Summary

My version of where Tony might have ended up after the crappy treatment he received in 'Boxed In'. This is a bit dark, but I have to go with the muse and this is what she provided. The thought woke me up crying, as a matter of fact. Triple Kleenex warning...

Notes

Dark themes here people. Also a 'ship that may squick you a bit. Just hang in with me and the ride will be well worth it, I promise...
Chapter 1

FOLLOWING MORNING: NCIS: 10:00 A.M.

"Anybody seen or heard from DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked for the tenth time that morning, his brow furrowed with irritation and frustration.

"No. Believe me, I would have told you, Gibbs." Ziva responded casually.

Mcgee stayed quiet, head bowed over his work, as he had every other time Gibbs had mentioned Tony. Finally, the older man rose and moved close enough to his young agent to tower over him.

"McGee. Talk to me. Now."

"About what, sir?"

The unaccustomed formality registered instantly with Gibbs and his anger flared.

"Don't push me, McGee. You get busted down from probationary agent, noone in D.C.'s gonna hire you."

"I haven't heard from him, boss. After last night, I'm not surprised."

"And that means..."

"Ask her." He replied darkly, inclining his head toward Ziva. "She's the one who lied to all of us."

"Pardon me?" Ziva shot back, sitting forward.

"Not if you held a gun to my head."

"That can be arranged." Ziva said, color and tension evident in her face. Gibbs halted the potential confrontation.

"Enough, both of you! What are you talking about, McGee?"

"Did you ask her why Tony wasn't at the dinner party?"

"I never thought about it. Why?"

"I did. She said he turned down the invitation. Last night, seeing his face when we were all talking about the fun we had... he just looked so upset. You never invited him, did you, Ziva?"

The young woman flushed a deeper red, responded tightly then returned to her work.

"No. Why would I? He's a child and children don't belong at adult gatherings."

Before Gibbs could turn and rip into her the way he desperately wanted to, his phone rang. Jaw tense, he moved to answer it, vowing she'd get the reaming out of her life the minute he finished the conversation.

"NCIS."

"Is this Agent Jethro Gibbs?"
"It is." He replied, his stomach sinking even before he knew who was on the other end of the line.

"This is Bethesda Naval Hospital. You're listed as the emergency contact for Agent Anthony DiNozzo. Is this correct?"

"Yes. What's happened?"

"He voluntarily checked himself into our mental health wing late last night. All he was really able to give us was his name and a request to call you and let you know he's safe."

"God... checked in for what? What is he... What's wrong with him?"

"You'll have to come down and discuss that with the doctor, I'm afraid. You should be aware that Agent DiNozzo isn't allowed visitors."

"What? Why?"

"His stipulation, sir."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"I'll let the doctor know to expect you."

Gibbs hung up slowly and turned to find McGee had risen to his feet. His body language said he was ready for anything, but his expression was anxious and fearful.

"Boss?"

"Tony's in the pysch ward at Bethesda. He checked himself in last night."

"No... he wouldn't..."

"He did. You pass the word to Abby, Palmer and Ducky. I'm gonna go talk to the doctor." Gibbs responded gruffly as he grabbed his coat and headed for the elevators.

"Boss... tell him the rest of us didn't know... and that we're sorry."

"Would if I could, McGee, but Tony doesn't wanna see anyone right now."

"Can you blame him?" Tim retorted, glaring daggers at Ziva.

"I only put blame where it belongs, McGee." Gibbs said quietly as the doors to the elevator cab closed in front of him. As he headed out himself, Tim felt slightly better seeing Ziva blanch in anticipation of what Gibbs would do when he returned.

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45 MINUTES LATER:

"Agent Gibbs? I'm Doctor Lewiston. Good to meet you."

Gibbs shook the doctor's hand brusquely, but wasted no time trying to get information.

"How's Tony?"

Lewiston waved at the rows of waiting room chairs.
"Let's both sit down, alright?"

"I'm not here to sit. Talk to me."

"This could take a few minutes, Special Agent. I have some questions to ask you as well, so if you wouldn't mind..."

Gibbs drew and expelled a slow breath, forced his hands to uncurl and acceded to the doctor's request. Once both men were seated, the doctor studied Gibbs' face carefully for a moment before he began to speak. "I can't tell you everything, obviously. There are issues of confidentiality to consider..."

"I also didn't come here to listen to what you *can't* tell me! Why can't you *damn* doctors just get to the point instead of doing a square dance around the *damn* truth!" Gibbs growled, standing once again and stalking a step or two away from the chairs.

"You're very upset. That's understandable. This would be a difficult situation for anyone to face."

"What situation?" Gibbs sighed, whirling back around to face the doctor. "Will you just tell me that? What the *hell* is going on with Tony?"

"According to the records, he walked up to the admitting desk just after 1 a.m., told the nurse that he was afraid he might hurt himself and asked for help."

Stunned, Gibbs moved back to his seat and slowly dropped down into it.

"He what? I don't understand. That's not... You checked him out? You talked to him?"

"For over thirty minutes."

"Half an hour? That's nothing! You can't find out squat in half an hour!"

"He couldn't have handled any more than that. Your colleague is suffering from fairly severe depression, Agent Gibbs. That short amount of time was more than enough for me to diagnose that."

"Depression? Tony? No. No way. Tony's always up, he's always making jokes... you've got it wrong, doc."

"Always a possibility. That's why I need to ask you a few questions. Has Agent DiNozzo been under an unusual amount of stress in the past few months?"

Gibbs' mind drifted back, recalling all that Tony had been through, but still not wanting to believe what he was being told.

"Maybe... but Tony's one of the strongest people I know. He's a survivor..."

"Of how many disasters? In what time frame?"

"He kept comin' right back... I should have seen something. Why didn't I know?"

"It's not your fault. Some people are so good at hiding and hoarding their pain that even those closest to them can't see how much they're struggling."

"His car got stolen and wrecked... he had to watch it happen on the news. The car was a classic. He loved that thing. God, it could have started that long ago..."
"What about more recent problems?"

"He... he got sick... pneumonic plague. He barely made it through that. Then one of our team was killed in the line of duty. He was beaten up pretty bad himself a few weeks back. Last night..."

"Straw, camel?"

"I didn't think so at the time. Look, what can I do, here? How can I help him?"

"Right now, all you can do is let him rest. I'll be talking to him over the next day or two. I'll try to keep you updated, but..."

"Confidentiality, I know. If he changes his mind... wants to see us or talk to us..."

"You'll be notified, I promise."

"Can you at least give him a message?"

"I can try. What is it?"

"Tell him the rest of us didn't know... that we were lied to."

Sensing Gibbs was holding back, Lewiston prompted him gently.

"Is that all?"

"Yeah. That's it."

Gibbs rose slowly to his feet, praying his suddenly shaky knees would hold. Lewiston stood as well and the two grasped hands once again before they went their separate ways.

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NCIS: FORENSICS LAB

"Abby, calm down..."

"Calm down?! Don't *tell* me to calm *down* McGee!" the young woman bellowed, punctuating her words with occasional thumps to Tim's chest. "How can you *defend* her?!"

Tim tightened his hold on Abby and tried to explain, despite how hard his effort was forcing him to breathe.

"I'm not, I'm protecting you! If you so much as... mess up Ziva's hair, the director will be... down on you so fast you won't... know what happened. Please, baby, don't give Sheppard... an excuse to suspend you."

At last, Tim's words seemed to get through to Abby and she went still, laying her head on his shoulder and relaxing in his embrace.

"Can't believe I hugged her. I wanna splatter her face. I wanna send her back home in teeny-tiny pieces." Abby told him sadly.

"I know. Me too, but we can't."

When Gibbs walked in a few minutes later, Abby left Tim and rushed into the older man's open
arms.

"Is Tony okay?"

"He will be, Abs. It'll take a little time and a boatload of makin' up... but he will be."

"Promise?"

"Yeah... yeah, I promise."

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TBC....
AFTER LUNCH:

Standing outside the door of Tony DiNozzo's room, Dr. Lewiston watched his new patient carefully for a few minutes, planning his initial approach. After his conversation with Gibbs, he had decided his usual opening gambit might be too harsh and forthright for the obviously fragile young man, so he was now working out how to tone it down a bit. Once he had his path clear in his mind, he entered and closed the door quietly, not surprised to see the lunch tray sitting by the bed untouched.

"Agent DiNozzo?"

"Tony. If you're here to convince me not to off myself... we should be on a first name basis." The young man curled up on the bed replied, his voice strained and weary.

"Alright. Tony it is. My name is Dennis Lewiston. Are you feeling a bit better today, Tony?"

"Define better."

"Okay... let's try this. Do you still feel you want to hurt yourself?"

Tony sighed quietly and rolled away from the wall, turning onto his back.

"I wish I could say no..."

"So do I. I talked to your boss this morning. He told me you've been through a lot these last few months."

"Understatement of the century."

"So what tipped it over? What made you decide you'd had enough?"

Tony produced a strained laugh, smiled tensely and threw one arm over his eyes.

"You'll never believe it."

"Try me."

"I barely believe it myself. It just sounds so... sixth grade now. The newest member of our team threw a party. Everyone one else knew... and nobody told me. See? Strictly junior high."

"Not really. It doesn't matter whether you're twelve or forty; callous, thoughtless behavior from people you consider friends hurts just as much."

"Yeah... well, it wasn't all their fault. They had no way of knowing."

"Knowing what?"

"How close I was to the edge. See... I'm a world-class, champion suppressor. I put on this "I'm fine, nothing wrong here, don't ask questions." mask... and I'm so good everybody believes it. Once at work... I let it slip, deliberately of course, that my college nick-name was "Sex Machine". Truth is, my best friend was the only one who really called me anything but Tony."

"And what was that?"
"The Man in the Iron Smiley Face."

"You've been using that mask a long time, I'm guessing."

"Oh yeah, but we're not going there."

"Everything's connected."

"Not for me. Not anymore. Look, can we... cut this short? I'm really tired. I haven't been sleeping much lately."

"I can tell. I'll be back in a few hours and we'll talk again."

"I was afraid of that."

Lewiston smiled and picked up the tray.

"If you just wanted a place to get some rest you'd have booked a room in a hotel. Instead you came here and asked for help. That was an incredibly difficult and courageous thing to do. Obviously, the desire to stick around was stronger than the hurt and the urge to give up. Hold onto that desire, Tony. With that, and a little help from me, you'll get through this."

"Confidence and optimism. Just what I was hoping for." Tony murmured, bitterness coloring his tone.

"Sarcasm is a good sign. It's one step away from humor. One last thing... you're sure there's nobody you want to see? Friends can be a big help when you're feeling like this."

"I'm not sure if I have any friends left."

Lewiston smiled sadly at the young man and started to leave. "Wait. There's one person. Dr. Donald Mallard. Only him, though. Don't even bother to ask about the others."

"Alright. I'll let the nursing staff know."

"Thanks. And you can skip the dinner tray, too."

"I understand. Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe... but I wouldn't put money on it."

NCIS:

Sitting quietly at her desk, Ziva rotated her shoulders subtly, trying to relieve the tension that had built up in them. Ever since the revelation of her trickery earlier that day, she'd been waiting for Gibbs to exact retribution, but he'd done nothing. He'd even spoken civilly to her several times. Trying to stave off whatever might be headed her way, she'd been exceedingly polite and professional and spoken only when asked a question or expected to provide information, but the strain was starting to show and not knowing what he planned was driving her crazy. When he'd brought her a sandwich at lunchtime, she'd hesitated, certain he'd done something diabolical to it, but had eventually given in and eaten, brushing aside Gibbs' inquiry as to what was wrong.

Tim had avoided conversation whenever possible, but for that she was glad. He was obviously still angry and she didn't have the energy to deal with it. When McGee strode off to another section of the office and Gibbs followed a few minutes later, she released a deep sigh and dropped her head to her
"So what's the plan, Boss?"

"What plan, McGee?"

"Ziva. Aren't you going to... do something?"

"Nope. Not yet, anyway."

"But... oh. I get it. The longer you make her wait, the more you mess with her head."

Gibbs grinned.

"I'll keep her stress level up for a while, keep her on edge. By the time she realizes what I'm doing behind the scenes, it'll be too late."

"So you do have a plan." Tim responded, his voice and expression clearly saying he was eager for details.

"Sorry, need to know, McGee. What you haven't heard you can't get your ass chewed for being involved in."

"I need to help, boss, please. What she did to Tony is just..."

"No, Tim. When the fallout happens, this has to be my play... nobody else's. Why don't you go check in with Abby, see if her end of the Marquez case is ready for court."

"Okay... " the younger agent replied, disappointed.

"Maybe she'll let you in on the revenge scheme she, Ducky and Palmer are putting together."

Tim's smile returned threefold.

"Right, boss."

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TBC......
Chapter 3

NCIS: 4:45 P.M.

"You're sure? That's the only name? Okay. No, I understand. Thank you. Good-night."

Gibbs hung up the phone and resumed shutting down his computer and preparing to head home. His jacket already on and backpack over his shoulder, Tim approached cautiously.

"Boss... has Tony changed his mind?"

"Only on one count. He wants to see Ducky." Gibbs replied, rising and gathering his own things.

"Ducky. That makes sense, I guess. He was the only one who wasn't there... the only one of us who didn't betray Tony."

"You need to quit that, McGee. Most of the time, guilt is a useless emotion. It blinds you and keeps you from doing what you need to do to fix a mistake. Go home, get some sleep... then come back tomorrow ready to do something productive to help clean up the mess Ziva made."

"Abby and I are already working on that." Tim responded, smiling grimly.

"Just the two of you?"

"Since we have our own specialties, we split into teams. Ducky and Palmer have their own ideas about the best way to wreak havoc. Jimmy said something about a goal of making her throw up or scream at least once a day for a whole week, but beyond that he wouldn't elaborate."

"Sounds like that's a good thing. Now obey orders, McGee."

"Home, sleep. Got it, boss. Do I even need to ask..."

"No... but the worry-wart treatment is appreciated. Go."

Tim nodded, lowered his head a little and headed for the elevator, Gibbs right behind him. They rode together as far as the parking level then parted ways with quiet good-nights.

"Ducky? You still here?"

The cultured, lightly amused voice of the NCIS coroner drifted out into the autopsy bay from somewhere out of sight.

"A moment, Jethro. I'll be right with you."

Ducky emerged a few minutes later, carrying an address book and wearing a knowing smile. "My apologies for the delay. I was arranging a particularly unpleasant surprise for Miss David."

"Do I need to know?"

"Meaning is it likely to be fatal? Unfortunately, no. I have a friend who works in crime scene investigation out in Las Vegas who also happens to be one of the foremost entomologists in the country. He's loaning me one or two of his more... disturbing exhibits."

"Bugs? Ducky..."
"I'm well aware of your preferences, Jethro. I will be absolutely sure you are well away from the area when I... do the dirty deed, so to speak. Was that all you wanted? I have a few bits and pieces of actual work to finish before I can go home, and I'd like to be shed of them as quickly as possible."

"I came down to update you on DiNozzo. I got a call from the hospital. He's decided you can visit."

"That's a great relief. I was hoping, since I was absent from that wretched party..."

"We all wish we could have had the foresight, Duck. Tell him the truth. Try an' make sure he understands." Gibbs requested, turning to leave.

"I'll do my best. Jethro... if I asked you not to go through with whatever it is you're planning..."

"Night, Ducky."

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THE HOSPITAL: TWENTY MINUTES LATER

"Tony?"

Lewiston's latest patient rolled over and sat up, bracing his back against the wall.

"Here we are again."

"I said I'd be back. I keep my promises. How's the appetite?"

"Still non-existent."

"Hopefully that will change. We need to talk about your time here. Since you checked in voluntarily, it's pretty much up to you how long you stay. I'd like to get your thoughts on that."

Tony grimaced and pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping one arm around them.

"I don't know. Two weeks at least, but it may not take that long. I want this to work... so there isn't much I'll be holding back."

"Yes, we've already defined those boundaries. Apparently discussing childhood trauma, and any connection it may have to your present issues, is over the line."

"You learn fast. Like I said... not going there." Tony replied, his good hand coming up to briefly scrub at his face. The doctor smiled lightly, but as his patient's left hand turned inward, something caught Lewiston's eye and the doctor's expression became sober and intent.

"When you were admitted, I warned you I needed to know everything you could tell me related to the reason you were asking for help. Do you remember that, Tony?"

"Vaguely. I was so low right then... my mind wasn't running on all eight cylinders, you know?"

"Then why didn't you disclose that you've attempted suicide before?"

Tony's slumped posture suddenly shifted and he sat ramrod straight. His expression blanked and he showed none of his volatile emotions to the man seated before him.

"I don't know what you're talking about."
"When you moved your hand, the overhead light picked up a streak... a spot where the skin shines. You've obviously had work done to remove the scars, but even the best plastic surgery can leave traces."

"Please... don't."

"I know you're still brittle and raw, Tony. I wouldn't push if it weren't important. I need to know about this if I'm going to help you. You've been so willing to open up... don't back off now."

"You don't understand. It was so long ago... it can't have any meaning now..."

"How long ago? How old were you, Tony?"

Tony's eyes slid shut. His mask slipped for a moment, revealing the barest suggestion of what he was feeling, but he fought to hold onto his shield and the emotional void slid back into place. His voice, however, he didn't have as much control over. When he finally answered, the single word was nearly choked off.

"Eight."

"So young..."

"Not really. I'd lived more than eight years... felt like twenty, at least."

"Can you tell me what was going on back then? What was happening that made you feel like you wanted to die?"

"I'm not sure I even remember anymore. I know my aunt had just passed away. Breast cancer they said... that wasn't the whole story, though. At the funeral, I heard the other relatives talking. The doctors couldn't do anything else for her... she was in pain every minute of every day... so when she couldn't take it anymore she broke the water glass on her nightstand and slashed her wrists. By the time they found her it was too late. I ran back and asked my mother if it was true... if Aunt Cassie had killed herself. First... first my loving mother slapped me across the face and told me never to say that again, that it would be a black mark on our name if anyone outside the family ever found out the truth. Then she said that sometimes, when people are in unendurable pain, they choose to take the decision out of the hands of others and end it themselves."

"I've counseled cancer patients at that point. It's a no-win situation. All the terminal person can see is that they want the hurt to stop. All the family can see is that time is being stolen from them."

"I loved Cassie. She saw me for who I was... treated me as if I was worth something. If I'd been there, though... I don't know if I would've stopped her or helped her."

"When it got to be too much, you didn't have anyone there for you either, did you?"

"No... not unless you count the housekeeper who found me and yelled for help."

"Found you where?"

