he had when…”

“You would have really liked her Sweetheart.”

“I know Grandpa. Will you bring anything? Tony’s making a sweet potato pie.”

“I’ll make some cornbread, my mother’s recipe. It was one of your father’s favorite when he was little. How many people will be there?”

“Six of us.”

“Perfect. I need to reopen the store Sweetheart, I’ll talk to you again this weekend, alright?”

“Absolutely. Love you Grandpa.”

“Love you too Abby.” Abby hangs up grinning.

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Almost immediately upon entering the plane Tony shutters. This he supposes, is the middle ground between real seats in a cargo hauler and canvass ones in a cargo hold. The bench seats don’t seem particularly comfortable but all four of them could lay down if they so wished. Once again he settles beside Gibbs leaving Ziva and McGee across the way. Once their bags are secured and they’re strapped in for take off Ziva directs a curious look at Gibbs, “What will happen to Chief Warrant Officer Bowen?”

“She’ll be tried for the assaults. Her attorney will probably strike a deal because of the attack on her. She’ll end up spending three years in prison and be dishonorably discharged. Nesting will receive a much harsher sentence for the rape. Once he’s out of the infirmary.”

“And Agent Harper?” McGee ventures.

“Will be placed with a more experienced agent to be retrained.”

“If he doesn’t quit outright and run to hide in the coattails over at the FBI,” Tony offers with a snicker.
“Certainly wouldn’t be the first,” Gibbs allows.

After a moment’s thoughtful silence Ziva asks McGee to explain the traditional celebration of Thanksgiving. Possibly because neither has to shout to be heard and the discussion is at least marginally topical.

That suits Tony just fine. After an insight like last night’s ‘were the women always a cover’ he’s glad to be off her radar for awhile. Gibbs pulls out a pen and his notebook. At Tony’s inquisitive expression he shrugs, “Shopping list for Thanksgiving. Indulging Abbs requires planning.”

With an acknowledging nod Tony pulls the half finished crossword from the morning paper out of his bag and continues working on it.

He’s doing his best to solve the last clue when McGee raises his voice to be heard, “What about you Tony, do you have Thanksgiving plans?”

“I’ve had a few invitations.”

“You mystery woman?”

“Does not exist. My parents, two of my frat buddies, a couple of other friends…” He shoots them a cheeky grin, “I’m a popular boy.”

“You’re not going to your parents?” McGee asks as though that’s a capital offense.

“Wasn’t a sincere invitation.” Deciding to redirect attention he shoots back, “What about you Probie? Going home to get pinched by the aunts and told what a big boy you’ve become?”

McGee looks a little wistful at that. “Probably not. It’s a long drive for one day. But when we do celebrate it’s just my immediate family. We do the traditional thing. You know, turkey, football, pumpkin pie.”

“And what is our crazy assassin going to do?”

“I do not know. It is not a holiday I am familiar with. And no one has invited me to any celebration. I am evidently not so popular as you are Tony.”

“It takes charm, good looks and time,” Tony teases in return. “What about you Boss? Abby rope you into anything weird?”

Gibbs gives one of his famous glares, though Tony sees the humor in it. “Do I look like the kind of guy who goes in for that new age crap DiNozzo?”

“No Boss. But Abbs can be from time to time.”

Silence settles once more and Tony shifts until he’s laying along the bench to catch some more sleep.

Gibbs watches Tony settle and considers the question in earnest. The traditions he knows, that he’s been a part of, are all pretty normal. The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. Turkey. Football. Involuntary naps due to too much turkey. All topped off with pie and some goodbye hugging. Of course this year there were a number of new factors. He’d never brought a date to a Thanksgiving celebration before, or had his father attend a Scuito family gathering. He’d never been the primary architect of the meal before either, hence the shopping list he was making out three weeks in advance. Tony’d mentioned not having had a family Thanksgiving in a long while. Was Gibbs just imagining the wistfulness of that statement or was there a story behind it? Tony shifts in his sleep,
wrapping a hand around Gibbs’ knee. Deciding for once to just go with what feels good Gibbs rests a hand on the back of Tony’s neck and lets himself fall asleep.

The change in pressure as they begin their descent wakes them both. Reluctantly they return to a more conventional seating arrangement.

“Are you coming home with me tonight?” Gibbs asks under cover of the plane’s engines.

“I need to move more work clothes to your place,” Tony returns at the same low volume after glance over at Ziva and McGee. “Why don’t we stay at the apartment tonight and I’ll pack a bigger bag?”

“It’s a deal.” Noting that they are approaching their destination he raises his voice to address the whole team, “I’ve requested the week of Thanksgiving off for the whole team, so barring a major terrorist attack you’re free and clear.”

“We need to thank Abbs, don’t we Boss?” Tony asks with a chuckle.

“She did insist.”

When they’ve escaped to the privacy of the car Tony shoots Gibbs an accusatory look, “Have you hidden Sheppard’s body and convinced Cynthia to sign documents for you? You got the whole team a holiday week off?”

“She’s still in shock over my being Abby’s father. Can’t look me in the eye. And besides with the exception of Ziva none of us has taken more than two days vacation at a time in years.”

“Clearly Abby and I should have ganged up on you about down time a long time ago.”

“Don’t get too used to it. Jenny will have recovered by the time it comes around to Christmas duty roosters. We’ll at least end up on call.”

“Maybe not. You never know, she might try what Ziva and McGee were accusing me of. Butter up the kid to get to… well ‘Pop’ in this case.”

“That’d be a hard sell, seeing as Abbs wouldn’t mind seeing her burned at the stake as a witch…”

“So, is Thanksgiving some grand affair in your family, requiring the extra days?”

“Not really. I thought, if you end up liking them, we might do some of the Smithsonian with Jolene and Victor one day. But mostly I wanted to be with you and thought McGee might appreciate the chance to take his kid sister home for Thanksgiving.”

“I knew that girl was too young for him.”

“I thought it was too pretty.”

“Couldn’t very well say to Ziva ‘Tim wouldn’t chase jailbait’ and even if I had, she wouldn’t get it.” Tony’s stomach growls. “Does Mr. Yoshida do take out?”

“Nope. If you want sushi we’ll have to eat there.”

“What do you say? It’s a Monday night, we might bump into Ernie.”

“Fine with me, but come hell or high water we’re leaving in two hours. I’ve missed you.”

“No argument from me.”
“Forget it Jethro, it’s not happening. No one and I mean no one is buzzing my hair. Beyond the fact that I’d look awful Jasmine would shoot me,” Tony declares as they arrive at his apartment.

“Jasmine?”

“My stylist, despite what you seem to think it takes careful control to keep my hair the right length for the ‘contrived chaos’ look. And the way you’re always petting my hair proves you like it.”

“What if I just like you?”

“No doubt about that one,” Tony smiles and pulls Gibbs into a deep enthusiastic kiss.

Someone clears their throat in the living room doorway, “Anthony?”

Tony almost literally jumps at that before turning around. “Dad?! What the hell are you doing here?”

Gibbs tenses immediately ready to protect Tony at any cost.

“You’ve been avoiding my calls and declining my invitations Anthony. I just wish to speak with you.”

Tony considers his father for a moment before nodding slightly, “Have a seat in the living room we’ll make some coffee and join you in a moment.”

Seeming to sense the danger in the situation Mr. DiNozzo does as he’s told. As he does Gibbs’ defensive posture backs down a bit. Tony tows Gibbs into the kitchen. “Guess I beat you to the ‘meet the parents’ punch after all.” He turns on the coffee maker and pulls Gibbs close. “Before you go in there looking for a fist fight you need to understand something. He’s never laid a hand on me. He never let the step moms or the nannies hit me. He just didn’t give a damn about me. Especially once I was old enough to think for myself. The point being if you hit him he will press charges. I won’t tell you not to do it, but I did warn you.”

“I never had any intention of hitting him Tony. Scaring a few years off his life on the other hand…”

Tony chuckles, “Aim for the wallet. It’s his vulnerable spot.”

As they enter the living room Gibbs makes a point of keeping his free hand on the small of Tony’s back. The proprietary gesture is not missed by either man. Tony shoots him an amused smile. Dominic DiNozzo on the other hand is clearly not pleased.

“First things first. Dad this is Jethro, my lover. Jethro this is Dominic, my dad.” They exchange a wary hand shake. Tony just shakes his head. “Now what is so important that my being out of town for a couple days necessitates a personal visit?”

“Jessica was hurt by your absence on Saturday. And Tammy said you’d taken up with a man who had a grown child.” Tony has to hand it to him, if he didn’t know any better he’d have said it was the grown child and not the man that bothered him.

“Now I see why Jessica missed me, we have so many things in common.”

“It’s not the same thing Anthony.”

“Really? How old did Jessica turn on Saturday Dad?”
“Thirty six.”

“And how old am I?”

“Forty.”

Tony doesn’t say anything more to that. “If you wouldn’t mind could we bring this around to the real reason you’re here? Between the cross country flight and the sake my patience is pretty thin just now.”

After a long level gaze Dominic drops the mask of civility and sits forward, “Since when are you gay Anthony?”

“Since an hour after the home coming game in 1983. Team captain and I had a little private party to celebrate the victory.” Tony grins helplessly over the memory of that fumbling encounter. It hadn’t been the first time he’d been lingering in the locker room to enjoy the view. It was however the first time he noticed someone else doing the same.

“That’s ridiculous Anthony. You almost knocked up that cute little cheerleader. What was her name Michelle? Micah? Melisa?”

“Denise. And no I did not. Her father found us sitting beside his shed at three in the morning and assumed. It was good for both our reputations if we didn’t deny it, so we didn’t. A few well placed rumors will make anyone believe whatever you want them to.”

“Are you trying to ruin me Anthony?”

“What?”

“We’re under intense scrutiny because of the Jamison Tech merger. I must have been asked twenty times why you didn’t attend Saturday.”

“Tell them you disowned me when I was twelve. It’s the truth.”

“Damn it boy, I don’t ask you to tow the line very often but for some reason my new bride has taken a liking to you. Can’t you just pretend to be the dutiful son for one month? A party or two, Thanksgiving diner. Do this for me and you’re back in the will Anthony.”

Tony laughs harshly, “Because I care about your money.”

“You should!” Dominic shouts angrily. “Look where shunning it has gotten you! You’re a god damned civil servant relying on a sugar daddy!”

To the surprise of both DiNozzo men Gibbs laughs uproariously. “I’m nobody’s sugar daddy sir. I’m a ‘god damned civil servant’ myself. If I was keeping him he sure as hell wouldn’t be living in this neighborhood.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my neighborhood Jethro.”

“Bullshit Tony. Do I need to have the princess pull up the crime statistics for this block?”

“You can’t keep me under lock and key J.” In a moment of inspiration the perfect words to make his father bolt from the apartment occur to him. “Well you could I suppose, actually. But I’m not into that. Too passive.”

Dominic does indeed stare in wide eyed horror, but makes no move for the door.
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Gibbs assures. “If nothing else the marks would be too hard to hide.”

“Thought you liked marking me.”

Sensing the role he’s meant to play here Gibbs grins lecherously, “With my teeth and tongue I like marking you. Bruising any of that pretty skin with cold restraining metal just doesn’t appeal to me Honey buns.”

After giving a reward of a long, slow, passionate kiss Tony once again focuses on the situation at hand. “I neither want nor need your money Dominic. If I were desperate enough to take money from the family Aunt Francesca has offered me loans time and time again. Now if all you want is to convince me to leave my family for three weeks to increase the share price of your company you can get the hell out. If there was anything else you needed to say to me out with it please.”

Dominic heaves a long sigh, “The reason Jessica was so intent on you attending her birthday gala was that she wanted me to tell you before we publicly announce it. In seven months time you’ll have a younger sibling Anthony. Jessica’s pregnant.”

All the color drains from Tony’s face as his eyes go wide. “A baby… Talk about being an older brother.”

“Yes exactly. Jessica wants our child to know their brother.”

Gibbs runs a reassuring hand up and down Tony’s back, “You okay Tony?”

“Shock I think,” Tony murmurs leaning into his lover. He’d known, intellectually, that a man in his sixties could father a child as easily as a man in his twenties, but the fact that his father had in fact done so was still enough to rock his foundations. He manages to gather his wits enough to formulate a pertinent question. “What do you expect of me in this Dad? An on call baby sitter? A place to shrug off your parental responsibilities?”

“Me? I want to make my bride happy. My Jessica on the other hand wants you to be friendly with your new sibling. Supportive. Affectionate I suppose.”

Tony feels like the weight of the world has just fallen on his shoulders. He’s not surprised but highly pleased when Gibbs muscles in to help him with the load, physically and emotionally. “What do you want Tony?” He shifts until he’s sitting behind Tony holding him around the middle.

“Right now? Time to think.” With a pat to one of the hands resting on his stomach he addresses his father again. “I have prior engagements to my family for the thanksgiving season. Besides which I need to take some time and figure out exactly what I’m hoping for here. If I’ve made a decision in time for the St. Cecelia’s foundation fundraiser I will attend. Barring any comment from you in regards to my attire, attitude or escort of course.”

“You wouldn’t dare, not at a church function,” Dominic hisses furiously.

“I wouldn’t dare? I have seen the very depths of human depravity. No nun with a ruler or priest with idle threats and abject lessons is going to change who I am. Think of it this way: Jethro and I are a package deal. You can’t have one without the other. Still need me to befriend your new child?”

“Very well. Tammy will be in touch.”

“You let yourself in, surely you can find your own way out,” Tony allows his tone to voice his displeasure at that little turn of events.
An acknowledging nod with a surprising amount of grace and civility accompanies Dominic out of the apartment. They sit in silence for a brief time before Tony heaves a put upon sigh, “Never can have a dull week, can we?”

“Hey, we’re exciting guys,” The teasing does its job, Tony chuckles. “So do you want to talk about what the hell just happened or do you want to catch some sleep first?”

“I don’t know what to think, or what to feel.” He rearranges them until they are laying across the length of the sofa. “My first stepmother… She was a piece of work. Dad’s always had a taste for younger women who like expensive gifts. He was thirty four, she was twenty two. She was a social butterfly, always planning some party or outing. That didn’t for one second mean she didn’t have her eye on the prize. She convinced my father that if he gave me access to any of his money I’d piss it away just to spite him. Evidently Dad saw merit in the argument. Next thing you know I’m out of the will. Still living under his roof, being taken care of by his staff, but technically disowned. Less than a year later Marley was out on her ass with a lot less money then she thought she’d get. Dad’s accountant is a smart cookie and most of his assets are tied up in Harcourt so the wives can’t touch them. That pretty much set the tone for the next two. Then three years ago he met Jessica. I didn’t bother getting to know her. After all I usually only communicate with Dad via the telephone, and even that is infrequent. He did manage to guilt me into attending the wedding. Jess and I hit it off. I think, if she weren’t my latest stepmother I might consider her a friend. Or I would have, before she outright demanded I pose with her for the Post. She’s a good person. Nice, funny, civic minded. She’s also very concerned with image, which is what this is really about.” He sighs and then yawns. “I suppose I want to know my little brother or sister but will they even be able to relate to me on those terms? And I know I’m whining but this is too much.”

“I won’t say you’re not whining-”

“Hey!”

Gibbs continues over the interjection. “-but you have every right to whine. You just had a hell of a lot dropped on you. And I don’t have the kind of experience to say something really useful here. Maybe you don’t need to force yourself into a traditional big brother role. You could try just being a friend. But you should talk to somebody with siblings. Maybe Abbs. And no matter what you say to your father you have years to work this out.”

“You always come up with the best plans.”

“I try.”

“Which makes it my turn to come up with a plan, huh?”

“If you say so.”

“Okay, so here’s my plan: We go in the bedroom, get naked, have sex. Sleep for two to three hours. Have a quick snack and some more sex. Go back to sleep until 0500. Still more sex and a shower before we have to leave for work.”

“Missed me a little?”

“Like you didn’t miss me right back.”

A warm laugh marks their passage into the bed room.
Tony pops his neck and takes his coffee into the living room to watch the morning news. He looks over his shoulder as Gibbs comes in to join him and notices the flashing light on the answering machine. When the news ends he plays them.

“You have five new messages. First message. Anthony?… I need to speak to you Anthony. Call me back.” His father. Tony hits delete. “Message deleted. Second message. Hey Tony. Out of town again? Call me or Stevie, Mark’s tying the knot.” He leaves that one.

“Frat buddies?” Gibbs asks from the doorway.

“Yup.”

“Third message. Anthony? Really Anthony this is childish.” Another delete. “Message deleted. Fourth message. Hello Mr. DiNozzo, my name is Emily and I’m with Bellson security-” He cuts that one off. “Message deleted. Fifth message. Hey man, Brandon here, we playing ball this week? Talk to you when I talk to you.”

“You play on Thursdays don’t you?”

“Brandon keeps expecting me to ditch him. Can’t hide the hickeys when I’m playing ball. He wants an early heads up if I am so he can get somebody else out to play.”

“Have you ditched him before?”

“No, but I’ve never given up a name for who I was seeing before either. And I got a little pissy with him when he tried to use it to psych me out.”

“In other words he’s perpetually single and figures you’re going to disappear now that there’s someone waiting for you.”

Tony shrugs, “I can see how, if you’re not getting any, it seems like a choice between basketball and sex. Like being there precludes the possibility of sex that day.”

Gibbs shakes his head and gives Tony a quick pat on the ass, “Better get moving, I hear your boss is a real hard ass who won’t appreciate you being late.”

“You doing a personal coffee run on your way in or should I pick up a round of caffeine for all?”

“I could scare the shit out of McGee and be the one to buy for everyone.”

“We don’t need him fainting. Just pick up yours and get Abby a caff-pow! I’ll fend for myself today.”

“You don’t have to,” Gibbs assures him.

“You’re not my sugar daddy Jethro, you don’t have to take care of me. Besides I have a lot of goofing off to do today if we don’t get a new case so you won’t want to much longer anyway.”

“I’ll always want to take care of you, Tony. Sometimes that includes smacking you upside the head to wake you up a bit.”

Tony draws Gibbs into a pleased kiss, “Head on out. I’ll be on my way once I’ve talked to
Brandon.”

“Tell him I like a little time on my own. Not much mind you, but enough for a few games of ball certainly.”

“Possessive bastard like you? He won’t believe it.”

“Just how much have you told him?”

“We talk. He doesn’t know enough to get either of us fired, but I talk to him. He’s a friend. And you mark me like I’m about to take off running, anyone could see you’re possessive.”

“I wasn’t worried about my job Tony. I’m worried one of your friends thinks I’m some possessive Neanderthal that’s gonna beat the shit out of him if he touches you the wrong way.”

“Not at all. Like I said we talk. He knows you’d protect me just as fiercely as you love me. Just like he knows you mark me for me, not to warn others off.”

“Oh I don’t know about that.”

“That reminds me, Ziva guessed last night that I’m dating Princess’ dad. Think she still has no idea Abby is Princess but that’s okay. She seemed very accepting. Maybe even happy for me.”

“Good, I was hoping she’d be open minded about it.”

“We really do need to get moving.”

“I’m going to stop in and talk to Ducky so you might beat me upstairs.”

“Noted,” Tony waves a hand toward the door as he’s picking up the phone. “Hey Brandon.”

“Tony, how you doing?”

“I’m great man. What about you?”

“It’s been a great week. Got that promotion.”

“Congratulations. So is there some reason we wouldn’t be playing ball?”

“Just thought the boyfriend would want you home.”

Tony laughs, “Jethro does not need to see me twenty four hours a day Bran. He’ll welcome a couple of hours without me. He likes a little quiet now and again. He already warned his daughter away and everything.”

“Good enough for me man. See you Thursday around seven.”

“Later.”

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“Morning Pop.”

“Good morning baby girl,” Gibbs offers Abby her drink and a kiss on her cheek. “Just a heads up, Tony’s going to want to talk to you about having a little brother. His dad turned up last night, his current wife is pregnant.”
“Isn’t that a really big age gap?”

“Welcome to the modern American family.”

“How’s Tony taking it?”

“He has no idea what to feel about it. That’s part of why I suggested he talk to you. After all he declined his father’s thanksgiving invitation due to a prior commitment to his family.”

“He did?” She practically squeals with joy. “Good. Of course I’ll be there for him. Who else is he going to talk to, you’re an only child after all.”

He hugs her, “Thank you Abbs. I’ll be down with Ducky if you need me.”

He makes sure his scowl is firmly in place in anticipation of the need to run Palmer off. And it works very well, upon seeing him Palmer turns and hurries out the other door. Ducky shakes his head when Gibbs chuckles. “Jethro if you keep deliberately scaring the boy he will never develop a spine. Or is that the point, to keep him terrified of you permanently?”

“No, the point is for him, and McGee for that matter, to develop some backbone. And for him to leave the room when I want him to in the mean time.”

“Has something happened to Anthony?” The deep concern, while uncalled for, is appreciated.

“Not exactly Ducky.”

“Please tell me you didn’t pick some petty fight with him Jethro.”

“We are not fighting. I was late this morning because of how well we’re getting along.” He sighs, “Last night when we arrived at Tony’s place his father was waiting for him.”

Ducky laughs, “Tried to scare you off, did he?”

“Well yes in a manner of speaking. He started quizzing Tony about ‘suddenly’ being gay. But the real reason he turned up was he had some delicate family news. Tony’s current stepmother is pregnant.”

“How did Anthony take the news?”

“He has no idea what to think or feel about it. And I don’t blame him. If Tony was half as promiscuous as he pretends to be he could be a grandfather himself by now. I think it never occurred to him that he might be an older brother out of the blue like this.”

“That is a rather striking age difference.”

“You should have heard his father Duck. The man didn’t even see his son. It was the first time in years I’ve wanted to just beat the shit out of somebody without any specific goal in mind. He kept going on about how his wife is worried about how it would look in the society pages, their child not knowing his or her half-brother. How in the hell don’t they see how special Tony is?”

“Why does any parent under value their child? No one knows the answer to that one Jethro.” Ducky chuckles at the scowl Gibbs shoots his way over the non-answer. “The damage Mr. DiNozzo has done to his son is what it is. You can’t undo it. All you can do is support young Anthony.”

“And if I’m not cut out for the job? I just sat there while that jackass made him feel small.”
“You cannot protect him from everything old friend. What did you do after Mr. DiNozzo’s departure?”

“I held him while we talked about it.”

“And did he want you to intervene with his father?”

“No. He didn’t outright say it but he advised me against starting a fist fight.”

“Then you did the right thing.”

Clearly not completely convinced but glad of the reassurance Gibbs gives Ducky a pat on the shoulder on his way out of the morgue, “Thanks Duck.”

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Tony decides on his way upstairs to take Abby to lunch rather than attempting to complete their discussion before they’re interrupted so when he reaches the bullpen he goes immediately to his desk. A glance around reveals he’s the first one here, he’s sure Gibbs is down stairs but the pile of morning mail in the center of the desk suggests he hasn’t stopped here yet. As does the yellow rose on top of the stack. He does a double take at that but McGee’s arrival keeps him from snooping. Instead he dials Abby’s extension. “Hey Abbs.”

“Hi Tony. What can I do for you this fine morning?”

“Wanna have lunch with me today? I could use some advice.”

“Nice misdirect there. Sure. I’ll come up around 12:30. You okay?”

“Just have a lot on my mind. We’ll talk at lunch.”

McGee looks over when he hangs up, his unease clear as day. “You aren’t really seeing Abby are you? I mean you’ve been spending a lot of time in her lab and those roses were from her favorite florist…”

“No McNosey I am not dating Abigail Scuito. You know what it feels like to have a little sister McGee?” Tony’s expression doesn’t give away even a hint that he knows about McGee’s little sister.

“Yes Tony. I have a younger sister, I know how it feels.”

“Well I don’t. But what I feel for Abby… I imagine it’s close to that. Maybe a little too protective for that, but close. Besides, I’m nobody’s toy.”

“You can never be too protective of a little sister. They usually need it.” He studies Tony for a moment, “Did something happen? Did she break up with you?”

“For the millionth time there is no she. Not that it’s any of your business but I got some news from my father. I want to talk it over with my friend. Is that a problem?”

“Sorry Tony. It’s just… Ziva’s right you and Abby have been really close lately.”

“We’ve been clubbing together,” Tony lies easily. “We’ve been trying to woo this pair of twins at club Emerald but they won’t give us the time of day.”

McGee’s disbelieving retort is cut off when Gibbs and Ziva arrive almost simultaneously from opposite elevators. Gibbs picks up the rose and looks askance at Tony.
“I don’t know Boss, it was there when I got in,” He shakes his head ever so slightly to communicate that it’s not from him. If the urge took him to send Gibbs a gift at work it certainly wouldn’t be a flower.

Gibbs reads the small note attached to the flower and smiles slightly. “Just to keep ‘em guessing, Liz.”

He dials her number and feels Tony’s eyes on him. Not distrustful, just curious. A sleepy grumble announces Liz’s presence on the line. “Good morning to you too Liz.”

“Jethro it’s eight AM.”

“Got the flower.”

“You’re still a bastard.”

“Never denied it.”

“I stopped by the house last night. Out of town?”

“No, I’m at the office.”

There’s a slightly longer than average silence, then she seems to get it. “When do I get to meet them?”

“Soon. Friday maybe? I’ll make dinner,” He glances up to make sure Tony knows the invitation includes him. Tony just grins.

“He must be cute if you won’t let him out of the house.”

“That’s not why. Call me at home we’ll work out the details.”

“Just a perk then, huh Jethro? I’ll call you tonight.”

He hangs up with a smile and continues going through the mail. About halfway through he looks up, “DiNozzo, recheck for offshore accounts under Carmichael’s name. McGee, confirm the exact amount he stole. Ziva, verify the whereabouts of his known associates.”

Ziva and McGee both shoot Tony confused glances when his only response is, “On it boss.”

A few hours later the director descends into the bullpen, “Secret admirer Jethro?”

“Not at all. Is there something you need from my team Ma’am?”

“What’s your status on the review for JAG on the Carmichael embezzling case?”

“It should be done within the hour.”

“Keep me apprised.”

When Abby turns up she sits on the edge of Gibbs’ desk, “Hi Pop.”

“Hello baby girl. What can I do for you today?”

“Can I borrow Tony for lunch?”

“That depends. DiNozzo, you done with your report?”
“In your email inbox Boss. Copies are off to JAG, the director, and hardcopy should be up any minute.”

“Go on.” As they near the elevators Gibbs calls out, “Be back in an hour you two.”

In the elevator they both laugh. “Well played Princess. McGee is up there wetting himself right now.”

“That was so much fun. It almost made up for not getting to tell Madam Director. So are you okay?”

“I’m good actually. Happy I think. And before you ask no it is not J that’s making me question it. My dad came by last night. Lit into me, in his way, about J. I don’t care about that. He also delivered the news that I’m going to be a big brother. I want to be happy about it. I’m just not sure how I’m supposed to relate to a sibling. Can we save the rest of this until we get to the diner?”

“And here I thought you were going to take me to someplace posh.”

“Next time sweetheart, I promise. Right now I need the messiest pot roast Fred can make. And a milkshake.”

“You’re really upset aren’t you?” Abby takes his arm.

“More unsettled than anything else.”

“Well first off, the great thing about little brothers is all they really want you to be is a friend. I imagine little sisters must be the same.”

“So I should what? Act like a divorcé dad? Show up twice a month and take them to the movies or the circus or whatever?”

Abby shrugs as they sit down. “If that’s the only way you can relate to them. Teach them the things your dad won’t. Get Pop to help you teach them to fish and sail. If it’s a boy teach him pick up lines and panty raid techniques. If it’s a girl teach her to kick the ass of any boy who bothers to offend her.”

“God my father is an asshole.” He sighs and starts playing with her hand. “Most of my frat brothers have kids of their own you know. God, Pete was worried a couple months back that his seventeen year old had knocked up some girl… Soon I’ll be the last one that’s single and I get no end of shit over it.”

“You’re unique Tony, I’ll give you that. Did you really want the life they’re living? A white picket fence, 2.5 kids and a dog?”

“Oh I don’t know, I could always talk J into a white picket fence and a dog…”

“Not even for you Tony. Are you going to tell them about… J?”

“When they start quizzing me about my love life at Mark’s bachelor party yes I’ll tell them. It’s not like they don’t know I play for the more… hands on team.”

“Exclusively?” Abby asks curiously. She wouldn’t have believed it had Tony not just openly implied it.

“Exclusively would be a bit misleading… more often than not would probably be the best way to describe it.” He checks the diner for other NCIS personnel before elaborating, “Women are certainly
attractive, just less likely to hold my attention. A third date is a rarity let alone introductions to my friends. But even then it was two or three dates with a woman and five or six with a guy if I was giving him the time of day to begin with.”

“How many are you up to with Pop?”

“Eight when I stopped counting.”

“So, why does this thing with your dad have you so flustered?”

“Having no idea how deal with a situation scares the hell out of me. It’s not something I’m used to.”

“Have we settled it enough for now?” Abby asks as their food arrives.

“You’ll have to help convince J to attend a church charity ball with me.”

“You might have real trouble with that one. He isn’t exactly the formal affair type. In fact, if you get him to go can I join you?”

“If you bring a date of your own. Somebody with a little discretion.”

“I could invite Timmy.”

“That’s not going to work for two important reasons.” He waits a few beats, “Tim won’t date you anymore, he’s too afraid of your father. And I don’t want anyone to find out that abruptly. Need to know I can trust him before he knows who it is I’m with.”

“Fair enough.”

“I mean it though, bring somebody who can hold up their end of a conversation. I don’t want to attract undue attention.”

“I’m more worried about what I’m going to wear. I’ll need a second cocktail dress.”

“Why?”

“Pop promised to escort me to the Marine Birthday Ball. I can’t wear the same dress to both.”

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McGee watches the elevator doors shut in wide eyed terror. Even with Gibbs and Tony confirming it he hadn’t really believed Abby was Gibbs’ daughter.

Gibbs bites his lip not to laugh at McGee’s expression. Instead he glares, “Problem McGee?”

“N-no Boss. Not at all.”

“Finish those reports before you go to lunch,” He instructs as he makes to leave in search of his own lunch.

“Jethro?” The director calls from the middle landing of the stairs, “My office please.”

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Would you like to join me for lunch?”
“I suppose. Is there something we need to discuss?”

“No. I just thought lunch with a friend might be nice.”

“Fair enough,” Gibbs concedes, knowing that just isn’t the case.

“Your… lady friend wouldn’t mind, would she?”

Gibbs smiles slightly, she’s fishing again. “No, Liz won’t mind. She knows me well enough not to worry.”

“You’ve known her awhile then?”

“About fourteen years.”

“You’ve been dating this woman for fourteen years?”

“Liz and I aren’t dating. Well, we went on one date, years ago. She’s just a friend Jen. She likes messing with my team. The rose was just a note that she’s back in town.”

“So you still aren’t going to tell me about the woman you’re seeing?”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business who I date Ma’am.”

“I thought we were friends Jethro.”

“Since when?” His tone is curious, fairly nonjudgmental.

“I thought we’d been friends right along.”

“Not from where I stood Jen. And I don’t mind in the least, just don’t try to meddle in my private life.”

“I didn’t realize wanting to know who you’re seeing was meddling.”

“Why is it that you want to know?”

“I like to know the people that are important to my friends.”

“If I believed that Jen I might tell you. If you don’t mind I think perhaps I should find lunch elsewhere.”
Abby and Tony are the first back from lunch and when they return Abby spots the rose, now perched on the bookcase. “Did you?”

He shakes his head, “Liz being funny. At least that’s what it sounded like to me. He couldn’t exactly explain to me.”

“Sounds like something Liz would do. Want to one up her?”

“No sweetheart, it’d be a little too obvious. Maybe I’ll leave something at the house before I go to my basketball game this week.”

McGee returns as Abby answers, “As long as I get to read the note.”

“You’re meddlesome Abbs, you know that? Yes you can proof read the note. Now get along back to your lab before the Bossman slaps me for distracting you.”

Abby chuckles, “Or for being distracted.”

“You’re evil. Pure evil. Hell you’re your father’s daughter.”

She laughs outright at that, “Guilty.”

Before Abby’s back in the elevator Gibbs returns hanging up his cell, “Grab your gear, we got a body at Little Creek.”

“CIA report this one boss?” He winks, “Or maybe a nude sunbather?”

“This one was found during a routine S&R training mission.”

Avoiding the imminent question Tony calls Ducky before following Gibbs. He’s glad to find that Ziva hasn’t arrived yet as it allows him the freedom to slide into the front seat and sit flush against Gibbs, no questions asked. He’s down right delighted when he finds a cup of his favorite coffee beside Gibbs’. He shoots Gibbs an appreciative smile. And then McGee ruins the moment by joining them, leaving Ziva to contend with a ride in the back of the truck.

A few minutes into the drive McGee turns to him, “So Abby knows your mystery woman then?”

“No. Abby wants me to send my stepmother flowers because I missed her birthday party,” The lie is easy and plausible.

“Why would Abby care about that?” McGee probes curiously.

“I missed it because I was teaching Abbs to make the perfect pork Florentine medallions.” Which is true.

“If you don’t want to tell me just say so.”

“Are you suggesting I can’t cook Probie?”

“No I’m outright saying it.”

“You’d be wrong,” Gibbs states matter-of-factly.
“I thought you agreed never to mention that incident again Boss.”

“I didn’t DiNozzo.”

Tony collects himself, “I was ordered to take cooking lessons four years ago. I’m very good at it now.”

“There was an incident?” Ziva asks through the window behind Tony.

Deciding to lessen the impact rather than prolong the interrogation Tony gives a curt, “I started a small fire.”

“On the job?” Ziva’s smile is alight with cruel amusement.

“No. At Gibbs’ house. There was a fire on the floor above mine, they kept us out of the building for a week. I was supposed to be paying for the use of the guest room in home cooked meals.”

“Talk to me Duck.”

“Patience Jethro. All I can say for certain Jethro is he died at least twenty four hours ago. He’s been in the water too long to be of much help here, I’ll have more for you once we get him home.”

Choosing not to comment Gibbs turns to the Lieutenant waiting for him, “Where exactly did your men find him?”

“Right here, when they made it to shore the body was lying here. As you can see he was clearly dead. My men know their SOP Special Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs nods, “DiNozzo sketch. McGee photographs. Ziva interview the sailors that found him.” He turns back to the Lieutenant, “How long were your men in the water?”

“About two hours. They were about a hundred and fifty yards straight out. If he was washed in by the tide he was moving Southwest.”

“Are any of the base facilities in that direction?”

“A few of the docks and one of the fueling depots.”

Gibbs considers it a moment, “DiNozzo’s in charge until I get back.”

“Sure thing Boss,” Tony’s pleased pride is clear.

Gibbs allows himself to smile as he walks away.

“You have something for me Ducky?”

“Will time and cause of death do Jethro?”

“It’s a start.”

“He was in remarkably good health at the time of his death. He bled out from one stab wound to the chest, thirty-six to forty-eight hours ago. I’d say he was in the water most if not all of that time.” He
moves to the light box to examine the dental x-rays. “Fingerprint identification is obviously not a possibility. Abigail is running his DNA and I’m working on matching his dental records. It’s unlikely we’ll find anything tonight.” After a quick glance at Jimmy, who is studiously cleaning another body, Ducky drops his voice a bit. “On a personal note, Jenny stopped by. You’ve provoked her again haven’t you?”

“Provoked? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Ducky stares him down. Not in the least intimidated, but getting the point the sighs, “I did not provoke her. She was trying to meddle in my private affairs and I refused to play along.”

“Perhaps you should tell her. It might prove useful in helping her to… move on.”

“I won’t contribute to whatever it is that has her meddling with my team. Especially not considering the damage she could do if given a chance.”

“You may have a point. But don’t judge her too harshly Jethro. In life one amasses many regrets, when given a chance to correct one it is only natural to want to do so.”

“Seems more like repeating the mistakes of the past than attempting to fix them Duck.”

“You know I don’t take sides.”

“Fair enough. Call me when you get a match.”

“I’m sure there’s someone who won’t appreciate that.”

“Then you’ll know why I’m not answering it.”

Ducky chuckles, “If that happens I’ll mark it on my calendar.”

Gibbs laughs, “Get your pen.”

In the bullpen the team are all glued to their screens, clearly tired. “Go on, have some dinner, get some sleep. We can’t do anything else until we get an ID. I want you all back here at 0800.”

“Night Boss,” Ziva and McGee chorus distractedly as they head for the elevator.

“Are we heading home Boss?” Tony asks quietly once they’re gone.

“I just need to check my email and I’ll go. Why don’t you head home and I’ll be there in a few minutes?”

“Your place, right?”

“Unless that’s a problem.”

“No problem.” A noise from upstairs makes him switch to signing, “Don’t be long.”

“Won’t. Love you.”

“You too.”

In a purposely loud voice Tony calls out, “Don’t work too late Boss. You need sleep too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind DiNozzo,”
Gibbs braces himself for the explosion as the tap of heels on the stairs descend toward him. “Jethro, I’m surprised you’re still here.”

“And why’s that?”

“Most people hurry home when someone’s waiting for them.”

“Who says anyone’s waiting for me? I’m dating someone, not remarried.”

“You don’t do casual Jethro.”

“I also don’t hide who I am. I’m a workaholic. Anyone who makes it past a first date with me knows that.”

The director sighs, “I understand that it’s not any of my business as your boss. And that I haven’t been a good friend these last few years… Longer really. I thought we had something Jethro. That you cared about me. When you said it was just a cover… I thought you were pushing me away because you were afraid of making the same mistakes again. When I turned up here you were flirting again, and I know it’s in your nature to flirt. I guess I thought it meant you were ready to try again. I’m sorry for the way I’ve been acting. But I really would like to know if you’re happy at least.”

He takes her words at face value and answers as he gets up to leave for the night. “I’m happy. Happier than I’ve been in years.”

He misses the soft “damn it” that’s muttered behind him.

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As he waits for the pizza delivery boy Tony dials his friend, “Hey Luke, sorry I didn’t get back to you earlier man, we were on a case. So Mark’s finally falling from our noble bachelor ranks?”

“He’s marrying Becky, yes. Leaving you the lone single brother from our pledge class.”

“So when’s the bachelor party?”

“November 18th in Baltimore. We’re all meeting up at the Hilton Baltimore Hotel and then it’s in Stevie’s hands.”

“So basically beers and strips clubs.”

“Or every porn video Stevie can lay hands on. I figure either way we’ll have a little hair of the dog on Sunday and catch up.”

“No can do on Sunday.”

“What, you can’t get two weekend days off work?”

“Well there’s that possibility too. But no the problem is the St. Cecelia’s foundation fundraiser. I’m scheduled to scandalize the hell out of Dad by turning up with my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Lover, Partner, bed-warmer. We’ve never discussed how to refer to each other.”

“Serious this time around?”
“Very much so.”

“Good for you Tony. He treat you right?”

“Yeah, he does. A little over protective from time to time but I do seem to get shot at an awful lot.”

“So do we get to meet this one?”

“Not at a bachelor party. And maybe not everyone. Next time you and Sherry are having Paul and Lisa or Mark and Becky over call me. If I can tear Jethro away from his boat long enough we’ll join you.”

“At least bring us a picture Sex Machine, we need to see the man who took you out of the game.”

“We’ll see man. Look the pizza boy just pulled up and Jethro should be home any minute. See you in three weeks.”

“Night Tony.”

After paying for the pizza Tony makes an executive decision. He grabs two cold beers and the pizza and heads up stairs. Five minutes later when Gibbs appears in the doorway he’s leaning against the headboard, naked and halfway through his first slice. “Hope you don’t mind. I figured if we eat here then we can just wash up and go to sleep. For tonight anyway.”

“I’d bitch about eating in bed but right now I’m just happy you remembered food, because I completely forgot.”

“Even the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs cannot survive on coffee alone. It appears you need a keeper and I’ve been nominated.”

“Who ratted me out?” Gibbs asks with a chuckle.

“Ducky. I had an email when Abbs and I got back from lunch informing me that I was to make sure you eat dinner if I had to force feed you as you missed lunch.”

“Jenny ruined my appetite.”

“Should I be updating my resume?”

“I think I got the point across.”

“I hope so. I really don’t want to leave NCIS.”

“You could lounge around the house for a few months while I did my bear with a sore head impression at the office. She’d beg you to come back.”

“No, we’d both be unemployed.”

“Probably,” Gibbs strips and attacks the pizza with real enthusiasm.

Gibbs examines the fresh hickey on his neck in the mirror as Tony stands beside him styling his hair, “How much planning did this take?”

“Not all that much. The sounds you make during the first cup of the day, or occasionally if someone
slips you a particularly good cup, pretty much ensure I’m going to watch you drink it. Which has left me with a very extensive knowledge of just exactly what shows and what doesn’t.”

“And you accuse me of being possessive.”

“I’m not the one who was harassed by his ex on at least three separate occasions yesterday.”

“She can harass all she wants Tony, she can’t have me.”

“I’m just staking my claim Jethro.”

“I thought you were concerned about the questions a hickey raises.”

“On me. None of them are going to ask you about it.” He kisses Gibbs’ cheek. “I’m stopping for good coffee. See you in a while.”

Gibbs shakes his head and decides Abby won’t be covering this mark, Tony has every right to mark his territory. And it’ll keep Jenny off his ass.

Abby pulls in next to him just as he gets out of the car, a sure sign of an early arrival. He hugs her and kisses her cheek, “Morning baby.”

“Good morning Pop. Have a good night?”

“Fair enough. Pizza in bed and six hours sleep. I did however have a very good morning.”

“I can see that,” She chuckles then pouts. “No caff-pow?”

He kisses her temple and whispers, “Your stepfather is on a caffeine run as we speak.”

“Should I give him a big kiss in thanks?”

“It would confuse the hell out of Ziva,” He snickers. “But no, no lipstick.”

“You’re no fun sometimes Pop.”

He shrugs, “You get a DNA match on our body?”

“He’s not in the system. I would have called if I got a match.”

“Shut the ringer on my cell phone off.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my father?”

“I’m his evil twin and I put him in bed with a pretty young thing and convinced him to stay there.”

“Oh, sorry Roy didn’t recognize you. Didn’t take much convincing, did it?”

“Have you seen his pretty young thing?”

“True. It’s good to see you like this Pop.”

“Like this?”

“Happy, less frustrated. I knew it would be good for you to fall in love again. I’m just glad to see that unlike the stepmothers, Charming actually makes you smile without even being by your side.”
“You are entirely too amused by all this.”

“It’s fun. Don’t be too nice today, you’ve got a case. Which Major Mass Spec should be working on, I should get down to my lab.”

“Don’t do too much damage to your ear drums today Baby,” He advises with a kiss on her cheek before taking her arm and leading her into the elevator. “I’ll drop you off as I suspect Ducky needs me.”

When Abby arrives in her lab she’s surprised to find McGee waiting for her. “If you’re hiding from my father Tim this is the wrong place to do it.”

“No Abby, I’m not hiding from Gibbs. I came to ask you some questions... About Tony.”

“What questions would those be?”

“Are you two really trying to pick up a pair of twins at Club Emerald?”

Abby laughs, “No way I’d let Tony within twenty yards of Greg or Thomas, he’s too pretty. Besides they’re not Tony’s type if you know what I mean. I’m only flirting with both because it doubles my chances of success.”

“Did he tell you what to say to me when I asked?”

“We didn’t discuss you beyond the look on your face when it really hit home that Gibbs is in fact my father.”

McGee seems to study her a moment, “Do you know why he’s being so evasive about this new woman in his life?”

“Who says there’s a new woman in his life?”

“The goofy distracted smiles. The whistling. The fact that aside from name calling he hasn’t done a thing to me in weeks. He bought breakfast for everyone on Sunday. He got flowers. He’s not talking about any girl. He’s had hickeys. And he’s off whispering with you in dark corners all the time lately.”

“I’m not telling you anything Tim. When you think you know why he’s acting the way he is you ask him about it. He’ll tell you the truth if he’s willing.”

“And if he’s not?”

“Then you don’t need to know. Try showing him you’re a friend. Someone he can trust. If he can trust you he’ll tell you the truth.”

“Of course I’m Tony’s friend.”

“Really? What’s Tony’s favorite book?”

“Do magazines count?” McGee asks without even thinking.

“Nope.”

He thinks about it for a moment, “Moby Dick?”

“Nope. What’s Tony’s favorite coffee?”
“Starbucks Italian Roast with Hazelnut creamer and three sugars.”

“No, that’s what he gets when you’re making a run for the Bossman as they’re the closest source of Gibbs approved coffee. Not his favorite either. Tony’s favorite is Panera Bread’s Hazelnut coffee with one cream and two sugars.”

“What’s Gibbs’ favorite?”

“Jack’s Beans’ Jamaican Blue Mountain.” Spotting Tony with her caf-pow! she waves him in, “But don’t try to use it to kiss up, it’ll just make him snippier.”

McGee flushes at Tony’s entrance, “I would never. Excuse me, I’m sure by now Gibbs has something for me to do.”

“He’s snippy already?”

“Nope. Laughing and cracking jokes. Timmy was just spying. Hope you didn’t go to Jack’s Beans.”

“Not today. I brought him some of Johansen’s sinfully expensive Hawaiian. Just to watch him try not to make those noises in the bullpen. It’s win-win for me. He succeeds I get to laugh at him. He fails I get to hear it…”

“You, Tony DiNozzo, are a strange man.”

“True enough. McGee’s not the only one due upstairs though so here, milady, is your particular poison. Enjoy,” He kisses her on the cheek and returns to the elevator.

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“Ah, there you are Jethro. I assume you had a pleasant evening.”

“Morning Ducky. I assume you marked your calendar. Did we get an i d?”

“We did. His name is Kevin Simpkins. He’s the son of Commander Holden Simpkins based out of Little Creek. Lived with his father and mother in base housing until he started attending Waverly University this fall.”

“Thanks Duck.”

When he arrives upstairs there is something of a tense silence in the bullpen, he pauses out of sight to see if they can resolve it without interference.

“I am sorry Tony, I truly did not mean to.”

“Of course you didn’t Ziva. Unless you’re secretly pining for me shirtless why the hell would you spill your ice cold coffee drink of choice on me? I’m mad because now I have to go attempt to make myself less sticky before I can change my shirt.”

“Sounds like a personal problem DiNozzo. McGee, pull up anything you can find on Kevin Simpkins, naval dependant and Waverly freshman. Ziva you’re with me, we’re talking to the family. Tony when McGee’s got an address you two check out his dorm, talk to his friends, teachers. Find out if somebody wanted this kid dead.”

“Sure thing Boss,” Tony nods and pulls a fresh shirt from the drawer. As he’s headed into the men’s room Gibbs passes behind him and sips his coffee, making the anticipated extremely satisfied noise. Tony just grins.
It figured if someone had to spill Mocha latte on one of his shirts it would be a white one. He’s tempted to throw it in the trash, it’s not like it’s one of those ridiculously expensive ones Tammy sends him. In the end though he just washes up and rinses it out. When he gets back to his desk McGee is waiting.

Once in the car McGee faces him, “So which twin are you supposed to end up with, Greg or Thomas?”

“Greg of course. Thomas is a stick in the mud. Not as bad as you, mind you, but still too stuffy for me. I guess Abby needs ‘em boring, opposites attracting and all.”

“Good one. Are you okay Tony? You haven’t been quite yourself lately.”

“Look McGee, I know it seems that way, I even know why. But I’m fine. I’m just happy, relaxed. Get used to a more mature me, okay?”

“If you’re sure you’re okay.”

“I’m great Probie. Genuinely doing well.”

When they arrive on campus Tony takes a considering look around before popping the trunk, “Grab the kit. His dorm room might be our primary scene. I doubt it, but stranger things have happened.”

Unconsciously responding to the demanding tone McGee does as he’s told. When he hears the trunk close Tony starts towards the dorms but stops and turns around when a feminine voice calls out, “Tim? What are you doing here?”

Tony recognizes her from McGee’s ipod and gives her his best flirtatious smile just to irk him, “Hey McGeek who’s the pretty girl?”

“DiNozzo,” He glares at Tony, “this is my little sister Sarah.”

“And you must be Agent Tommy,” Sarah smiles back and offers a hand.

“No, my name is Tony.”

“Oh, in Tim’s book you’re Tommy.”

“Tim’s book?” Tony is genuinely surprised by that.

McGee shoots her an annoyed look, “Agent Tommy is not based on you Tony.”

“You’re much cuter than Tommy at any rate. And it’s such a waste…” Responding to Tony’s repressive look much more readily she smiles at him, “It’s called Deep Six. They sell it at the campus book store.”

“I’m going to kill you,” McGee growls at her.

“You should have told me it was a secret.”

“Don’t we have a scene to search?” McGee practically whines.

“We sure do Probie. Nice to meet you Sarah.”

Without saying a word Sarah pulls out a post it note and writes a quick “SMcGee@WaverlyUni.edu E-mail me, I have questions.”
Tony chuckles and shrugs noncommittally, figuring his anger level after he starts reading the book will decide his course of action.
“Mrs. Simpkins, I’m special Agent Gibbs, this is officer David. We need to speak to you regarding your son.”

“You found Kevin? Is he all right?”

“No ma’am, I’m sorry to tell you that your son is dead.”

“No. No, there must be some mistake. Kevin got a little carried away at a party that’s all.”

“His body washed up on shore here at the base ma’am. Our ME matched his teeth to the dental records in the missing persons file.”

Steady silent tears replace the desperate denials and Gibbs remains stoic, knowing anything else would not be welcomed at the moment. When she reaches for a tissue and takes a deep breath he braces himself for any of a half-dozen possible outcomes. “How did it happen?”

“He was stabbed. We think by someone who knew him.”

“Did you suspect someone specific?”

“Not yet. May we ask you a few questions?”

“Certainly.”

“You reported Kevin missing on Monday morning?”

“Yes, we always have dinner together on Sunday evenings, especially when his father is deployed. I figured he just got a little carried away and forgot. So the next morning I called his dorm and his roommate said he hadn’t spoken to or seen Kevin since Friday. Campus security talked to some of his friends when I called and advised me to file a missing persons report.”

“So he has been missing since Friday?” Ziva asks curiously.

“No. Friday night he stayed with his girlfriend Frannie. She said he left her apartment at noon on Saturday. No one had seen him since.”

“Could you give us the names and addresses of his friends?”

“Yes, I made a list for the detective who took the missing persons report, let me get it for you.”

“Which one would you say is his best friend?”

“Malcolm Fry, they grew up here together. They’ve been inseparable since they were ten years old. Malcolm was protecting a younger boy from the school bully and Kevin stood with him. They were going to go to college together, they had it all planned out.”

“What changed their plans?”

“Malcolm couldn’t get a scholarship and couldn’t afford to attend without one.”

After a nod from Gibbs Ziva makes a note of that and asks, “What about enemies?”
“Kevin’s a sweet boy. No one would wish him harm. No one who knew him at any rate.”

“Do you or your husband have any enemies that might try to use Kevin to harm you?”

“I don’t. And I doubt any enemy of Holden’s would recognize Holden, let alone our son.”

“Thank you for your time Mrs. Simpkins, we’ll be in touch,” Gibbs promises as they head out the door.

“Please, Special Agent Gibbs, find the man that killed my son.”

“That is what we do Ma’am.”

As they get back in the car Gibbs calls Tony.

“DiNozzo.”

“Report.”

“Dorm room isn’t our primary scene. Simpkins is your typical kid. The rooms a mess. No drugs. No money. No style. Room mate’s got an alibi. We’re just heading out to speak to his friends and teachers. Did Ducky have a more accurate time of death?”

“Between 1600 Sunday and 0400 Monday. Make sure to speak to Frannie McKenzie she’s Simpkins’ girlfriend. She’s the one the campus police identified as seeing him last. Call if you find anything.”

“She’ll be our first stop Boss.”

“No stopping to girl watch DiNozzo.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

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“Got an address for Frannie McKenzie there McGee?”

“It’s in the missing persons report. She lives a block off campus in the Johnson heights apartment complex.”

“We’re starting there, she was the last to see Simpkins, officially.”

“Didn’t the police already talk to her?”

“They didn’t know he was dead McGoo. Now get in the car.”

“Tony, about my book-”

Tony cuts him off, “I’m buying a copy as soon as we finish here.”

“It’s not about you Tony. You are not Agent Tommy. Sarah was just trying to annoy me.”

“We’ll see. She seemed pretty confident of her facts to me.”

“Sarah has some… odd ideas about my books. Keeps insisting things I never wrote are clear as day about some of the characters. Turn here.”
“Let me do the talking here Elf Lord.”

“Can I start talking when she slaps you?” McGee asks as they get out of the car.

Tony shoots him a reasonable imitation of Gibbs’ glare. “Ms. McKenzie?”

“I’m Frannie McKenzie. How can I help you?”

“I’m special agent DiNozzo, this is special agent McGee. We’re from NCIS. I’m sorry to inform you that Kevin Simpkins is dead.”

She begins to cry, “What happened to him?”

“He was murdered.” Tony hands her a tissue, “We understand you were the last to see him. Did Kevin mention where he was going?”

“He was going to see Malcolm. That’s Malcolm Fry, his best friend. Malcolm’s enlisted in the Navy, Kev’s been spending a lot of time with him before he goes.”

“Do you know of anybody who’d want to hurt Kevin?”

“He has a long standing fight with Jimmy Lloyd in his dorm. Something about guitar practice at one AM, I sort of tune Kevin out when he starts to go on about it…” She looks guilty after this admission. “Kathleen Benson’s wished him dead a few times. They broke up before they started here but she keeps coming around. No one else I can think of.”

“Was Kevin into drugs, gambling, anything like that?”

“Nothing like that. Kev was a dedicated student, and a video game addict but what college boy isn’t?”

“Okay. Thank you Ms. McKenzie, you’ve been very helpful. If you think of anything else just give us a call.”

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They find Malcolm Fry at a gym in town after being redirected there by his father. “I’m Special Agent Gibbs, this is Officer David. We need to speak with you Mr. Fry.”

“Have you found Kevin?”

“As a matter of fact we have,” Ziva offers carefully. “Mr. Simpkins is dead.”

“What happened to him?”

Gibbs steps in, “That’s what we’re investigating. When was the last time you saw him?”

“Thursday night. Kev and I have been working on my Charger for years, and just when we finished it I lost my chance at college and ended up enlisting in the Navy. We’ve been taking it out every chance we get. You know, reaping the benefits while we can.”

“Kevin’s mother mentioned that you’d planned to go to college together. Did it bother you that Kevin got to go and you didn’t?”

“A little, I suppose. He couldn’t have managed Chemistry without me. But if you’re suggesting I killed Kev you’re insane. He was the best friend I ever had. I don’t know what the hell I’m going to
do without him.”

“You’re telling me in nine years you never once had a fight with Kevin Simpkins?”

“Of course we fought, we’re guys. Kev cleaned my clock when I beat him to the punch with Shelly Quinn. I beat the snot out of him when he let slip that I like Pride and Prejudice. We argued over whether sweat equity earned him partial custody of the charger. Normal stuff.”

“He’s got it all. A girl, a full scholarship, and a bright future. It must have burned you a little that on top of all that he wanted your car too.”

“I never once begrudged-”

He’s interrupted as a half dozen bullets shatter the window behind him. Gibbs quickly tackles him to the ground but is hit by not one but two bullets on the way down.

Ziva quickly calls for an ambulance as one of the trainers rushes over with a first aid kit. Neither wound is life threatening, a pair of grazes, one to the forearm and the other to the top of his shoulder. Still the paramedics insist he go to the hospital because of the blood loss and possibility of nerve damage.

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“He what?!” Tony practically shouts. “Has anyone called Abbs?”

“No. I did not know how to tell her. They say he will be fine by the end of the week. They just want him to go home for the rest of the day.”

“All right, take him to his place. I’ll get Abby and we’ll meet you there and take care of it. When we do you can get to work on this angle. Where’s Fry?”

“The local police are transporting him to NCIS.”

“After you’ve talked to him make sure he’s got protection.”

McGee’s watching him with concern, “What’s happened?”

“Gibbs got himself shot. And he’s not listening to the doctor. I’m going to pick Abby up and let her emotionally blackmail him into doing as he’s told. You’ve seen the kind of sway she’s got over him. Keep going with the interviews on campus. I’ll meet you at the office when you’re done.”

“On it.” If Tony were in a better mood he might have laughed at the visible urge to add a “Boss” to that.

Instead he’s halfway to the car and speed dialing Abby’s lab. “Abbs honey, I need you to listen and stay calm, okay?”

“Tony what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

“Our idiot is in the hospital. He’s fine. Never even a chance he wasn’t going to be okay. But he did have to have a transfusion and probably several stitches.”

“He’s okay? You’re sure?”

“He’ll be fine, I promise you Baby girl. If not I’d have to kill him myself, remember?”
“Okay. Where is he?”

“I’m coming to get you. Ziva is bringing him home. We’ll put him to bed, and force feed him his pain medication if we have to.”

“Hurry.”

“I am,” He promises and hangs up.

Upon Abby’s entrance to the car Tony pauses long enough to pull her into a tight hug before speeding away. “As much as I’m dying to see him you’ll need to go in alone when we get there. I have to run Ziva off. He wants to go back to work. You know how he is. He thinks he’s superman.”

“Not exactly. He knows he’s mortal. He just thinks everyone else is worth more. Because he’s an idiot.”

“Then it’s up to you and I to keep convincing him otherwise, isn’t it?”

In the silence that follows Abby settles her head on Tony’s shoulder and calls the director.

Abby goes directly to Gibbs’ room as Tony speaks to Ziva. “What happened?”

“We were interviewing Malcolm Fry when someone shot at us. It was a drive past. Gibbs was grazed on the forearm and shoulder.”

“Drive by,” Tony corrects absently. “Were they aiming at you or Fry? Could you tell?”

“They were not aiming at anyone specific. But if I had to make a deduction I would have to say they were attempting to harm Fry. His presence at that gym was a known part of his routine. We on the other hand were there by chance.”

Tony takes a considering breath before responding. “Makes sense. Head back to the office and start searching for reports containing Simpkins’ name. It sounds like he might have witnessed something and been killed to keep him quiet.” Despite himself he looks toward Gibbs’ room, “How concerned was the doctor?”

“I am not sure. He seemed rather upset that Gibbs wanted to head back to work.”

“Infuriating man.”

“Does he know?” At Tony’s blank look she continues, “Does your boyfriend know you’re in love with Gibbs?”

Tony barks out a mirthless laugh, “I’d say so.” He doesn’t wait to see if she understands, he just joins Abby in Gibbs’ room.

“I do not need to stay home baby girl. I’ll take the pain medication they gave me and I’ll be fine.”

“No, you’ll be passed out over your desk. I already told Madame Director you were going to stay at home and I meant it.”

“You what?” Gibbs asks just the slightest hint of outrage.

It’s Tony that responds, “You’re not fucking superman. You’d be no good in the field on percocet and you know we don’t need you in the office running searches. So for once in your life just do as you’re damn well told Jethro.”
“Yes dear.”

“That’s it, just ‘yes dear?’”

“You both keep telling me I need to look after myself and we all know you can handle the team. I can spend one afternoon in bed if it will ease your minds. But I am going to work tomorrow.”

“Fair enough,” Tony concedes with a glance at Abby.

Gibbs falls asleep almost as soon as he’s settled, convincing Tony that they dosed him before signing him out. Which frankly he’s grateful for, he’s panicking enough over having outted them to Ziva without having to own up to it. It’s only a light doze so he and Abby agree with a look to wait it out.

Abby brings a water and the prescription bottle upstairs. She sits at the foot of the bed while he slowly stirs, “So who’s hero were you being today Pop?”

“No one baby. It was a drive by, aimed at Fry. I just had the misfortune of being closest to the window.”

That placates her, “Then I guess there’s evidence waiting for me. Get some rest Pop.” She kisses his cheek and leaves the room.

“I’ll call when we have something,” Tony promises offering his own kiss goodbye before following her. Gibbs is out again before they’re out the door.

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Half an hour later the landline in the house rings. Gibbs doesn’t really wake up at first, but answers the phone on autopilot. “I’m fine Honey buns.”

Fornell chuckles, “Honey buns huh? That what you’re calling the new redhead? So tell me a little about her.”

“Brunette this time, with the prettiest green eyes I’ve ever seen and legs up to here. Caring, loyal, funny, and strong enough to stand up to me.”

“Sounds like I might have to poach this one before you marry her.”

“Two major problems with that Tobias. You couldn’t if you tried and who said it was a ‘her’?”

“Really Jethro. I never would have pegged you for that kind of thing. Is that why you let three beautiful women get away?”

“No, it’s not. It’s why I’m not letting a beautiful man get away. Now unless Jenny Sheppard is blackmailing you this isn’t why you called.”

“You’re investigating the murder of Kevin Simpkins?”

“My team is.”

“I suppose asking you to back off won’t do any good?”

“Has it ever?”

“Simpkins is a civilian.”
“A naval dependant, killed on a naval base. No jurisdictional issue Tobias. Just send whatever you’ve got to DiNozzo.”

“Why would I send anything to DiNote-zoe?”

“Because I’m at home on pain killers and I promised my daughter I’d stay here tonight.”

“I heard about that. What is it Jethro, a midlife crisis? Claiming a daughter, new boyfriend. What next, a sports car?”

“No midlife crisis. Just settling down. And it was Abby who was keeping that a secret. She didn’t want people treating her like spun glass to avoid my wrath. And right now you’re tempting hers. I’m supposed to be sleeping.”

“Forget midlife crisis Jethro, you’re just plain getting old.”

“Blood loss Tobias. Now why do you have such a problem giving the case file to Tony?”

“Because then I’ll have officially handed it over.”

“Fine. Bring it here. Tony can pick it up later and I’ll read it over in the meantime.”

“Front door still unlocked?”

“Probably not. Abbs tends to lock it when she leaves. Just ring the bell when you get here.”

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Abby clings to Tony until the elevator opens on her lab, “Thank you for taking me with you Tony. I needed to see him.”

“I know how scared you’ve been when any of us gets hurt since Kate was killed sweetheart. Now let’s figure out why some dumb ass decided to shoot up the front of a gym in broad daylight.”

“I’ll call the minute I’ve got something.”

“Please do. I don’t have your father’s clue e s p,” He kisses her forehead and hits the button to return to the bullpen.

Ziva gets up as soon as she sees him and pushes him back into the elevator. She of course hits the stop button, “Am I to understand that you are involved with Gibbs?”

Tony takes a fortifying breath and braces himself for one hell of a fight. “Yes I am. I have been for months.”

“What of rule twelve?”

“When have you ever known Gibbs to worry about breaking a rule, even one of his own, if he wants something?”

“What about you?”

“I love my job, but not enough to give him up.”

“You really are serious about him.”
“Completely. Now that you know what do you plan to do about it?”

“What would I do about it?”

“That depends. If you’re a friend you’ll keep your mouth shut. As I’ve said we’ve been together for months, it hasn’t effect our working relationship. If you’re not a friend, well I’m not going to go making suggestions.”

“I would not tell the director if that is what you are worried about. I meant what I said when I figured out that you are gay. I am glad you have found someone, and I do not understand the American obsession with and prudishness about sex. Also I am not blind about Jenny Sheppard’s interest in Gibbs.”

“Which complicates things. Any other director might be willing to work with us on finding a solution that would allow us to work together without any sort of conflict. I don’t know how Sheppard would react but I can’t believe it would be good. Especially as she’s made no effort to hide her personal interest in Gibbs.”

“Do you call him that at home?” Ziva asks with a hint of interested laughter.

“Not that it’s really any of your business but I call him Jethro at home. It just wouldn’t do to let myself slip up here and get us caught, would it?” He restarts the elevator, “What’d you find concerning the drive by earlier?”

“I was able to recall a partial license plate number and have put out a BOLO. As for reports concerning either Kevin Simpkins or Malcolm Fry I was not able to locate anything. Perhaps one of them was a confidential informant.”

“Unless it was a first offense they made a very sweet deal on they aren’t a CI without an arrest record.”

“I am still looking into it.”

“Any word from McGee?” Tony asks as they reemerge into the bullpen.

“He called me to let me know Simpkins had a metro card a short time ago. He had three more interviews to complete and I sent Abby the information about the metro card.”

He nods and is interrupted by a phone call. When he’s done he shoots her a rueful look. “I need to brief the director on why Gibbs is out of commission. Wish me luck.”

“You do not need it.”

Tony doesn’t agree but makes his way upstairs with his head held high. “Afternoon Cynthia. Is she available?”

Cynthia laughs, “You’re only the messenger Tony.”

“He offers Cynthia a wan smile, “I know. If she kills me have Abby call my family, won’t you?”

Cynthia laughs, “You’re only the messenger Tony.”

“That’s a bad place to be milady,” Tony calls as he approaches the door.