"On my parents bathroom floor. They were in one of their streaks... it could last for days or months, I never could predict which it'd be. He'd drink, she'd scream, he'd scream back. That phrase my mother had used kept running through my head... unendurable pain. It sounds so stupid now, but I knew if I broke the Waterford crystal tumbler in my bathroom and I *didn't* die, I'd be in more trouble for the glass than I ever would for trying to kill myself. I snuck into their suite looking for... something, anything sharp. I finally remembered his razor. It was one of the old kind that held a
blade. I went and got one from the medicine cabinet... had to pull myself up on the sink, but I was always a strong kid. As I did it, I remember thinking that it only hurt for a second... that was nothing compared to surviving in that house when the two of them got going..."

Slowly, Tony's face crumpled and he fell onto his side, curled up in a ball and began to sob. "Damn... I can't believe I just did that... nobody's supposed to know... I'm not supposed to tell... I promised..."

Lewiston left his chair and knelt by the bed, gently holding Tony's good hand. "Your parents were wrong to make you do that. I'm really glad you told me. It'll all be easier from now on..."

Tony grasped Lewiston's hand tightly and fell silent, though the tears continued to run down his cheeks and his breathing took a long time to calm down.

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A PARK SOMEWHERE IN VIRGINIA

"I'm not in a mood to hear your problems, Mr. Webb. Can you do what I asked?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. Are we still using the same liaison?"

"Yeah. When it's set up you get in touch with Fornell. He'll contact me."

"Alright. You do realize how much this is going to piss Jen Sheppard off."

"I can handle her."

"I hope so. Not many men have been able to say that and back it up."

"I'm not them. I'm me."

"Right. I'll be in contact soon, Gibbs."

"I'll be waiting."

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TBC...
AN: Disowned at twelve? There had to be a reason. The developing plotline and a dream inspired this thought...

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When Lewiston arrived to see Tony the next day, it was unplanned and he had a physician, pulled away from the ER, at his side. In the early morning, during one of her quarter-hour checks on Tony, the on-duty nurse had noticed that the young man was trembling and nearly buried, head and all, under his blankets. Fearing something was seriously wrong, she'd contacted Lewiston, who had come running, dragging a friend from the emergency department along just in case the problem was physical.

"Tony? What's wrong?"

"Nothing... I'm fine."

"You're shaking... and you have a slight fever. What happened last night?"

"Nothing happened... just go away..."

Lewiston motioned his companion over.

"Tony, this is Dr. Harris. He works in the ER. He's going to check you out, alright? Try not to fight him." He joked. Tony smiled, with more than a touch of anger and fear behind it, and finally told them the truth.

"My arm... I was grazed... just a scratch. I was supposed to keep it in a sling... take pills... but I didn't much care. When I came here... I left everything at home..."

Harris carefully examined the stitches, trying his best not to cause additional pain.

"It's a little red. The wound is just starting to become infected. It could have been much worse. You were taking anti-biotics?"

"And pain meds..."

"I should hope so. This isn't a scratch, it's more like a knife slash."

"Bullet. I'm a Fed. Occupational hazard..."

"Ah. That explains the wound and the macho routine. I'll write him the scrips you need, Dennis." He said, turning to Lewiston and preparing to leave.

"Thanks so much, Scott."

"No problem."

Once the other doctor was gone, Lewiston moved back and took his chair beside Tony's bed.

"Okay, what was that about?"

"It wasn't a routine... had nothing to do with thinking I was a tough guy. I just hate the stupid meds
that come with getting hurt. The pain pills make you sleep half the day and the anti-biotics keep you in the bathroom the rest of the time. Life already sucked. I didn't feel like dealing with the fallout from the meds too."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, at least until that arm is healed. Do you think you can get back to sleep or should we talk?"

"Once I'm up, that's usually it for the day."

"Alright. Let's pick up where we left off, shall we?"

"No. I won't break my promise again. I've done enough damage."

"What about the damage that's been done to you?"

"It doesn't matter. Look, ninety-nine percent of the time my mother was cold and manipulative and distant... but she had a little shred of humanity in her. I saw it... and because I did I have to shut up about the past. I need to not hurt her anymore..."

"Can you tell me about that? About realizing she wasn't always the person you knew?"

"She wouldn't want me to... but she never realized I was watching."

"If she had you would have been sworn to secrecy on that as well?"

"In a heartbeat. I... I was just about to walk into the room when she got the call about my aunt. All the color just drained out of her hands and face and she... she just slid out of her chair... like she'd melted. She screamed and the servants came running. My father strolled in five, maybe six minutes later. He pried the phone out of her hand, listened for a little while, then he hung it up. He dragged her back up to her feet, handed her to the maid and told her to take "the silly bitch" upstairs and put her to bed. That was his favorite name for my mother. He considered it affectionate."

"How did it feel to hear that all the time?"

Tony laughed, but his face held no real happiness.

"I've been through this before. I know my father wasn't exactly a role model for how a man should behave. As a captive audience to their so-called marriage I could have gone two ways; marry and become an abuser like he was, or decide that if that's love I want no part of it and become one-night-stand guy. I picked the second one, fortunately."

"Or not. The second option may seem safe and relatively pain free, but it's got to be incredibly lonely."

"Yeah, well, no wife and kids to permanently screw up. That's all that's counts. Lonely... I can deal with."

"I can see that. When did the final separation happen?"

"What?"

"From your parents. To be as self-sufficient as you are, it must have come pretty early. If you'd stayed in that environment through high school, it's likely you'd either be extremely protective and defend your parents actions, or you'd be much more bitter and angry than you are. My yardstick puts you somewhere in the middle, so maybe thirteen or fourteen."
Tony stared at the doctor wide-eyed. The accuracy of the man's comments was shocking and Tony's emotions were all over the map. Unable to straighten them out, he tried to shut down, closing his eyes and curling into a ball, but Lewiston wouldn't allow the retreat.

"I told you... I won't. She wasn't the greatest mother but she at least deserves not to have our family compost pile aired out, damn it..."

"Why not?"

"Come again?"

"Why doesn't she deserve it? Why aren't your needs as important as hers?"

Tony sat up and opened his mouth, ready to tell Lewiston where to get off, but he couldn't make the words come out. In the end he replied simply and honestly.

"I don't know. I... I'm not even sure what my needs are."

"Do you want that to change?"

"That's why I'm here... I think. God, this is... why is it so hard? I didn't think I was still so stuck back there. I was so sure I didn't give a damn about either of them anymore... not 'till I just heard myself."

"Abused kids who don't get rescued grow up to be confused, hurting, self-sabotaging, rigid people. The child was powerless to stop the abuse, so the adult fights for clearly defined boundaries in every area, especially emotion. Controlling what you feel, or convincing yourself you don't feel anything at all, is the ultimate form of protection."

"Abused? No. No way. I wouldn't call it that."

"C'mon, Tony. You've been in law-enforcement long enough to know what I'm talking about. Verbal and emotional violence, neglect... they can do more lasting damage than a physical beating. You understand that."

"I understand... but that's not me. I get over, I move on. I don't do long-term grudges."

"Maybe the mask doesn't, but the mask isn't you either. Inside, behind that facade, I'd bet there's a whole toxic waste dump of things you haven't come to terms with. Think about those hours and days after you were found on that bathroom floor. When your parents came to you in the hospital and forced you to make that promise, what did you think? Honestly, what was your visceral, gut reaction?"

Tony closed his eyes again, hating how right Lewiston was about his control issues and, seemingly, about everything. Images floated through Tony's head and he winced, not wanting to exhume the memories the other man wanted to hear about. Of all the past traumas that occasionally gave him screaming nightmares, the days after his attempted suicide clung to him with the most tenacity. He suddenly knew that giving this up could either raze or restore him, but he wasn't sure it was worth the risk he'd have to take to find out.

Taking as deep a breath as he could, he held it in his lungs briefly, reminding himself that he was here because he'd finally admitted all was not right with his world. Recognizing that first and toughest barrier was already behind him, Tony released the air slowly, drew breath again and spoke.

"I wasn't."
"Wasn't what? Forced?"

"No... I wasn't in the hospital."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're saying."

"I told you... they'd do anything to hide what I did. A public hospital... forget it, out of the question. The family doctor came to the house that night. He stitched me up... bandaged my wrists. They kept me home for a week... told the school I had a virus. It wasn't both of them, by the way, just my father. He walked into my room the morning of my first day back in class. He told me that a promise was a verbal contract... and that people who break contracts pay penalties. That's when he made me swear never to tell anyone what I'd tried to do. If I did... I wouldn't be his son anymore and I wouldn't be able to live in his house."

"That must have terrified you."

"Way beyond. I knew he meant it. When it came to business, he was never anything less than dead serious. He actually made me shake hands... to seal the deal, he said... and he deliberately squeezed my wrist. I yelled, cried a little... that was the first and only time he ever hit me. When I got to gym class that day, I found out he'd sent a note to the school telling them that because of the "virus" I wouldn't be able to participate for the rest of the year."

"Of course. They didn't want you taking off your shirt in front of the other boys."

"On the nose, doc. A year after that they told me I was going to a doctor's appointment... pulled me out of school and everything. I didn't find out 'till I got there that it was really a plastic surgeon. Another week out of school and poof... no more scars for little Anthony."

"Ah. The skin in those spots wasn't as elastic and since you hadn't finished growing yet..."

"The marks still show. Faintly, but they still show."

"How much longer were you able to hold all this inside?"

"Three more years. We were at a buddy's house... his parents were gone for the weekend and being your typical oblivious, super-rich mummy and daddy they left him by himself with a phone and an unlocked liquor cabinet. Needless to say the minute they pulled out of the driveway the party was on. It was just a few of us guys though. The girls we were drooling over wanted nothing to do with us. We each picked our poisons and proceeded to get blasted beyond all recognition. Some idiot decided we should play the testosterone-laced version of truth or dare..."

"Gotcha. I remember it well. One person asks the question and the rest of the group all have to answer it before the next person can ask. Anyone who refuses has to perform the chosen dare."

"That's the one. Tony confirmed, his voice now beginning to tremble. "The minute I heard the question I should have walked out... probably would have if I'd been anywhere close to sober, but I wasn't. You know what? To this day I have no idea why I did it. Maybe I was just sick of hiding and lying, but when he asked what was the stupidest thing we'd ever done to ourselves... I told the truth."

"And it got back to your father."

"Through the school grapevine, yeah. I got home the Friday after that party... and my clothes were packed and waiting for me by the front door. He wouldn't look at me... all he'd say is that my mother was upstairs and didn't wanna see me. I.. I moved into a dorm at school... I had to take a test, but luckily I'm smart and I always studied really hard... so I got to stay in school after my father stopped
paying my tuition. I had to... you know, work to pay for my books and food... but I didn't mind. It was better that way...

Lewiston realized that not only was Tony crying once again, he was also sweating profusely and swaying in place, struggling to remain sitting up. He ended the session by calling in a nurse to give Tony the pills Dr. Harris had sent over. As the pain medication relaxed his patient, Lewiston gently slipped Tony's arm into the new sling, covered him with the blankets again and left quietly.

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1:00 P.M.

"Officer David. Where are Gibbs and McGee?"

"Director Sheppard. Uh... I really don't know, ma'am. They left for lunch about twelve-thirty and haven't come back yet."

"They didn't tell you where they'd be?"

"They don't tell me much of anything lately. Not since DiNozzo..."

"Since Agent DiNozzo what? I notice he's also missing, by the way. What is going on around here?"

"Gibbs didn't... you don't know about Tony?"

"Why do I have the feeling I'm *really* not going to like this?"

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A CAFE: SOMEWHERE IN D.C.

"Make it quick, Fornell. We need to get back to the office before Jen gets her nose in the wind."

"You trained her, Jethro. It's probably already too late."

"Probably. You have something for me, Tobias, or are we all wasting our time?"

"Be in MTAC tomorrow night at ten. You and McGee only. You'll have fifteen minutes. I hope that's enough."

"It should be. Thanks. Let's go, McGee. I have a feeling a storm may be brewin' back at the office..."

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TBC...
1:30

Gibbs and McGee strode back into the office to find Jen Sheppard waiting for them. She was standing by Gibbs' desk, arms crossed and tapping one foot.

"Jethro."

The tone of her voice didn't bode anything pleasant, so her former paramour did everything he could to avoid the confrontation she clearly had her teeth and temper set for.

"Jen. What can I do for you?"

"We need to talk... in my office."

"I have work to do. It can wait, can't it?"

"No."

"Then tell me here and now. I need to get going on this case file."

"It's about DiNozzo."

"What about him?"

"Jethro, please. I'd really rather not do this in public..."

"McGee and Ziva aren't the public, Jen. Besides they're aware of what's going on."

"I'm not."

"It was need to know. You didn't." Gibbs replied coldly, moving away from the others. Jen followed.

"For God's sake, Jethro..."

"He's taking some personal time. You know what he's been through the last six or seven months. When he asked for a few days to rest I wasn't about to deny him."

"I should have been informed. Protocol says I have to process any request..."

"Would you have approved it?"

Jen hesitated then looked down at the floor as she responded.

"Eventually. We can't spare anyone at the moment..."

"Well he needed the break now, Jen, not three months from now! That's why I didn't bother to go to you and beg your permission. Tony deserved consideration, not a pile of bureaucratic manure dumped on his head."

"Consideration or preferential treatment? And damn it, how many times do we have to discuss not using my first name in the office, Jethro? It's disrespectful and even if there isn't anything between us anymore, I am the head of NCIS and I demand respect!"
Slowly, Gibbs turned from the filing cabinet he was searching in and faced the director, his eyes boring into hers and sending icy shivers down her spine. His words made the sensation worse, seeming to drive the frost into her core.

"I don't respect hypocrites."

"Excuse me?"

"From now on, you call me Agent or Special Agent Gibbs, I'll call you Director Sheppard. That should solve the problem."

Her lips tightened and she looked like she badly wanted to slap Gibbs across the face, but she clamped down on her anger and abandoned a little more of the hope that he would ever again look at her with passion, adoration and trust, the way he once had.

"Fine."

"Good. Anything else you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No."

"Then I can get back to work.... Director?"

Turning on her heel, Jen stalked back through the bullpen and up the stairs. Gibbs smiled to himself and resumed his search. When he found the folder he wanted, he removed it, closed the drawer and moved back to his desk. McGee had his head bowed close to his computer screen, sensibly avoiding eye contact. Ziva was looking at Gibbs cautiously, her brow lined with concern.

"I didn't tell her, Gibbs."

"Your judgment's improving. Doesn't mean I trust you."

The young woman opened her mouth to say something more, perhaps to apologize, but she wisely closed it again. Her position was tenuous enough without letting her ego tear out any more of the ground underneath her. If she wasn't very careful, she might end up out of NCIS and she could not afford to let that happen. In fact, whatever she had to do, whatever it cost her, she would fight to stay. The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

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4:00 : BETHESDA

Lewiston quietly entered Tony's room, stopping just inside the door for a moment or two of solemn observation. According to the nurses, the young man had been sleeping most of the day, but had been awake for the past half hour or so. Shifting the food tray to his other hand, he closed the door and approached the bed. Hearing his footsteps, Tony slowly turned over and regarded the doctor with bleary eyes.

"Hey."

"How are you feeling? Besides tired, I mean."

"A little better. The arm doesn't hurt as much... but I've been asleep pretty much since you left."

"As you said, pain meds will do that. Unfortunately, you were also right about the antibiotics. You need to give your system something to work with."
"Ugh. No thanks..." Tony said, throwing a disgusted look at the tray.

"You have to try. The next step is nutrition shakes, and if that fails, an I.V. I don't want to resort to either one. I'm not saying you have to wolf down everything on here. Just make an attempt, alright?"

Tony threw another glare at the toast, milk and scrambled egg, but he slowly sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bed. The first bite caused him to look as if he desperately wanted something to spit it into, but he managed to swallow. The next was smoothed on its way by a sip of milk and Tony's expression wasn't quite so grave. After a few more minutes and another three or four reluctant bites of food, Tony finally looked up at Lewiston, who was now sitting in his usual chair.

'You don't have to watch me. I promise, I'll choke it all down somehow."

"I'm not monitoring you. I just thought since you've been alone for several hours you might want company."

"Not if we go back to the same topic of conversation. You're not making me do... that anymore."

"Do what?"

"That. What I was doing before I fell asleep this morning."

"Crying."

"Right. That." Tony replied, ripping a chunk of toast off angrily, as if the bread had offended him, chewing and swallowing before he tried to speak again. "And don't try telling me it's normal and everybody does it. I know better."

"You do? How?"

"My... I just do."

"Your father told you that didn't he?"

"Don't push."

"Have you ever heard the term "parent tapes" ?"

"No."

Tony's face now showed mild curiosity amid the frustration and fury, and Lewiston mentally cheered, knowing he hadn't lost the connection they'd started to build.

"It refers to phrases and lectures that pop up in our brains in certain situations. When I'm about to go out without a heavy enough jacket, even though I know perfectly well the temperature is close to freezing, I swear I hear my mother saying 'You're not going out like that, young man! If you catch a cold and end up sick in bed, don't think I'm going to nurse you! You can just fetch your own tissues and juice!' "

Tony laughed briefly, then finished off the last of the small amount of egg he'd been provided and took a long drink of milk.

"Mine couldn't have cared less what I had on. I could have run around naked as long as the neighbors didn't see me. I get what you're saying, though."

"That was a positive example of course. Those tapes aren't always a good thing. Adults who suffered
emotional abuse in childhood can have horrible things running through their heads. The slightest mistake and suddenly it's like twenty years never happened. They're right back there, hearing someone scream that they're stupid or worthless or they'll never amount to anything...."

"Stop! Damn it, just... stop." Tony demanded, pushing the food away from him. "It wasn't my father. He barely spoke to me unless he wanted something. Nobody had to *tell* me crying is a waste of time and water... all I had to do is watch him... I learned."

"Watch who?"

"Gibbs. I've never known anybody as strong as he is. From the moment I started working for him I could see it. His eyes, the way he carries himself... That first day, I walked up and asked him if he had any instructions for me. He looked me straight in the eye and said "Never back down, never give up. Stick to that and you and I will get along fine." I never forgot. I live by it. I hate that he knows I'm here... but I couldn't let him wonder what happened to me. I respect him too much for that. Besides, he's my boss... he had to be told. I hate it, though."

"You really believe he'll think less of you for seeking help?"

"Hell, yeah. I broke the rule... I gave up. I couldn't handle things and I ran to somebody else to solve my problems."

"Tony... first off, you've got it backwards. Killing yourself would have been giving up. You didn't do that. Secondly, it takes more strength and courage to admit that you're not in total control anymore than it does to keep faking it and let your depression get worse and worse."

"Depression? You think I'm depressed?"

"After all you've been through, who wouldn't be?"