“Special Agent DiNozzo. Please brief me on the status of your investigation.”
“We are currently completing our initial interviews with friends and associates of the deceased. During the interview of the victim’s best friend, a Malcolm Fry, at a local gym several shots were fired from a vehicle. No one was grievously harmed, but Gibb was grazed by two bullets. He required more than a dozen stitches and a transfusion so at the behest of his doctor and daughter he has gone home to get some rest. We have a BOLO out on the suspect vehicle in the drive by and are looking into theories linking the attempt on Fry and Simpkin's death.”

“You will be keeping me informed Tony.”

“Yes Ma’am.”
Abby hesitates before calling Tony, half expecting him to turn up uncalled for despite his assurance he wouldn’t. “Got something here for you.”

“I’ll be right down Abbs.”

Feeling more impatient than usual she pulls up the data on the metro card on another screen and examines the last few uses. Nothing jumps out at her and she sits back a bit in frustration. Right back into Tony, making her jump a bit comically. “Don’t do that! It’s bad enough Pop sneaks up on me.”

“I didn’t sneak! You just couldn’t hear me because you’ve got the stereo cranked up to ‘rattle the windows’ turn it down sweetheart.”

When she does Tony rewards her with a chocolate bar and a kiss on the cheek, “What’d you find?”

“The bullets at the gym came from two different guns. The four that actually shattered the glass were from a Glock 17. All five of the other bullets, including the two that hit Pop, were fired from a Colt Mustang. The Colt slugs brought up a case-to-case match on a murder in Norfolk, VA. The ten year old son of a timber company executive. It was a kidnapping gone wrong.”

“Fun. I think this requires a call to the Bossman. He and Fornell have some weird bond and we’re going to need that case file.”

“The weird bond’s name is Diane.”

“What?” Tony asks momentarily sidetracked. “Why would that be a bonding experience?”

“Because when it was all said and done between Fornell and Diane he knew there was one person who would understand completely. Pop liked him from the beginning I think. It would explain why he tried to warn him about Diane. And it didn’t hurt that they both think the slightly antagonistic working relationship they share is funny. Or that Fornell marrying her let Gibbs off the alimony hook.”

Tony considers it, “Actually that added to the whole enjoying being bastards thing makes a lot of sense. It’s not sharing a favorite football team and a morning commute, but considering who we’re talking about that is the most reasonable explanation in the world for their friendship.”

“So you’re going to have Pop ask for the file? Why not just have McGee hack into it?”

“Because McGee is going to be searching the witness protection assignments at the FBI to see if Simpkins was supposed to be in their care.” He drops his voice, “Besides, do you have any idea how many times in the last four hours I’ve wanted to call Jethro to check up on him? I keep telling myself he’s asleep and I need to leave him alone but at the same time I feel like he’s doing something completely foolish like trying to work on the boat even though he’s doped up.”

“Never. He wouldn’t risk damaging the boat. Has he talked to you about what he wants to do if he ever manages to finish one of them?”

“Not yet.”

“Ask him. He gets all wistful and his eyes do that crinkling up thing. You can almost see him picturing it.”
Gibbs manages to hide his relief when his cell phone begins ringing. “I need to answer that Jen.” He heads upstairs without awaiting her response. “Gibbs.”

“We got a case to case hit on some of the bullets from the drive by Boss. Kidnapping gone wrong. Think you could get us the file?”

“I’ve already got it. Simpkins and Fry witnessed the ransom drop. Simpkins recognized the kidnapper. He was due to give his deposition and go into protective custody Sunday evening.”

“Abbs is right, how the hell do you do that? She only got the hit five minutes ago.”

“But Fornell heard we were looking into the death about six hours ago.”

Tony’s a little surprised to have gotten the answer, “Are you feeling all right Jethro?”

“Might have taken my next dose of pain killers a little sooner than was strictly necessary. Jenny Sheppard dropped by with dinner.”

“If she thinks she’s going to drop in and play Florence Nightingale she’s got another thing coming,” Tony growls.

“So call the house and we’ll put on a little show Honeybuns.”

“I’m coming to pick up that file, and maybe steal a little dinner if that becomes a viable option. I’ll call for show from the car.”

Gibbs chuckles and returns to his guest in the living room.

“Is everything under control Jethro?”

“Just DiNozzo reporting in. I really am doing fine Jen, I’m just a little too drowsy to be in the field. If Abby wasn’t as much of a mother hen as her grandmother I’d probably be out there having DiNozzo chauffe me around. You don’t need to stay.”

“Nonsense Jethro. No one likes to eat alone and it gives us a chance to catch up, away from the office. I meant what I said about being friends.”

He sighs, “Fine Jen. What’s new in your life?”

Before she can answer the landline begins ringing. He keeps his voice low, as if to maintain privacy “Gibbs.”

“Hey sweet cheeks, she still there?”

“Sorry Honey, I didn’t think she’d call you.”

“So you’d keep it from me that you were shot if I was just the boyfriend of the moment?”

“It’s only some scratches really. Most likely they won’t even scar.”

“That’s no excuse you know.”

“The farthest I’ve been from bed is the front door. I’m behaving I promise.”
“Is she really buying the repentant boyfriend shtick?”

“Yes Honey, I think so. You can change the bandages if you don’t trust me.”

“I told you last night you need a keeper.”

“That’s probably true, but I’m not the only one.”

“I may be a trouble magnet but at least I eat and sleep on a regular schedule without prodding.”

Gibbs chuckles, “I love you.”

“Love you too. Now throw her out.”

“I’m trying. See you tonight.”

“You hadn’t told her? Really Jethro, do you know anything at all about women?”

“It’s not as if it was a life threatening injury. We already had plans tonight, I would have explained it then.”

“So she’s an afterthought?”

“Not at all. A pair of scratches is an afterthought. We’ll talk about it, I just didn’t think it was a big deal. I still don’t.”

“You really have no idea Jethro.”

“I’m not worried Jen.”

“If you say so.”

“You never did answer me Jen, what’s new in your life?”

“There isn’t really anything to tell. I’ve been so focused on work I haven’t done much besides settle in.”

“The lobbyists and civil servants aren’t just lining up for your company? I thought that was part of the appeal of coming to DC.”

“No Jethro, being the first female director of an armed federal agency was the appeal of coming to DC.”

“I stand corrected.” He runs a hand through his hair and grimaces, “Not that I don’t appreciate dinner, or the company, but I need to get the rest of the glass out of my hair before my date. So if you’ll excuse me…”

“Of course. Feel free to call me if you need anything.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Tony’s glad to find the driveway empty when he pulls up but doesn’t pull into the garage in case she’s watching. He finds Gibbs in the kitchen, settling a plate at Tony’s usual spot. The file is open in the middle of the table. He kisses Gibbs before taking his seat, “So what are you thinking Boss?”
“What I’m getting from the file is that the suspect is a Gideon Lokey, he knows Simpkins and Fry. Maybe he even realized after the fact that they might have seen him in commission of the act. So when he heard that some one was coming forward he killed Simpkins and tried to kill Fry.”

“But why stab Simpkins and shoot randomly into a gym where Fry works out?”

“I don’t know Tony. Maybe that’s the question the lead agent on the case should be working on…”

“As soon as he’s had dinner with his injured partner.” Tony pauses, “Did you know McGee wrote a book about us?”

“My copy is on the top shelf of the bookcase behind my desk at work.” Gibbs grins, “You’ll either laugh your ass off or threaten to kill him depending on which bits you focus on.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“Because I hate feeling like the only adult in a roomful of ten year olds. And as much as what he did isn’t right, it’s a good book.”

“So am I Agent Tommy?”

“No. But Agent Tommy is you, as McGee sees you. And he has a rather skewed view of you. He buys the eternal frat boy act hook line and sinker. Which surprises me after you tried to help him through that whole shooting incident.”

“McGee understands that I was a cop for years before you snatched me. And he realizes that means I know a thing or two about backing up those around me. He ascribes my trying to help him through that as an attempt to keep the team intact. To a degree he’s right. It was my years with various PDs that had me trying to shore him up, but because I’d seen first hand how having to shoot someone who turns out to be innocent can destroy a guy. I don’t want to see that happen to Tim. He’s good, a little sheltered but good. Once he grows a spine he’ll go far.”

“He’s had a good teacher. Even if his teacher is slacking off just now.”

“I just got a huge break in the case, which if you didn’t think of it probably means I won’t get home until two or three AM, I needed to pick up the file here anyway. I decided to eat and reconnect while I’m here. And I should point out you’re the one that had a plate of food ready for me when I arrived.”

“If I could think straight when it came to you I wouldn’t have. After all you’ve got a scared kid in protective custody and Fornell waiting to poach any headway you make.”

“It’s not about credit, it’s about protecting the people who protect our country.”

“Don’t use my own rules against me Tony, especially the ones that are too obscure to have numbers.”

“I will get you to tell where the rules come from one day you know.”

“I’m sure you will Tony. But by then we’ll both be retired and living on a sail boat, going where the wind takes us. You won’t really care anymore.”

“I’ll always care. Besides you know how much I love a puzzle.”

“What are you going to do when you’re out of things to work out about me?”
“Start inventing new ones. Like ‘what would Jethro do if I painted the kitchen cabinets forest green?’”

“Pat you on the head, tell you ‘it looks pretty dear’, and ask Abbs if you might have been drugged at the scene.”

“See? Not the reaction I would have thought you’d have.”

“Finish your dinner and come give me a proper kiss goodbye,” The tone is soft, fond.

Tony obeys without even the thought of hesitation. “Want me to stay at my place tonight?”

“No, I don’t. You’re too much of a trouble magnet to go without checking in, and what better way to check in then across the pillows? Besides I’ll need a ride in tomorrow, it might as well be with you.”

“Such a sentimental fool. How does anyone resist your charms?”

“Would it make you feel better to know it’s also so that I can get a trademark DiNozzo good morning kiss? Which I find myself missing every time you spend the night at your own place?”

“Much better. And I love you too.”

“I do love you, now go prove to the director you can still do my job.”

“As if there was ever any doubt. About either.”

When Tony arrives in the bullpen Abby is sitting behind Gibbs’ desk with her caff-pow! and the candy bar he brought her earlier. “To what do we owe the pleasure Abbs?”

“Just wanted to see what you got before I go look in on Pop.”

“We have a suspect sweetheart. Go check on the bossman for us.”

“If you need me just call.”

“You know I will.” With a hand on Abby’s arm he turns his attention to the others, “Grab your gear, we’re headed to Norfolk.”

McGee eyes him warily and Ziva smirks at him but they both do as they’re told. He pulls “Deep Six” off the bookshelf and kisses Abby’s cheek, “I’ll be by the house when we’ve finished but it probably won’t be until midmorning.”

“I know he wants to be alone for awhile tomorrow night but if he isn’t behaving himself tonight I’m going to stay and make sure he doesn’t over do it.”

“As you well should. Do me a favor though?” She nods. “Once you get him settled get some rest yourself. You’ve been doing your energizer bunny routine since I dropped off your caff-pow! this morning.”

“Yes stepfather,” Abby grins as he claps a hand over her mouth and looks around. When he judges the coast is clear he drops his hand glaring at her. “What? Ziva knows.”

“But McGee, the director, and everyone else have no clue and most of those people can’t know Abbs.”
“I get it Tony. I just… I’m happy and I can’t seem to remember to keep it to myself. For the first time in a very long time everyone in my life is happy. Mom, Dad, Pop, my baby brother and his wife and kids. My Tony. Even Grandpa Jack seemed pleased Pop’s willing to talk to him again.”

“Good enough. I’ll see you later Princess.”

Tony slides into the driver’s seat and enjoys a brief moment of amusement at their continued lack of questioning before giving them the basic facts, “The man we’re looking to arrest is named Gideon Lokey. Three weeks ago he and two other as yet unidentified men kidnapped the ten year old son of a timber company executive living in Norfolk. Lokey’s wife is stationed out of Little Creek. Simpkins has lived half a block away from him nearly all his life. Then three weeks ago he witnessed Lokey receiving the ransom drop at the Y in Norfolk. I’m thinking Lokey got word someone was coming forward and realized that Simpkins and Fry might have been at that Y, as they often had in the past.”

“But why kill Simpkins outright and make such a sloppy attempt on Fry’s life?” McGee questions from the back seat.

“That, Probie, is one of the things we’re here to find out.” It’s a long drive and Tony knows he needs to lighten the atmosphere in the car a bit. He hands the book to Ziva, “Why don’t you read some of this aloud? I think we might all find it enlightening.”

“What is it?” Ziva asks even as she does as she’s told.

“Just a novel a friend recommended. Start with the description on the dust jacket, we all just want a taste anyway.”

“Deep six follows the adventures of the swashbuckling, socially repugnant Special Agent Tommy. His partner Lisa, the sultry and emotionally distant Mossad Officer. The resourceful and adaptable Special Agent McGregor. And their boss, L.J. Tibbs who drinks to alleviate the burden of his Messianic complex.”

Tony snorts, “Good thing this is just fiction Probie, because if you were talking about the bossman like that his little girl might kill you, resurrect you using voodoo and let her father kill you again…”

“It’s not about you guys!” McGee protests.

“Ziva, see if you can find a physical description of anyone in the first chapter.”

“He paused, as he often did, to take note of Officer Lisa. Her smoky, exotic beauty combined with the air of menace she always exuded made her intriguing. But most of all he noticed her eyes, Lisa’s eyes reminded him of emeralds flawed only by the icicles in her heart.”

“That’s not Ziva at all.”

Ziva leafs through a few more pages, “Tibbs squinted at the report in a vain attempt to compensate for his failing eyesight.”

Tony suppresses his chuckle at that one. No need for either of them to know that “failing eyesight” was relative. Gibbs was a sniper, his eyesight was one of his defining characteristics. Just because his eyes were no longer up to the task of a perfect shot from 500 yards did not mean there was any real deficiency in his vision. Instead he shoots McGee a feral grin, “I think LJ might just shoot you this time McAuthor. In fact this reminds me of a movie. It’s called The Dark Half, a writer tries to kill off one of his characters so the character hunts him down and tries to kill him…”
“Ohh!” Ziva calls delightedly. “As a well placed kick from their suspect sent Agent Tommy reeling McGregor wondered if he ever actually played football at all. He was built wrong for it, too tall and wiry, and he simply couldn’t take a hit.”

“Okay Probie, now that one was personal. Yes I did play football. Ask Dr. Brad Pitt of Bethesda Naval Hospital, he broke my leg and ended my chances of going pro. And I know you wouldn’t understand this, seeing as you can’t manage hand to hand combat and all but it’s harder to take a hit without pads.”

“Tony, please do calm down. If nothing else you are the one that is driving.”

“Even if you won’t believe Tommy isn’t you didn’t Sarah say you’re cuter?”

Tony visibly brightens, “You’re right, she did.”

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“I’m sorry I wasn’t home yet when you called Liz. We caught a case.”

“And the new boyfriend accepts that excuse? Really?”

“I don’t have to make excuses to Tony, Liz. When I catch a case so does he.”

“Tony? The cute one on your team? Why the hell didn’t you call me Jethro? It’s not like they don’t have phones in Stockholm.”

“Neither of us was ready to talk about it until recently. Since we had the ‘let’s tell our friends’ talk we’ve been busy as hell. I did plan to tell you. Tony wants to meet you in fact. Which is part of why I invited you to dinner Friday.”

“He’s the one with the nice ass that Abby keeps saying is perfect for you, right?”

“That’s the one. And I’m pretty sure Abbs is right. He makes me laugh and that’s something I haven’t had in a long time.”

“Good Jethro. You need to figure out that it’s ok to be happy.”

“I’m happy Liz. Hell I let Abbs and Tony talk me into staying home for a graze today. Which left Tony in charge and then I distracted him for almost an hour.”

“Did they drug you?”

“A little. But that’s not it. I knew he wouldn’t be home until late, I was sending him out on a lead. There’s really no chance I’m going to actually see him tonight, despite the fact that he is coming home.”

“Home?” Liz asks amused.

“All three of us, and by that I mean Tony, Abby and myself, are having trouble with the whole concept of taking it slow. Tony and I have known each other a very long time, and we spent a lot of time at the beginning making sure this was going to work.”

“Always so prudent. You need a sweet young thing that knows how to have fun.”

“Got him.”
“Lucky bastard. Which reminds me, if you ever call me at eight AM again the next time I speak to you will be looking down into your coffin. You know that we’ve been teleconferencing with Tokyo, I always do for at least a week after I get back from Sweden. You also know that means I’m up all night and asleep all day.”

“I’m sorry ‘Lizbeth. I forgot that you’d just arrived in town. I had good news and you had good timing.”

“Good timing?”

“You remember that Jenny Sheppard is my boss now? We obviously can’t tell her we’re together and your little bit of teasing just happened to distract her.”

“I didn’t cause you any trouble with Tony did I?”

“No. He gave me a questioning look, but the minute I said your name he knew what was going on.”

“You want me to tease the wicked witch some more?”

“She’s not that bad. And don’t try to provoke her. She’s pushing me but she hasn’t become a problem yet and Ducky’s working on her.”

“If that’s what you want LJ, it’s your life. I’ve got to head out to work now Hon. I’ll see you Friday.”

“Is dinner Friday going to be a problem?”

“Not at all. They’re a day ahead and being a western company none of our offices work Saturday or Sunday.”

“Go on then. We’ll talk when you’re here.” He hangs up on Liz and yells, “Get up here Baby girl.”

“I was just getting you some juice Pop.”

“Bullshit Abbs. You were lurking, what’s up?”

“You worried me today Pop.”

“I promise it wasn’t something I could have prevented. I’m being careful.”

“You took that no back up undercover assignment.”

“No, I trusted Tony to back me up even if he couldn’t be right next to me where he belonged.” He sighs and pulls her close, “I’ve got everything in the world to live for I’m not going to mess that up taking stupid risks. Go grab one of your books and sit with me until you feel sleepy or Tony gets home. I may not be good company but I’m not going anywhere.”

“You better not,” Abby murmurs as she heads into the spare room to get one of her books. When she gets back he’s asleep sitting up and she can’t help but smile. She kisses his cheek and settles with her book, “‘Night Pop.”
Tony takes a long look at the street as he exits the car. It’s a quiet family neighborhood, like most base housing, but he still feels uneasy, as though eyes are watching them from all directions. “Keep your eyes open, we know this guy is dangerous.” The others nod and Tony knocks, “NCIS, Mr. Lokey.”

There’s a distant bang of a door being slammed open and within seconds Tony is around the side of the house, weapon drawn, with Ziva hot on his heals. The chase is more arduous than most, requiring the hoping of several fences. Whether it’s because this is the man he suspects shot his lover or a reaction to McGee’s implied insult to his physical prowess in his book Tony isn’t certain, but he keeps after the suspect like a man possessed. It’s only once they’ve reached open ground that a final sprint allows Tony to deliver a tackle that would have made any of his old team mates proud.

“So am I supposed to take that as a confession or are you training for the Olympics?”

Lokey has the good sense to do nothing but lie there and pant as Tony cuffs him.

Feeling an intense desire to beat the shit out of him Tony pushes Lokey toward Ziva, “Arrange for a cell and an interrogation room for me, I need a word with McGee.”

Without looking back he heads back to the house the way they came. He finds McGee still on the front porch, cell phone to his ear. Tony waits patiently. “Lee’s working on getting a search authorization. I’ll sit on the house until it comes through Boss.”

He deliberately sets aside his annoyance to comment, “Well done on the anticipation there McGee.” Gibbs’ crack, light hearted though it was, about him slacking off as McGee’s mentor reminded him that McGee still needs a guiding hand, even if he doesn’t understand Tony’s methods. Gibbs has investigative techniques and general life lessons down. It’s Tony’s job to teach him to trust his own skills and strengths. True his combative teasing form of teaching is slightly counter productive but it works. “Call Ziva when it comes through.” McGee nods and Tony sets out after their suspect.

Ziva is waiting in the hall when Tony arrives. She quickly scans their surroundings before speaking, “Do you really think you should be the one to interrogate him Tony?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” His tone is a warning.

“Because he is the prime suspect in a shooting that injured your lover.”

“So? I call that motivation.”

“You wished to hurt him when you took him in to custody.”

“And I therefore put some distance between us.” He almost literally growls, “You may not respect it but I’m in charge here Ziva and as far as I’m concerned there is no question. I am going to interrogate Lokey, and I am going to see that he gets everything he deserves.”

“Do not do something you will regret.”

Tony shows no sign of hearing her as he enters the interrogation room, file in hand. Letting his anger fuel an approach with a little finesse he sits down without saying a word and levels a menacing stare
at Lokey.

Less than a full minute later, “I don’t know what you brought me in here for but doesn’t it usually help to ask questions?”

“I already know what you did. You killed a ten year old and stole two million from his father in the process. Then you killed another innocent kid for recognizing you. And to top it all off you took a few pot shots at a federal agent. My partner as it happens. I don’t give a damn what you have to say.” Even as he says it the mental gymnastics of explaining it away rush through his head but he sets all that aside for the time being. ‘Boss’ lessens his authority, it’s a genuine reason if he needs it.

“I never killed anyone and I don’t even have a gun.”

“I just love it when some idiot thinks the innocent act is going to work. Our ballistic tech pulled your gun permit as soon as your name came up. You own a Colt Mustang.”

“No, I bought a Colt Mustang. I sold it four years ago. I have the paperwork at home.”

Tony makes a note, “Even if that’s true the only one that was shot was my partner. You still look good for both the kids.”

“I mean it man, I didn’t kill no one. Not that kid we kidnapped, and not anybody else damn it.”

“You just admitted you were in on the kidnapping. The kid ended up dead. Who else is to blame?”

“I was just the moneyman. I went to pick up the drop, I came back and they’d smothered the kid. I had no reason to wish him harm, he’d never even seen me. I don’t kill kids. I don’t kill anybody.”

“Like I haven’t heard that one before.”

“What do I have to do to prove I didn’t kill this kid?”

“Who did?”

“Jesse Copley. I think. Burke Flynn was the experienced one, I doubt that he’d make that kind of mistake. I mean he’s the one who brought me into this, said his old moneyman got pinched on a job in Woodbridge.”

“Be that as it may, neither of them had a reason to kill Kevin Simpkins. He never even saw them. But he named you Lokey, and you just couldn’t have that, could you?”

“Little Kevin from down the road? I haven’t seem him in months.”

“He’s seen you.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“There you go lying to me again.”

“I don’t know what you mean, I honestly had no idea anyone had fingered me.”

“Then why did you run?”

“Burke called and told me there was heat headed our way on the Holiday job. I figured you were there to pinch me on the kidnapping.”
Tony thinks about it before posing his next question, “Where were you Sunday night?”

“I was up at my mother’s is Fawn Grove.”

“Where is that exactly?”

“Pennsylvania, just over the boarder from Maryland.”

“So you stayed the night?”

“Yes. I spend three or four nights a month with Mom when Jordan is deployed. You know how women are, they assume we’re helpless to look after ourselves.”

Tony ignores that, “So let’s say I believe you, all this killing just happens around you. That still doesn’t explain why you kidnapped the Holiday boy.”

“It was a job. Jordan kept talking about wanting to be a stay at home mom once this tour was up and I needed to make a lot more money than a nine to five could bring me in order to make that happen for her. Burke has sources. They slip him information. Who’s loaded. Who has kids. Who underpays their household staff. I don’t know exactly. I’m quick and discreet behind the wheel, that’s why he recruited me. I’m the wheelman on the grabs and I pick up the drops. I know my part and that’s it. That’s the way Burke operates. If the right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing nobody can rat you out.”

“You seem to have an awful lot of information if that’s the case.”

“Not really. I don’t know who we work for. I don’t know how they handle the demands. I don’t even know the names of the targets. I only know Holiday’s name because it was in all the papers after what went down.”

“That’s too bad Lokey, because if you can’t give us anything concrete on the others you’re looking at a long stay in prison…”

“I can give you the address where the Holiday kid died and I already gave you their names. I’ll do what ever you need me to if it’ll get me out from under this.”

“That’ll be up to the federal prosecutor I imagine,” Tony comments dryly as he leaves the room. Ziva joins him in the hall with an expectant look. “There’s one of those toll transponders in his car. If his story about visiting his mother in Pennsylvania checks out hand him over to Fornell.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the house to help Probie so we might get to head back before sunrise. I don’t want my stepdaughter mother henning her father to death.”

“Your stepdaughter?” Ziva practically snorts.

“She keeps calling me her stepfather and seeing as her father doesn’t correct it…”

“Does she believe the three of you are characters in a fairy story?”

“Very funny Zee-va.”

“How so?” Then he light of comprehension dawns on her face, “Oh! I did not mean it like that. I was taken to understand that was an offensive term.”
“Most terms for our sort of relationship are offensive.” He shakes his head, “Get to work on that alibi, if you can prove he’s not our guy on Simpkins we can hand the house over to the FBI too.”

Tony manages not to wake either of them as he enters the house at 4:07 but can’t contain a slight whine to find Abby curled up on his side of the bed. Abby doesn’t so much as twitch but Gibbs wakes up. Gibbs’ look is so eloquent Tony whispers “Not him.” Gibbs nods, then takes an appraising look at Abby before carefully shifting toward the center of the bed.

Tony shoots Abby one more uncertain look before stripping down to his boxers and sliding in on Gibbs’ usual side of the bed. Gibbs pulls him close and whispers, “Pretend she had a nightmare.”

Not bothering to express his continued unease Tony offers up a heartfelt kiss before snuggling and murmuring “’Night.”

When Abby bounces back into the room with coffee at 0830 neither man stirs until the smell reaches them. When it does Tony buries his faces deeper into the union of neck and shoulder and grumbles, “If it’s 0600 I will kill you Jethro.”

“I didn’t even set the timer last night Tony. Abbs must have put it on for us.”

Abby laughs at them, she’d never have thought she’d see a day when either of them missed her presence in a room, “I know what big babies all men can be, especially without their caffeine and took pity.”

Gibbs turns to her, “And we appreciate it baby girl.”

“So what happened last night Tony?”

“Not our guy. He was definitely the right guy on the botched kidnapping but he was in Pennsylvania for the entire TOD window on Simpkins and no longer owns the Colt. We left him with the local FBI office before coming home. None of us are going in until nine. I figured we’ll all need fresh eyes considering we’ve been firmly set back at the beginning.”

“It’s eight thirty now Tony.”

“Great. And I’ll bet I look like death warmed over.”

“No, you just look like you had a very long night,” Abby teases.

“Unfortunately I did, just not the fun kind.” He notices that she’s brought the coffee upstairs, “Princess, I love you.”

Abby laughs, “I know you do. Now get moving before Madame evil stepmother starts to put two and two together.”

“Now that I have covered. Bossman still can’t drive so I came over to pick him up and unfortunately I never attended the Mario Andrade school of driving.”

“You wanted to see me Dr. Mallard?”

“Not in an official capacity. When I called to check up on Jethro last night he mentioned that you stopped by with dinner.”
“I was just checking on an injured friend Ducky.”

“Are you certain you were not hoping to assess the competition?”

“I fully admit I’m curious about her but not as competition. I honestly just want to know what type of woman could tie down Jethro.”

“It isn’t enough to know that he’s happy? That Abigail approves of this match?”

“It’s enough. Just… When did I become public enemy number one Ducky?”

“I believe it was when you forced Abigail to take on an assistant who framed young Anthony.”

“I did a background check. He had a very good false identity. I had no idea he posed a threat.”

“That is far from even approaching the point Jenny. All of them told you Abigail didn’t need help. Then the young man used her to frame one of her best friends for murder. She’s a sensitive soul, having contributed to the accusation against Tony almost destroyed her. And yes you had no way of knowing what would happen ahead of time, but you didn’t even say you were sorry Jenny. How can you expect forgiveness when you’ve never asked for it?”

“They work for me Ducky, I can’t afford to apologize to them. If I so much as appear weak my authority is undermined.”

“And you think that your behavior with Jethro hasn’t already done that? This game of cat and mouse you try to play with him, it just tells both Jethro and his team that irrespective of rank he is in charge.”

“I don’t know any other way to deal with him. There is no action I can take in my role as director short of firing him that he would respond to.”

“You only make it worse when you rise to his baiting.”

“It’s a natural response.”

“In some ways Jethro will always be a young boy testing his limits. And you keep doing exactly the wrong thing when faced with that mentality. He pushes and you push back. You can’t do that Jenny. You have to be the adult and ignore him.”

“Thank you Ducky. I’ll… take that under advisement.”

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“All I’m saying Abbs is that you do not fix a man’s tie while he’s driving. It’s distracting as hell and I could have killed us all.”

“You denied me caffeine for most of the drive, I needed the adrenaline.”

“We needed to beat rush hour, have you ever seen the bossman stuck on the freeway with only one cup of coffee?”

As they’re in the bull pen Gibbs shoots Abby a quelling look at that. She pouts, “It’s not fair for you to judge Tony. You’re one of those weirdoes who doesn’t have a caffeine addiction.”

“Chocolate is more satisfying.”

“Base security reconfirms Lokey’s alibi, he left the base at 0900 Sunday and didn’t return until 1400 Monday. The FBI is giving him a deal for turning on Copley and Flynn. And it’s beginning to look like Copley and Flynn may have been the ones behind the drive by at the gym, but neither of them had access to the base to kill or dump Simpkins.”

“Ziva?”

“While speaking to base security I realized we could narrow down Simpkins’ time of death by finding out when he last passed through the security check point. He entered through the main gate at 1643. None of the other activity at the gates struck security as odd. It had to be someone with access, and was likely someone Simpkins knew.”

“Who would have wanted him hurt beside Lokey?” Tony asks with a hint of exasperation. Their murderer or not the guy cost him four hours of sleep and at least one night of really good sex. “Probie, did you get anything on the campus canvass after yesterday went to hell?”

“Kathleen Benson was starting to look like a viable suspect, but I didn’t have time to run the background checks. She made multiple public threats against Simpkins. Told anyone who would listen that he ruined her life.”

“Did any of you finish interviewing Fry or check on his alibi?”

“Got something Boss?” Tony asks interestedly, he wouldn’t have pegged Fry.

“Just my gut. Check on Benson too.”

“Okay Probie, you pull background on Benson. Ziva get back in touch with base security and see if either of them were on base. Boss? You want Fry in interrogation…” The ‘or should I question him’ lingers unspoken.

“Bring him up. Abbs, any progress identifying the murder weapon?”

“Not yet Pop, I’ll get back to it.”

A lightening quick move results in a tug of one of her pony tails, “Wasn’t a reprimand Sweetheart. We all got a little sidetracked.”

“I’m supposed to follow the evidence while you follow the leads.”

“And you did. You followed the evidence on the more immediate situation. The shooting.”

“Thanks Pop.” She almost whispers before hugging him and heading down stairs.

“Staring at me is not getting any of you closer to Simpkins’ killer.”

Tony leaves without a word.

Gibbs rereads the FBI’s transcript of their interview with Fry. It’s brief, only half a page, but it deepens his sense that Fry is hiding something. What that something was remained to be seen.

“I thought we might finish our conversation somewhere a little safer.”
“You still think I hurt Kev? They were shooting at me, man.”

Gibbs doesn’t respond to the question. “Tell me about what happened at the Y last month.”

“Kev and I were finishing a game of one on one and this guy in a suit goes into the locker room carrying a briefcase. We headed in to change and the guy shuts a locker and heads right back out without his briefcase. A couple minutes later somebody else comes in, I didn’t see him because I was still in the shower, but later Kev tells me it was Gideon Lokey and he picked up the briefcase and left with it.”

“And Kevin wanted to take this information to the police?”

“He said it was only right.”

“You tried to convince him to keep his mouth shut?”

“Do you know how dangerous testifying against somebody is when they don’t know who you are and were you live? I almost lost an eye in high school because I turned in a guy who was selling meth on the corner down the street from the school.”

“So you were worried about what would happen to Kevin if he went to the police?”

“Exactly. This guy had already kidnapped somebody, there was no telling what he was capable of.”

“Were you worried they’d think you might turn them in too?”

“I wasn’t worried about myself, no. I didn’t see anything.”

“Lokey didn’t know that.”

“He also didn’t know I was ever there.”

“He’d known you and Kevin a long time. He’d know you two were joined at the hip. From what we’ve been told it was pretty much understood that the two of you always played ball at that Y during the winter months.”

“I wouldn’t do it. No way in the hell was I going to talk to the FBI. I told them what I’m telling you, I didn’t see a damn thing. I don’t care what Kev said I didn’t see anything.”

“What makes you think Kevin said otherwise?”

“He told me he was going to tell the FBI I saw something so they’d protect me. Like they could.”

“What did you see Malcolm?”

“Nothing! For fuck’s sake! It was just something Kevin was saying. I saw the first guy and the briefcase, that’s it. The only thing I could tell them they already knew. A guy came in with a case and left without it. I couldn’t even really describe the guy. I wasn’t paying any attention to him.”

“So you killed Kevin so he’d stop trying to convince people you saw something?”

“No way, I couldn’t hurt Kevin. I just made it very clear I would never testify.”

“Seems like they think you might. What with the drive by and all.”

“Exactly, whoever shot at me yesterday must have killed Kev, you know to shut him up.”
“There’s one big problem with that Malcolm. Kevin died on base. The two men that shot up the gym didn’t have access to the base. You on the other hand live there.”

“So do a lot of people.”

“When was the last time you saw Kevin again?”

“Thursday. He was down visiting his mom and stopped to see me.”

“Kevin told the FBI and his girlfriend he was headed to see you the night he died Malcolm. He was on base for at least two hours before he died. Now there’s a lot of ways this could have gone down. He was pushing you to put yourself in harms way. Maybe you struggled. You grabbed the knife to scare him a little. But Kevin was sure you’d never hurt him and kept coming at you…”

“He was trying to get me killed. I really didn’t see anything and he was going to tell them I did just so I’d get shot. What kind of friend does that?”

“What kind of friend kills you and dumps your body?”

“I didn’t dump him. He fell off the dock after I stabbed him. I didn’t want him dead. I swear I didn’t. I just wanted to keep him from getting me killed. He always had to tell the story, no matter who it would hurt.”

“That was no reason to kill him.”
“Okay so Fry killed Simpkins. But Simpkins never said a thing to the FBI about Fry seeing anything and Lokey had no idea that anyone had turned him in. So why would Lokey’s accomplices go after Fry?”

“Good question Tony. Why go after somebody who can’t pick you out of a crowd? The whole thing makes no sense.”

“When do these things ever make sense?”

“Get Fry booked for the murder, I’m going to walk to the coffee shop and call Fornell. Maybe they know who would be taking pot shots at Fry. If he was even the target.”

“We should also have a look into the owner of the gym.”

“And take a quick skim of the ‘ones that want to kill us’ list too.”

“Yours or the team as a whole’s?”

“Both.”

“Fantastic. I always love it when they’re after us personally.”

“We don’t know that they are.”

“Come on Jethro, it’s us we’re talking about, if there’s so much as a chance they’re after us, they probably are.”

“Seems like. Go get the others scrambling. I intend to demand answers when I get back.”

Despite his declaration of unreasonable expectations Gibbs takes his time at the coffee shop and then calls Fornell.

“Jethro. I was wondering when you were going to call to gloat.”

“Gloat, me? Never Tobias. Besides, it was Tony’s bust. I was at home in bed. Who did the checks and interviews into Simpkins’ background and associates?”

“Sacks did them. Why?”

“Did he do an in depth check on Malcolm Fry?”

“He was present at the ransom drop, Jethro, of course we checked him out.”

<Anybody beside the suspects have a reason to want him dead?”

“It’s not like a nineteen year old is swimming in gambling debts Jethro. Who’d be after him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“You don’t think it was Flynn and Copley?”

“It doesn’t look like it. They didn’t even know about Fry, it’s unlikely they bothered to shoot at him.”
“You thinking you were the target?”

“Or the gym we were at. Too soon to tell.”

“Worried they’ll try again?”

“Worried that Abbs will guilt herself into a frenzy in the meantime.”

“What does she have to be guilty over?”

“Nothing. She’s got this idea that it’s her job to watch over me. That I can’t take care of myself. She had lightened up since meeting the new boyfriend, but my getting shot has her firmly back in ‘Pop is a hapless moron’ territory.”

“Isn’t that what all little girls think of their father? The part that always amuses me is we’re hapless morons when they’re well and happy, but the moment there’s a sign of trouble we become heroes.”

“Not quite Toby. We’re always morons and heroes. It’s just that which is more important is determined by the situation. Though personally I’ve been ‘the good king’ fairly often lately. But that’s mostly so she can tell horror stories about her ‘wicked step mothers.’”

“You know Diane thought Abby was your piece of tail on the side.”

“I know. But we both know why she might think that, don’t we?”

“In her defense, I thought so too until I found out she worked for you.”

“Just shows your failure to see the big picture. I need to get back to scaring my team…”

“What, the boy toy hasn’t turned you into a warm pile of mush at the office?”

Gibbs just hangs up on him.

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After setting McGee on background on the gym owner and Ziva on the enemy list, a long one and make no mistake, Tony sits at his desk a minute wondering what angle he should pursue. Then it dawns on him, he dials Abby’s extension. “Hey Abbs, did you ever get around to cross checking the gun licenses and the partial plate from the drive by?”

“It’s still compiling. I did it without putting in a make on the SUV just to be safe. Something about this whole thing bothers me Tony.”

“They winged Bossman Abbs, of course it bothers you. Hell, it bothers Probie.”

“Not that sort of bothering Tony. What kind of an idiot pulls a drive by with a hand gun? Yes one of them shot out the window and then the other one shot at Pop. Tony, tell me the truth: Was this meant as an attack on Pop?”

“We honestly don’t know yet Abbs. I promise I’ll tell you the truth as soon as I have an answer. Call me when you’ve got that list.”

“Will do Tony.”

“Thanks hon.” He hangs up and crosses to Ziva’s desk, “Eliminate anyone with an extensive criminal or military history. As Abby just pointed out only an amateur would pull a drive by using
hand guns.”

Before Tony can even get back to his chair Gibbs arrives, coffee in hand. “Report.”

“We just managed to narrow the suspect list based on the fact that they were using hand guns, and were clearly not experienced criminals,” Tony reports.

“Ya think?” Gibbs snaps but Tony doesn’t believe it for a second.

“I think I’ve got something Boss,” McGee pipes up. He receives a raised eyebrow as his only encouragement. “I was looking into the gym owner, Frank Ruck’s background. Eighteen months ago he broke up with his fiancé, a Morgan Falstaff. Three months later he had two restraining orders issued. Against Nathaniel and Austin Falstaff, Morgan’s older brothers. Evidently they had been threatening and harassing Falstaff since the break up. There were a series of minor charges filed against the Falstaff brothers by Ruck. Eventually they spent four months in county and were released last week.”

“Nice catch McGee,” Gibbs offers evenly, inadvertently impressed that they’d found anything this quickly. “Address? Tony and I will check it out while you two keep going from here.”

When they’re alone in the elevators Tony smirks, “You will have to take one of them out with you and leave me behind at some point you know?”

“I told Jen I’d have you chauffeur me around Tony, I intend to enjoy the spoils of my latest war wound.”

“Oh, it’s a war wound now? Yesterday it was barely a scratch. So which is it?”

“A war scratch?” Gibbs tries with a charming smile.

“Your sense of humor sucks Bossman.” He glances over as they get in the car, “What’d you get from rejects-r-us?”

“Fornell’s checks didn’t turn up anything of interest on Fry. And you saw the kid in interrogation, there’s no way he did anything to stick his neck out. Let alone got mixed up with shady characters.”

“Shady? You’re showing your age Jethro.”

“What is it Tony, you miss real head slaps?”

“Love you too Boss.” He shakes his head, “You think this really was a case of wrong place, wrong person, wrong time?”

“It would figure, wouldn’t it? Only we could stumble on a whole new crime investigating something entirely unrelated.”

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Abby smiles when the phone rings just as she finishes reading her search results, “Hiya Pop.”

“Hello Princess. What have you got for me?”

“The crosscheck on gun registrations against partial plates yielded three names: Lisa Marie Maniski, a real estate broker. Lester Palmarrow, a short order cook. And Austin Falstaff, a garage mechanic.”

“Good work Abbs.”
She pulls up a mass spectrometer report, “I’ve got more. The rounds from the Colt all had a blue powder trace on them. Turns out it was pool chalk. Whoever loaded the gun is probably a pool player.”

“I owe you for this one Baby girl.”

“So take me to Manhattan.”

“When am I going to Manhattan?”

“Um, about that Boss…” Tony interrupts.

“Opps. Talk to you later Pop.”

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Gibbs hangs up and turns bodily to Tony before repeating, “When am I going to Manhattan?”

“I was hoping you would attend the St. Cecelia’s Foundation fundraiser with me on November 19th. No dancing, no PDAs. You’d have to wear a suit, but other than that it’s just walking in with me, mingling a little. Some people will assume it means what it means, but no one would be able to hold it over us.”

“Tony I’ve told you time and again, a reasonable degree of caution is one thing, paranoia is another. If people find out about us so be it. If it gets us separated at work…we’ll decide how to deal with it. I’m not going to spend my life seconding guessing how I touch you in public.”

“That’s all well and good Jethro but you should understand about the St. Cecelia’s Fundraiser, there are routinely senators, congressmen and other high ranking officials in attendance. And oddly enough one or two of them actually know who I am.”

“If you can promise me one thing I promise you I will put on a suit and attend this fundraiser, I’ll even agree to bring Abigail along.”

“What do you need me to promise?”

“That I won’t open the paper and find our picture in it the next day. It would compromise our ability to do our jobs.”

“I promise if anyone catches us on film I will make it clear to the photographer in question that we do not consent to the release on our images. Then I’ll let slip we’re feds. No danger of pictures in the paper.”

“It’s a deal then. Now let's go make some arrests so I can work on my boat tonight.”

“I see how it is, you’d rather spend the night with your boat than with me.”

“You could come home after your ballgame.”

“Wasn’t it you who said we shouldn’t be spending every night together?”

“Strictly speaking we didn’t spend last night together.”

“Sharing the bed with the princess was more than a little mood killing, yes.”

“She would have gone to the guest bedroom had you asked.”
“She needed the sleep. And it wasn’t like it was some unbearable hardship, I just… My family never would have spent a night in the same bed. Hell we had trouble spending a night in the same house.”

“Having met your father I understand that.”

“Okay. Now we need to talk case this last half mile so I can get my game face back on. One of them owns the guns and the SUV. Ruck hurt their sister and they’ve been doing their best to get revenge ever since. So what, they shoot up his gym in hopes of shutting him down? He wasn’t even there from what Ziva told me. But if it was just to scare off his customers why wait until the glass breaks to start the second volley, purposely attempting to hurt someone?”

“Maybe it wasn’t what they planned. Maybe one of them questioned what they were doing and hesitated.”

“And then takes aim at the three people standing in the window?”

“Okay. Maybe one of them was more pissed off than the other. Decided that shutting Ruck down wasn’t enough. That whoever was in the gym was collateral damage. And lucky me…”

“You are lucky. Lucky the asshole wasn’t a better shot.”

“Are you and Abbs going to break down every time I get shot at from now on?”

“When we don’t know who or why? Probably.”

“So if I’d been laid up by say your old buddy Chip who shot me because he doesn’t like my casting you’d be a picture of calm right now?”

“Once we knew you were okay? More or less. I’d still have to kick Chip’s face in, but you know that’s a given no matter who did this.”

“Just make sure all the injuries occur before we cuff them.”

“Rule 49, I know.”

Gibbs laughs, “I know for a fact I’ve never told you rule 49, as it doesn’t apply to a work situation, and even if I had it wouldn’t be that.”

“I didn’t say it was your rule 49.”

“You have 48 others?”

“Spoilsport.”

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After a surprisingly easy bust, only a short scramble through the house resulting in Tony giving the elder brother a very satisfying black eye, they take both suspects to the same holding facility that Tony had used the night before.

“Hello again Lieutenant Chesterfield. So nice to see you again,” Tony offers her a charming smile as he guides Nathaniel Falstaff into the interrogation room. Her glare propels him into the room almost as efficiently as the silent weight of Gibbs’ expectation. “Before we begin here Nathaniel, as a civilian you have the right to be informed of the charges against you and as it’s a bit of a list I’m just going to read it so bear with me. Vandalism. Breaking a protection order. Parole violation. Destruction of private property. Assault on a Federal Agent with a deadly weapon. And attempted
murder.”

“Assault on a Federal Agent? How is running away from a guy assault, let alone assault with a deadly weapon?”

“This isn’t about your hundred yard dash to the backdoor Nathaniel. It’s about the agent you wounded in your little drive by two days ago.”

“What were feds doing in Frankie’s shop? Is he finally going down?”

Curiosity overrides his anger, “Why would Ruck be going down?”

“He’s a thief. He stole Morgan’s life savings to open that damn gym, then once it was off the ground he dumped her.”

“Did she get her money back?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then Ruck didn’t do anything wrong. And even if he had you shot randomly into a public building. What did you think was going to happen?”

“I shot at a window. In a very precise star pattern designed to break the glass. I’ll cop to the destruction of property but I know I didn’t shoot anyone.”

“Even if you didn’t actually shoot anyone, my partner was shot during your drive by and that makes you equally responsible.” Considering the fact that he has all he needs Tony just leads Nathaniel back to holding freeing up the interrogation room for Gibbs and Austin.

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“You’re going to prison for a very long time Austin.”

“On that scumbag’s say so? Not damn likely.”

“Your guns. Your truck. Your blue chalked fingerprints on the bullets. And your brother gave you up. The charges that are really going to put you away are assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder.”

“Attempted murder? I didn’t try to kill anybody.”

“You fired randomly into a room full of people. You hit one person and missed two others by inches.”

“No I didn’t. Everyone hit the deck when the window shattered.”

“Not until after you had fired. Oh and that Colt fired the bullet that killed a ten year old boy last month.”

“I was in jail. I didn’t kill no kid. I bought that gun off an old cellmate Monday night.”

“What’s the name of this old cellmate?”

“Jesse Copley. We shared a cell in county for about two months right after Nate and I got popped.”

“You’d testify to that?”
“What would I get?”
“We might be able to drop the attempted murder.”
“Deal.”

Gibbs gives a silent nod and leaves the room.

Tony shakes his head as he emerges into the hall, “You just made a deal with the man who shot you.”
“And because I did they’ll be able to tie the gun to a man that killed a child.”
“Always have to be somebody’s hero, don’t you?”

Gibbs shrugs, “I do what I know.”

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Tony laughs and sinks an easy lay-up, “That’s three games to one. Wanna go best of seven or are you humiliated enough for one week?”
“I thought you’d been working all week, why aren’t you too tired to play?”

“Thrill of the chase. We caught two bad guys today and three yesterday.” Then he smirks, “And I’m going home to a warm comfortable bed with a hot body in it.”

“Maybe if I was willing to switch teams I would be too.”

“I doubt it Bran, not with an ugly mug like that.”
He feigns hurt, “That would burn if I didn’t know for a fact I’m prettier than you.”

“In your dreams Brandon. Men and women flock to me. You’re lucky if you don’t get laughed at.”

“Harsh Anthony. You can’t play ball so you talk trash instead?”

“You started it ‘Muffin’.”

“I’d tell you to bite me but I’d be afraid of how you’d take it.”

“Not a chance in hell Bran. You’re too soft for me.”

“I have a six pack to die for man,” Brandon really is defensive this time.

“Wrong kind of soft. I need somebody strong willed, principled, with enough attitude to match me when I get on a tear. You’re too nice.”

“And too straight. You gonna play ball or flirt?”

“I’ve got real skills man, I can do both at once. So what was up with the certainty that I was gonna ditch you?”

“I’ve seen you in relationships, good and bad. I’ve seen you in lust and just playing around. I’d never seen you in love before. The first week or two you were nervous and a little jumpy. The next few sort of distracted. I knew when I saw the hickeys you were really happy this time. Then the next week you call me last minute and cancel our game. I figured it might become something of a pattern.
I don’t mind you know. I get it that this is sort of the honeymoon phase and you’re just enjoying it.”

“I am in love, and we are walking around like hormonal teenagers. That doesn’t mean I’d just automatically kill our weekly game. Last week was a work thing. Which happens often. Now stop being such a girl and play Muffin.”

“Them’s fighting words, Cupcake.”

Gibbs arrives in the office, coffee in hand, to a smirking Ziva, a confused McGee, and no sign of Tony. When he rounds the cubicle wall and spots the package on his desk at least part of the answer becomes apparent. “Is there something I can help you two with?”

“No Boss,” McGee quickly drops his eyes to his computer screen and starts typing. Ziva on the other hand continues to smirk.

Gibbs snickers as he flips the card over and finds a red heart sticker with “LJ” written on it holding the flap down. The card itself is a plain white square, “A little gift to help you keep in mind who loves you. -AM” Opening the box proper reveals easily a twenty-five ounce travel mug and a pound of Jack’s Beans’ Jamaican blue mountain coffee beans. He tucks the note into his pocket and wonders briefly if it’s worth the trouble to commandeering the break room coffee pot for a few minutes…

Almost as if responding to some cue Tony appears just as Gibbs decides office etiquette be damned, “Boy am I glad we aren’t in on this turf war boss. Metro and the FBI are having a pissing contest over how to deal with Falstaff informing on Copley.”

“Next time they can do the work,” Gibbs growls and heads into the break room.

When they’re sure he’s gone McGee murmurs, “You missed it Tony.”

“Missed what?”

“Somebody sent Gibbs coffee. His favorite according to Abby.”

“So?”

“Aren’t you curious who sent it?”

“The same person who gave him the hickey he had yesterday, I would wager,” Ziva throws in moving to join them on their side of the bullpen.

“Good for the Boss, he needs somebody. Maybe he’ll mellow out.”

“Not likely DiNozzo. Now would one of you care to explain to me why you’re discussing my personal life rather than working?”

“I’m pulling cold case files as we speak Boss.”

“Didn’t we get a tip on the Lieutenant Wright murder a while back?”

“Dead end. Knowles was on duty, six guys confirmed his alibi, no way he killed Wright, even if he was responsible for the graffiti.”

“Still, hand me the Wright file.”
“On it Boss,” Tony crosses the small space with the file and breaths deep the scent of good coffee. He returns to his desk and signs, “You like?”

Gibbs answers in kind, “Better than flowers. Thank you.”
Meals and Questions

Around noon Tony receives an email from Abby that contains a single declarative sentence, “My boys are taking me to lunch today.”

Gibbs’ phone rings a few minutes later and Tony assumes he is receiving the same demand. “Really? When did I agree to that?”

Tony smiles to hear Gibbs playing with Abby and distractedly opens the next email without reading the subject line.

“Your reservation details for Mark’s bachelor party. I booked you a queen just in case. Baltimore is closer than DC to New York. You could make it a stepping stone in your trip. Just think about it. It’s a nice hotel.

“Call me if there’s a problem, Luke.”

“When are you going to New York?” McGee asks startling Tony.

As it’s easier to just answer Tony rolls his eyes, “I’m attending a fundraiser for a women’s shelter affiliated with the church my family attends the weekend before Thanksgiving.”

“Are you taking your secret sweetheart to this fundraiser?” Ziva asks without even looking at them.

“I have an escort for the ball, yes.”

Ziva looks up with a wicked gleam in her eyes, “That is a sight I would pay hand over fish to see.”

“Hand over fist, not fish. And you won’t be seeing it.”

“Why would one put a hand over a fist?”

“Why would you put a hand over a fish?”

“So you’re admitting you’re seeing someone now?” McGee interrupts.

“I did no such thing. I said I wouldn’t be unescorted at the charity ball. Take from that what you will.” He gets up, “I’m out to lunch Boss.”

Gibbs nods, unconcerned.

Tony arrives at his car as Abby enters the bullpen, “No excuses Pop, let’s go. You said yourself you owe me.”

“Just a minute sweetheart,” He closes the file he’s been working on and takes her arm. “You two go to lunch too.”

McGee watches the elevator doors close before turning his attention to Ziva, “You know something.”

Ziva hesitates, then true to her word doesn’t mention what she knows, “I suspect something.”

“Well? Why won’t he tell us about her?”
“His objections to our suppositions have all been rather specific,” She leaves before he can respond to her.

“Okay Abbs, what’s wrong?” Tony asks when their drinks arrive.

“Why would anything be wrong?”

“Because you demanded that we take you to lunch, then refused to offer an opinion on where we should go. In fact you’ve spoken less in the last twenty minutes than you usually do when you greet me.”

“And we both know you Baby. Now what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, not exactly anyway.”

“What happened Abby?”

“I just wasn’t thinking…”

“When you did what Princess?”

“I invited Grandpa Jack to stay with me Thanksgiving night.”

Gibbs gets it first, “And Jolene and Victor are already staying with you Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.” He sighs, “There is no way I’m inviting him to stay at the house until at the very least he’s proven he can be civil.”

“I know Pop, and I wouldn’t ask you to. What I would ask you to do is help me to figure out how to tell Grandpa that he can’t stay with me without hurting his feelings.”

“Baby girl, he loves you. Hell he adores you. Just tell him the truth, that you were excited, and planning big plans and forgot yourself. You got carried away and we’ll put him up in a hotel instead.” Noting Abby’s reluctant look he tries again, “Jolene and Victor could stay with us I suppose.”

“No, I want Mom to stay at my place.”

“He’s not staying at the house Abbs. It’s just not happening. We’re bound to fight as it is.”

“He promised me he’d be nice.”

“Abigail, I know you have no way of knowing this so I’m not mad, but my reluctance to give Jackson slack is justified. He claims that it’s my life and I can do as I please, that he knows he has no say. And then he tries to manipulate the situation based on what he thinks I need. I’m sure he has every intention of being polite, but it won’t stop him from trying to impose his judgment on my life. And while that’s all well and good, I will not encourage it by inviting him to stay in my house.”

“I wish you’d mentioned this before,” Tony murmurs, put out.

“Why?” Gibbs asks confused.

“If he’s going to try to run me off it helps if I’m not blind sided by it.”

“Not like that Tony. He’ll try to convince you that I’m too old for you. That I’m just playing with
you until I find wife number five. That you need someone who isn’t bound by don’t ask don’t tell. He’s done it to everyone I ever brought home, including Shannon. It’s not about what he thinks about you, it’s about what he thinks about me.”

Abby, looking entirely contrite, plays with her napkin, “So which hotel should we put him up at?”

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McGee waits five minutes then moves over to Tony’s desk. He knows it goes against Abby’s instructions to show he can be trusted, but he figures he’s using Tony’s methods so Tony will understand. The first drawer he opens is a bust, just a bottle of water, a glass and a toothbrush. The second isn’t much better: a few files, exhibit advertisements from various museums in town, and the card that came with the roses a few weeks back. He considers the brief message more carefully. Why sign it with just an initial? It’s not because a lack of space. Maybe it’s someone who works in the building. Who has a first initial J? The only answer McGee can think of is a laughable one: Jenny Sheppard. Maybe the name itself would give away something either the sender or Tony wouldn’t want broadcast around. The remaining drawers only turn up one item of real interest, a key on it’s own keychain with a tag reading “Tony’s.” Clearly whoever she is, it really is serious. Having come up empty he considers what Ziva said. What did Tony say exactly about the mysterious J? “Someone who enjoys my company.” Who typically enjoyed Tony’s company? Women who knew he wasn’t interested and enjoyed flirting anyway. Guys who wanted to talk about sports and action movies. That Medal of Honor recipient who thought he’d killed his best friend…

What else had Tony said? He kept saying there wasn’t any mysterious woman. Could that mean? Could Sarah be right? That would be one reason not to sign your name, signing “XO, Jack” would be a little telling. But surely not, Tony makes such a big deal of being a skirt chaser. Unless that’s the point. Could that be what Abby meant? That Tony doesn’t trust him enough to tell him that he’s actually gay? As much as Tony talks he doesn’t really say much. Frankly he’s revealed more in recent discussions about his current relationship than he had in the four years before that. In fact, he did say he was having dinner with “his princess’” father. His objections to the teasing about dating someone with a child had centered around not even knowing the girl’s mother.

McGee considers it a moment longer before heading out to lunch himself. If that is Tony’s secret he really does need to prove himself trustworthy. The sheer lengths Tony goes to hide it imply he’s had a bad experience in the past and that can’t be an easy thing to let go of.

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Finally back on her conversational stride Abby bounces slightly, “What are you doing for Halloween?”

“What have I done for Halloween every year you’ve known me sweetheart?”

“You’re going to sit home and hand out candy.”

“Got it in one Abbs.”

“What, no scary movies?” Tony asks affronted.

“You could come over and help me overcome my ignorance of such an important tradition.”

“On a school night?”

“I think you and I both know that one is as dead as rule 12.”
“Not dead, just no longer relevant.”

Drawing their attention back to her before they forget they’re out in public Abby sits forward, “Do you wear a costume when you hand out candy Tony?”

“Nope. I don’t exactly have the best memories of Halloween, Princess. I just like seeing the kids’ enthusiasm.”

“I could take you to a costume party tomorrow night.”

Tony chuckles, “Who exactly is throwing this party?”

“Okay so it’s not your scene… He’s a very up person, but half the fun of a costume party is the mystery.”

“No thanks Baby, but you have fun.”

“I promise we’ll have some fun this weekend princess, crave some pumpkins, eat some pie.”

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The director is leaning against the railing in front of MTAC watching the bullpen when Gibbs, DiNozzo, and Abby return from lunch. Earlier she observed the opening of the gift and can’t help but wonder at how this new love interest knows Gibbs so well. DiNozzo has an arm wrapped around a laughing Abby and is teasing her about her Halloween costume. Gibbs laughs brightly, his response carrying easily to her perch above them. “Not likely Sweetheart. I expect the unexpected from you.”

“We’ll see Pop.”

DiNozzo gives Abby a push toward the secure elevator and moves behind his own desk before glancing up and spotting her watching. He nods to her slightly before turning his computer back on.

Gibbs must see that as he continues around to the stairs and heads up to her. “Was there something you needed Director?”

“I’m just observing my agents. Though I must say I’m a little surprised you’d let DiNozzo date your daughter.”

He laughs genuinely again, “Tony is not dating Abbs. They’re too close for that. I wouldn’t call it a sibling relationship, but it has that air of hands-off to it. But I’m curious, what about Tony am I supposed to find so objectionable?”

“Even I know he chases everything in a skirt Jethro. You’d let him play with your daughter like that?”

He smiles as Tony hits McGee with a wadded up paper ball. “Abbs plays with boys like they were live action dolls. And she’s proud of it. As long as she doesn’t want more from someone I’m not going to fault them for not being serious about her. She’s thirty, not thirteen. As for Tony, what’s wrong with a little flirting?”

“It can be rather… misleading.”

“I’m sorry Jenny. I never meant to lead you on.”

“Honestly Jethro, I wasn’t talking about that. I was just noticing that Abby has been especially close
with Tony lately, and wondering if perhaps she doesn’t think something else is going on.”

“From what she tells me she’s been advising him on personal matters. She won’t say any more than that and I think you and I should both respect that.”

“I have no intention of delving into their personal lives Jethro, I just want to know if the relationship between them is going to be a problem. I know how you feel about coworkers dating.”

“I think it’s a good thing actually. And if I had a problem with it I would deal with it myself, as I suspect you know.”

“I saw your friend sent you another gift.”

“Not Liz this time.” He glances down to see that it’s become an all out paper ball war downstairs, “I better go break this up.”

She retreats to her office, commenting to Cynthia along the way, “You were right. He knows something.”

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Despite a second paper ball fight breaking out, and ending only when Tony is hit square between the eyes by Gibbs himself, the rest of the afternoon passes quietly. The last of the paperwork on the murder and drive by is filed and six cold case files are reviewed but nothing new comes in. As he starts to pack up Tony looks across the aisle at Gibbs, “We on call this weekend Boss?”

“Not unless something truly major goes down.”

“Good. I could really use the time off.”

“The new love of your life wearing you out already?” McGee attempts to tease, careful to keep his comment gender neutral.

“Or perhaps you are hoping they might make an attempt to do so,” Ziva adds grinning.

“Don’t you know yet? A DiNozzo can’t be worn out.”

“That is wishful thinking DiNozzo,” Gibbs comments dryly.

“In the sense they were implying Boss.”

Gibbs smirks his contradiction without voicing anything.

A moment later Tony’s email dings. “Don’t forget dinner with Liz. My place, 8:00. If you turn up early we’ll discuss your claims.”

Tony smiles and quickly drafts a response, “You can prove me wrong everyday for the rest of my life babe. Be over after I drop some things off at the dry cleaners. Twenty, half hour at most.”

“Either way your new sweetheart is obviously improving your look out.”

“Out look. And my outlook hasn’t changed a bit. I’m as sunny and up beat as I always was.”

“So you’re admitting that J’s a new sweetheart?” McGee questions.

“I confirm or deny nothing. Except that I cannot be worn out and would appreciate a couple days
“Give it up Tony. We all know you’re seeing someone.”

“Then you don’t need me to tell you anything,” Tony smiles and leaves with a half wave in the direction of Gibbs and Ziva.

Liz arrives almost a full hour early and is startled to find the door locked. Gibbs answers it smiling, “Always so impatient.”

“I thought I might help with the cooking.”

“Nothing to help with Liz, I made you my all day slow roast.”

“You’re locking your door now?”

“Tony does from time to time. When he doesn’t want anyone to just walk in.”

“Did I interrupt something?”

“No.” Gibbs chuckles, “He pretty much dared me to wear him out. I had just finished pouring him into the shower when you rang.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Two months now.”

“Isn’t that a little quick to be moving him in Jethro? Even for you.”

“We’re not living together Liz.”

“Really? You were doing the New York times crossword in ink this morning?”

“No, Tony was doing the crossword at breakfast. We slept here, we ate here, simple as that. You missed me Monday because we stayed at his place. We are not living together. We haven’t even discussed living together yet.”

Liz laughs, “You’re so cute when you’re defensive. It scares the hell out of you how much you like having him here doesn’t it?”

“Not exactly. I’m glad we honestly enjoy each other’s company.” He listens for a second to ensure Tony is still in the shower, “The part that scares me is I know for a fact that if he came to me tomorrow and told me they’d evicted him I wouldn’t even give him a chance to look for a new place. And I know he wouldn’t understand for a minute why that bothers me.”

“Do you know why it bothers you?” Liz asks curiously.

“Because it’s always hard to live with someone, no matter what you feel for them and with our situation it is going to be harder. I can guarantee I will do something stupid at work and hurt him. It’s a foregone conclusion. If he moves in before we’re both ready a fight like that could break us and I can’t lose him. It’s why it took Abbs so damn long to convince me that it was a risk worth taking.”

“You’re an idiot Jethro,” The statement comes from Tony, not Liz as he walks into the kitchen. He extends a hand to Liz, “You must be Liz. I’m Tony. Nice to meet you.”
“Smart and cute. If I dated men I might have to steal you away.”

Recovering slightly and deciding to face the discussion now that he’s in it Gibbs squares his shoulders, “Why exactly am I an idiot?”

“Because I know you, you jackass. I know you’re going to snap and snarl from time to time. I’m well aware at some point or both of us is going to have to tell a bald-faced lie. I also know that when we get around to living together we’re going to fight like cats and dogs for awhile before we work out the details of sharing space. I also know the first thing I’ll have to do is carve out a space of my own so that when it’s time to go to ‘neutral corners’ I have one. Now, that being said you’re right. It’s too soon for us to move in together. Besides the fact that for whatever reason you’re not comfortable with the idea I figure we need to have at least one good fight before we even discuss it.”

“I can tell I’m going to like you,” Liz comments as she pours glasses of wine.

Tony moves into Gibbs’ personal space before he murmurs his parting shot, “Stop assuming I’m going to run from you, Jethro. You want me gone you’re going to have to run me off. I’m not one of your dumb redheads too stuck on some vision of a romantic hero to see what I’ve really got.” After a kiss that proves he isn’t worn out yet Tony takes his usual seat at the table and smiles charmingly at Liz, “Was he this stupid when you met him?”

“Don’t blame him too much. He has a hard time with the concept of good things happening to him. Now I want to hear more about you.”

“If you’ll tell me more about yourself as well I’m willing to talk.”

Abby isn’t surprised to find the door locked when she arrives for lunch, Tony’s taken to locking it more and more often. She rings the bell and fusses with her hair watching her reflection in the glass. Gibbs opens the door and stares, “Something you want to tell me baby?”

“Happy Halloween?”

Comprehension dawns on his face, “Is it a wig or did you actually dye your hair platinum blonde?”

“And have to keep it this color for weeks?” She makes a face, “No thank you. It’s a wig.”

“And the costume is?”

“You can guess after I take my coat off.”

He laughs and steps aside so she can do just that. Once she does he takes her hand and leads her to the kitchen calling out to Tony, “It seems the guest list for lunch has changed slightly. No sign of Abby but Marilyn Monroe has joined us.”

Tony turns around with a confused look, which brightens into a appreciative grin. “Welcome Ms. Monroe, or do you prefer Ms. Mortenson?”