"He wouldn't. He doesn't surrender to anything, no matter what. I've tried so hard to live up to his example... to be as tough and steady as he is... and it kills me that I fell short of that. It just... pisses me off that I'm not everything he wants me to be..."

"Has he ever said that? Has he ever actually told you that to your face?"

"No..."

"You're a trained investigator, Tony. If you made an assumption about a case and arrested someone, without the facts to back it up, what would Gibbs do?"

"Kick my ass... and make me go back and do it right."

"Something to think about. Here," Lewiston responded gently, holding out Tony's pills. "take your meds and try to get some more rest, alright? I'll see you tomorrow."

Tony grumbled under his breath, but he downed both pills with the last of his milk. As Lewiston left with the tray, his young patient lay back down and pulled the blankets over him, but with so much whirling through his mind, it took a long time for even the powerful medicine to drag him down into sleep.

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MTAC: 10:00 P.M.
"You ready, McGee?"

"As ready as I can be, boss. Do I get to know what we're doing and why I'm running the comm. equipment instead of the usual tech?"

"Not from me, but if you keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut..."

"Got it, boss. Shutting up."

"Good. Do it."

McGee pushed buttons and did some rapid typing and within a minute or two, the large screen in front of Gibbs flared to life and a man's face came into focus.

"Good evening, Agent Gibbs."

"You're not who I was expecting."

"I am his representative. If I decide that your message has merit, then, and only then, will you speak to him. If the arrangement is not to your liking..."

"No. I understand the need for security better than anyone. Tell him we need to talk about her."

"Her?"

"He'll know. Tell him a decision needs to be made and I have information that will help him do that. There are things noone has told him... secrets he has the right to hear."

"About her."

"About her."

"That is all you are willing to say?"

"At this time... yes."

"I will pass on your message. You will repeat this contact two nights from now at the same time. I should have your answer by then."

"I'll be here."

The image vanished from the screen and McGee produced a relieved sigh, gazing at Gibbs with a mixture of wonder and fear.

"Was that who I *think* it was, boss?"

"Absolutely."

"So your plan is to... boss, can I just say..."

"No, you can't. I know what I'm doing, McGee."

"I'm not questioning that..."

"Damn right, you're not. Good job tonight. Now go home and get some sleep."

McGee nodded and hurried out of MTAC and down the stairs, wondering how Gibbs thought he'd
be able to sleep. If his boss was doing what Tim suspected, the young agent was fairly sure that safety and peaceful rest would become precious commodities in all their lives until the plan was complete and perhaps for a long time afterward.

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TBC....
Chapter 6

When Ziva arrived at work the following morning she frowned at the large package taking up most of the space on her desk. Checking the label, she noted that it was addressed to her at NCIS headquarters. She knew that since the near fatal mistake made by the screeners, policies and procedures had been tightened considerably, so she wasn't worried about it being anything that would harm her. Shrugging, she retrieved a utility knife from her desk and slit the tape securing the top flaps of the carton. When she got it open and peered inside, however, the sight that met her eyes caused her to screech, leap backwards and trip over her chair, landing in a less than graceful heap somewhere between her desk and Tim's. McGee moved swiftly to help her to her feet, admirably repressing his urge to laugh in her face.

"Are you alright, Ziva?"

"I will be... after I've tortured a few of the screeners in the mail room... to death."

"Why? What happened?"

"The box... I thought..."

"Go sit at my desk. I'll check it out."

As McGee was carefully looking into the box for himself, Ducky rushed in, his entrance precisely timed and his expression schooled to insure his innocence couldn't possibly be doubted. He halted just inside the bullpen and, seeing Ziva, closed his eyes and groaned faintly.

"Oh dear... I'm too late. I was afraid I might be."

"Ducky... what are these things?" Tim asked, backing away from the box. He knew perfectly well what the box contained, as he'd been as thoroughly informed of the plans of the ME department as they had been of his and Abby's.

"Centipedes and millipedes. Specifically, these are some of the world's largest species. Dead and mounted, of course. Couldn't send them through the mail live, could we? The lovely things would never survive the trip. Let's see how they came through the less than certain care of our national postal service..." he clarified, beginning to extract one of the mounting boards from the box. Ziva's bellow stopped him before even one of the insects could be seen.

"Doctor!"

"Hmm? Oh... oh, I'm so sorry, my dear. I completely forgot about your aversion to such things. I'll just take this down to my lab where it belongs." He told her, his sincerity seemingly beyond reproach, no matter what the truth might be. He hefted the box and turned to go, but stopped when Ziva questioned him in a hostile tone.

"How did it end up here in the first place? And why was it addressed to me?!

"The museum made a shipping error. They only just now called me. I rushed up to ensure that noone got a nasty surprise, but I didn't make it in time. Again, my deepest apologies..."

"That thing looks heavy, Ducky. Lemme give you a hand with it."

"It is, actually. Thank you, Timothy."
Somehow, McGee managed to wait until he, Ducky and the box made it into the elevator and were on their way down before he collapsed in helpless laughter.

"Ducky... oh my God... that was..."

"Yes. I only hope what I missed was as satisfactory as what I witnessed. I trust Abigail's done her part."

"I guarantee she's... pulling the whole thing... off the footage from her secret camera... and burning it to a CD as we speak."

"Good." Ducky replied, a wicked smile curling his lips. "When you see Jethro next will you let him know that I've taken the afternoon off?"

"Of course. Setting up another practical joke?"

"No. I'm going to have lunch... and then visit Anthony." he said, sobering rapidly.

"Oh... right. I wish..."

"So do I, Timothy, so do I. He'll change his mind, I'm sure. When he's ready... we'll all get our chance to grovel and make our abject apologies."

"You weren't there, Ducky. You have nothing to apologize for."

"Oh, but I do, dear boy. In fact... I see myself as far more culpable in Tony's breakdown than any of you."

"Ducky, no. You couldn't have known..."

Tim would have continued, but the elevator was approaching the morgue level and the older man grabbed his box, which was actually quite light.

"The plan you and Abby have concocted is set to go off this afternoon?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry you'll miss her reaction first-hand."

"The visual record will do just fine. I'll look forward to both your accounts of the carnage, however. See you in the morning, Timothy." Ducky said as he stepped out, leaving McGee behind. Tim began the ride back up to the bullpen in a much more solemn mood than he'd been in on the trip down.

1:30

"Can I help you?"

"I sincerely hope so. My Name is Dr. Donald Mallard... I believe I've been approved to visit Anthony DiNozzo?"

The nurse's bright smile put Ducky a little more at ease, but didn't completely alleviate his anxiety. Knowing Tony was locked in this place, in distress and without a single person he knew by his side, twisted the older man's stomach into knots.

"You absolutely are, Doctor. It's very good to see you. Sometimes just the idea of a friend or family member being here can make visitors too afraid to even try."

"She said as she came around the desk.
"Oh, dear lady... I'm one of the unfortunate, I'm afraid. I've had to witness a loved one in a much worse place than this and in much worse shape than Anthony. A lovely, clean facility such as this, where I know Tony will be helped and well cared for... it could never frighten me."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, so was I at the time."

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to his room. The doctor said if you decided to visit that you could have half an hour." the nurse informed him as she led the way down the hall and through two sets of secured doors.

"Is he doing well?"

"He seems to be. The pain medication he's taking for his arm means he's sleeping a lot, right now, so don't be surprised if he drifts off on you."

"But other than that..."

"I don't really know. If you'd like to talk to the doctor after your visit, I can arrange it."

"Yes, please. I'd appreciate that very much."

As they walked up to the door of Tony's room, the nurse lifted her keys and started to unlock the door, but stopped when Ducky gasped and raised a hand to the viewing window.

"Oh, Tony..."

"Doctor?"

"I... I'm sorry, my dear. I simply... well, even as wonderful as I'm sure this place is, seeing Tony locked away, knowing the reason... it's very difficult. Please, go ahead."

"I understand. He really is getting the best care, believe me. Dennis Lewiston is one of the most knowledgeable, compassionate doctors I've ever worked with. If anyone can guide your friend through this, he can."

"I'll trust to your judgment. Still, speaking with Tony will ease my mind..."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry too. You seemed so upset, it was automatic to try to reassure you. Nurses instinct." She told him with a chuckle. "He seems to be awake." she commented as she turned back and opened the door. "If you'll stay here for just a second, I'll see if he's feeling up to seeing anyone."

After a brief exchange with Tony, which Ducky was relieved to see had animated the young man considerably, the nurse returned, leaving the door open a little.

"He's eager to see you. Go on in. Half an hour..."

"I remember. Thank you so much."

"No problem. I'll contact the doctor while you're visiting. By the time you're done, I should know if he has the time to see you today."

The sound of the door closing and locking behind him drew a slight wince out of Ducky, despite how quiet the noise actually was, but his discomfort only lasted a moment. The sight of Tony sitting up and holding out his good arm in welcome shifted his focus back where it belonged. In a moment,
the older man was sitting beside Tony on the bed and holding him in a powerful embrace.

"Anthony... you silly, silly boy..."

"I know. It's so good to see you, Duck. I wasn't sure..."

"I wanted to rush right over the minute I heard you were willing to see me, but work and plotting a bit of nasty revenge kept me busy until now." Ducky told him, pulling away and swiping at his cheeks.

"Revenge?"

"Yes. One of my better efforts, if I do say so myself."

"Ducky..."

"It's nothing that will get me in trouble, I assure you. Merely a little payment in kind for the cruelty Miss David perpetrated on you and the rest of my family."

"I don't understand..."

"Your doctor hasn't passed on our message?"

"No. We've been kinda busy working through some old stuff. We're not up to that night yet. You tell me."

"Ziva lied to all of them, Tony. She led them to believe that you had been extended an invitation and refused it. Her reasoning for the deception was petty and childish and you don't need to hear that right now. What you must know is that none of us knew the truth."

"Don't include yourself in that apology, Ducky. I know you weren't there."

"You... but how?"

"Why would you blow off a chance to spend your anniversary alone with Gerald? A dinner party could never compare with that."

"My God... How long have you... when did you..."

"Please. You guys were always discreet, but anyone who really looked could see how you felt about each other. I mean... when he was shot, the look on your face... it was like that bastard had reached in and crushed your heart." Tony explained, his eyes lowered. When he met Ducky's gaze again, concern was evident in his expression. "I never told anyone. I wouldn't do that..."

"Oh, I realize that. Don't give it another thought. It's just... oh well. It's almost a relief, I suppose. We've been hiding for so long... I don't like to think about that night. I came so close to losing Gerald... even that piece of filth being dead hasn't rid me of my anger completely. Jethro is just as upset on your behalf, you know."

"Don't. Don't go there."

"Tony..."

"No. I can't."

"But you've gone through the same situation. Having to watch you dying in that isolation unit almost
killed Jethro. Still, through that whole ordeal he was stronger and more in control than I've ever seen him... at least until he knew you were going to survive."

Tony's immediate reaction to this statement shocked Ducky. The younger man stumbled to his feet and backed away, his eyes wide.

"You're lying."

"What? Why would I? I don't..."

"You're lying! He wouldn't... not over me, not over anything."

"Of course he cries. When he lost his daughter he spent the better part of two days utterly lost... he sobbed in my arms as if he were a child himself..."

"No! No..."

"Tony... what's wrong?"

"He has to be perfect... he has to be... otherwise it isn't safe..."

"What isn't safe?" Ducky asked, moving to stand by Tony and gently touching his shoulder.

"Loving him..."

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TBC....
"Tony... my God. I suspected... but I was never quite sure..."

Abruptly, Tony began to panic and gripped Ducky's bicep frantically with his good hand.

"You can't say anything! Promise me you won't! Please, Ducky, you have to swear to me you won't tell him!"

"I do, I do. You have my solemn vow. You must calm down, Tony. Here, come back and sit down. You're trembling..."

After a few moments of hesitation, Tony nodded and allowed Ducky to lead him back over to the bed and help lower him to the mattress. "There... you'll be alright now."

"I wish. I never should've opened my mouth. Forget you ever heard it, okay?" Tony pleaded, his head dropping forward as if he were too tired to hold it up.

"Oh, no." Ducky declared gently as he reclaimed his chair. "That I will not do and you shouldn't either."

"You don't understand..."

"I'll freely admit that. You explain it."

"It won't make sense."

"Few things in the world do these days. May as well try."

Tony sighed and surrendered.

"It's easy for me to give, Ducky. Anything you need, whatever it is, you've got it. I'll give 'till I'm homeless and naked. Taking... I'm not so good at. I can do one-sided love, I understand how it works. When the other person starts wanting it to go both ways, though... I just don't know how to handle that. If Gibbs isn't what I thought he was... if there's even a chance he might feel something for me, I'd have to leave. The job, if not the state."

As Ducky reached out a hand to brush easy fingers over Tony's brow he caught sight of his watch and realized his limited time had almost run out. Inside, he deeply regretted all that he hadn't yet said, but for Tony he produced a gentle smile.

"Oh, Tony... you must know it's far too late to expect us not to feel affection for you. I took to you the moment we met and as for Abby... well, if you ever tried to tell her she wasn't allowed to care about you, I shudder to think what she might do. Even McGee and Mr. Palmer respect you, as much as you use sarcasm and exaggerated irritation to keep them at a distance. Gibbs, I'm afraid, moved beyond affection long ago. Foolish, silly boy..."

A moment later the door opened and the nurse stepped just inside the room. Ducky looked over his shoulder briefly to acknowledge her presence then turned back to Tony. "I'm so sorry, Tony. They've only given me so much time today..."

"It's okay. I understand."

Reluctantly, Ducky stood and stepped away.
"I *will* be back. Have no fear of that."

"I don't. Your promise..."

"I won't forget. Take care... don't give the staff too difficult a time, hmmm?"

"I'll keep it to a minimum. Thanks for showing up. Bye."

"No. See you soon."

As the door closed behind him, Ducky leaned against the wall slightly and ran a shaky hand over his face.

"Doctor Mallard?"

"I'm alright. Guilt is simply more draining than I remembered."

"I won't try to tell you not to. It's something every family member feels when something like this happens." She commented as they walked away.

"Believe me, the lack of platitudes is appreciated. Were you able to contact Tony's doctor?"

"I was, actually. He'll be down to speak with you in about five minutes if you can wait."

"I absolutely can. I must thank you for your kindness and encouragement today. It helped a great deal."

"No problem. It was the least I could do. You can sit in the waiting room if you like. I'll send Dr. Lewiston right over when he comes down."

"Excellent suggestion."

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3:00 -- NCIS :

For the fourth time in less than two hours, or it could have been the fifth (she'd lost track) Ziva sat back away from her monitor and watched a performance she dearly wished would cease. This time her frustration level was such that her hand strayed to the drawer where her gun was stored. Tim caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and moved to her side, gazing at the screen.

"I won't help. I mean, it'd make you feel better, yeah, but they'd take the cost of the monitor out of your paycheck."

"I don't care." She growled at both Tim and the annoying image.

"Up to you I guess. I swear, I just don't understand this. None of your data seems to be affected?"

"No. I get this... *thing* walking around my screen for several minutes and then normal function is restored."

"Then why do it at all? And why a duck?"

"I'm sure I don't know but I want it repaired *now*!"

"I'll see what I can do, but... whoops. Gone again. I'll have to wait until it happens next time. Sorry."
"I'm not. Now I can get back to work." Ziva sighed, sitting forward again with an expression of intense relief. Her restored mood didn't last long, however. Within minutes, a tall man in workers coveralls strode into the room carrying a ladder and set it up close to her desk.

"Excuse me..."

"Sorry, miss. The conduit I have to reach is just up here. I won't be long, I promise."

Ziva growled again, but turned back to her computer and tried to resume her current task. Unfortunately, she didn't have much success as not only was the worker continually nudging her with his leg and foot, pieces of debris periodically rained down on her head and shoulders as he worked. For an hour or more she withstood it, flinching and avoiding dust and bits of ceiling tile as best she could, but eventually she screamed through clenched teeth and vaulted out of her chair.

"That... is it! I give up! I'm going home!"

"What should I tell Gibbs?"

"Show him the... the *spud* all over my desk! He'll understand."

"You mean crud. Yeah, I guess... Hey, I think I just figured out what the problem with your monitor was all about. It was somebody's weird way of warning you the repair guy was coming. You know, duck? As in look out?"

"Yes, well, if I find out who it was, they'd better take their own advice!" Ziva threatened, grabbing her bag and coat from under the rubble and stalking off. Tim waited until he was sure the elevator had started down then looked up and called to the man on the ladder, fighting to speak through his giggles.

"You can come down, Barry. She's gone..."

Once the other was on solid ground again, he and Tim high-fived.

"I really enjoyed that." The taller man said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I swore I was about to laugh and get myself shot... thanks so much for agreeing to do this."

"Hey, after what my brother told me she did, I jumped at the chance. I only met Tony once or twice, at holiday parties and such, but he seemed like a really nice guy."

"He is. Way beyond nice. I can't wait to tell him..."

Tim's face fell and he lowered his eyes.

"Yeah. Jimmy told me that too. Just one more reason to help get a little revenge on the bitch."

"You want help cleaning this up?"

"Nah. I've got a dustbuster in my tool bag. Won't take but ten minutes. Oh, before I forget, Jim asked me to remind you about the game you promised him tonight. He'll meet you online at seven-thirty."

"I remember. Thank him too, when you see him. The duck thing... was inspired."

"I will. I keep tellin' him he needs to let everybody know how good he is at programming, but he says he loves what he's into right now and wouldn't trade working with Dr. Mallard for anything."
"Man, that reminds me. You missed a classic moment this morning..."

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TBC....
Chapter 8

Just as the sun was setting, Lewiston quietly made his way into Tony's room, once again carrying a tray. Stretched out on his bed facing the wall, Tony turned over quickly and sat up, hoping that Ducky was returning. Seeing the doctor disappointed him, but he covered the reaction.

"Hey, doc."

"Evening, Tony. I brought dinner."

Tony shrugged and accepted the meal, setting the tray on the bed beside him, but he didn't make any immediate effort to do anything with it. Lewiston smiled and responded. "You do want out of that sling ASAP, right? Eating equals healing."

His patient grimaced, but he lifted the tray into his lap and cracked open the bottle of cold juice that had been provided, taking a healthy swig. He carefully placed the drink on the floor at his feet before reluctantly picking up half of the sandwich and nibbling on it. "I hear you had a visitor today."

"Yeah."

"You don't have to tell me about it. Whatever you said is between the two of you."

"But?"

"But nothing. What we discuss in these sessions is pretty much up to you."

"Pretty much... there's the qualifier I was waiting for."

"You know what I'm saying. We need to talk about certain subjects, like why you felt suicidal that night and how your past might have set you up for being in that place emotionally. Other than those critical issues, it's your ball and you decide when to play and what the rules are."

"Okay... thanks."

"You're welcome. Speaking of your emotional state... how about a status check?"

"It's not like it was that night... but the urge is still there. I need it all to just... stop... and some part of me doesn't wanna give up on the idea of a permanent solution... not just yet anyway."

"I wouldn't expect you to. It's early days, Tony. You'll get there, I promise. I'm not giving up and I don't want you to either."

"I haven't. It's... I don't know. I guess I didn't think about having to walk *through* all the pain to get beyond it and feel okay again."

"You've been going around, over and under it for a long time. Old habits die hard."

"That... is the understatement of the century, doc." Tony stated wearily, finally pushing aside the remnants of his sandwich. He laid the tray on the floor and picked up his juice, draining it in a few swallows. He didn't relinquish the clear plastic bottle, however, holding it by the neck and slowly twisting it back and forth in front of his face, as if it were a prism or a kaleidoscope. Lewiston gave him a few minutes of peace and contemplation before he gently interrupted.

"What are you looking for?"
"A way out, I guess. Hell, Alice did it with a mirror. Who says it won't work with a juice bottle?"

Lewiston lit up with an easy smile.

"Nice dream. Just jump into a hole or through the looking glass and leave all your baggage behind."

"It's not that easy..."

"No, I'm afraid it isn't."

Abruptly, Tony dropped onto his side and curled into a fetal position, his good hand covering his eyes. Lewiston moved from the visitor's chair to the edge of the bed in a flash. "Tony? What is it? What happened?"

"I love what I do... I'm a good investigator, damn it..."

"From what I've heard, you wouldn't be working for Jethro Gibbs if you weren't. You sound like being good at your job is a negative thing."

"No... leaving will be."

"Why do you have to leave? Do you actually think you'll get fired for seeking help when you needed it?"

"You don't get it..."

"No, I don't."

Slowly, Tony's hand fell away and he sat up again, swiping at the tears he wished he could control. "You... you ever see any Lloyd Webber musicals?"

"One or two."

"How about Jesus Christ Superstar?"

"Film and play."

"There's a song... it's Mary's signature..."

"'I Don't Know How To Love Him'?"

"That's the one. If you don't go deeper than the title, you won't understand what the song is really about. She knows how to cherish and take care of Jesus... how to shut his mind down for a while so he can sleep. She shows that in another song, 'Everything's Alright'."

"That's a really good point. Go on, I'm following you so far."

"See, 'I Don't Know How To Love Him'... the truth of the song is in the last verse."

"It's been too many years. Can you remind me?"

Tony's head dropped forward and he began to pick at the blanket he was sitting on. Eventually, he responded, but his voice was barely audible.

"That's where she says that her real problem is being afraid that he'll love her back. She finally admits that if he ever spoke the words she'd be lost and scared... and she wouldn't be able to handle
it. She'd choose to run instead of taking the risk."

Lewiston reached out and tipped Tony's chin up, wanting the younger man to look at him when he asked his next question.

"So who is it you'd be running away from?"

"I can't..."

"Saying the name won't commit you to anything and it might give you a little peace."

"I... I have to leave my job... leave Gibbs."

"Your friend that visited today... he told you that your boss might have feelings for you?"

"Ducky's known Gibbs a lot longer than I have. If he said it... he believes it."

"Accepting love is a terrifying idea for you, isn't it?"

"It's more than that. Trusting is too hard. I carry enough pain and regret around already. Who needs somebody else adding to it by breaking my heart one more time?"

"And if he said he wanted to take some of your burden away, you'd swamp yourself with guilt about putting *your* weight on *his* shoulders."

Tony squeezed his eyes partially shut and gazed at Lewiston critically.

"You're trying to get me to realize how little sense that makes, aren't you?"

"Your intuition is intact. That's a good sign.." The doctor praised, patting Tony's shoulder gently. Taking the juice bottle, he walked into the attached bathroom, half-filled the container with cold water, returned and handed it to Tony with his meds, which the young man stared at, brooding, before finally swallowing them.

"Am I... will I need more medication when I get out of here?"

"I don't know yet. I'm hopeful we can avoid anti-depressants in your case. You're so open and willing to work with me, I think there's an excellent chance that traditional therapy will be enough and you won't need pills."

"But you can't be sure."

"As I said, it's early days. My feeling is that our talks are already making a difference. Give me a little more time, alright?"

Tony nodded then turned away slightly, looking as if he were settling in for a long stretch of heavy thinking. Lewiston grabbed the tray and bottle and left quietly, not wanting to disturb him. Once he was in the hall, he strode quickly to the elevator, headed up to his office to make notes on his conversation. He had ideas percolating in his head that would take some convincing to get Tony to agree to, but he was determined. There were things he needed to know and he couldn't find them out from his patient.

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10:00: ABBY'S APARTMENT
Curl up with Abby on her couch, Tim stroked her hair gently then kissed her softly on the forehead. She sighed and looked up at him without lifting her head off his shoulder.

"You didn't have to come over, Tim. I know how much fun you and Jimmy have online..."

"Of course I had to. When you call and say you need me... I'd find a way out of heaven or hell to get to you. You scared me, you know..."

"Me too." Abby replied meekly, snuggling closer.

"I've never heard you that upset. What happened?"

"Ducky called me earlier. He wanted me to meet him for a drink. When I saw him, I wanted to cry and punch something at the same time. He looked... old, Timmy. He never looked like that to me before..."

"He is, Abs. I know he doesn't act like it most of the time, but Ducky could have retired ten years ago probably. He stayed on because he loves what he does and he loves all of us. I think seeing how raw Jimmy was and how much he needed guidance made him hang on a little longer, too. After Kate died and he had to do the autopsy, though... I was sure he'd be gone."

"You think he'll leave now?"

"Yeah. I love Ducky, too, but... I hope he will. As much as he wants to help Jimmy, Ducky misses Gerald more."

"He really does. I don't want him to go... but you're right. Tony being so hurt might have been the last straw. What we've done to Ziva isn't enough. I need to really hurt her..."

"Gibbs is handling it. You just have to trust that he knows what he's doing."

Finally, Abby lifted her face up and looked curiously at McGee.

"What is he doing? I know you know, you were right there in MTAC with him the other night..."

"I have an idea, but I can't say anything. He told me to keep my mouth shut until everything is over... just in case."

"Will somebody else rearrange her internal organs?"

"No guarantee, but if Gibbs' plan works... who knows? She'll be massively unhappy, that I'm sure of. She won't be the only one, either. We'll know soon. That's all I can tell you."

Smiling for the first time since Tim had arrived, Abby returned her head to his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist, drawing him close.

"Okay. I can wait then."

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TBC....
FOLLOWING MORNING: BETHESDA

When Dr. Lewiston entered Tony's room just after breakfast the next morning, he found Tony sitting up on his bed, his functional arm wrapped around his bent knees. The young man appeared somber and contemplative, as he'd expected. Tony, however, did have a major surprise in store for his therapist.

"Morning, Tony."

"Hey."

"The nurse told me you ate well. Are you feeling a little better physically?"

"Some. The stitches are starting to itch, and that's usually a good sign."

"It is. I'm glad to hear that. Do you think you're ready to cut down on the pain meds?"

Tony lit up.

"Hell, yes."

"I love seeing that smile. Okay, I'll let the nursing staff know to start reducing it gradually. You've got a ways to go on the antibiotics though. Those you'll have to stay full schedule on until Dr. Harris says you're fully healed."

"I understand. I don't have to like it... but I understand."

"Nobody likes them, but they're a necessary evil and stopping them before the course is finished can mean serious problems the next time you get sick or hurt."

"I know, I know. Been there, done that. Look... can we change things up today? Is that doable?"

"Absolutely. How?"

"I... I need to talk a few things out... but I need you not to comment until I ask you to. Alright?"

"That's fine. Start whenever you're ready."

For a long moment, Tony was silent, simply drawing and expelling deep breaths, as if he were preparing to attempt a free-dive for the first time. Eventually, he settled his gaze on the far wall and began to speak.

"What I wanted to talk about is alcohol... and anger. See, over the past few years, I've been doing some research and I know that it isn't necessarily specific addictions that are hereditary. It's the addictive personality that can get passed on. Still, there's the 'learn what you live, live what you learn' thing... Talking about my past so much, it's stirred up memories I wish had stayed buried... mostly about my father. Last night I lay awake for hours, going over and over things I've done... moments I really regret. I realized that as much as I've tried not to become him... that's where I'm headed if I don't do something."

Tony paused for another round of slow breaths and Lewiston stayed quiet, as much as he wanted to help erase the anguished, lost expression on Tony's face. He knew the young man might be about to
open some very painful doors and any interruption now could cause him to decide they'd be better off shut and triple locked.

"My father was addicted to booze and fury... I've known that for a long time. Back in the day, that meant dear old pops had a big dilemma. There he was, a major name in the corporate world, but he was also a rage-aholic. He couldn't afford to lose it out where his cronies or the media might see, so he brought it home. Me, he just threatened and scared the hell out of. My mom was the one who got his fists and backhands. I remember... most nights I used to pray for him to start drinking instead of her. It sounds weird, I know, but alcohol mellowed him out. The fights only really happened when *she* drank. See, when she got plastered, that was the only time she had the courage to try and get out from under his thumb... the only time she wasn't his ideal wife. He couldn't stand that. I've since learned that some rage addicts explode because their need for total control is overwhelming. That level of... of perfection is something they can never achieve, though... especially not in the people closest to them. That's why their families are the ones who usually get hurt when the addict blows."

Tony paused again, running his fingers through his hair and shifting position to stretch limbs that were going numb. When he resettled finally, he was sitting with his legs over the side of the bed and his gaze was now riveted to the floor.

"I know, all that was the *extreme* long way around to get to the point... but I do have one. I swore to myself I'd never become the son of a bitch my father was and I'd never be a drunk... like most kids in that situation do, I guess. Thinking about the past few months of my life, though... I'm suddenly scared shitless. The one moment that's really throwing up a red flag is an undercover assignment I was on a few weeks back. I can't give you details, but I'll tell you what you need to know to understand. I went in with another agent, a woman. The assignment got twisted and off course, and we ended up back to back, tied into our chairs. Total cliché, I know, but true. Anyway, I knew my partner could handle herself, but not if she wasn't free, so I told the black hats that only she knew where we'd hidden the item they wanted. One of the two bad guys took her to go get it... and the other one... he left off beating the living hell out of me and pulled out this huge knife."

Hearing about the beating made Lewiston's anxiety step up another notch. Not speaking and not comforting Tony became even harder to resist, but he continued to hold back, sensing the story was close to an end.

"I saw it... and I knew I was done if I didn't change things. From that point on... that's where it gets really scary for me, because... I don't remember anything else until my partner and Gibbs busted in. It's not like I blocked out the memory... I think I'd feel different if that was the case. That few minutes just... doesn't exist in my head. According to Gibbs, when he and Ziva showed up I had the second suspect trapped between the beds in this hotel room. I was still tied to the chair, but I managed to find a way to kick the bastard into unconsciousness, apparently. I found out later he was in a coma for three days. It's so weird... I mean, I remember seeing the knife... and feeling this mixture of fear and anger flood over me. Then I was standing over a motionless man and telling Gibbs something about a divorce... probably because Ziva was driving me crazy. That night I went home, flushed the pain pills Ducky gave me... and drank until I passed out. Thank God I had a couple days off thanks to my injuries, because the next morning... I couldn't move. I managed to lean over and barf into my bedside trashcan a few times, but that was about it."

For several minutes, silence finally reined in the room, though the words that had been spoken left the atmosphere feeling oppressive and tense. At last, Tony looked up and directly into his doctor's eyes. "Okay. Your turn."

Instantly, Lewiston was beside Tony on the bed, touching his shoulder gently and turning the young man to face him.
"First off... wow. When you said you wouldn't be holding much back you really meant it. That had to be incredibly difficult for you to talk about... and you were incredibly courageous to put it out there. I'm very proud of you for risking yourself like that, especially considering how often you've been betrayed and hurt. Second, what happened to you in that hotel is a rage blackout. That's what I call it at least. I'll admit it does concern me, but we'll work on it another time. Right now, I want to discuss the points you raised. You're right about addiction. We think it's the susceptibility that gets passed on, but environment definitely influences what direction a child of addiction might go when they get tempted. In your case, I'm not too worried about you following in your father's footsteps. Your awareness and understanding of addiction, and his motives specifically, make it much less likely that will happen."

"But... the hotel, and what I did after..."

"Mitigating circumstances in both instances."

"But..."

"Tony, have you ever been so angry you hurt someone close to you? Your co-workers or friends?"

"No."

"Has drinking ever seriously affected your work? Have you ever come in drunk or had a hangover so bad that you couldn't do your job?"

"No. I faked a few hangovers... just to keep up appearances, but the few times I've screwed up at work, it had nothing to do with booze."

"Then you aren't in trouble yet and I don't think you ever will be. As I said, the blackout isn't exactly a good sign, but we'll talk about it. Once we both understand why it really happened, I can help you develop strategies to keep it from happening again. I tell you what. You took such an amazing step this morning... how would you like a reward?"

Tony studied Lewiston warily.

"Like?"

"Half an hour in the sunroom."

"What? I'm not ready yet. It's only been a few days... what if... I told you the feelings that put me here aren't gone. I could freak out. I really could. You understand that right?"

"I trust you to talk to me if you get overwhelmed. You deserve this, Tony, and I'll be with you every minute."

Tony stood and tugged Lewiston up with his good hand then began to straighten the blankets, sheets and pillows. "What is it, Tony? What's scaring you?"

"Nothing... not really. I just like it in here. It's nice. Kind of bland with all the white and beige... but nice."

"You mean it's safe."

"That too."

"I'm not shoving you out the hospital doors today, Tony. Eventually, you will have to face the world
again, but all I'm suggesting right now is a little sun."

Tony sighed and abandoned his attempt at neatening the bed.

"Sometimes I think I'm really strong... then something knocks me on my ass and I'm drowning in doubt all over again. It sucks..."

"You are strong. My God, do you think a weak man could have admitted the things you did today? Not in a million years. C'mon. Session's over. Let's go catch some rays and relax, hmm?"

"You won't leave?"

"I won't leave."

"Okay."

Wrapping one arm around Tony's shoulders, Lewiston led him slowly to the door. He opened it and waited for his patient to decide he was ready to move beyond the threshold. It took several minutes, but Tony eventually shuffled forward a single step, blinking in the brighter light of the corridor. Joining him, Lewiston smiled and lightly squeezed the young man's shoulder.

"Alright?"

"So far."

When they made to the sunroom and dropped side by side onto a window seat, Tony closed his eyes and turned his face up to the warmth and natural light streaming through the glass. The other man gave him a few minutes to unwind then asked a question designed to take Tony's mind completely away from any thought of the stress he'd been under for so long.

"So... what's your favorite ice cream?"

"You're Barbara Walters now? If I were a tree, I'd be an oak." Tony replied, never turning away from the sunlight.

"Ice cream."

"Do I have to pick just one?"

"I can't bring ten different bowls with your dinner tonight, now can I? The staff nutritionist would have me drawn and quartered."

Tony grinned.

"Rocky Road."

"Appropriate."

"And delicious."

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10:00 THAT NIGHT: MTAC

"You ready, McGee?"
"Anytime you are, boss."

"Atta-boy. Do it now."

Once again, Tim typed and punched a button and the screen above Gibbs came to life. The face was the same one as before, but the status-quo didn't last long. After a brief greeting, his former contact stepped aside and a new man took his place. Silver hair shone from his temples, while the rest remained a glossy black, and his proud bearing told Gibbs that this was the man he had hoped to see.

"Director David. I appreciate this."

"As well you should. What is this news you have concerning my daughter?"

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TBC......
"Agent Gibbs?"

"Yes... my apologies. I hope you can understand how difficult this is for me. I'm a soldier... I follow orders and I've been ordered never to discuss this with anyone. Most especially not you. But now with the situation what it is... I can't justify staying silent."

David's irritated expression slowly evolved into one that showed his intense interest and focus.

"Go on."

"First of all, if you would, sir... I'd like to know what you've been told about the death of your son."

"My son."

"Yes, sir. I know they were brother and sister."

David didn't respond for several seconds and Gibbs felt the tension step up several levels and the temperature drop the same amount.

"I was informed one of the scum he was involved with took his life."

Gibbs expertly feigned a regretful, pained reaction.

"I'm sorry, sir... but you were lied to."

"Indeed."

"I'm afraid so. If you want to hear it... I'm prepared to tell you the truth."

"And receive what in exchange?"

"Their lives. All I ask is that they not be killed."

"They? Who else are we... ah. You are referring to your present agency director."

"Do I have your assurance, sir? I'm doing this because I felt you deserved to know what happened, but..."

"My guarantee, Special Agent Gibbs. Whatever you tell me... their lives will not be forfeit. Now, I beg of you... speak."

"Yes, sir. I assume you're aware that your son mur... shot and killed a member of my team."

"I am. A tragedy of massive proportions. The boy was out of control... and far beyond my influence."

"Understandably, I was a little out of control at the time myself. Grief and anger eroded my judgment and if I could have found him... I don't like to think what might have happened. I have enough violent deaths on my conscience."

"As do I. The justifications others provide can never wash away the stains completely, at least in our own eyes."
"Well said. As it happened, I never had to face that moment. He came looking for me. He confronted me in my home and he died there... but not at my hand."

David's eyes went cold and he breathed out heavily before asking the question.

"Then whose?"

"Your daughter's... at the instigation of Director Sheppard, but I didn't discover that until recently. Jen apparently convinced her that she could have a wonderful life here, and a permanent position on my team, if she wasn't afraid to show our government that her loyalties lay with the U.S. She must have followed her brother to my house that night. I didn't even know she was there until she fired."

"Your life was in danger?"

"Absolutely. I was grateful... I've even come to like and respect your daughter. When I found out what Director Sheppard had done, though..."

"Of course. My... thanks for your integrity and courage, Special Agent Gibbs."

"It won't make a difference to the fact that I just blew my career to hell... but I appreciate it, sir."

"Yes... do not plan your retirement just yet. I must take some time to absorb this information and decide what to do. Expect to hear from me soon. Perhaps not directly, but... you understand."

"I do. Take care, sir."

David nodded curtly just before the screen shifted over to static. A moment later it went black as Tim shut it down. He looked at Gibbs, but seemed to be too in shock to speak right away. Gibbs stepped close to him and asked a soft question. "Why is he going to believe me, McGee?"

"Uh... well, you were respectful and polite. You said soldier, not Marine. Instead of raising potential American-Israeli cultural barriers, that put you on common ground. The plea to spare Ziva and Director Sheppard's lives showed you had compassion... and that you were willing to stand up for your principles, even if it meant giving up on telling him what he wanted to know. You never used Ari's name. Not only could that have upset and sidetracked Director David, which was the last thing you wanted, avoiding the name was an acknowledgement of his grief. Lastly, you didn't place the blame squarely on Ziva's shoulders. That allows him to forgive her... meaning he doesn't have to lose both children. He'll be grateful to you for giving him that out."