“Marilyn will be fine.”

Tony twirls her, “Great costume Abbs. Is this for the party you’re going to tonight?”

“I figured if I couldn’t get you to come out and play I’d bring some of the party to you.”

“I guess we had something of the same idea. I made pumpkin risotto and prepped the craving
pumpkins. Figured you could at least offer some suggestions on designs.”

“Cool. How did dinner with Liz go?”

“She threatened to steal me away. It was very flattering.”

“I can see from Pop’s expression you got along better than he might have liked.”

“It’s not that. Not exactly,” Gibbs defends. “You should have heard them, plotting to push Jenny Sheppard’s buttons. I was having serious visions of needing a back up plan in the event of losing my job.”

“Madame Wicked Stepmother wouldn’t fire you Pop. She wouldn’t have access if she did that.”

“If she found out my boyfriend and one of my oldest friends were deliberately taunting her I wouldn’t count on any prediction of what she’d do.”

“I swear we were just playing. I have nothing against little zingers like the coffee beans but I wouldn’t provoke her. I’d like to think we could talk her into just splitting us up. I wouldn’t be happy with that but it’s better than having to explain to potential employers why I was fired for an inappropriate sexual relationship.”

“You’d really leave NCIS after talking her into letting you stay?” Abby asks concerned.

“It’s not the plan or anything Princess, but I don’t think I could deal with opposite shifts and being on alternating weekends. Now, on a brighter note: Have you decided who you’re bringing to the fundraiser?”

“I was thinking I’d bring Chester. He’s one of the forensic anthropologists over at Quantico. He’s sweet, well educated, a little shy. He won’t steal any of your thunder or embarrass you.”

“I’m not worried about being embarrassed Abbs. There are two key reasons you need a decent date for a thing like this. The first is that your date is the first line of defense against the worst of the church ladies, who are going to get one glimpse of the tattoo on your neck and try to save you. And two I’m going to have enough on my mind without making sure my Princess is enjoying herself. Besides which I may end up being asked to leave if the scene with my father becomes too overt.”

“Just how fancy is this party?”

“They’re not going to announce you at the door but you need a nice dress and I’ll loan you some of my maternal grandmother’s good jewelry if you want.”

“You’re the best step dad ever Tony.”

Tony laughs and shoos her to the table for lunch.
Gibbs wakes up to his cell ringing and an empty bed Monday morning. Having slept badly and knowing an early call is bad news he growls, “Gibbs.”

“I can hear how well you slept.”

“Cute is probably not your best bet right now Tony.”

“We’ve got a dead Private First Class at the Palomar Hotel.”

“Ducky on his way?”

“He’ll beat us there.”

“Any details?”

“PFC Pete Bering just arrived in town on leave. He did not have a reservation or a room at the Palomar and was found in room 209, registered to a Michelle Livingston who was not present when the maid found the body. Metro found his military ID on the night table and contacted us. The only note I’ve got on the condition of the body is there was a good deal of blood in the room.”

“You at the office?”

“Nope. Just rolled out of my own cold bed. But I should warn you, if your next question is what am I wearing I have put jeans on.”

“Take your time, I’ll pick you up on my way. I’ll be there in twenty-five. Get Ziva and McGee moving.”

“I’ll make you a pot of coffee to go if you come up and give me my good morning kiss.”

“Sounds like a deal. See you in a while.” He grins as he hangs up, once again highly amused that Tony can always make him smile no matter his mood.

When he arrives at Tony’s he lets himself in and pads silently up behind the younger man, intent on making him jump.

Tony however surprises him instead, turning easily and smiling at him, “Good morning Jethro.” Upon seeing his questioning look Tony grins, “The door squeaked when you shut it. Now are you going to give me my good morning kiss or do I have to hold your coffee hostage?”

Faced with an offer like that, one which meets his own needs as well especially, who is he to refuse? One economical movement has them pressed together tightly and with a hand in Tony’s hair Gibbs begins reacquainting himself with the taste and feel of this lover. Intellectually he knows they’ve been apart less than a day but the long, restless night makes it seem like longer. When he pulls back from the kiss he has a handful of Tony’s ass and a powerful need to breath. Still he manages a welcoming smile, “Good morning Tony.”

“Morning Jethro. Your coffee should be ready.”

“And if I don’t want coffee?”

“You don’t have time for any other pick-me-up so I suggest you drink your coffee.”
Gibbs sighs, “It’s going to be a long day.”

“You ready to go?”

“Almost. Stand here with me for a minute then I’ll pull on some shoes and we can go.”

“I can definitely do that. How long did you give the others?”

“They’re supposed to be there in fifteen minutes but unless they’ve both been taking quick change lessons from superman we should still beat them by about five minutes. Ducky will probably arrive there any minute now.”

“We should get going.”

“On it boss.” Tony waits a few beats, “As soon as you let me go.”

After another moment’s stillness they start moving again.

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Walking into the scene undoes the tension release that their momentary break had afforded Gibbs. The boy is sprawled across the bed with one arm wrapped around the pillow looking for all the world as if he’s merely asleep. All except the entrance wound in his back and the puddle of blood below him that is. It’s almost a relief when Ducky rolls him over and breaks the illusion.

The search of the room yields more questions than answers. The only thing they recover in the room that doesn’t belong to either their dead PFC or the hotel itself is a pair of hot pink panties hanging from the head board.

“Ziva, question the guests in the neighboring suites. McGee go down to the front desk and get a description of Michelle Livingston and any security footage you can lay hands on. DiNozzo, get in touch with your contact at metro. See if they’ve had anything similar recently. If not start digging into the PFC’s life.”

A quick chorus of “On it Boss,” leaves Gibbs in the room alone with Ducky, Palmer and the body.

“Anything other than the obvious Duck?”

“There’s some fairly extensive bruising around his left leg and his left big toe is broken. Initial evidence suggests he was asleep and in the position in which we found him when he was shot. No one tried to perform CPR or take any other life saving measures.”

“Which points to his bedmate as his killer.”

“That’s one way to interpret the evidence,” Ducky concedes.

“Yes, I know it’s possible the killer took whomever he was with. But I don’t see signs of a struggle and what kind of kidnapper takes the victim’s belongings?”

“I notice you’re not using pronouns, do you suspect he was with a man?”

“No, I’ve just gotten used to doing it defensively because Jenny keeps fishing.”

Jimmy Palmer’s eyes go a bit wide at that statement but he keeps his head down.
“There is a third option Jethro. Perhaps his lady friend left while he was asleep to avoid the awkward morning after.”

“And she left her underwear on the headboard as a parting gift?”

Gibbs examines the bloody sheet before bagging it for Abby. He waits until Palmer is about to cross the threshold before calling out “Am I more frightening or less all of a sudden Jimmy?”

Palmer gets the look of a deer in headlights but to his credit he answers fairly promptly. “Neither Agent Gibbs.”

Gibbs chuckles at that before nodding and moving over to the small cluster of Bering’s belongings on the night table. Nothing stands out. His clothing, the unies he undoubtedly left the ship in, are in a pile on the floor. He bags those as well. Nothing in the room points at anyone in particular.

“Report.”

“No one heard a shot last night or this morning in the surrounding suites. The other guests noticed a pretty brunette coming and going to room 209 the last few days. They describe her as 5’ 9” to 5’ 10” with shoulder length brown hair and dark eyes. They noticed her but none of them reported seeing Bering.”

“The desk clerk gave the same description of Livingston. He wasn’t able to tell me when she checked in. I got the surveillance tapes for Friday when the room was rented and yesterday. I haven’t had a chance to look at them yet but the name and license she gave when she registered have to be bogus. There is no Michelle Livingston in Providence, RI. Or at least not one within twenty years of age of the approximate age given by the witnesses.”

“Nothing similar on Metro’s radar Boss. Just started digging into Bering’s life. All I’ve got so far is that he doesn’t have any family, his parents both died in a car accident six months before he graduated high school. And he hasn’t been back to his home town in South Dakota since joining the Marines.”

“You stay on background Tony. McGee get the video down to the lab and help Abby go through it. Ziva set up a communications link with his current posting. I want to know if anyone aboard ship knows anything about Michelle Livingston.”

After Gibbs heads out, presumably for more coffee, Tony heads into the break room for a pick-me-up and nearly bumps into Cynthia. “Tony, I thought you were all out on a case.”

“We just got back. I just need a snack before I get moving, missed breakfast.”

“I heard you had someone taking care of you these days.”

Tony chuckles, “You’ve been misinformed.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that Tony. You’ve been much happier lately.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t seeing someone, just that no one’s been taking care of me.”

“Abby isn’t taking care of you? She always seems so very concerned about your well being.”
“Why does everyone assume that Abbs and I hanging out more than we used to must mean we’re sleeping together?” He sighs, “Abby and I are family. I would never even think of her that way, let alone act on it. I would however rip anyone who hurt her into little tiny pieces.”

“Sorry Tony,” Cynthia offers meekly before retreating back upstairs. The director is at the railing again and Cynthia offers in a low voice, “It’s definitely not Abby. He made that ‘kissing my sister’ face when I suggested it.”

The director gives an infinitesimal nod and heads into her office.

Cynthia shrugs and heads back to her desk.

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Abby grins and turns to the door when her computer beeps. Not one to disappoint Gibbs enters promptly, caf-pow! in hand. “What do you have for me Baby?”

“How about some stills of ‘Michelle Livingston’?” She smirks and brings up an image on the plasma screen. A thirty-something man with dark hair and eyes.

“That’s Michelle Livingston?” He asks skeptically.

“Michelle Livingston, naturalized citizen of Providence, RI. Born in a small town near Marseilles, France. I also have footage of him handing the key to the room off to a young woman matching the description given to you as Michelle Livingston. I have McGee running facial recognition scans against the Rhode Island DMV database.”

“Great catch Baby girl.”

“That’s not all I have you for you Bossman.” A few keystrokes bring up a list of times and dates tagged with some sort of serial numbers. “This is the hotel access record for the door to the suite. There was only one guest key issued,” She highlights a dozen of the twenty entries, “Presumably being used by our not-Michelle. Unfortunately it only logs when a key is used to open the door, not when it’s opened from the inside.”

“You earned this one sweetheart,” He comments fondly handing over her drink.

“I earn them all,” She complains before kissing his cheek, “Have a good weekend Pop?”

“It started better than it ended.”

“You know there is a quick easy cure for that. One little, tiny, insignificant word that would keep the bad day at bay.”

“And what, exactly is this magic word?”

“Stay.”

“As if I were talking to an obedient puppy?” His tone is amused, which they both know is confusing McGee.

“If the simile fits..”

He does his best to glare at her as he leaves the room and manages to hold his laugh until he’s in the elevator. When he reaches the bullpen he dials her extension, “That wasn’t nice Abbs.”
“Oh come on, it was funny. The look on your face alone.”

“Nice use of the Saint Bernard thing.”

“Not like it isn’t true.”

“Still. In answer to the issue on the table, I have to sleep alone sometimes.”

“Who do you think you’re kidding? I know you didn’t sleep well at all.”

“Never do when I sleep alone. It doesn’t change anything.” He looks up as Tony returns from the vending machine with a bottle of Gatorade. “Don’t pick on MIT too much Princess.”

“No promises.”

He hangs up. “What have you got for me Tony?”

“A little. Bering just isn’t all that remarkable. A passably good student. A dedicated marine. A good son by all accounts, just not particularly remarkable. Always had a thing for tall brunettes according to the couple of high school friends I tracked down, but we both know that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. The reason he’s on leave is that he was kidnapped for ransom two weeks ago by locals who thought he was a rich boy tourist. When they found out he was a marine they let him go, no ransom paid. They were good though, he couldn’t id any of them.”

Gibbs nods, “Which makes it unlikely the two incidents are related. The reason McGee couldn’t get anything on a Michelle Livingston in Providence is because he was looking for the wrong gender. Michelle is a man. He and Abbs are tracking the girl but I want you to pull what you can on Livingston. Maybe it was some kind of bait and switch. He goes up to a pretty young girl’s hotel room, she does her part, and then she lets tall dark and homicidal in.”

“Or maybe the mystery woman is Michelle’s wife or girlfriend and he came back and wasn’t too happy to find some random guy in bed with his woman.” Knowing exactly what the glare he’s receiving means he puts on his most contrite expression, “On it Boss.”

Gibbs heads back out, down to the morgue.

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Knowing what he’s got is over his head Tony emails it to Abby and heads down to her lab. He finds her alone and hugs her, “Hey Sweetheart. I found something on Michelle Livingston that might be extremely important, but we both know girls rule and I need you to look at it and make sure it’s what I think it is.”

“What’ve you got?”

“Open your email. I found the company Livingston works for and I need to know if I’m understanding what they do correctly.”

“Okay. Let’s see. Oberon Security Technologies.” She skims the company site briefly, “Tony they make electronic key card locks.”

“Meaning that any information we got off the access log is suspect. But why go to all that trouble to kill an orphan marine?”

“Maybe they didn’t pick him ahead of time, maybe he was just the fish they happened to catch.”
“Which means we’ve got suspects, a ton of fairly damning evidence and no clue why they killed him or where they went afterwards.” He shakes his head, “I’m not going to get a good night’s sleep for a week.”

“I thought you lifted the school nights restriction.”

“We did. Doesn’t keep him from carrying all his tension to bed with him. Doesn’t mean we’ve got time to have some tension relief either. You know how hard it is to really relax when your bedmate is wound tighter than violin strings?”

McGee reenters the lab and heads back to Abby’s desk without really looking around. When he reaches it he calls out, “We got a match.”

“Good work Probie, who is she?”

McGee jumps at that. To his credit it takes him less than thirty seconds to recompose himself, “Her name is Natalie Sidle. Just a second. She’s 24, a native of Providence. She worked for an Oberon Security Technologies until three weeks ago. No one reported her missing but she lives alone. Has a living mother and two sisters.”

“Okay, so we know who the players are at least.”

“Is that so?” Gibbs asks from just behind Tony. Payback from this morning no doubt.

“Yes Boss. I was able to pull up several pieces of relevant information on Livingston and verify the implications of what I found with Abby and McGee’s identified the woman and found a connect between her and Livingston.”

“A connection?”

“Both Sidle, that’s the woman, and Livingston worked at Oberon Security Technologies. They’re based in Providence and they make electronic security systems, including the key card locks used by hotels. I’ll be contacting Oberon as soon as I get back to my desk.”

Gibbs looks over what they’ve got up on the various screens, “Which means the access logs are useless.” He makes an annoyed noise, “Why the hell did they kill this kid?”

He heads back out without another word and heads up to MTAC. When he arrives there Ziva is just thanking the captain of Bering’s ship at one of the stations along the near wall. When she returns the headset to its hook Gibbs looks on expectantly.

“No mention of a Michelle, but he was talking about a girl a lot in the week between his kidnapping and his leave.”

“Did he have anything to say about the kidnapping or Bering’s reaction to it?”

“He said Bering was more angry than shaken, that he wanted to go back into country and seek them out but the mission would not allow it. He described Bering as a dedicated soldier with a rather fiercely patriotic outlook.”

“I’m not surprised. The kid was nobody until he joined up and then suddenly he was hero.”

Ziva nods, “That was my assessment also. Captain Tanner has agreed to ‘round up’ Bering’s bunkmates and friends for a second video conference in three hours. Perhaps they will be able to give us more information.”
Tony cracks his neck as his call is transferred for the fifth time.

“I hate it when you do that.”

Tony looks up at Gibbs and signs “Love you too Honey.”

There’s a click on the line, “Special Agent DiNozzo? I'm Fred Rosen, head of operations. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling for any information you can give me on one current and one former employee, and anything they may have worked on.”

“We will of course cooperate as much as we can but there are certain areas of information that are proprietary that I am not at liberty to divulge.”

“We’ll deal with that if it becomes a concern, sir. Let’s start with Michelle Livingston., what can you tell me about him?”

“First of all he’s currently on a leave of absence.”

“Beginning when?”

There’s a shuffling of papers, “Two weeks ago. He’s scheduled to return on the fifth of November.”

“What else can you tell me about him? What specifically is his position with your company?” He opens his email program and begins taking notes.

“He’s one of our design engineers. He creates and improves the hardware for our security systems, specifically the magnetic and barcode readers used in various door locks. One of the things he’s attempting to develop is a clearance scanner to make sure there are no wires or attachments to the card being used. If successful it will eliminate the primary method of breaking coded key card locks.”

“And the company is one hundred percent behind this project?”

“If we can create and patent it our survival as a company would be virtually guaranteed.”

“So there is absolutely no bad blood between Livingston and your company?”

“Well… He did object in writing to our cancellation of one of the software projects, but his points were duly considered before the decision to terminate the project was finalized. He seemed to understand that it was simply a matter of cost-benefit. The customers would never even notice, let alone appreciate, the improvement so it simply wasn’t worth the $50,000 it would have cost to implement it.”

“What was the project meant to do?”

“Add a secondary magnetic code, encrypted so that only a matching encoder/reader set would have compatible keys. Basically the idea was to make it so even if a card had the correct sequence to open a door if it was not encoded by the authorized encoder it wouldn’t work. The problem with it from a business standpoint is encoding their own keys is generally not a tactic used by anyone trying to bypass these locks. We’ve only ever had one report of it and it was carried out by a desk clerk at a rival hotel chain using the encoder at his place of employment to commit several acts of petty theft. Mainly women’s under garments.”
“And what can you tell me about Natalie Sidle?”

“Ms. Sidle was the programmer who suggested and was pushing for the project in question. She had a bit of a… breakdown over our refusal to go forward with the project and ended up resigning from her position.”

“Did any of her arguments in favor of the project stick in your mind?”

“She kept insisting it was a weakness that was going to exploited by criminals sooner or later if we didn’t address it. She did blame every member of the board of the directors personally for this potential wave of crimes.”

“Do you recall anything about Ms. Sidle personally? Was she always this passionate, or was it the project specifically?”

“It was most definitely the project. She was generally a quiet person who did as instructed. Her direct supervisor and I were both shocked when she refused to drop the matter.”

“One last thing Mr. Rosen, then I’ll let you get back to your business. What sort of relationship did Mr. Livingston and Ms. Sidle have?”

“Outside the office I couldn’t speak to, but within the confinement of their positions the two had regular contact coordinating the two halves of our products. Often changes to the hardware require reworking of the software, and occasionally changes in the software cause unexpected behaviors from the hardware. They would communicate back and forth until a given issue was resolved.”

“Thank you Mr. Rosen. You’ve been extremely helpful. If you think of anything that you may have forgotten or neglected to mention your secretary, the reception desk, and research and development now all have my number. Don’t hesitate to call.”

“You’re welcome Agent DiNozzo and I will keep that in mind.”

Tony emails his notes to Abby with a blind copy to his own box and closes his eyes, sifting through the information he’s just been given.
Before Tony finishes composing his thoughts McGee hurries into the bullpen, “Boss, I think I know why she did it. Her younger sister was beaten and robbed in a hotel room in Detroit. The Detroit PD decided it must have been an inside job because the girl’s attacker used a key card to access the room. They cleared all the members of staff at the hotel. Sidle insisted there were other ways to breach those locks but her concerns were dismissed.”

“Any details on her theory?”

“Detroit PD didn’t put enough stock in it to take her statement.”

“I think I can help with that Boss. Sidle believes they encoded their own keys after hacking into the hotel’s computer system. She was pushing her company to safe guard against it. When the company refused to fund the project she had the breakdown that led to her leaving her job. Livingston spoke on her behalf but just like the police Oberon dismissed such a breech as a viable criminal tactic.”

“Okay, she’s out to prove there’s a security weakness in the key card system,” McGee posits evenly. “But why kill him? If they robbed him using key cards they made themselves the weakness is just as exposed.”

“Not necessarily,” Tony begins dialing even as he speaks. “If they committed a few robberies and no one made the connection they might escalate to murder just to make someone pay attention. I mean why else would Livingston register under his own name if they didn’t want us to know who did this?”

“I don’t know Tony, that seems a little far fetched. I mean if it was just Sidle I could see it, her sister was brutalized, but why would Livingston go along with it when it went beyond simple thefts? I mean you steal a few little items you go to jail for a few months, maybe serve a year or two in prison. You walk into a room intent on killing somebody best case scenario you spend your life in prison, worst you get the death penalty.”

“Did you find out what exactly the relationship between Sidle and Livingston is?” Gibbs asks as Tony begins talking to Metro.

“There was no mention what so ever of Livingston in Sidle’s background information, Boss.”

“Keep digging. He’s helping her commit murder, have an affair, whatever he thinks she’s doing in that hotel room, there must be some connection between them.”

Abby arrives in the bullpen at one thirty with a bag from a local deli and six pack of bottled water. “You know you can’t live on coffee alone Pop.”

“The hell you say.”

“I will tell on you to Ducky and your new keeper.”

He sighs and risks a lightening quick glance at Tony. “Fine, what’d you bring me?”

“A Philly Cheese steak.” She deposits said sandwich on his desk before turning to Tony, “An Italian sub.” Next is Ziva, “A turkey pita.” And McGee “A Rueben.” With a little twirl she makes a second
pass handing out water, “And as I know you can’t agree on any other beverage I brought you all water. Now eat.”

“Thank you Abby,” Tony offers with a smile while Gibbs tries to stare her down.

Abby just kisses Gibbs’ cheek, leaving a vivid lipstick mark. With that he cracks, “Thank you sweetheart. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” She leaves with a real bounce in her step.

“I’ve got some answers for you Boss.” Gibbs just raises an eyebrow at him, “Metro had a string of thefts in hotels around the city, it started small: clothes and cash. Then it escalated to jewelry and other valuables. The last one the occupant was in the room and was beaten and robbed. That was a week ago.”

Gibbs nods, “Anything of Livingston’s connection to Sidle McGee?”

“Nothing in the public records Boss.”

“I’ve got that too Boss,” Tony volunteers shooting a smug sneer at McGee. “I can’t believe you missed it Probie. You had it all along.”

Annoyed at Tony’s snark in the face of a pissed off Gibbs McGee snaps at him, “What did I miss Tony? A tattoo reading ‘I’m a gullible schmuck’ on Livingston’s driver’s license photo?”

“No. The interviews in the file on the younger Sidle’s battery case. Particularly the one with her fiancé, a ‘Michael’ Livingston. The address listed is that of our Michelle Livingston.”

“So we know who, why, and how. We just have to find them.” McGee finds himself on the receiving end of two nearly identical glares.


Ziva calls them all into MTAC a short while later. On the screen three corpsmen are doing their best not to look nervous. After a delay of a few seconds two of them push the third forward, “You asked to speak to us Ma’am?”

“Yes I did, PFC Gordan. As you have likely been told PFC Bering has died. We believe he was likely murdered. We have some questions.”

“Of course Ma’am, we’ll help in any way we can,” Gordan is still speaking for the group.

Gibbs steps up, “Did Bering talk to any of you about what he was going to do on his leave?”

“Pete was kind of an odd guy. He had no family, no friends in his old hometown. It was like he didn’t have a life before the corp.”

“Not like he was hiding anything Sir, just that he didn’t have anything to go back to,” The young man whose uniform identifies him as Fredricks adds.

“We don’t suspect PFC Bering of any wrong doing,” Gibbs assures them.

All three of them nod, and then the last one, Dixen speaks, “There was a girl. Pete met her in Philly a few months back. They’d been writing back and forth ever since. About a month ago she started talking about moving to DC, something about a new job or project.”
“When he called and told her he was going to be off on leave she told him she had a place in Kalorama Park but she wanted to meet him at a bar near Dupont Circle. She said it was easier to find,” Gordan adds.

“Any of you remember her name?”

“Michelle I think,” Fredricks volunteers.

“Thank you Gentlemen,” Ziva nods slightly.

“Ma’am?” Dixen steps toward the camera just the slightest bit.

“Yes?”

“Did she kill Pete? Is that why you want to know about his girl?”

Again Gibbs takes over, “She at least knows something.”

Dixen looks troubled but doesn’t say anymore.

Ziva disconnects and Gibbs leads them out of MTAC to keep from disturbing anyone else. “McGee start searching for anything in Kalorama in Livingston or Sidle’s name, anything that even might be them follow up on it. Tony, Ziva get down to Dupont Circle canvass the bars. See if anyone remembers seeing Bering or Sidle, Livingston too for that matter.”

“And you Boss?” Tony dares to ask.

“Not that it’s any of your business DiNozzo but I’m going to take a harder look at Bering’s file, see if I can’t figure out what it is exactly that PFC Dixen didn’t want to mention to us.”

“Want me to pull Dixen’s file too Boss?” McGee volunteers.

“No, I want you on the angle I assigned you McGee.”

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After almost two hours they finally find a bartender that recognizes Bering. “Sure, he was in here Sunday night. I remember because he had a baby face, I carded him and he flashed a military ID. We don’t see many of those around here if you get what I mean.”

“I do not follow,” Ziva is clearly genuinely confused.

“Nobody has to ask or tell anything around here sweetheart.”

“Did he seem to know what kind of bar this was?” Tony asks before Ziva can ask for further explanation.

“No, he was a little wide eyed. Said he was supposed to be meeting some girl here. I guess he had the right place after all. About ten minutes later a tall brunette walked up to him and lead him out of the bar.”

“Is this the woman?” Ziva shows him a picture of Sidle.

“Could be. I didn’t really get a look at her.”

“What about this man?” She shows him the picture of Livingston.
“Not one of my regulars and I didn’t see him with soldier boy, but he could have been in here.”

“Okay, thank you very much. Is there a security camera on the door?”

“We’ve got two on the register but nothing on the door.”

“If you remember anything else about any of them give us a call.”

“Is this your direct line Special Agent DiNozzo?” The bartender asks with an appreciative once over of Tony.

“No, it’s our department number.”

“Perhaps you should write down your cell number for me then.”

“I’m flattered, I really am,” He moves his shirt collar to expose his most recent hickey. “but I doubt my boyfriend would appreciate it.”

The bartender laughs, “Possessive, eh? I don’t blame him. I would be too.”

Ziva chuckles but stays silent.

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Upon their return to the bullpen McGee shoots them a relieved glance.

“Don’t tell me you came back empty handed,” Gibbs growls at them.

“We found the bar Boss, but it didn’t give us any leads on Sidle. She just picked him up there, didn’t even go to the bar, let alone order a drink.”

“There better be more coming DiNozzo.”

“The bartender asked for Tony’s phone number.”

The glare Gibbs shoots her would have made a lesser agent wet themselves. As it is Ziva just grins.

“It confirms that she likely has an apartment in Kalorama Park, Gibbs.”

“How are you doing on finding it Probie?” McGee doesn’t even bother to answer.

Gibbs looks up just in time to see Ducky descend the stairs. He drops his eyes back to the file in his hand until the doctor clears his throat from across the desk. “Yes Ducky?”

“You know as well as I do that you and your team need rest. It is my understanding the investigation has stalled.” He waits with an expectant expression until Gibbs nods, “Then I strongly suggest you all go home and get some rest and resume your search in the morning. Otherwise I might have to call your medical fitness into question Jethro, you have after all just returned from an injury.”

“Blackmail Ducky? Honestly?”

“It’s for your own good Jethro.”

“I suppose you have Jenny and Abby backing you up on this?”

“Just Jenny actually.”
Gibbs knows he’s beat, “Go home, get some rest. Be back here by 0800.”

McGee and Ziva hurry out. Tony chats with Ducky, packs his bag, does just about anything he needs to in order to stall until Gibbs gets up and heads into the elevator. “Should I bother coming to your place or are you just going to drink yourself into a stupor and sand the boat?” Tony asks oblivious to Ducky’s presence.

Gibbs sighs, knowing it’s a legitimate question, “Come over, I’ll do my best to be good company.”

Tony manages a small smile at that, “I don’t need you to be good company Jethro. I just need you to relax a little.”

“I’m not the best at relaxing.”

“I’m aware,” Tony comments dryly. “Let’s pick up dinner on the way.”

Ducky just grins through the whole exchange.

After dinner Gibbs disappears into the basement without a word. Tony decides to give him an hour to unwind before getting annoyed. Instead he turns to one of his own tension relief activities, exercise. Lately vanity has been pushing him to work on his abs, because watching out for whether or not Gibbs is eating regularly has him eating better as well and he imagines he’s developed a bit of a paunch. No matter how many times he’s told that it just isn’t there he can’t quite believe it.

At the end of the hour he makes his way to the basement and sits near the bottom of the steps, a subtle but clear demand for acknowledgement. Another five minutes pass with only the quiet rasp of the sandpaper on wood before Tony can’t take it any longer.

“Goodnight Jethro.”

“You’re heading up to bed already?”

“No. I’m going home. Clearly you don’t need my company and I don’t need a bedmate who’s so pissed off he’s grinding his teeth. Rather than snapping at you later and causing a fight neither of us needs just now I’m going to walk away. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

Before he can manage even one step Gibbs has his wrist in a loose grip, “Don’t go.”

Suddenly furious Tony whips around with a glare that would make a drill sergeant proud. “Damnit Jethro make up your mind. Either you want me here or you don’t. And I know you said you did but then you act like I’m not even here.”

“You said you didn’t need me to be good company.”

Tony sighs, not liking the direction this is taking. “And you said you’d try to relax.”

“You’ll have to help me out with that one Tony. I honestly don’t know how.”

“Fair enough. Come up stairs.”

Tony leads the way into the master bathroom upstairs and takes his time contemplating the bathtub before turning the water on just a bit warmer than strictly necessary and adding a few drops of his body wash.
“I thought we were relaxing here, not trying to recreate a scene from Abby’s romance novels.”

“Romance novels? Seriously?” Tony asks over his shoulder as the tub fills. He shrugs and then turns, “Trust me Jethro, follow my lead, do as I say. When I’m finished, before I get around to seducing you, you’ll be relaxed.”

“Teach away.”

“Strip.” Gibbs offers a skeptical eyebrow. “You thought we were getting in the tub dressed?” Knowing the tub is too tight a fit to do this properly Tony still pulls Gibbs down into the water with him and begins massaging tight shoulders. “Talk to me.”

After an unhappy huff Gibbs gives in, “The idea of knowing who and why-”

Tony puts a hand over his mouth. “I didn’t say tell me why you’re upset. I said talk to me. Hmm. Tell me about the boat. Not the specifications, not the techniques you’re using to build her. Not why you won’t tell us her name. Tell me about what you see when you imagine being done with her.”

“I see us sailing into some foreign port where neither of us knows a word of the language. You’re half naked with an all over tan and I keep having to pull you close to make sure the locals know where you belong. Eventually we manage to re-supply and head back out to open water where you begin to convince me that maybe I need an all over tan too… We see the world a port at a time. No criminals, politics, exes. Just you and me and the water.”

Tony can’t even breath for a moment. “Thought you’d go crazy without something to fixate on.”

“I’m sure I’d find something to fixate on.”

“Relaxed?” Tony almost gulps.

“Actually, I am.”

“Can we talk about that some more another time? When my brain re-solidifies?”

“It’s the future Tony, I’m sure we’ll talk about it often before it comes true.”

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“Break’s over,” Tony murmurs as the elevator doors close.

“Then it’s time we get back to searching for these sick freaks.”

Tony hits the stop button just as they reach their floor, “Don’t start feeling guilty about relaxing last night. If you go all out all the time you end up making mistakes, and frankly you blame yourself for enough of the things you can’t control already.”

“Is this where I say ‘yes dear’ and we both pretend I can do as I’m told?”

“You can let yourself off the hook for last night. I know you’ll always feel guilty about things you have no control over. Me pulling you into a tub and making you think happy thoughts isn’t one of them.”

Gibbs gives one of his patented half-smiles, “Don’t forget jumping me like there was a chance I’d take off running.”

“If that’s why you think I jumped you we really need to talk.”
With a quick kiss Gibbs restarts the elevator, “Tonight.” He emerges into the bullpen and barks “McGee” before the others can make note of his joint arrival with Tony.

“Yes Boss?” McGee almost gulps.

“I saw you start a computer search before you left last night, did it turn anything up?”

“I don’t know how useful it will be.” He pulls up a map on the plasma screen, “I was searching all the local rental listing for notations that the renters would accept cash payments. As you can imagine the results I got were not from realtors or rental agencies but newspaper classified and Craig’s list. I turned up thirty-five buildings in the area. If we eliminate the ones that aren’t in Kalorama Park we have eight possibilities.”

Before Gibbs can respond his desk phone begins ringing, “Gibbs.”

“Pop, I’ve got a possible angle on Sidle but I need McGee to help me run it down.”

“You got it Baby girl. He’ll be right down.” He hangs up, “DiNozzo, Ziva take the list and see if any of the building managers recognize Sidle or Livingston.” He waits until they’re in the elevator and then with his gravest expression calls, “And DiNozzo, if I hear you’ve been flirting on my time I’ll do a hell of a lot worse than slap your head.”

“I’ll keep that in mind Boss!” Tony does his best to look cowed.

Ziva doesn’t buy it, “Was he upset over the phone number?”

“Didn’t even mention it. He hasn’t been particularly jealous since the very beginning. He understands the flirting is part of the role I play.”

“Even when it is him you are flitting with?” Ziva asks chuckling as they get into the car.

“On a case? I never.”

“Yes you have. But then you flirt with Abby, McGee and myself from time to time as well. Almost as if you cannot help yourself.”

“Playful comments in and of themselves are not flirting.”

“When they are of a suggestive nature they are.”

“Not always.”

“Let us agree to disagree.”

“Thank you.”

“Both of you seem to be in a better mood this morning.”

“You’re skating on thin ice here Ziva.”

“I do not mean any offense Tony. Gibbs was simply steaming when I left last night.”

“Fuming or steamed not steaming. And whatever goes on between Gibbs and me at home is not up for discussion.”

“I am simply glad to see you both more relaxed.”
“What’s the first address?”

“Did you find something Abbs?” Gibbs asks when he returns with her Caf-pow!.

“Sidle has a hormone deficiency, she has a daily prescription and it’s fairly rare. I figure she might be using a false name but she still needs her pills so I checked the pharmacies in the area. Only two carry the supplements she needs and only one has an active prescription on file. The recipient’s name is Karen Lloyd. Her description matches the one I have for Sidle. Do you want the address or should I send it to Tony?”

“Send it to Tony. Tell him it’s on his list to go straight there. McGee and I are going to go to the pharmacy. Good work sweetheart.” He kisses her cheek. “And thank you for tattling to Ducky on me last night.”

“He told you that was me?”

“No, you just did. I have a keeper now Abbs. I don’t need two of you.”

“Like you wouldn’t use every dirty manipulative trick in the book to get your own way.”

“I’m your father. I’m allowed.”

“And I’m your daughter, did you ever really expect anything else?”

“I expected more wheedling about being no fun on Halloween. I didn’t expect demands that I change the habits of a lifetime.”

“Sometimes a little change is good for you.”

“Whatever you say sweetheart. It’s just lucky Victor raised you instead of me. You’ve got me wrapped around your finger so tight you’d have been a world class brat for sure.”

“Nope. You only dote on me because we missed so many years.”

“Maybe. I’m going back to work sweetheart.” Abby just grins.
When they arrive back at the office Tony takes a firm grip of Ziva’s forearm, “Stay down and stay quiet. I managed to head off the snapping and growling last night. I’m not going to be able to do it now. Basically I’m gonna draw fire here, just let me do it.”

“As you wish.”

“Such team spirit you have.”

“You know the man best. If you tell me to let you handle it that is exactly what I do. If I tell you to allow me to handle someone trained in hand to hand combat by Mossad do you protest?”

Tony shrugs, “Fair enough.”

“What’ve you got DiNozzo?”

“The address Abby sent us was their place boss. Two bedrooms, lived in but they didn’t leave much. Either they knew we were on to them or they always planned to clear out after the murder.”

“In other words you got nothing.”

“That remains to be seen Boss. Abbs has what we collected. If it was planned they probably set up a new safe house, if there’s anything to find you know Abbs is our girl. And it gave us some more insight into Sidle and Livingston.”

“Because that’s exactly what we need to know,” Gibbs growls, clearly frustrated.

Tony ignores his ill temper, going directly into briefing mode. “They had separate spaces set up, they definitely are not a couple. Livingston had at least a dozen pictures of the fiancé in his room. No journal or computer. A lot of books though. It seemed like he spent a lot of time there. Sidle on the other hand clearly wasn’t spending much time there. Her room looked like a college girl’s. Pictures and mementos from various social events, dozens of hangers, and an entire bathroom counter of hair products and make-up. It looks like he was very focused on getting revenge and then getting back to life he had planned. Sidle might have lost the thread of things though, this new life as a party girl that let her get close and case victims seems to have appealed to her.”

“And it gives us a new avenue of investigation,” Ziva volunteers, clearly forgetting Tony’s instructions.

“And that would be?” Gibbs prompts impatiently.

“Livingston clearly intends to return to his life in Providence. It seems likely that he would still be in touch with his fiancé.”

McGee perks up at that, “I could put a trace on the fiancé’s phone line, when he contacts her we’d have his location.”

“You’re assuming that he’d call her. If they’ve gone to ground that would be a foolish risk to take.”

“And he’s shown such a keen military mind up to now,” Tony shoots back.
“Abigail, I’m sorry but I may have to kill your father.”

“He’s really being that bad?” Abby chuckles as Tony crosses to her side.

“I can handle rude, difficult, testy and unrealistic but he’s being negative and confrontational. We give him a foot he wants to know why it isn’t a yard. I get that he’s frustrated. We’re all frustrated. At least the rest of us are trying to contribute.” Tony rubs his eyes, “He’s read through Dixen’s file six times now. And yes I know how pathetic it is that I know that.”

“Why are you so convinced Dixen is a dead end?”

“I never said Dixen is a dead end. I just doubt very much that there’s going to be anything that even points to what he knows in his service record. I mean what could there possibly be? A note from his last CO mentioning he’s something of the company chaplain, taking unofficial confessions?”

“So call him back. Ask Dixen what he knows.”

“Not that easy Princess. It’s not like he has cell reception.”

She turns to her computer and types a few quick commands, “Maybe not, but he’s got email.”

“You figure out a discreet way to get information through email and I’m on it Abbs.”

“Could he contact you?”

“If he was willing to let his CO know he had more information for us.”

“So convince him to come forward rather than having you prove he’s hiding something. Imply you know what it is.”

“Now that might just work. You, my dear, are a genius. Must take after your mother.”

“Don’t be too hard on Pop, he just has a low threshold for frustration.”

“Tell me something half the eastern seaboard doesn’t already know.”

“Rule forty-seven is ‘Respect is earned, love isn’t. Don’t put up with people who make you work for the wrong one.’ And it isn’t one that Pop made up.”

“Good advice,” Tony allows evenly. “So you know who the rules originally came from?”

“Nope. But I know two people who didn’t start them. Pop and Grandpa Jack.”

“I’m getting the distinct feeling I’m going to have to use extortion to find out who came up with them initially.”

“I’d say that’s a safe bet,” Abby grins. “Are you going to email Dixen or not?”

“Yes I am. And then I’m going to drag him home and convince him that it’s okay to be human. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck Tony, but I don’t need to know anything about what you do need.”

Tony laughs, “Fair enough. You be careful tonight, just because it’s Halloween doesn’t mean the scary kind of freaks and ghouls aren’t out there.”
“You’re so cute when you go all parental.”

“I mean it Abbs.”

“I know. I’ll be careful, I promise.”

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“Go answer the door. No candy if they’re old enough to shave, and if it’s little Bethany from down the street make sure she takes the little vampire teddy bear Abby left for her.”

“You want me to go hand out candy?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“To your neighbors’ kids? Barefoot and fresh from the shower?”

“Until I finish shaving at least, yes. This is a difficult concept why exactly?”

“Just an interesting way to introduce me around.”

“As long as you’re wearing pants and don’t leer at the mothers I’m not seeing a problem.”

The doorbell rings again and Tony heads down to answer it. A small boy, four or five years old dressed as Woody from Toy Story looks up at him shyly and then back over his shoulder before holding out his bag, “Trick or Treat?”

Tony smiles and drops some candy in the bag, “Happy Halloween partner.”

“Thank you.”

The boy’s mother steps forward with her own slightly shy smile, “We haven’t met yet. I’m Flora from two doors down.”

“Nice to meet you I’m Tony…” He trails off helplessly, who the hell should he say he is?

Gibbs wraps an arm around Tony’s waist, “Good evening Flora, I see you’ve finally met ‘the new boyfriend’.”

“And I’m certain I’m the envy of all the neighborhood gossip hounds just now.”

Gibbs nods and releases Tony to drop down and speak to the boy, “Who are we this year Andrew?”

“I’m Woody Mr. Gibbs. From Toy Story.”

“I guess that makes you the sheriff in these parts.”

“Of course not silly. Woody’s just a toy.”

“Oh, I see.” He nods solemnly and stands up. “Good night Flora.”

“Good night Gibbs, it was nice meeting you Tony.”

Tony shuts the door and turns a confused gaze on Gibbs.

“You thought no one noticed you spending night after night here?” Gibbs laughs, “Old Mrs. Colter from next door has asked everyone for two blocks but me about ’that handsome young man that
keeps spending the night with Mr. Gibbs’. And Miss Lennox from the next block over is appalled that ‘homosexuals have moved into her neighborhood’ despite the fact that she only moved into this neighborhood a year ago.”

“You want me to start fetching the paper in my boxers in the mornings?”

“We could make out on the front porch…” He pushes Tony gently against the wall, “Or I could just introduce you as they turn up on the doorstep.”

“Okay, you win. Am I allowed to put a shirt on?”

“If it makes you feel better.”

“Sorry, something about all the kids running around… And the idea of being eyed like a side of beef again doesn’t exactly appeal either.”

Gibbs laughs, “Caught that did ya?”

“You think it’s funny?”

“A little bit.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Good thing for you.”

“Don’t I know it.”

They settle comfortably in the den, where Tony’s convinced Gibbs to let him put up a flat screen TV and he’s brought over “The Creature from the Black Lagoon” and “The Thing from Another World.” The plan is to enjoy too much sugar and cheesy old movies while the little ones hang on the bell.

As he settles back against Gibbs’ chest Tony asks a quiet, “You know all the kids in the neighborhood, don’t you?”

Gibbs shrugs a little, “I like kids.”

“I know. I just didn’t realize you were this active in your neighborhood, it’s… nice.”

“Nice?” Gibbs attempts a growl.

Tony sits up and drops a quick kiss on Gibbs’ cheek, “Yes, nice. I bet all the mothers tell their little ones to run to you if they’re ever in trouble.”

“Yeah, they do,” His tone is happy, satisfied. Tony smiles and resettles against Gibbs.

An hour later Tony pauses the movie and takes his turn answering the door without much thought, “Hello.”

It’s a smiling little girl dressed as if she were Abby’s mini-me whose face begins to fall when she looks up at him, “Um, is Mr. Gibbs here?”

“Sure hold on just a minute,” Tony smiles reassuringly before turning back toward the sofa, “Jethro,
I think you should field this one.”

Gibbs comes into the front hall and upon seeing the girl’s expression scoops her up, “Well if it isn’t Bethany, queen of darkness. I see you managed to convince your mother to let Princess Abby dress you.”

“Isn’t it cool Mr. Gibbs?” The little girl enthuses brightly.

“It’s just right. Now why’d you look so sad when I came out here.”

“You didn’t answer the door. Last time you didn’t answer the door you…” She sniffs.

“I promise I was only a little hurt then, Abby just wanted me to make sure I was going to get better as fast as possible.”

“I know. I just thought you might be hurt again.”

“I’m perfectly fine. You can even ask Tony, he wouldn’t lie to you.”

“This is Tony?” Bethany asks breathlessly.

“At your service Ma’am,” Tony offers his hand.

“Abby’s right, you’re very pretty.”

“Pretty huh? I might have to have a discussion with the Princess about that.”

“She says you’re her Daddy’s Prince Charming.”

“I hope so anyway.”

“Come on in Heather, it seems like you could use a break,” Gibbs directs out the open door and the girl’s mother steps forward.

“Thank you Jethro. I could use a few minutes. Where on earth do they get all that energy and why can’t I bottle it?”

“Trade secret of being a kid,” Tony offers with a smile. “Hi, I’m Tony.”

“I’m Heather and I’ve heard a lot about you, second hand of course, but still a lot.”

“I wouldn’t take too much of what filters through Abby’s fairytale glasses seriously. She just doesn’t see the flaws.”

“So you don’t chase down criminals on foot and reunite lost children with their loved ones?”

“So maybe some of it contains small kernels of truth.”

“You hunt bad guys with Mr. Gibbs don’t you?” Bethany prompts.

“Yes Honey, he does.”

“The team and I find the clues and Gibbs puts them together and saves the day.”

“Don’t make it seem like I’m always the hero. You’ve been the one to put it all together and save the day plenty of times.”
“Why don’t you sit down and color for a few minutes while I talk to Mr. Gibbs and Tony, sweetie?” Heather asks her daughter with a subtle push into the kitchen.

“Sure Mom,” Bethany agrees readily pulling a coloring book from her trick or treat bag.

The adults continue on into the den. There’s a moment of stilted silence before Heather smiles a little self consciously, “I feel like I already know you a little.”

“I really have to have a long talk with Abbs about this, first Liz now your neighbors…”

“It’s not that she talks about you so much, at least not exactly. She just tells a lot of stories about chasing down the bad guys and she gets rather descriptive. I feel as if I know the whole team really,” Heather assures him.

“Fair enough,” Tony concedes easily. “I’m still at a bit of a disadvantage. All I know about you is you wish you could bottle your daughter’s energy and you let Abbs dress her up for Halloween.”

“She had her heart set on it. I think Abby is her hero. We moved into the neighborhood just over two years ago after we lost my husband in a gas station robbery. Everyone was giving her the standard grief speech, ‘I know it hurts but it will pass. You’ll feel better eventually, I promise.’ And I guess I missed it but the idea of forgetting her father scared Bethany to death. I really don’t know how I missed it. But then one Saturday Bethany was playing jump rope on the sidewalk while the other kids all played together and literally bumped into Abby. And Abby saw what I missed. She came and talked to me and together we helped Bethany the way she needed us to. There are definitely worse friends out there for a little girl.”

“That sounds like our Princess all right. I’m sorry about your husband.”

“Thank you. More than you ever wanted to know about some strange woman from down the street huh?”

“Not at all. You’re clearly someone Abby and Jethro care about, a high recommendation in my book.”

“Which is part of why I’m glad to meet you. You’ve got the same high recommendation. That and we all like seeing Jethro happy and you’re obviously one means to that particular end.”

Noting Tony’s embarrassment at that pronouncement Gibbs smiles at her, “How have you two been the last few weeks?”

“As busy as you’ve been I’d wager. It seems like every girl in the first grade had a birthday in the last two weeks. I’m pretty sure a few of them weren’t even friends of Bethany’s.”

“Oh I don’t know about that, she’s far from shy.”

“Like I said, if I could only bottle her energy.”

“Try caff-pow, it seems to be pretty close,” Tony manages to joke.

Heather laughs and stands back up, “I’ll keep that in mind but for now I think it’s time we let you gentlemen get back to your movie.”

“I have something for Bethany which if I fail to hand over my own daughter will have an absolute hissy fit despite being thirty.”
“Now Jethro that’s not fair. A hissy fit involves yelling and crying. Abbs would just lecture you on not being nice and then babble about how you are nice but not polite nice and your head would explode.”

“Which would be bad,” Heather interjects solemnly.

“Yes it would. It would ruin the paint job and just generally wreck up the place. And being the long suffering boyfriend I’d end up cleaning it up and throwing the wake, patting strangers on the shoulder and accepting completely insincere condolences. And then I’d have to go and be mad at your little girl and I don’t like that idea one bit.”

“At least I know now how broken up you’d be.”

“I’d be devastated and you know it Jethro. Now grab Bethany’s present before we make even bigger morons of ourselves in front of your lovely neighbor.”

Heather chuckles, “I was finding it very entertaining.”

Gibbs approaches the little girl with the teddy bear held at his side as if it were nothing extraordinary. “Abby had plans tonight but she wanted me to make sure you got this,” He hands over the bear.

“She found him!” She hugs the bear tightly and displays it to the adults, “His name is Count Cubula and he’s a vampire bear. See, he’s got fangs and everything.”

“Very cool,” Tony provides enthusiastically.

“You’ll tell Abby thank you for me Mr. Gibbs, won’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you,” She hugs him. “And make sure you’re extra careful, daddies are important.”

“I promise.”

“And I promise I’ll protect him,” Tony volunteers.

“Thank you Tony.”

It takes another five minutes to sort out the goodbyes and Tony’s almost relieved when they do.

“Is she always that worried about you?”

“Abby accidentally mentioned to her how I was hurt last week. Considering how her father died I think it’s understandable how much that scared her.”

Tony nods. “And she sees Abby as a playmate, not an adult?”

“Abbs goes out of her way to act the part.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

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“So how was your Halloween?” Abby asks curiously as Tony joins her in the elevator.

Tony grins, “Enlightening.”
“Met some of the neighborhood kids, huh?”

“I found Bethany especially enlightening.”

“She’s a sweet kid and she needed a friend, not another babysitter.”

“And being her friend required you calling me pretty?”

“You are pretty Tony! Those cheekbones, and your eyes? You are a beautiful man Tony.”

“I worry about you Princess.”

“Well Bethany agreed with me didn’t she?” Abby demands as the doors open to the bullpen.

“She was coached.”

“Believe whatever you want Tony,” She continues across to the secure elevator without a glance at the others.

Tony offers McGee and Ziva each a brief nod before booting his computer and reading Dixen’s email. When he has he breaths a silent sigh of relief. This morning Gibbs has been a bear with a sore head, well since they exited the shower anyway. He sets up their end with one of the MTAC techs before Gibbs arrives, coffee in hand.

“You better be smiling because you have a lead for me DiNozzo.”

“I do Boss. I’m speaking to Dixen about what he knows in about twenty minutes.”

“When did you arrange that?”

“Last night.” He correctly interprets the raised eyebrow as “When?” “Sent the email just before I left for the day. Made Dixen an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

That receives a twitch of the lips, a micro expression only Tony knows to look for, indicating the amusement he was hoping to achieve.

“What are we waiting for?”

Tony can feel the Director’s eyes on him as Dixen appears on the main screen. He wonders for a heart pounding moment if she can see the love bite on the back of his neck from there. “PFC Dixen.”

“Agent DiNozzo.”

“It was clear to us yesterday that you knew more about PFC Bering’s mysterious Michelle than the others and didn’t want to say anything.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say I know anything Sir. I couldn’t bring myself to tell Pete you see but I read those letters. I don’t think she was what he thought she was…”

“What does that mean exactly Private?” Gibbs probes, impatient at the young man’s hedging.

“I believe Michelle was a man sir. The letters just didn’t sound like what a woman would write.” He bites his lip, “And the bar she asked him to meet her at? My sister’s been there a few times, it’s… a liberal sort of place if you take my meaning.”

“Did you mention any of that to Bering?”
“To tell you the truth I thought maybe he knew. But he wasn’t telling me anything and I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask. Pete was a good man. A friend of mine. Who he choose to spend his liberty in bed with wasn’t any of my business.”

Tony still senses some hesitation on Dixen’s part. “But you don’t think that was what was going down, do you Private?”

“No sir. Pete was sort of a hound dog. I figure if he had a wandering eye it’d be pretty easy to tell. At least for those of us who knew enough to look. I thought maybe this guy was going to try to blackmail him actually. Pete wouldn’t have taken that well you see.”

“Is there some reason Bering would be susceptible to blackmail?”

“He was a little… excitable as to how others perceived him. He might have scrounged up the money just to keep ‘em quiet.”

Gibbs strides up the ramp and Tony tries to smooth Dixen over a bit, “Thank you for the information Private. I’m sure it’ll prove useful.”

When Tony makes his way into the Bullpen Gibbs is brooding at his desk and McGee is watching Tony curiously. “Dixen thinks Michelle might have been planning to bait and switch Bering and then blackmail him.”

Before anyone can comment that the possibility doesn’t help them find Livingston and Sidle, McGee’s computer beeps. “Boss, I just got the hospital records on the attack on Rebecca Sidle. Severe beatings doesn’t begin to cover it. She spent six days in intensive care. They didn’t know if she would survive for the first three. She was a painter and they crippled her right hand. She lost her livelihood.”

“Which explains why Livingston might have changed the plan and killed the mark,” Tony provides.

Gibbs glares and Ziva stands quickly, “We just received a response to the BOLO, a Maryland state trooper just pulled Sidle over for speeding on Interstate 95 near Calverton. He has her in custody.”

“Ziva, with me. Tony, contact Detroit PD, see if you can get any more information about the investigation into the attack on the Sidle woman. McGee, keep looking for Livingston. Until we’ve got them both this isn’t over.”


Tony’s already on the phone but he does look up to sign “Careful.”

As they arrive to pick up Sidle Gibbs’ phone rings and he hangs back, “Gibbs.”

“Hey Bossman, I’ve got good news.”

“Is that so sweetheart?”

“They might not have a computer at the apartment but Livingston had access to one somewhere. He was printing out a lot of assassination for dummies kind of stuff. Including how to make a silencer. He’s definitely not a pro but he had the necessary information to pull off the murder at the Palomar.”

“Good work Abbs.”
“Any luck finding them yet?”

“Looks like we’ve got Sidle, but Livingston is still in the wind.”

“You’ll find him.”

“I hope so Baby girl.”

“Did they locate Livingston?” Ziva asks as she returns with a handcuffed Sidle.

“No. But Abby found evidence that links them directly to the murder in the evidence collected from their apartment.”

“It wasn’t a murder!” Sidle protests vehemently. “We were going to photograph him. In bed with Michelle. They weren’t even going to do anything. Just some pictures while he was asleep and purposefully bad job of blackmail. It was just to prove that I was right, that it was dangerous to trust the individual company firewalls to protect the generated security codes. The code generators can’t be hacked. A system that logs the codes can.”

“So you say,” Ziva responds quietly.
Tony watches as Ziva escorts Sidle through the bullpen and is surprised to find that the need to assert his cover just isn’t there.

Obviously McGee notices as well, “They must be special.”

“What are you on about Probie?”

“Pretty girl walks through the bullpen and you don’t even look? You must be in love.”

Tony almost rolls his eyes at that, “Maybe I just don’t find murders attractive no matter what they look like.”

McGee seems to ponder that harder than is strictly necessary but as he stays quiet Tony ignores him. Instead Tony follows the pair until he reaches the observation room. He leans against the wall beside the window and is a little surprised when Gibbs joins him. A quick glance over his shoulder reminds Tony to be discreet, “You’re letting Ziva take this one?”

“Sidle was singing before we had her in the car. Ziva can handle it.” Gibbs takes note of the AV tech as well, “Find anything for me?”

“The lead detective didn’t actually remember the case but he found and faxed me his notes.” He flips through the notes, “She was severely beaten but it looked like they didn’t intend for her to live. Her wrist was a defensive wound, not an attempt to stop her painting. The maid interrupted the attack. They dropped the personal angle from the official files at the insistence of the victim. Which leads me to believe she knew who wanted her dead.”

“If she knew perhaps her sister does as well.”

“I can’t speak to that one Boss.”

“Anything linking Bering to the attack?”

“He fit Rebecca’s description of the ring leader but the timeline doesn’t work out. As you know there’s no such thing as a mid-week break from Paris Island.”

“And yet they targeted him specifically over a period of months. There is more going on here and I doubt she’s going to tell us.”

Tony manages to mostly reign in his amused smile, “Give Ziva a shot. She scares the hell out of me sometimes, mostly when she thinks she’s flirting with me but still.”

Gibbs graces Tony with a smile but no other response.

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“If it was not a murder why is Private Bering dead?”

Sidle seems near tears as she responds, “I don’t know. I left the room as planned, put my things into the truck and got the camera. When I got back to the room Pete was dead and Michelle said he didn’t know what had happened. He was so panicked. And Michelle’s such a gentle man, he could never hurt anyone.”
“You left Bering alone in the room?”
“In bed asleep, yes.”
“And you were gone how long?”
“Ten, perhaps fifteen minutes.”
“And Livingston was with him when you returned?”
“Just like we planned, except Pete was dead.”
“You targeted Bering specifically for this extortion scheme?”
“I met Pete a while ago. He was a nice enough guy but he was clearly a player. He picked me up from Becca’s once and Michelle said he’d be the perfect mark for the blackmail plan. I didn’t want to do that to Pete, I mean it wasn’t like he was ever going to be my boyfriend but he didn’t deserve to have his life ruined. No one does, I don’t think Michelle understands that. No one should go through what Becca went through.”
“Then why set Bering up?”
“Michelle can be… persuasive.”

“Boss, we may have a location on Livingston,” McGee calls out almost the instant Tony and Gibbs emerge from interrogation.

“May have?” The warning is clear.

“May have,” McGee confirms grimly. “Rebecca Sidle is on the line with someone using a disposable cell phone here in D.C.. There’s no way to know for sure that it’s Livingston but whoever it is we have their exact location.”

“What are you waiting for McGee? Let’s go,” Gibbs weighs his options for a moment before nodding for Tony to join them.

Ten minutes later Tony’s phone rings and he flips it open without checking the caller ID expecting Abby, she always seems to know when calling Gibbs would be tantamount to homicide. “Talk to me.”

“Tony?” Ziva asks confused.

“Sorry Ziva, thought you were Abbs. What’s up?”

“Has something happened?”

Realizing that none of them called Ziva he quickly fills her in. “We’ve got it on this end. Make sure Abby gets Sidle’s car to start processing. We’ll call if we find him.”

“Sidle said one other thing to me as I was taking her back to the holding cell. Livingston is apparently a planner. He had follow up plans for all sorts of contingencies.”

“Back up. Back up plans. Thanks for the heads up Ziva.” He shifts in his seat to face Gibbs, “Livingston’s a planner. He might have a plan for us cornering him.” He glances at McGee before
continuing, “Maybe you should let me take point on this one Boss. Your shoulder-”

“Isn’t my gun hand DiNozzo,” Gibbs growls shooting him a warning look.

“You get shot again you better call Abby yourself.”

Gibbs doesn’t think before responding, “That’s an empty threat Tony. She’d kill you for not calling her.”

“She loves me. She’d threaten to kill me, not actually do it.”

“Tony, as much as she loves you I’m her father, there is no way she is going to kill me.”

“It’s your call Boss.”

McGee wants to laugh but can’t imagine he’d like either man’s reaction if he did.

They pull up to a sleepy little diner and Tony grabs Gibbs’ arm, “Hold on Boss. We’ve got the advantage here, we’ve got his picture and he no clue we’re even after him.”

“So?” The warning is unmistakable.

“So if we walk in there flashing badges and asking questions and he’s here he’ll panic. Why don’t we go in, sit down, order some coffee, give ourselves a moment. Then if he’s actually in there we can take him down without it becoming a huge scene.”

Gibbs’ expression doesn’t change, “You buying the coffee?”

“I suppose it is my turn.”

Gibbs takes the booth closest to the front door and offers the plump blonde waitress one of his rare smiles when she approaches, “And what can I get you boys?”

“Coffee, black.”

“Hot chocolate.”

“Black coffee,” McGee requests politely.

“Anything to eat boys, or do you need a minute?”

Tony pre-empts any response from Gibbs, “We need a minute.”

McGee watches in fascination as Gibbs and Tony lock eyes and begin to sign. Finally Gibbs makes eye contact with McGee and tilts his head in the direction of the counter.

Sure enough, Livingston is sitting at the counter, looking back and forth between the door and a cell phone.

Another moment passes and McGee’s phone gives a single ring, he’s received a text message. “We’re going to sit on him for now. Unless he makes for the door ignore him and drink your coffee. No food.”

After a short while Tony stands up and pops his back, “Be back in a jiffy Boss and then I’ll take the next shift driving.”
“Take your time, we’ve got a long way to go yet.”

Tony nods and sort of strolls away. When he’s directly behind Livingston he pulls his cuffs and has him restrained before it even registers he’s there. “Michelle Livingston? You are under arrest for the murder of a US Marine as well as larceny and a few misdemeanors that we’ll have someone read to you at head quarters. You have the right to remain silent, you have the right to an attorney, if you can’t afford one we’ll pass that along to legal and see what they come up with. Now move your ass.”

“Not exactly regulation there DiNozzo.”

“It’s not my fault he’s a prolific scumbag Boss.”

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Tony’s mental countdown reaches zero almost exactly as Gibbs slaps two photos down on the table side by side, one of Bering in the morgue the other of Rebecca Sidle in the hospital. “Does she know you did this for her?”

“I have no idea what you are referring to.”

“You shot Pete Bering in his sleep in retribution for the attack on Rebecca. There’s really only one problem with it Michelle. Pete Bering had never met your fiancé before the day she told you he’d attacked her.”

“That’s not true. He beat Rebecca within an inch of her life.”

“Rebecca was mistaken. There is no way Pete Bering was in Detroit that day. He was in a room with twenty other young men learning to break down and rebuild their weapons at Paris Island.”

“No, he was in a motel room in Detroit trying to take my Rebecca away.”

“Why would he want to do that, you’d clearly never met before.”

“I angered some very dangerous people. The type of people who send strangers to kill you.”

“Then why kill the messenger?”

“Access. It’s as simple as that, I had access to him.”

“He was innocent.”

“So was Becca.”

“You shot him.”

“I did.”

Gibbs can’t seem to find a response to that, instead he gets up and walks out. Tony joins him in the hallway, “You okay Boss?”

“No DiNozzo I am not okay. He shot a young man, an innocent young man, in the back. While the kid was sleeping. For no reason at all, and he doesn’t even care.”

“And that’s why we’re going to lock him up and throw away the key.”

“And if I’d prefer to shut the cameras off and beat him to death?”
“I’ll cuff you to a chair. Abbs and I won’t let you get yourself thrown in jail.”

“Fair enough, but I don’t want to see him again. Get him back to holding, I’ll be down with Abby for a while.”

The wrap up is pretty straightforward and by the time quitting time approaches everyone’s final case reports are on the way to the director.

“Special Agent Gibbs? My office,” The Director instructs from the bottom of the stairs.

Wary at her use of his title over his name Gibbs shoots Tony a look before doing as instructed. He comes to attention automatically when he enters the office, “Ma’am?”

“It has been brought to my attention that your team has never completed a sexual harassment seminar.”

“We maintain a heavy caseload Ma’am.”

“Not tomorrow you won’t. At 1000 your team, Abby, Ducky and Jimmy Palmer will be in training room B. Anyone who does not attend the whole seminar will be on unpaid leave for two weeks before being given the chance to complete the course. Anyone who fails to complete it the second time will be summarily dismissed. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Please inform Ms. Scuito. I will speak to Ducky and Mr. Palmer personally.”

“I’ll pass it along.”

“This isn’t a punishment Jethro.”

When she doesn’t elaborate he turns to leave, “Goodnight Director.”

He descends into the bullpen, “Head home. We have a training session at 1000 tomorrow, everyone get some rest.”

Tony takes one look at the others and decides not to ask, at least not now anyway. He has the distinct impression there’s a reason the answer’s been withheld.

When neither McGee nor Ziva is brave enough to question the silence Gibbs continues down to the lab. Abby is preparing to leave for the night when Gibbs arrives. “Do we have another case?” She almost pouts.

“No baby girl, no case until midday tomorrow at the least. We’ve all been ordered to attend a sexual harassment seminar tomorrow, I was instructed to inform you personally.”

Abby chuckles, “What did you do to her today? Did you kiss Charming in front of her?”

“I hadn’t even seen her all day baby girl, and Charming and I are generally careful.”

“Generally?” Abby pounces on this phrase intently.

“I slipped in front of Palmer the other day, no mention of my Prince, but I did make it clear I’ve been playing the pronoun game with Jenny.”

“I didn’t even know you knew what the phrase means.”
He just shoots her one of his half smiles and kisses her cheek, “Goodnight sweetheart.”

“Night Pop.”

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Tony heads upstairs without so much as a thought to the rest of the house. Five minutes later when he pads back down the stairs barefoot he almost jumps out of his skin at a knock on the door. He debates not answering it at all but decides instead to check and see who it is before opening it. Recognizing that it’s one of the neighborhood children though he doesn’t remember a name he opens the door, “Hello again. Jethro’s not home at the moment.”

“That’s alright Mr. DiNozzo,” The mother assures him evenly, “Go ahead Ricky.”

“That’s alright Mr. DiNozzo, my name is Ricky Folsom. My class is having a holiday fundraiser to support our music program. Would you like to support us by buying something?”

Tony smiles at the clearly rehearsed speech and leans against the doorframe, “I’ll take a look.”

Ten minutes later, and thirty-three dollars poorer, Tony waves goodbye to Gibbs’ neighbors. Before he can close the door behind them he finds himself face to face with number 2 on his own personal worst case scenario hit parade, Fornell.

He’s grateful that he’s at least not the only one looking uncertain on how to deal with the situation, “Apartment troubles again DiNote-Zoe?”