"But?"

"But he'll also owe you, which could come back to bite you in the ass later."

"Never miss a trick, do you? Good man. Finish up and head out." Gibbs told him, turning and exiting the room. Tim grinned, reveling in the rare words of praise as he completed the one or two tasks necessary to place the equipment in overnight monitoring mode then rose and left by a separate exit, assuring that he and Gibbs would not be observed leaving MTAC together.

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FOLLOWING MORNING: BETHESDA

"Morning, Tony."

"Hey. So what are we doing today?"
"Nothing. You made such progress yesterday that you've earned a day off."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I only stopped in to bring your breakfast and ask your permission for something I'm planning."

"Which would be?"

"I'd like to talk to your co-workers."

"Why?"

"They know you better than I do. I'd like to hear their perspective on things."

"Things?"

"The stress you've been under the past few months, what they were thinking when they treated you so cruelly that night... how they see you in general."

"You have to?"

"Not if you don't agree."

"But it would help."

"I think so. Noone exists in a vacuum, Tony. The people around you now have as much influence on your decisions and reactions as the ones in your past. The better handle I can get on the people closest to you, the better handle I can help *you* get on them... and on why they hurt you the way they did."

"Ducky... he said they were lied to... that they didn't mean to be such jackasses."

"That's entirely possible."

"You're working up to making me talk to them, right?"

"Eventually."

"Terrific..." Tony grumped, making Lewiston smile.

"I swear I won't even bring it up again until you tell me you're ready."

"Good. If you really need to do it... you've got my permission, though I can't figure out why you'd bother asking. I can't stop you from talking to Gibbs and the others."

"Don't you think it's about time someone started getting *your* opinion before they screw with *your* life?"

Tony's mouth gaped open and he could only stammer a response.

"I... you..."

"It's okay. You'll have a lot of quiet time today to think about an answer. If you feel like going back to the sunroom for a while, one of the nurses will take you. Just let them know when they come to deliver your pill. Thank you for agreeing, Tony."
"Yeah... you're welcome."

Lewiston turned and left, heading back to his office to make the call and set up the group session.

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NCIS:

"You want what? I don't... yes, of course, but... okay. If it'll help you help Tony... that'll work. I'll make sure security knows you're coming. Yeah. No, thank you. Anything we can do to make up for... for what we did. Yeah, I'll think about it. Okay. Thanks, doc. Bye."

"What's up, boss?" Tim asked.

"I'm buying you dinner tonight."

"You are? Can I ask... why?"

"We're skipping lunch. Tony's doctor asked for some time to talk to all of us and I said yes."

"Wow. That's great, boss. I'm there, definitely. Ziva, I wouldn't be so sure about..."

"She's the cause of the problem. She'll show up or I'll know the reason why. Go let Ducky and the others know, would you?"

"Absolutely."

Tim hurried off to do as Gibbs had asked and Jethro turned his attention to some overdue paperwork. A few minutes later, however, his uncanny sixth sense made him grimace and lift his head, though he didn't turn to look over his shoulder.

"Director Sheppard."

"My office, J... Agent Gibbs."

"I have work to do."

"I know where Tony is."

Eyes shutting briefly, already hating the headache he knew the upcoming battle would cause, Gibbs rose and followed her upstairs.

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TBC....
"You may as well sit. I have a feeling this could take a while."

"You'd be wrong. I don't have to justify this my actions to you on this."

"Yes, you damn well do, J... Agent Gibbs. You lied to me about Tony."

"And just how do you know that?"

"After our last conversation... I started having your incoming and outgoing calls traced."

"Son of a..."

"Don't finish that phrase, Gibbs. You left me no choice. I have to know the whereabouts of my agents at all times..."

"*Your* agents?"

"I *am* the director of NCIS, as much as you like to behave otherwise. Now about Tony..."

"No."

"No?"

"No, I'm not giving you any information on why he's there, how he's doing or when he might be back. If he chooses to tell you, that's up to him. If that's all, I have paperwork waiting for me..."

"We're not done, Gibbs. What makes you think you have any options here? I'm your superior and I'm responsible for the welfare of every agent in NCIS. Now sit down and tell me what's going on."

Gibbs laughed, shook his head and turned back to face Jen, his expression showing her only what he wanted her to see.

"You really wanna go there? Hmmm? You won't like it, I guarantee."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine. You want both barrels... you'll get 'em. First off, you were a decent agent... but you were *never* superior to me and you never will be. Second, everything I've seen so far tells me you're a lot more worried about how you look and what the rest of Washington thinks of you than you are about the 'welfare' of anybody in this building. You don't really give a damn about Tony. You just need to show that you can make me toe the line, whenever and wherever. Not gonna happen."

"A member of your elite team is in a mental ward. That doesn't say much for your leadership style." Sheppard said coldly, her anger finally rising in response to Jethro's refusal to yield to her authority over him.

"I never had to tell McGee and the others I was worthy of their loyalty, Director Sheppard. I lead by example. Considering our past, I wouldn't trust you to water my plants and if I let slip what happened in Paris... neither would anybody else in this town."

"Paris was years ago."
"Not as many as you wish it was. You'll drop this and you'll leave Tony alone. When he comes back to work, you will *not* question him about it or I'll have to do something I don't want to."

"You wouldn't. It would do as much damage to you as it would to me."

"You forget I know the real story, not the one you passed off to our handlers as the truth."

Sheppard paled and felt her hands begin to tremble.

"You went along with it."

"At the time I still felt something for you... I felt obligated to protect you from a swelled head and lack of judgment. That was then, this is now."

"I see."

"You'll back off Tony and take that trace off our lines."

"Yes."

"Thank you... Director." Gibbs said, ice in his eyes and in his tone. Spinning on his heel, he strode out of her office and moved back down to floor level to find Tim had returned and was busy re-working a very cold case. Pausing, Gibbs lifted the front half of the open file folder to look at the date on the cover.

"This is fifteen years old, McGee."

"I know. We haven't had anything fresh come in yet, so I went looking through the old files... and this one caught my eye. There are things I might be able to do, avenues I could go down that weren't available with the technology they had back then. I promise, when a new case comes in, I'll put this aside, boss."

"Good. Meanwhile, keep working. What sent you into the cold cases anyway?"

"Tony. I was thinking about him... what he's taught me."

"I thought all he did was irritate you."

"I know it looked like that, but I've learned a lot from him. One of the big things he drilled into me was that the victim will always deserve justice, no matter how long the crime goes unsolved. If I can find something new for the family in this case, I'll feel better... like I made it up to Tony a little for treating him the way I did."

"When we finally get to talk to him, you remember to tell him that." Gibbs replied quietly, pushing his volatile emotions farther down inside him so his facade of calm and control would stay intact. "And if you solve it, tell him that too. He'll be proud of you.... like I am."

Tim gaped slightly as Gibbs walked back to his own desk, but gradually a pleased grin curved his lips. Energized, he dug back into the file, more determined than ever to break it and earn a repeat of the atypical and precious gift his boss had now bestowed on him twice in two days.

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LUNCHTIME:

"McGee, Ziva. Conference room two, let's go."
Tim rose immediately and walked off in the direction of the room Gibbs had indicated. Ziva however, hesitated.

"I was just going to lunch. Can it wait?"

"No. If it stays quiet you can have half an hour to get something later. Well?"

"Do I get to know what this is about?"

"Are you questioning me, Officer David?"

"No, of course not, but..."

"Then get your ass in the conference room. Tell the others I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Understood." She responded warily, standing and trailing after McGee. Gibbs picked up the phone and called down to security.

"Lobby."

"Freddy. Is my guest there yet?"

"Yes, sir. He's just about done. He should be up in a few minutes."

"Great. Thanks."

"No problem, sir."

Hanging up, Gibbs moved to a spot a few steps from the elevator, greeting Lewiston warmly when he emerged.

"Doc. Welcome to NCIS."

"Thank you, Special Agent Gibbs. This place is huge. I'm amazed..."

"My name is Jethro." The older man announced offhandedly as the two moved off side by side. Lewiston studied the other man carefully before replying.

"I think I've just been afforded a rare privilege. Thank you again."

As they reached the conference room door, Gibbs paused and locked gazes with the doctor.

"You're right... but you're about to earn it."

"I hope I can."

"So do I."

The two men entered and the group already occupying the room turned away from their private chats to greet Gibbs and the visitor. Excited to see Lewiston, Ducky stood and moved to greet him.

"So good to see you again, Doctor. Please, come in and have a seat."

Ziva's expression shifted instantly, somehow managing to look surprised, guarded and confused all at the same time.

"Doctor?"
After looking briefly to Gibbs for approval, Lewiston answered her.

"My name is Dennis Lewiston. I'm the doctor treating your colleague Agent DiNozzo over at Bethesda Naval Hospital."

"Treating him for what, may I ask? Perhaps lack of tact and chronic immaturity? You could only improve his sense of humor and his respect for women."

Lewiston gazed at Gibbs, one eyebrow raised.

"That's Ziva I take it?"

"I don't need to ask how you know."

"I couldn't tell you if you did."

The others smirked or chuckled quietly, while the woman in question merely scowled and looked as if she didn't quite get the joke. Gibbs let the amusement subside before speaking up again.

"Enough, people. Doc?" he said, gesturing Lewiston to a chair and taking one himself. Ducky exchanged a few more quiet words with the other doctor before reclaiming his own seat. Once the older man was settled, Abby, unable to repress her worry any longer, spoke up.

"Is Tony okay? I know you can't really talk about what he says or anything... I just need to know that he's alright."

"He is. He's doing very well, in fact. The wound on his arm is almost healed and he should be getting the stitches out any day now."

"You mean stitch, don't you?" Ziva snarked. "That little scratch couldn't have taken more than one."

"As a matter of fact, it took twelve. If you like I can give you the name and number of the ER doctor who treated and redressed the wound when it became infected."

Ducky groaned.

"Good Lord... let me guess; Anthony not only left his pills at home when he checked in, he never told anyone he was injured until he began to get sick."

"Sounds like you know him pretty well." Lewiston replied, grinning.

"Yes. As young Anthony neither likes nor trusts most doctors, I became his primary physician when he joined our little family. I bandage his scrapes and abrasions as well as dealing with the more serious physical consequences of simply doing his job."

"Should I warn him that he's in deep excrement with you when he gets back to work?"

"Indeed."

Lewiston laughed, but it died fairly quickly when he caught sight of Tim's pale, angry face out of the corner of his eye.

"Are you alright, Agent..."

"McGee, and no, I'm not. Not even close."
"Feel like talking about it?"

"It's nothing... I'm just mad at myself."

"Why?"

"For trusting a liar."

Ziva flushed and responded instantly.

"I did not lie. DiNozzo takes such delight in being juvenile, I assumed he was exaggerating how badly he was hurt just to garner more sympathy."

"And I went along with it. The things I said... I don't how I can forgive myself for siding with you over him."

"We're all kicking ourselves over what happened, Timmy." Abby told him, laying a soothing hand on his arm. "You're not the only one who's feeling guilty, but it'll be okay. We'll fix things."

"That's actually why I came here today... to help fix things. I'd really like to get each of your perspectives on the events of that night. The better I understand where you all were coming from and what you were thinking, the better I can help Tony understand it and the closer he'll get to forgiving himself and you."

"Himself? Why the hell does he think he has to forgive himself for anything?" Gibbs retorted.

"You'll have to ask him that when the time comes."

"Do you really think it will? Do you really think he'll want to see us and talk to us again?" Jimmy asked from his position beside Ducky near the far end of the table.

"Positive. I'm hoping that what I learn here today will help me get Tony to that point. Does anybody feel like starting?"

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TBC...
Chapter 12

"Is it okay if I do?" Tim offered hesitantly.

"Of course. Go ahead."

Tim took a deep breath, not sure how to begin, but Abby's calming presence and a reassuring pat on the hand from Ducky bolstered his confidence.

"Okay... first, you need to understand that none of us... correction; *almost* none of us were aware how much we were hurting Tony that night. I said some things that, in hindsight, were pretty cruel, but at the time... I thought of it as teasing. See Tony and I... we tease each other a lot. It wasn't easy being on the receiving end at first, since I've gotten that kinda stuff pretty much all my life. I didn't understand that Tony was ragging on me for a reason. I finally got it when I stepped out of my first solo interrogation. I realized that the suspect hadn't rattled me and I had the information I went in there to get... and I suddenly knew I had Tony to thank. What initially felt like harassment had thickened my skin... taught me to speak up instead of ducking my head and keeping my mouth shut. If I hadn't learned that I was capable of pro-active instead of passive self-defense... I wouldn't still have my job."

"I'm sure that's not the case. You obviously have a lot going for you..."

"He's right." Gibbs interjected. "When Tim came to us he was a rabbit; shy, quiet and really unsure of himself. I almost started calling him Timid, just to see if I could raise his emotional temperature a little... but I knew that when a boss does it, a technique like that can backfire way too easy. Tony came through and kicked the kid in the butt, though. He started acting as if Tim had legally changed his name to Probie, meaning every time Tony wanted his attention, Tim got a reminder that he was a probationary agent who had a long way to go... and something to prove to himself and me. All I could do was sit back and hope that because they were closer to being on the same level, Tim would take it as a challenge, not an attack, like it might seem if it was coming out of my mouth. I wanted him to take all the potential I saw in him and make something of it. He's done that... just like I knew he could."

Tim grinned, but he was fighting back tears.

"So what am I now, boss?"

"Badger... working your way up to grizzly bear."

Tim swallowed hard, took a minute or two to regain his composure and looked back to Lewiston, continuing the story he had been leading up to and praying his gratitude was clear enough in his eyes that Gibbs had read it before he pulled his gaze away.

"Anyway, like I was saying, that night I thought we were teasing, as usual... until I really looked at Tony's face. I could tell he was hurt and confused, but then he shut down and the look was gone. That made *me* confused. I wanted to ask him what was going on, but he never gave me a chance. He grabbed his coat and his bag, told Ziva he was canceling on her offer to make dinner for him and he left. I looked at her and she was studying a paper on her desk with this... nasty, spiteful smirk on her face. I thought about the night before and the pieces started coming together. At the party, she told me that Tony turned down an invitation... but she never invited him at all."

"Was anyone else told the same thing?"
Abby and Jimmy raised their hands. "Agent McGee, how do you know your suspicion is true?"

"The morning we found out that Tony checked himself into Bethesda, Gibbs confronted her and she admitted it. She called Tony a child and said children don't belong at adult parties. I think Gibbs wanted to rip her a new one, but the hospital called and Tony became the priority, so it never happened."

Turning a calculating gaze briefly on Ziva, Lewiston studied the flushed, seething woman, wondering how much longer she would last under the onslaught of accusations and animosity, and what she might do when she decided not to suffer in silence any longer. Smiling grimly, she virtually dared him to direct a question at her, giving her an excuse to erupt, but instead he turned his eyes to the only other young lady in the room.

"Miss Sciuto?"

"Call me Abby."

"Okay. Thank you, Abby. Do you want to share your thoughts on what happened that night?"

"The party or after?"

"Either one."

"I'd love to... but I can't. I'm still too mad and when I get mad, sometimes I say things I shouldn't... things that could get me fired."

"Nothing you say will ever be used against you, Abs, I promise you that." Gibbs pledged.

"He's right." Lewiston added. "Anything revealed in this room stays here as far as I'm concerned."

"Okay...When I found out what she did I wanted to rip her face off and send it through a paper shredder and then dice up the pieces and go feed 'em to the tigers at the National Zoo."

To his credit, Lewiston evinced only mild shock and his smile was genuine, if a bit pained.

"Good grief. If you're that creative and imaginative in your work it's no wonder every agency in Washington would give their right arm to steal you away from NCIS."

Abby lit up.

"They would? Wait, how do you know?"

"I did a little phone research before I came over today."

"Well? Gimme! Who said it and what're they offering?"

Gibbs, McGee and Ducky chimed in almost simultaneously.

"" ""Abby!" " "

"Chill, guys. I didn't say I was packing my bags, but once in a while a girl likes to know she's wanted."

"I ever hear you even *thought* of going over to the FBI and believe me, you'll be wanted... in four states and Canada." Gibbs growled. Lewiston laughed, but, diplomatically, made it a quiet one. Ducky repressed his urge to chuckle at the predictable family squabble and tried to get things back
on track.
"Children! Can we please return to the subject at hand? Abby, dear, I think you were getting around to talking about the night after the party?"

"Right. Well, I'd been helping as much as I could that day, from back here in the office, so I knew the trouble they were in, but even before I found out how Ziva lied to us, I was way more worried about Tony than I was about her. It wasn't that long ago that he was framed for murder, you know, and I knew he had to be thinking about the time he spent in that cell, not sure if he'd ever get out, and he goes on what was supposed to be a pretty simple mission and there he is, locked up all over again. When they finally did get back I was so relieved that I hugged him before I realized he was hurt. I *still* feel guilty for that, along with about a million other things. Anyway, he yelped when I hugged him and I could tell he was really hurt. Unlike some people, I know Tony and he would never say it was worse than it was just to get sympathy. If anything, he downplays how sick he is or how much pain he's in so he can get back to work faster."

"*If* that were true, I'm sure you've interpreted it incorrectly. DiNozzo is simply afraid he'll be replaced with someone competent if he stays away from work for too long." Ziva snarked, arms crossed over her chest.

A glare overtook Abby's face that was worthy of Gibbs before his first cup of coffee and a growl sounded deep in her throat that a full-grown male lion would have been proud to claim. Tim instantly latched onto her bicep and the others, including Lewiston, rose and moved to support him in his effort to save her from an attempted murder charge.

"Abby, don't. She wants you to do it... don't let her win."

"He's right, Abs." Gibbs added quietly. "She's baiting you, girl. Every time you jump for it, it makes her happier. I know you don't want her happy..."

The doctor crouched on Abby's left, leaving physical restraint to the rest of the men and employing his specialty, words and simple common sense, to help calm the young woman down. Leaning close to her ear, he whispered to her, hoping he could get through.

"Okay, Abby, I need you to try and listen to me. You know she wouldn't have to behave like that if her own self-esteem was as strong as yours is. I suspect she doesn't really like herself very much, so she has to drag others down in order to feel powerful. Don't let her do that to you. Look at the friends that rushed to your side just now to make sure you wouldn't get in trouble. Do you see anyone doing that for her? You have choices here, Abby. Think about it... then make a decision. What happens next is up to you."

A moment later, Abby stopped straining forward against the hands wrapped around her arms and shoulders.

"You can let go now, guys."

Warily, she was released. Gibbs and Ducky expected her to go straight for Ziva's throat, but instead all she did was turn to the man still hunkered down beside her and gently touch his hand, which was braced on the arm of the chair to help him keep his balance. "Thank you."

"Anytime." He replied, grinning at her as he rose again to his full height. The smile vanished, however, as he turned to face Ziva. "Miss David. You're free to go."

"Excuse me?"
"This discussion is intended to help me learn more about Agent DiNozzo and the people he's closest to. It's obvious you don't belong in that category, so you really don't belong here. In addition, I only have another half hour to learn as much as I can today and your hostile, malicious attitude is a distraction none of us need. Please leave."

Color rose into Ziva's cheeks again and she turned her shocked expression on her boss.

"Gibbs..."

"He makes sense. Out."

Indignant and grim-faced, Ziva rose to her feet stiffly and moved toward the door. She paused for a moment when Gibbs addressed her again, then stalked out, slamming the door.

"Do you have work to do until the rest of us finish here or do I need to find something to keep you busy?"

"I need nothing from you."

The boom of Ziva's exit echoed through the conference room and the outer office for several seconds. When the group recovered, they all resumed their seats and continued the meeting.

"Abby, did you have anything else to add?"

"Not much. Just that I feel so guilty for not realizing how bad Tony was feeling that night. Sometimes, I get wrapped up in my own little world and I don't pay attention to other people as much as I should. All I could do was talk about the party and how great it was... now all I want is a chance to say how sorry I am."

"When he tells me he's ready to talk about forgiveness, I promise you I'll try to get you that opportunity, but it has to be up to him."

"I understand."

"Okay. In the last... twenty minutes or so, is there anything else any of you want me to know? I guess we should start with the stories of anyone else that was here in the office the night after the party. Nobody? Okay, let's just talk about Tony in general terms, then."

"You mean... like Tim did?" Jimmy asked.

"Exactly."

"Then... I'll go."

"Great. I'm sorry, your name is..."

"Jimmy Palmer. I assist Dr. Mallard. Tony calls me Autopsy Gremlin... but I'm not sure if he knows that *I* know that." Jimmy admitted with a shy grin.

"You don't mind the name?"

"No. Not really. I kind of did, until Dr. Mallard explained that Tony was pretty close to the man I replaced and the nickname is a way of welcoming me into the family, but keeping me at a distance at the same time, so he won't be hurt if I leave too."

"That makes perfect sense."
"Tony... he acts like he knows exactly how cool he is... but he has no clue. The things I consider cool about him would never cross... I mean he just can't see... sorry. This is hard. It feels like we're talking behind his back..."

Ducky reached over and patted Jimmy's hand while Tim gripped his shoulder lightly from the other side. The slight young man smiled again, took a deep breath and shot his friends brief, grateful looks.

"Are you alright to continue? You don't have to." Lewiston offered.

"I'm okay. So... what I was trying to say..."

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DIRECTOR SHEPPARD'S OFFICE:

"Ziva, calm down and switch back to English, would you please? You know my Arabic isn't that strong."

"You said I would fit in easily... that they would accept me and trust that I was one of them within a week or two. That promise has been falling apart for some time and you have chosen to ignore the problem. Now... I expect you to do something about it."

"I can't *force* them to like you, Ziva! Especially when you keep planting landmines for the favored child to step on."

"Yes, well, I expected that when he finally did, they would see DiNozzo for the fraud he is and the field would be clear for me. Instead, the rest of them have rallied around that... weakling and built a wall to keep me out. My coming here was *your* idea, love and I've decided that I like this country very much. Fix this."

"I'll do what I can, but as I said..."

"It is what I say that counts..." Ziva purred, taking Sheppard's face in her hands and placing a quick kiss on her barely open mouth. "... or don't you like that game anymore? Perhaps I shall have to find a new playmate."

"No! No... I'll make things better for you, I swear. Just... don't leave me."

"Good girl. Very good girl."

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TBC....
Chapter 13

Just as Jimmy was really beginning to feel confident in speaking his mind, the door opened, startling him, and his words stumbled to a halt. Gibbs and Lewiston both looked up, frowning at the interruption and upset for Jimmy.

"Director." Gibbs greeted her sourly. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"You can end this unauthorized meeting immediately."

Gibbs rose and moved to stand close to her, grasping her elbow firmly.

"Outside." He told her, turning back to speak to the group, and Palmer specifically, "Go on, Jimmy. Finish what you were saying. I'll be right back." before guiding Sheppard forcefully out into the main office and closing the door.

"Don't you dare get angry, Gibbs. I'm within my rights..."

"As what, constant pain in my backside?"

"Gibbs."

Abruptly, Gibbs allowed the anger and frustration to leave his expression and replaced it with a mask showing deep weariness he didn't really feel.

"I'm sorry, okay? For that crack and for the scene in your office earlier. Since Tony... I'm just really concerned about him and I'll do everything in my power to help him get better. That's what this is about. You understand that, right?"

Sheppard's eyes widened and she gaped for a moment, unable to believe what she'd just heard. Jethro Gibbs had never said he was sorry for anything or to anyone, most especially not her. Luckily it didn't take her long to recover from the kick in the teeth he'd given her.

"I do."

"Thank you. Now I need to get back before our lunch hour is over..."

"Don't worry about that. Unless and until you get a case, feel free to keep this going. Stick with it as long as it takes."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely. I'm not the unyielding harpy you obviously think I am, Agent Gibbs. I can be as sympathetic as the next person. Just keep me in the loop from now on and I'll bend over backwards to get you what you need."

"I appreciate it."

"I hope so. Now get back in there. Your team is waiting."

Gibbs nodded, favored her with a sweet smile and turned away to re-enter the room. The moment the door was once again closed behind him, however, the smile shifted and became a victorious, fiendish smirk. McGee's own grin was uncertain as he watched Gibbs settle back into his seat.
"Boss?"

"She's so off-balance a light breeze could knock her on her ass."

"What'd you say?"

"I apologized for yelling at her in her office."

"Apologized... but you never... wow. That must've freaked her out. I bet she was humming the 'Twilight Zone' theme all the way back up the stairs."

The room erupted in various levels of laughter. Gibbs even contributed a little himself.

"Entirely possible, McGee. Whatever else it did, it got her to reverse her decision. Unless we get a case, we can stay right here. Long as that's okay with your schedule, doc?"

"That's fine. This is going so well I wasn't looking forward to leaving without giving everyone a chance to speak. Mr. Palmer, I believe you were in the middle of a thought before we got so rudely interrupted."

"Well... all I was saying is that Tony... he doesn't understand himself really. He shows the world this... smooth, ultra-hip, sarcastic ladies man, but if you look in his eyes long enough... you see how hard he's fighting to make himself believe it so everyone else will too. I'm sure he doesn't think anybody's noticed this, but I can almost always tell when that fight is harder than usual for him."

"How?"

"When he wears his shades indoors. It's like his walls are weakening... and he has to add an extra layer of protection to keep people out."

Ducky nodded and hmmmmed, contemplating Jimmy's words, then spoke slowly, his tone telegraphing the revelation he was coming to.

"You know... that could well be his problem with small children and animals. He's always assumed they simply don't like him... but they could be responding negatively to his self-protection and artifice. There was a young boy we were watching over not so long ago... he consistently stuck to Jethro's side and avoided Tony. I can see now why he might have instinctively chosen one over the other. The child could easily have interpreted Tony's reticence as lying. On the other hand, Jethro's self-confidence and candor would have engendered trust."

Lewiston raised an eyebrow.

"Very astute, doctor. Children and animals do seem to have emotional x-ray vision. May I tell Tony your theory? It could be a strong catalyst for the changes he's trying to make."

"Of course. Anything to help."

"Would you like to speak next?"

"I would, actually. My thoughts, however, are more about all of us as a group rather than strictly about Anthony."

"That's fine. As I said, the better I understand all of you, the better I understand Tony. Go ahead."

"Thank you. What you must understand, doctor, is that we are all very much a family. Perhaps the roles weren't assigned or arbitrarily thrust on us, but we all sense what our place is and we've taken it
on willingly. Jethro... Jethro is father; stern and resolute when it's required, indulgent and patient when it isn't. Personally, I've never been able to choose between Dutch uncle and grandfather... I suppose I'm a bit of both. At any rate, as I never had grandchildren, Timothy, Abby and Tony fill those deficits for me. I do believe Anthony would be the oldest, a fierce protector and designated tormentor by turns, and Abby the youngest; the loving, sweet-faced child that noone can possibly deny anything to. Unfortunately, that leaves poor Timothy stuck smack in the center, filling the unenviable role of the middle child."

"The peacemaker and good kid who gets dumped on by both sides, but puts up with it because he knows that he'll get blamed if the oldest and youngest knock each other unconscious." Lewiston responded with a slightly wicked smile.

"Precisely."

Jimmy's face fell when his name wasn't mentioned. Tim opened his mouth to interject and correct Ducky's oversight, but Abby squeezed his hand in warning and shook her head. She then turned her attention to Jimmy, favoring him with a reassuring smile and silently nudging his attention back to Ducky. "When Katelyn was still with us, the four of them were closer than many actual siblings I've had the misfortune to encounter. Her loss... was devastating for us all. We still haven't quite recovered. When I was told about Tony... that he could've been yet another loss, and at his own hand... it only confirmed in my mind how powerfully connected we all are."

"I'm not sure I follow." Lewiston remarked, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"It's quite simple. Only family gets close enough to wound each other so profoundly. Being slighted and rejected by strangers or acquaintances... one can usually set that aside and go on with the business of living, but receiving the same treatment from people who are supposed to love you and to know better... that can cut to unimaginable depths. Knowing Tony, his first instinct when a *second* family dismissed him in such a heartless manner... was to finally decide that the fault lay with *him*. Merely contemplating that poor boy being so deeply hurt and then automatically blaming himself instead of the ones truly responsible..."

Unable to continue and embarrassed by tears he couldn't stop, Ducky dropped his eyes and turned in his chair so that he no longer faced Lewiston or the rest of the group. A few moments later his sorrow was tempered by a soft chuckle when three handkerchiefs were placed on the table beside him, one after the other. Lewiston smiled as Ducky chose one, quickly wiping the offending moisture away.

"Can I borrow one of those?" the doctor requested. "No blowing my nose, I promise."

Ducky laughed and passed another of the white squares to their guest. "Thank you. That was eloquent, brutally honest and extremely moving, Doctor Mallard, and I applaud you for being willing to voice your pain that openly. Very few people could manage that."

"Yes, well... the older one becomes, the less important it seems to keep one's innermost thoughts a secret."

Laughter burst out around the table.

"And the more vital it is that the younger generation see that courage and wisdom and learn from it. Well... does anyone else have a comment or a question? No? Okay, I guess we're done. Thank you all so much for doing this. The insight and information you've given me will be a huge help in my work with Tony."
Randomly, the group rose and moved toward the door, all taking a few seconds to shake Lewiston's hand and say good-bye. Abby, however, threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. After recovering from his shock, he laughed and returned the unexpected embrace. As she and Tim exited, Gibbs tossed the doctor a rueful smile.

"Not shy is she?"

"That's how she shows her appreciation. Like Ducky said... you're saving her big brother."

"I'm trying. He's doing a great deal to help himself. What I learned today can only speed and clarify the process. I really believe you'll get him back sooner than expected."

"Sounds like you haven't run into his stubborn side yet. Just don't give up on him."

"Not in my job description."

Gibbs grinned, shook Lewiston's hand firmly and walked out. Outside the conference room, Jimmy and Abby were having a heated, but sotto voce argument. She was trying to get him to talk to Ducky about his obvious omission of his assistant from the family structure. Jimmy was adamantly refusing.

"You know he wouldn't just leave you out, Jimmy. He must've had a reason..."

"It doesn't matter, Abby. I know I don't fit in... I don't really have a place with you guys and I'm okay with that."

"James." Ducky intoned darkly from just over Jimmy's shoulder. The young man turned slowly, head down, but Ducky didn't let that last long. In a flash, Jimmy's chin was tipped up and his gaze was locked into his boss'. "I didn't mean to hurt you. If I did, then I'm very sorry. I did, indeed, have a reason for not including you in my little discourse on office genealogy. You and I are colleagues... and good friends. I see you as much closer to being my equal than to being one of the brood."

"But that doesn't mean we don't care about you." Abby continued. "We do. It's just... different. Okay?"

"You mean it? We're friends?"

"I don't say what I don't mean, James. Now, shall we return downstairs and get some work done?"

"I'm right behind you, doctor."

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TBC....
Chapter 14

When Lewiston entered Tony's room just after one-o'clock the next afternoon, he was presenting an even more cool, calm and collected demeanor than usual, having been forewarned by the nursing staff that Tony had woken up agitated and had only gotten worse as the day wore on.

As he closed the door behind him, he observed his patient silently for a few minutes, taking note of nervous gestures and edgy, uneasy behavior, before he spoke up.

"Tony? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? You're what's wrong! Actually, you know what? To hell with you *and* this place. I don't need this... I don't need any of it. I'll fix myself, damn it... who needs a stupid doctor anyway?" he muttered, pacing rapidly back and forth.

"I don't understand this change in attitude, Tony. What happened while I was away?"

"Nothing happened! I was just left here thinking... nothing to do but think. And then you didn't show up this morning and all I could do was wait and wait... stuck in this room getting more and more jittery... and you just kept *not* walkin' through the door! What is *up* with that, huh? Tell me!"

Lewiston recognized the fear and deep sense of abandonment Tony was drowning in and knew he had to address it, but a direct approach was not the way to go. He would have to calm him down first then come at the source of his emotional outburst obliquely and with caution.

"Tony. Tony, stop for a minute and look at me. Please... just stand still for one second and look into my eyes."

When Tony finally complied, Lewiston held his gaze intently, sensing that the intermission would only be temporary if he didn't break through right then. "Thank you. I'm sorry, Tony... and I'm here now. Can we sit and talk? You don't have to. It's your choice."

"Yeah..." the other man replied at last, running a shaky hand through his hair. "... yeah, I guess. But just for a minute."

"I appreciate it."

Lewiston waited for Tony to light on the edge of the mattress before taking his regular chair.

"I'd really like to tell you about my conversation with your colleagues yesterday, if that's alright."

"Whatever. Go ahead..." Tony acceded grudgingly.

"First of all, I learned a great deal from all of them... well, except for one. A very disturbing case..." 

"Let me guess... Ziva?" Tony asked, cracking the faintest possible smile and only for a moment.

"That woman needs me a lot more than you do. I'd love to get her under my psychiatric microscope and find out what makes her so bitter and callous."

"She's Mossad. That should give you a few ideas."

"I see. It definitely explains a few things. Moving to the far opposite end of the spectrum, I could easily learn to adore Abby."
"She's a sweetheart alright... most of the time."

"I found that out when Officer David started denigrating you. Sweet Abby turned into a she-wolf defending a member of her pack. Once I asked the instigator to leave the room, though, Abby shifted back to what I assume is her normal, high-spirited self. She even hugged me as I was leaving."

"Yeah... that's my Abs. To a T."

"By the way, is she a singer?"

"Not that I know of. Most of the stuff she listens to barely has words. At least not ones anybody can understand. Her favorite performers don't sing so much as imitate howler monkeys being flayed alive."

Lewiston laughed warmly.

"I only ask because I found her breath control amazing. She got out more words on one intake of air than I've ever heard anybody manage before."

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"Let's see... oh yes, Jimmy Palmer and Tim McGee; both intriguing and intelligent men. Listening to them provided me some very powerful insights. They seem to know you extremely well, and at the same time they're both harboring serious cases of hero worship. Fascinating. Gibbs... a consummate leader. If he ever decided to teach, there'd be nobody who could touch him. His student loyalty would be unrivaled and I'd bet that not a single child would leave his class with anything less than the absolute best grade they were capable of."

"That sounds right. I never thought about him being a teacher... but he definitely could. He'd be the ultimate substitute. One look at his face and no kid would dare try anything." Tony responded, his hands finally stilling as his body gradually released the tension he'd been hoarding for hours. "Did you, uh... you met Ducky before, when he came to see me, right?"

"I did, but we didn't really have much of an opportunity to talk in depth. I'm so glad he decided to participate yesterday. What an amazing man he is... wise, compassionate and a wicked sense of humor. When he explained how all of you have become like a family and talked about your roles, I was riveted."

Tony's eyes finally lifted a bit and he sought out Lewiston's open, forthright gaze.

"Family... yeah, I guess we sort of are. It's always there in the back of my mind... but I never said it. Wasn't sure how... or even if I should. If anyone could put it in words, though, it'd be Ducky. So... what'd he say? If it's okay for you to tell me, that is."

"I don't think any of them would mind me sharing their thoughts with you. We'll get around to everyone eventually, but let's start with Ducky, since we were already there. Apparently, you, Tim and Abby are instinctively siblings. You'd be the first born; fiercely protective, but not at all shy about kicking the other two in the behind when necessary or teasing them unmercifully just because you feel like it. Abby is the baby of the family; charming, beautiful and happily indulged by everyone who knows and loves her, but fully capable of pulling down the roof if she's angry, thwarted or betrayed. Poor Tim, I'm afraid, is left with the position of middle child."

"The buffer between the other two, the victim of every evil conspiracy his sibs can imagine and the one who ends up with the blame for every prank and stupid stunt the bookends pull."
"Bingo."

"Katie..."

"He didn't say much about her. Just that the four of you were very close and that her loss was overwhelming for the whole team. It's kind of hard to visualize a place for her in the structure Ducky laid out."

"Kate... she was my fraternal twin. On the surface, nobody would ever have said we were alike, but deep down... like looking in a mirror. That's why we fought constantly. I think we saw too much in the other one that we hated about ourselves. I respected her... God, did I, and I'll hold to that 'till my dying day. Katie was strong, smart, dedicated, braver than most men I know, in *or* out of law enforcement... but she had her own set of masks and man, did she know how to use 'em. That was our bond. Never let anybody in, never give up even a little bit of what's really going on behind the walls. She understood that..."

"I can hear how much you miss her... but you also sound angry."

"Angry? No... no way. Why would I be angry?"

"I don't know. Why would you?"

"I'm not. It's not like her de... it's not like it was her fault. She didn't wake up that day intending to go out and get sh... taken down by some terrorist."

Lewiston noted and filed away the reluctance to speak certain words in relation to Kate's murder, then continued on the track he'd been guiding Tony along.

"Of course not. Putting her life on the line was simply part of the job. The person you just described to me could have done nothing less."

"Right..."

"So why are you angry at her?"

"I told you, I'm not." Tony shot back, his anxiety and anger rebounding.

"Easy, Tony. I hear you."