Before Tony can decide whether or not to lie Gibbs pulls up, distracting both of them. As Gibbs climbs the porch steps Fornell grins, “Taking in strays again Jethro?”

“Some reason you dropped by Tobias?”

“Just thought you might like to know that we finally reached an agreement with Metro regarding Falstaff. He’s going to testify against Copley and then do five to seven and a half for the assault.”

“For shooting into the front window of a public building, how fitting,” Tony mutters darkly.

“You prefer we let the baby killer go free DiNote-zoe?”

“No I’d prefer it if it weren’t an either or situation.”

Feeling oddly protective of Tony’s right to be angry over this Gibbs steps in, “Is that all you wanted Tobias?”

“I thought I might catch you with your new…diversion. I’m terribly curious.”

Gibbs shoots Fornell a quelling look, silently implying Tony doesn’t know his new love is a man, “I already told you Tobias there’s no way you’re stealing this one so you can just get over it.”

“I’m curious to see what lured you away from redheads.”

Tony puts an exaggeratedly curious look on his face, “This one’s a blond, Boss? You never mentioned that.”

“Brunette DiNozzo and you know better than to fish.”
“I’ll just go my mind my own business then Boss.”

Gibbs shoots him a slightly concerned look but Tony’s already headed into the kitchen.

When Tony is presumably out of earshot Fornell speaks again, “I need that file back Jethro. There was a reason I couldn’t officially hand it over.”

“I’ll get it. What’s up with this one Tobias? The father play golf with a senator or something?”

“Something like that.” He accepts the file and then nods toward the door, “I need to get this back to the office but I’m still curious Jethro.”

“So?”

Fornell chuckles, “Fair enough. ‘Night Jethro.”

“Goodnight Tobias.”

Gibbs stops in the doorway to the kitchen, unsure if he’ll be welcome in Tony’s personal space just now.

“You can stop trying to come up with something apologetic to say. I’m not mad or hurt. Hell I’m glad you let him think I was clueless.”

“Then why do you sound like your puppy died?” Given at least some indication of acceptance, if not outright welcome, he crosses the kitchen to lean beside the stove next to Tony.

“He’s a trained investigator Jethro. Sure he’s FBI and by definition a little thick, but still. At some point in the near future he’s going to start putting together details.”

“Like what?”

“When he arrived I was buying something from one of the neighborhood kids’ school fundraiser. Depending on how long he was there he might know they recognized me as being someone who belonged here. When I excused myself I headed for the kitchen not the guest room. That I paused too long when he asked if I was having apartment trouble. That you gave me one of those sun-from-behind-a-cloud smiles when you arrived.”

“He may figure it out,” Gibbs concedes easily.

“And if he goes to Sheppard?”

“I’ll remind him just how important the bridge he’s burned is and we’ll deal with the fallout. I told you before Tony, caution, not paranoia.”

Tony nods, accepting if not outright agreeing. “Do you think he would?”

“I don’t know Tony. He is my friend and he didn’t really see anything definitive. But he’s a by the book sort of man. I think he’d come to us before her, and I think I could make him understand that there’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing, that we both know what our priorities in the field should be.”

Tony relaxes a little at that. “And if he gets us fired we could finish the boat and start that world tour you were talking about.”

Gibbs laughs, “Exactly.”
Almost in apology for all of them being stuck in a sexual harassment seminar Gibbs brings coffee for everyone with him after his nine thirty caffeine run and prods them all downstairs. When the team arrives Abby is sitting in the back of the small classroom motioning Gibbs to sit beside her. He kisses her cheek and hears the instructor, Ms. Taylor make a small noise of distress, “Is there a problem Ma’am?”

“That is inappropriate workplace behavior.”

“She’s my daughter Ma’am.”

“Still.”

Gibbs just shakes his head and takes the seat Abby’s indicated, happy to indulge her. Tony practically lays in the chair in front of him, his head on Gibbs’ “desk.”

Ziva and McGee sit to either side and Tony zones out through the video presentation.

“In the workplace sexual harassment can take many forms. A co-worker tells a sexual joke or looks you up and down.”

Tony turns his head slightly and does a deliberate once over with his eyes before muttering, seemingly to McGee, “If you’re lucky.”

“A hand ‘accidentally’ brushes your body.”

Gibbs lets his fingers run over the back of Tony’s head and Ziva smirks, “If you’re really lucky.”

“There are three categories of physical contact. Green light is normal behavior, a handshake, a brief tap on the shoulder. Yellow light is borderline behavior, such as hugging.”

Abby almost shoots to her feet, “What’s wrong with hugging? I hug people all the time!”

“While it may seem innocent to you, your coworkers might find it offensive.”

“You guys get offended when I hug you?” Abby asks searching the expressions of her NCIS family.

“Of course not Abbs,” Tony asserts immediately.

The others add their ‘no’s willingly. Gibbs is the last to speak, “You can hug me anytime sweetheart.”

“I’m hugging you all in my mind right now.”

Ms. Taylor give a frustrated sigh, “Be that as it may, Miss, D.O.D. policy is very clear on this point. You must have permission before touching a co-worker.”

“You’ve always got my permission Abby,” Tony assures her.

“And mine,” McGee is quick to add.

“Me too,” Jimmy Palmer grins at her.

“I will always welcome one of your hugs my dear,” Ducky assures her.
“You have my permission as well,” Ziva is more hesitant than the others but obviously sincere.

Ms. Taylor just shakes her head and goes on, “Red light is deliberate, unwelcome behavior.”

Gibbs slips his fingers into the back of Tony’s shirt collar touching the mark he’s left at the top of his lover’s spine. Then he leans in to whisper, “Better sit up Tony, remember what happens if you ‘fail’ this.” He’d informed Tony of the director’s dire threats over breakfast but hadn’t told the others.

Tony sits up at if burned. McGee shoots him a curious look.

“Did you have a question sir?”

Tony takes a moment to consider it, “Is it inappropriate when a higher ranking member of the agency requests you escort them to a work related social function?” Ducky snickers, knowing exactly what it is Tony is referring to.

“That would depend on the nature of the request. If it is a request for you to attend as a second representative of the agency it is acceptable. If it is a request for you to act as her date that is not acceptable.”

“And if you’re not sure which it is?”

“Err on the side of caution. Inform the offending party that you are unclear about their request, ask for specifics.”

After that the team settles down to quietly endure the rest of the session. When it’s over, after they’ve all left, Ms. Taylor makes her way to the Director’s office.

“How did it go?” The Director asks almost before Ms. Taylor can enter the room.

“They are… an odd bunch.”

“I was aware.”

“I get the feeling they’re all guilty of what you or I might see as harassment, but none of them see it as such. They appear to regard their group as more of a family than a team. The team leader informed me the girl with the pigtails is his daughter.”

“She is. Was there any other specific behavior you took as noteworthy?”

“Just that young lady’s determination to hug people.”

“I trust they all attended the entire session and passed the closing quiz?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Thank you Ms. Taylor. I appreciate you closing this session to other teams. It likely would have proven even more disruptive if Gibbs had needed to quell a series of inane questions.”

“I was just doing my job Ma’am.”
Photographs and Inheritance

Tony shuts his refrigerator with an annoyed sigh, “Get dressed Jethro, we’re going to breakfast before work.”

“Are we?”

“I don’t even have un-curdled milk and I’m hungry. Which I blame you for.”

“That you’re hungry or that your cupboards are bare?”

“Both.”

Gibbs laughs, “Then I suppose, in penance for such sins, I should take you out to breakfast.”

They end up at a small diner not far from Tony’s place. The waitress eyes Tony like a steak dinner, “Long time no see Gorgeous.”

“Morning Laura.”

“What can I get for you today?”

“The strawberry pancakes with sausage and hash browns and a cup of hot chocolate.” Tony shoot Gibbs a wry smile, “Sorry to say Jethro their coffee isn’t exactly up to snuff.”

Gibbs gives an acknowledging nod, “Not like it’ll be my only cup. Two eggs over easy, bacon and toast. And a cup of coffee.”

Laura eyes Gibbs uncertainly before giving them both a smile, “Coming right up.”

“You’re dying to growl ‘hands off’ at her right now, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say dying. I’m tempted.”

Tony interlaces their fingers on the table top, “You have nothing to worry about.”

It makes Gibbs grin that Tony is finally throwing caution to the wind, “I know I don’t. But I still don’t like the thought of you being looked at like a piece of meat.”

“You’ve obviously never seen the looks you get.”

“I don’t get anything near the looks shot at you Tony.”

“Can we change the subject now Jethro?”

“What subject would you like to discuss?”

“Abbs and I are going out to lunch tomorrow.”

Gibbs raises a skeptical eyebrow, “Are you now?”

“We are. You’re invited if you’d like to join us. We’re going to my bank so she can pick out some jewelry for the Marine Birthday Ball first.”

“Will you be joining us?”
“No. I’d prefer not to spend the evening making small talk with Corp leaders. No offense Jethro but they’re stuffed shirts no matter how you cut it. I’ll play ball with Brandon or make the rounds in my building. You know, make sure the nice grandmotherly ladies are doing okay.”

“So I won’t be seeing you afterwards?”

“Did I say that?” A genuine version of Tony’s usual camouflage grin graces his face, “You know you could just ask me to come over.”

“It’s not as if you don’t know I want you there.”

“Sometimes a boy likes to hear it.”

With a brief, accommodating dip of his head Gibbs asks, “Would you please come over to my place next Friday night? I’ll have Abby home and be back at the house by 2300.”

“I’ll be waiting in bed with a snack from about 2230.”

The waitress returns with their drinks just in time to hear that. She doesn’t say a word, just sets both cups down and retreats toward the kitchen.

Tony ignores her and Gibbs turns their hands over, “Do you want me to come with you tomorrow? I know you and Abby were close before you and I…”

“You’re welcome to join us Jethro. The only reason I hesitate at all is that I doubt you’ll enjoy the bank visit portion of our plans.”

“I can survive a few rounds of dress up. And Abbs might enjoy it.”

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When Gibbs enters the bullpen McGee shoots out of his chair as if he were spring loaded. “Boss, Becky from records called three times and the director keeps coming to the railing, I think something’s up.”

“Get caught up on your paperwork,” Gibbs instructs absently as he heads up the stairs wondering if this is it, the day it all goes to hell.

Cynthia doesn’t even try to stop him, just announces him to the director.

“My team informs me you’ve been looking for me Ma’am.”

“Has Ms. Wells been in contact with you?”

“No.”

“It seems all your team’s quarterly performance reviews have been improperly filed since Director Morrow left the agency.”

“That would be because Tom always completed those reviews.”

“Regardless of how Tom Morrow dealt with the situation it is your job to complete those reviews in a timely fashion.”

“If they weren’t doing their jobs I’d have fired them already.”
“Then say as much in their reviews, just file them.”

“What is it Jen, one of the paper pushers at DoD have pictures you don’t want shown around or something?”

“Not that it’s any concern of yours Agent Gibbs but I was recently informed that this quarter’s audit will determine whether or not I remain on as Director.”

“Is that why you’ve been spying on my team?”

“Statistically speaking it is the safest way of preventing trouble around here. Your team, collectively, has required more medical attention since I took over as director than the rest of the teams required in the last four years.”

“Is that a fact? I would have guessed three.”

“Just file whatever paperwork records and personnel need you to Jethro. Believe it or not I have bigger problems than you.”

“I do your paper work and my team comes out of the fishbowl?”

“Whatever it takes.”

It takes the better part of the day, with the help of Tony and McGee to file the various forms, reports, and reviews. Out of deference to the fact that she isn’t officially NCIS he leaves Ziva the task of compiling the case summary for Bering’s murder. When five o’clock rolls around his in box is finally, blessedly empty. “We’re on the call list this weekend but we’re in the third position so try to relax and get some rest in, but know we may be called back.”

“Got a date Boss?” Tony teases.

“Is that somehow your business DiNozzo?”

“Just, being friendly Boss.”

“What about you DiNozzo? Spending the weekend with your new special someone?”

“Hope to.”

Gibbs gives in, “One way or the other I am.”

“Good for you Boss. We should all get out and have some fun.”

Ziva smirks at Tony, “Do not do anything I would not do.”

Tony laughs happily, “Can’t promise that. I have no idea what you wouldn’t do. Well, except use contractions anyway. And for the record that wasn’t an invitation to tell me. You kids have fun. I myself have seen enough paperwork for a lifetime.”

“You seemed to enjoy it while you were doing it,” McGee shoots back.

“I was writing your performance reviews Probie, of course I was having a laugh.”

“Like I’d buy that one Tony.”

Tony actually had written the reviews, all accept his own, but he just grabs his backpack and leaves.
Gibbs has no idea what McGee and Ziva are doing but he can sense both of them tensing when his cell rings. He checks the caller ID and smiles, “Gibbs.”

“Hiya sweet cheeks. I’m stopping by my place for a couple of DVDs and some things I need to put in my safe deposit box. Want me to just get some take out?”

“Isn’t it my turn to cook?”

“Is it?”

“I think so Babe. Don’t worry about it. I’ll plan for a sit down around seven, take care of your errands.”

“We gonna do something Ziva wouldn’t do for desert?”

“Not how I’d refer to it but don’t we usually?”

“Love you too.”

“You know I do. See you at the house.” Gibbs resists the urge to roll his eyes at Tony’s antics.

There’s a hesitant knocking on Abby’s Lab door just as she’s shutting off her music for the night, “Jimmy?”

“Hi Abby. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure thing Jimmy. Come on in,” She pats the seat of one of her rolling chairs. “What can I do for you tonight?”

“Have you ever… been uncomfortable working with someone?”

She eyes Jimmy suspiciously but answers, “Sometimes. Mostly when Bossman agrees to a ‘joint operation’ and I end up with some inexperienced stranger’s hands all over my babies.”

“I meant uncomfortable personally.”

“Is this about what you overheard Pop saying to Ducky?”

Jimmy practically jumps at her vehemence. “What I heard…” He trails off. “Oh! No not at all. What someone chooses to do at home is their own business.”

“Okay,” Abby accepts this explanation readily. “Then what do you mean by personally uncomfortable?”

“Say someone who’s seen you naked is walking around the building… If we’re not talking about sexual harassment how do you deal with that?”

“You broke up with Lee?”

Jimmy sighs, “Does everyone but Dr. Mallard know?”

“I think even Ducky knows.”

Jimmy turns a little green at that, “Everyone?”
“I didn’t say anyone cared Jimmy. Just that everyone knows.” She pats his arm reassuringly, “As for how to deal with her, just treat her like a stranger. If you don’t behave like you’re uncomfortable eventually you won’t be.”

“That’s your advice, ignore it until it goes away?”

“Unless you want to quit or transfer.”

“I see what you mean. Thanks Abby. And for the record, even though he scares me I like- well I respect your father.”

“And he likes you too. Otherwise he would have used threats of violence to keep you quiet. If you stop acting like a frightened doormouse he’ll stop scowling at you for laughs.”

Jimmy’s acknowledging nod smacks of disbelief but Abby doesn’t bother calling him on it.

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By the time Tony hits the last step he’s already snapped six pictures and Gibbs has gone perfectly still. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what Tony?”

“Don’t go all tense on me. Luke asked to see your picture and after looking through what I have I need new ones. I figured I should try to get some of you at rest. You know: working on the boat, doing the dishes with Abby, pretending not to watch TV.”

“All because your friend wants to see pictures?”

“Not just for Luke, no. All the pictures I have of you are from work. They’re pictures of Gibbs, not Jethro.”

Gibbs reaches out a hand and, obeying the silent request, Tony comes to his side. “How long will I have to endure being cataloged like evidence?”

“A few minutes now, maybe an hour tomorrow? A little longer if Abbs doesn’t cooperate.”

“Is there any benefit for being your artistic subject, Mr. DiNozzo?”

“What’d you have in mind, Mr. Gibbs?”

“I could use a hand making sure the house is… fit for guests.”

“Any room in particular?”

“Now that you mention it I do believe the guest room especially needs a good… once over. After all someone recently pointed out I wouldn’t know a decent mattress if it jumped up and bit me on the ass.”

(Of course not. A decent mattress doesn’t bite you on the ass.)

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Abby deliberately vamps it up as soon as she sees the camera, “No one told me there was going to be a photo shoot.”
“Because there isn’t. I don’t do posed photographs. I just want some pictures of my favorite people.”

“Aww Tony, that is so sweet of you.”

“You know you’re one of my favorite people Princess.”

Abby hugs him. “What’s in the folder?”

“Dad’s lawyer sent me some information on my new trust fund. It seems he thinks that it makes it less likely that I’d interfere with baby brother’s inheritance if I receive my own, less hefty settlement.”

“They found out the baby’s a boy?”

“I don’t know Abbs. Haven’t spoken to them. I just have a feeling I’m getting a little brother. Maybe he’ll be the son Dad wanted.”

“Your father’s an idiot Tony.”

“Don’t I know it.” Tony wraps an arm around Abby’s waist, “But it’s your inheritance I want to focus on today Princess.” Abby looks at him askance. “You know we’re family sweetheart. And who else in our family would be interested in my grandmother’s jewelry? In any case you really are the Princess, you’re the only female among us. I just ask that you keep up the tradition of passing it down, your daughter, your niece as long as they’ll wear it once in a while. Same promise I made to Nana Pazzi.”

Picking up on the importance of the request she offers a solemn “I promise. Tell me about her sometime?”

“I’d like that.” Tony looks over at Gibbs, “Let’s get a move on before the sap drives Jethro down to the basement.”

Gibbs softly cuffs the back of Tony’s head, “I like it when you talk about family too, Tony.”

“He admitted it!” Abby crows happily breaking the mood.

“No one would believe you.”

“Who cares? I know you said it.” Both Gibbs and Tony laugh at that.

Almost as if purposely trying to lighten the mood Tony spends most of the trip to the bank snapping pictures. Abby practically sparkles under the influence of all the attention. The highlight of the trip for Tony is a picture of Gibbs kissing Abby’s cheek over her shoulder. A close second is Abby’s face when she discovers the pearl and ivory cameo that has been passed down through four generations of his mother’s family.

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When they get back to the house Abby quietly takes possession of the camera, snapping away as if determined to use every bit of memory on his card. Tony really doesn’t mind, especially when he finds that she’s taken the perfect picture for his purposes. Gibbs is sitting in the corner of the den sofa, Tony curled into his side. Neither of them is paying the camera any attention, they look comfortable and peaceful together. It’s exactly what he wants to show Luke.

When he’s done ordering prints of some of the pictures he finds Gibbs in the basement with a glass
of bourbon beside his tools.

“Did something upset you that I missed?”

“No, why would you think so?”

“You’re drinking,” Tony states simply as he wraps an arm around Gibbs’ waist.

“No offense to my little girl, you know I adore her but prolonged exposure, especially when she’s ‘on’, requires a little down time.”

Tony chuckles at that, “I can see that. And she was in fine form today.”

“I think you made her month with that little speech about her being your family and needing to pass on a family tradition.”

“I meant every word. I loved my grandmother, I mean to keep my promise to her, and you know I think she would have liked Abby. Might have wanted to know why I’m casting myself as her stepfather rather than her husband but nobody’s perfect.”

“So she wouldn’t have liked me?”

“Nana was a spit fire, she’d probably try to steal you away.”

Gibbs laughs, “I’d end up disappointing her then, wouldn’t I?”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

“Did you want children? I know I made a pretty presumptuous statement before…”

“Want would probably be the wrong word. When I was young it was clear what was expected of me. I was supposed to learn to run my father’s business, get married, take over and have a house full of children. Both sets of grandparents made it painfully obvious that the fact that Mother couldn’t have any more children was a tragedy. I never felt like I belonged in that life, as you know, but I guess part of me just kept on assuming I’d end up with kids. I’ve never felt like I was missing anything, never watched kids playing in a park and wanted that.”

“Have you actually thought about it since we’ve been together?”

“A little. After we talked to my father…I know enough about the kind of man he is to know there’s a distinct possibility that one day he’ll decide raising a family again is too much trouble. But Jessica will do just fine, and frankly I don’t want that kind of disruption in my life.”

“Just so long as it’s really what you want.”

Tony doesn’t bother to respond to that. Instead he steals a sip of bourbon and runs a hand over the hull of the boat, “She’s almost done, isn’t she?”

“I could stretch out working on her for years yet if I wanted to, but yes Kelly should be seaworthy by Presidents day.”

“You named her Kelly?”

“Naming them after the wives just wasn’t working out.”

“Want a hand with her?”
“You’re going to help me apply varnish to the boat in one of your good suits?”

“No, but I could go change.”

“It’s up to you Babe. I’ll be down here about an hour and a half, you can join me or not.”

“You just bowl me over with your unrelenting enthusiasm for my presence.”

“I just know that wood working isn’t your favorite pass time.”

“Actually I like you sharing it with me. I just know that it’s also how you unwind.”

“If I need you to leave me alone Tony I will let you know.”

“Now that is easy to believe.”
Tony calls for his messages at the apartment on the way into work when he realizes he hasn’t spent more than five minutes at “home” since the previous Monday. The first two messages are from his neighbors, Mrs. Howard and Miss Lobel, wondering why he hasn’t been around. The next two are sales calls. The last two are both mildly distressing. One is from Luke, a terse “Tony, I need to talk to you. Call me.” And the second is from his father, “I got an interesting call from Father Vincenzo today Anthony. He informs me you purchased four tickets to the ball. I’d like a word with you.”

Without giving it even a second thought he speed dials Luke.

“Hey man, that was quick.”

“What’s up Luke, you sound pretty upset.”

“I’m just a little shaken. Mark was in a car accident last night.”

“Damn, is he okay?”

“He will be. He broke his leg, got a few cuts and bruises. He’ll be fine by the time the wedding rolls around but he’s vetoed Stevie planning the bachelor party. Says if he wanted something humping his cast he’d get a dog.”

Tony laughs at that, “I can see how that’d be the case. So what’s the new plan?”

“I was thinking one stripper, with proper instructions. A few of the college highlight films, and some beer pong. But you’re the party animal so I’m consulting with you first.”

“Sounds good, but considering it’s Mark I’ll pick up some good cigars too.”

“See? I knew calling you was a good idea. What about you? Anything special you want for your last hurrah?”

At this point Tony is boarding the elevator at work. He chuckles, “We’re not getting married Luke. Not yet at least.”

“I know you Tony. You used term partner and said you were very serious. Sure the two of you getting married is a pain in the ass you won’t get around to anytime soon but that doesn’t mean you aren’t in this for the long haul.”

“You think you know me so well.”

“You told me you had to get off the line because ‘Jethro should be home any minute.’ Sounds pretty domestic to me, sex machine.”

“Maybe. We’ve had the ‘it’s too early to talk about moving in together’ talk.”

“How long have you known this guy?”

“Five years.”

“Then how is it too early exactly?”

The elevator arrives at the bullpen, but Tony doesn’t think before he answers. “We’ve only been
really dating about three months.”

Luke laughs, “Oh, one of those. What kind of forbidden fruit was he?”

“A shark.”

“Sharks don’t do well in captivity you know.”

“Yeah but penguins don’t circle.”

“I take it from the fact that this just became a course on zoological metaphors that you’ve arrived at work.”

“I’ve told you time and again they’re going to take away your jock license if you keep using those big words, Luke.”

“You can fuck off too Tony. See you in a while.”

“I’ll call you when I get the plans squared away.”

McGee is smirking at him when Tony hangs up, “Dating three months, huh?”

Tony resists the urge to swear a blue streak. “That is what I said.”

“Some reason it’s been such a big secret?”

“Just like messing with you Probie,” Tony tosses off like it’s no big deal.

“If you say so.”

Before Tony’s forced to retort Gibbs returns from downstairs bearing a ruby red lipstick mark on his cheek. Noting the fact that McGee and Tony are both focusing on him Gibbs’ eyes immediately move to the railing above to check for the director. “We pull a case?”

“No Boss. Abbs just got you good.”

That makes Gibbs smile, “Most likely on purpose.”

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“McGee, dig up everything you can on Lance Corporal Humphrey Mitchell. Ziva, pull together anything you can find about large thefts of prescription drugs in the area. DiNozzo you’re with me.”

“What’ve we got Boss?” Tony asks as he grabs his bag.

“DEA and Metro busted a prescription drug ring last night and while Mitchell himself wasn’t snagged in the round up plenty of evidence that he should have been was.”

“And since they’ve already got the big fish they tossed the little one who got away to us. How gracious. Where are we headed?”

“Quantico. Either he doesn’t know anything’s happened and he reported for duty today or we’ll question his buddies about him.”

The door closes behind them and McGee, unwilling to aid the rumor mill by saying it aloud fires off a quick email to Ziva and Abby, “You missed it earlier. Tony was on the phone when he arrived and
he admitted he’s been dating ‘J’ for three months. Have either of you gotten him to admit why it was such a secret yet?”

“Because it’s none of your business?” Abby replies quickly.

Ziva’s message comes almost as quickly. “Clearly he is serious about this person. It is likely he was just protecting the relationship from the pit falls of public scrutiny.”

Realizing suddenly that they both know the truth he shoots back, “And neither of you think that J being a man has anything to do with it?”

“Even if that’s so it’s still none of your business.”

“That would be one reason to conceal the relationship, given American attitudes on the subject.”

McGee counts both responses as confirmation. “He introduced J to both of you then?”

“Nope.”

“He has not introduced anyone to me.”

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“Hey Abbs, you got something for us?”

“Nope. Just thought you might want to know McGee’s been snooping around about J. With particular emphasis on gender.”

“How’d he seem about that notion?”

“I couldn’t really tell. He was trying to be discreet, using email. Did you really tell him you’d been dating three months?”

“That wouldn’t be how I’d word it. I was talking to Luke earlier and he said I was sounding awfully domestic lately. I told him that was putting the horse before the cart.”

“Deny it all you want we all know you two are as good as married.”

“Wishful thinking on your part princess.”

“Bullshit Tony.”

“Love you too.”

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Though Tony and Gibbs return with a suspect in tow McGee knows Tony’s glare is for him.

When they disappear in the direction of holding McGee hisses at Ziva, “You told him?!”

“It was not me. But Abby is very protective of Tony.”

His head drops to his desk top with an audible thump. “I’m dead meat.”

“Right about that one Probie. Spreading rumors about me is dangerous ground.”

“I didn’t spread any rumors!” McGee is quick to defend. “I asked a couple of questions. Discreetly.”
“Conference room. Now.” Tony’s voice is tightly controlled but no less angry.

McGee follows as instructed, “I really didn’t say a word.”

“Go ahead, ask your questions. Just stop being a ten year old girl and ask me,” Tony demands as he flips the stop switch.

“Is the reason you’ve been so secretive about J that he’s a man?”

“Yes.”

“Am I the only one who didn’t know?”

Tony considers this, “You’re the last to figure it out. Well unless we’re counting Palmer. How did you figure it out?”

“Little things. You kept saying there wasn’t a woman in your life. The flowers were signed with an initial not a name. You never talk to him on the phone while you’re here. Even the joking about picking up male twins with Abby.”

“And here I thought I was being so discreet.”

“Why bother?”

“Because this is special to me. Important. And anyone who would make fun of me for kissing a man without realizing the horror of it was that I had kissed my friend’s killer is not a person I want to have a chat with concerning the love of my life. Your reaction to my kissing a man made it pretty clear what you’d think of my relationship with J.” Knowing full well he’s been unfair Tony still releases the elevator and stalks off anger apparent in every movement.

“Oh hell,” McGee mutters quietly. He heads down to speak to Abby, fairly certain he’s unwelcome in the bullpen at the moment. She looks up as he enters the lab and her glare just isn’t all that promising, “I know you’re not happy with me right now, and you’re right, but you’re the only one I can talk to.”

“It better be good.”

“Do you think I’m homophobic?”

“Maybe a little. You’re not going to shun someone or try to hurt them over it but it clearly makes you uncomfortable.”

“Give me an example,” McGee asks, genuinely confused.

“When I took you to that party at Marla’s and her roommate and his boyfriend started making out.”

“I was uncomfortable because the boyfriend was 6’3” and could have snapped me in half! Travis had been asking me to dance all night.”

“If that’s true I’ll give you that one.” Abby considers it a moment longer, “The uncomfortable and ceaseless chatter about Gerald slapping that paramedic’s ass.”

“It was unprofessional!” McGee protests.

“Pop didn’t seem to think so. He said it was good to know Gerald wasn’t letting working in the morgue turn him into a zombie like Ducky’s previous assistant had. Besides it’s not like it was some
stranger. They were dating.”

“I am not homophobic,” McGee insists quietly.

“Then why even ask me?”

“Tony was pretty mad. He said some things about my past behavior…”

“Were they true?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should be worried about them not what Tony meant by it.”

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Tony’s glad to find Ducky hard at work with paper and pen rather than body and scalpel, “What’s the good word Duck?”

“Anthony, what a pleasant surprise. I was just working on the psychological autopsy of Special Agent Rennie’s homicide victim.”

“Mind if I just sit down here for a minute, Ducky?”

“McGee pushed and I pushed back. A hell of a lot harder than I needed to.”

“What did Timothy do to provoke such a reaction?”

“He was asking the girls some pointed questions about my new love.” Tony sighs and runs a hand through his hair, “He acted as if it were a foregone conclusion that he had every right to the intimate details of my life and I just… snapped.”

“Is there some reason you don’t want him to know about your… partner? It didn’t appear to bother you when anyone else made the discovery.”

“Abby’s… Well you know who she is to everyone involved. And Ziva may not like me exactly but she’d never deliberately hurt me either. You only want what’s best for your friend. But McGee… He’s a wild card. One of the few people I get no read on about this. Add to that I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop, for some one other than my father or Jenny Sheppard to react badly and you’ve basically just created an emotional time bomb.”

“First of all Anthony you need to stop borrowing trouble. You are in love and others may take from that what they will but they can only hurt you if you let them.”

“No disrespect Ducky but that just isn’t so. Having to leave NCIS would hurt me.”

“I very highly doubt that it would come to that dear boy.”

“I have a lot of faith in J Ducky but that’s one train wreck even he couldn’t stop.”

“I wasn’t urging you to have faith in… Jay, Anthony. I was suggesting that Timothy is rather unlikely to do something as harsh as informing the director about your activities. If nothing else you are aware of some rather glaring breeches of protocol on his part.”
“Mutual blackmail. How encouraging.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that Tony.”

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“Tony!” McGee calls from the door to the stairwell.

Tony stops, still not ready to show weakness.

“About earlier.” He pauses, clearly hoping for help. “I was out of line, pushing you like that.”

Tony agrees blandly.

“I know it’s no excuse but the way you’re always talking about your personal life… The idea that you had someone you wouldn’t tell us about was incongruous. I bothered me. So I began to wonder why and I knew Abby knew the truth.”

Tony finally takes pity, “I’m not mad you wanted to know about my love life probie. Hell I don’t care that you went through my desk. I’m pissed off you went to Abby and Ziva rather than asking me. The other things I said… I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“But you were right. I’ve never given you any reason to trust that I wouldn’t react badly to the fact that you’re gay.” Seeing that he’s gained at least a little ground McGee presses on, “For what it’s worth, I am glad you’ve found someone who makes you happy. I still shutter to think about what sort of influence you are on his daughter but that’s between the three of you.”

Tony shakes his head with exasperated good humor, “I know you find it hard to believe but my Princess is a sweet, smart, amazing girl who has never suffered the slightest ill effect from my presence. And she’s very much in favor of my relationship with her father.”

“So you’re her diversionary tactic then?”

Tony laughs honestly at that, “That could be part of it. Though I doubt she needs me for that. He’s wrapped around her little finger. But then I suppose, I am too.”

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Gibbs waits until Tony’s in the middle of cooking dinner that night to bring up the earlier disappearances, “Is Sheppard going to be raking us over the coals on McGee’s behalf?”

“No. He’s seen the error of his ways.”

“That sounds vaguely ominous.”

“I laid into him a little about assumptions and the damages they can cause.”

“How much does he know?”

“That ‘Jay’ and I have known each other a long time but have only been dating three months and that I adore your daughter.”

“How’d he put it together?”

“ Mostly that you had the flowers signed ‘J.’”
"Any other variation of my name would have been more telling."

"At least now everyone knows. Well except the director and Cynthia, gossip hounds extraordinaire."

"Were they part of the plan?"

"Not until they started poking around."

"And which angle are you going to toss them, long term relationship with a child in the mix or secretly gay?"

"I was actually thinking I’d throw bread crumbs of the serious relationship variety and let them draw whatever conclusions they like from it."

The elevator stops at the lobby to admit the director and Gibbs tenses slightly at her once over.

"Good morning Jethro."

"Morning."

"I’ve been meaning to ask you…” She hesitates obviously, "Will you be attending the Corp Birthday Ball this year?"

"Abby asked me to take her, yes."

"Oh. I thought perhaps you might bring your… companion and let DiNozzo escort Abby."

"Too stuffy and political. Seems marine brass just aren’t up to snuff for a night’s entertainment. Besides, as I understand it Tony already has plans so who would escort Abby?"

"Are you keeping her separate from your work for a reason Jethro?"

"A very good friend advised me to never introduce my mistress to my wife."

"I thought you weren’t to the point of marrying with this one yet."

"As Stephanie pointed out on her way out the door the job is my wife. Maybe if I embrace that any relationship I have is an affair it’ll be easier to maintain."

"And your new girlfriend?"

"Has much the same relationship with work."

"If you say so Jethro."

Just as Tony’s about to throw a paper ball at Ziva over the concerned looks she keeps shooting at both himself and Gibbs they get a call, "We’ve got a PFC assaulted in his apartment in Somerset. DiNozzo gas up the truck. Ziva head on over to Bethesda and get a statement."

It goes unsaid that Gibbs himself is headed to refill his travel mug and McGee simply chooses to follow Tony to the truck.

When he’s reasonably sure they’re alone he grins, “So tell me about Jay. No wait, let me guess. In
college he was on the beach volleyball team. He was all set to go pro when he was approached about a contract modeling underwear. He realized that would mean more time to work on his tan and accepted happily.”

Tony snorts, “While J definitely has the abs and ass to be an underwear model I would wager good money he’s never played beach volleyball.”

“Okay so he’s not a jock. He works for the state’s attorney’s office helping to draft legislation that protects puppies and children.”

“Next you’re going to accuse me of dating some twenty-four year old male bimbo frat boy,” He snaps without real heat. “J is smart, strong and good looking, but not to the shallow extremes you’re implying. All you really need to know is that being with him makes me happy. Makes me feel like maybe I’m a better person than I was raised to be. And that he’s his daughter’s hero.”

“What father isn’t?”

Tony shoots him a glare Gibbs would have been proud of, “After seeing the things you’ve seen you can still ask that?”

“Point taken. If you won’t tell me about Jay at least tell me what makes him your type. Should I be worried you’re checking me out in the locker room?”

At that Tony lets out a bark of startled laughter, “Not a chance in hell Probie. I don’t go for the baby faced and pudgy look. As a matter of fact the scenery was part of the incentive for joining NCIS. Not that either the bossman or I acknowledged that.”

“The boss knows you took the job to ‘inspect the troops’?”

“Not just to inspect the troops, no. But when has the bossman known less than the whole truth McGoo?” When McGee doesn’t respond Tony grins wickedly, “Which reminds me, did you even think before writing the adventures of ‘LJ Tibbs’?”

“For the love of- It’s not about you guys Tony.”

“You described him down to the coffee addiction, the boat in a basement and the head slaps.”

“Talks like me too. If you ladies are finished gossiping there’s a crime scene to investigate.”

“Any word on the severity of his injuries?”

“Just that it doesn’t seem to be life threatening.”

About halfway through the journey Tony’s cell rings, he answers it without thinking, “DiNozzo.”

“How did you get this number Dad?”

“It wasn’t all that difficult Anthony.”

“Whatever. What’s so urgent you need to speak to me right away this time Dad?”

“As I said in my phone message yesterday I spoke to Father Vincenzo.”
“Not a rare occurrence, or at least it’s not supposed to be. He is your priest after all.”

“He tells me you purchased four tickets to the charity ball.”

“That’s right, I did.”

“I know you intend to bring your…companion. I just need to know if your stepmother and I should brace ourselves for additional social fallout.”

“I left a list of the names and relationships of my guests with your assistant Dominic, and I do remind you, respectfully, not to stir up trouble unless you’re ready to face the consequences. It’s a charity event, I’ll bring whomever I wish.”

“You told the father that you’re bringing your stepdaughter.”

“Because I am.”

“And do you plan to introduce her to others that way?”

“If shock value becomes a necessity I will use it. If however the rules of polite society as I’ve been taught them hold so will my adherence to them.”

“Very well Anthony. Does your attendance mean you plan to get to know your new sibling?”

“I’ll try.”
As they approach the door to the PFC’s apartment the sounds of an ongoing scuffle are unmistakable. Without a single word Gibbs and Tony take up defensive positions on either side of the door before Gibbs reaches out to carefully try the door. It opens easily, having been left unlocked by the cops who are still on scene.

Inside they find the two patrol officers trying to hold off a large hissing and spitting cat with a broom.

“What is that?” Tony eyes the animal distrustfully.

“Whatever it is it attacked your sailor and took a chunk out of my partner’s arm,” The cop holding the broom complains.

“McGee, get animal control out here. Tell them we have a wildcat in an apartment.”

“On it boss.”

“What was it doing before you tried to get control of it?”

“It was asleep,” The injured man admits with visible chagrin. “Looked like a really big house cat with bloody paws…”

“And where did the broom enter into it?”

The other cop answers this one, “It was the first long handled item I found to keep it off of Thompson.”

Gibbs and Tony both just shake their heads at the stupidity.

Ziva enters the ER just in time to hear the doctor ask “Private, are these claw marks?” Choosing to observe and then assess the situation she doesn’t make her presence known.

“I shouldn’t have startled her. It’s my fault.”

“Startled who?” The doctor presses again.

“My… cat Tigger.”

The doctor examines the wounds more closely, “What sort of cat is Tigger?”

He gives a resigned sigh and looks directly at Ziva before answering. “She’s a Tigerillo. A friend brought her back from Ecuador for me.”

“Was she properly quarantined when she was imported?”

“No Ma’am.”

“How long have you had her?”

“About three months.”

“I hope you enjoy the jello Private as you’ll be staying with us for a few days while you’re on IV
antibiotics.”

“What will happen to Tigger?” He looks imploringly back and forth between the two women. The doctor, perhaps sensing Ziva’s confusion steps us, “That will be up to animal control I’m afraid.”

“He was keeping it as a pet,” Ziva explains.

“What was he thinking?”

Tony fields this one, “He wasn’t. It was kind of cool looking. He probably thought it’d help him impress the ladies. Especially after he made up some story about rescuing it from poachers with only the force of his principals. Now he’s facing smuggling charges and a dishonorable discharge.”

“You all finished your reports on the subject?” Gibbs demands as he rounds the corner.

“Check your in-box boss,” Tony grins at the annoyed look that response earns him.

“Did you need something Abbs?”

“I need to talk to you about Friday Pop.”

“You’re dumping me for a real date, huh?”

“Never Pop.” She glances around before suggesting, “Maybe we should talk in private.”

Without a word he enters the elevator expecting that she’ll follow. “What happened?”

“Madame Director stopped by for a chat. She wanted to make sure I knew I didn’t need a marine escort to attend. And that if I did indeed bring a date it would encourage you to bring your new companion.”

“She tried the same tactic with me earlier.”

“Persistent, isn’t she?”

“And I haven’t the faintest idea why. We never really got along all that well. Hell, I’m pretty sure she wanted to shoot me a time or two.”

“You think Charming hasn’t considered it on occasion?”

“Not with serious intent, no.”

“As for Madame Director, she was used to seeing you as the back-up plan. With you in a serious relationship that becomes much harder. It’s not so much that she’s still looking to win you, more that she needs to understand why she lost. The female ego takes being passed over for someone else personally. To accept it she needs to see that this new person is nothing like her.”

“I’m not telling her Abbs.”

“That it’s Charming? No, I didn’t think for a minute you would, or should. But if you tell her you’re seeing a man it might make her back off.”
“No baby, at least not until my discharge papers go through.”

She’s clearly shocked, “You’re leaving the reserves?”

“It’s time. I mean it when I say there’s no such thing as an ex-marine, but I don’t have to stay with the Corp to keep the faith. I still stand by the principals but I can’t keep a commitment to the Corp and to Charming when the two are in direct conflict.” He drops his voice and leans in, forehead to forehead before continuing, “And Tony isn’t asking me to hide who I am the for the rest of my life, which means even if he weren’t the more important of the two he’d still be the more honorable.”

“Does he know yet?”

“No, I don’t want him to feel like it was a choice I made between him and the Corp. We both know he’d over react to that. I was going to have to leave one way or the other, I prefer to do it with an honorable discharge.”

“Will you still be doing the collection for Toys for Tots at the office?”

“This year will be the last time in uniform, but yes.”

Abby smirks just a little, “Going to let Charming take lots of pictures?”

“Doubt I’ll have much say in the matter.”

She nods knowingly, “True enough. What are you going to do about Madame Director?”

“Nothing I can do really sweetheart. If she’s determined enough she could figure out who I’m seeing in a matter of hours. I’m not going to hide in some pathetic attempt to avoid her wrath. I’m not attached enough to my job to give him up for it.”

In what is undoubtedly a political maneuver the director insists they aid the FBI in tracking down the other illegally imported animals, resulting in an incident Tony has nick-named “Cat got McGee’s tongue.” The fact that it also got three thin strips of flesh makes the whole thing less funny, but not overly so. The net result is that come Friday they’re all ready to run for the hills and savor their rare not-on-call weekend. The tension when Gibbs’ phone rings at five o’clock is almost palpable.

“Go ahead and bring it up Abbs. It’s about time,” He smiles slightly causing McGee and Ziva to exchange a confused look. Tony just begins shutting down his computer and gathering his things out of sight.

Abby arrives with two garment bags and a smile. She offers one to Gibbs like it’s an everyday occurrence. “The director offered me the use of her private washroom to change, I’m sure she’d do the same for you if you asked Pop,” She casts an indiscreet glance around indicating the prying eyes of not just the team but the other agents on the floor as well.

“Go ahead sweetheart, I’ll just change in the locker room.” He represses a smirk as Tony quietly slips off, presumably to wait for the free show.

Gibbs startles McGee and Ziva deliberately by asking, “Why don’t you two follow DiNozzo’s example and head out?” He doesn’t wait for their reactions, just heads downstairs.

Unsurprisingly he finds Tony sitting beside his locker, “Coming back here after the party Boss?”
“Nope, can’t run the risk of Prince Charming having turned into a pumpkin while I was busy driving all over town. I’m dropping my daughter off and heading straight home by taxi, it’s already scheduled for 2200.”

After a quick look around to make sure they’re alone Tony offers his best charming smile, “I have it on good authority the prince would wait all night.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Did you bring your camera?”

Tony nods, “And a pretty convincingly idiotic routine about how our baby’s all grown up and going to the prom to be aimed at McGee.”

Gibbs sets about changing into his uniform.

Tony watches with open interest, “Does Madame Director know about your discharge yet?”

“What do you honestly think I would have told her before I told you?”

“Fair enough.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since last Saturday at the bank. You didn’t tense when Abby told you that you had to wear the uniform. Every time she’d said it before that you braced your self as if expecting a blow.”

“You read me too well sometimes Tony. Any thoughts on my leaving the Corp?”

“I understand why you’re doing it. ‘Pride. Honor. Integrity.’ Gotta admit the thought of you as a Retired Marine throws me a little bit. But then I’ve never believed in anything half as strongly as you believe in the Corp.”

“That’s not true Tony. You just never had anybody hand you a list of principals to follow. You had to find your own way, but you did. I know because I’ve seen the look in your eyes every time we got there in time to save someone, to do justice for someone who deserves it.”

“That’s not the same Boss. Everybody believes in justice.”

“Not really. Because for every one we save there’s one where we’re just too late. Sometimes more than one. For most people that would be enough to break the faith. Not you. And because you keep the faith we do better than maybe we should.”

Clearly deciding it’s a fight he can’t win Tony gives a mild smile and half a nod, “The point being that it’s the right thing for you and that’s what important. I might just miss the uniform though.” He swallows audibly, “No cover?”

“We don’t wear them inside so I didn’t bother with it.”

“Promise you’ll politely break Sheppard’s fingers if she can’t keep her hands to herself?”

“Why don’t we assign that task to Abby?”

Tony laughs brightly, “She’ll like that. Guess I better head upstairs and begin my photo shoot.”

“See if you can get most of it out of her system before I get up there, won’t you?”

“I’ll try.”
When Tony arrives back up stairs he finds Ducky regaling McGee and Ziva with a tale of an
Ambassadorial reception he once attended. Despite his warm feelings for the ME Tony can’t help
but be glad he’s missed the first half of the story. He begins snapping pictures as soon as Abby
begins descending the stairs and has to smile, she’s wearing a dark burgundy dress that would be
right at home on the pages of one the magazines on her coffee table, “Gothic Beauty” if he’s
remembering correctly. Meaning she left the more traditionally fashionable dress for the charity event
the following week. Her hair is carefully arranged and serves to accentuate the cameo she’s wearing
even as it obscures the pearl earrings. His grandmother would approve highly of this display of her
finery. The others notice her as she arrives on the middle landing and Tony moves into position
beside McGee. “This is it, she’s all grown up. Just look at her, she’s not our little girl anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” McGee is clearly annoyed.

“It seems like just yesterday she was sitting on my desk in her school outfit trying to teach me to
braid hair and just look at her now…” Tony opines snapping photograph after photograph.

“That was yesterday,” McGee huffs shaking his head.

When Gibbs arrives on the floor Tony discreetly adjusts his angle to focus solely on the marine and
goes right on shooting. He catches one he knows will turn out particularly well when Gibbs kisses
Abby’s cheek in greeting. Just as he’s about to take the only posed shot, one of Abby with an escort,
Gibbs and Ducky, on each elbow Madame Director descends into their midst.

Tony shoots her a chagrined smile, “Company newsletter. Not everyday the Bossman wears his
dress blues. Why don’t you join them?” He discreetly captures his intended shot before Ducky offers
her his free arm. She nods almost imperceptibly and accepts the offered arm.

The small group breaks up and Ducky, ever the gentleman, compliments his companion for the
evening.

Tony uses the opening to pull Abby aside. “Abbs, got a minute before you go?”

She steps to the other side of the staircase and smiles at him, “I’m ready for my close up.”

Once he takes it he knows this is another one worthy of framing. “She so much as touches him you’ll
break her fingers for me, won’t you sweetheart?”

“Like you have to ask.”

“Knew I could count on you sweetheart. Have fun.”

“Abby, you look lovely tonight,” A major general compliments as he hugs her. The director manages
to contain her surprise at this, the third such display.

“Thank you General Layton. You look dashing as always.”

“You my dear inherited your father’s talent for exaggeration.”

“Based on what Nick?”

“Three words Jethro, ‘Situation Under Control.’”
Gibbs laughs, “Fair enough.”

“Charles tells me you put in for a discharge.”

“Retirement is calling my name.”

“Pull the other one Jethro, it’s got bells.”

Abby grins conspiratorially, “He wants to be sure he has free time with his new love.”

“I didn’t hear you’d remarried.”

“I haven’t. I don’t really plan to either. But there is someone new in my life, someone I’d like to have free time for.”

“It’s good to see you happy.”

“And how’s Isabel doing?” Abby asks Layton.

“She’s having the time of her life with her sister in Tuscany.”

“I hear it’s beautiful there.”

“So Isabel tells me. If you’ll excuse me, I just spotted someone whom I need to have a word with.”

“It was nice talking to you again General.”

“It’s always a pleasure to see you Abby,” He offers her a kiss on the hand and heads off in the direction of the buffet table.

“Dance with me Pop.”

Jenny Sheppard watches with unchecked fascination when Gibbs gives in to his daughter without hesitation and seamlessly leads her around the floor. Abby speaks briefly to a few of the other dancers before directing Gibbs to a more open section of the floor. There he allows her to take the lead and follows with the same easy grace.

She finds herself wondering what Abby could have said to make him smile like that.

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“Do you ever dance with Charming at home?”

His smile is genuine and bright enough that it takes five years off his face, “We tried once. It was clear we’d both had lessons and both of us were trying to lead. Needless to say we both ended up with bruises.”

“Why do men always try to turn dancing into combat?”

“It’s not so much that it’s combat, more that we’re taught from the beginning to lead. To internalize the rhythm and patterns to the point where leading is automatic.” He executes a quick turn he knows will make her giggle like a little girl standing on her father’s shoes at a wedding reception. “It’s hard to shut down instinct.”

She leans in a bit, “Make the effort. He’s a good dancer.”
“You are the worst kind of incorrigible.”

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Tony smiles at the soft, melodious chime that sounds when he enters the shop. “Okay Patrick, hit me with your best shot.”

“Mr. DiNozzo,” Patrick smiles at him, “I think I’ve got just the thing for you. Excuse me for a moment.”

Tony settles into the armchair in the corner of the shop.

“Given the photograph you sent me I’ve gone with a basic black for the pants and suit jacket, with clean lines as we aren’t able to complete any tailoring.” He presents each piece with care and respect. “A blue brushed cotton shirt that compliments but doesn’t match those baby blues, and no tie. Your ‘silver haired fox’ seems more the rugged and dashing type, I think we should play to that.”

“Brushed cotton?”

“He doesn’t seem the silk type, Mr. DiNozzo.”

Tony laughs at that, “Fair enough.”

“Assuming the size information you were able to provide is accurate he should look positively smashing in these.”

“The man can make a faded oversized sweatshirt sexy Patrick, rocking a suit won’t be much of a feat.”

“How have I done?” Patrick presses.

“Very well. I like it, but what’s more important is I think Jethro will like it. I knew I could count on you.”

He gives a modest dip of his head, “It is what I do.”

“And you do it well my friend. Even if you do refuse to call me Tony.”

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Abby and Ducky sit at one of the tables eating and watching as Gibbs is pressed into service dancing with the wives of schmoozing generals. Many undoubtedly pressing him for information about his new lady friend. But the part that amuses Abby to no end is Jenny Sheppard’s attempts to get close enough to claim the next dance while dancing with partners of her own. Eventually Abby excuses herself out onto the terrace for some fresh air and hears the distinct click of dress boots behind her.

When she turns it’s the son of one of Gibbs’ former commanders, Nathan Shipley. She smiles easily at him, “I didn’t know you were coming tonight Nate.”

“Dad asked me to. I just didn’t realize I was attending in the capacity of human shield.”

“Boredom is a very dangerous enemy.”

“Indeed. Is that why your father brought you along?”

“I asked Pop to bring me. I knew this was my last chance to attend a Corp Birthday Ball with my
marine and didn’t want to miss it. As much as Pop hates this kind of thing there’s a... sense of deep belonging when he’s here. I like experiencing that, even second hand.”

“You could have joined the corp yourself you know, we take girls now.”

She punches him in the upper arm, “I like it in my lab, thank you very much.”

“Dance with me?”

“Lead the way.”

When Tony arrives at his building Miss Lobel is just completing her evening walk. “Tony Darling, I was beginning to think you’d abandoned us.”

“I don’t mean to Miss Lobel.”

“Have you really been that busy at work?”

“Work was some of it. Mostly I’ve been spending nights with my boyfriend.”

“Maddie mentioned you might have a new sweetheart.”

“Maddie Howard pays far too much attention to my comings and goings,” There’s amusement, not sanction in his tone.

“You’re more amusing than the soaps dear boy. Is there some reason you spend all your nights at his place rather than here?”

“Habit. He has a house and he bought me a new bed when I started to spend the night. We just tend to go there.”

“And where is he tonight?”

“He had a prior obligation. One I politely declined to attend.”

She nods and tugs on his take out bag, “I hope you eat better when you stay with your beau.”

“Jethro and I usually take turns cooking, Miss L.”

“Alright then Tony Darling. Do say hello to Maddie if you see her, she’s been worried about you.”

“I’ll make sure I speak to her before I leave for the night.” He kisses her cheek, “Night Miss L. Don’t spend too much time tormenting Mr. Morris tonight.”

“I never!” He gives her a disbelieving smile and a small wave.

When Abby returns to the table after a fourth consecutive dance with Nate the director is alone at the table as Gibbs is now talking to a group of younger marines in the corner and Ducky is chatting up a blonde near the buffet.

“He’s handsome,” Sheppard observes of Nate who is being introduced to someone by his father now.
“Nate? Not my type. He reminds me too much of my brother.”

“It’d still have to better than pining after Tony who sees you as a sister.”

Abby laughs at that, “I’ve never seen Tony that way, or Nate for that matter. I like ‘em geeky Ma’am.”

“Which I’m sure delights your father to no end.”

“Pop pretty much minds his own business. Grandpa Jack often has more than I want to hear to say about who I date, but the only thing I hear from Pop on the subject is about Mikel. And not letting Pop break his legs.”

“Whatever happened to Mr. Mawher?”

“I’m sure he’s fixated on someone new now a days. So long as he stays well away from me both Pop and I prefer to let him be.”

“I suppose given the situation that was the best possible outcome.”

“He wasn’t going to magically get better, no. I understand that there was never anyway I was going to help him. He was sick in a way you just can’t fix. Pop makes real sure I learned that lesson.”

“And has he learned his lessons?”

Abby shrugs a bit, “Seems so. He stopped marrying every redhead who stuck around him more than a month. Found someone who tells him when he’s being an ass but doesn’t hold it against him. Who makes him laugh and have fun.”

“I take it from that you like the new girlfriend?”

She smiles brightly, “I’m happy for Pop, and for our family. I think having the support of someone he genuinely loves is one of the deciding factors and in his agreeing to start speaking to Grandpa Jack again.”

“Jack is Jethro’s father? I thought he was dead.”

“Daddy just likes to be melodramatic. The remains of some repressed teenage angst, I think.”

“Ever stop to think I might just be a private person Sweetheart?”

“Well that is true too,” She allows patting his hand. “But saying ‘I don’t speak to him’ just doesn’t have the same impact as ‘he’s dead.’”

“Like I said I’m a private person. You say dead and people stop asking questions. You say estranged and a whole new set crop up.” He smirks, “It’s something like the looks you get when you call Victor ‘Dad’ and me ‘Pop’ when all of us are out together.”

“But it’s funny to watch them trying to work out which two of the three of you are a couple.”

“You really are evil baby.”

“The apple doesn’t fall from the tree.”
When he’s otherwise ready to leave for the night Tony grabs the Tupperware container from the last batch of brownies Mrs. Howard made him and heads next door. As he’s emerging from his apartment Mrs. Macalister from across the hall gets off the elevator.

“Well hello there Honey, long time no see.”

Tony offers her a fairly insincere smile, “I’ve been busy. How have your husband and kids been?”

“Jerry is at work, as always. Parker and Emily are still away at boarding school. I’m almost always by myself these days. It’s a lonely life.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Mrs. Macalister.”

“What about you Honey, are you lonely tonight?”

“Not at all. I’m just dropping in on Mrs. Howard before I head over to my boyfriend’s. Miss L says she’s been worried about me since I’ve been spending so many nights at his place. Thought I’d reassure her that I’m alive and well.”

“Lucky boy.”

“Yes I am. He’s good for me. Nice and… settled.”

“Is that so?” She clearly recognizes the subtle reference to her usual line of questioning.

He grins genuinely and nods, “Our friends keep calling us married.”

“How sweet.”

“Well, good night Mrs. Macalister.”

He doesn’t wait for a response just continues on to his intended destination.

“Anthony, you had me worried,” Mrs. Howard practically clucks as she hugs him.

“I didn’t mean to Mrs. H.”

“So which distraction is it that’s been keeping you away? Work or” she smirks, “Jethro?”

He blushes recalling all too late that the walls aren’t exactly sound proof, “A little work and a lot of nights with Jethro.”

“He is that handsome man that’s been picking you up out front the last few months, isn’t he?”

“That would be him.”

“And he treats you well?” Mrs. Howard has seen a two few many bruises on Tony to take this on faith.

“Like I’m his very own prince charming.”

“Oh really?”

“It’s what his daughter calls me when she’s trying to be discreet.”

“And how do you get along with her?”
“She’s convinced we’re as good as married already and keeps referring to me as her stepfather. And before you can ask, she’s thirty.”

“And does that bother you?”

“No, marrying Jethro would definitely be something I could get behind. And I adore Abby. I guess I’m just with him when he tells her it’s a little early for that. We know each other very well but that doesn’t mean we know each other well enough. We’re in that first flush of the relationship where everything is good and happy, no one fighting or bitching about wet towels on the floor.”

“He just drops them?”

“Not long term, no but the towel rack is right there, why not just hang it up?”

Mrs. Howard laughs, “Mention it and you might get your way.”

“How are the grandkids Mrs. H?”

“Spoiled as always.”

“Then you’re doing your job.”

“Run along now, you’ve got better things to do than jabber with me.”

“But I love jabbering with you Mrs. H. At the very least I need to give you back your dish.”

“That’s fine and well dear but you keep checking your watch, I suspect your Jethro is waiting for you.”

“Not yet, but if I’m to beat him home my window is closing.”

“Then off with you.”

“Night Mrs. H.”
Goodbyes and Plans

At 2130 Gibbs collects Abby from the dance floor where she’s once again taken Nate’s invitation. “That’s cruel you know.”

“How so?” Abby asks innocently.

“You know Nate’s sweet on you baby girl. It’s not nice to lead him on.”

“I can’t help it if Nate won’t listen.”

“He doesn’t 'listen' because you won’t tell him you’re not interested and then you snuggle. Anyone would get the wrong impression.”

“I promise next time I see him I will tell him I see him as a brother, fair enough?”

Gibbs chuckles, “I just don’t like you playing with his emotions baby girl.”

“I know, and I don’t really do it on purpose,” She holds up an arresting hand, “Not with Nate anyway. In the beginning I thought he knew I wasn’t interested, I guess I just never changed my behavior.”

“All that aside it’s time we start on our goodbye rounds.”

“You know it would floor Charming how good you are at this when you want to be.”

“He’ll find out next week.”

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Jenny Sheppard watches Gibbs and Abby making the rounds like they attend such events all the time and contemplates all she’s learned. Despite his own protestation clearly Gibbs is more than able to grease the wheels and chat up a political ally when he wishes to. And he’d learned when to open with a compliment as well. Not that any of the various women he’d danced with put over much stock in his praise, but most called him charming and used it to segue into polite questioning about his new love.

What shocked Jenny, though, was the simple matter of fact way General Layton had spoken of Gibbs requesting a discharge. He hadn’t mentioned anything to her, and as it affected his work schedule he should have, if only in a professional capacity.

The fact that it got the room atwitter about who on earth Jethro Gibbs would give up the corp for irked her even more. She had heard her own name listed at least twice among those who hadn’t accomplished it.

One of the generals’ wives, someone named Nadine, passed along a vague description in ear shot of Jenny. If accurate it was far more than she’d managed to extract after weeks of wheedling. “Tall, beautiful green eyes and short brown hair, legs to die for and a smile that could melt ice sculptures at half a click. Smart, funny, loyal, caring, and not afraid to tell him to get my head out of his ass.” Nadine then chuckled warmly, “Sounds like a match made in heaven.”

Jenny was annoyed when they then dropped their voices and began whispering about his discharge. When Nadine embraces Gibbs and whispers in his ear Jenny has the urge to growl.
“Hope he knows how lucky he is,” Nadine Jareau whispers in his ear.

“That I can promise you,” Gibbs assures her before turning his attention to Charles Jareau, his current CO in the reserves. “Thanks for keeping the scuttlebutt to yourself there Charlie.”

“How was I to know it was such a secret?”

“Because the discussion didn’t take place at one of your grandmother’s tea parties?”

Jareau chuckles, “Good to know you’ll never change Jethro.” He turns and lifts Abby’s hand to a kiss, “You, young lady are doomed.”

“How so?” Abby asks with genuine curiosity.

“Because you inherited your mother’s good looks and your father’s smart mouth. It’s a dangerous combination.”

She gives a delighted laugh at that, “I’d say it suits me.”

“It does that. Look out for your old man, won’t you?”

“I will but I’m the last line of defense.”

“As it should be,” Gibbs assures them both.

“If we don’t get moving I’m going to loose a slipper and the cab will turn back into a pumpkin.”

They all laugh but Gibbs is grateful for the excuse to escape.

Abby, being Abby has to push just a little as they make their exit, “Guess it was a good thing I wasn’t looking for Prince Charming, it seems he decided to stay home tonight.”

About halfway to her apartment Abby lays her head on her father’s shoulder, “Remind Charming to call me tomorrow. We need to set up the details for next week.”

“We’re expecting you for lunch sweetheart.”

“I thought we’d take a week off. Give you two a little space.”

“We don’t need space from you Abbs.”

“I figured with the trip next weekend and Thanksgiving right after it’d be best to give you some private time.”

“Sunday and weeknights are for private time. Saturday is,” He pauses to ensure he has her full attention, “family game night.”

As he intended she chuckles, “Okay Daddy, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I’m even cooking this week.”
“Did you say something to Abby about needing more private time?” Gibbs asks as he seasons the ribs he’s going to grill.

Tony pulls a chair over and straddles it, “No, I love Saturdays with Abbs. Why?”

“She was worried about intruding. Said we should take some ‘private time’ as we’re spending so much time with her next week.”

Tony sighs, “Okay, that is my fault. I said I was looking forward to having some private time in Baltimore. I didn’t mean we weren’t getting enough here, but maybe that wasn’t clear. Want me to talk to her?”

“No, I think she’ll be all right. I just wanted to know why she was acting so strangely last night.”

“Was everyone else on their best behavior?” Tony manages, somehow, to make it sound like an idle, casual question.

“Charlie spilled the beans about my discharge. Abbs told them all it was so I could spend more time with my new lover, Nadine, Charlie’s wife, put the pieces together and said she hopes you know how lucky you are. Nate Shipley tailed my daughter like an over attentive puppy. And everyone’s favorite director didn’t even manage to so much as ask me to dance.” He smirks, “Oh and Ducky acquired a new admirer. How was your night?”

“I ran a few errands and visited a few of my neighbors, including Mrs. Howard whose bedroom shares a wall with mine…”

“So we’ve given her a few nights of entertainment.”

“From her tone I’d have to say so, yes.”

“Are you blushing?” Gibbs’ tone is one of fond disbelief.

“You’re not half as funny as you think you are Jethro.”

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Abby tucks her feet under herself, leaving her facing Tony, “So what’s the plan for next weekend?”

“My friend Mark’s bachelor party is Saturday night in Baltimore. We’re going to head out Friday night, caseload permitting of course. Then we’ll head to Park Central Sunday morning. I have you booked into the adjoining room. I figured you’d join us there when you were ready to. The party begins at seven.”

“And Chester?”

“Is welcome to join us, if he’s brave enough.”

“I said ‘I’m taking a trip with my father and stepfather and I need a date.’ And he agreed to come.”

“You may find even the bravest man shrinks from the phrase adjoining room. At least when it’s your father in the other room.”

“You might say the same about a man knowing his boyfriend’s daughter is staying in the next room.”

“But you forget two pertinent facts my dear, I know you and I have no shame.”
“Oh, I don’t know about that. I’ve seen you blush a time or two.”

Monday morning Tony can’t seem to sit still, once again humming and tapping his feet. He plays his movie trivia game and picks on McGee.

“You seem to have had another pleasant weekend.”

“All it takes is the right company. We spent most of the weekend sitting on the sofa watching TV.”

“Gear up, we’ve got a dead navy pilot in Denver.”

“Do we at least have time to pack properly for the trip?” Tony whines.

“Plane leaves from Pax River in just over half an hour. What do ya think DiNozzo?”

“That I’ve got just about enough time to check my trunk for my go bag.” Then his face falls, remembering he didn’t drive his car in today.

Gibbs checks that the others aren’t watching and signs “In my trunk. Get mine too.”

Tony nods and heads downstairs. He’s amused to find that his bag isn’t the one he’d packed a month ago. He opens it a little and grins foolishly as he finds his OSU sweatshirt on top. He shakes his head and moves the bags into a pool car before retrieving Ziva and McGee’s as well.

Just as he’s shutting the trunk Gibbs rounds the front of the car with an abrupt, “Keys.”

Tony tosses them and calls out “Shotgun” as if there’s any danger of the others taking his seat.

Tony stifles a groan as they are lead to canvass seats slung between pallets of cargo. “We got any details yet Boss?”

“Diego Cortez, 26 has been a Naval Pilot for four years. Six months ago he was assigned to Reslin Avionics for the testing phase of a new ejection system. About three hours ago one of his neighbors called a disturbance into police and his body was discovered. He’d been shot in the right shoulder and stomach. Local ME says he’d been dead six hours.”

“He caused a disturbance six hours after he died?”

“One of the things we’ll have to look into DiNozzo.”

“Any background yet?”