"No. No, no, no..." Tony murmured, rising again and pacing erratically around the limited space. "Don't you say that about her. You didn't even know Kate! She never would've..."

"What, Tony? What wouldn't she have done?"

"Nothing! Nothing..."

"It's alright, Tony. Nothing you say will diminish Kate's memory or change what she meant to you and the others."

"Stop talking about her, damn it. I'm not talking about her..."

"Alright. What would you rather talk about?"

"McGee. Tell me what he said."

"Okay. He said the two of you tease and push each other's buttons a lot. It took him a while to realize
that your side of the game had a purpose, though. He claims it didn't hit him until he stepped away
from the first interrogation he performed on his own. He realized that he hadn't let the suspect fluster
him, he'd gotten them to surrender the information he wanted and that you were really responsible for
his success. What he'd initially taken as hounding and taunting was meant to... thicken his skin, in his
words. It encouraged him to speak his mind more often and made him frustrated enough to defend
himself and his ideas instead of backing down."

Gradually, Tony slowed to a halt. Shaking his head, he dropped down to sit cross-legged on the
floor.

"I underestimated the kid... wasn't sure if he'd ever get that. Good to know he really does have
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"He also told me his interpretation of the night you checked yourself in here. When he was talking
about how wonderful the party was, he thought it would just be another round of kidding. He had no
clue how badly he'd wounded you. None of your friends did."

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"Bad associations. I understand."

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"Or indulgent uncle. He said he couldn't decide and finally settled on a little of both."

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"He never will, either. Look, I'm really sorry I freaked out on you when you showed up today. I
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"I didn't get on the plane, Tony."

"No... This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Doc."

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"I hope so, Tony. I truly hope so."

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TBC......
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TBC......
Chapter 16

LATE THAT NIGHT:

Huddled close to her lover on the couch in Jen's apartment, Ziva sighed heavily and wiped a hand over her face. Sheppard held her tighter and softly asked the question they'd both been avoiding.

"Why would he contact you now? What could he have heard that would make him upset enough to go through Shia?"

"I don't know. I just don't know... though I can guess who does." She said, her tone growing dark and quiet.

"Gibbs wouldn't dare. I'm sure of it."

"Of course he would. I just don't have confirmation yet that he *has*. When I find proof of his treachery, that bastard will regret he was ever conceived..."

"You can't go after Jethro, love." Jen warned her gently. "It's a no-win situation, trust me."

Ziva pulled back and looked sternly at her lover.

"Can't?"

"I... I'm sorry. I meant it can only end badly. I'm speaking from experience, don't forget..."

"I thought we discussed and dismissed Paris long ago. You did what you felt you had to do."

"No, I did what was convenient and necessary. At least I thought so at the time... now I know better. Nobody turns on him or hurts him without paying for it. Officially, I'm in charge of NCIS, but he never lets me forget who really holds the power. Every single man and woman in that building would back him over me on a moments notice or follow him through the gates of hell if he asked them to." Jen ranted mildly, her words laced with old bitterness and anger.

"He is charismatic, but that can be easily overcome."

"It's more than charm. Something about him... people just respond, even strangers."

"Yes, I witnessed that yesterday. That doctor..." Ziva growled, her own acrimony bubbling to the surface briefly, only to subside a moment later. "Listen to me. I reprimand you for dwelling on the past then make the same mistake. We have more than enough to deal with in the present. Why don't you go get ready for bed, love? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Of course." Jen responded, rising to her feet. At a nod from Ziva, the older woman dropped a soft kiss on her young lover's cheek. "Please don't let yourself get drawn in, no matter how angry your father is. You getting emotional with him never does any good."

Ziva's eyes instantly became hard and disdainful.

"Still trying to dictate to me? You really *don't* understand, do you?"

Sheppard took an uncertain step back.

"I do. I understand. I said please..."
"And you'll be saying it many more times tonight, I guarantee. Bed." Ziva told her, standing and pointing in the direction of their shared room.

For a moment, Jen stood there stubbornly, feeling misunderstood and wronged. She opened her mouth to defend herself again, but a further drop in psychic temperature and a few slow, quiet, menacing words from Ziva made her reconsider. In a moment, Jen's hands were locked together behind her back and her gaze had dropped to the tips of her shoes. "Think before you speak, Jennifer. Think very carefully."

"I apologize, mistress. I was wrong to presume that you needed guidance. I'm the one who's lost. I need you to show me the way."

"Indeed you do. Go."

Eyes still glued to the floor at her feet, Jen turned and left the room. Ziva watched her go, reluctantly pushing aside the titillating choice of what punishment to administer. Sighing, she moved to where her briefcase sat beside the couch, lifted and unlocked it. Reaching in, she pulled a small cell phone out of a concealed compartment, flipped it open and hit a button. Raising it to her ear, she spoke into the device.

"5781 6435. David, Ziva, Hedya." She recited mechanically, having gone through this routine many times. She waited two or three minutes and finally a voice spoke at the other end.

"Ziva?"

"Yes, father. What's wrong? Why did you need to talk to me so urgently? You know it isn't safe to communicate this way very often."

"All too well."

"You sound so tired."

"I am weary of the endless circles my position forces me to walk in, that is all."

"Then why did you contact me?"

"I have received... disturbing information, little one. I am praying you will tell me it isn't true."

"Go on." Ziva replied tensely, sitting forward on the sofa.

"Tell me it wasn't you. I beg of you, tell me you were not the one who took his life..."

Ziva paled and was forced to take a few slow deep breaths before she could respond.

"Father... for God's sake, no. I explained how Ari was killed."

"Ziva, my child... since you were very young we have had no lies between us. You knew precisely what I did every day and what the realities of our world entailed. Do not break that trust now..."

"I am not! My brother was lost and he chose to be involved with people who pulled him further into the darkness... a darkness that swallowed him whole. *I* tried to save him! Father, please..."

"No. No more, my daughter. It will be alright... I will make it so. You will come home."

"I... I can't. I have a job... and I have built a life. How can you even think of just asking me to walk away?"
"Ziva... I am not asking. You will come home."

"Father..."

"You have rarely defied me, little one. You were not pleased with the consequences when you did so..."

"I know... but I won't willingly give up what I have here. I can't..."

"Very well." Her father responded, his voice heavy with regret and sorrow.

"Wait, please..."

"Good-night, child." He said, breaking the connection. After that, Ziva sat utterly still for several minutes, lost in shock and visions of her carefully planned future crumbling around her. Eventually, she closed and replaced the phone, restoring the briefcase to its previous spot. She would safely dispose of the phone in the morning before she arrived at work. Rising, she slowly headed for the bedroom, all thoughts of a night of play banished by fear of what her father would choose to do and intense, blazing fury for Jethro Gibbs.

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FOLLOWING MORNING: BETHESDA

As he entered Tony's room, Lewiston shifted the item under his arm so that it wouldn't fall and turned to close the door. Tony glanced up, a light smile on his face, but it swiftly faded when he saw what his doctor had brought to the session.

"That better not be what I think it is."

"Sorry to disappoint you. C'mon. Up on your feet, okay?"

"I'm not getting on a scale."

Lewiston carefully laid the slim, square, clear glass device on the floor then looked back up at his patient.

"Ordinarily, I'd say the choice was up to you, but not this time. I need you to do this for me."

"Why? It has nothing to do with the reason I'm here."

"You know better than that."

Tony sighed, rolled his eyes and finally complied.

"Fine." He conceded warily, rising and approaching the scale with trepidation. "I hate these things... I don't own one. Too much of a temptation to get down on myself." he explained, staring straight ahead.

Lewiston crouched down to read the display then pushed a few buttons. The read-out changed, he studied it, then repeated the procedure. He stood, patted Tony on the shoulder and released him.

"You can sit back down. How much do you normally weigh, give or take five pounds?"

"Anywhere between 150 and 160."
Lewiston frowned as he took his seat. "What? It can't be that bad. I exercise all the time..."

"I'm sure you do. It's not weight gain I'm worried about."

Tony blanched a little and swallowed hard.

"Yeah. Go on."

"You're down to 138. That's a real concern."

"Under 140? I can't be. It's not possible..."

"This worries me, Tony. We need to talk this out... see if we can work out where it started."

"You mean whether it's just a symptom of my depression, something medical or a separate disorder?"

"Exactly."

"Skip the last one. I'm positive it's not that. It's a combo of the first two. See... after I got out of the hospital, I was a total mess. They gave me this inhaler, but I felt like I was using the damn thing every five minutes, so I tossed it out. Of course then the coughing made my head and chest ache and I wasn't allowed to take anything but aspirin."

"Anything else might interfere or interact with your medication."

"You got it. Even the aspirin was a problem after a while... my stomach couldn't handle it. I was exhausted, nauseous... I couldn't even look at food. Basically, I existed on vitamin pills, canned broth, nutrition shakes, milk and juice for about a week and a half."

"But it got better."

"Yeah... eventually everything calmed down and I wasn't coughing so much... so I went back to work. Then... God, it seems like it was only a few days later that... that Katie was gone. It turns out grief and rage are the world's best appetite suppressants. After that, it felt like it just never stopped. I got locked up for a murder I didn't commit, I had my little *incident* in the hotel room... in the middle of all that, making sure I got three squares a day just wasn't all that important. Stupid, I know. The fact that I was getting less than four hours of sleep a night didn't help my judgment any, I guess..."

"No, I'd have to agree there."

"It just got to a point where all I wanted was to find someplace dark and quiet, where I could close and lock the door and just hide forever... a little room where I could pretend I was never thrown away like a rotten banana peel by a person who was supposed to love and protect me, I never spent days in isolation, wondering which breath would be my last... and I never had to lay a flower on the coffin of someone I loved. That's what the knife was supposed to help me find. Darkness and silence... and peace. I could see it so clearly and I wanted it... God, I craved it. It was all right there in front of me... then I looked down at my wrist... at that damned, barely visible scar. When I did that the illusion cracked... and so did I..."

Abruptly, Tony leapt up, stalked to the wall and began pounding one fist into it, fiercely and rhythmically. Lewiston went to him and wrapped one arm around his waist, tugging him backwards a little and speaking softly to calm him down.
"It's okay, Tony... everything's okay..."

"No it's not! I'm not a weakling... I can't be! I'm an athlete, I'm smart and strong, I'm a cop and a Federal agent... I'm not allowed!"

"Easy, Tony... easy."

"You don't understand! I have to be strong! I have to eat, I have to stop being angry and I have to stop missing her!"

"You will... you will."

"But I don't know how!" he wailed, teeth gritted. Backing toward the bed, Lewiston sat down, pulling Tony with him. When a nurse's concerned face appeared at the small pane in the door in response to the pounding, he shook his head and waved her away. Cradling the younger man against him, Lewiston absorbed Tony's sobs and struggles and poured constant reassurance into his ear.

"You'll weather this storm, Tony, I promise you that. I won't let you drown. Just don't let go, alright? Keep holding on..."

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TBC......
"I'm worried about you, Don. You look so tired lately."

Ducky sighed, closed his eyes and settled deeper into the arms of his lover, silently thinking that there had to be a more descriptive, more accurate word than tired. Over the past few days he'd begun to feel his energy level drop and drop until here, locked safely in Gerald's comforting embrace, the master coroner felt as if every moment of his many years was lying heavily on his chest.

"I'm sorry, my love. So much is going on... I'm simply feeling a bit overwhelmed, I suppose."

"Don't apologize, just talk to me."

"I've tried. I trust you with everything I feel and all I am, you know that."

"But I've never had children."

Ducky instantly reacted to the almost undetectable trace of hurt in Gerald's voice.

"Now I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't. My turn to say I'm sorry. I'm soaking up your emotions again..."

"I treasure your deep empathy, Gerald. It's one of my favorite things about you, I've told you that a thousand times..."

"Yeah, well it isn't helping much right now, is it?"

"Just being close to you is a great help. Knowing I have somewhere warm and safe to escape to is enough."

"Usually."

"Always. The situation with Anthony is just so frustrating. His doctor is excellent and I believe he's doing all he possibly can to help the poor boy heal... but I feel as if there has to be more I can do. When I looked at him through that door, just for a moment..."

"You saw Steven."

Ducky gave no response, but Gerald didn't need one. "It's alright. I'm proud of you for going to visit Tony, even knowing you'd have to face the memories."

"Tony isn't my son... I know perfectly well he isn't. His being in that tiny, bare room isn't my responsibility. Still, in that instant I could have sworn..."

"Tony's going to get well, Don, you have to believe that. Depression is a far cry from schizophrenia... and you didn't cause either one."

"So you continue to tell me. It's an old battle, love..."

"Old and ongoing."
"Yes, well, you're still no closer to winning me to your point of view."

"That doesn't mean I'm giving up."

"Thank God for that. I really don't know how I'd cope if you did. He told me he knows about us. Has for some time."

"And?"

"He's very pleased that we found each other and more than willing to be discreet, though he seems to think that discretion may be a moot point, at least among close friends and colleagues. According to Tony, anyone who took more than a cursory glance at you and I would have easily seen how deeply we're in love."

Gerald chuckled and stroked his lover's back tenderly.

"None of them had time for anything deeper than cursory. Your little trick with the stories is guaranteed to drive anyone but Gibbs or Jimmy back to wherever they came from. If they ever found out you only do it to get them to leave..."

"Yes, you're going to keep that to yourself, aren't you. I may be feeling two hundred years old tonight, but I believe I have enough energy to tickle you within inches of vomiting..."

"I don't doubt it. No need to demonstrate. How's Jethro holding up, by the way?"

"Giving his usual brilliant performance."

"He should know by now that anyone who really knows and cares about him doesn't buy it."

"He doesn't think anyone truly knows him. Or I should say that he *hopes* they don't."

"If nobody gets past his barriers he can't be hurt again... but nobody gets to love him either. That's really pretty sad."

"He and Tony are very alike that way. If only they could both just drop the walls, they'd see how much healing they could provide each other."

"You know it isn't that simple, love." Gerald countered gently, pulling his lover closer to him. "You're a perfect example."

"I did tell you about Steven."

"But it took you years. Even when you did finally let me see that pain, it came out in pieces, over the course of several days. That kind of secret hurts more when you let it go than it ever did holding it in."

"Yes... but at least Anthony now has Dennis Lewiston on his side, working to help him let go of the darkness he's been hoarding inside for so long. Jethro..."

Ducky's sentence trailed off as the buzzing doorbell interrupted him. Gerald persuaded his exhausted lover to stay on the couch and let him answer the summons. After gazing through the tiny security lens he opened the door with a rueful grin, finishing Ducky's thought and announcing their visitor all with just three words.

"Jethro has us. "
"Gerald. You're looking great." Gibbs greeted his old friend.

"Thanks. You aren't, though. C'mon in."

"I'm fine." The older man grunted as he stepped far enough in to allow Gerald to close the door again. A look was exchanged between the lovers that said 'Weren't we just talking about this?' and Ducky did his best to match Gerald's smile.

"Jethro, is something wrong? Is Tony alright?" Ducky asked.

"He's fine as far as I know."

"Then to what do we owe this visit?"

"I don't know. I didn't feel like getting drunk and falling asleep under the boat again, I guess. This was stupid... sorry, Duck. I'll go..."

"No, please don't." Ducky pleaded, rising to his feet only to find his weary legs trembling under him. Gerald rushed to his side and held him up.

"Time for bed, love."

"Yes... yes, I think so."

"Jethro, stay here, alright? I won't be long."

"Gerald..."

"Please. There's something you need to see. Trust me, you won't regret it."

Releasing a frustrated breath, Gibbs nodded and sank down into a chair. Within twenty minutes, Gerald returned. "This way. The elevator's over here."

"Elevator?"

"What I want to show you is in the basement."

Reluctantly, Gibbs rose and followed Gerald into the small cab and stoically endured the brief ride down to the lowest level of the house without making snide comments or insisting that he really should be at his own home, drowning in his usual method of stress relief.

Stepping out into darkness, Gibbs held his spot until Gerald turned on the lights. What was revealed confused Gibbs completely and he moved warily over to investigate and try to understand what he was seeing. Boxes, buckets and bags of ceramic items, from decorative figurines to chipped cups and saucers, lined the farther wall, and above them on hooks were a pair of heavy gloves and two sets of protective goggles. Turning, he looked down and found a line drawn across the cement floor in white paint and, perhaps thirty feet ahead of the line, a six foot high, four-foot wide cinderblock wall.

"What in the hell..."

"It started out as a way to help Don's mother, but all three of us have used it at some point." Gerald told him, choosing an item at random from one of the containers and handing it to Jethro. The young man then reached up, plucked the goggles from their hook, slipped a pair on Gibbs and donned the other himself.

"Now what?"
"Fling it."

"Come again?"

"Fling it. This is a place where you don't have to be strong or brave or whatever you think the outside world expects you to be. Down here... pissed and frustrated is a very good thing."

Gibbs stared at the coffee mug in his hand, then focused on the cinderblocks.

"You?"

"Don showed me all this when I stopped seeing progress in my PT a few months back. I was convinced my shoulder would never be a hundred percent and I was furious and in pain... so I came down here and started flinging Hummels and crockery with my good arm. Don stood right beside me, talking to me non-stop, until I felt like I'd gotten it all out."

Gibbs looked at the mug one more time, frowning and trying to justify breaking it just because he was frustrated. Gerald sensed his thought process and responded. "Don and I pick this stuff up at garage sales, yard sales and thrift shops for a quarter or fifty cents a piece. Fling it, Jethro. It helps... I swear, it helps."

After bouncing the mug lightly in his hand a couple of times, Gibbs finally gave in and sidearmed it into the cinderblock wall, grimacing as it exploded and scattered chiming shards across the floor. For a long moment, he merely studied the debris, unsure what to make of it, but eventually he looked back to the box nearest his hand then up to Gerald's calm face. "Go on. Choose another."

Gibbs did and that piece met the wall with less reluctance. "That's it. Take another one and do it again. Good! Again. Keep it up, Jethro. There you go! That's the way..."

The more items Jethro broke, the more rage and sorrow showed in his expression. As the mess piled up at the base of the wall, he even released a restrained scream or two and a few unbidden tears. An hour later, the basement ceramic collection was short fifteen pieces and Jethro was crouched close to the floor, curled into himself and panting faintly. Gerald knelt beside him, squeezing and rubbing his shoulder. "Better?"

"Hell, yes. Can I..."

"Anytime you need it. You don't even have to call. Day or night, just show up and one of us will be here for you."

"Thanks."

"No problem. No problem at all."

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FOLLOWING MORNING: BETHESDA

"Doctor Lewiston?"

Looking up the paperwork he was finishing up, Lewiston gazed at the young man standing in his doorway, struggling to determine where he'd seen him before.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

My name is Brad Pitt."
"Oh yes, infectious disease. I thought I knew your face. Please, come in and sit down."