“You want the locals to do all your work for you DiNozzo?”

“It might make for a nice change of pace.”

Gibbs suppresses a smile, Tony catches him at it and it’s enough for him to relax for the rest of the flight. At least so much as he can relax while impersonating a piece of cargo at any rate.

Tony offers his best charming smile to both representatives of the Denver PD that meet them on
scene but focuses on the detective when he re-poses his earlier question, “How exactly did Lt. Cortez cause a disturbance six hours after he died?”

“He had one of those new alarm clocks that get progressively louder until they’re shut off. When the walls began to shake from the noise the neighbor called it in,” Detective Spencer explains pointing at the unit in question. “When patrol arrived the front door was unlocked and Mr. Cortez’s body was laying here.”

“Which neighbor called it in?” McGee asks a little timidly.

Spencer looks to the patrolman who provides for her, “Mr. Morgan in 4B.”

“I’ll head over and talk to him Boss.”

“Ziva talk to the neighbors on the other side, find out if they heard anything.”

Tony takes a long look around the room trying to place what bothers him about it. Suddenly he turns to Gibbs, “This look like a military man’s room to you Boss?”

Gibbs in turn takes a long look around, “What’re you thinking DiNozzo?”

Tony turns to the Detective again, “Did anyone speak to the building manager?”

“I spoke to him. Cortez signed a one year lease five months ago and lived alone.”

“I think I need to put a few questions to the neighbors Boss.”

Following Tony’s train of thought but wondering where exactly this is leading Gibbs tails him across the hall.

A woman in her early thirties answers with a particularly sour expression, “This better be good.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, this is Special Agent Gibbs. We’re with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. Your neighbor in 6B, Lt. Cortez was murdered.”

“Diego? When?”

“Last night. Did you see or hear anything unusual?”

“I wish that I could help, I really do, but I just got home from a twenty-four hour on call shift. I’m an intern at St. Anthony Central.”

“That’s alright, did Diego live alone?”

“I think so. He had a girlfriend who stayed over a few nights a week but she was a bit of an odd duck.”

“How so?”

“She’d always come over all dolled up, hair, make-up, the works. But they never seemed to go out and once she’d arrived she seemed to spend the rest of her time here wearing Diego’s clothes. Like she couldn’t be bothered to bring her own.”

“Would you happen to know her name?”

“Diego called her Carino but the one time she introduced herself to me it was as Elena.”
“Thank you for the information Ms…”

“Crain. Joanna Crain.”

“If you think of anything else Ms. Crain you can contact us at this number,” He hands her one of McGee’s business cards.

“I really am sorry about Diego. He was very sweet.”

When she shuts the door Gibbs and Tony re-enter Lt. Cortez’s apartment.

“Where have you got us staying?”

“The Holiday Inn on I-70 in West Pleasant View. I put it in the car’s GPS.”

“When we split up get the locals to drop you off there.”

“Sure thing Boss.”

“And if I find that detective’s phone number in your possession you can sleep in your own room tonight.”

“Understood.”

Ziva returns first, “They were unaware of any disturbance and seemed genuinely surprised something untoward had befallen the lieutenant.”

McGee is shaking his head as he enters the apartment, “Clearly they didn’t get along but Mr. Morgan claims he had no idea anything was wrong until Cortez didn’t respond to his banging on the wall.”

“McGee check his computer, bank records, the usual. DiNozzo, background and find out who Elena really is. Ziva you’re with me at Reslin.”

“Who’s Elena?” McGee asks as Gibbs and Ziva exit the apartment.

“If we knew he wouldn’t have asked, now would he Probie. Don’t you need to be doing something at this point, like getting his computer so we can get out of here?”

“Where are we going?”

“Boss wants us to get set up at the hotel and work from there.”

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“I’m Wayne Williams, head of security. How can I help you Agent?”

“We’re investigating the death of one of your test pilots, we need any information you can give us about Lt. Cortez and everything about the project he was working on.”

“That’s proprietary information sir, I can’t release that to you. Dr. Coltrane has authorized a release of Mr. Cortez’s file and an overview of the project. I have it for you right here.”

“Then clearly we’re talking to the wrong person. Dr. Coltrane you said?” Gibbs turns on his heel and heads back into the corridor with his usual air of “as a matter of fact, I do own the place.”

Immediately Williams is after him flapping about it being a secure facility. Gibbs ignores him until he
is face to face with the man in charge, his bearing unmistakable.

“Dr. Coltrane?”

The man in question shoots a furious glare at the suddenly silent Williams before answering, “Yes, I am. How can I help you?”

“I’m Special Agent Gibbs, this is Officer David. We’re investigating Lt. Cortez’s death.”

“I’m aware. I’ve instructed Mr. Williams to cooperate fully.”

“Mr. Williams informs me that this,” He snatches the top sheet from the stack in Williams’ hand and flaps it, “half page progress summary is all he can release about the project Lt. Cortez was working on.”

“The project which Lt. Cortez was assisting us with is very sensitive. We won the contract with the Navy by developing a unique new system. Any number of our competitors would go to extreme lengths to get their hands on the specifics of our design.”

“Which is precisely why we need that information. This is not a request. As a contactor for the Navy you are compelled to cooperate with NCIS as needed in any situation that involves your company.”

Coltrane’s expression is the picture of fury.

Sensing that this is where Tony would step in with some diplomacy Ziva tries her hand at it, “The information will remain strictly confidential, especially if it is not a contributing factor in the lieutenant’s death.”

“Madeline,” Coltrane snaps impatiently. “Get these agent the specifications and official progress reports on the Maple Key project.”

“Right away,” A somewhat mousy blond affirms and hurries into an office behind her.

As Ziva accepts the reports in question Gibbs turns back to Williams, “Was there anyone on staff that was particularly close with Lt. Cortez?”

“He was friendly with Martin Kessler, one of the research assistants.”

“We’ll need to speak to him.”

Tony cracks his neck as he answers his hotel room door, phone on speaker in his hand. He’s hoping it’s Gibbs but knows that knock would be coming from the door to the adjoining room. McGee comes into the room without preamble, putting Cortez’ laptop on the table.

“Come on in Probie. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Shut up Tony and look at this,” McGee instructs quietly. He opens an email and Tony’s eyes go wide.

“We know Cortez. And it has to stop. You know what you have to do to prove it. You have forty-eight hours. Use them wisely.”

“This was just there on his computer?” Tony asks setting the phone on the table and reading the email a third time.
“Would it have taken me this long to find it if it was?”

Tony picks up the room phone and calls Gibbs.

“Gibbs.”

“Hey Boss, McGee found us something good. Cortez was being blackmailed. And whoever it is knew someone might look into it. No names, no account numbers, no addresses. Not even a concrete offer of proof, just assurances that they know and he has to stop.”

“Any indication of what it was?”

“Not yet Boss, but it might be a direction worth looking into there.”

There’s a slightly too long silence and then “Tell Probie good work.”

“On it.” He hangs up, “Find anything on his financials yet?”

“Not yet. I started with the computer.”

Tony gives him an eloquent glare until he begins working again. Finally a voice comes on the line on his cell and Tony flops on the bed, “I understand that. You have to have some contact info for her. A cell or home number.”

“We of course have that information sir, but I’m not at liberty to release it.”

“Ma’am, I’m a federal agent asking you for a telephone number not national secrets.”

Suddenly she’s more receptive. “What exactly is this in reference to?”

“She lost a family member earlier today and we need to speak to her about it.”

“Oh my goodness! Poor Constantia. It wasn’t her daughter Elena was it?”

“No Ma’am, it wasn’t. Do you have that information for me?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” She dictates an address and phone number to Tony. “She’s out with the flu just now, she should be at home. Please let her know she has our sympathies.”

“I will let her know Ma’am.” Tony hangs up dramatically, “This sucks.”

“Generally that’s how this works.”

“More so than usual. I’m going to have to make notification which means a delay in getting Gibbs the information he wants. Getting slapped upside the head is not how I saw my night going.”

“And see I thought that might just be your idea of a good time.”

“Maybe you’re thinking of Agent Tommy.”
“You were friendly with Lt. Cortez, Mr. Kessler?”

“We hung out a little, had a few beers. When he didn’t have to get home to Elena.”

“This Elena lives with him?”

“No, but when she was staying over he’d always go straight home.”

“Who was she to him? His girlfriend?”

“I don’t think so. He was clearly very fond of her but he treated her more like a little sister than a girlfriend. He wouldn’t say much about his family so I can’t say for sure if she was but that’s what it seemed like.”

“Did you ever meet her?”

“Just the once. She was kind of a funny girl. Real quiet, hardly said four words to me. When I told her she looked pretty you’d have thought I called her a troll. Diego didn’t seem all that surprised by her reaction, just whisked her off.”

“And he never said anything about it later?”

“No. He really didn’t seem to think it was at all strange.”

“Did the Lieutenant have any enemies, Mr. Kessler?”

His attention, and interest turns to Ziva at that, “Diego wasn’t the type to make any enemies Ma’am. I’ve known more than a few navy men in my time and if I didn’t know any better I’d have said there was no way Diego was one of ’em. Didn’t seem to believe in violence. Saw him talk men out of brawling more than once. Made more than a few friends saving men from their own stupidity.”

“What about here at Reslin, did Lt. Cortez have a problem with anyone he worked with?”

“He seemed to dislike Dr. Harvey but he wouldn’t say why. And there was some glitch with his internal security clearance about six weeks ago. He couldn’t get into the lab or the testing hangar.”

“Thank you Mr. Kessler, you have been very helpful.”

“One last thing Mr. Kessler,” Gibbs interrupts Kessler’s response to Ziva’s dismissal. “Where were you last night between two and four AM?”


“We just need to be able to clear you,” Ziva assures him.

“Can anyone verify that you were at home?”

“My doorman. All the exterior doors in the building have electronic locks that log when you open them except the manned front door.”

“We’ll just need your address then.”
Once they reach the car Gibbs waits for Ziva to face him, “I don’t need someone to be diplomatic for me.”

“I just thought-”

“You thought that because Tony steps in when he thinks it’s needed you can too. You don’t have Tony’s instincts yet. I wanted Coltrane off balance.”

“But we needed his co-operation.”

“And he was required to cooperate under the terms of his contract. I wanted him thinking about what I could do to him if I received less than full disclosure.” After a long pause to ensure she gets it he adds, “Don’t assume you understand a situation just because you have all the facts.” He pulls into traffic and answers his ringing cell.

“Hey Boss. No one notified the family yet so I’m heading out to gather the background in person.”

“Watch your back DiNozzo. I’m not there to do it for you.”

“Love you too. Don’t let the crazy assassin get you into trouble.”

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“Once again I am very sorry for your loss Ms. Dalton, but if you could answer a few questions about Diego it might prove invaluable.”

“Yes, yes of course. What do you need to know?”

“Were you Diego’s only family?”

“His father died when he was about six, Enrique had a heart attack. His mother, my sister Maria, passed when he was twelve. She was bitten by a rattlesnake while hiking near their home in New Mexico. Diego came to live with me and my daughter Elena. She was only seven but Diego was an angel with her. Always so patient and attentive, he was the brother she always wanted. She always told him things she wouldn’t tell me, ran to him when she was hurt or in trouble. How am I going to tell her he’s dead? How do I even say it?” Ms. Dalton begins crying again.

Tony hesitates before wrapping an arm around her shoulder and getting her a tissue, “There’s no right way to deliver news like this, Ma’am. All you really can do is let her know you’re here for her, that she’s not alone.”

He rubs her back until the sobs subside then moves back away from her giving her space.

After a long while Tony asks, “May we continue Ms. Dalton?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Did Diego have any enemies?”

“Enemies is such a strong word Mr. DiNozzo. There were boys he didn’t get along with of course. Diego was something of a slight boy. The other boys would use that to their advantage. I often wondered if that might be the reason Diego joined the Navy, so that he could show those boys what he was made of. When he came home to visit he didn’t seem to have any interest in revenge though. And when he took the new assignment here in town he seemed… happy. Elena started spending a few nights a week at his apartment. They both seemed to finally be settling.”
“May I speak with Elena?”

“She’s in Taos at a training session for her new job. She’s going to be a trend analyst at Kline and Barrowman Market Research. She’s due home tomorrow around 3.”

“She still lives here with you, Ma’am?”

“Yes. She’s just starting out. I don’t want her wasting money on an apartment until she’s settled in the new job at least.”

“I’d like to be here to speak with her when she gets home if that’s all right.”

“Of course Mr. DiNozzo. I’m sure she’ll want to help you in any way that she can.”

“Thank you for your time Ms. Dalton. I am truly sorry for your loss. If you think of anything else, anything at all, please feel free to call me.” He hands her his card and quietly leaves the house.

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McGee rubs his eyes irritably and dials Abby’s lab.

“Timmy, what have you got for me?”

“I need you to find what you can for me on a company called Montrose Electronics. I keep hitting a brick wall. Basically all I can get is the name and incorporation date.”

“I’ll call you when I have it.”

“Thanks Abbs.”

“How are things going?”

“We don’t have many leads yet. Cortez was being blackmailed and Tony’s trying to find out about someone named Elena but that’s all we’ve got.”

“And how does Montrose figure into it?”

“He’s been getting regular payments from Montrose Electronics since 1992. Three months ago the payments increased almost a hundred dollars an installment. All I have is the deposit records, no explanation of why he’s receiving the payments. While you pull what you can on the company I’m going to search the local papers and court records. Maybe it’s a lawsuit settlement or a royalty payment. I just don’t know yet.”

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Emotionally exhausted from the weight of consoling an agitated loved one, Tony wants nothing more than to fall into bed, and preferably Gibbs’ arms, to sleep clear through to morning. That of course isn’t to be. For one, McGee still has his room commandeered as operations head quarters. For another Gibbs will be expecting to hear what he’s found. Which just might prevent the bedmate part of his plan, if Gibbs is sufficiently pissed off that he accepted the daughters absence virtually unchallenged.

No sense in delaying the inevitable though.

He’d expected them all to be in his room, Gibbs hates hotel conference rooms and McGee had already commandeered the table in his room. What he hadn’t expected was to open the door and find
Gibbs sprawled on his hotel bed as if he belonged there. He did, but that was beside the point. How was Tony supposed to report with Gibbs looking like that? Hell, how was he supposed to do anything but crawl into that bed and cuddle?

Gibbs solves the dilemma just as quickly as he caused it with a short, “What’d you get from the family?”

As he gives a summary of Lt. Cortez’s background he sits beside Gibbs’ feet, watching the computer screen over McGee’s shoulder. “Get anything useful at Reslin?”

When Ziva gives her own summary Tony catches Gibbs glaring at her slightly. He raises a discreet questioning eyebrow and receives the sign “later” in response.

“What about you McGoogle?”

“You all already know about the blackmail e-mail. I’ve got a back trace running on it but it’s almost certainly a untraceable free email account. I also found regular payments from a Montrose Electronics. The dates seem to be consistent with the payment beginning at the death of his mother but there are no records of a court settlement, or even of Montrose Electronics at all. Abby and I are both working on it though Boss.”

“Ziva, go pick up some dinner for yourself and McGee downstairs and then see what you can get on the mother’s death. Tony, you’re with me.”

After he’s sure they’re out of hearing range Tony quips, “Isn’t this the wrong time for a dinner date Boss?”

“I wish,” Gibbs offers affectionately. “While I do plan to feed you this outing is mostly thanks to my gut.”

Abby considers calling McGee first but she hasn’t talked to Tony all day and he’s sure to be by Gibbs’ side. “Hi Tony.”

Tony puts her on speaker, “Hey Abbs, you got something for us?”

“McGee told you I was running down information on Montrose Electronics, right?”

“Right.”

“It’s of course a dummy corporation. There are six regular transactions to and from its accounts. A deposit of nearly ten thousand a month and then five checks of nearly two thousand each going out. I tracked down the registered owner, Butch Montrose. He owns two other companies as well. A small manufacturing plant in Nevada and Hillcrest Technologies in New Mexico. In March of 1992 five employees of Hillcrest died on the same day. The circumstances are all listed as something unrelated to their work but within eight weeks of the deaths all five families began receiving checks.”

“Did you find a cause of death on Mrs. Cortez?”

“Heart failure due to poison of indeterminate source.”

“Get a copy of the report to Ducky and ask him what he thinks of the findings for me baby girl.”

“Sure thing Pop.”
“And Princess? Pull anything you can on an Elena Dalton, for me.”

“On it. Where are you anyway?”

“Following the famous gut.”

Abby chuckles, “I’ll call when I’ve got something for you.”

“Great Abbs, and let Probie know what you found on Montrose, maybe it’ll help him. And makes sure Ziva gets the names of the other families that lost someone at Hillcrest.”

She lets some of her concern enter her tone, “You two aren’t out playing hero are you?”

“Not unless staking out a dead man’s apartment is playing the hero,” Tony reassures her effortlessly.

“Stay Safe.”

She’s about to dial McGee when Jimmy Palmer comes in with a batch of samples from Ducky, “Anything new and mysterious for me today Jimmy?”

“Well, we found this pink gel on the body but I doubt it’s really all that mysterious what it is,” Jimmy blushes spectacularly.

A spark of mischief makes her grin at his discomfort, “Something about it seemed telling?”

“W-w-where we found it was suggestive. But as it smelled like raspberries Doctor Mallard said we shouldn’t speculate.”

Abby just laughs and makes a mental note to scold Ducky for playing dumb just to embarrass Jimmy. Not that she’d ever call him on it to anyone else. “Major Mass Speck is on the job,” She promises signing the chain of evidence vouchers.

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At eleven o’clock Gibbs turns the car around and heads back to the hotel. He knows Tony’s looking at him curiously and decides to give in, “She’s staying there, or she had been. Maybe her mother managed to contact her. Either way I don’t think she did it so we’ll just try again tomorrow.”

“What’d Ziva do to piss you off earlier?”

“She assumed I was being abrasive because I couldn’t help it and tried to play the diplomat.”

“Strike one for the crazy assassin.”

“She reassured the project leader I was intimidating.”

“Maybe I should start calling her Probie.”

“Just remind her I already have a keeper.”

Tony chuckles and waits about a minute before ever so casually asking, “Am I sleeping alone tonight?”

“Did that detective give you her number?”

“She offered. Professionally of course. I had her give McGee her card.”
“Just make sure you put the do not disturb sign on the door handle.”

Tony smiles brightly, “And mess up the sheets to keep the house keeper’s suspicions at bay.”

“Oh I doubt house keeping will be all that fooled.”

“And here I thought we’d just cuddle.”

“Tired of me already? What happened to ‘making like rabbits for the next twenty or thirty years?’”

“I said I thought we’d just cuddle, not that it was what I wanted. You see my boyfriend has this pair of unfortunate, at times, personality quirks. He’s a workaholic and he has this notion of propriety.”

“Oh I doubt house keeping will be all that fooled.”

“And here I thought we’d just cuddle.”

“Tired of me already? What happened to ‘making like rabbits for the next twenty or thirty years?’”

“I said I thought we’d just cuddle, not that it was what I wanted. You see my boyfriend has this pair of unfortunate, at times, personality quirks. He’s a workaholic and he has this notion of propriety.”

“Only at the yard Tony. Our free time is our free time, even in a hotel room paid for by the agency.”

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In the morning they regroup in the hotel restaurant and Tony can’t seem to peel the contented smile off his face. It was happening a lot lately and he’d heard more than one whisper around the yard about how ‘adorable’ and ‘sweet’ it was.

McGee was more inclined to smirking than whispering though, “If I didn’t know better I’d say you got laid last night.”

“Ever hear of phone sex?” Tony quips against his orange juice.

Ziva offers a smirk of her own, “After so short a time apart?”

McGee doesn’t even think before offering an amused, “Going twenty four hours without some kind of sex might strain something.”

“Just because you children can’t maintain healthy adult relationships doesn’t mean no one can.”

McGee snorts, “Like three months makes you an expert.”

For a split second Tony recoils as if the comment were a physical blow. Even though he’s got his game face back in place before Ziva or McGee can blink Gibbs sees it, gives his knee a reassuring squeeze under the table and makes a mental note to mention it later. Tony turns reflexively to humor, “Three months is a long time to still be at it like teenagers with someone you’ve known for years. You’re just jealous none of your girls would ever think to… make sure you weren’t lonely while we’re away.”

“More clues about the mysterious Jay.”

“Is that what we’re investigating?” Gibbs asks archly, too contented to truly snap.

McGee looks proper chastised but Tony just smirks, “You’re in a good mood Boss.” In the face of the quiet disbelief from all fronts he grins, “You didn’t smack him.”

Just as he’d known it would that prompts a double smacking, and a quick brush of fingers across the back of his neck. Abby was right, they were going to get caught.

And with that thought he pulls out his cell and speed dials her, “Hey Abbs. You find us anything on those mysterious deaths?”

“All five were forms of poisoning, and nine months after the incident there was a scandal involving
one of the coroner’s assistants, a Malcolm Rush. Nothing in the public record as to what exactly he was accused of. He left quietly and no charges of any kind were filed against him. But the local DA did deal down two negligent homicide cases and a life insurance fraud scam that all seemed pretty solid the next day.”

“Any real evidence that he had any involvement in the five cases we’re looking at?”

“Well he is listed on the reports of all five autopsies as the examiners assistant.”

“But the local ME signed off on all the reports?” Gibbs tosses out there.

“Yes, but the only one where Rush would have had to fake something was Cortez. Her ‘snakebite’ required wounds. They were placed and shaped correctly but the poison didn’t spread the way it should have according to Ducky. The circumstances of Brody’s death appeared to be a CO2 suicide, sitting in his car in his garage. Young had been ill and was written off as undiagnosed lung cancer. Johansen supposedly fell victim to botulinum toxicity. And Scott is listed as having died as a complication of a combination of asthma medications.”

“Aside from Cortez was there any evidence that the deaths weren’t what they seemed?” McGee questions tentatively.

“I had Ducky look over all the autopsy reports, he says the CO2, medicinal interaction and lung cancer are, and I’m quoting here, ludicrous oversights. He didn’t have anything to say about the botulinum toxicity.”

“Good work baby girl. Put a couple more caff-pow!s on my tab.”

“Thanks Pop. Call me later when you have some free time. It’s about Thanksgiving. I talked to Jackson last night.”

Gibbs heaves a put upon sigh, “I’ll call when I can Princess.”

McGee’s expression is thoughtful and Tony snaps him out of it as quick as he can, “Did you come up with anything on Montrose yet Elf Lord?”

“The only thing I’ve been able to confirm so far is that he doesn’t appear to have any personal holdings what so ever. His house, his car, all his utilities, everything is paid by the corporation. The only things he owns are his companies. He’s been divorced seven times so it isn’t all that hard to understand, but it might also point toward some sort of personal liability since about forty percent of those holdings were moved after the incident at Hillcrest.”

“What about the families?”

Ziva consults a note pad, “Brody had just been through a messy divorce, which seems to have been why suicide was deemed plausible. The money goes to a Hilde Wilcott, his younger sister. She has no criminal record or financial difficulties that I was able to locate. Young’s wife Melinda seems to have developed a gambling problem since his death. Loses the money as fast as Montrose sends it. Johansen’s son Zachery appears to have no other means of support. He seems to be just allowing the money to build up. As far as I have been able to track he has not spent one red penny of it.”

“One red cent,” Tony corrects distractedly.

“Ziva get me more detailed information on Melinda Young and Zachery Johansen.”
“Just them Boss?” McGee asks curiously.

“If the motive is money you look at those who need it, not those who have it,” Ziva imparts sagely.

“McGee, get ahold of that detective and see if there was an investigation into the suicide. Then get back with Abby on that email.” He glances at Tony’s still quarter-full plate, “You’ve got until I get a cup to go to finish that DiNozzo.”

“Sure thing Boss,” He scoops the last of his scrambled eggs on a piece of toast and folds it for portability then downs his orange juice in one go. “We starting at Cortez’s or her mother’s?”

“Let’s see what her new employers have to say about her whereabouts.”

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“Detective Spencer?”

“Yes sir, how can I help you?”

“It’s Agent McGee with NCIS, we met yesterday.”

Her tone instantly becomes interested. “Of course Agent McGee. What can I do for you today?”

“In the course of our investigation we’ve found some other deaths that might be related to the Lieutenant’s. We were hoping you might be able to pull one of the files for us.”

“Of course I’d be happy to help. What’s the deceased’s name?”

“Richard Brody, but he died fourteen years ago in New Mexico.”

“That might take a while longer. I’ll bring the file by soon as I can get a hold of it.” She hesitates, “Agent DiNozzo will be there, won’t he?”

“Probably not. He’s backing up the boss today.”

“Tell me Agent McGee, is Agent DiNozzo single?”

“No Ma’am.”

“Too bad,” She mutters evenly. “I’ll get that file out to you as quick as I can.”
Relationships and cover-ups

Chapter Notes

While the factoid about Colfax Ave. is true the author would like to point out she is only marginally aware of the geography of the city as she is only an occasional visitor. The streets all exist, but that’s as much as I can say.

Kline and Barrowman Market Research turns out to be three dozen people entering the information from interest surveys into a database and another five dozen using that database to make sales calls. No one there has ever heard of Elena Dalton or been sent for any sort of training in New Mexico.

“If she was in this kind of trouble why didn’t our dashing hero rescue her and deliver her back home?” Tony asks as they get back in the car.

“There isn’t just one kind of trouble this might be Tony.”

“Prostitution fits. A severe negative reaction to compliments on her appearance. Refusal to wear feminine clothing at Cortez’s apartment. Lying to her mother about a job keeping her out nights.”

“Your psych minor’s showing,” Gibbs teases. “I’m not saying you’re on the wrong track. Just that prostitution might be too much. Stripping I think.”

Tony hesitates before shrugging, “Could be.”

“But you don’t think it is.”

“This girl is in some kind of serious trouble. And she thinks she deserves it.”

“Maybe.” Gibbs concedes, “Or she was just in too deep. Cortez could have been shot for trying to get her out of it.”

“I don’t think so. If it was a message it would have been messier.”

Tony calls Abby again, “Hey sweetheart, you busy?”

“Still trying to back trace the blackmail email, why? What’ve you got?”

“Nothing exciting. I just need an employment history. If I had access to a computer I’d pull it up myself.”

“No problem. Name?”

“Elena Dalton. Same address as Cortez’s next of kin.”

“She had a series of jobs in various fast food restaurants over the past five years and then six months ago she started working for Shahrazad Inc. A high end escort service. Everything seems above board there.”

“Above board Abbs? At an escort service?”
“No warrants or police action of any kind and two filings with the labor board about terminations stemming from inappropriate contact with a client by an escort.”

“That does seem surprisingly upstanding for an escort service,” Tony concedes.

“That’s all I’ve got on it Tony. I could get you more if you and Pop want but that means setting aside the email.”

“No Princess I don’t think you need to do that. Aside from the location of Elena Dalton it’s doubtful Shahrazad Inc has anything to do with the case.”

“Is Pop there?”

“’Course he is. Hold on a second Hon.” He switches to speaker, “Go on.”

“Like I said Pop, Grandpa Jack called about Thanksgiving. It seems Great Uncle Frank invited him for Thanksgiving and he felt it was only fair to give you a chance to change your mind about him joining us.”

“Tell Jackson I expect him at eleven o’clock to start making Grandma’s cornbread. I promised my little girl a proper family Thanksgiving. That means not just her parents and stepfathers but her grandfather as well. And ideally your brother and his family as well but I’ll admit limiting the invasion of my space isn’t something I object to.” He sighs slightly. “Baby girl, I want Thanksgiving to go as we’ve planned it. Don’t you dare tell him but I’ve missed my father and so long as he doesn’t try to cause trouble in our family I’ll… well maybe ‘be glad’ is wrong. I’ll be relieved to see him again.”

“I’ll speak to him tomorrow. Talk to you both later.”

“Later, Sweetheart.”

“Bye baby girl.”

“Forget to tell me we got married?” Tony teases.

“Pretty sure we’ve been married from the first date.”

Ziva knocks on McGee’s door and has to wait rather a long while before he opens it. “Any progress?”

“Nothing useful. We finished back tracing the email but the account was a free one and the terminal is at a cyber café in Lakewood.”

Ziva nods, “That makes sense. Zachary Johansen lives in Lakewood.”

“What did you find on Johansen?”

“He has never held down a job for more than a month and his MySpace page talks about someone ‘stirring the pot’ and ‘messing with a good thing’.”

“Did you get a hard copy of his photograph?” She pulls one from the file. “Let’s go see if any of Lt. Cortez’ neighbors recognize him.”

“And if they do not?”
“I’ll recheck the surveillance on the entrance to the building now that we have a face to look for.”

“We should call Gibbs while we are on our way.”

“We’ve got movement Boss. Looks like our girl.”

“I see her. How do you think we should handle this?”

“Let’s stop her before she hits the elevator, it’ll probably be best if she doesn’t see the crime scene tape.”

“You go ahead, be charming. Stall her until I can scare the hell out of her.”

“You sure you want me flirting?”

“As you told me, when you do it for a case it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I appreciate that, but what I meant was given what we know of Elena Dalton wouldn’t that be as likely to make her run as barking ‘stop police!’?”

Gibbs chuckles slightly, “Point taken. Why don’t we just call her name and introduce ourselves then?”

“Miss Dalton?” Tony calls as he jogs across the street. She turns, clearly startled. “Excuse me Ma’am, but I need a word with you.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Special Agent DiNozzo, this is Special Agent Gibbs. We’re with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.”

Worry clouds her features, “Is Diego in trouble?”

Tony allows himself half a seconds hesitation to glance at Gibbs, “I’m sorry to tell you he was murdered early yesterday morning.”

Gibbs steps forward and uses the tone usually reserved for young children and Abby, “We know this is a shock as well as an overwhelming loss but we’d appreciate it if you could spare us a little time. It would help us catch his killer and we could transport you to your mother’s while we speak. I’m sure she could use your help.”

At that she visibly crumples, “He can’t be dead. He just can’t.”

Tony offers her a steadying hand, “I’m so sorry Ma’am, but he is.”

“But… He’s always been there for me. He’s always been the strong one. The level headed one.” She gives a pained laugh, “He always said I’d wind up dead in a ditch if I didn’t straighten my life out.”

“Are you in some sort of trouble now Ma’am?”

“No. Diego got me out of a bad situation about six months ago and things have been quiet for both of us ever since.”

They get into the rental and Tony contorts himself a bit to face her, “Might that have been a reason
for someone to target your cousin, Ms. Dalton?"

“No. No, well I don’t think so…”

“What sort of trouble were you in?”

“I had fallen in with the wrong crowd. I was being pushed to do things I wasn’t comfortable with
and I felt trapped by the situation.”

“We are aware of where you really work,” Tony informs her quietly. “What exactly was going on?”

“I was working as an exotic dancer and Nero, one of the bouncers, was pressuring me to become
one of his girls. He thinks he’s a big time gangster and a pimp. Mama’s getting older but she can’t
really afford to retire and I need to start supporting both of us but there’s just no way I was doing
that. Diego found me the job at Shahrazad. The girls are nice. The clients are respectable. And if
anybody tries anything the company helps file assault charges. All I do is look pretty and act like the
man whose arm I’m on is the most charming thing I’ve ever seen.”

“If it’s that easy why did you need help to get there?”

“They don’t take just anyone. For one, Agent DiNozzo, if I had your manners I’d be no good to the
service at all. I have to convince everyone from the suspicious business partner to the generous
benefactor to the wait staff that I belong there. That I met him in Paris or over cocktails at a charity
event. If I seem out of place to even one person I haven’t done my job.”

“Fair enough. How angry was Nero when your cousin intervened?”

“He did some posturing, made some threats. He had to or risk someone else doing what Diego did.
Everyone knows what happens to a guy like Nero if people lose respect for him. But they talked. I
don’t know what was said exactly but Nero told his boys they made a deal.” She sniffs, “Diego
knew his limitations, he wasn’t trying to save the world. He didn’t even ask me to try talking the
other girls into leaving. He just wanted me safe.”

“You’re sure Nero wouldn’t come after Diego?”

“Well, no. But I don’t think he’d bother.”

Gibbs and Tony exchange a glance but before either can speak Gibbs’ phone rings.

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“Boss? We showed Johansen’s picture to Lt. Cortez’s neighbors. Two of them said they’d seen him
a couple of times in the days before the murder. But the neighbor across the hall said both times she
saw him he was with a ‘blond, slender, about five ten, green eyes and a nervous demeanor.’”

“Sounds vaguely familiar. Any idea who she is?”

“Ziva mentioned that it sounds like someone from Reslin Avionics.”

“Check it out.”

“On it Boss.”

Ziva leads the way as they arrive at Reslin, causing the security guard to make a highly suspicious
and hushed call. He seems surprised when she asks to speak to “Dr. Coltrane’s assistant.”
He makes another, calmer call and nods at them, “Ms. Hollis will meet the elevator on the fourth floor.”

Ziva smiles at him, “Thank you.”

McGee can’t suppress a surprised expression.

When the elevator doors close Ziva glares at him, “Is it so incomprehensible that I am polite?”

“To some random security guard? Yes.”

“I have all ready established my role as ‘good cop’ here, I shall continue so long as it is useful.”

“Is that what Gibbs was in a mood about when you got back yesterday?”

“Gibbs is always in a mood.”

“Not lately. I think it’s because he’s got the next future ex-Mrs. Gibbs in the wings. In comparison to his usual mood he’s been a ray of sunshine the past month or so. He hasn’t been growling or smacking us as much. He’s not like a dog protecting its bone every time we get a case. Which is odd considering how much the director’s been nosing around. And I think he keeps taking Tony out with him because Tony’s so caught up with his new boyfriend he doesn’t notice a thing.”

McGee can see Ziva suppressing her immediate response but thinks nothing of it, “I had assumed his teaming himself with Tony more often was meant as a show of confidence in our abilities. No matter what you might say to Tony you know as well as I do he is the senior field agent and Gibbs puts a good portion of the supervisory responsibility in his hands. Or had you not noticed that it is always Tony that signs off on our performance and compensation reviews, not Gibbs?”

McGee has the good sense to look entirely pole-axed, “Tony really does write our reviews?”

Ziva shrugs, “He has written all of mine at least.” She studies her team mate for a moment, “Does it really disturb you that much? He was team leader for a time, surely you realized he was above you in the ladder of command.”

“Chain of command,” He corrects automatically before checking any other response in deference to their arrival on the fourth floor.

“Officer David, How may I help you today?”

“We have a few more questions Ms. Hollis.”

“Certainly. If you’ll follow me I’ll just let Dr. Coltrane know that you’re waiting.”

McGee steps a bit closer to her at that, “Actually Ms. Hollis, it’s you we’d like to speak to.”

That obviously startles her. “Oh. Well, just let me inform Dr. Coltrane that I’ll be unavailable for a few moments then.”

McGee and Ziva trade glances as Hollis steps into her office but don’t say a word until she’s lead them into a conference room down the hall.

“I’ll give you all the help I can, obviously, but I didn’t really know Lt. Cortez all that well.”

McGee checks his ‘notes’, “I understand there was a problem with the Lieutenant’s security access a few weeks ago?”
“Dr. Harvey tightened the access group for the test of the Mark 3 prototype and forgot to include Lt. Cortez on the approved list security was working from. It was an honest mistake. Day to day Lt. Cortez didn’t spend much time in the testing lab. His primary function between test flights was stress testing the materials and participating in simulations for the development lab.”

“Were there any prior problems between Lieutenant Cortez and Dr. Harvey? Even professional disagreements?”

“There were never any professionally problems between them actually. They clearly didn’t like each other, but they didn’t let it effect the project.” She seems to be relaxing, “Dr. Harvey was hoping to secure a long term, exclusive no bid contract with the Maple Key project and Lt. Cortez was sure it would save lives if it worked. They were both very invested in its success.”

“And how does Dr. Harvey get along with the rest of the staff here?” Ziva presses gently.

“No one likes Mitchel Harvey very much, Officer David. He’s a hard man. Demanding. Rigid. Not exactly the type of person you’d want to spend time with. But he’s brilliant and professionally actually very respectful. He credits good work and never forgets that without the staff he’d be just another out of work idea man.”

McGee makes a show of checking his notes, “What about you Ms. Hollis? How did you get along with Lt. Cortez?”

Her tension returns instantly, “I rarely so much as spoke to Lt. Cortez. As you know I’m Dr. Coltrane’s assistant and Dr. Coltrane is the chief administrator at our facility. I am of course privy to his meetings with Department heads and project chairs but he didn’t interact with the Lieutenant so neither did I. I believe the most I ever spoke to him was a few weeks after they brought him on the project when he asked to sit with Mary St. Clair, one of the other assistants, and myself.”

“Where were you between 11 PM Sunday and 2 AM Monday?”

“At home, asleep. Where else would I be?”

“One of Lt. Cortez’s neighbors seems to think you were in his building.”

“I don’t know what’s you’re talking about.”

Ziva pulls Johansen’s picture out of a file, “Do you know this man?”


McGee and Ziva share a look. “When was the last time you saw Mr. Johansen?”

“He stayed with me last night.”

“Do you happen to live in Aurora near Colfax Ave.?”

She laughs genuinely, “Neither of you are from around here, are you?”

“No, we are not.”

“Colfax is one of the longest surface roads in America. Everywhere in Denver is near Colfax, you’ll have to be more specific.”

McGee takes an assessing look at the map in the file, “Near Potomac and East 13th then.”
“No, I live on Franklin and East 37th.”

“Then you’ll need to come with us, Ms. Hollis.”

Her panic is palpable, “Why would that be?”

“We have footage from an ATM you passed by at 11:18 PM Sunday night putting you 40 yards from Diego Cortez’s building. Lying about your whereabouts clearly requires further investigation.”

“You may come with us quietly and not arouse the interest of your coworkers or we can restrain you and lead you out of the building in disgrace.”

She makes no verbal answer but gets quietly to her feet.

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“Do you think she was covering for him?”

“I think she really believes they worked something out. She kept saying things like ‘guys like Nero’ but I don’t think she had any idea what it takes to remain top dog in that world. Maybe Nero got nervous, decided Cortez had to go before he tried it again.”

“So, friendly cop, pissed off cop or disdainful federal agents?”

“Let’s play it by ear.” Gibbs lets the silence settle for a few blocks before glancing over at Tony, “Why’d you let McGee get to you at breakfast?”

“Get to me?” Tony is genuinely confused.

“You flinched like he’d hit you when he said three months didn’t make you an expert.”

“Of course you caught that,” He grumbles. “I just forgot for a second.”

“Forgot?”

“That he wasn’t talking about us. That he had no idea what he was talking about at all. The reaction was to him claiming you and I wouldn’t last. But he was talking about me and some imagined man he’s thought up. Probably imagines you’re the twenty-something doctors’ without borders poster boy with a tiny eight year old wunderkind on your hip.”

Gibbs laughs, “She was cute as a button and her mother says she was always whip smart. And are you calling me old there sex machine?”

“Not at all. What the hell would I want with a twenty-something doctor? I’d have to house train him, and I’m sure as hell not up for that.”

“This is the place. You want to take the back or the front door?”

Tony eyes the building in question, “I’ll take the front, try to blend in with the afternoon crowd.”

“No touching. And I’m giving you five minutes before I come in signal or not.”

“On it Boss.”

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“Zack said we were just looking for an old friend of his. Said they were both involved with the same stock broker and the other guy was rocking the boat. He knew the street address but not the apartment number. We hung around in the lobby for awhile Saturday afternoon but it didn’t get us anywhere. Zack made some calls and found out his friend lived on the fifth floor. When we got upstairs he showed me Cortez’s picture and I panicked a little. I told Zack we should just leave. He wouldn’t so I headed home alone. I had barely made it out of the building when I heard the shot but I couldn’t believe Zack would do that. Am I going to go to jail? For helping Zack find Cortez?”

“If you help us find Zachary I’ll make sure they know you cooperated with us.”

“He’s staying at the Motel 6 on I-85 near 16th Ave.”

McGee exits the interrogation room, “Could you hold her as a material witness for us Detective Spencer?”

“Assuming you have a material witness order.”

“Of Course.” He motions Ziva out the door, “Call Gibbs, let him know we have a suspect and we’re headed to pick him up.”

“What in the name of hell made you suggest he branch out? Even if he hadn’t taken a swing at you one of the strip club patrons was sure to.”

“He knew I didn’t belong there. Said I was awful nosy, I figured taking a swing at me for being queer was better than considering that I might be a cop.”

“And it never occurred to you he might not aim for your pretty face?”

“It never occurred to me he’d get his buddy behind me to do it for him.”

“Do we need to go to the hospital?”

“No, he just bruised a couple of ribs.”

“Only you would consider a couple of bruised ribs a good outcome.”

“I can now tell you for a fact there’s no way Nero’s our guy. He’s so stupid he would have left some big, flashy gangland message to prove he’s the biggest bad guy around. Hell he’d have practically signed it.”

“True. But whoever our guy is, he isn’t much brighter.”

Tony’s phone rings and after a short conversation he offers a sheepish smile, “Sounds like we’re about to find out, McGee and Ziva just picked up their suspect.”

As they speed through the streets of Denver Tony notes that the locals are better equipped to react to Gibbs’ driving than the folks in DC generally are. Some of them might even drive worse, objectively speaking. When they arrive both McGee and Ziva are waiting with Detective Spencer.

Gibbs asks a mild, “He confessed?”

“Um, no Boss we were waiting for you.”

“You’re a big boy now McGee you can handle this on your own.”
Ziva briefs Gibbs as Tony observes the interrogation. It doesn’t take much at all to break Johansen. When McGee mentions that his girlfriend gave him up he just starts talking. First about the aerosol release of the neurotoxin they were developing at Hillcrest. Next about the cover up and Montrose’s settlements being conditional on all the families remaining silent. About his dependence on the settlement payments. Finally about Cortez’s statements that Montrose deserved to pay for the deaths, not in money but in jail time.

Tony just shakes his head and rubs his sore back.

Gibbs walks up behind him, and confidently replaces Tony’s hand with his own, “Want a massage when we’re done?”

Tony hums appreciatively, “After dinner.”

“Delegate the booking.”
When Tony and Gibbs return from a lunch out together on Thursday Fornell has made himself at home behind Gibbs’ desk. It raises Tony’s heckles but he bites his tongue.

“There you are Jethro. I thought I was going to have to wait here all day.”

“If you’d just called me you could have gotten a hold of me half an hour ago Tobias.”

“Needed to speak to you in person.”

“Get Abby’s report before you hand out assignments. I’ll be in the conference room.”

“Already on it Boss.” Tony holds eye contact as long as he can, trying to communicate his unease without resorting to signing.

Gibbs nods in acknowledgement and follows Fornell out to the conference room. “To what do I owe the pleasure Tobias?”

“I need your help Jethro.”

“Go on.”

“I received some written death threats this morning. They’re credible. I’m going to a safe house straight from here but the problem is I’ve got Emily until tomorrow afternoon and I don’t want her anywhere near this.”

“Details Tobias.”

“She’s at school right now. Her principal knows what’s going on and is going to hold her until you pick her up. Diane is out of town until noon tomorrow. When she comes in a couple of my agents are going to meet her, they can bring her here to pick Emily up on her way to a safe house. I just need you to keep her safe for twenty-four hours Jethro. There were no direct threats against Em but I don’t want to take chances.”

“We’ll need to clear it with Jenny if I’m going to bring her here. And she’s going to be bored at my place.”

“Sheppard will be easy won’t she? Or did you tell her about the boy toy?”

Gibbs rolls his eyes, “He’s not a boy toy Tobias. And she thinks, as you did, that he’s another one of my red heads. Which is why I might not be your best ally when it comes to getting her on your side.”

“I’ll talk to her alone then.”

“I’ll head out to pick up Em as soon as you get the ok.”

“Thank you Jethro. As for Em being bored, she’s a kid, they carry their own entertainment these days. Coming?”

“Gotta call the boyfriend, tell him to stay home tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that.”
Gibbs dials just the same, “Hey Babe.” Fornell exits the conference room grinning.

“What’s going on sweet cheeks?”

“Tobias needs me to look after Emily for the night. It’s up to you if you want to come over or not.”

“You mean it’s up to me if we out ourselves to him or not.”

“That’s the gist of it, yeah.”

“Let me think about it. I’ll let you know around quitting time. This going to interfere with our trip?”

“Shouldn’t, but you know how these things go.”

“You may not be my sugar daddy but if I have to eat Friday’s reservation you’re paying for it.”

“If you’ll recall I wanted to pay for it in the first place.”

“And I told you that you can pay for the Park Central stay but in Baltimore I’m footing the bill.”

“Abby’s right, you can out stubborn me any day.”

“I don’t know about that.”

They hang up and as Gibbs re-enters the bullpen Fornell descends from upstairs. “I’ll be gone a while DiNozzo, call me if you get a break on Kopchek or Deboniski.”

“Abbs got a hit on one of the accounts but we can handle it Boss.”

Gibbs nods and boards the main elevator beside Fornell. “So I know him then?”

“If you say so.”

“Why else would Emily meeting him matter?”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like kids.”

“Pull the other one, it’s got bells.”

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When Gibbs returns Tony makes eye contact briefly but doesn’t say anything until Emily sits at Gibbs’ desk and pulls out a video game. “Ziva and McGee are at the bank talking to the accounts agent that opened the suspicious account but I need to go have a word with Abbs.”

Gibbs nods his understanding and Tony heads out. Abby pouts when he turns down her music, but then she catches the look on his face and hugs him instead, “What’s wrong Tony?”

“It’s not wrong, not exactly. Fornell had a death threat made against him and Emily was staying with him, so Jethro agreed to take care of her for the night. No big deal, I expect absolutely nothing less from him. But he left it up to me whether or not I go home tonight. Effectively making it my choice if Fornell finds out about us or not. And I don’t know if I trust Fornell.”

“If you’re this bothered by it I’d have to say it isn’t time for him to know.”

Tony sighs, “I just don’t want the shadow of this cast over our vacation. In either direction. Either I decide to hide and risk one or both of us having issues crop up over it, or I decide to face this head
on and we wait ten days to find out if he ran to Sheppard or not.”

“Nothing I say is actually going to help, is it?”

“If it makes you feel better, as much as I’m talking what I really came down for is a hug.” Abby wraps him in a tight hug and just holds him until he speaks again, “I just needed to vent a little first Princess. What do you think I should do?”

She pulls back to look at him, “I don’t think Fornell has ever actually been out to get you. And he doesn’t really get along with Madame Wicked Stepmother all that well, so I think it’d be okay. Besides, he’s pretty much Pop’s best friend…”

“So you’re pro-telling Fornell is what you’re saying?”

“I think the less you have to hide the better, for both of you.”

“You don’t secretly call him uncle Toby or anything, do you?”

Abby laughs, “No Tony. I honestly just think it’d be for the best. But what I think, hell what Pop thinks, doesn’t matter. What you think is all that matters.”

“I guess maybe I’m still not over him arresting me for murder.”

“That wasn’t his fault Tony. He had no way of knowing that the wicked stepmother gave that creepy little hobgoblin access to both you and my lab.”

“I know Princess, and I’m trying to let it go. Especially as it’ll make our trip go so much smoother if we can take one car tomorrow. But on top of all the prudent, well reasoned arguments against telling him is my inner child shouting ‘but it’s mine and I don’t wanna share damn it!’”

“In the end we can’t tell you what to do Tony.”

“And I’m being a crap stepfather right now, too.”

“We are friends first, last and always Tony. I’m too old for you to worry about that nonsense.”

“And if I asked you to come over and distract Emily for a few minutes so I can have a private word with Jethro?”

“That would make you a horrible excuse for a stepfather.”

“Thanks for the reality check Abbs. You’re the best.” He kisses her cheek when she tilts her head in his direction.

“Just relax, it’ll be fine.”

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Tony deliberately arrives at the house first, banking on Gibbs driving like a human being because he has a child in the car. He puts his car in the garage in preparation for its weekend stay and makes an honest effort at seeking out a kid friendly meal among the purposely dwindling contents of the kitchen. After less than five minutes he shrugs in silent defeat, not knowing what constitutes kid friendly as much as anything else. In stead he heads upstairs to change.

He’s just pulled on a sweatshirt he’s not sure belongs to him when there’s a thunder of small feet on the stairs followed by Gibbs’ more sedate steps. Both stop at the top. “Do your homework before
dinner and we’ll find something fun to do later.” The tone says it all, it may have been phrased as a deal but it’s an order just the same.

“That’s a deal. I’ll still be due on Monday.” Tony’s impressed; he’d probably be threatening or wheedling by now.

“Is there somewhere I can set up my iPod at least?”

“Abby has a port or something set up on the nightstand in the guest room. You can work in there.”

Gibbs enter the bedroom after a few seconds, smirking. “Hiding out?”

“Not exactly. I was changing when you got here. I just...didn’t come out. Figured I’d listen a little, get the lay of the land. How well do you know Emily?”

“A little. She knows my name. She knows I’m her father’s friend. And she’s one of those kids who knows if they’re ever in real trouble they can run to me.”

Tony nods, processing. “How much does she know about the situation?”

“That her dad’s is in danger but he’s ok and she’s safe, but that she needs to be here so she’ll keep being safe.”

“That’s good, we won’t spend all night fielding ‘why can’t I’ questions at least. How much does she know about our situation?”

“It seems Tobias told her to ‘be good and mind Jethro and his boyfriend.’ So more than I would have told her unless she asked.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay with Fornell knowing?”

“I am in no way ashamed or embarrassed about you Tony. And if you mean trusting him not to gossip like a ten year old girl, I promise I trust him.”

“Okay. What’d you plan on feeding our company then?”

“The cupboards are a little bare, I thought we might just order pizza. Any suggestions on what might constitute fun without letting her leave the house?”

“I’ve got some games on my computer and some possibly kid friendly DVDs. But I think it depends on her. And I’m not exactly the experts on kids here.”

Gibbs smiles in acknowledgement before giving in to the urge to kiss Tony, glad to be where they can get away with at least that, even with young company. “But you are the household expert on pizza, so why don’t you see what Emily likes on her pizza and put an order in for us?”

“You’re just not going to be happy until I jump in with both feet, are you?”

“I’m not pushing you Tony. But you came here instead of going to your apartment. Which reminds me there was something addressed to you in the mail.”

He closes his eyes and rests his forehead against Gibbs’, “Cover me Boss, I’m going in.”

“You’ll do fine,” After another kiss Gibbs heads for his own loungewear in a silent command.
Tony pauses in the guestroom doorway, reminded of Abby despite the fact that the music is cookie cutter pop and not quite in the ear splitting volume range. Emily’s foot is tapping the chair in time with the beat and she startles obviously when Tony knocks on the doorjamb.

She turns in the chair and does that apprehensive young girl laugh that he remembers getting scores of when he was in school, “Agent DiNozzo! I didn’t know you were here.”

“It’s just Tony at home, we figured we’d just order pizza but Jethro didn’t know what toppings you like. Any preferences?”

He can see her working out what this means and braces for some sort of impact. When she just looks disappointed and shrugs he feels vaguely cheated. “Sausage and green peppers.”

“Coming right up.”

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Everything goes well until Fornell calls to touch base with his daughter before bed. Neither of them thinks anything of it when she answers her phone with a slightly exasperated “Yes Daddy?” There’s a long pause. “Yes Daddy. I’m behaving.” “I’m minding Jethro just fine and Tony hasn’t really told me to do anything.”

They both jump when she yells out “Jethro! Dad wants to talk to you.”

Gibbs accepts the pink cell phone with a look of mild distaste. “What can I do for you tonight Tobias?” He leaves them in the den as he takes the call in the kitchen.

“Did I hear my daughter correctly? You’ve shacked up with DiNote-zoe?”

“No, our new houseboy is named Tony.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Three months Tobias. Is this suddenly a problem for you?”

“A problem? No. Funny as hell? Only a lot. You know I considered it and dismissed the possibility when I found him at your place two weeks ago.”

“So long as you don’t have an undeniable need to blab about it all over town you can think what you will.”

“You mean so long as I don’t go whispering in Jenny Sheppard’s ear.”

“Pretty much.”

“Not a problem. And I’ll give you one thing Jethro, he is pretty.”

“I’ll let him know you think so.”

“He any good with the domestic stuff?”

“Why do you care Tobias?” He rolls his eyes but answers. “He’s fussier than I am about the cleaning and a pretty damn good cook. Neither of which effects us watching over your child.”

“I’m just enjoying a laugh at your expense here.”
Laugh all you want. I’m happy. No one nags or gets badly timed head aches or resents my boat and my job. And your kid is about to go to bed.”

“Put her on. I’ll say goodnight and rag on you another time.”

“Sure thing.” Gibbs walks the phone back to Emily before pulling Tony into the kitchen. “You can calm down.”

“He didn’t realize which Tony she meant?”

“He thinks it’s funny as hell but he has no intention of gossiping about it.” Gibbs smirks, “And he says you’re pretty.”

“He comes within ten feet of me with any such intention and I will shoot him.”

That earns a startled laugh. “I’m going to put the company to bed. You going to stay down here awhile?”

“It’s barely nine Jethro.”

“Which is her bed time.”

“I was referring to the idea of you and I going to bed. Since I won’t be getting what I really want I’m expecting at the very least a human pillow for a Hitchcock flick. If you hurry I’ll let you pick which one.”

While Gibbs gets Emily squared away Tony pops a bowl of popcorn and notices the envelope that arrived for him. It’s oversized, one of those priority mail envelopes, and has “Do Not Bend” stamped across the front. When he opens it he’s pleasantly surprised, it’s the larger reprints of some of his recent photos. He hadn’t expected them to arrive before the holiday. He shakes his head at his own foolishness when he finds himself considering places here in Gibbs’ house rather than in his own apartment to hang them. He’s still looking them over when Gibbs wraps his arms around him, “I like that one.”

Tony holds it up and smiles, “So do I. She looks beautiful and your smile could heat the whole house.”

“You just have a thing for the uniform.”

“No, if I have a thing, it’s for you actually smiling. It’s a hell of a thing when you smile Jethro. And when you’re smiling at Abbs… I can’t help but think that’s how you were meant to smile. It’s open, honest, warm, proud and just… genuine.”

“I guess it’s just one of those ‘you never see yourself as others do’ things. I look at this picture and all I see is my beautiful girl.”

Tony pauses and then holds up the one of the two of them nestled together on the sofa, “What do you see here?”

“Home.” With that he grabs the drinks and heads back into the den leaving Tony floored in his wake.

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Emily is gently but firmly instructed not to mention that Tony was at the house on the way into
office. She rolls her eyes at them, “I’m not five you know. Who you date is your business not anyone else’s. I didn’t know Daddy didn’t know or I wouldn’t have said.”

“We don’t mind that you told him Emily. We just need it to stay a secret at work.”

Emily is the picture of discretion, Ziva however makes several pointed comments.

Tony is in fact rather grateful when Diane arrives with a tight, “Jethro.”

Gibbs returns an equally tight “Diane” just in time to be overridden by Emily’s “Mom!”

The director descends into the scene, “Ms. Dawson, I trust the Agents who picked you up briefed you on your protection detail.”

“Yes Director Sheppard. It’s not the first time we’ve been taken care of by Agents Lister and Rossi. But we are grateful that you allowed Jethro to take care of Emily here. And I’m sorry if doing so caused any disruptions.”

“I consider Agent Fornell a friend of the Agency and it was our pleasure to help keep Emily safe. As for disruption, it was likely more paperwork got done with her here than would have been otherwise completed.”

Clearly unsure if it’s a joke or not Diane begins to collect her daughter's things. Once the women have left Tony glances across the bullpen before calling out, “I’m going to head down for Abby’s report on where they routed the money, it might give us a starting point for the money laundering ring.”

Gibbs nods his acknowledgement, knowing full well he means he wants to talk to Abbs about the upcoming week before the others start trying to interrogate him about his plans for their week off.

Abby smirks when Tony walks in, “How’d playing Mommy treat you?”

“Very funny Abbs. All I did was order pizza and provide the entertainment. Any and all care giving duties fell to your father.”

“Pop’s good like that. What can I do for you today?”

“I wanted to touch base with you about the weekend because we’re hitting the road at quitting time. Is Chester going to be staying with you?”

“Unless he chickens out.”

“I’m going to check you in when we get there. Just call me when you hit Manhattan and we’ll meet you in the lobby. You have the directions?”

“I’ve got them. Are you honestly stressing over this?”

“A little. Mostly about Stevie and BT figuring out that Jethro’s in the hotel and trying to be funny.”

“BT?”

“Blair Timor York. I’d make people call me BT too.”

“And what would they consider being funny?”

“Storming our room like it’s their own personal Normandy with scads of gay porn and the story of
how they figured out the ‘Sex Machine’ really was tutoring the cheerleaders. Or the one about when they discovered that I didn’t know the ROTC captain from ‘back home’.

“How’d they react to that?”

“Oddly enough it got me smacked in the ass with a towel a little more often and pushed toward every guy they thought was my type. I think it’s why I made the effort to stay in touch with all the guys. They were the first group of people I ever knew who just shrugged and accepted me for who I am.”

“So what does it matter if they try to embarrass you? Isn’t that how it’s supposed to work?”

“Their regard is a little… intense for the uninitiated. I won’t put it past BT to get his hands on a shot gun and demand that Jethro ‘do right’ by me. Apparently where he’s from that’s still the accepted method for coaxing the reluctant into a marriage. And as much as we’ve been joking about it I think Jethro might shoot BT over the method of delivery.”

“He’ll get along with your friends just fine Tony, especially because he won’t pull that ‘still waters run deep’ crap on them.”

“Thanks Abby. One more visit like this and I’m going to have to start paying you for your services as a shirk.”

“Nonsense Tony, we’re family.”

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When Tony returns upstairs Gibbs is gone, presumably on a coffee run. Ziva smirks but surprises him all the same when she asks, “Did you make plans for Thanksgiving after all Tony?”

“I asked me to come to the family dinner. Did you find someone to celebrate with?”

“I did receive an invitation from Ducky but because we were granted the whole week off my father requested that I use the time to return home.”

“What about you McGeeky?”

“My sister and I are going home too. Is your dad upset you aren’t going home Tony?”

“I doubt he’ll actually notice I’m not there. He was concerned the Times might mention the fact that ‘his son was not in attendance’ and make him look bad.”

“He is actually influential enough to garner the attention of reporters?” Ziva asks curiously.

“His company is one of the major contributors to the St. Cecelia’s Foundation and he’s in the middle of a big merger so there are some eyes on him. And he makes the society pages from time to time when the wife of the moment takes him out to covered events. It’s not like there will be pictures of the family dinner but if it’s a slow gossip day there could be a mention of his poor disowned son not being invited to his table.”

“Did he disown you because…” McGee makes a rather ineffectual hand gesture.

Tony laughs at the obvious discomfort, “No. He disowned me to please Wife number two. She was after his money and didn’t want me getting a cut of her big pay day. Unfortunately for her Dad isn’t exactly a ‘til death do we part’ kind of guy and he’s well protected against divorce lawyers.”
“Correct me if I am wrong but is it not considered something of a large step to meet a lover’s family?”

“It’s ‘big step’ and yes generally speaking meeting family is a big deal.”

“It’s a prelude to getting really serious, sometimes it even means a marriage proposal is on the horizon,” McGee is clearly trying to tease.

“That one’s doubtful McMatchmaker. As for things getting serious… I think we’re already there.”

“I am glad for you Tony. You have been much happier lately.”

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When they check in at the Hilton Baltimore Tony calls Luke to let him know they’ve arrived and he asks to have dinner with them. “We came straight from work. Give us half an hour?”

“No problem. I need to check in with Sherry first anyway. Meet you downstairs?”

“We’ll be there.” Tony stretches and watches Gibbs pulling casual clothes out of their bags. “Shower with me?”

“You going to wash my back?”

“If you’ll wash mine. Come spend a little alone time with me,” Tony coaxes.

“I’m not the one who agreed to go out to dinner with someone,” Gibbs protests even as he pulls Tony into the bathroom.

“We’re popular boys, it’s simply too much to ask for us to be left alone.”

That earns him a laugh and a quick massage before they dress and hurry down to the lobby.


Knowing he’s being evaluated Gibbs makes an effort to be friendly during dinner and leaves them alone for a few minutes after the meal under the guise of calling Abby.

When they’re alone Luke turns an assessing gaze on Tony, “Are you sure you’ve only been dating three months?”

Tony laughs, “We circled each other for three years first, but yes.”

“So when you say dating you mean sleeping together.”

“No when I say dating I mean spending time together in a recreational fashion with the expressed intention of cultivating a lasting relationship that includes but is not based on sex.”

“Hey now, don’t get defensive with me. You two just fit really well together. Hell if Sherry was here she’d probably be cooing over how cute the whole thing is.”

“I’m glad to amuse you then.” He shakes his head, “Even before we were actually together Jethro and I spent most of our time together. We just… It wasn’t personal, or at least we tried to keep it from being personal. And around the rest of the team he was pretty much a functional mute. I gotta admit I was floored when we went out the first time and he just, started talking. Not that either of us has laid it all out on the table. Damnit Luke why are you letting me ramble?”
“Because hopelessly smitten is a good look on you. And for the record? You are totally 100% committed Tony. There may not be a formal ceremony involved but it’s Mark that’s the last bachelor among us, not you.” Luke grins evilly, “Especially as your man seems to have a possessive streak.”

“I have no idea what you’re on about.”

“He kept at least one hand on you at all times until he’d decided I had no interest in you.”

“When we’re not on duty we touch a lot. At home or in public doesn’t matter.”

“Your dad must be in a self-righteous rage over that.”

“Dad’s busy doing preemptive damage control for the scene he expects me to make on Sunday.”

“What’s the nefarious plot you’re supposed to be hatching?”

“I told Father Vincenzo that I’m bringing my stepdaughter and her date along with my date. Dad’s worried that’s how I’m going to make introductions. I hadn’t really planned on it, at least not so blatantly, but if Dad can’t behave himself I still remember how to oh so casually point out who my father is.”

“Stepdaughter?”

“My friend Abby is Jethro’s daughter. She declared me her stepfather immediately upon finding out we were dating. She’d been trying to get us together for a while. I have pictures of her in the stack I’m bringing with me tomorrow night. Which reminds me, the others do not need to know Jethro’s here, you get me?”

“You do know he could probably kick their asses, right?”

“I spar with him, I know it for a fact. But I want him in a good mood when it comes time to do the society schmoozing, distant relative charming routine on Sunday.”

“I get that. When Jethro gets back I think I’m going to call it a night, let you guys have a little alone time.”

“Thanks man.”
Saturday morning they lose themselves in the tourist role, Tony acting as guide. It’s freeing being somewhere they’re not likely to be recognized, or even noticed. Tony’s also pleased that Gibbs lets him ramble about the history of the buildings, his own experiences and sites of television and movie filming without so much as an impatient look. They stop at a sleepy looking mom and pop Italian restaurant for a late lunch. Tony grins brightly at the young man who steps up to lead them to a table, “Still working for your folks Nicky?”

Nicky eyes him for a moment, “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

Tony blushes, “Sorry. I used to be a regular, guess I just forgot how long five years is to a teenager.”

Nicky still looks confused as an older man, graying at the temples steps into the foyer from the dinning room, “Is there a problem here Nicky?”

“No Papa, no problem-“ He’s cut off.

“Anthony! Francesca will be so happy to see you. Was Nicky giving you trouble?”

Tony laughs, “No, he just didn’t remember me. It's good to see you again Mr. Scarpa.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times Anthony it’s Ray. And Nicky, for shame boy. How could you forget Anthony? He was almost your brother and not all that long ago either.”

“You’re exaggerating again Mr. Scarpa. One Christmas dinner does not an adoption make.”

“Francesca was ready to strangle your father over that Anthony. Nicky set number thirteen for them. We’ll have to visit Frannie first or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

A glance over his shoulder reminds Tony that introductions are in order. He takes Gibbs’ arm, “Jethro, this is Nicky and Ray Scarpa, some old friends of mine. Ray, Nicky, this is my boyfriend, Jethro Gibbs.”

Gibbs shakes hands and offers a genuine, “Pleased to meet you both,” as it’s clear these folks were a happy part of Tony’s life in Baltimore.

“Likewise,” Ray chuckles, “And Frannie really will want to meet you then. She’s very picky about who takes care of her boys.”

“It’s not like I’m wasting away you know,” Tony grumbles with the practiced annoyance of a stock response.

They push through the swinging door into the kitchen and an aggravated female voice calls out, “So help me Raymond if I have to call your mother-“

“I’ve brought someone back to say hello Frannie.”

“I’m coming, but don’t you dare touch that saucepot.” When she steps around the prep stations her face lights up, “Anthony DiNozzo, is that you? It’s been far too long sweetheart.”

“It’s me alright Mrs. Scarpa. It’s been about five years. As much as I love you it’s a bit of a commute from Washington.”
She envelopes him in a tight hug before stepping back and scrutinizing him carefully, “You look good, clearly you found someone new to take care of you. A girl maybe?”

Tony laughs, “Not as such. I got better at taking care of myself. Well until recently. Nowadays Jethro and I look after each other, which brings us to proper introductions. Mrs. Scarpa, I’d like you to meet Jethro Gibbs, my boyfriend.”

She gives Gibbs a long penetrating gaze, “Aren’t you the one that whisked our Anthony away?”

Though he manages to maintain a charming smile he cringes internally, “I am Ma’am. He wasn’t being properly appreciated in his work despite how well you were looking after him.”

“So you took it upon yourself to ride in like the white knight in a fairy tale and carry him off in search of glory?”

Gibbs laughs, “That isn’t how I’d put it, but I suppose it’s true all the same. We do from time to time manage to rescue a fair maiden or two.”

“Just know this Mr. Gibbs, Anthony is one of my boys whether he accepts it or not. That means if you hurt him I will hunt you down and hurt you.”

“You’d have to wait in line Ma’am. My daughter, and two of our co-workers, both of whom are quite frightening in their own right would be there before I could get my foot out of my mouth. And besides, I know better than to ruin what just might be the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Tony turns wide eyed at that.

Not one to blush or backtrack Gibbs just gives his hand a gentle squeeze, “Wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

Tony’s grin is shy and delighted for a few seconds before he quips, “If I’m the best thing to happen to you so far Jethro you’ve been leading a sheltered life.”

Gibbs doesn’t allow that, “Just know a good thing when I’ve got it.”

Mrs. Scarpa pats Gibbs’ cheek, “That’s a good boy. Now shoo, I can’t cook for my Anthony if I’m clucking away like a chicken.”

At the end of the meal Tony is hugged enthusiastically and admonished to resume writing. Gibbs can’t help but smile. “For someone with a less than ideal family you sure have a lot of adoptive family members.”

“The consensus always seemed to be that I was a wounded puppy.”

Gibbs shakes his head, “I don’t think so. I think it’s that when you let people in they see how special you are and want to protect that.”

Feeling suddenly exposed Tony plasters a false leer on his face and questions, “I’m special?”

Gibbs offers a soft but distinct head smack in return, “I’m not blowing smoke up your ass here Tony. Don’t need to lie to get you into my bed and we both know it. From what I’ve seen your father is all about what value a person can be to him, what he can get from them. The fact that you had that as your primary example and still came out of it an empathetic and honorable man is amazing. That on top of it you went into police work when I’m sure you could have followed his example and used your natural charms to your advantage in business speaks to the kind of man you are. And that kind,
before you can ask, is a rare one.”

“It’s unfair when you go all mushy like that. I’m supposed to be the smooth one.”

“It was my turn.”

After his shower Tony lets Gibbs pull him back into the bed before he gets dressed, “So what are you going to do tonight? No boat to sand here.”

“Maybe it’s my nefarious plot to seduce you and keep you in this rented bed all night.”

“With an offer like that I’m not going anywhere.”

“But then your friends would storm the room and I’m not putting on a show,” He offers a long slow kiss as conciliation. “I’ve got a new book and I expect Abby to call on her usual pre-meeting mission to make me understand I don’t have to scare this Chester half to death.”

“Please resist the urge, just this once. At least until he’s served his purpose as Abby’s back up in that den of pretentious idiots.” Tony then presses his face into Gibbs’ neck, “Promise not to be too late or too drunk when I get back.”

Gentle fingers lift his face, “Do you not want to go all of a sudden?”

He sighs, “Luke has already firmly joined the ‘they’re so married’ club and I’m not sure I can deal with an entire night of less than tactful drunken questions about it. They’re great guys but they don’t exactly understand the world you and I live in. Everything for them is much more… black and white. They’re going to assume the secrecy is one of us being ashamed of what we have.”

“First of all from what I’ve seen and heard so far these men are your friends. Anything they push you about will be in an attempt to make sure you’re okay. Just make sure they know you’re happy and the rest should work out fine. Secondly, no matter what the situation I have your back Tony, call for me and I’m there. And for the record, even if it meant losing our jobs I could never be ashamed of what we have.”

“I know that. And I hope you know I feel the same.”

“Now go, get dressed. Spend some time with your buddies, just don’t get too drunk.”

Tony makes a face, “Hard enough to face Dad when I’m not hung over. And I’m hoping to make it worth your while if you wait up for me.”

By the time Tony arrives with the cigars- both Cubans and the cheaper version rolled by Cuban immigrants in Florida- the others are already sitting around drinking beer. He’s greeted with a warm round of his name and one loud “Finally!” Obediently he makes his way over to Mark, “Not to be ungrateful for your presence Tony but I can’t drink so a good smoke is a must.”

“Then I’m glad to deliver. So you’re taking the plunge at last, huh?” Tony accepts a beer without looking up.

“It’s time. Though Luke tells us you beat me to it.”

“Damnit Luke, we’re not married.” He tries to sound annoyed but his laughter ruins it.
“A technicality. You’re as committed as anyone else in this room Sex Machine.”

“And we’re hurt this is the first we’ve heard of it!” Pete throws in from across the room.

“Isn’t this Mark’s party?”

“We decided it should be for both of you.” Tony glares at Luke. Luke smirks back. “Where are the pictures you told me about?”

“Thought you met him?” Mark asks as Tony pulls the photos out.

“I did meet his Jethro, but Abby, the stepdaughter I’ve only heard stories about.”

“Stepdaughter?” Pete chuckles, “Never imagined you with kids, Sex Machine.”

“She’s thirty, and we’ve been friends almost as long as I’ve known her father.”

BT goes wide-eyed at that, “How old is this guy?”

Tony laughs, “Younger than Yvette,” in reference to BT’s wife.

“Tony,” BT’s tone is meant to be a warning.

Tony rolls his eyes, “Jethro is forty-eight, so calm down.”

“Don’t give me the eye roll Tony. You have daddy issues.”

“No, I don’t particularly care for my father and I doubt he ever really gave a shit about me. That does not mean I’m going to head out and get into some psychologically damaging relationship. It means I’ll chose my family over my father every time. Which reminds me, while I’m not a particularly parental figure to Abbs I will kick the ass of anyone who decides to make inappropriate comments about her.”

Pete leans over the back of the sofa and pinches Tony’s cheek, “Our little boy’s all grown up and protecting his baby, it’s sweet.”

“Here, this one is Abbs and Jethro just before they headed to the Marine Corps Birthday Ball.”

“No wonder you’re protective,” BT puts in.

Stevie laughs, “You always did like a military man.”

“It’s the haircut,” Tony deadpans. He can’t help but brace for the reaction as the photos make the rounds.

Luke’s grin becomes almost manic, “This one sums it right up!”

Paul takes a look and chuckles, “It’s adorable. Are you his widdle cuddle bunny?”

“Fuck off,” His tone is petulant and slamming his beer down on the table doesn’t help but that tone always puts him on edge.

The slightly defensive reaction must make something click for Paul, “He the one that made you take the cooking lessons?”

Tony sighs, “Yes.”
Stevie ruffles Tony’s hair, “I always knew you’d make someone a good wife one day.”

“I can see how you might make the connection, I’m sure your wife could kick your ass with one hand tied behind her back. Surely we have something better to do than to discuss my love life.”

Stevie gives one quick rap on the door to the adjoining room obviously signaling the stripper.

Tony almost groans at the overly clichéd cheerleader outfit, in Ohio State red and white no less. When her companion follows he does make a distressed little noise. “Um, you guys really, really shouldn’t have.”

Mark stage whispers, “I think Stevie’s secretly curious. Figured he could pin it on your bachelor party and still get to see a guy in a g-string.”

The ‘football player’ winks at him, “A little curiosity never hurt anybody.”

The cheerleader just giggles for a second, “Could we move the coffee table? We wouldn’t want the show to take place too far from the guests of honor, now would we?” Luke obliges silently as BT puts in a CD. She approaches Mark, “Mark right? I’m Trinity.”

The football player offers a pleased smile as he eyes Tony, “And I’m Chet, but I was called in a little late and didn’t catch your name.”

Resigned to his fate Tony shakes his head but smiles, “I’m Tony. But if Stevie wants your attention, please, feel free.”

“Suit yourself,” Chet’s clearly doubtful about the attempt to shift focus.

The routine is obviously a well practiced one, and more show than grinding and groping. Some of the guys make unhappy noises when Trinity stops at her panties but Chet goes for the full monty. But the drinks have been flowing and there are a number of hoots and wandering hands as well.

Trinity does a careful lap dance, being mindful of Mark’s cast. After one last confirmation from Tony Chet makes his own attempt at a private dance for Stevie leaving Tony with a fine view of his, admittedly very nice, ass. The cheer when Stevie pats said ass is rife with both amusement and titillation.

By the time they’ve been paid and slipped back into the other room only Tony and Mark are left sober. After a few beats of silence Mark finally weighs in, “Surprised you didn’t even want to look but I’m glad you finally found someone Tony. We were all beginning to worry.”

“But I do really seem so incapable of taking care of myself?”

“Keeping yourself fed, healthy and cleaned up after? No you do all that just fine. Making sure you’re not working too hard, taking too much emotional abuse, blaming yourself for other people’s stupidity? Not so much.” At Tony’s shocked expression Mark smiles sadly, “I know you imagine that we all buy that carefree-fun guy act you like to project and that we just couldn’t possibly understand the rigors, mental and emotional of dealing with death, violence and crime all day every day. But I at least have seen you when it had you in a bad spot Tony. I remember you railing against the world because a ten year old girl dying a violent death at the hands of someone meant to protect her was just too fucking much. I get it, even if I could never really understand it, having never been in anything nearing that situation. And I’m betting your Jethro doesn’t have that problem. Don’t be afraid of letting him help you through that shit Tony.”

“We’ve had that part worked out for a long time. He doesn’t let me get lost in my head and I don’t let
him tear the world down trying to punish himself. Not that we don't both trip up from time to time, but we're getting better.”

“Like I said, I'm glad you found the right person this time. And from what I've seen I'm guessing Luke’s right, actually married or not you are committed, and nothing about that is a bad thing Tony.”

Tony sighs, looks around and decides no one aside from Mark will remember a word he’s about to say tomorrow. “I knew before he so much as kissed me that Jethro and I were meant to be together. Like for the rest of our lives together. But neither of us has a stellar track record. We’ve both been hurt before. And in his case it’s left him a little gun shy on the big milestones. I promised him from almost the first date that I could take this as slow as he needed me to. And I meant it. Do I want to just say fuck it all, pack up all my shit and move in with him? Truth be told I do. Am I willing to do it before he’s a hundred percent sure it’s what he wants? No way in hell.”

“There’s the sweet side you try so hard to hide.” He takes stock of the room, “You think it says something about us that it’s barely eleven o’clock and they’re all pretty much passed out?”

“That our friends are a bunch of lame assed married men that can’t handle their booze and hoot at strippers at the same time?”

“And here I thought it meant we were getting old.”

“Speak for yourself. I plan to spend another few hours testing out the hotel mattress after I abandon ship. Which reminds me, you going to be okay playing shepherd to this flock of lightweights on your own?”

“Thereir keys are all in my room next door. I’ll leave ’em a bottle of aspirin with a case of bottled water and lock both doors. They’ll be fine.”

“Mind if I duck out then?”

“Go on. And tell your man we’ll kick his ass if he hurts you. Marine or not we’ve got him outnumbered.”

“Not you too,” Tony sighs. “Goodnight Mark, and congratulations.”

“Thanks man, but I expect you at the wedding.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

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“That was quick.” Gibbs greets setting his book aside.

“I’ve been gone for four hours.”

“They can’t have all already passed out.”

“I think the presence of a male stripped got the beer flowing a little more freely than expected.” An inquisitive look prompts him to continue, “They’d decided it was my bachelor party too and they should provide equal opportunities for ogling. Or that it was a once in a lifetime chance to walk on the wild side under the guise of friendly teasing, but I’m not judging.”

Gibbs chuckles, “Was he at least pretty?”

“He had a nice ass. Other than that I let Stevie have his fun so I didn’t really see much of anything.”
“Didn’t you say something about making it worth my while if I waited up?”

“It’s not even nine and we’re on vacation!” Tony bitches when Gibbs slips out of bed.

Gibbs just continues on to his destination and brings the envelope that’s been pushed under the door to the bed.

“What is it?”

Gibbs flips it over, someone’s scrawled “Jethro” on it. With a shrug he opens it and reads the note aloud, “After Tony showed us his Jethro it got me thinking about some things and I thought maybe we should show you our Tony, as we’re expecting you to take care of him.” He shakes the envelope and smiles at the first picture. It’s clearly a very young Tony, in his football uniform grinning like he just saved the world in the middle of a crowd of other boys which includes Luke. The second picture is a shyly grinning Tony in his letter jacket with his arm around the waist of a boy who couldn’t be more obviously RTOC if he was wearing his uniform. The next is presumably Tony, though the cheap Nixon mask makes it hard to tell. Whoever it is has been caught mid-stride in the middle of a college quad wearing nothing but a jock strap. Two pretty girls watching as Tony draws something in a notebook. A pillow being squeezed within an inch of bursting in his sleeping grip. And finally Tony in a flawless tux standing at Luke’s side as his best man.

Gibbs flips through them a second time and lingers on the second photograph.

“Is the interest in the boy or the letter jacket?”

“Mostly the jacket. You ever let anyone else wear it?”

“Didn’t mean the same thing but the time I was in college Jethro,” Tony chuckles. “But there was a time or two where I might have.”

“Still have it?” Gibbs puts on his best indifferent façade even as the question itself contradicts it.

“Both of them.” After a moments thought he adds, “Well sort of.”

“Sort of?” This time the curiosity is clear.

“The one from High school isn’t actually mine, but I didn’t realize that until I was packing for college…” Gibbs just raises an eyebrow. “Had a… friend on the team senior year. I don’t know if it was on purpose or not but our jackets got switched. Might be time for me to get rid of it…”

Gibbs suppresses a chuckle at the look Tony’s giving him. “A memento of a first boyfriend isn’t going to threaten me anymore than the pictures of Shannon and Kelly threaten you.”

“He wasn’t a boyfriend. Not really.” It’s a weak protest at best.

“He gave you his letter jacket.”

Tony huffs, “Do you want mine or not? That is what you were getting at.”

Gibbs chuckles, “Could have Dad bring my Stillwater High one down for you, that way we could swap.”

“I’d rather steal a couple of your ratty NIS shirts. They’re soft as silk.”
"You can have 'em, but I doubt I'll be taking your jacket. Appreciate the sentiment though."

"Told you at the start, months, years, maybe forever. If that’s not going steady I don’t know what is."

"Thought we were married."

"Won’t marry you until you learn to respect my need for sleep."

"Didn’t mean to wake you," Gibbs murmurs softly. "Never sleep very deeply in a strange place and someone pushed something under our door Tony. It’s not in me to ignore that. You could try sleeping on a pillow."

"Prefer to sleep on you."

"I do get out of bed at night from time to time, it never bothers you at home."

"You’re not the only one who can’t really sleep in a strange place."

"Somehow I doubt that. Remember the iguana in Cuba?"

"Was dreaming of something entirely more pleasant climbing into bed with me."

"That why you were sleeping naked?"

"Made the whole thing memorable did it?" His tone is smug. "I sleep naked when it’s warm. Or when I have someone to keep me warm. I only ever put boxers on at your place in case Abbs drops in on us. Was dreaming of you though if that’s what you were getting at. We’d been playing ‘flirt in front of the profiler’ for awhile and even though Kate missed it I caught every look, touch and double entendre."

"For a student of human nature she did miss the mark entirely on you," Gibbs agrees quietly.

"I still miss her too."

"It was just such a senseless thing."

"Okay, enough of that. If I have to be up this early on vacation let’s get moving. If we make good time we might be able to enjoy the whirlpool tub in our suite before we have to meet Abby."

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Abby arrives just after one o’clock and Tony, refreshed and satisfied, suggests they get lunch.

Despite Abby’s repeated assurances Chester is clearly terrified of Gibbs. As Gibbs has been on his best behavior Tony finds it positively hilarious.

"Abby tells us you’re a forensic anthropologist for the FBI,” Tony attempts to bring him around.  "That keep you busy?"

"We do a lot of consulting for local agencies.” He smiles shyly at Tony’s continued focus. “There really isn’t all that much use for a forensic anthropologist in most communities so they send us stuff from all over. Some of the most interesting stuff doesn’t turn out to be criminal but it’s really fascinating.”

"Such as?” Abby coaxes him further out of his shell.
“Last June we got a pair of bodies in from Tinsdale, Tennessee. They were starting to build a new housing development on converted farmland and unearthed the bodies digging out a foundation. They were both women— one was about sixteen and the other in her early thirties. They were in surprisingly good condition when you take into account that they’d been dead about a hundred and twenty years. It took us almost two weeks to pin down the cause of their deaths, both had died of smoke inhalation. Shortly after they uncovered the remains of the burned farmhouse, four other bodies were located. After some digging we were able to locate some anecdotal evidence of the deaths in a local doctor’s journals. If the account was indeed in reference to those specific bodies the older woman was the girl’s mother and entered the building intent on saving her. It may not be as exciting as chasing down terrorists and murderers but we do speak for the dead, in our way.”

“Without techs and forensics all the chasing in the world would get us no where,” Gibbs offers matter-of-factly.

Chester visibly relaxes, though he does seem at a loss for a moment or so longer, “Do you both do much charity work?”

Tony blushes a little, “I don’t really do any charity work. I write a lot of checks, but the way I was brought up mixed with our hectic schedule makes me sort of hands off.”

Gibbs offers Tony a fond smile in return for his embarrassment, “I volunteer a little, but as Tony said we’re usually rather busy. I do some of the plumbing for Abby’s Habitat for humanity builds and toy collection for Toys for Tots.”

“Maybe next year you could give me some wood working lessons and we could make some toys for the drive,” Tony offers shyly.

“I’d like that, and if you turn out to be all thumbs I can always put you on painting duty. I know you’re good at that.”

Tony scowls for a second before the tone registers, “Love you too, you unfunny bastard.”

Abby makes her ‘aren’t they adorable?’ noise.

It brings Tony’s focus back to Abby and Chester, “I grew up here in Manhattan and tonight’s fundraiser is something of a family tradition. It was a favorite charity of maternal grandmother. She was a wonderful woman who, despite having grown up well off, never felt entitled or above others. She understood the value of hard work and the need to take care of those less fortunate. I think I became a cop to make her proud.”

“The specific charity is a women’s shelter, isn’t it?” Chester is obviously very interested.

“Yes. It’s a first step to independence from an abusive husband or father and a stepping stone for young girls to get off the streets. It’s a very worthy cause.”

“And I’m glad to be able to help. Which brings us to what I really wanted to discuss—”

Tony stops him, “I’ve already paid for the tickets and it’s my contribution. If you want to donate they accept pledges and checks at the fundraiser and there’s also a silent auction. And that way the charity gets twice the money.”

“Fair enough.”
Partners

After their shared shower Tony is a little disappointed that the dual sinks mean they aren’t in each others’ personal space as they shave. It does allow him to finish first and slip into the bedroom to lay out both suits unobserved. Gibbs moves as silently as ever but Tony feels the shift in the air just before a hand settles on the small of his back, “This why you insisted on doing the packing?”

“It’s one of the reasons, yeah. You like it?”

“Frankly I’m just glad it’s not some ridiculous designer tuxedo.”

Tony chuckles, “I wouldn’t do that to you unless my cousin Jacqueline gets married. Of course the chances of that happening are somewhat akin to the chances of locating a specific grain of salt in the ocean, but we can pretend we don’t know that.” He smiles a little self-consciously, “So you’ll wear it?”

“You know I will. Where’s the tie?”

“No tie. We’re aiming for rugged and dashing not buttoned-down and elegant.”

“Want me to play the world traveling man of action?”

“Want you to be yourself. You know, Jethro, who keeps getting mistaken for my husband?”

“I think we’ve met. You do know that means I’m going to do my best to make your father’s head spin if he gets out of line, right? Maybe start talking about how it’s not right that we’d have to leave the country to get married or that I had to leave the corps because of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.”

Tony’s smile is the brightest he’s ever given, “I love you.”

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After some careful deliberation Tony decides that a simple, in stride joint entrance is what’s called for. Anything else would either be blatant to the point of combativeness or too subtle. After quickly communicating this to Gibbs he turns his attention to briefing Chester on the responsibilities and behaviors of an escort.

When he gets to the instruction that Chester may not ask another woman to dance until Abby accepts an invitation from another man Abby giggles, “What am I a debutante?”

“Some of the young ladies present will be and so the boys are taught to treat them all as such just in case. And while I am all for you being exactly who you are princess tonight will be more amusing if none of us stand out too much.”

Imagining the worst Tony gives Gibbs one last confirming glance and steps through the most important door of his life.

Reality of course is never as dramatic as what we build up in our minds, so there is no sudden hush, no staring, no wave of obvious whispering. There are, of course, a few curious glances and even one bright smile directed at Tony. Once even that mild show of interest has abated he pauses with an absent hand on Gibbs’ wrist and turns to Abby, “You want a formal introduction or to mingle your way over later?”
“I’ll be more inclined to behave if we all go together.”

“Fair enough. Let’s start with Dad, he’s mostly likely to push all our buttons.”

For a few fleeting seconds Gibbs’ hand rests on the small of Tony’s back. An innocent but innately possessive touch, it’s exactly what Tony needs.

Dominic spots their approach and politely reengages his wife’s attention from the young woman congratulating her on her newly announced pregnancy.

Tony offers his stepmother a smile and a kiss on the cheek, “Dad, Jessica I’d like you both to meet Jethro Gibbs, my partner. Abby Scuito, his daughter. And Chester Jones, Abby’s escort for the evening.

“And this of course is Dominic DiNozzo, my father, and Jessica DiNozzo, his wife.”

Gibbs offers a cool “Dominic” but gives Jessica an actual smile, “Nice to meet you, Ma’am.”

Jessica returns the smile, “It’s very nice to meet you Jethro, and I do hope we’ll have sometime to get acquainted. Neither of the boys has told me a thing about you yet.”

“I’m not surprised. Dominic and I haven’t exactly met in the strictest sense and our lives have been a little hectic since we’ve gotten together.”

“All the more reason for us to get acquainted.”

“If you really mean that we could have dinner tomorrow night, that is if Abby doesn’t mind giving us up. This is her vacation after all,” Tony volunteers.

“We’ll go do something tourist-y,” Abby assures him.

“What do you say Dominic?”

It’s clear what he wants to say and the response his wife expects him to give her differ greatly but he attempts a charming smile, “Come to the house, we’ll have Emilie make Anthony’s favorite.”

Tony does an admirable job of suppressing his immediate reaction to this offer. As it happens only Gibbs sees the moment of pleasure in Tony’s expression. “We’ll be there. But for now we should make the rounds. Wouldn’t want anyone to feel neglected.”

“I know Lucas Dashal wanted a word and Father Vincenzo mentioned wishing to speak to you,” Dominic confirms.

Tony’s smile is the charming one he uses when he needs to smooth over Gibbs’ abrasiveness. “I’ll make sure to speak to both of them, and I expect a dance with my stepmother later as well.”

Jessica’s smile on the other hand is genuine, “Absolutely Anthony, if you’ll let me dance with Jethro afterwards.”

“That is entirely up to Jethro.”

Gibbs chuckles, “I’d like that Ma’am.” He shares a brief look with Tony, they’d agreed ahead of time that they would dance as little as possible but both knew it couldn’t be avoided entirely. If nothing else Abby would demand a turn around the floor from each of them.

“It’s nice to meet you Abby, and you as well Chester,” Jessica shakes each hand in turn.
“Nice meeting you Ma’am,” Chester offers.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again,” Abby’s smile is at best forced.

As they move on Tony offers her a curious gaze, “Jess offend you there Princess?”

“She was being dismissive,” The statement, while brief, is obviously one born of hurt.

He grabs her wrist and waits for her to face him, “She can rot for all I care. You’re one of the best things in my life Abbs, and you’re more my family than she could ever be. Even before we were officially family.” He drops his voice to a conspiratorial tone, “Plus Nana’s jewelry is much prettier than that swag Dad’s strung round her neck, which is fitting given that you’re prettier than she is as well.”

“And that’s why you’re prince charming.”

They all share a chuckle before a call of “Anthony darling” makes Tony spin around.

“Aunt Cess, how’ve you been?”

“You know how it is, another party, another set of insincere windbags shaking hands and congratulating each other for helping the less fortunate… Father V asked me something very interesting about you young man.” She seems to notice Gibbs and Abby watching, “Oh, but you’ve brought guests.”

Tony laughs, “Yes I have Aunt Cess. Jethro, Abby, Chester, this is my Aunt, Francesca Milan. Dad’s sister. Aunt Cess, this is my partner Jethro Gibbs, his daughter Abby Scuito, and her escort Chester.”

“Partner?” Francesca eyes him curiously.

“However you want to take it.” His use of the term was deliberate, as both meanings are equally true.

“Then it’s lovely to meet you, Jethro. And you my dear are a vision, Janine would have been proud, eventually anyway, for you to wear her mother’s jewelry.”

To the amusement of the men accompanying her Abby blushes a little, “Thank you Ma’am, I’m very proud to have Tony claim me as family.”

“It’s not a claim princess and you know it,” Tony corrects.

“Very nice to meet you Ma’am,” Gibbs offers with genuine pleasure.

She pauses, clearly assessing him, “I take it I don’t need to tell you how special our Tony is.”

“No Ma’am you don’t. I know what a gift I’ve been given.”

Tony blushes deeply.

“Good man. Do me a favor? Don’t let him forget it.”

“I can promise you that.”

“If you two are quite finished the father appears to be waiting for his own introductions.”

Francesca leans in to kiss his cheek and whispers, “The father’s sensibilities could do with a bit of
ruffling, Anthony Darling, but he is an old man, don’t go causing him a heart attack.”

Tony chuckles. “I will try to be delicate,” He returns the kiss to her cheek. “Shall we?” He gestures somewhat grandly, using it as a cover when he runs his fingers across Gibbs’ in a quick reconnection.

Father Vincenzo meets them halfway, offering Tony a hand as they near each other, “Anthony, I’ve been waiting to speak to you.”

“Absolutely Father. But first I’d like to introduce you to my partner, Jethro Gibbs. His daughter, Abby Scuito, and Chester Jones, Abby’s escort.”

An ill-concealed look of annoyance crosses the father’s face, “Mr. Gibbs, Miss Scuito, Mr. Jones. Nice to make your acquaintance. But if you don’t mind I truly must speak to Anthony in private.”

Tony considers him a moment, despite his break with the church he remembers a time when Father Vincenzo was the only person who would listen to him. The only one that didn’t tell him to grow up when chronic nightmares kept him from sleeping. With this in mind he turns to his companions, “Why don’t you go get some drinks, I’ll come find you in a few.”

Gibbs scan his expression for insincerity before nodding. “What are you drinking?”

“Single malt if they have it, if not bourbon is fine. Neat.”

Chester is clearly a little overwhelmed but he performs his duty admirably, offering Abby a gallant arm and follow Gibbs without trailing after him like a duckling.

True to his word Father Vincenzo leads Tony to an antechamber where they can speak in privacy. “I’m very concerned for you Anthony.”

“Concerned why exactly?”

“When you mentioned that you were bringing your stepdaughter tonight I thought I had just missed your wedding announcement. I asked your aunt about it and she seemed surprised by the question. I know you’ve never been particularly close with your father Anthony, but Francesca loves you. And you need family my boy. Don’t shut those who care about you out needlessly.”

“I have not shut Aunt Cess out, Father V.” He smiles a little ruefully, “I haven’t even really shut Dad out. Though when I talk about my family it’s not them I mean.”

“Not telling them you got married is essentially the definition of shutting them out.”

“I didn’t actually get married. Abby declared herself my stepdaughter and we’ve all just carried on with it. I wasn’t really thinking when I called her that to you.”

“The young lady you brought with you?”

“She’s our princess yes.”

“I thought you said she was your partner’s daughter.”

“In this instance I mean life-partner as well as work partner.” He smiles a little self-depreciatingly, “Not that I wouldn’t marry Jethro in a minute flat if we could but at the moment it isn’t an option.”
“You’re telling me that you’re in a homosexual relationship with that man, Anthony?”

“That is exactly what I’m telling you.”

“You know that’s a sin.”

“So is divorce, and yet you’ve married my father and a new bride every few years for decades.”

“That’s a bit different. Church law on the matter of divorce changed.”

“And if tomorrow the Pope decrees that homosexuality is great and the answer to keeping priests from touching little boys then it’s just so?”

The father ignores the question, “It’s unnatural and immoral.”

“Unnatural. People like to throw that one around. I just can’t see how it’s any more unnatural than any other type of sex. Hell, given the way it feels I’d wager it’s how sex is supposed to be done. If you mean two men loving each other in an emotional sense is unnatural… That one I can’t speak to. I’d say love is love but there just aren’t any arguments to make on that one. As for it being immoral, who am I harming? How am I negatively affecting others lives?”

“When some one like you, some one well off, talented and successful goes around proclaiming that there’s nothing wrong with homosexuality, that you are in fact a homosexual yourself, it sets a dangerous example. Young people begin to think of it as a viable choice, an alternative to a normal family life instead of the perversion of normal relationships that it is. Do you imagine that young lady is better off with you parading her around claiming to be her stepfather than she would have been of her parents stayed together?”

Tony huffs a disbelieving laugh, “Yes because after twenty five blissful years of marriage and family Jethro clapped eyes on my perfect ten of an ass and just had to leave his wife to spoil me rotten and whispers sweet nothings into my ear for the rest of our days.” He shakes his head, “Abby has not been affected in the slightest by my relationship with her father. And I’m certainly no home wrecker, Jethro had been single for quite some time when we met.”

“Be that as it may, if she’s come from a broken home she needs some proper role models all the more.”

“Just how young do you imagine her to be?”

“Nineteen, perhaps twenty.”

“Our princess is thirty. And her own women irrespective of any example we might set.”

“It’s still wrong Anthony. It’s a choice and it’s one of the things our teachings expressly forbid.”

“Your teachings Father V. I finally have a family that loves me and no one can make that dirty or wrong. I will always be grateful that you were there for me when I was a kid, but if that help had strings attached I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“I would have expected you to grow to be a moral and upstanding man whether I assisted you in troubled times or not Anthony, but it was never a quid pro quo arrangement. You were a member of my church in need of guidance, it was my job to provide it.”

“So long as I wasn’t threatening the sanctity of your church by following my own calling.”
The father sighs deeply, “I’m sorry if our teachings have come to offend you Anthony but I stand by my god, my church and my pope. And all three agree that what you’re doing is a trespass against the laws of both nature and god himself. I’m going to pray for you but if you don’t repent it won’t do you any good.”

Deciding to take it as a kindness that it didn’t denigrate into an actual shouting match Tony shakes his head and heads back into the main room, craving both Gibbs and the drink being fetched for him in nearly equal measure.

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Abby spots Tony well before he can make it back across the room to them and begins subtly maneuvering both Chester and Gibbs toward a small empty table as the look on Tony’s face is a clear indicator that he could use a moment.

“Spot somebody you know Abbs?” Gibbs asks when her herding becomes just a bit more blatant. He follows her gaze and know immediately what she’s doing. He also makes an effort to suppress his rising anger, he’d foolishly thought that getting through the initial meeting with Dominic DiNozzo was the hard part. “Run interference for us for a while Princess?”

“You don’t even need to ask Pop. Just make sure he’s okay.”

Gibbs kisses her cheek, “You know I will.”

Tony slides into his seat and retrieves his drink without so much as a word. The others wait patiently. He sighs, “Needless to say Father V did not take the news well.”

The toneless statement worries Gibbs and he drops all pretenses, guiding Tony’s gaze to meet his own with a gentle hand, “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I will. I guess I just didn’t really think about it… When I was a kid my parents were just a little too busy being well-to-do and upcoming to spare any time to deal with their bratty little son’s nightmares. Father V was always ready to listen, to talk me down. He never called me silly or dismissed my concerns the way Dad did on the couple of occasions where he actually listened. I guess I just thought he’d understand this too. Which is stupid, I know. I mean the man is a catholic priest.”

“It’s not stupid to want the approval of the people you looked up to in your youth Tony.”

Tony finishes his drink, gives a wan smile, and gently takes Jethro’s hand from it’s perch under his chin to hold it under the table, “At least he didn’t directly call me a pervert and ask that we all leave at once.”

“We don’t have to stay,” Abby quickly reassures him.

“No you don’t Abbs, but I do need to stay a bit longer. Rounds to make, obligations to fulfill. No matter how hard I try I always get pulled back into this world to one degree or another and rebuilding burnt bridges can be a real pain. And it’s something of a ritual for me and Mrs. Draper to spontaneously start a discussion about how the foundation was started in front of some newcomers. I just need a minute here with my real family first if you don’t mind.”

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“No, neither of us ever minds spending time with you Tony, you know that,” Gibbs promises.

“Never ever Tony. You’re an important part of our family and you know it.”
After a few moments discussing the sights Abby would like to see while in New York Tony feels more like himself again. He even manages not to startle when Lucas Dashal puts a hand on his shoulder, “There you are Tony.”

“Lucas, it’s been a long time, what three years?”

“Something like that.”

“Lucas I’d like you to meet Jethro Gibbs, my partner; Abby Scuito, his daughter; and Chester Jones, her escort for the evening. Everyone, this is Lucas Dashal, we attended middle school together.”

“We’ve met before haven’t we?” Lucas asks Gibbs as he shakes his hand.

“Yes we have Senator Dashal, most recently at the Marine Corp Birthday ball last week.”

“I remember, Mrs. Jareau seemed to think it important that we meet.”

“Nadine was just playing politics. She seems to think the agency needs to establish better relationships with the oversight committee.”

“I do always forget that you’re with NCIS now Tony.”

“Just goes to show what an awful friend you are. My father said you wanted to speak to me?”

“Vera wanted me to make sure you had her new number in DC.”

“I thought you were discouraging that nonsense.”

“I’ve tried, time and again. You were her hero, I just can’t counteract that.”

“Neither can I, and I’ve been trying for over two decades.”

Lucas laughs, “You saved her from an over eager date Tony, I think to a girl with too many years of reading fairy tales that makes you prince charming.”

Abby begins giggling at that, “Well he’s someone’s prince charming anyway.”

“You went and found yourself a princess at last then?” Lucas asks Tony with amusement.

At that Gibbs and Tony chuckle as Abby continues to giggle. When he’s able Tony offers his friend a more sincere smile, “I settled down with someone yes.”

“And I missed something funny.”

“Not so much. Just a bit of an inside joke. One of Abby’s nicknames is Princess. So all you wanted of me was to pass on a little love note from Vera?”

“And to ask if you’re going to step up and play this year or just back our team again.”

“I’ve told you before Lucas I can’t guarantee I’d be there and if you’re down a man you automatically forfeit. You can count on my usual pledge though.”

“I expected nothing less but you know I have to ask.” He glances up at his wife, “I have to go back to being senatorial now. It was very nice meeting you Jethro, Abby and Chester. A welcome
distraction from all the glad handing and lying.”

Before any of them can respond he’s off into the crowd around them. Tony shakes his head but smiles a more relaxed smile, “Context is everything, I suppose.”

“Didn’t know your friend was a senator?”

“Just didn’t know he was on the oversight committee for NCIS’s budget or that he attended functions like the Corp’s Birthday ball. I suppose to me he’ll always be the kid from down the block who’s younger sister got in over her head one New Year’s Eve.” Clearly remembering he has a role to play Tony stands up, “Jethro, if you’ll accompany me it’s time I had that discussion with Mrs. Draper. Why don’t you two go check out the silent auction?” The last is addressed to Abby and Chester absently.

Recognizing one of Tony’s masks, though this is a new one in his experience Gibbs follows as asked sparing only a second to nod to Abby. “I suppose I’m to ask about how the foundation got it’s start.”

“You can. But mostly I pulled you along hoping afterwards we might find a secluded corner for a moment. I’m trying to minimize the public displays. No need to ruffle too many feathers unnecessarily.”

It’s clear all the personally important introductions have taken place and creating false impressions is no longer a danger so much as a fact of life. Gibbs takes this as a cue to turn on the charm and begin deflecting questions that would cause more harm than good if they were to answer them. He even goes so far as to mingle a bit outside of Tony’s immediate sphere, not flirting or even really discussing all that much, just making small talk and carefully tasteful jokes.

Tony, a bit surprised by the sudden adeptness at what is essentially playing politics, makes his way to Gibbs’ side and puts a hand at the small of the other man’s back, “There you are Jethro. Have you met Carl Iverson yet? He’s an old friend of Doctor Mallard’s and when I mentioned you were here he said he’d be delighted to meet you at last. Any friend of Ducky’s and all that.”

Gibbs smiles at Tony before returning his attention to his conversational partner, “It’s been a pleasure Ms. Yorke.”

“Likewise Mr. Gibbs.”

After a few feet Tony murmurs, “So it’s just when we need you to be diplomatic that you’re incapable of it?”

“Your mask is a flirtatious frat boy, mine is an unapproachable bastard. Wouldn’t do to go charming officials and witnesses left and right. Or making deals with people I’d prefer to lock up and throw away the keys to their cells. Besides, I like watching you be diplomatic on my behalf.”

Tony shakes his head but smiles, “You really are a bastard.”

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Abby does her best to focus on the offerings for the silent auction, but can’t help but worry over Tony’s uncharacteristically distant behavior.

“Abby?” Chester asks, clearly concerned.

She shakes her head and follows the men’s example, putting on a diplomatic face, “Sorry, just a little worried about Tony.”
“He seemed to be handling himself well to me.”

“He is, and it’s not at all surprising. I’m just worried about how distant he’s acting all of the sudden.”

“I’m sure it’s just a reaction to the situation.”

“I hope so.”

An idea occurs to Chester and he gently pulls her in the other direction, “Besides I need you tell me if there’s anything on offer that he and your father might like. I was thinking I’d bid on something of a thank you gift for the hospitality they’ve shown me.”

Abby is quickly captivated by the idea and is inspecting the lots with the full force of her not inconsiderable attention.

“Tony would adore the puppy but it’d probably have to live with Pop and I don’t think he’d appreciate it.” She bids on him anyway and Chester gives her a curious look. “If I win I’ll keep him. He’s adorable.” The tiny retriever in the photo is most certainly that.

“No art, jewelry or fashion of course,” Abby murmurs almost to herself.

“Are either of them Jets or Mets fans?”

“Nope. The only team they agree on is the Redskins. Pop is a Nationals fan, Tony prefers the Orioles. Well I suppose they both like OSU, but I think on Pop’s part it’s mostly that Tony looks cute in the sweatshirt and jacket, but I could be wrong.”

“Even I can tell that dancing lessons or art classes wouldn’t be right.”

“The camping equipment might be just right. Seems like something they could both enjoy.”

“Sounds good to me.”

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“One more kiss for luck?” Tony asks hopefully with a glance at the door to their empty little hallway.

Gibbs smiles at that, “Is there something waiting in there that you need luck for?”

“Only the thing I’ve been dreading the most: the dancing.”

“You’re a good dancer, at least when you’re not trying to dance with me. Or so Abbs tells me.”

“It’s not the ability to dance that’s the problem. I was classically trained at my father’s insistence. The problem is that the auction doesn’t close for almost an hour and I saw Abby bidding on something, which means we need to be here. Now even if I stretch it as much as possible and rope Aunt Cess into a dance that’s only about fifteen minutes. That leaves about forty minutes of listening to women I don’t know chatter and watching girls like that little blonde number you were chatting up pawing you.”

“You’re the one likely to get pawed, not me.”

“I’d say false modesty doesn’t suit you but I think you honestly believe that.” He shakes his head, “I’d think between four former wives, Abby’s Mom, me and Jenny Sheppard the conclusion would have been pretty much drawn for you Jethro.”
“Oh I appeal to certain people, there’s no doubt about that. But I’m too old and blue collar to attract
the attention of the debutants, and just not young enough for the prowling wildcats. Here at least
you’re the one they’ll flock too.”

“You underestimate the draw of a handsome and mysterious man with a charming smile and the gall
to go tie-less.”

“But my date picked out my suit.”

“They don’t know that.”

“True enough, and unfortunately if we spend any longer in here someone’s bound to notice.”

“I think some of them already have.”

“Don’t care. And if you do I’m sorry, but you looked haunted back there.”

Tony smiles at that, “I don’t mind you touching me in public at all. Even here. Formell laughing it off
pretty much cured my fear of discovery by anyone but Jenny Sheppard. That’s not to say I’m ready
to completely abandon discretion, but if they saw so be it.”

“Still, you’ll want to comb your hair before we rejoin the party.”

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Abby is so relieved when Gibbs asks to cut in that she spins out of Chester’s grasp faster than he can
respond. “Is Tony okay or is he still talking like some trust fund zombie?”

Gibbs chuckles and grips her wrist in a calming gesture, “He’s fine. He was feeling a little
overwhelmed and you know Tony, he puts on a brave face when he feels that way. I took good care
of him, I promise. Now I came for my dance with the prettiest girl at the party, and I know Tony will
want his turn as soon as his stepmother lets him go, so let’s dance Princess.”

She waits until they’ve been dancing for a bit before fixing her gaze on Tony, “She seems to like
Tony well enough.”

“From what he’d told me before I expected her to be colder.” He agrees, also watching Tony and
Jessica chatting warmly.

“She liked you too,” Abby brings her gaze back to her father, “Which I certainly wasn’t expecting.”

“Me either to tell you the truth.”

“It’s good for Tony though.”

“If we’re lucky she’ll continue to keep his father in line too.”

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t, and neither does Tony. But he’s Tony’s father and having some relationship, even a bad
one, with his father would probably be good for him. He let that man’s disregard hurt him for a very
long time without ever severing the connection. It could only do him good to improve the
relationship.”

Abby laughs, “It is totally sweet how protective of him you are.”
“I always protect the ones I love Baby.”

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“Shall I cut in or do you want to?”

“Seeing as the princess is expecting a dance from me anyway, I’ll cut in.” Jessica looks at him askance and it occurs to him that she missed the significance of who Abby is earlier. “Abbs is Jethro’s daughter. She declared me her stepfather almost as soon as we told her we’re together. There were some jokes about it being better for everyone that the king had decided to give up on wicked step mothers in favor of settling down with prince charming. It became a natural extension of the concept that she’s our princess.” He smiles a little embarrassedly, “And while we’re a bit too close in age for me to feel parental towards her exactly, I do feel protective and that she is definitely family.”

“She…” Jessica hesitates, “She seemed like a sweet girl.”

“You dismissed her out of hand, like we all do when we’re introduced to random strangers at functions like this. Unfortunately you paid her exactly no notice and missed who she was in relation to Jethro, myself and even you Jess.” He doesn’t wait for a response, just strides over, says a few words to Jethro and waltzes his princess away.

Jethro’s smile as he approaches could probably be called charming if his posture weren’t so rigid. “I believe I owe you a dance Ma’am.”

“That you do,” She smiles and falls easily into step with him. “So how did you and Anthony meet?”

“On the job. He was investigating a series of murders and when the last two victims turned out to be naval personnel I was called in to take over the case. He turned on the charm and started talking about finally getting a sensible ally on the case. I thought he was blowing smoke to try and keep jurisdiction, and getting in a little flirting on the sly. Turned out he really did have a good line on the investigation and no real support. Three weeks later we’d wrapped the case and I talked the director into luring him away from Baltimore.”

“From what little Dominic told me I thought you two hadn’t been together all that long.”

“We’ve known each other about five years but we’ve only been seriously involved about three months. If you need more detail than that you’ll need to speak to Tony.”

“Fair enough. Your daughter seems very found of him.”

“He’s family and family is pretty much the most important thing in the world to Abby.”

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“Where do you think you’re going?” Tony asks as Abby tries to break away from him after their dance.

“To dance with my date. He’s been very patient so far.”

“So you’re just going to throw me to the wolves?”

“Go dance with Daddy. I’m sure he’d appreciate the rescue.”

“That would be a bit too overt princess.”

Abby rolls her eyes, “Then ask one of the grandmotherly old church ladies to dance. Just don’t tell
them you’re living in sin with a man.”

“We’re not living in sin. Yet. We’re just doing a hell of a lot of sinning, period.”

“Just don’t tell the nuns.”

In the cab ride back to the hotel Tony tucks himself unabashedly into Gibbs’ side and laments, “I am never doing that again.”

“What happened?” Gibbs asks with real concern.

“Just a little bit of wandering hands from a lady old enough to be my nana.” He shakes his head, “One of the ones I thought was safe too.”

Gibbs wraps an arm around Tony’s waist and kisses his forehead before murmuring, “Other than that it seemed to go well.”

“Thanks in large part to Jessica manipulating Dad but I’ll take what I can get. What about you Abbs, did you have a good time?”

“Once I was sure you were ok I had fun.”

Tony relaxes every block they put behind them, “What did you find to bid on?”

“This adorable little golden retriever and an offer of obedience lessons.”

“I thought you couldn’t have pets at your place Princess.”

“New landlord. I’m not sure he’d let me keep a dog but he was cute and it would have been for a good cause.” Neither of them mention the ill fated attempt at bidding on a thank you gift.

Tony turns a curious eye on Chester, “How are you holding up there Chester? They didn’t try to eat you alive did they?”

“No too badly no. I was asked numerous times about my religious affiliation and martial status but nothing more aggressive than that.”

When they arrive at the hotel Tony’s managed to rally some better spirits, “Dance with me?”

“Upstairs.”

“Fair enough. You kids have fun,” He instructs lightly before kissing Abby’s cheek.

“Don’t do anything you’d be scared to tell your mother about,” Gibbs adds kissing the other cheek.

“That’s not much restriction. ‘Night Pop, night Tony.”

In the elevator Tony tucks himself into Gibbs’ side again and given his usual hesitance toward any sort of public display Gibbs has to voice his concern, “You sure you’re all right?”

Tony hums inquisitively before it clicks, “Oh, Father V’s attitude hurt but that’s not what’s getting to me. It’s exhausting playing that part. Polite society is a maze of lies and evasions. Remember which one to use with whom is always exhausting. I always swear after one of these things that it’s the last time. And yet, somehow, Dad always finds a way to rope me into it again.”
“Family’s like that. And if attending these things bother you so much we won’t do it anymore. One of the great things about being part of an us? If for instance, you find yourself unable to say no to your father I as your back up can step up. Refuse on your behalf. Make up some foolish excuse. Tell him off. Whatever you need from me.”

“Charm the pants off all the ladies when I do indeed give in.” Tony allows himself to be led into their room.

Gibbs shakes his head, “Given how much of a flirt you are this jealousy thing you’ve got going is a little shocking I have to say.”

“I am a flirt. I flirt with everybody. You on the other hand barely even flirt with me.”

“And I wasn’t flirting with anyone tonight.”

“Call it what you will, you were smiling, telling jokes, encouraging discussion.”

“I was mingling. Making a good impression on people who may or may not have an impact on my partner’s relationship with his family.”

“Partner huh?”

“I think it covers all of our various bases nicely.”

“True enough, we are work partners, bed partners, dance partners… Life partners…”

“Right on all counts but one. I seem to remember us being pretty much awful as dance partners.”

“We were both trying to lead. Tonight I’m going to put on some old blue eyes, follow your lead and remind you, preemptively, that if you in any fashion call me a lady you’ll regret it.”

“Fair enough. And it seems to me we’re at our best when you follow my lead.”

Tony laughs and moves to set up his ipod. When he returns Gibbs has shrugged out of his jacket and he quickly goes to work on Tony’s tie. After a quick pause to tuck the dress shoes against the wall Gibbs begins to move them in time to the soft melody of “I’ve got you under my skin.”

As they move together effortlessly Tony makes a small sound, almost a purr. “Thank you for tonight Jethro. For… For making promises to Aunt Cess I don’t want to know about. For being friendly to Jess. For not starting trouble with my father. For dancing with me. For-”

Gibbs cuts the flow of words off with a quick kiss, “No need to thank me Tony. I love you. This, all of this, was no hardship.”

“Still, thank you.”
Mending fences and regrets

After a morning spent indulging Abby and an afternoon spent indulging themselves Tony knows he should be relaxed and comfortable. The looming dinner with his father and stepmother weighs on him a bit too deeply for that to be the case. His father will likely follow his wife’s directive and mostly keep quiet. Jessica on the other hand is likely to make a heavy handed attempt at social interrogation.

“You’re over thinking this Tony,” Gibbs murmurs as he reaches around Tony to retrieve his razor.

“And you know that how exactly?” Tony grumps.

Gibbs kisses the back of his neck, “You look like someone ran over your dog.”

Tony sighs, “I’ve been thinking about the questions Jess is going to ask. Thinking about us from an outsiders perspective.”

Gibbs stops and really studies Tony at that, “What are you saying exactly Tony?”

Tony’s eyes go wide when he realizes what that may have sounded like, “Not that. I have absolutely no problems with us Jethro. I guess I’m just realizing how quick we’ve taken things.”

Gibbs wraps his arms around Tony and meets his eyes in the mirror, “How long had it been since you’d had an actual date before I kissed you breathless and told you we were going out for that Friday’s dinner because it was a date?”

“More than just a drink at the same table?” Tony muses on it for a minute, “Not sure. More than a year.”

“How long had we been having at least one private dinner a week together at that point?”

“Eight months.”

“Exactly.”

Tony snorts, “So making me steaks cowboy style and forcing me to cook for you was what, dropping hints?”

“More like hoping we could both make due with friendship.”

“So we were dating and both us were in denial about it?”

“Something like that. And we’ve known each other a long time, that always makes things more intense.”

“This where you tell me you married one of the redheads quicker than this?”

“Nope. Always wait until I’ve dated someone at least at year,” Gibbs quips. “It’s up to you what you tell them but saying we’ve been dating for over a year wouldn’t be a complete lie. We were certainly doing things that could count as dates.”

“For the record you did a much better job after you admitted they were dates.”

“Had it on good authority that cooking for your date and curling up in front of a roaring fire are both
Tony laughs and relaxes completely into the embrace. “Where are you taking me for our anniversary then?”

“If I can get us out of Abby’s clutches I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

Turning his head for a kiss Tony notes the slight stubble burn he gets from the action and gently ends the embrace, “If we don’t get moving we’ll be late.”

After some clumsily maternal questioning from Jessica Dominic steps in, “You didn’t mention you were seeing anyone when we spoke on your birthday Anthony.”

“Have I ever told you such a thing?” He shakes his head, “You’ve never given a damn Dad, and I’ve never felt the need to inflict you on anyone.”

“How exactly is telling me you’re seeing someone inflicting me on them?”

“You want me to be blunt and speak my mind for once?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, anger getting the better of him, “You’re a mercenary bastard who cut me out of your will when I was child to protect your assets and your life when I chose to help others not myself. Exposing even the existence of someone in my life to you is exposing them to your regard. What you really want to know is how they affect you. Well the answer is really simple in this case, how it affects you is not at all. Jethro and I will come around to visit my sister or brother but you don’t even have to be there. I’m an adult and I sure as hell don’t need your approval. If you suddenly decide it somehow benefits you to have a gay son keep me out of it. I will never be your press piece, do I make myself clear?”

“Anthony,” Jessica calls gently, “Please do calm down.”

Gibbs takes Tony’s hand but addresses Jessica and Dominic, “If it’s honestly Tony’s welfare you’re concerned about in all this I can assure you there’s nothing for you to worry about. The years we spent as friends gave us a strong foundation of trust and respect. I will love and protect Tony until the day I die, or the day he demands that I leave his life. And should I be stupid enough that he makes the demand that I leave Abby will step in to beat me over the head before mediating the dispute most likely in Tony’s favor.”

Tony gives a weak laugh and pulls Gibbs’ hand up for a kiss, “I think she’d back you actually Jethro.”

“Not if I screwed up. She loves you too much to let me get away with anything that doesn’t make you happy.”

Dominic is watching them contemplatively as Jessica smiles as though looking at a basket of kittens. He draws himself to his full height before speaking, “You’ve been together long enough for Anthony to get that close to your daughter?”

Tony fields this one with more composure than before, “I’ve know Abby almost as long as I’ve known Jethro. We share a love of B movies and poorly written actions flicks. As much as she’s been a presence throughout our relationship she’s also a friend of mine in her own right.” He catches his father’s gaze, “I will never expect her to see me as a father figure, she has two of those already. That being said she is family, I will always love, respect and support her.”

“I’m sure she knows how very much you both love her and appreciates it,” Jessica offers a little
shakily.

“You’re family too Jessica. Especially now, and I would love to try to establish a friendship between us. Because surely you know that trying to establish yourself in a parental role in my life is a little absurd, don’t you?”

“It did always feel heavy handed to try and behave that way,” She allows.

“So don’t.”

“This is the choice you’ve made for yourself then Anthony?” Dominic asks in the following silence.

“Yes Dad. This is the life and the family that I’ve chosen for myself. Jethro, Abby and being an NCIS Special Agent. If you can accept that maybe we can find our way to speaking terms again too.”

They don’t discuss dinner at all when checking in with Abby, not that either of them has much chance with Abby’s excited chatter filling the room. Only once they’re alone together does Gibbs ask, “Are you ok?”

“I’m good,” Tony’s answer is truthful and just a little questioning.

“You let him get to you back there. That doesn’t happen often.”

Tony rubs his eyes, suddenly tired, “He’s always known how to push my buttons.”

“Gonna let me in on which one this was?”

“He was implying that we were lying to get under his skin. That I was pretending to be someone I’m not to get his attention. He’s accused me of it so many times… And this time he had to know it wasn’t true. Hell he met you by walking in on us making out.”

“I admit I can’t claim to know the man at all but from what I’ve seen Dominic DiNozzo thinks the entire world revolves around him. Even the way he never refers to Jessica by name proves it. Everything is about him.”

“I know. And I know his issues are his alone and have nothing to do with me. Doesn’t stop him from having the ability to piss me off like nobody’s business. But I meant what I said to him all the same. If he’ll accept the life we’re making together maybe we can get back on speaking terms. It’s an old story, I love my dad I just don’t like him very much.” Feeling that he’s said enough the last two days, and hoping for some reciprocity he pulls Gibbs down on the bed and comments, “We never did get around to you telling me why you don’t get along with your dad.”

Gibbs sighs and pulls Tony close, “We never really got along, no specific reason. At first we were just too different. But when Mom was alive we managed. I always knew he loved me, still do truth be told, but that wasn’t enough to make us see eye to eye. After Mom died every decision I made was wrong. The points where before Mom would intervene became shouting matches that left both of us out of sorts for weeks.” He pauses to kiss Tony and take a deep breath, “Final Leroy, Dad’s best friend and business partner, took over as our mediator. He was pretty good at knowing when to side with who and when to stop the fight from even starting.

“I was just shy of my seventeenth birthday when Leroy caught me making out with Kevin Jones rather than working on my car like I said I would be. He sat me down and we had a long talk about
hard paths. I guess he saw me a little more clearly than I did myself. Dad nearly decked him when he found out later that Leroy knew and didn’t tell him. I’d never seen them fight before that.

“Dad asked if I wanted to get a reputation for ‘that sort of thing’ the day he found out. When I told him I didn’t give a damn about my reputation he went on for three days about not being selfish. Started talking about how it was fine and well for me to do whatever the hell I wanted but didn’t I even think about what I was doing to Kevin’s reputation? This was after he’d started chasing off anyone I dated by the way.

“When I told him Kev and I weren’t dating, just lending each other a helping hand in a long and dateless summer you’d have thought I burned the store down. Leroy finally told him he was being a jackass. Couldn’t manage to keep me from joining the Corp or Dad from making an ass of himself with Shannon but he sure tried. Might have even been able to keep us from becoming estranged if he’d lived long enough.”

He buries his face in Tony’s neck a moment before going on. “In the end it was a straw that broke the camel’s back sort of thing, only the straw in question was the size of a sequoia. The whole estrangement that is. He brought a date, not a new wife or girlfriend, a date to the girls’ funeral. He couldn’t have the fucking respect not to treat it as some social occasion.”

Tony drops his head to it’s habitual perch on Gibbs’ shoulder, “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

With a gentle finger Gibbs tilts his head to make eye contact, “I’m not. For the first time in a long time talking about the girls is a good thing. Because I know you understand that who I was and who they were to me is an important part of who I am and who you are to me. As for the stuff about my dad I offered to tell you. All you did was pick when. And it’s best you know before we’re sitting at a table with him.”

“Then can I ask one more thing?”

“Anything Tony.”

“Is this going to ruin your chances of making up with him? That you’re with me?”

“He never had a problem with me being bisexual after that first fight so I don’t think so, but if it does that’s his problem. I’m not hiding or giving you up in my own damn home Tony.”

Tony smiles an acknowledgement, “You know back when we started spending time together off the clock I would have called someone a liar if they told me we’d talk this much.”

“When you only knew me as your boss we wouldn’t have. If there was one thing fighting with Jackson my whole childhood taught me it was that words have power, and sometimes it stems from withholding them.”

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Abby arrives at the house the next morning while Tony’s off getting some more clothing and holiday movies from his apartment. “Pop?”

He calls back “I’m in the den.”

When she enters the room he’s moving books and small decorative objects off the center shelf of the bookcase closest to the new TV.

“Sudden urge to organize?” She teases.
“I’m not having company with the leaning tower of DVDs on the floor.”

A glance toward the TV confirms that the stack is now knee high. “Wow. Um, I didn’t realize-”

Gibbs cuts her off, smiling, “Think he’s finally decided ‘slow’ means moving in piecemeal, and after clothing the DVDs are the top priority.”

“Other way around,” Tony announces from the doorway. “I’d be happy naked but entertained.”

“And you need your DVDs for that?”

Tony laughs, “You can’t entertain me 24/7.”

“Fair enough.”

“Besides, you like watching them with me.”

“Some of them,” Gibbs concedes.

“Want me to finish this? It’s my mess.”

“We’ll be in the kitchen,” Abby announces immediately and pulls her father away.

“What’s on your mind Baby girl?”

“Grandpa Jack arrives tomorrow. I was thinking maybe we’d have lunch, clear the air before the big day…”

“Chester propose after we left you last night?”

She punches his arm, “You know what I mean!”

He sighs, “Just the three of us, at or near the hotel.”

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Abby hangs around for about two hours reviewing the menu and game plan for Thanksgiving day before offering her father and Tony each a kiss on the cheek and leaving. When she’s gone Gibbs seeks Tony out in the den and finds him dusting the books individually with a soft cloth. “Tony?”

Tony smiles at him, “Did Abbs actually leave or just go to her car for her list?”

“She left this time. There some reason you’re dusting?”

He blushes, “I know I don’t live here or anything but I feel like any mess they find around here is automatically going to be attributed to me.”

Gibbs grins at that, “Which is why I took a page from your book and hired someone.”

Tony studies him in mild disbelief. Gibbs values privacy despite habitually leaving the door unlocked and the idea that he’d invite a stranger to pick through the house and by extension his life seems, frankly, a little ludicrous.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had the kind of company that would care about the dusting and frankly I don’t want to waste a whole day of our vacation doing it. But at the same time I’m not about to have some stranger change our sheets and pick through our laundry. The only thing upstairs
“on my list for whoever they send is the guest bathroom.”

“Which service did you hire?”

“Speedy Clean.”

Tony nods, “So I can stop this now but I need to make sure to wear pants around the house tomorrow.”

“You damn well better.”

That earns a pleased kiss, “You’re cute when you get all possessive.”

“You’ve said yourself that you’re mine.”

“And you’re mine. Didn’t say there was anything wrong with the possessiveness.”

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Abby is frankly quite relieved that they’ve made it through the meal without raised voices or stony silences. So much so she misses the change in Jackson’s bearing when he squares his shoulders and instructs, “So tell me about your boyfriend then.”

“What is it you want to know Dad? Who his parents are? What my intentions toward him are? His stats as a running back for the Buckeyes? His favorite color? His most embarrassing childhood memory?”

“You could answer all that?” Jackson sounds a bit impressed.

Which actually seems to please Gibbs, “To start with.”

Jackson nods, “Actually I was thinking more along the line of what’s so special about him you’d abuse your position to have him though.”

“Because it just couldn’t be that our personal and professional lives are simply separate things.” Gibbs shakes his head, “I should have known you’d do this. Thanks for the vote of confidence there, Jack. Just to be clear, Tony pursued me. Not all that aggressively, but persistently. We’d been flirting the entire five years and about eighteen months ago I got it in my head that a little platonic companionship would settle him and stop tempting me to throw the rules out the window. So we started having dinner together on Fridays. One of us would cook, we’d have a few beers and talk about anything at all that wasn’t personal or particularly important. It was nice, safe, comfortable. But it didn’t stop him flirting with me or the pointed references to true love and soul mates when other people hit on him. And when I was honest with myself I was relieved. So I bit the bullet, kissed him senseless, and took him out on an honest to god date.”

“You were lying to me!” Abby protests indignantly when he pauses uncertain as to whether to continue or not.

Deciding facing Abby is less volatile Gibbs asks her “How is any of that me lying to you?”

“I kept telling you that you belonged with Tony and you kept telling me you were better off as friends when you knew the whole time that wasn’t true.”

“No I honestly thought friendship was enough. And maybe I was a little afraid of him getting what he was after and being disappointed.”
“Oh Daddy,” She scolds fondly, “Tony is completely in love with you.”

“I know that now Baby girl.” At the look she gives him he chuckles, “You’re somehow surprised I’m dense all of the sudden?”

“So you do love the boy then?” Jackson’s question is a little pointed, like it’s the one he’s been working up to.

“With all my heart,” Gibbs intones quietly.

“That’s all you had to say.”

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His father’s reaction to the simple and honest admission that he loves Tony rocks Gibbs more than it perhaps should. So much so that he’s still thinking about it on the drive home. About halfway there he comes to the conclusion he hasn’t said it to anyone else that mattered to him before. Dominic DiNozzo certainly didn’t count. “Have I been hiding him?” He doesn’t realize he’d asked the question aloud until Abby responds.

“I wouldn’t say that. You told me, Ducky, Liz, Jackson.”

“Not that we’re together,” He’s hesitant to discuss it even though he’d brought it up. “That I’m serious about this, that I love him.”

“I knew, but no, you never did actually say so.” She notes his expression and continues, “But Tony knows you love him.”

“That I’m sure of.” He murmurs absently and she takes it for the dismissal of the topic that it is.

“You and Jackson got along pretty well,” She tries instead.

“I’m not as angry as I thought I was. I’m still hurt that he disrespected the girls that way but as long as he’s respectful of Tony I think we’ll get through it.”

“He seemed surprised that was why you were mad.”

“I was angry over a lot of things at the time. Mom or Leroy would have made us talk about it but left to our own devices as we were, there was no chance of either of us starting that discussion. Although I did think I shouted it at him at some point.”

They both let the silence settle for a few blocks before Abby declares in a sadly wistful tone, “I know it’s silly but sometimes I, well, sometimes I miss them.”

He watches her in concern for a few seconds before asking, “How so Princess?”

“When you tell me or Tony about your life with them it’s obvious how much you loved them and how much you loved life when you had them. Even when you’re talking about losing them you just light up. When it comes down to it maybe what I really mean is that I miss the idea of them, of being part of that happiness. That family.”

He pulls over and hugs her tightly without a pause but considers his words carefully before speaking, “They would have loved you just as much as you would have loved them baby but that’s not what’s important. I can’t turn back time, I can’t give them to you. And I love you differently than I did Kelly but that would have been the case no matter what. When I talk about loving my girls and keeping
them close that includes you. It may not be what I wanted when I was twenty two but the life our little family has is exactly where I want to be. But I am sorry if you don’t feel the same.”

Abby stiffens clearly alarmed, “That’s not what I meant Daddy. I love my life I just-”

He hushes her with a gentle finger to her lips, “You just want that too.” She nods.

She bites her lip and declares softly, “But that’s why you and Grandpa have to make up. You never know what will happen tomorrow and what chances you’ll lose.”

He hugs her again, “I get it Abbs. I promise. And I will continue to make an effort with Jackson but you have to realize he’s not at the top of my priority list by a wide margin.”

“He doesn’t get one of those coveted spots above work, then?”

“Only you and Tony do.”
Giving thanks

Shortly after Gibbs and Abby leave the house the doorbell rings. Tony pulls on one of his appropriated NIS shirts as he hurries down the stairs, the smile he offers the young woman on the front porch is a sheepish one, “Good morning.”

“Good morning Mr. Gibbs, I’m Jan with Speedy Clean.”

Tony shakes his head, “I’m not Mr. Gibbs-”

She overrides his explanation quickly, “I’m sorry Mr. DiNozzo, I just assumed-”

Tony in turn stops her, “No problem, I just didn’t want any confusion.”

“I understand completely Mr. DiNozzo. If you don’t mind we’d like to start right away but I do have some questions for you or Mr. Gibbs first.” There are two other young women unloading cleaning supplies from a van in the driveway.

Taking a deep breath and just going with it he steps back, “Jethro’s not home at the moment so I suppose I’ll have to do.”

“I’m sure you will,” Her smile is indulgent, not flirtatious.

“What can I do for you?”

“On our work order it says you paid for us to do the whole house but that we’re not doing any work upstairs.”

“Jethro and I are private people. He doesn’t want strangers in our bedroom and I respect that. The other rooms upstairs are my stepdaughters’ rooms and the bathrooms. We do want the guest bathroom cleaned but you don’t need to touch the rest.”

The indulgent smile hasn’t changed and Tony finds himself wondering if it’s just her customer service smile, “If that’s what you’d prefer Mr. DiNozzo it’s not a problem. With that being the case we should be done in about two and a half hours.”

He smiles back and accepts the invoice, “If I’m in the way just let me know.”

Despite his own joking the night before and his experience with having a cleaning service he finds it distinctly uncomfortable to be in the house while they do so. He feels like he’s constantly in the way and given that they’re treating him as if he owns the place that’s something of an accomplishment.

He gets up to leave the den without being asked when Jan turns to address him and accidentally knocks a picture frame off the book case. Reflexes and proximity allow him to catch it before it comes to harm and when he looks down at the photo he can’t help but smile at it. It’s the picture of the two of them curled up on the sofa he’s just vacated together. Jan looks at it and grins at him, “You and Mr. Gibbs make a very handsome couple.”

He feels uncharacteristically self conscious, “He makes it easy.”

“I meant more that, well, you seem happy together,” She blushes.

Tony on the other hand smiles genuinely for the first time since coming downstairs, “We are.” The fact that Gibbs framed this photograph and displayed it in the den warms him to his bones.
Gibbs startles just a little when a call of “Good afternoon Mr. Gibbs,” comes from his oven. Despite the van outside he hadn’t expected to find a young woman with her head in his oven.

He offers a smile though she doesn’t turn, “Good afternoon.”

He’s saved from whatever small talk she was about to make by Tony stepping into the kitchen with a laundry basket full of table linens on his hip. He offers Tony a confused smile instead, “Those were clean.”

“No, they were cleaned before they were put away, it’s not the same thing. They smelled so strongly of mothballs that I almost puked pulling them out of the closet. Now they’re clean.”

“You’re cute when you go all domestic.”

Tony tries to glare but he’s still smiling slightly, “Bite me Jethro.”

“Best offer I’ve had all morning.” He wraps an arm around Tony’s waist and very deliberately bites his bottom lip.

When they part Tony shakes his head, “Liar. I made you a much better offer before we got out of bed.”

“That was a demand not an offer.”

A single huff of laughter concedes the point and they just stand there for a moment, reconnecting as if they’d been apart for weeks. Eventually it sinks in for Tony that he’s still receiving a contented, not even partially concealed smile, “You’re in a much better mood than when you left.”

“I had a good talk with Dad, and with Abby too for that matter.”

“So I can wear a nice shirt to dinner tomorrow? No risk of a food fight?”

“Wear whatever you like. And feel free to move anything you want over.” He presses a quelling finger to Tony’s lips, “I’m not suddenly asking you to move in. Just… we spend more time here than we do there, and we both know eventually you will be moving in here, so in the meantime…”

“Must have been some talk with your dad.”

“It was. And so was the one with Abby. Got me thinking about regrets and what I really want. And I’d regret loosing more time to caution when we don’t really need it.”

Tony seems to consider it, “Most of the important stuff is here, but if you could find me a little bookshelf space for actual books I’d appreciate it.”

“I’m sure I can manage that,” Gibbs murmurs, already planning the new one he’ll build for the thin space between Tony’s bedside table and the wall.

Tony answers the door when Jackson arrives at ten o’clock and is mortified to feel himself blush. “Mr. Gibbs, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

Jackson smiles, just a hint of mischief in it, “You must be Tony.”
“Oh! I’m sorry, yes, yes I am. Tony DiNozzo,” He turns and points, “Jethro’s in the kitchen.”

“You can calm down Tony, I don’t bite.”

“Of course not, Sir.”

Jackson laughs at that and the sound is so familiar Tony finds himself relaxing instinctively. It doesn’t, however, coax his feet into motion. The low murmur of greetings escapes the kitchen and Gibbs emerges with a questioning look.

“Less ready than I thought,” Tony explains quietly.

Gibbs considers him for a long moment before pushing him firmly but gently toward the stairs, “Head up to the bedroom. I need a minute to finish up with the turkey and get Dad settled but then I’ll be right up.”

Tony concentrates on his breathing and doesn’t even glance in as he passes the kitchen. He’s not sure why actually meeting Jackson Gibbs sent his head spinning but the one thing he absolutely refuses to do in this situation is throw up. That concentration carries him up the stairs, down the hall and around to his side of the bed.

He startles when Gibbs locks the bedroom door.

“We can still go.”

Tony’s response is immediate and emphatic “No!” He takes a deep breath, “I want to be here. I want to do this. It’s just-”

The bed dips and a strong hand steadies him.

“I’m not the kind of guy anyone introduces to their parents. I’m… a good time. A good boyfriend. Just not the sort of boyfriend that’s going to impress your parents. I get that.” Another long pause, “I know you didn’t pick this and you don’t give a damn about what he thinks. I get that too. But I guess it just hit me, back there, how this must look to him.” That earns him one hell of a glare. “I’m not saying I think you don’t love me, I kno-”

Gibbs claps a hand over Tony’s mouth. “Shut up Tony.” He waits for Tony’s nod before continuing. “I’m fairly sure Jackson got exactly the right impression when I told him I love you with all my heart.” He sighs and kisses the back of Tony’s neck, “I know you don’t have a lot of experience at this but you’ve got to learn to trust me. Trust us.”

“What if he hates me?”

“What if he hates me?”

“Then he really is a foolish old man who has no place in my life. But I doubt that’ll be an issue Tony. Just be yourself and he’s bound to love you.” Tony’s continued tension makes him add a soft: “Or we could stay up here and I could love you instead.”

Tony pushes him bodily away but chuckles, “Not with your Dad downstairs Jethro.”

“Then we best get down there. I need to baste the turkey and your sweet potato pie won’t assemble itself.”

“What else do we need to make?” Tony asks as they make their way downstairs.

“Squash, turnips, mashed potatoes, salad and cranberry sauce.”
“No green bean casserole?”

“Abbs is bringing it.”

“She use those french fried onions?”

“Is there some other way to make it?” Gibbs teases as they enter the kitchen.

“Emilie seemed to think so. But I think that comes from Dad trying to convince a French chef to make a clearly American dish. The first Thanksgiving he was working at the house he saw the list of vegetable dishes and decided that since all the ingredients were there he should just make ratatouille. Rebecca threw a fit.”

“I think I’m glad we only had the one meal there.”

“I’m glad your side of the family runs toward simpler tastes.” Jackson chuckles at that and Tony colors, “No offense, sir.”

“You seem quiet cozy with my boy Tony, I think you can call me Jack.”

“I can try Jack, but I make no guarantees.”

“If my granddaughter can do it I think you can manage.”

Tony chuckles, “I’ll do my best.”

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At noon they reach a point where the rest of the work for dinner has to wait until closer to serving and a light lunch, ham sandwiches and beer, has been put together. They eat while discussing the afternoon football game despite a lack of any real interest in its outcome. Jackson collects the plates and calmly says, “Leave me and Tony alone for a few Leroy.”

Gibbs pauses beside the recycling bin and looks at Tony. After a few seconds without their usual nonverbal communication he signs, “Up to you.”

Tony considers them both before nodding, “Go on, I’ll be fine.”

Jackson laughs at that, “Was there some question about it? I’m not a firing squad.”

Tony shakes his head, “That remains to be seen.”

“I’m sure I’m a pussycat compared to Abigail when it concerns Leroy.”

Gibbs chuckles and kisses Tony in passing, “I’ll be in the den.”

For a very long moment they stand in front of the sink in silence. Jackson is washing and Tony’s drying. Then almost out of the blue Jackson asks “My boy treat you right?”

“He loves me and he makes sure I know it.”

“And what about you?”

“Me? I’m a heart on my sleeve kinda guy. Jethro knows I love him too.”

Jackson considers him for a short time before speaking again, “Isn’t he a little old for you?”
“Not at all sir.” Noting the look he’s getting Tony grins disarmingly, “Eight years isn't really all that much and we compliment each other well enough to make it a moot point. He grounds me, supports me, reminds me that I don’t need to be the class clown for people to like me. In return I keep him from taking responsibility for the whole world, remind him that it’s ok to have fun. We balance each other out.”

“And yet you let him keep that ugly ass uncomfortable excuse for a sofa.”

Tony gives a startled laugh at that, “I’m not his interior designer and I don’t live here so I’ve got no say on the sofa front.”

“You’re not living here?”

“No sir, not yet. We’re in negotiations about it.”

“Negotiations?”

“Sorry, bad joke. I have things here but we’re not exactly at that point yet. We’ve both been a little burned in the past.”

“And he’s a stubborn bastard that has to be right.”

Tony stifles a laugh, Jackson maybe more diplomatic than he’d expected from Jethro’s dire predictions but the tactics are exactly as advertised. “I don’t really mind that he’s a bastard. I find it… endearing actually.”

“You are a strange young man Tony DiNozzo.”

“That’s probably so. You’re really this dead set against me and Jethro?”

“Despite what Leroy may have told you I’m not trying to run you off.”

“If this is you not trying to run me off… Well sir if I were a man less sure of his relationship with your son I’d be long gone by now.”

“But that’s exactly the point. If you aren’t sure enough to make it through a few uncomfortable questions from me you aren’t fit for my boy.”

“Well then have I passed the test or are we headed for the true/false questions?”

“I just have one more thing to ask you before we go ease Leroy’s mind.”

“Ask away.”

“I know my boy better than he thinks I do but this big fight,” He looks toward the living room, “I called that all wrong. I was in the wrong and I accept that. I will do my best to make amends and I know Abigail is prepared to help me. All I’d like from you is warning if I end up working against myself, if I’m making things worse just ask Abigail to let me know.”

“Despite my little panic attack I like you Jack. I think it’s important that you and Jethro make up. But I won’t betray any confidences on your behalf, most especially not Jethro’s.”

“I’m not asking you to. Just…” He sighs, “You know sometimes a situation looks different long distance than it does up close.”

“I’ll do what I can to help, but I’ll do it my way.”
“Fair enough.”

When Tony fails to follow Jackson into the den in a timely fashion Gibbs has to steel himself not to go in search of him. He manages to wait silently through twelve downs and a field goal before calmly turning to his father, “What the hell did you say to him?”

“No that it’s any of your business Leroy but we mostly talked about him. I like him.”

“And yet he disappeared upstairs again.”

It’s Tony that answers that one, “While I appreciate that you want to protect me Jethro you’re out of line right now.”

Gibbs looks back and forth between them a few times before signing, “He get out of line with you?”

Tony shakes his head but responds in kind, “I passed the Jackson test. No big deal. Went upstairs to fetch the pictures from our trip.”

“But you’re okay? I worry.” Gibbs returns to verbal communication.

Tony chuckles, “Yes. Now can we watch some football before the ladies descend on us or would you two prefer to talk about our feelings some more?”

“You have some bizarre gender identity issue with talking about your feelings Honey?”

Noting the humor in Gibbs’ expression Tony whacks him lightly upside the head before muttering “Fuck off Jethro” and snuggling into his side.

Jolene acknowledges Tony’s inexperience at signing with a grin and a hastily signed promise to be patient with him. The look on Tony’s face at that makes everyone else laugh and when he gets it he signs and speaks, as is polite, “That was just mean Ma’am.”

Abby beams at him, “It means she likes you.”

Over dinner polite questions are exchanged, mostly by Tony and Jolene. Both talkative and playful they get along well and Tony finds himself thinking Gibbs might have a prevailing type after all, just that his criteria are far less shallow than most people’s. He’s milling the concept over with such concentration he almost misses it when Jolene asks, “How on earth do you put up with Jethro?”

“I don’t know what.” He stops when he realizes he hasn’t been signing and tries again, “I really don’t know what you mean.”

“He’s always been a bit of a bore. No offense Jethro.”

Tony finds himself laughing at that. “People change I guess.”

“He doesn’t spend all his time messing about with his car anymore?”

“That sounds like a story worth hearing.”

“I told you I used to have an old Charger I liked working on. It was part of the story about Kevin.”
Jackson groans at one. “He came round the shop a year or so back looking for you. Wouldn’t say why but his mother told me his wife had just thrown him out on his ass.”

“Even if that was why he tried to look me up Jackson it’s hardly my fault.”

Tony shakes his head and turns back to Jolene, “These days he prefers his boat, which he’s building in the basement. But unless he’s stressed it isn’t difficult to get him to come upstairs to amuse me.” A few beats pass before he remembers tone is hard to convey in sign. “With conversation, or a movie.”

“Is that what they call it these days?” Victor laughs as he signs.

Tony blushes and tries not meet anyone’s eye.

Gibbs sighs, mostly for effect, and comments to the room at large, “Can we have one family meal without double entendres?”

Abby giggles as she replies simply “No.”

The rest of the meal finds Tony quieter than usual but passes pleasantly enough.

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Tony is clearly still uncomfortable when they move into the den for pie, coffee, and football.

About three downs in Jackson turns his attention to Tony again, “So Tony, Leroy tells me you played some football in college?”

“I was a running back for the Buckeyes. Thought I might go pro until a broken leg ended my career.”

“In a game or unrelated?”

“Kinda of a funny story actually,” Tony relaxes again as he settles into the topic. “It was the last game of my junior year, we were tied but it was only the third quarter. I took the hand off and the blocks all just sort of came together. I had a clear field and a good ten-second lead on the nearest defender behind me. I might have made it the whole length of the field. Except just as I crossed their thirty I get hit, hard. Unfortunately to pick up the last little burst of speed he jumped at me. We both went down and how we landed I just happened to break my leg in two places. I knew I was done for in football and as much as I like basketball that was never going to take me anywhere so the next day I went in and changed my minor. But the funny part doesn’t come into it for over twenty years. On the job I was exposed to a pathogen and ended up in the hospital. The Doctor introduced himself as Dr. Brad Pitt and was so adamant about making sure we understood there was no relation that I didn’t really think about it until later. Then I asked him which school he attended and when he said Michigan suddenly I knew, he was the one who broke my leg. So he ended my football career but twenty years later he saved my life.”

“I send him a Christmas card every year,” Gibbs puts in.

“For which part?” Abby asks cheekily.

“Both actually. Doubt we’d have ever met if Tony’d made it to the NFL. And that’d be a hell of a waste of natural talent.” He smirks a little, “In more ways than one.”

“Now you’re just doing it to make me blush.”
“Maybe a little,” Gibbs concedes easily.

“Not so sure I like you keeping in contact with Dr. Pitt though.”

“The only thing I have in common with the man is gratitude that he saved your life and understood what that meant to me. Didn’t it strike you as odd that no one tried to kick me out of your room?”

“Guess I just attributed it to the natural authority you exert on most people when you want something.”

“And I probably would have if I’d needed to, Dr. Pitt made sure I didn’t need to. And he checks on any test result that involves your lungs. Seems you made an impression.”

“Not every day you get a patient with the plague I’m sure.”

“The plague?” Jackson is clearly stunned. A quick glance confirms that Jolene and Victor aren’t.

“Yes I’ve had the plague. Our crazies tend to be crazy in the extreme.”

“You’re certainly proving to be an exciting addition to the family at least,” Jackson murmurs distractedly.

“Well I am the life of any party,” Tony grins cheekily.

Jolene and Victor leave with Abby as evening begins to fall leaving Jackson, Tony and Gibbs alone again. Tony gets up with a stretch so complete that his back pops. “Okay I don’t know about you two but I need to move around a little, work some of that food off before I slip into a coma.”

“What’d you have in mind?” Gibbs asks with the barest hint of a leer.

“A walk you pervert. Maybe a little freeze tag with Bethany if Heather’s got her playing in the park.”

“I’d like that. What do you think Dad?”

“Who’re Bethany and Heather?” Jackson asks as he pulls on a sweater.

“Bethany is a little girl down the block that Abby sometimes plays with. Heather is her mom. Bethany lost her father awhile back and in bonding with Abbs she’s sort adopted Jethro as a father figure.”

“Abby’s told her that Tony is my prince charming and little Bethany is both in awe and smitten.”

“Single parent or not I may have to shoot Heather in the foot for telling you that.”

“I didn’t need Heather to tell me anything. Last time you played with her Bethany told me you were the prettiest prince in the whole wide world and if you didn’t already love me so much she’d want you to be her prince charming instead.”

“Given British genetics that isn’t much of an accomplishment, and what seven year old doesn’t fall for her friend’s pretty step-dad right?”

Jackson laughs heartily, “Now I have to meet this little girl.”

“Off we go then,” Tony makes a sweeping gesture toward the door and allows both of them to pass.
him before shutting the door without ceremony.

Jackson startles just a bit when Gibbs falls into step beside Tony and places a hand at the small of his back. “You boys are awfully… open about this whole thing.”

“The neighbors all already know. And aside from some of the people at work I just don’t care who knows.”

Tony blushes just a little, “As much as I prefer that Jenny Sheppard never know I’m no longer worried about what anyone else thinks. And it’s fun to bait Miss Lennox from time to time.” He glances back at Jackson, “She’s a busybody from the next block over.”

“Mrs. Beale asked about you when I said I was coming down,” Jackson comments casually.

“I hope you told her something appropriately scandalous.”

“Didn’t know your boy toy was a pretty young thing or I would have told her so. Instead I just said your boyfriend wanted to meet me.”

Gibbs chuckles warmly at that, “Did she faint?”

“No, but she did look as though I’d slapped her.”

Any further response dies under the force of the shouted “Mr. Gibbs, Tony! Come play with me, please? Please? Please?”

Tony catches the running Bethany mid-stride and swings her onto his hip, “And what are we playing Miss Bethany?”

“Tag?”

Tony stage whispers conspiratorially, “I think Mr. Gibbs should be it.”

A small hand darts out and taps Gibbs’ shoulder and Bethany calls “You’re it Mr. Gibbs!” as Tony runs away with her still on his hip.

Gibbs laughs and turns to Jackson, “Heather is just over there if you want company while I do my duty as the evenings’ entertainment.”

Jackson grins, “Go on Son, I’ll be fine.”
Tony stretches happily and falls back into the sofa. “That went well.”
“You were definitely a hit.”
“I like your Dad.”
Gibbs smiles a bit reluctantly, “He liked you. You two discuss anything interesting?”
“I passed the interview and he didn’t manage to offend me Jethro. Count it as a win and forget about it.”
“I figured as much, I’m more worried about what he might have told you about me.”
“Jolene gave me more ammo than your dad on that front. Though I would like to hear more about the Charger.”
“Not much to tell really. Just a car I spent time restoring. Needed something to do and it was cheap. Never got it running, or painted for that matter.”
“If that was all why did Jolene seem resentful of it?”
“Because we were seventeen,” He shakes his head, “at that age girls think any boy that likes them should never pay attention to anything else.” There’s a long pause before Gibbs asks quietly, “Do you resent the boat?”
Tony gives him a withering look, “I love the boat and you know it.”
“And there you have the answer to why we work.”
Tony chuckles, “My affection for the boat huh? And here I thought it was because we understand and respect each other.”
“Who said anything about respect?”
“You did. Told my dad you love and respect me.”
“Damn, you caught me.”
“So are we doing the tourist routine with Jolene and Victor?”
“If you’re up for it, yeah. Thought I might ask Jackson along too.”
“A regular family outing.”

Sunday night finds them in the basement sitting arm’s length apart each sanding a section of the boat. It’s quiet and comfortable, at least at first. As time wears on Tony’s silence is noticeable to the point where Jethro physically stops his movements. “Something wrong Honeybuns?”
Tony smiles at the teasing, “Just thinking over the last few days.”
“I miss something?”
He shakes his head, “I guess it’s just hitting me… Your family actually likes me. You invited Jackson to join us for Christmas, not you but us, and he seemed happy about it.”
“You had some doubt? Thought maybe I came from a family with extremely poor taste?”
“One of those too good to be true things.”
“You’re Prince Charming, you’re pretty much guaranteed a happily ever after.”
“If we’re predicting on precedent I don’t like the way I’m supposed to get there.”
“Oh?”
“The King usual dies, leaving the Prince to take care of the Princess.”
“We’ll rewrite it.”
“We better. Baring some asshole with a grudge taking one or both of us out I expect you to be around a very long time.”
“Months, years,” There’s an obviously deliberate pause, “probably forever.”

McGee is already in, and frankly looks a little harried, when Tony arrives. “Not the Cleaver family Thanksgiving you were hoping for Probie?”
“My holiday went fine thanks. Aside from Sarah gloating about being right about you, that is.”
“Thought you said I wasn’t Agent Tommy.”
“That’s bullshit and everyone knows it,” McGee huffs irritably.
“Who burned your cookies McGrumpy?”
“Accounting sent back half my expense reports while we were away.” He sighs and shakes his head,
“How’d things go with Jay’s family?”
Tony grins involuntarily, “His dad likes me.”
“It is serious then,” McGee grins back triumphantly.
Tony shakes his head, “I said it was didn’t I?”
“When do we get to meet him?”
Tony is saved from answering this by Ziva’s arrival. She looks like two miles of bad road and Tony
is genuinely concerned when he asks her what’s wrong.
“My flight was delayed, I spent the night in the airport, was unable to sleep on the plane due to a
criing infant and I have not been home yet.”
“Head home Ziva. Get some sleep. We’ll call when we need you.”
Tony risks a warning look at Jethro but gets a dismissive glance in return. So he goes on the
offensive, “Had a good vacation Boss?”
“I did, DiNozzo.”
-----------------------------------------------
Abby comes upstairs around ten and offers Gibbs a sunny smile and a kiss on the cheek, “Can I
borrow Tony for a while?”
“For work or gossip?”
“We can multitask.”
Gibbs gives one of his barely there half smiles and shakes his head, “Go play already.”
Abby grabs Tony’s hand, “Come on, you’ve got to tell me all about meeting Jay’s family.”
In the elevator Tony laughs at her, “Because you didn’t have a good enough view from across the
table?”
“Because you spent time with Grandpa Jack while I was at home with Mom and Dad.”
“I like him. And he seemed to approve of me.”
“He looked scared half to death when you just casually mentioned that you’d had the plague Tony.”
He blushes just a bit, “I forget that it isn’t the kind of thing that happens to normal people.”
“I don’t know if I’m supposed to laugh or hug you right now.”
“Hug me. We’ll both enjoy that.” He kisses her cheek as they hug, “Thanks Princess. How’d it go
with your parents?”
“I had fun. Any excuse to see my mom really. And we all had a good laugh at you panicking over
how fast Mom was signing.”
“That woman is pure evil. So what did you need my help on?”
“I need to test the length of time it would take to snap a frayed safety line under the pressure caused
by supporting an adult male.”
“You need me to hang from a rope until it breaks dropping me to the floor basically.”
“But you’ll only need to fall an inch or two.”
“The things I do for beautiful women.”
“Like you wouldn’t do the same for a beautiful man.”
-----------------------------------------------
Cynthia grins conspiratorially as she enters Jenny’s office, “God bless the boys in the mailroom.
Anna Thompson is in fact getting married and I finally got something interesting on Tony.”
Jenny gives her full attention at that, “Interesting how?”
“Seems the reason no one knows about Tony’s new girl is that it isn’t a girl.”
“You’re sure?”
“It explains his reaction to me assuming it was Abby he’s seeing.”
“It makes a certain amount of sense.”
“I don’t follow.”
“It’s misdirection. If he shows you what you expect to see you tend to assume that it’s all there is to
Jenny summons him with an email that is clearly meant to be a friendly appeal but reads more as a command around noon. On a whim he knocks before entering, but only just. “You wanted to speak to me?”

“I was concerned about Ziva. Cynthia tells me you sent her home. Was she ill?”
“Just a little jet lagged and sleep deprived. They’re of no use to me if they fall asleep at their desks.”

She’s momentarily speechless in the face of that statement. “You really are happy.”

“There was some question?”

“It’s just… a surprise I suppose. I take it your holiday went well?”

“Made up with my father and everything.”

“I suppose Abby orchestrated that?”

“You know Abbs,” He smiles fondly, “couldn’t let me just go on not speaking to him.”

“And did he like your new lady friend?”

“You’re fishing again Jenny.”

She gives a tiny nod of confirmation, “I’m just concerned about you.”

“I’m a grown man Jenny, no need to be concerned for me.” He doesn’t give her a chance to respond, just heads back to his own desk.

A collective six cold case reviews, and a useful result to Abby’s experiment later Tony and McGee are packing up to leave for the day when McGee turns to Tony, “Wanna grab a beer? I could use some advice.”

Tony makes eye contact with Gibbs for a second before nodding, “Sure Timmy. I’ll meet you downstairs in ten. Need to make a call first.”

“Tell Jay I say hi.”

“Sure thing.” A moment’s consideration sends him into the break room to avoid someone overhearing both sides of the conversation. “I assume you heard?”

“I did.”

“I might end up having to drive him home, depending on what he needs advice on. Want me to just crash at my place tonight?”

“Do I want you to? No. But maybe you should.”

“If I can get away before nine I’ll be home. If not I’ll go to the apartment.”

“Fair enough. Love you.”

“Love you too. Cross your fingers that he doesn’t want advice about coming out.”

“Makes him nervous enough to be a possibility you know.”

“Don’t remind me. I’ll call if I’m not coming home.” Before he can lose his resolve he hangs up and heads down to where McGee is waiting.

It takes less than fifteen minutes alone in the house for the silence to begin to bother Gibbs. It’s not a unique occurrence, it’s why he used to listen to the farm report, it just used to take longer. Tony’s absence is glaringly conspicuous after a full nine days in his company. The boat doesn’t help and the sound on the TV in the basement has become distant and scratchy as the set has aged. All of which results in Gibbs sitting on the sofa in the den with his book and a horribly cheesy James Bond movie on the TV.

Of course without Tony’s little sounds of amusement, disappointment and envy the movie just isn’t the same. All of which makes Gibbs especially grateful for Liz’s uncanny ability to call at just the right time. Still, it’s best not to show his hand too soon, lest Liz gloat through out the whole conversation.

“Gibbs.”

“Don’t be like that LJ. I know you’ve got caller ID.”

“Force of habit. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We’ll get to that, first how did Thanksgiving with Tony go?”
“It was good. Everyone loved him of course. And Abs insists on working miracles.”
“Made you talk to your dad, huh?”
“Jackson and I made up, yeah. That girl is tenacious as hell when she wants something and this time
she wanted her family back.”
“You’ve missed him LJ and don’t think you can lie to me about it. You were mad, you probably still
are, but you did miss him.”
“Maybe I did. But I would have gone on not speaking to him all the same if Abby hadn’t made it
otherwise.”
“True enough, you have always been a stubborn bastard.”
“And how was your holiday Elizabeth?”
“My mother carefully avoided the topic of my love life, Aunt Catherine kept making statements
about how I let myself get too old to have children like she isn’t an old spinster herself, and Bradley
moped because his ex had the kids this year.”
“So a typical holiday in the Strafton house.”
“Exactly.”
“That’s not why you called though.”
“You know me too well Jethro.”
“Margaret wants to buy a house. Together.”
“I thought you were happy with Margaret.”
“I am happy with Margaret, but isn’t too soon? I mean I only split up with Lauren eighteen months
ago. You’re the expert on break ups but I just don’t think it’s been long enough.”
“Are you not ready to make that kind of commitment to her?”
“I don’t know.” Liz admits quietly.
“Don’t do that to her Liz. It’s not about Lauren and you know it. Whatever it is just tell Margaret the
truth.”
“You really don’t care what it is, do you?”
“Not in the slightest. I’m here for you but that doesn’t mean I’m suddenly one of the girls.”
“I should have called Tony. He wouldn’t pull this falsely macho bullshit,” She sniff theatrically.
“No he’d just make understanding noises while signing for me to get him a beer and give him a scalp
massage.”
“You’re evil. And where is the stud muffin tonight?”
“McGee needed his advice. Not sure if he’s coming home tonight or not yet.”
“You’re miserable, aren’t you?”
He allows himself a heavy sigh, “Yup.”

So what burning question do you need my expert advice on?” Tony asks as their beers arrive.
“I got a job offer.”
“Okay. And?”
“I’m not taking it. I’m not even considering it. But should I tell Gibbs? That I got the offer in the first
place I mean.”
“That depends on who made you the offer.”
“A data encryption and security firm called HG Clemment’s. They handle data security for a number
of banks and investment firms.”
Tony shakes his head, laughing at himself for ever suspecting it might be something else. “My rule of
thumb Probie is if they’re trying to trade on knowledge you gained working here or if it’s another
agency looking to snatch up an asset you tell the boss immediately. If on the other hand they
genuinely want you on your own merits it’s totally your call. And this sounds like the latter to me.”
“Would you tell him?”
“Yeah,” He just catches himself before he says too much. “I’ve worked for Gibbs a long time now
and I prefer his trust to keeping my private life private. That being said as long as you’re not actively
hiding something or lying I doubt he’d give a damn about this. In fact he probably knows about it
and figures you haven’t mentioned it because it isn’t important. Don’t stress yourself out over it
McTwitchy, it’s really not a big deal.”
“Do you ever get offers?”
“Not as often as I get phone numbers, but sure. Once or twice a year a private security firm asks me to dinner and every once in a while some idiot tries to entice me to join the FBI or on one notable occasion the INS. Gibbs laughed at that one. Asked what they needed with an undercover man.”

The phone rings three times before it’s answered and it’s long enough for McGee to figure out where he is and inexpertly place himself in ease dropping distance. Tony doesn’t exactly blame him. “Hey sweetchecks.”
“We got an audience?”
“Absolutely. Tim and I ordered bar food. I’ll come around at eight thirty, unless you’d rather come to mine?”
“This you asking that we stay at the apartment tonight?”
“Might be better if we did, yeah.”
“I’ll be there before you get home. Got any coffee in or do I need to pick some up?”
“I don’t think there’s any left. If you’ll do a quick grocery run I’ll make pancakes, eggs and bacon.”
“Actually I think I’ll cook for you this time Babe.”
“You are too good to me. See you later then.”
“Love you.”
“And I love you.”
“And if you can catch him at it smack McGee.”
Tony laughs and hangs up before returning inside. “Jay seems to think I need to relay a message to you for him. He says ‘try it and I’ll break your hands’.”
McGee turns an alarming shade of red, “What? No! I mean- not that there would be anything wrong-you know I’m not.”
Tony laughs again, “Calm down McHetero, it was a joke.”
It takes a very long moment but eventually McGee asks, “Your joke or his?”
“Mine. Jay knows he’s the only one for me, it probably wouldn’t even occur to him to make jokes about it being otherwise. Besides, how would he know it’d freak you out to suggest you had ill advised designs on me?”

The sound of high heels on linoleum is so common place in a supermarket he doesn’t notice her until she calls out, “Jethro?”
He steels himself, settling his mask back into place before he turns, “Jenny.”
“You’re a little far from home.”
“Was passing this way and stopped in to pick up a few things.”
“She lives around here then?”
Deciding to humor her a bit, he smiles a little, “Close, yeah.”
“And you’re making her breakfast.”
“Breakfast in bed as a matter of fact. You can never go wrong with a touch of romance.”
“On a workday though, I’m surprised.”
“We seem to do alright with it. Having a well developed habit of being up with the sun does occasionally work in my favor.”
Jenny seems at a loss with that one and he seizes her indecision.
“Nice seeing you Jenny but I really need to get going.”
“Have a nice night Jethro.”

Jenny doesn’t deliberately follow him, but when she notices they’re going the same way she watches to see if she knows the building where he stops. Something about it is familiar, but she can’t quite place it. Still she takes note of the address and continues on her way, sure that whatever it is she’ll remember given time.
The neighborhood isn’t what she’d have expected of Jethro’s girlfriend but she can admit, if only to
herself, that she’s expected that he’s fallen for someone very much like herself. The building suggests someone more of a like mind with Jethro than a strong woman who takes control to prove she deserves her place in a man’s world. Which makes sense. Jethro isn’t the type to stand back and support someone else’s success. If he can’t actively affect the outcome he’s more likely to stay out of the situation entirely. He’s a man of action. Speculation isn’t get her any further now than it has in the past few weeks, and perhaps Cynthia will know why the address is familiar to her. In either case, it can wait until morning.
Gossip and Manipulaton

Chapter Notes

Just a quick little aside with Jenny. If I'm being too vague about what is happening here please comment and if there's a majority I'll address it more explicitly at a later date.

Cynthia quietly enters the office and waits while Jenny finishes her phone call. When given a nod to continue she hands over Jenny’s coffee and smiles, “The teleconference with Senator Dashal’s office has been pushed back to two o’clock. I moved your three-thirty appointment back to four and rescheduled the deputy director for later in the week.” She shuffles the files in her arm and hands one across the desk, “Sec Nav wants a briefing on the arrest made aboard the USS Kennedy last week. The details seem straightforward but the agent afloat can brief you directly as necessary. And Agent Reston’s weekly check-in is in five minutes.”

Jenny considers all this momentarily before nodding slightly, “Cancel my lunch with Mr. Paulson as well. And send Agent Reston in when he arrives.”

Cynthia nods, “If that’s all Ma’am…”

“Thank you Cynthia.”

Less then three minutes later Agent Reston enters the office, the charming, if bland, smile that brought him to Jenny’s attention in full force.

“You’re looking well today Danny.”

“I’m feeling well Ma’am. I believe we’re finally making some real headway.”

Jenny’s expression becomes more intent, a non-verbal ‘do continue.’

“Her father’s coming to visit. She’s asked me to meet him.”

She smiles genuinely at him, “That is good news. When are you meeting him?”

“The plan is for us to take him out to dinner on Saturday. At seven o’clock, unfortunately she plans to have him pick the restaurant so I have no influence over that.”

“That’s quiet all right Danny. Just remember he needs to like you. To trust you. To never doubt you’re exactly who you say you are.”

“I won’t let you down Ma’am.”

Jenny grins internally, a little ambition goes a long way. It’s far from the first time she’s been glad she re-thought using DiNozzo for this. There was never any chance he’d be this easy to control and despite his talent for short term undercover work he would have balked at playing with the girl’s emotions the way Reston has.

“I’m sure that you won’t Danny. You’ve done well.”

It’s almost three hours before she finds time for her usual gossip check in with Cynthia but it’s a vital part of keeping her pet project safe and she makes the time. Obviously gathering intelligence on the private lives of her subordinates through the office grape vine makes it much easier to brush off if someone notices her interest in Reston’s new girlfriend. And the bonus of having a ready supply of information already in place when Jethro began seeing someone it’s to be over looked. The thought of which reminds her to ask if the address she saw Jethro stopping at last night is familiar to Cynthia.

“I’m not sure,” Cynthia rarely says no, a little digging can make most answers a yes after all. “I’ll see what I can find.”

When Cynthia retreats she looks once more at the surveillance photo of Rene Benoit kissing his daughter's cheek and resists the urge for a stiff drink.
Cold Cases and Hot Cars

Tony arrives humming something happy, even he’s not sure what, and sipping excellent coffee from a travel mug. Ziva grins at him, “Good night?”

“Good morning. Jay made me breakfast in bed.”

“Good cook?”

“Very good cook. Better than I am at breakfast, by a wide margin. You seem to be happier with the world today.”

“I slept like a stone.”

Tony chuckles, “Like a rock, you mean.”

“Do we have a new case?”

“No yet. We spent yesterday catching up with things that came in while we were on vacation and reviewing cold cases.”

“Ah yes, I had forgotten. Did meeting ‘Jay’s’ family go well?”

“Despite the Princess having an evil sense of humor it went very well indeed. Especially with Jay’s dad.”

“So the little girl is Jay’s daughter?”

“Yes McStalker.”

“But I thought…”

“She wasn’t with him last night, that’s part of why we stayed at my place.” He deliberately looks around before adding, “Now can we change the subject before Gibbs smacks me for distracting you two?”

“But we are so enjoying seeing you so smitten,” Ziva teases.

“And I for one am fascinated by the new direction you’ve gone in,” McGee smirks.

“You know if you really want a walk on the wild side McCurious I know a cute barista who might go for you. He really thinks the federal agent thing is ‘sooo hot’ or so he keeps telling me.”

Gibbs, with his perfect timing, turns the corner just as McGee begins spluttering, “You’re still going to that coffee shop DiNozzo?”

“They make great muffins Boss.”

Gibbs shakes his head, “Abby cleaned up the footage from the Donavan case, we got a plate, an address, and a pair of tentative facial recognition hits. DiNozzo, with me, McGee, Ziva go check on the possible IDs.”

“Donavan case?” Ziva asks as she and Gibbs both retrieve their weapons from locked desk drawers.

It’s McGee that answers, “Five months cold. Home invasion, Petty Officer first class Gerard Donavan was beaten unconscious and the house ransacked. They took easily portable high values items, but also the contents of a safe. Lieutenant Commander Molly Donavan was deployed but it seemed likely they thought she kept files on Project Minesweeper at home. She denies it, but the perceived breach was enough to warrant NCIS involvement.”

“Memorize the file there Probie?”

“I just re-read it yesterday Tony.”

Tony waits until they’re out of the garage before asking, “Some reason you didn’t bump this down to one of the newer teams? It doesn’t really sound like it needs our expert efforts.”

“It managed to go cold. Besides I didn’t think it was the best idea for the team to be under Jenny’s watchful eye today.”

“Are you honestly worried she’ll figure it out?”

“I don’t know. There’s a chance. But I doubt she’s figured it out yet as neither of us has been raked over the coals so let’s do our best not to jog her memory.”

Tony just shakes his head, “I think Ziva is enjoying McGee obliviousness a little too much.”
“We haven’t exactly been working at concealing it from them and considering how much he’s been questioning you the fact that he still has no clue is a little amusing.”
“He really is too interested in the whole thing.” Tony takes a moment to center himself and then flips open the files, switching mentally into a work mindset, “Which do you figure this one is, innocent bystander whose car was stolen or truly stupid criminal who is about to tell us that his car was stolen?”
“Abbs seems to think it was an innocent bystander as the car was reported stolen from a mall parking lot the day before the home invasion but they might be smart enough to be telling a convincing lie.”
“We going for good cop/bad cop or charming federal agents in need of any additional insights they might have?”
“I was thinking we start with the ‘I know you’re lying’ silent stare and then if they actually aren’t involved you can step in and be charming.”
“So more, quiet cop/buddy cop then.”
“Sounds about right to me.”

“How did you know that Jay spent the night at Tony’s apartment?” Ziva questions as they get in the car.
“I overheard Tony making the arrangements.” He glances at her contemplatively, “You know who Jay really is don’t you?”
“I have… made some observations on the subject.”
“I feel like it’s staring me in the face but I can’t put my finger on it.”
“If I felt confident of your reaction I would clue you on but I am not certain you would like knowing.”
“In, not on, ” He corrects absently, “Why would knowing who it is cause a problem? He’s Tony’s boyfriend not a new team member.”
Ziva can’t suppress her smirk.
McGee’s eyes go wide as the penny drops. “Tony’s the new future-ex-Mrs. Gibbs?”
Ziva snickers, “I highly doubt Tony would change his name, or request a divorce for that matter. They are very happy together.”
“But Jay is Gibbs?”
“Surely you knew he prefers Jethro over Leroy.”
“Now I have to bleach my brain,” McGee groans.
Ziva lets her blossoming anger show, “I thought you were not concerned over Tony being gay.”
“I don’t give a damn that they’re gay, or that they’re together Ziva. But some of the things he’s said to me about Jay are things I’d never want to know about my boss no matter who his significant other is.”
“Were any of those revelations unprovoked?” Ziva asks archly.
“No. But I still don’t want to know that Tony thinks Gibbs could be an underwear model even if I brought it on myself.”
Ziva considers it, “He certainly seems fit enough.”
“You’re evil.”
“I trust you know not to mention this to… certain people.”
“Director Sheppard would kill me for just being the messenger. I don’t plan on making that mistake, no.”

Tony has been coaxing details out of the rather skittish couple for almost ten minutes when Gibbs’ cell goes off. He glances over but continues on as Gibbs leaves the room. “What’ve you got McGee?”
“Winters fled when we identified ourselves to his roommate. We pursued him on foot, and when we caught up to him he continued to resist. Ziva’s escorting him to the hospital.”
Gibbs considers it a moment, “Sit on the apartment until you can get a search warrant, call in Bates for back up while you wait. Tony and I will check out Keller.”

Tony quickly wraps up the interview and joins him at the door, “Something happen to the probies Boss?”

“They arrested Winters. We’re taking over checking out Keller so they can follow up with the booking and the search.”

“They make a good team.”

“So do we.”

Tony grins brightly, “There was never any question about that Jethro.” A few beats later he stops his motion toward the car and turns wide eyed to Gibbs, “Unless you were implying that they’re…”

Gibbs laughs, “He wouldn’t survive. And the princess would kill him.”

“Thought Abbs was finished with him.”

“She is, but she still seems to think she has a say in who he dates and she says Ziva’s too unobservant for ‘her boys’.”

“It took her less time than Probie to figure us out.”

“I doubt that would affect Abby’s opinion on the matter.”

“True enough.”

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Keller surrenders quietly, just a wistful look at the third story window before offering up his wrists. His fiancé on other hand takes offense, in the taking pot shots from the aforementioned window variety. Thankfully she’s a miserable shot.

The dull thuds of rounds hitting the sedan annoy Tony more than anything but a quelling looking from Gibbs has him quietly awaiting Metro’s arrival.

The stand off itself lasts less than an hour but the discussions, negotiations and paper work take almost three.

After another hour in interrogation Keller admits they were hired to try to steal the Project Minesweeper files.

“Guy said it’d be an easy job and when we cased the place it seemed easy enough. I was a little worried about the safe cracking nonsense, but Winters said he’d handle it.”

“And he did?” Tony prompts from his spot beside the mirror. Gibbs, though he’s sitting at the table, has yet to say a word.

“Thinks he’s funny. The money man gave him the combination.”

Tony flicks a quick look over Gibbs before asking blandly, “Where’d the money man get the combination?”

“He didn’t say.”

“You ever see him again?”

“No and he refused to wire the rest of the money cause the papers weren’t in the safe.” Keller gives an aggrieved growl, “Like it’s my fault he had us break into the wrong safe.”

“Did he contact you again at all?”

“No but Winters might still be working for him. He’s been on some job without me for almost a month now.”

Tony heads out into the hall without a word, confident that Gibbs will follow. He waits for the door to close before speaking, “An inside job then. I’ll have McGee bring Winters up so you can do that silent menace thing you do.”

“You finish with Keller. I’ll get Abbs checking if there’s some way to hack those combinations. Make sure it is an inside job, report said it was a digital lock.”

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In the end Keller doesn’t prove useful and Winters stonewalls through both Gibbs’ menacing and Tony’s charm. It takes the threat of a trip to Gitmo to crack him and when he does, he folds like a paper bag. The backer for the repeated attempts to gain the Project Minesweeper files has taken
enough precautions that even with Winters’ full confession they don’t have enough to find him and he becomes just another sketch on the watch list. The digital combination for the safe turns out to be stored in a database that Abby is able to hack into in just under an hour, and when she does she finds someone else has left them self a back door into the program. Still two arrests is better than none and Tony’s glad to call it a day at five-thirty on a relatively good outcome.

He’s just casually signed “home” in Gibbs’ direction when McGee grabs his elbow, “Come on Tony, Abby demands to be taken out for tapas and a frilly drink.”

“And so she sent you?”

“Well no. She demanded I do it. But I figured we could make a team night of it. Ziva went to change her shirt.”

“Fine, but one drink and some tapas, I have some place to be.”

“You could invite… Jay along you know.” McGee waits for the elevator doors to close and then smirks, “He is the team leader and all, he should be at team night.”

Tony gives him a full minute-and two floors- to go on. To freak out, or whine, or threaten to tattle. No such reaction emerges, “Took you long enough. Ziva figured it out weeks ago.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“I figure Ziva or Abby already threatened to utterly destroy you if this gets back to Shepard through you and I’ve told you more than enough details, so yeah that’s it.”

McGee shakes his head, “You owe me serious brain bleach.”

“Not my fault you assumed I was dating some mindless little pretty boy. Not like I gave you lurid details or failed to disabuse you of the notion that I had some bit of fluff waiting at home either. You never even bothered to ask real questions, just a bunch of ‘hey I’m an understanding, if a little uncomfortable, straight guy’ nonsense. Hell you never even asked how old ‘the Princess’ is.”

When they get to the garage McGee shakes his head, “Call him. We’ll be at On Tap over on 8th. With or without him you better be there in twenty or I’ll tell Abby you talk about her like she’s twelve.”

Tony shakes his head, “I’ll be along once I find out if Jethro’s coming. And for the record Abbs wouldn’t care.”

When Gibbs arrives Tony’s at the bar waiting to order his drink and the others have a wide selection of bite-sized foods spread over their usual table. Too close to the Yard to risk a kiss he puts a hand on the small of Tony’s back and leans over his shoulder just a bit as the bartender comes over. “Hey Nathan. Two of the usual and put anything for table six on my tab.”

Tony raises an eyebrow at him, “Paying for the table is great but you just assume I want a beer?”

“You drove the mustang over. That means one beer now and then soda ‘til we leave.”

Tony laughs at that, “Sorry Probie made a few cracks before I came over to order my beer and I’m a little defensive.”

“You stood up to your dad, my dad, and Ziva about us. Tim’s not anything to worry over.”

“I know, I know. I just… You know better than anyone I don’t have the best track record in the world. When he started in on that future-ex crap he says when he thinks you can’t hear him… It makes me nervous about the myriad ways I could screw this up. Leaving me open to attack about being a boy toy kept around for the entertainment value of having a pretty young thing around the house.”

“I’m still not your sugar daddy. I get that it’s irrational but you have nothing to worry about. It’s my insecurities we’re fighting with and frankly any time we’re forced to spend apart is tipping the scales in favor of a big grand gesture. Jenny be damned.”

“Enough of this before we do something stupid in a bar where they know us. Princess is holding court.”

“Then I suppose our place is at her side.”
They’ve moved on to dinner and switched to soda all around- it being a work night and all- when the television catches Abby’s attention. “Um, Shelly?” She asks the waitress bussing the next table, “Can you have Nathan turn up the volume on the TV?”
The others notice her attention and turn to watch as well. The aftermath of a bombing is a sight familiar to them all.
“-r bomb went off at about 7:50 and that the lone occupant of the vehicle was dead before the blaze could be contained. We have unconfirmed reports that the victim may have been a federal agent but are unable to secure a comment from the police or fire departments at this juncture. What they have told us is that the bomb was not designed to be used as a weapon of mass destruction. Our police source says it may in fact be a personally motivated attack. We will bring you further updates as they become available. But for now let’s send it over to Karen for the sports report.”
It takes a long few seconds for any of them to react and it’s McGee that recovers first, “Isn’t that near Munroe University Hospital?”
Tony, the one who has been hospitalized there before looks closer, but it’s Gibbs who answers, “A few blocks from there.”
“Wonder what makes them think he was an agent,” Tony muses absently.
They go back to their meal discussing possible motives among other topics, but for the most part it’s idle speculation and Abby wondering aloud who’ll be handling the evidence. Tony’s phone rings about five minutes after the news report. “DiNozzo.”
“Hey Tony. It’s Rick, We might have one of yours here, DOA.”
“One of ours?”
“We found a badge and gun in the wreckage of a car bomb that went off a little before eight.”
“It hit the news a few minutes ago, yeah. Any legible ID or just the badge?”
“Just the badge.”
“Ok, sit tight for us, I’m with my team now so we should be there soon. Oh, while I’m thinking of it, were you able to get a VIN on the car?”
“5GZ CZ4 3D8 3S8 127 15” Tony writes it down for Abby as it’s relayed to him.
“And where exactly is the scene?”
“2400 Pennsylvania.”
“Thanks Rick, we’re on our way.”
“Already on it,” Abby pauses, “But Tim drove me over.”
“Take my car to the Yard Princess. We’ll just take the mustang home if we head that way tonight,” Gibbs passes her his keys.
“You call Ducky then because you are not driving the mustang.”
“Yes dear.”

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Abby calls just before they reach the scene, “Whatcha got for me Princess?”
“The car’s registered to a Danny Ross. He’s not on our payroll. I’ve got dispatch looking into whether or not anyone is missing. And I’m pulling everything I can on him. I’ll call back if I get anything useful.”
“Thanks babygirl. If you pull up a picture of Ross send it to Tony and McGee.”
“Sure thing Pop.”
“Danny Ross sound familiar to you?”
“No. I assume he owns the car.”
“So our princess reports. You feeling better about McGee knowing or do I need to growl at him?”
“You can’t fight my battles for me Jethro. But I appreciate it. And I’ll be ok, he just hits a nerve now and then. Maybe without even noticing. Besides all I have to do to make him flinch is imply that he’s being a bigot.”
“I did notice you hit a nerve with that one.”
“I’ve been mean about it actually. I know he’s not actually an asshole, he just sees us the same way most people see their parents. You know they have sex but you don’t want to know anything about
it. When he realizes he isn’t funny, or when his sister stops rubbing his failure to see it in his face I’ll let him off the hook.” At the next light Tony takes a deep breath and mentally shifts gears, “So either Ross is an undercover alias or he did something to one of our people and ended up dead for his trouble.”

“And we can’t even begin to guess at which it is until we get to the scene.”

“I’m not crashing my mustang to get you to the scene two minutes faster Jethro.”

Gibbs chuckles, “Fair enough, I know how much you love this car.”

“Besides you would have tried to bully your way through Dupont Circle and we’d have ended up here at the same time anyway.” He parks next to the police cruisers and smirks at Gibbs, “You do know if you get out of this car smiling like that you’re going to ruin your unfeeling bastard rep with Metro.”

“You know me better than that Honeybuns.”

By the time Tony hits the sidewalk Gibbs is halfway to the spot beside the remains of the vehicle where Tony’s friend Rick is consulting with the arson investigator. Tony lengthens his stride and joins them just as Rick holds out an evidence bag containing a badly scorched NCIS badge. It makes Tony a little sick just looking at it, thinking it could have been one of his team in that car. There really isn’t much left of the car, just the engine block and a smoking frame. “Awfully contained for so much damage,” He directs this at the arson investigator.

“Who ever set it knew what he was doing. It burned hot and fast but didn’t really explode, cars very rarely do. Aside from the initial ignition source it’s likey there was some type of accelerant sprayed on the undercarriage of the car.”

“We’ll let our lab tech know that. Have you guys had a bomb disposal unit in to check for other explosives?”

“No, the car was in motion and the fire would have set off any secondary devices.”

“Fair enough. Thanks guys, we’ll take it from here.” He runs a hand through his hair, “I’ll fetch my gear and start taking photos.”

“You’ve got your full kit?”

“The one in the car is missing a few drug testing supplies but it should have everything we need for this, yeah. Besides who’s to say the van’s ever going to get here with Jimmy driving it over for us.”

“As long as he follows Ducky as instructed he’ll be fine.”

When Tony returns with the kit Gibbs takes it and begins to process the car as Tony photographs. Tony deliberately puts all his attention on his sketch when Ducky and Jimmy begin manuevering the body into the body bag.

“I’m done with this, need anything out of the van?”

“Grab me a couple of sterile swabs, there’s something on the bottom edge of the passenger side door panel.”

When he gets back McGee and Ziva are reporting in.

“The general consenus from the pedestrians that stopped to talk to the authorities is that the car left the French resturant down the street following a limo at a low rate of speed. There was then a loud bang and the car became engulfed in flames.”

McGee takes over, “One of the bystanders tried to get to the car to attempt to free the victim but the flames were too intense.”

“Did you talk to anyone at the resturant?”

“Not yet Boss.”

“Do it, and get any footage they have of Danny Ross, Abby should have sent you his picture. Then meet us back at the Yard.”
Tony hugs Abby when he enters the lab, “What’ve you got for us Princess?”

“A lot of nothing unfortunately. There’s no mention of a Danny Ross in our records. There’s no agent, no civilian contractor, no undercover alias, no suspect, not even a witness by that name in our databases. But he also doesn’t seem to exist in the real world either. The social security number on the car loan tracks back to junior partner at Fisk, Stoat and Gage. On paper he’s the model employee with favorable, though not glowing, reviews. Only Fisk, Stoat and Gage them selves have never heard of him. It also matches a lease on an apartment in Crestwood but it’s the only residence Ross has ever had and it’s only been on his credit report seven months. It’s definitely an alias.”

Gibbs kisses her cheek, “Find out anything from the ID found with the badge?”

“It was pretty badly burned. I got the first two numbers of the ID but that matches over four hundred agents.”

“Where was the ID found in the car?” Tony’s examining the photographs he took which are slowly scrolling by on one of Abby’s monitors.

She consults the evidence bag the ID was delivered in. “In the spare tire well. It would have been under the trunk’s floor when the car was intact.”

“Definitely hidden then. Could’ve encountered our UC and hid his credentials to protect him,” Tony postulates.

“We’ll look into it. Anything else Abby?”

“I’m analyzing the residue you found on the car door and the wreckage you sent me but both of those are going to take time. And before you ask Major Mass Spec needs another twenty minutes on the accelerant. I’ll call that one up to you.”

“You do that baby girl.” With one last kiss to her cheek he leads Tony back to the elevator, “Call Metro, have them check if they’ve got an undercover using Ross as an ID. I’ll call Fornell.”

“I’m sorry for the delay. I’ve been arranging for my staff to visit the clinic. A few of them were showing signs of hearing damage from the incident.”

“We understand Mr. Panchet. We’ll need to speak to your hostess and some of your wait staff though.”

“Absolutely Agent McGee. The valets were of course, the most urgent as they were out doors. I’ll have Jacqueline join you as soon as we’re finished and she’ll be able to help you identify and locate the others.”

“Thank you Mr. Panchet. We will need any security footage you may have,” Ziva requests politely.

McGee pulls up Ross’ photo on his phone, “And to know if you have ever seen this man, either
tonight or in the past?”

“I may have seen him. I’m just not sure. But if he was here Jacqueline would definitely know. I’ll just fetch her for you and retrieve those tapes.”

“Not that I mind but do you think they’re going to send us out together from now on?”

“When it is not a determent to the case, yes. They work well together and they do not need to pretend to be anything other than themselves when they are alone together. I greatly doubt that they would do any thing that might endanger a case for their own comfort however.”

“Oh, no, I um, I didn’t mean it like that. Just… Well Gibbs used to send Tony on assignments like this. Coaxing memories out of cute girls…It’s sort of Tony’s area of expertise.”

“Are you afraid that you will not be able to charm the young ladies?”

“Not like Tony can, no.”

“I truly doubt any charm will actually be needed for this particular assignment. We are, after all, only seeking information as to who Mr. Ross was dining with and perhaps whom he left with.” She looks McGee over critically, “And no one is as charming as Tony.”

“Not even Tony,” McGee murmurs in an undertone.

“I do not know about that, he certainly seems to have charmed Gibbs.”

Before McGee can find a response to that the hostess joins them in the office. “Mr. Panchet said you need to speak to me?”

“That’s right. Ms. ?”

“Fucoe, Jacqueline Fucoe, I’m the evening hostess here.”

“Yes we’re aware Ms. Fucoe. That’s why we need to speak to you. I’m Agent McGee, this is Officer David, we’re with NCIS. Have you seen this man before?”

“Just earlier tonight. He came in with Miss Benoit.”

“Miss Benoit?” Ziva cuts a glance at McGee.

“She’s been in a handful of times since I’ve worked here. Her father likes it here and asks her to meet him here or brings her in whenever he’s in town. Which isn’t very often. When they come in together they both seem happy but when Miss Benoit arrives first she always seems sad, it’s why I remember her so well.”

“You’ve come to know her well then?”

“Not as such. I’ve had a few chats with Jeanne but I wouldn’t say I know her. Just that I’m an acquaintance who knows she wishes her father were around more often.”

“And who waited on the Benoits and Mr. Ross tonight?”

“I sat them in Amelia’s section tonight. She knows how to handle our more… discreet guests. Mr. Benoit doesn’t like being overheard.”

“How so?”
“Last year one of our waiters, Ryan Kohl, was waiting patiently beside the table to take a drink order from one of Mr. Benoit’s companions and from what I gather Mr. Benoit was unaware of Ryan’s presence. When he turned and realized Ryan was standing there he demanded that Ryan be fired for ease dropping on him. Mr. Panchet talked to both of them in private and ended up promising to keep Mr. Benoit out of Ryan’s section from then on. It’s not a common occurrence but some of our wealthier guests prefer to know where the staff is at all times. It takes a degree of subtly to do it properly. Amelia’s quiet good at it.”

“Thank you Ms. Fucoe. Could you please send Amelia in to speak with us?”

“Absolutely Agent McGee.”

The short blond that shows up in the doorway looks scared out of her mind, “Jacqueline said you wanted to speak to me.”

“Yes, we need to speak to you about Mr. Ross and the Benoits, whom we are told you waited on this evening.”

“I took care of Mr. Benoit tonight but I don’t know who Mr. Ross is.” McGee shows her the picture. “Oh, Miss Jeanne’s boyfriend. From the bits I heard, and with how much Mr. Benoit prizes discretion that wasn’t very much, Miss Jeanne was introducing your Mr. Ross, who she called Danny, to her father.”

“Was this the first time she’d brought someone to meet Mr. Benoit?”

“That I’m aware of, yes. Though he has on occasion brought someone to meet Jeanne.”

“Did they leave all together or separately?”

“They left the restaurant together but you’d need to speak to the valets to know if they stayed together after they made it outside.”

“Thank you Amelia.”

Mr. Panchet returns with the security tapes and after the sort of pleasantries Gibbs would scowl at they head to Munroe University Hospital to interview the valet.

Questioning the valet turns out to be a more difficult prospect than it appears at first as the one they need to speak to is the young man who is showing signs of hearing damage from the explosion. It takes almost twenty minutes of writing back and forth to determine that the Benoits left in a limo with Ross following and that Mr. Benoit repeatedly offered to have one of his staff bring Ross’ car along so that he could ride with the family in the limo.

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“That’s every PD for a hundred miles Boss, he’s definitely not a cop.”

“Not any variety of fed I can find either.”

Tony nods and looks around his desk for something, anything, else constructive to do. Finding nothing he gets up and sighs, “I’m gonna see if Abbs needs any help.”

“I’ll get her a caff-pow. And Jenny will probably ambush me on my way back. Call if I’m not there in a reasonable amount of time.”
“Sure thing,” He smirks and switches to signing, “She can’t have you.”

Gibbs stifles a grin and signs back, “No she can’t.”

In addition to Abby’s soda he picks up coffee for himself and Tony, well aware that no matter what this is going to keep them at the yard well into the night. As he makes the attempt to pass from the main elevator to the secure one Jenny falls into step beside him. “Metro sent over their report. Have you identified who the badge they found belonged to yet?”

“Abbs is doing her best to lift the badge number but we’re also trying to determine who the owner of the car really is. The ID was good on the surface but didn’t stand up to scrutiny. Unfortunately no one will own up to his being one of their under covers either.”

“If you give me the alias I’ll check with my contacts. Whoever it is they had one of our own Jethro. They may have killed him, we have to make sure they pay.”

“I know that Jenny, and we’re working on it. The registered owner of the car was a Danny Ross. Abby says he isn’t one of ours. DiNozzo and I checked with our contacts but giving yours a try couldn’t hurt.” He silently notes her quick suppression of her reaction and knows something isn’t right.

“I’ll certainly check into it. I know we haven’t exactly been getting along lately Jethro but I need you to keep me in the loop on this one.”

A few seconds consideration and his own innate defiance have him countering her deliberately familiar tone with a clearly professional one, “I’ll make sure one of us calls as soon as we know anything Director.”

“I’ll call you if I find anything on my end,” She informs him stiffly and turns back toward the stairs.

When he arrives in the lab the first thing that strikes him is that the music is at a considerably lower volume than normal. Moreover, he knows the song, it’s one of the smooth, smoky jazz numbers Tony likes to sing in the shower. Tony himself is sitting at one of the side tables crossing names off a pair of lists.

“He’s one of ours,” Gibbs announces confidently.

“Boss?”

“Jenny got jumpy when I told her the name. She recognized it.”

“Tony’s on that,” Abby announces evenly. “The accelerant was military grade. Almost impossible to get on the open market. Whoever it is has serious connections.”

“Oh good, we’re dealing with a professional,” Tony snarks before turning around, “Two names left. Leslie Jones and Daniel Reston. I’m betting it’s Reston. He’s one of the agents in the legal department.”

“Which lists are you comparing?” Gibbs asks curiously, Abby hadn’t had any lists ready for them to compare when he’d called.

“The missed check-in log from dispatch against the call-outs from HR for the last twenty four hours. Figured if an agent was missing they’d only be on the one list.”

“And he missed a scheduled check in?”
“At 2000, according to the checklist.”

“Was he on the evening search authorization and warrant rotation?”

“No, he’s first shift, 0800 to 1630.”

“So why would he have a 2000 check in?”

“An off the books undercover op,” Abby volunteers as she pulls up a few logs on the big screen. “It’s the only thing that explains his call-ins, and eyes only emailing frequency the last eight months.”

“What did she have him doing?” Gibbs murmurs looking at the NCIS ID photo Abby has on the screen beside the DMV one for Ross, it’s undeniably the same man.

“If there’s any written records I’ll find them,” Abby vows as Tony moves for the door.

He hesitates when Gibbs doesn’t join him, “We checking out Reston’s place or not Boss?”

“We’ll check out the place in Crestwood too. Call McGee, get an update before we head out.”

Tony holds his response until they’re in the elevator, where he hits the stop button. “Sure thing. Right after you tell me what was up back there.”

“I just hadn’t realized she’d become that ruthless. He’s what, twenty-six or twenty-seven? Barely even out of law school I’d bet. Wet behind the ears, no field experience, and she sent him out on his own on an unsanctioned undercover op. Then she lied to my face about it. Not that I’m surprised at that last part really.”

“So we’ll have to do right by him instead. We find out what really happened to him and we don’t let her get away with it. Not if he’s dead because she didn’t do her job protecting him. Or teaching him how to protect himself.”

Gibbs smiles a little at that, “Just no rooting for her to be the bad guy.”

“No,” Tony agrees immediately, “I’d much rather find that she’s at least somewhat innocent of this. Hanging some poor kid out to dry and wanting to be a home wrecker are, after all, vastly different things.”

Gibbs sober a bit, “Whether it’s her fault or not can wait. First we need to find out who killed him.”

“And why. We’re assuming whatever she’s got him doing got him killed. Maybe it’s a coincidence. Maybe all she’s doing is sexually harassing him in new and creative ways and a crazy ex-girlfriend or disgruntled poker buddy took him out.”

“We can only hope,” The comment is dry, but not without sincerity.

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McGee shoots Ziva what seems to be a knowing look when they return to an empty bullpen, but she doesn’t respond to it.

“I shall seek out information on the Benoits while you review the security footage. Abby will likely have her hands full already.”

“I’m sure she does, especially as she sent up copies of the reports on the accelerant and the registration on the car.”
Ziva checks over the documents quickly, “And I will check with my sources about anyone making purchases of this accelerant under the radio.”

“Radar,” Tony corrects emerging from the elevator. He waits until he can lower his voice to explain what they’ve found and get McGee’s report in return. When they’re all up to speed he grabs his gun gives them a little wave, “Bossman and I are off to check out Reston’s apartment. Call if you find anything interesting. And send along Jeanne Benoit’s picture when you get it Ziva. We’ll see if his neighbors recognize her. At either address. You kids behave.”

“It is you who needs the reminders to behave Tony.”

“I have no idea what you mean. I’m the absolute definition of professionalism and I’m offended that you’d imply otherwise.” His tone agrees completely with the joking sarcasm the words are meant to engender but the look in his eyes says there’s more truth to them than anything else.

“I am sorry Tony, I was only teasing. Your behavior has not changed in any manner at all since… your change in status.”

Tony sees an opportunity in that statement to salvage this encounter and seizes it with both hands, “Was that a facebook reference Zeeevaa? Do you network when you’re not here with us?”

“I do not know what you mean,” The denial falls flat and Tony takes it as a cue to retreat, smirk once more firmly in place.

“He’s really not you know,” McGee comments when he’s sure they’re once again alone.

“Not in his general behavior, no. But if I had not pointed out the change of the last few months you would not have realized it was relevant to our work environment at all,” Ziva contradicts easily. She pauses to observe their surroundings briefly before continuing, “And their behavior toward one another is just the same as it has always been. They seem rather adept at separating the two.”

“True, I didn’t see it, but some of the people who read my book did.”

“That is common to all fiction with compelling male characters. It speaks more to how well you captured them as people than it does to their behavior toward one another. Especially as they were not together yet when you were writing about them.”

McGee just shakes his head and returns to his work.

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They start at the apartment in Crestwood, which turns out to be in the building across the street from Tony’s. “Told you it wasn’t a bad neighborhood.”

“Because some wet behind the ears kid set up his cover here?”

“You really think Reston set this up himself?”

“No Jenny probably set this up for him,” Gibbs concedes. “Doesn’t change the fact that there’s far less crime in my neighborhood.”

“You live in a community of multi-story family homes with a neighborhood watch. Community policing works. Wanna talk to the neighbors or search the place first?”

He smiles just a little, “Fair enough. Let’s search the apartment first, you can flirt with the neighbors
in little while."

"I don’t have to flirt. You can be plenty charming when you want to."

"We could try something new and act like federal agents instead."

"Doesn’t sound much like us."

"Search the desk. I’ll check the bedroom."

When they come back together Gibbs has a small wire bound notebook and Tony has a stack of photographs.

"His notes were in the heating vent under the headboard but they’re in a shorthand I can’t read. What’d you find?"

"He was a little careless with his film. There are a bunch of telephoto lens surveillance photos and then some normal focal length ones of him with the girl and the girl by herself. Well, I say girl, looks like she’s a doctor over at Monroe University Hospital. They look happy together."

"Maybe they are. Maybe he’d been seeing her and when Jenny found out she saw it as an opportunity to get to the father."

"She does keep an ear to the ground about gossip." Tony shakes his head, "But we’re not speculating and neither of these get us anywhere on their own."

"Not until the Princess can take a look at the notes anyway. Ziva get you that picture of the girl?"

Tony checks his phone, "Got it. She’s kind of cute." He notices the look that earns him, "Seriously Jethro? I faced down a panic attack to meet your dad. Thinking, subjectively, that some girl is cute really shouldn’t threaten you."

"What can I say, I’m a possessive bastard."

"Would it soothe the savage beast to know that I’ve always sort of preferred to admire women from a far? That up close and personal they’re far too much work for far too little return in my books?"

"You’re cute when you’re placating me. Now why don’t we get to asking the neighbors about her instead?"

The first guy they interview, 4B, is so obviously fresh out of school Tony expects his greeting to consist of a six syllable “dude” and an offer of a beer. His response to the picture is “Cute chick. I’d remember her. But I don’t think I’ve ever even seen 4A let alone his dates."

It is only force of will that keeps Gibbs from laughing. The woman in 4C proves far more useful.

"Jeanne. Yeah Danny’s been seeing her almost as long as he’s been living here. He really seems to adore her. And he’s really sweet with her too. They dated for six months before she spent the night here. And he’d cook her meals and run them over to the hospital when she was working nights. I think they were starting to get serious the last few weeks. He told me she was taking him to dinner with her mother a few weeks ago."

"So you talk to Danny often?"

"We get off work at the same time most days and we chat as we walk up the stairs together. Danny says it’s the only way he gets any exercise and I just don’t like enclosed spaces like the elevators."
“And he comes home at the same time most days?”

“Usually, yes. Occasionally he has an early date with Jeanne, or stays at her place. And once a month or so he pulls an all-nighter at the firm. Has something happened to him? Is that why you’re asking all these questions about Danny?”

“His car was involved in an accident, we’re not sure yet if it had anything to do with Danny or not. Have there been any problems around the building lately: break-ins, car thefts, anything like that?”

“Mr. Kwaten in 1D said some boys were in his place last week but nothing was stolen or broken. The police seemed to think he was lying.”

“Thank you Ms. Layton, you’ve been very helpful, if you think of anything else don’t hesitate to call,” Tony gives her his card.

“If it does turn out that Danny’s hurt, or heaven forbid, dead, will you have someone let me know?”

“You’ll get a call as soon as we’re able to release any information about who was hurt,” He promises patting her hand.

“He reminds me of my little brother,” She smiles sadly at them and retreats into her apartment.

“So, think we should look into Mr. 1D’s mysterious break in?”

“I doubt it has anything to do with Reston’s death even if it isn’t just some crazy rambling but we’ll put in a request for the report later. Let’s see what 4D has to say and then check out his official residence.”

The last neighbor proves useless and Reston’s official residence looks a lot like Tony’s place has lately, dusty and unused. Tony finds another coded notebook, but this one is casually tossed on the desk, not hidden like the other one had been.

When they return to the bullpen Ziva is grinning triumphantly and McGee moves to display something on the big screen.

At a nod from Ziva McGee brought up the surveillance footage of Reston in the foyer of the restaurant with Jeanne and Rene Benoit.

“As we told Tony earlier this is Jeanne Benoit, identified as Danny Ross’ girlfriend. She is a doctor at Munroe University Hospital. From what I was able to gather she is kind and caring, yet she seems to know how to take care of herself from the reports of a recent incident in the hospital. She was able to resolve a dispute with a drug addled family member of a patient without allowing harm to come to her or the nurse who was also involved in the incident. It is clear what Ross would have seen in her but there was no reason I could find for her to be the target of an investigation. Rene Benoit on the other hand is an international arms dealer known as La Grenouille. While he is not a priority for any specific agency, he could prove to be a feather in the director’s cat if she were the one to bring him down.”

“Cap,” The three men chorus absently.

McGee flips through a series of surveillance photos, ranging through months of time before picking up the reporting. “While a quick inter-departmental cooperation bulletins search provided no results someone at the CIA is definitely looking into him as the number of their surveillance photos tagged with his name over the last six months has doubled. Either he’s been more active on the international scene or someone has taken an increased interest in what his activities entail. Unfortunately if I
actually open the photos someone will become aware that I’ve been in their system.”

Ziva continues, “None of my contacts were aware that Benoit was currently being investigated and they all seemed to find it unlikely that he knew it either. Without proper investigation I cannot say for certain but I doubt he had discovered that Ross was actually Reston.”

Gibbs seems to consider this new information for a moment, “Fill them in on what we found. I’m going to grab a round of coffee and call Tobias.”

Tony gives him a slightly plaintive look but does as instructed after only a few seconds hesitation.

“Ross’ neighbors seemed well acquainted with him as though he had been living his cover full time. Reston’s apartment on the other hand was empty, dusty, and unused. Ross’ neighbors seemed familiar with Jeanne Benoit to an extent that tells me there was either a genuine relationship or he had embraced his cover fully. We found his notes but they’re coded. I’m going to run them down to Abbs now. We also found some surveillance photos he took of Rene Benoit. Why don’t you try to identify the times and locations McGee and see if they match up with your CIA files. Ziva puts some feelers out about somebody at the CIA taking on personal projects and start trying to get some background on Reston. Gambling debts, disgruntled exes, neglected pets, the usual.”

“Who died and made you the boss?” McGee mutters mostly to himself.

“No one McSnippy. I’m the senior field agent. I just finished bringing you up to speed and so I gave out assignments. If you have an issue with me being second in command because of who I go home with or to, suck it up. You’re an adult, act like it.” Tony doesn’t bother to stomp off or slam the door he just silently enters the secure elevator and heads down to see Abby. The last thing he sees before the doors close is McGee’s stricken look as he tries to fumble for words to defend himself.

It takes a bit of effort but by the time Abby’s door slides open Tony’s managed to diffuse enough of the tension in his stance and expression to not have to explain himself.

“Finished with Major Mass Speck, Princess?”

“No, there was some residue on the badge that he’s running now but if you’ve got something for me he’s all set and will work just as well without me.”

“Reston’s ops notes are coded, Bossman thought you might be able to translate. Or find someone who can.”

She looks it over for a few pages, “This is short hand but not steno. It’s familiar though. Give me an hour or two, I might not have it all by then but I should be able to at least tell you if it can be done.”

“Thanks Abbs,” He kisses her check and turns to head out only to find McGee in the doorway.

He looks to Abby as if assessing how dangerous a suspect is before stepping just far enough into the room to let the door shut behind him. “It has nothing to do with who your boyfriend is.”

Tony lets a long silence stretch before verbally confirming his response to that, “Could have fooled me. You’ve never openly questioned my authority before.”

“You didn’t act like your word was law before.”

“I’m second in command McGee. I, as far as you’re concerned anyway, always have been. Now I will admit that giving orders didn’t fit with the dumbass over grown frat boy persona so I used to imply that every order came from Gibbs and I was just the messenger. But the change has to do with
thinking I no longer needed to put on an affectation with you, not my relationship with Jay. If I’m over stepping my boundaries that’s between him and me. I know my job and how my personal life does and does not affect it. Now are we done or do I need to start looking into new geeks? None of this will make your next performance review, I’ll just write it up as yet another personality conflict, this time with me.”

“What?” McGee’s look of panic is genuine.

“If you can’t deal with me being higher in the chain of command you can transfer off the team, no questions asked.”

“I didn’t say I wanted off the team.”

“No you’ve just acted like an insubordinate asshole since we left the bar.” He shakes his head, “Look I’m not going to force you out. I’m not going to go running to Gibbs. But I’m also not taking any shit from you. You and Ziva are going to have to get used to the fact that I’m a competent adult because unless the situation calls for it I’m not going to go on hiding it anymore.”

“I um… Wow… I’ll… Okay. I’ll just get back to work then.”

After he’s left Abbs hesitantly pulls Tony into a hug. “You okay?”

“Yeah. It was a one push too far thing. The jokes about me being Jethro’s bit of fluff or lap dog pushed my buttons but popping off about me not being the boss when I’ve literally been his boss was just too much.”

“The yelling might have been a bit of an over reaction but you know the rest of us have your back right? Even Jimmy I’d bet.”

“I know Princess, and I appreciate it. This case is about to get touchy though and I don’t need to waste a lot of energy pretending to be too dumb to search our own database to make him feel better, you know?”

“I like you better when you’re yourself anyway, and so does Pop. Now start scanning and I’ll start sending character samples to see if anybody recognizes the shorthand he’s using.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Chapter End Notes

This one was a beast to write. I kept seconding guessing if McGee was pushing too hard or not hard enough to get under Tony's skin. So if it feels off sorry. If you happen to be able to articulate why drop me a note, I'd appreciate it.
Heroes

When Gibbs gives him the name Benoit, Fornell insists on meeting in person.

“How’s the boy toy?”

“Doing well but you didn’t demand we meet in person to discuss my love life Tobias.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe I didn’t want Shepard overhearing and shooting the messenger.”

“And she might. Yet I still don’t believe you asked for this meet to avoid the wrath of a woman scorned. Especially as you aren’t the one it’d be aimed at. What do you know about Benoit?”

“The CIA has a man inside his operation. Fairly high level from the tips they’ve been giving us. How did he cross your radar?”

“His daughter’s boyfriend was the victim of a car bomb. Turns out he’s one of ours.”

“Someone in Benoit’s camp make him?”

“We don’t think so. There’s no sign they knew he was anything other than what he said he was. It might have even been a message aimed at Benoit.”

“I’ll keep an ear to the ground and speak to my guy at the CIA.”

“Thanks Tobias. You’ve got two minutes if you have anything to say.”

“Boy waiting for you, is he?”

“In fact he is."

“How’d that come to pass, it isn’t like you to pick up one of your own.”

“He was persistent and knew what he wanted.”

“You’re serious about all this, aren’t you?”

“You know I am.”

“Em called the pair of you adorable.”

“That does seem to be the female opinion on it.”

“You seem happier.”

“I am.”

“Want me to distract Shepard?”

“Forever? Seems impractical. Thanks though Tobias.”

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Tony’s still in the lab with Abby when a window opens on her computer, “You joining a debate team Abbs?”
“It’s a debate shorthand?” Abby asks without preamble.

“I’m feeling the love right now Abby.”

“Yes, hello, Stewart. You know you’re my favorite biochemical engineer. Now this is sort of urgent, you recognize the shorthand I sent you?”

“Yes and no. It’s similar to a debate shorthand that’s pretty widely used. There are two or three terms being used that are either wildly out of context or I’m misreading them though.”

“It’s probably a terminology issue. We often use words differently than the general public,” Tony responds, forgetting he’s out of frame and therefore a disembodied voice.

“Stewart, this is Tony. Don’t worry, I speak cop,” Abby assures them both. She then focuses solely on the monitor, “Have I brought you on as a consultant before Stewart? I can’t remember.”

“If you mean have I read the sixteen page confidentiality agreement that explains exactly how long I could be imprisoned for keeping, copying, or distributing any information sent to me by NCIS and signed it, yes I have. I also know I will receive a mildly generous hundred dollar check for my efforts. Send me what you’ve got.”

“Don’t worry about context or anything just translate it into English for me and I’ll do the rest.”

“Will do Abbs. Want it as it’s done or all at once?”

“Bossman needs this as quick as possible so as you get it would be great.”

“The things I do for you.”

“I love you for it.” She shuts down the webcam and smiles at Tony.

“So who is Stewart?”

“An old friend from college. We were in all the same chemistry labs. Back then he wanted to teach so he took some speech classes and was on the debate team.”

“What does he do now?”

“He was head hunted by one of the Parkinson’s studies that’s been getting mad funding lately. So he tries to save the world and in the mean time he helps me with some of the trickier organic compounds that come through here.”

“Not a boyfriend?”

She laughs, “Not a boyfriend. Did Jack put you up to this?”

“Well he did seemed to think your father lacked a proper level of interest…”

“Finish scanning those pages and shoo you spy.”

“I am not a spy. I wasn’t planning on telling Jack anything. Just curious about the endless supply of ‘old friends’ all of them male.”

“I’m an interesting person,” Abby declares with just a hint of a huff.

“Fair enough Princess, that’s certainly true.”
Ziva waits expectantly as McGee retakes his seat. When it’s clear he isn’t going to speak unprompted she pushes, “Did you apologize?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did he fire you?”

“No.”

“He should have.” That snaps McGee out of his stupor but Ziva doesn’t give him a chance to respond. “You were insubordinate, men have been fired for less.”

“Not anyone who works for Gibbs. He offered to transfer me.”

“Perhaps you should accept.”

“You seem awfully upset about this.”

“I am. I expected you to behave like an adult even if you have some deep dusty issue with what he’s doing.”

“Deep dark. I have an issue with Tony’s new attitude not… Well you know what it’s not about.”

“He can be whom ever he really is, so long as you do not have to take orders from him. Is that it?”

“Neither of you are listening. His behavior towards his work and the team has changed, that’s the part I’m having trouble with. He can go get his jollies in the elevator for all I care but I’m not used to him pulling his own weight, let alone controlling how I’m expected to pull mine.”

“You are truly a fool McGee.”

Gibbs enters the bullpen and oblivious to the tension in the room asks, “Any progress?”

“A handful of Reston’s surveillance photos match the dates and times of the CIA files I can’t get into, so it’s a safe bet he was indeed investigating Benoit. And if he’s sent anyone the photographs the CIA might be aware that he’s in undercover with Benoit’s family.”

“It is unlikely any of my contacts will be able to get back to me for a few hours.”

“Have you found Jeanne Benoit yet?”

“It seems as though her father has her hidden but I shall continue to do my best to locate her.”

“Go home. Get a few hours sleep. Be back at o eight hundred.” He glances at McGee, “Leave whatever this nonsense is at home.” He heads for the secure elevator without letting them respond.

Abby and Tony are leaning on one another companionably when he enters the lab. They’re both focused on the computer monitor. And Tony looks like someone just slashed his tires.

“Tony?”

Tony startles and turns haunted eyes on him as Abby hugs harder, “The kid was falling for the girl.
For real he says, and he went to Shepard about it. She was the only one who knew he wasn’t a junior partner at a law firm who met an interesting girl. Shepard told him it meant he was good at his job. That falling for her was what he was supposed to do. That if he didn’t really feel it the girl would know.”

He runs the hand not holding onto Abby through his hair, “He didn’t want to sleep with her under false pretenses. Shepard basically told him that if he didn’t seduce Jeanne he’d never work in law enforcement again. He began to question if he was cut out for undercover work.”

When the silence stretches long enough to be deliberate Gibbs decides he needs to be the boss first, “He kill himself?”

“No, no, no,” Abby cuts in. “It sounds more like he was going to quit, tell her he lost his job, and marry her. But we’ve only got about forty of sixty-three pages.”

Gibbs considers them both a moment and begins signing “She will pay. Soon. Not now.”

Tony nods sadly.

“Got someone else translating for you Abbs?”

“Stewart from college.”

“Can he send it to the secure email you get at the house?”

“Sure but why?”

“We could all use some sleep and at the house we could take shifts reading.” He also signs, “walls have ears.”

“Sure. I’ll let him know and meet you in the garage in fifteen.”

He decides to throw caution to the wind this once and wraps the pair of them in a quick hug. “Fifteen.”

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Despite the plan to all get at least a little sleep the three of them end up on the den sofa curled together taking turns reading aloud.

It’s clear to Gibbs after only a few pages that Reston was never taught how to make proper operational notes. A large portion of his notes are Jeanne’s childhood recollections of her father. Stories of a warm and loving father, while heartwarming, are hardly useful to either investigation.

The few truly useful notes are about assignments outside the general operation. Report notes about observing meetings from a distance and on one occasion bugging a limo. It’s clear Shepard directed both of these assignments personally.

It isn’t until the final page that anything truly useful comes of it. Reston notes having received two anonymous calls three days before the car bombing. One at his desk at the yard and the other on his undercover phone. Both said simply, “Stop trying to occupy some else’s place.”

While not a lot of information it’s enough to be going on with. Abby sets the computer to trace the calls and Gibbs stands up bringing both of them up with him. “Well get back on it in the morning. For now we all need sleep.”
“Tuck me in?” Abby mumbles tiredly.

“Sure thing Princess.”

Tony just yawns.

“You awake enough to brush your teeth Tony?”

“Sure thing. Just crashing. Couldn’t let myself be tired before so it’s hitting me pretty hard.”

Gibbs nods his understanding. It takes careful maneuvering but he manages to get them all upstairs without letting go of either of them. Tony stumbles a bit when Gibbs steps away at Abby’s door but regains his footing and dutifully continues down the hall.

Abby kicks off her boots and fumbles with her spiked belt and necklace for a moment before she’s able to take them off. She then sits heavily on the edge of the bed and pulls Gibbs down beside her. “He’s not going to tell you. He told me so. Thinks you’ll fly off the handle. But, Daddy, you need to know.”

“What is it Princess?”

“She approached him about this.”

He searches for a meaning in that and ‘this’ is just too vague to suggest the answer. “Who approached him about what?” He is at least confident that the ‘he’ is Tony.

“Madam Evil Stepmother approached him about this op. While you were… away. He didn’t take it ‘cause he was leading the team. He’s blaming himself for what she did to Reston. He was just a baby. Barely even an agent.”

“I’ll take care of him sweetheart. I promise.”

“Remind him” She yawns widely, “he’s a hero. My hero. Well you’re my hero. But Tony is too. You’re both my hero.”

“Sleep, Abbs. Let me worry about Tony.” He pulls the blanket up, kisses her forehead and leaves quietly.

Tony is leaning heavily on the bathroom counter brushing like it’s an after thought.

“You okay?”

“Abbs told you.”

“She did. Wants me to tell you we’re both her hero and that this is not your fault.” He takes the toothbrush away, rinses it, puts in the cup, and takes a firm hold of Tony’s chin. “You’re my hero too Tony. Every time you put the team, the civilians, the mark above your own safety. Because you don’t do it for glory, or pride, or because you’ve devalued yourself. You do it because you are the very definition of a good man Tony. You are a real hero, not those fool hardy bad asses in your movies, not some jackass who saves a life to say he did. You, who’d do it alone, in the dark, because it’s the right thing. And yes if you’d been the dumb puppy she thought you were and had taken on an undercover assignment while leading a team of rebellious teenagers Danny Reston would not be dead, but you might be. This is her fault.”

“And what would you have done if I’d told you I knew she was trying to start her own little private
war?"

“I would have pestered her about it for about ten minutes. She’d have made a snide comment about your operational security, tried to hit on me, and I would have left her office.”

“You wouldn’t have somehow known that she’d flipped her lid?”

“I only know everything about the people I care about. Jenny’s issue is that she never qualified.” He lets his thumb drift back and forth over Tony’s late night stubble, “Come on, let’s get some sleep and in the morning I’ll remind you why I’m your hero in the shower.”

“I hope you mean the part where you love me for my body, not the bit where you love me for my mind.”

Gibbs chuckles and takes a clearly overtired Tony to bed.

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Breakfast comes entirely too fast but none of them closely resemble the walking dead any more so the few hours they have managed to sleep have clearly done their job.

As Gibbs makes hash browns and bacon to go with the store bought bagels Tony watches the coffee pot longingly and Abby reads out the results of the phone traces.

“They’re both from the same burn phone. It’s part of a large bulk order shipment purchased through one of the CIA’s front companies, Ironclad Security Services. Which is supposedly one of those firms you call to hire some guy named Bruno who is built like a brick house to handcuff your briefcase to himself. The problem with the pretense being that Ironclad Security Services has neither clients nor employees. A little sloppy from the boys over at the company actually.”

“So somebody at the CIA warned Reston off of investigating Benoit.”

“Looks like it,” Abby confirms as she pours herself a juice, “But how did they know Reston was undercover?”

“That depends entirely on who had operational knowledge of this little farce,” Tony concludes warily.

“You didn’t find anything about it in the proper channels but Reston was writing eyes only emails, there’s a record of that isn’t there? Even if you can’t break the encryption on the actual data.” Gibbs questions as he serves breakfast.

“It’s possible to find out that they’re there, like I did. Sure. But there’s no way to know about what they’re actually about. We only know they’re about Benoit because we know Reston was purposefully getting close to Benoit’s daughter. Beyond all that, there’s the fact that they’d have to know that Ross was really Reston to even begin looking. If they knew that they probably found out about it the old fashion way, by tailing him. No way anyone could mistake the Yard for Fisk, Stoat and Gage.”

“I have to hope he was trained well enough to spot a tail. Most of the mail room guys can manage that.” There’s just a touch of distain in Tony’s voice.

“Anything we’ve seen about this kid make you think ‘well trained’ there Honey buns?”

“No, not really,” Tony concedes. “And I will start calling you sweet cheeks in the field.”
“Still your boss.”

“Not at the rate you two are going.” Abby laughs.

“Speaking of which, the peanut gallery is due in at 0800. I told them to leave whatever was going on last night at home. If you’re part of it, it might be best if you do the same,” His tone betrays the fact that for once he honestly doesn’t know what’s going on.

Tony kisses him, “Thanks for not pushing it.”

“You’ve got a handle on it though?”

“I’ve already let him know what’s going to happen professionally if he can’t keep the personal crap out of it, yeah. As I had to remind him, it is my job to keep the team working together smoothly.”

“Good thing too. If it was Pop’s job it’d still just be the two of you,” Abby teases.

That allows them all to laugh and drop the subject.

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McGee is unfailingly professional all morning and while it isn’t precisely annoying it has both Gibbs and Tony refraining from asking him questions unless he’s the only one able to answer them.

Ziva on the other hand points out almost immediately that Tony looks as if he hasn’t slept.

“I slept just fine Zee-va. But we were all up half the night deciphering Reston’s operational notes.”

“Was there anything useful in his notes?”

“He got two messages from a burn phone purchased by a CIA front company. They wanted him to stop taking someone else’s place.”

“And the fact that it was a burn phone makes it impossible to determine who exactly the message came from,” Ziva concludes.

Tony nods but then pauses thoughtfully, “We should check the message isn’t over the girl. It’s a long shot but it’s a possibility.”

“You got it, or did you have something else to check out?”

Tony smirks just a little, “I’m on it. Gonna let me expense it if I have to buy a gossipy nurse lunch?”

“If you get me the information I’m looking for, why not?” A quick glance tells him they are alone enough, the four of them, “Just give her Ziva’s extension when she asks for your number.”

“Could give her your cell number, Boss.”

“Then I’d be getting a string of nonsense calls. The last time you did that it took me far too long to figure it out.”

“Up close and personal with a psychopath was not exactly my ideal assignment thanks.”

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It’s almost noon when McGee escapes from the silently hostile territory upstairs to the relatively
neutral ground of Abby’s lab. Abby eyes him a bit distrustfully, and it stings. “Could use your help with some photos,” He explains into the silence that greets him.

“What type of help, Agent McGee?” She notes his stricken look, “You honestly thought I wouldn’t side with him? He’s my family. If he and Pop were a little less emotionally stunted they’d have run off to Niagara Falls for horribly cliché Canadian wedding by now.”

“So I’m not allowed to be pissed about being kept in the dark about the capabilities and knowledge of a team member because he’s your new step-dad?”

“You’re claiming you’re mad because they didn’t feel the need to correct your laughably naive assumptions about Tony?”

“Because that’s why I’m mad.”

“Were they supposed to teach you to turn on your computer and load your gun too?”

“Well no-”

“And Ziva tell you she wouldn’t actually kill you? That she had emotions?”

“Of course not.”

“Did Pop tell you he wasn’t going to throw you out of the building for missing something, or breaking one of his rules?” He doesn’t answer her but she doesn’t seem to mind. “You didn’t take them at face value. But you did it to Tony. You don’t get to blame him for that.” She shakes her head and turns back to her screen, “What did you need done to your photos?”

He stands, still, silent, and aggravated for a moment before stepping up beside her and pulling up the three photos in question. “I was going over Reston’s photos again and looked at the ones we’d deemed irrelevant- the photos of Jeanne that seemed more like snapshots. In these three there are reflective surfaces in which it appears we can see the same man at each location. And earlier Tony reminded us of the possibility that this might be about his relationship with Jeanne, not La Grenouille. I thought if you could help me confirm that it is indeed the same man we might have a lead.”

Ziva has finally gotten Jeanne Benoit in for questioning when Tony leaves to meet with one of the nurses at Monroe. He notes idly as they pass one another that she is indeed cute, but the look she gives him is wholly unattractive, not that it would be worth the headache to mention it to Gibbs. And it is in that spirit that he slips on the wedding band he borrowed from Ops management after sliding in behind the wheel a boring motor pool sedan. Generally speaking nurses liked a cop as a prospect, lord only knew why, and a little protective coloration can go a long way.

They meet, at her suggestion, at a café half a block from the hospital. He smiles blandly, “Thank you for meeting with me Ms. Rodgers.”

“I’m not sure why you wanted to speak with me but I’m always happy to help law enforcement.”

“Dr. Benoit was involved in an incident last night. She’s fine, no need to worry, but we need to know if any one would have had reason to want to hurt her.”

“Hurt Jeanne? No, everyone loves Jeanne.”
“Anyone who might want to hurt her boyfriend that you know of?”

“I dunno if he’d hurt him but Jeanne’s ex, Sebastian, didn’t seem to like Danny very much.”

“You expected him to?” Tony is clearly more than a little skeptical.

“When I say ex… Three years ago Sebastian and Jeanne were engaged. Sebastian is some sort of federal agent, I’m not sure what agency, but he went away on a mission for more than a month. When he got back he broke off the engagement but he and Jeanne stayed friends. He seemed to be fine with it when Jeanne started dating again. Until she started seeing Danny.”

“Did they get to know each other first or did Sebastian dislike Danny right away?”

“From what I understand they had one private conversation before Sebastian informed Jeanne that Danny was wrong for her.”

“Did anyone besides Sebastian dislike Danny?”

“No, the rest of us really like Danny. He's sweet, very attentive. Like I’ll bet you are with your wife.”

A split second decision has him smiling warmly, “My husband is the attentive one actually.”

She looks him over again and smiles, “I can understand that.”

The rest of the meal is full of mostly meaningless chatter. He does end up giving her Ziva’s extension, but mostly as that’s the card that he encounters first in his pocket. He orders a milkshake to go and learns against the side of the sedan as he calls Gibbs. “Got a name for you, Sweetcheeks.”

“That so Honey buns?”

“Seems Jeanne Benoit used to date a federal agent, might even have been CIA, who mysteriously broke off their engagement three years ago. They were still friends and after a private discussion with Ross he decided that Ross was no good for Jeanne.”

“I’ll have to tell Bethany how it was your gut that saved the day this time.”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“Get back here.”

“On my way. Need coffee?”

“No, just did a run because Abbs needed Caff-Pow.”
The Company

Chapter Notes

It was recently called to my attention while playing comment tag with a new fan (and I love new fans) that I have neglected up to now to mention my gratitude to one of the most long-standing fans for this story. Marianne has been commenting on this story since July of ’09 which is pretty much from the beginning. And I’ve loved her from that first email. It was several paragraphs covering everything from writing style and characterizations to plot and voice. Over the subsequent two and a half years she has been a cheerleader, a sounding board, a cannon reference, and a friend. She steered me (at my request, she didn’t want to influence me) away from at least one major mistake and gently corrects my typos and slip ups. (She caught Ziva using a contraction so quickly I don’t think it was there long enough for anyone else to see my shame.) I guess what I’m saying is Thank you Marianne for all that you’ve done. Prince wouldn’t be what it is without you.

“Sebastian Thorne. Employment with the CIA terminated in June of this year for ‘medical reasons.’ I’d bet he failed a required psych eval,” Abby declares handing the file folder to Tony as he arrives and stealing his desk chair in one efficient movement.

“Anything to back that guess up Princess?” Gibbs asks as Tony watches her pull something up on his computer.

“A medical termination without a proceeding trauma or subsequent disability claims tends to be a failed psych eval.”

“Too much caff-pow! Abbs?” Tony asks leaning over her shoulder as she brings up her findings to transfer them to the big screen.

“Just glad we’re making progress,” She gives him an obnoxiously loud kiss, deliberately leaving a lipstick mark on his cheek. “They have him listed as an analyst but he’s been out of the country for long periods of time that coincide with known, at least after the fact, undercover operations.”

A few records highlight and enlarge on the screen.

“But from what I’ve found it seems like he was working with a money laundering ring when he was seeing Jeanne Benoit. Very white collar, their front was a dry cleaner and the majority of the surveillance on the op was centered on a country club. The money was coming from weapons sales in some of the more unstable regions of northern African. Benoit doesn’t do business in the area and I doubt working for his competitors would have been an ideal cover to buddy up to him.”

“Then it is as Ms. Benoit told me.” Ziva confirms as she re-enters the bullpen. “They met in a supermarket near Ms. Benoit’s home in 2001. They dated for two and a half years before he proposed. They had been engaged for five months when he left town on an assignment that lasted five weeks. When he returned he broke the engagement, saying he could not endanger her anymore. Ms. Benoit seems to believe he was genuine in his concern for her well being out weighing their relationship and informs me that they are on friendly terms even now.”
“And you asked her about Thorne’s relationship with Ross?”

“I am not, despite what you like to imply, new at this Tony. Of course I asked about Thorne’s reaction to Ross. According to Ms. Benoit he was very supportive until he met Ross in person. They spoke alone for a time and Thorne subsequently began objecting to the relationship. Ms. Benoit seemed to think it was belated jealousy.”

Tony leans against his filing cabinet, “Or Thorne recognized that Ross was an agent and figured that alone would put the girl in danger.”

McGee joins them as well, “Facial recognition gave us an 87% match on Thorne. None of the reflections were on a clear enough angle to give us better but given the connection to the victims I think it’s a reasonable assumption.”

“So the questions become: Where is Thorne, and was he concerned enough to kill to protect her.” He reaches around Abby’s shoulders and begins filling in a BOLO.

Which of course is just the moment Director Shepard descends into their midst.

Tony stiffens slightly, aware that now is not the time and this is not the place to confront her about what she’s done to Danny Reston. He can’t however stop himself from glaring at her.

Thankfully for Tony’s continued employment she is wholly focused on Gibbs once she arrives in the bullpen. “Making progress on the car bombing?”

“We’ve got a positive ID and a possible suspect. His real name was Danny Reston and he was one of ours on an unauthorized undercover assignment.” He watches for her reaction to that.

Her flinch is almost microscopic but he can see it all the same. “The name doesn’t ring a bell, whose team is Reston on?”

“He’s one of the legal department’s agents actually.”

“And there was an indication that he’d been undercover in Benoit’s operation?”

Gibbs casts a quick look over the team in warning before answering her, “His notes seem to indicate he’s been dating Benoit’s daughter Jeanne to gain access to Benoit.”

Tony meets Gibbs’ eyes before commenting, “His procedures are way off and his reporting style leaves something to be desired.”

“He has not gathered any intelligence of use either,” Ziva adds.

“Was he compromised?” Shepard asks warily.

“Not that we can find Ma’am.” McGee manages to hide his confusion at the attitude the others are giving the director.

“It seems, Ma’am, that Jeanne Benoit’s former boyfriend may have taken exception to him,” Tony’s tone is dry enough to use as sand paper.

“And he chose a car bomb as his means of self-expression?”

“It’s a possibility,” Gibbs purposefully doesn’t volunteer any details on their suspect.

“Keep me in the loop Jethro.”
“Yes Ma’am.”
She heads back up the stairs without another word.

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“We don’t actually think he’s going to admit to anything do we?”
“You never know until you try,” Gibbs smirks.

“Suddenly an optimist?”

“It’s all the steamy illicit sex. It messes with my ability to be a cynical bastard.”

“Ilicit?”

“It could get us both fired.”

Tony smiles and shakes his head, “So we’re punching holes in his alibi then?”

“And trying to get an idea of where he built the bomb, yeah.”

On the short walk up the driveway Tony’s hand strays to his gun three times and his whole body clenches when Thorne opens the door. “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“I’m special agent Gibbs, this is special agent DiNozzo. We’d like to speak to you about Danny Ross.”

“Which agency did you say you’re from?” Thorne’s wariness is almost a living thing.

Tony purposefully stiffens his demeanor to that of the proverbial stuffed shirt. “Naval Criminal Investigative Service, sir.”

“Danny was NCIS. Wouldn’t have guessed that one.” He shakes his head, “Look, I was onto Danny but I didn’t kill him. I just wanted him to leave Jeanne alone. She deserves better than some jerk, me or him, using her to get close to her dad.”

With a quick glance at Gibbs Tony drops the posturing entirely, “This might not be the best place to discuss this.”

“Fair enough, come in.”

They sit at Thorne’s kitchen table without the usual uncomfortable offer of drinks.

“You were the only one who knew Danny wasn’t who he said he was.” Gibbs is still doing that bland non-threatening thing.

“And I warned him away from Jeanne. But I didn’t kill him. Didn’t even threaten him. Well, not with bodily harm anyway.”

Tony raises a curious eyebrow at that, “What exactly did you threaten him with?”

“Jeanne knows her father isn’t what he claims to be. Don’t misunderstand, she has no clue who he really is but she knows he’s been hiding what he really does for a living her entire life. I threatened to tell Jeanne that he was only getting close to her to benefit his business interests in her father. It wouldn’t blow his cover in a manner to see him harmed but it would have crashed his relationship
with Jeanne in a spectacular fashion. If there’s one thing she truly despises, thanks in no small part to her father no doubt, it’s liars.”

“And did you follow through on this threat?”

“It wasn’t time to yet. I gave him a month to let her down easy. I truly don’t want Jeanne hurt in all this.”

“Why break the engagement then?”

“I was one of the lying bastards.” He smirks at them, “Three years with Jeanne and I got two usable sentences out of Rene Benoit and a real good look at the kind of scum we are. It’s one thing when it’s another agent to maintain cover, or the target themselves. They know there’s a chance you’re lying to them about absolutely everything to gain some nebulous sort of knowledge. When it’s someone like Jeanne, someone innocent, they have no idea that we’re using them. That nothing we say or do can be trusted. I loved her. But how could she really love me? She never even knew me. And no matter what he said it was going to be exactly the same with Danny.”

Tony shakes his head, “Danny was going to quit NCIS for her.”

“And go on lying to her forever,” Throne sneers.

“Actually I doubt Danny told Jeanne very many lies. You see he wasn’t a trained undercover agent. Aside from who he practiced law for every thing Jeanne and her friends told us about Danny is true.”

“Jeanne did tell us most of the same things Danny’s co-workers in the legal department did,” Gibbs agrees evenly.

“It really doesn’t matter. Their whole relationship was built on a lie, but not just that. It was a lie that could get them both killed. I would never have let him risk Jeanne that way.”

“And if Jeanne didn’t care about the lie? If she loved Danny for who he was?” Tony seems just a touch wistful as he says it, earning him a discretely raised eyebrow from Gibbs.

“Like I said lying is a deal breaker for Jeanne. She takes it from her dad because he’s her dad. She wouldn’t let Danny get away with it.”

“People have overlooked a lot more than meeting under false pretenses when they’re in love,” Tony prods again.

“She wasn’t in love with Danny,” Thorne’s tone is final and his use of the past tense isn’t overlooked by either agent.

“If you were giving him ultimatums I take it you had some way of contacting Danny that didn’t involve Jeanne.”

“I followed him home the night she introduced us. It wasn’t hard. He just hopped the metro and never even really looked around.”

“Sounds a bit like stalking Mr. Thorne.”

“Seems to me in our line of work they tend to call it surveillance Agent Gibbs.”

Tony gives up on being even the least bit circumspect, “You wouldn’t happen to have a ready source of military grade accelerant would you?”
“In this country? No. If however you need to lay hands on a half a pound of Sematex in Dubai I could get you to the right men.” Thorne stands, “I didn’t kill Danny Ross, or whatever his real name was, and I’d appreciate it if you gentlemen left my house. Unless of course you intend to arrest me for bad intentions.”

Tony doesn’t even bother to move the car as Gibbs calls in to assign a surveillance team. Despite the fact that they’re both fairly convinced Thorne is their killer they can’t chance it on so little evidence, not when the victim is an NCIS agent. Nor are they sure enough to stay themselves.

“Nells and Maiko will be here in thirty-five to take first shift on the surveillance detail.” Tony drums his fingers on the steering wheel, “He’s not really trying to hide it, is he?”

“No, he’s not. He’s either sure we can’t pin it on him or he honestly thinks we’re dumb enough to fall for the ‘I’m too obvious to be the killer’ routine.”

“We do seem to give the impression that they might be able to sell us a nice bridge in Brooklyn given the number of them that lie to us,” Tony offers contemplatively.

“You do have a very trusting face.”

“You’re not funny Jethro.” He glances in the rearview as an agency sedan parks behind them. “Does Tobias know anybody at the CIA?”

“Has an old task force buddy there, yeah.”

“Maybe he could get us the details on Thorne’s separation from the company.”

Gibbs smiles at him winningly, “You going to call him?”

“Why would I call him? He’s your friend.”

“But he thinks you’re pretty. It might work to our advantage.”

“Smug may in fact be a good look on you but it doesn’t make you funny.”

“You love me.”

“Just call him.”

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Ziva smiles triumphantly and hits Tony’s speed dial. “I have found it.”

There’s a bit of a lengthy pause, “The source of the accelerant?”

“Nine months ago an arms dealer out of Kiev hired some men to raid a United Nations peacekeeping force’s supply depot in hopes of stealing guns and ammunition. Or so my contact assumes as there just is not a vast market for military grade accelerant. But being an enterprising man he decided once he had the accelerant he might as well sell it. She tells me there were two sales made to American buyers. One to a militia group in Wyoming and one to a former CIA agent out of Charleston, South Carolina.”

“Was she able to give you any details on the Charleston sale?”

Ziva consults her notes, “Just that the deal took place in the French Quarter of Charleston on September 19th.”
“Have McGee look into Sebastian Thorne’s travel records for September. Gibbs and I are on our way in now.”

She relays the request to McGee and is surprised at his quiet acquiesces. She allows herself a moment of satisfied reflection before deciding they need answers before they can continue on. “I am going to pick up dinner, would you like anything in particular?”

The consideration seems to surprise him in turn. “I could do with some food, sure. Where are you going?”

“I thought I might try that new deli over at eighth and L.”

“Sounds good, thanks. Want me to come with you?”

“I shall manage on my own. Just let Tony and Gibbs know I am on my way with food when they arrive. Would you like a Rueben or your usual?”

“My usual would be great, thanks.”

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Gibbs is still bantering with Fornell when Tony hangs up with Ziva. He glances over to make sure he has Gibbs’ attention before speaking, “See what he knows about Charleston, SC too.”

Gibbs nods an acknowledgement before returning his attention to his phone.

“What does the boy toy need?” Tobias asks with a chuckle.

Gibbs puts it on speaker, “Business Tobias. DiNozzo wants me to ask if you know anything about an ex-company man operating out of South Carolina. Charleston specifically. And anything you can get us on a Sebastian Thorne’s medical discharge would be helpful as well.”

“You want the English crown jewels while I’m at it Jethro?”

“You owe us Tobias. And we don’t need you to actually get us anything actionable, just some intel.”

“I haven’t heard anything about Charleston. I’ll get back to you about Thorne. For Emily.”

“Thanks Tobias. Get back to me when you can. The Boyfriend and I’ll take you to dinner when we’ve got this one sorted.”

“Not into that kinky shit, Jethro. No need to wine and dine me.”

“I wasn’t offering that Tobias and you know it. Besides he’s expressed distress at the thought that you might be interested, I think you’re safe from each other. Just a meal.”

“If he promises to keep his hands to himself, I’ll even cook,” Tony offers brightly.

“There you go, a warning to keep your hands to yourself and an offer of some damn fine cooking.”

“Maybe I’ll bring Emily. She seemed… amused by your partnership.”

“We’d like that.”

Tony shoots Gibbs an unhappy look, “She’s a good kid.”
“I’ll call you back if I find something for you.”

“Thanks Tobias.”

“Yeah, thanks Toby,” Tony adds with only a touch of sarcasm. When Gibbs has hung up Tony sighs, “What the hell are we going to do if Thorne isn’t our guy?”

“Throw Jenny in interrogation until she gives up the details on Reston’s operation.”

“Somehow I wish that was a bad joke.”

“Me too,” Gibbs admits quietly.

“Still have Sec Nav’s number?”

“Let’s hope we don’t need it.”

When Ziva arrives back in the bullpen Tony is at his computer reading and McGee is typing and clicking as he usually does. Gibbs is no where to be seen. Tony seems to notice her attention and looks up. She looks curiously at Gibbs’ empty desk in question, hoping the continuing silence will maintain the cease fire with McGee.

Tony indicates the director’s office with a tilt of his head, also recognizing the novel lack of tension.

Ziva distributes the sandwiches and various drinks before finally speaking, choosing to address McGee directly, “You should take a moment to eat McGee. The information will still be there to find when you are finished and you skipped lunch today.”

McGee stops, thinks for a moment and then reaches for the food, “You’re right I did.”

It’s not the comfortable banter of a week ago but it’s not a biting comment or cold professionalism either so both Tony and Ziva are willing to count it as a win.

Gibbs returns from what he’d call briefing the director if asked, though he’d held back more information than he’d imparted by far, to the relative peace and rather than barking for results or a status update he simply joins the others in eating their meal. The uncharacteristic tolerance does seem to startle Ziva and McGee but Tony smirks at him. He shrugs slightly and signs “my mask is slipping. Your fault.”

Tony shakes his head and responds in kind “all you.”

The others are either unaware or willfully blind to the byplay and Gibbs demands an update as soon as he’s finished eating.

Much to everyone’s relief McGee answers with his old distracted enthusiasm, “Despite his separation from the CIA Thorne has retained the papers and accounts of one of his cover aliases, Gordie Howard. I’ve found a Swiss account and should have the domestic account soon. I’ve also got a search running through the FAA database for both names in September and can expand that into August and October if we don’t get any results. That search should be almost complete without me.”

“Tony, run property records on Gordie Howard. We still need to find where he built the bomb. Ziva, look into any connections to Howard in Charleston. I’m going see if Abby has anything we forgot when we found Reston’s journals.”
Tony glances up and comments, “There was something about a chemical residue on the badge. And Rennie’s team had her working on the trace from a body dump in a dumpster so you might want to make sure she’s not trying to subsist on Caff-Pow! alone while you’re down there.”

Before McGee can look at Tony in wide-eyed confusion Ziva comments, “I would have been happy to bring her dinner.”

“I didn’t know you were going out or I would have asked you to.”

Gibbs shakes his head and leaves without a word.

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When Gibbs arrives in Abby’s lab with soup and a sandwich from a diner nearby she is indeed scowling at the sheer number of evidence bags on her table. He puts the food down on the counter, pulls a bottle of water from his pocket and then turns her chair toward it, “Breath and eat Princess.”

“There’s just so much clearly useless nonsense here Pop. None of Rennie’s team are baby agents, they should have better judgment than this.”

“Get Colson down here to sort it out for you Baby girl.”

She glances back at him before turning her attention to the food, “Maybe when I’ve finished eating.”

“I won’t do it for you,” The admonishment is fond, as is the kiss on her cheek. He pulls the other chair over and asks the questions he’d normal ask her over a Saturday lunch as she eats. In the time it takes her to eat and unwind from the stress wrecked creature he walked in on she is able to update him on the habitat for humanity house’s progress, the bowling team’s standings and her not-a-date with a carbon dating tech at the Smithsonian.

Deciding she needs another minute or two of calm he teases her, “And if I were to ask him about it he’d tell me it was ‘not-a-date’ too?”

“We talked shop,” She defends, blushing. Abby has no shame about boy toys and exes, but prospective boyfriends make her flush like a naïve schoolgirl.

“The whole night?”

“No.”

“Having a real relationship wouldn’t kill you Princess.”

“I’m still not ready Pop.”

“Okay. Fair enough. Now, no need to jump up and start demonstrating or explaining but did you ever figure out what was on Reston’s badge?”

“It was a little odd, but not helpful, sorry. It’s the melted remains of double sided tape. I think he had the badge taped into the well of the spare tire and it melted.”

“You’re right, not all that helpful, but it does tell me Reston was at least minimally aware of the need for operational security. It tells me he was under trained, not completely clueless about what he was doing.”

“And we all know whose fault that is.”
“Yes we do. I mean it about Colson, you shouldn’t have to do this alone. If I sent you this much evidence you’d demand McGee or Tony come down.”

“I know. But they’re family. Colson always looks like he thinks I’m going to drain his blood and drink it out of Caff-Pow! cups.”

He shakes his head and kisses her cheek, “He can deal with it.”

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When Gibbs returns to the bullpen McGee immediately gets to his feet bringing up some documents on the big screen, “Gordie Howard flew down to Charleston on September 9th and returned on the 25th. The account that paid for the tickets makes several prearranged transfers each month including the utilities on a house but not mortgage or rent payments. The activity is what you’d expect to see in someone who is away from a given address for long periods. It really does seem to be Thorne’s back up identity.”

As McGee finishes Tony gets to his feet and grabs his back pack, “Got an address Boss. There’s a house in Howard’s name in McLean, he bought it outright six years ago and according to the real estate listing from the purchase the property includes a detached two car garage.”

Gibbs eyes both McGee and Ziva for a second before prodding, “What are you two waiting for? Let’s go. This could be our secondary scene.”

During the drive Tony sets legal on getting them a search authorization.

When they arrive the house is very clearly deserted, the lawn is over grown, the mailbox full to bursting. Tony is quick to point out that the side door to the garage is both clean and clear of debris. Together he and Ziva check the door over for obvious triggers before opening it. Inside is a bomber’s paradise.

“It’s looks like a Radio Shack in the early nineties in here,” McGee comments as he moves among the bins of wires, circuits, receivers and batteries.

“Photograph and bag everything. If anyone finds something that looks even remotely assembled we fall back and call in the bomb squad,” Gibbs instructs before calling the surveillance team to have Thorne picked up.

“Gotta admit the guy had a pretty good poker face,” Tony comments as he bags tools from the work bench.

“Or he knew by the time we had enough to bring him in for this he’d be gone,” Gibbs growls hanging up his phone.

“He got past Maiko and Nells?”

“Extraction team got him out ten minutes ago. Nells gave them a good chase but they had a secondary team and boxed them in. I doubt we’ll find Thorne again,” Gibbs growls.

“He murdered a kid for falling for his mark and the CIA is covering for him,” Tony is clearly incredulous.

“That is… screwed up,” To the amazement of all it’s McGee that speaks up.

“They’re both going to get away with it.” Tony doesn’t bother explaining who or what, Gibbs
knows what he means and he’s not feeling friendly enough toward McGee to care if he’s confused anymore.

“Not if I can help it,” Gibbs vows quietly.
They don’t arrive back at the Yard until almost eleven and Gibbs sends McGee and Ziva home without a word of explanation. The only word he offers Tony is “later”. They check in the evidence and make their way to Abby’s lab in resigned silence. Abby sits worrying her lip and watching the door when they arrive. Gibbs opens his arms and she practically flings herself at him.

Tony leans against the wall by the door and wishes they were home where he could slide an arm around each of them to draw and give comfort.

As if reading Tony’s mind Gibbs relaxes the embrace, “Come to the house Princess.”

“Sorry I didn’t figure it out sooner,” She mumbles softly in return.

“Bullshit Abby,” Tony almost growls, “it is not your fault that a CIA agent with backup slipped a tail. So don’t do that to yourself. Let’s just get out of here.”

Abby considers Tony a moment before nodding, shutting down her computers and wrapping both her arms around Tony’s left, “You said something about Home?”

In the elevator she tilts her head to rest against Tony’s and he smiles a bit before kissing her forehead, “We won’t give up Abbs. Not until someone answers for this.”

Recognizing their continued tension Gibbs stops the elevator and wraps them both in a hug, “She is going to pay for this. Sooner rather than later. But we need to come after her carefully and quietly. So first I’m taking you both home. We are going have a real meal and then we’re all going to get an actual, reasonable amount of rest. Tomorrow we’ll start documenting all the ways she failed Reston. And don’t believe for a minute I’ve given up on Thorne either.”

He knows sending his team home for the second time in two days will likely alert Jenny that something has changed, but he sincerely hopes she believes they’re all still ignorant of her involvement. Situational awareness outside of undercover operations was always one of her weak points, and had in fact contributed to their falling out.

Tony startles him out of his thoughts with a quick kiss and a nod toward the control panel, “Let’s get home.”

When the smell of fresh brewed coffee fills the house at just after 0600 Tony sits up to yell in the general direction of the stairs. Then it occurs to him he just lifted his face from Gibbs’ shoulder and the other man still has an arm around his waist. After the last couple of days there’s no way it’s Abby downstairs, so he turns back to his bedmate and pokes him in the shoulder, “Did you leave the door unlocked all night?”

“You locked up last night,” Gibbs reminds him quietly. “Stay here, I’ll see who it is.”

“If you’re not back in five minutes I’m shooting first and asking questions later.”

“I always feel more confident with you on my six,” The comment is a touch flippant but the smile it’s
offered with assures it authenticity.

“You just like knowing I’m checking out your ass,” Tony shoots back with a smile of his own.

Despite Gibbs’ instruction Tony pulls on a pair of track pants, grabs his gun and moves down the hall to Abby’s room. When he arrives she’s still soundly asleep and he decides it might be for the best to just let her sleep. To that end he takes a defensive position inside the door. Which is where Gibbs finds him two minutes later when he comes back upstairs. He grins and pulls Tony into the hall, “Protecting our little girl?”

“She is our only little girl after all,” Tony quips. “Who is it?”

“Tobias has news.”

“And a key?”

“No, he just knows which section of the gutter the hide-a-key is usually in.”

“You guys are too loud for this early in the morning,” Abby complains as she emerges from her room.

“You know your father princess, always a workaholic.”

“Fornell let himself in sweetheart. We’re headed downstairs, you can go back to bed if you like.”

“Is it about Danny?”

The men share a look at that, clear evidence that in failure Abby’s become attached to Reston more so than perhaps she should. “Yeah Princess it is, I’m going to put on a shirt if you want to take a second and come down with us,” Tony offers.

Abby retreats to pull her hair into a ponytail as Tony disappears back down the hall.

When they arrive in the kitchen Fornell is sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. Abby immediately takes the seat beside him as Gibbs and Tony both take a moment to get their own coffee. As they do Fornell smirks, “The whole family’s here huh?”

“When stressed we stick together,” Tony responds just a touch defensively.

“Fair enough. Sebastian Thorne’s medical discharge was a cover. He’s in place as Jeanne Benoit’s friend to protect another agent’s cover. You’ll recall, Jethro, I told you earlier that there’s an agent in Benoit’s organization. Thorne served as a distraction when the other agent had a close call.”

It’s Tony that gets it, “And Ross was threatening Thorne’s influence, whether or not he was an undercover operative.”

“So he blew him up?” Abby demands, clearly horrified.

“So he neutralized him.” Fornell corrects gently.

“He told us himself he tried to talk Danny into walking away. Danny didn’t go for it. Thorne knew before we told him that Danny wanted to marry Jeanne.” Tony explains quietly, “He didn’t know any better than to fall for her and it got him killed.”

“She has to pay for this,” Abby is almost vibrating with anger.
“She will,” Gibbs promises, “but we’re going to try to do it the right way first because she will go down swinging.”

Fornell looks to each of them in turn with confusion written clear across his features.

Tony looks to Gibbs for confirmation before answering, “Danny Reston was an agent in our legal department with no field experience, no undercover training. And this was an unsanctioned op, some sort of personal vendetta of Shepard’s.”

“How have you not thrown her into the deepest darkest hole you could find yet?” Fornell asks Gibbs directly.

“Had to try to do right by the kid first. He was one of ours even though he wasn’t a field agent. In fact we owed him more because of that. And she has no idea we know what she did.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“She’s a vain creature who believes entirely that no one else can see what she’s up to if she just smiles while she lies.”

Fornell nods, “She shouldn’t get away with it. Call me if there’s anything else I can help with. And your cooking better live up to the hype DiNote-zoe.”

Tony smiles at that, “I’ll make you my specialty Toby. We all appreciate the help.”

“Thanks Uncle Toby,” Abby adds kissing his cheek.

Fornell chuckles, “I’m Uncle Toby now?”

“You are Pop’s best friend.”

“I’ve been adopted haven’t I?” Fornell asks.

“Don’t worry, we’re still aware that only other agencies’ rejects work for the FBI,” Tony assures him.

When Tony pulls away Gibbs glances at Abby, “What exactly is McGee’s problem with Tony?”

“There are two possibilities. Either the fact that Tony is competent really disturbs his world view or he was only comfortable with Tony being gay when he didn’t know who Jay was. Either way it’s completely McGee’s issue and Tony handled it as well as he could. Tim will grow up and get over it. It’s just going to take a little time.”

“Keep half an eye on the situation for me baby girl.”

“Sure thing Pop. And you make sure you back Tony up when he acts like a grown up.”

“I couldn’t do anything else sweetheart.”

Abby nods and shakes her head, “What are we going to do about Shepard?”

“You’re going to start by logging Danny’s ops notes and your friend’s translation into evidence. Then trace the lease on his cover apartment and go after the money trail on the car’s registration again now that you know for sure that it should trace back to an NCIS account, or if she’s really
gone over the edge, Shepard’s private accounts.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to try to finesse some information out of Jenny while McGee goes over Reston’s records and Tony searches out what Jenny’s grudge against Benoit is.”

“And Ziva?”

“I honestly don’t know yet.” He stops the car to pick up Abby’s Caff-pow! and tips her face toward
him with a gentle hand, “If it comes to it I’ll throw her in a deep dark pit myself sweetheart. I know
she isn’t your favorite person but the history I do have with her means we have to at least try to give
her a fair shake, even if we all know she doesn’t really deserve it.”

“He was just a baby.”

“I know it Princess.”

When they arrive at the Yard he walks her to her lab and stays at her side as she boots up her
computer. She hugs him tighter knowing that he’s about to leave her. “Send Ziva a copy of Reston’s
notes. We’ll have her look at anything he did that might have resulted in actual evidence.”

“She’ll have it before you can make it upstairs.”

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It takes over three hours for any of them to turn up anything useful. When he does Tony gives Gibbs
a significant look and announces “I’m heading down to see Abbs.”

Gibbs nods and follows him into the elevator. Almost immediately Tony hits the emergency stop. “It
seems Benoit is suspected to have been responsible for the death of Jasper Shepard, and for the
record yes, that is her father.” He sighs heavily, “I get wanting revenge for his death, I really do. I
don’t get putting a baby agent in harm’s way to get it.”

He pulls Tony close but doesn’t quiet hug him, “I honestly don’t know. Especially because if she’d
come to me in the first place I would have helped her.”

“I know you would have. I probably would have, too. I might still if Reston hadn’t ended up dead.”

“I know what you mean. As it stands I’ll gladly watch them put her away for the rest of her life. The
minute she forgot her obligation to that boy any good will went out the window.”

“Now we just have to prove she did it.”

“She’s not half as clever as she thinks she is, we will find the things she’s missed.”

Tony sighs, “You need to find a minute and let Tim in on what’s really going on here. If I’m the
messenger he’ll assume it’s about the way she drools after you and run to tattle about us.”

“He does sometimes miss the importance of standing by our own. Even when it’s one of us that we
have to defend them from.”

“It’s that lack of real world experience. Comes from recruiting them right out of college.”

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It doesn’t take Ziva much longer to find a hand written report, photographs and two SD cards with video footage on them logged in under a phony case number. It’s unclear whether Reston did it for insurance or because he didn’t know how to properly log evidence obtained while undercover but it’s helpful all the same. Ziva observes aloud that there is no mention of any of these materials in Reston’s coded notes.

The photos are the ones McGee was able to confirm correspond to CIA surveillance of Benoit as well as two dozen that don’t. Some are fairly standard for an investigation into an arms dealer, Benoit meeting with someone on an airstrip. A package being exchanged for a briefcase, no doubt one packed with cash.

Others are far from normal, they show Benoit kissing his daughter’s cheek, having dinner alone in an upscale restaurant. The last set of three are just the smallest bit disturbing, they’re clearly taken from a distance with a telephoto lens, and they show Benoit taking coffee in a dimly lit kitchen. They seem more like the work of a stalker than surveillance.

The videos are standard stuff and enough to put Benoit away had that been Shepard’s intention. Given that they pre-date many of the still photos it’s unlikely Shepard had ever been interested in justice for Benoit’s crimes. What they don’t make clear is what her intentions actually were.

A silent look that passes among them tells Tony that Ziva and Gibbs both believe that she likely intended to find an opening and kill him herself. None of the evidence they have supports the theory though so they continuing looking for signs of a negligent disregard for Reston’s life.

The report details a surveillance operation in a restaurant that, if accurately reported, is the sloppiest thing Tony’s ever heard of. The kid literally sat at the next table and wrote down what was said. On top of the danger of being caught he wasn’t able to see a damn thing and given that a meeting like that is almost always about a hand off not being able to see would constitute a problem.

Tony cringes and turns to McGee for confirmation that Reston hasn’t been trained for anything nearing what Shepard had clearly expected him to do.

“A deeper look into his records and files just confirms what we knew on that front, he was never field trained. The only thing even nearing field training is basic firearms qualification which Reston himself requested. There is a recommendation that he be allowed to begin training for field work from his immediate supervisor in his file. The request was making its way through channels but had yet to pass through the right hands to be approved or denied. Judging by the dates he was already working on this assignment when the request was made.”

“I’m going to start trying to prove she knew how dangerous this man is before she put him in there,” Tony announces softly and Gibbs nods his assent.

After a moment he sighs and stands, “McGee, try tracking Thorne’s movements, he may have gotten sloppy running on such short notice. Ziva make sure we’ve got records of everything we’ve found so far.” He turns to Tony knowing he’ll be understood, “I’m going to go make the call neither of us wants to.”

Tony nods his understanding.

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Gibbs declines a drink but takes the seat across from Sec Nav as instructed.

“I assume this isn’t a social call Jethro.”
“Is it ever a social call, Phillip?”

He shakes his head, “And does Director Shepard know you requested this meeting?”

“That would defeat the purpose, sir.” He slides a folder across the table. “I assume you’re aware of the death of Agent Reston Tuesday night.”

“He’s the agent that died in the car bombing?”

“Yes sir, he is.”

“I believe the director mentioned you had a suspect but were unable to apprehend him.”

“An extraction team helped him slip our net, yes. But Thorne, the suspect, is not what I’m here to discuss. Danny Reston was not a field agent sir.”

“It was my understanding that he was undercover dating the daughter of an arms dealer.”

“Yes sir he was. In an unsanctioned operation.”

Sec Nav stiffens at that and makes a ‘go on’ motion.

Gibbs details Shepard’s connection to Benoit, including the ridiculous name she’d called him the last time they spoke about the case, when she thought she was in clear. He summarizes Reston’s lack of training and experience. And he closes with the sad facts of the romance that was Danny Reston’s undoing.

When Gibbs is finished Sec Nav orders another drink. “I assume this file is the documentation of the facts you’ve outlined for me?”

“That’s all of it yes.”

“I expect you to stay out of this from now on. You’ve brought it to my attention and I’ll handle it from here Jethro.”

“So long as you do indeed handle it Phillip.”

“How is it that Tom never had you shot?”

“I’m that good. And so is my team.”

“It will be properly handled.”

Deciding a little respect won’t kill him Gibbs smiles sadly, “I’m sorry it’s come this.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Gibbs leaves it at that.

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Both Tony and Abby remain agitated the entire week the evidence rests with Sec Nav. When the other shoe does drop it’s not quite what any of them expect.

He comes in to speak with her personally with Ducky at his side and a short while later a paramedic and one of the security guards join them upstairs. Moments after that Shepard leaves with the medic
and the guard. Ducky emerges half an hour later and heads directly for Gibbs’ desk.

“You really should have told me what she’d done Jethro.”

“You’re not responsible for her Duck.”

“In this I am. She confided in me months ago that she was unwell.”

“That makes what she did worse Ducky.”

“Join me in my office Jethro,” Ducky instructs stiffly.

Gibbs follows without comment.

Once they’re alone Ducky sighs, “She has a brain tumor Jethro. She’s lost all inhibitions. I had thought she was showing remarkable restraint given the circumstances. I should have known that just wasn’t possible.” The lack of an anecdote about loss of inhibitions speaks to just how deeply Ducky is disturbed.

“Even with lowered inhibitions she made a choice Duck. If she had decided that all bets were off and gone after Benoit with a gun in the street I would believe that her medical condition made her incapable of restraining herself. She didn’t. She plotted, planned and had a naive young man who had no idea that what she was asking him was beyond the responsibilities of his job do her dirty work. And what’s worse is she then didn’t prepare him for what he was facing. I’m not saying he would absolutely be alive right now if she had bothered to at least show him the ropes, but he’d have had a fighting chance. Most of all because he would have been able to tell the situation she was trying to put him in was a bad one.”

“I thought he was an agent.”

“In that he worked for the agency, yes. He was one of the agents in the legal department. From what McGee tells me young Danny was a whiz with legal precedent and sweet talking the civilian court system. He was twenty-five. Barely even finished with law school. She didn’t set the bomb, but she put him in the car.” He dials back the glare he knows he’s unfairly leveling on Ducky, “We were too late to save that boy but there is no way I was going to let her get away with what she did to him.”

Ducky is silent for several minutes before nodding sadly, “Secretary Davenport allowed her to voluntarily commit herself to a psychiatric facility. It’s my understanding that he’s going to tell the press that she’s stepped down for medical reasons.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything else from a politician.”

“You wanted to see her go to jail?”

“She left a subordinate twisting in the wind for her own agenda Duck. And she shook my little girl’s faith. I wanted her to pay for those things.”

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Tony hands Abby her caff-pow! and kisses her cheek by way of his morning greeting, “What has you all abuzz today Princess?”

“Two things, dear Prince Charming. First, I’m really excited about who I got for secret santa.”

Tony makes an acknowledging sound. Based on who he got and Ziva’s reaction to who she got he’s
willing to bet he knows who Abbs got. “And second?”

“Second is a little something I heard on the rumor mill. It seems our new director thinks very highly of you, Very Special Agent DiNozzo. There’s mention of a comment that the reports that you’re juvenile and lack focus must be referring to another agent.”

“Director Mills just never met frat boy Tony. I won’t tell if you won’t.”

She laughs, “There are other rumors that Pop had you brainwashed.”

Tony laughs too, “I like the blackmail rumor better.” Her confused silence prompts him to shake his head and explain, “According to that one Toby requested I be assigned to a joint task force and Gibbs gave me the option: I could grow up and start acting like I was his second in command or he’d put me on the task force.”

She hugs him, “Let them speculate, they’ll never guess the truth.”

“No, none of them could even conceive of it.”

“It’s probably for the best.”

“What are you up to today?”

“I’m trying to plan the team holiday party. You want to help?”

“I will decorate the house and cook if you’ll do the rest of the planning.”

“So it’s your house to volunteer now, is it?” Gibbs asks from directly behind Tony.

Tony is proud that he neither startles nor instantly grins like an idiot. “Like you could say no to either of us on a thing like this, let alone both of us.”

“As if I’d want to,” Gibbs concedes evenly.

Abby grins broadly at that, “And they lived happily ever after.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay folks, we've reached the end of this story. But if you need more of our modern fairytale the link below will lead you to Corey, a continuation of this 'verse.

Works inspired by this one: Snow Day by C_C

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