"Thank you." Pitt said, taking him up on the offer and claiming one of the visitor's chairs on the other side of the desk.

"What can I do for you?"

"It's about Tony DiNozzo. I was the one who took care of him when he was here with pneumonic plague. I just found out he was back. I went to the medical service first, of course, thinking it could be a recurrence of lung problems. When they sent me up here... I couldn't believe it."

"It's good of you to worry about him."

"We didn't spend all that much time together, I admit, but he really impressed me. He tried to stay positive, even when he had to know his condition was becoming critical. How he pulled through I'll never understand..."

"Would you like to see him?"

"That would be great. Only if you think it wouldn't upset him."

"On the contrary, I think it would do him good. I was just about to go visit him myself. You're welcome to come along. As a matter of fact, you can do me a huge favor..."

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TBC......
Chapter 18

Lewiston waited and looked over a few charts while he waited for the other doctor to hunt up the items he'd been asked to gather. When the younger man returned, the two men headed for Tony's room together.

"I still find this hard to believe. The man I treated in that isolation unit was such a fighter..." Pitt mused as they walked.

"He still is. What he's battling now is just too big for him to handle, so he asked for help."

"I'd hate to think... can you at least tell me if it's organic?"

"No, thank God. He started to sink under the weight of too many emotional traumas in too short a time period, that's all. I'm bringing him through them one at a time, helping him understand how they all led up to the event that led him here."

"So he'll be alright? Eventually?"

"I have high hopes."

"No signs of breathing difficulties?"

"No. He does have about a dozen stitches in one arm, but I had him checked out and they're healing well now. They should be about ready to come out, actually."

You couldn't get a hold of the doc who helped you out initially?"

"He's on a week's vacation. In addition to being good for Tony, you were also a very lucky break for me. Don't get me wrong, I'm very grateful..."

"Hey, don't worry. I'm just glad Tony has someone on his side."

"Here we are. Thanks again for doing this."

"No problem. I'm glad to do anything I can to help. Tony and I... we got to be pretty close while he was recovering. I actually called him a stubborn bastard when he insisted on going back to work a week early. He wasn't physically ready, but he wouldn't listen. He kept saying the solitude and his own cooking were about to kill him. I gave in. Stupid..."

"Don't. It wasn't your fault. I have it on good authority that he has a deep-seated distaste for doctors in general, so, even though he liked you personally, he would have found a way out from under your care one way or another. Shall we go in?"

"Yeah. If you're right, he isn't going to be happy about this, so the sooner I get started, the sooner it'll be over."

Lewiston unlocked the door and both men entered single file, Brad dropping the bag filled with medical equipment and tools near his feet. When Tony spotted his former doctor, his eyes lit up, he rose and moved to embrace his friend. Curious to see how the conversation would play out, Lewiston stayed quiet and took his usual seat, intent on remaining in the background unless he genuinely felt his colleague needed backup.

"Brad! Damn, it's so good to see you!"
"You too, Tony. I'm so sorry I didn't come before now, but I just found out you were back. Are you okay?"

"Gettin' there. It's slow and all uphill... but I'm gettin' there."

"Uphill with the emergency brake on, maybe. C'mon, sit back down before you fall over."

"Don't you start. He's already nagged me about my weight." Tony protested mildly, even as he allowed Brad to guide him back to the bed.

"This isn't nagging, it's concern for a friend. It must've been really hard to work up an appetite when you went home from here last time."

"Yeah... more like impossible."

"I can see it. You've lost, what, ten pounds since I saw you last? Maybe more?"

Tony glanced sharply at Lewiston, ready to accuse him of betrayal, but Brad overrode him. "He didn't tell me anything. I have eyes, Tony. Talk to me."

"Twelve. According to him and the stupid scale anyway."

"Damn, Tony... why didn't you come to me? I would've helped you figure something out."

"I thought about it. In the end I handled it on my own. No big deal."

"Tony."

Sighing heavily, Tony shrugged.

"I know, okay? I know..."

"It's been months since you've been checked out, right?"

"Yeah." Tony replied carefully, sudden tension lifting his shoulders and straightening his spine a little.

"Then let's correct that."

"I don't think so..."

"Hey, remember our motto? The one you came up with?"

"Immoveable object, meet irresistible force."

"And..."

"The irresistible force, which is you, always wins."

"Right. A quick exam, just to catch up on how you're doing. Twenty minutes, tops."

Tony sighed again and frowned.

"I'm perfectly fine."

"I know you are. This is for my peace of mind. Okay?"
"Check the stitches." Tony conceded, holding out his arm. "If they're ready to come out, you can do that. Anything else... is up for negotiation."

"I'll take what I can get." Brad responded with a grin as he peeled back the bandage to get a look at the wound.

"Damn... that had to hurt. How'd this happen, anyway?"

"Bullet. It's a long story."

"It always is with you, but I've never minded listening."

"You were the only one who didn't. I appreciated that back then."

"Rival schools didn't mean we had to be enemies. This looks really nice. I can definitely get these stitches out for you. You don't want anything to dull the sting, I assume."

"Have I ever?"

"No, double M, you never have. I'll just get on it with it then."

Lewiston finally spoke up, wondering about the nickname.

"Mighty Mouse?"

"No. Mucho Macho. Don't look at me like that, he picked it." Brad chuckled. "So? Give with the tale of daring do, Tony, my man."

"I was on assignment down at the shipyard in Norfolk. Can't tell you any details..."

"I work at a military hospital, I know all the restrictions. Just talk..."

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NCIS:

Engrossed in the computer program he was endeavoring to make function, Tim was surprised to look up and find Abby was no longer on the stool beside him. Circling his neck to relax the muscles, he gazed around and saw his lover huddled in her tiny office, hugging her hippo to her chest. Sighing quietly, he left the computer to run through the tasks he'd set it and moved to her side, determined to draw her back out into the lab.

"Abby? What is it?"

It took almost a minute for the young woman to finally look up and meet his eyes, and the pain and anger Tim saw there broke his heart. "It'll all work out, Abby, I swear it will. We can talk tonight, but right now we have to work on this program. Gibbs really needs this information. Come back and help me?"

The only response Tim received was a tightening of Abby's arms around her stuffed animal, causing a whoopee-cushion like sound to emerge. "Okay..." he said, crouching in front of her chair. "... I understand how sad you are right now, but..."

Scowling, Abby sat forward and swung the hippo, smacking Tim solidly in the face and producing another inappropriate noise. He fell sideways, flailing his arms as he toppled over. Rising, she stalked out of the office without a word. When he got his breath back, Tim rushed out after her, only to be
attacked with fur and stuffing once more. "Abby! Cut it out... whatever I said, I'm sorry..."

"You... don't... understand... anything!"

"Ow! I can see that... but will you... stop hitting me with Bert, please?!"

Despite his pleas, Abby chased him around the lab until she heard the door open and turned to see who was entering.

"Abby."

"Gibbs..."

"Drop the hippo."

"You didn't hear what he..."

"Drop the hippo, Abs, or you'll never see another Caff-Pow. Ever."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

Reluctantly, Abby passed Bert to the older man when he held out his hand. Placing the toy on the counter, he flitted his gaze to Tim and back to Abby.

"Go on upstairs, McGee."

"Yes, boss." He responded gratefully, making his escape.

"Gibbs..." Abby began, only to have him interrupt and sweep her into his arms.

"I'm mad too, Abs... so mad I don't know what to do with it all, sometimes. You gotta channel it... make it work for you, like you did with the stunt you pulled on Ziva. What you can't do is take it out on the innocent geek who loves you..."

"I could've cold-cocked him with the GC mass-spec... or electrocuted him."

Smiling, Gibbs pulled back a little to stare into Abby's eyes.

"So I should be admiring your restraint?"

"Absolutely." She responded boldly just before she dropped her gaze to the floor, suddenly looking ashamed. "No."

"That's better." He praised, tipping her chin back up with one finger. "It's not his fault."

"Tim or Tony?"

"Two guesses. The first one doesn't count."

"I know. I just started thinking about him not being here anymore, not because some bad guy took him out, but because... I got really pissed at him. I should apologize to Timmy..."

"Do that. And after work, you bring him over to Ducky's. I've got something to show you."
TBC......
Ziva leaned against her lover's desk, frowning at the floor. Despite the closeness and intimacy they had shared for so long, Ziva was determinedly holding back about her conversation with her father and Sheppard was worried.

Ziva finally spoke up, musing about the topic she wanted to discuss, but Sheppard wouldn't give up.

"I'm telling you it is a good idea, Jennifer. You need to do it. There should be no possible way to question the opinion of a government-approved psychologist. We simply have to hope that he is weak enough so that our viewpoint can easily become his. It doesn't even have to be anything particularly severe... if he will affirm even the slightest tendency toward permanent mental instability in DiNozzo, it will be enough to assure that Gibbs' little pet can never show his face here again."

"Ziva... love, why won't you tell me what happened?" Sheppard pleaded, coming around the desk to face the other woman. Moving close, she stroked Ziva's shoulder gently and laid a soft kiss on her furrowed brow. "I know you're upset about the call, but all you can talk about is this plan to keep Tony from coming back to work."

"I talk about it because it is all that matters right now."

"You matter to me... and I know you're in pain."

"I am... disturbed, yes, but nothing is certain. It is impossible to know what my father will do, so it serves no purpose to dwell on it. I can only deal with what is in front of me. At the moment... that means Tony."

"Alright... but if you need me..."

"Believe me, you will know. Don't you always?"

"Hmmm, yes. Always..." Sheppard responded, a dreamy smile slowly blossoming on her lips. "So... back to convincing everyone that Tony is unfit..."

Ziva went through her idea one more time and Sheppard nodded, agreeing that it sounded more than plausible. "I can't really get out of here for about an hour..."

"An hour is fine. As long as it's done soon. Gibbs needs to understand that his actions have consequences..."

Frightened by the sheer rage she heard in the younger woman's voice, Sheppard stepped back, her eyes widening.

"Ziva? What the hell is going on? What has Jethro done? He has something to do with the phone call from your father, doesn't he?"

Reaching out, Ziva shoved down on Jennifer's shoulder, driving the older woman to her knees.

"What is my third rule, Jenny?"

"Don't push. Pushing leads to punishment."
"Continuing to talk about my father... is pushing."

"I'm sorry, mistress... I didn't think before I spoke..."

"You rarely do. And you have no idea what regret truly is, but you will tonight. The penalty I overlooked will be added to the one you just earned."

"Yes, mistress. I understand."

"Good. Now get up."

Sheppard rose to her feet, but her gaze stayed on the carpet and away from the woman who, when she chose, could assume instant control of Jennifer's heart, mind and soul with nothing more than a touch or a word. Ziva growled under her breath, took a deep breath and consciously cleared her expression, knowing how vital it was that the surface not reflect the depth of anger she was truly feeling. Once she was certain she'd succeeded, she walked slowly out of the office and back down to floor level.

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THIRTY MINUTES LATER: BETHESDA

Still playing fly on the wall, Lewiston struggled not to burst out laughing at the scene being played out before him. At some point in the next few days, he planned on stopping by a local sports store and purchasing a small trophy for Brad Pitt, engraved to acknowledge undaunted persistence in the face of exceptionally mulish, willful behavior.

"Tony, you're acting like a three year old."

The only response Brad received was a tongue briefly extended in his general direction. "Make my point, why don't you? For God's sake, I didn't ask you to breathe as if you're planning to free-dive the Great Barrier Reef. I said take as deep a breath as you can manage."

"And I said go play in traffic."

"No thanks, but I'm ready to toss *you* under a bus."

"Just try it." Tony growled, pulling away from Brad's touch once again.

"You can't do it can you? Not without coughing, I'll bet."

"You'd lose."

"Ducky will know, for sure. I can just go call him and ask..."

"No! Leave him alone. He's got enough to deal with."

"Then talk to me, damn it."

Tony glared down at his crossed arms and huffed in irritation.

"Freaking doctors always assume... It's not what you think, okay? I don't have a hell of a lot of reserve energy right now. What I *do* have is invested in eliminating some pretty ugly mental scars. I don't have the strength right now to worry about my damned treacherous body."

"You can't separate the two, Tony." Lewiston finally interjected. "They're intrinsically connected."
"Of course I can split them off! I do it all the time. When I'm doing something physical and active, it's easy to shut my mind down and just let my body do what it's been trained for. When I'm reading or doing research at work, I don't think about whether I'm hungry or thirsty or have to hit the head." Tony responded defensively. The sudden intrigued gleam in Lewiston's eyes told his patient he was in for a session once Brad was finished. To his therapist's amusement, Tony rolled his eyes and groaned. Brad turned Tony's head toward him with a hand on his chin and spoke to him gently.

"I understand you're low on pretty much everything right now. Like I said, I can see it."

"So why am I wasting time and effort fighting you off? I'm good at fighting... and I don't know any other way."

"I'm not telling you to stop. Just let go of the idea that you personally have to wield every weapon in the armory. I can fight too, Tony."

"I get that, I do... I'm really grateful, doc, even if I don't act like it sometimes." Tony responded, turning his gaze to Lewiston.

"I know." The older man replied simply, favoring Tony with an understanding smile.

"You also know how long I've had to watch my own back."

"You share that with Jethro and Tim, now."

"Shared. Past tense."

"Yes, well, that's a future discussion. The point Brad and I are trying to get across is that you don't have to lay down your sword. All we ask is that you allow him to use his knowledge and skills in your defense, the way I have."

"How quickly we forget yesterday's tantrums."

"That was a legitimate release of pent up emotion. I know the difference. What you were pulling on Brad was a tantrum, albeit a mild one."

"Ha-ha. Fine, I surrender. Bring on the stethoscope and the tongue depressor and whatever else you can think of. Short of the one taboo item you swore never to inflict on me again."

"Now, Tony, what fun would an exam be if I didn't give you a shot? Or at least threaten you with one."

"No. I mean it, Pitt. No needles."

"We'll see."

"Not 'We'll see', not 'Maybe', not 'I reserve judgment'. No needles, or you and the horse you rode in on can evaporate!"

"Here we go again..."

"Hey, you know better than anyone why I'm practically phobic about the things!"

"Of course I do, but..."

Brad let his thought trail off and turned his head toward the door, listening. A moment later, the other two followed suit, their attention drawn outside the room by the sound of a strident argument.
becoming more and more audible. Lewiston rose, moved to uncover the source of the noise then looked back to the pair on the bed.

"You two stay here and work things out. I'll be right back." he told them, slipping out the door. Approaching the trio that was still bellowing at each other, Lewiston pushed the three people apart and turned to the one he recognized, a nurse he had worked with for several years and trusted implicitly.

"Barbara, what's going on out here? We can't have this..."

"I'm so sorry, doctor. This woman insists she be able to see Agent DiNozzo. I tried to explain that only one visitor is on his approved list, and it certainly isn't her. She wouldn't listen..."

"It's alright, Barbara. You did well. Go on back to your duty station."

"Thank you, doctor." The woman said, breathing a sigh of relief as she hurried away. Lewiston now turned to the pair that had caused the disruption. "May I ask who... wait. Director Sheppard, correct?"

"Yes."

"My apologies. We didn't see each other very long the other day and I wasn't exactly focused on intrusions into what we were trying to do. Can I help you?"

"This is Dr. Markette. He's the consulting psychologist for our field office and I insist that he be allowed to evaluate Anthony DiNozzo."

"No. Anything else?"

"No?"

"Your hearing is obviously in working order. Good for you. If we're finished, I need to get back..."

"Doctor..."

"You have your answer, Director. You may wield considerable power at NCIS, but I'm the big shot here and I decide what is and isn't in Tony's best interests. Even if I were to let this man interrogate my patient, which I won't, Agent DiNozzo doesn't know him from Adam and has no bond of trust with him. Send a stranger in there firing off idiotic questions and Tony will most likely withdraw and shut down, the end result being stress, trauma and a massive waste of everyone's time. Therefore... no."

"I'm sure he'll be just fine if you stay with him. You'd have to agree not to interfere, of course..."

"Maybe your hearing isn't as good as I thought."

"That's enough, Doctor Lewiston..."

"I completely agree. If you can't find your own way out, I'll call security and they'll escort you out of the building."

"You have no right to refuse an independent assessment of his condition, doctor, and I'm sure there are multiple ways you can be compelled."

"Do whatever you think you have to, Director. You aren't getting anywhere near Tony while I still have the authority to stop you."
Whirling on his heel, Lewiston left a gaping Jen Sheppard behind him in the hallway and raced back to assure himself that Tony was alright.

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TBC......
Chapter 20

Unfortunately, Lewiston's hopes were dashed. Before he even got to the door his ears told him Tony was in trouble. Stepping inside, he saw Brad physically supporting Tony and trying to talk his friend down from a severe bout of hyperventilation. Swearing under his breath, Lewiston rushed to assist.

"Tony, relax. It's alright... c'mon, buddy. You can do it..."

"Look at me, Tony. Slow down... slow your breathing."

Unable to speak, Tony shot Lewiston a look of sheer panic and mouthed 'Can't...'

"Okay. It's alright, Tony, I'll help. Close your eyes. It won't be easy, but just go with me. I know what I'm doing, I promise. I need you to count backwards from ten in your head. Slowly... as slow as you can manage. Show me on your fingers so I know when you're done. Excellent... three... two... one. Now backwards from fifteen, counting in threes. You can do this. This is nothing for you... Good. Back from twenty in fours..."

When he finished, Tony stared at Lewiston in shock as he realized his breathing had eased considerably. Swallowing, the younger man croaked out a one-word question.

"How?"

"When your body is going crazy, your mind can make it worse. You get too focused on how scared you are, making you even *more* scared, and it all spirals out of control. All I did was redirect your thoughts. Here, lay down and rest for a while. We'll talk about what triggered this episode once you've recovered a little more."

Once Tony was helped down onto his side, his blanket draped over him and tucked in around his shoulders, Lewiston tugged Brad over to the door to question him.

"What happened?"

"I wish I understood it. He heard you talking to Sheppard and suddenly his eyes went wide. He started repeating 'It's gone, it's all gone' over and over..."

"Damn that woman..."

"I'm sure she's just doing her job."

"No. No way does she have Tony's best interests at heart."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I spent time with the people who *do*. That's all it took to help me learn the difference. I'll make a call later and find out what was really behind that lame-ass attempt to get at Tony."

"My God... she really upset you."

"Infuriated me is more like it. C'mon. Tony's waiting..."

As the men approached the bedside again they were relieved to find Tony fairly relaxed, though his breathing was still a little unsettled and irregular. Lewiston crouched and spoke Tony's name softly, but the only response he received was a noise reminiscent of an elderly, badly maintained car being
asked to start on a bitterly cold morning. He chuckled and decided gentle humor wasn't out of place
now that the young man was no longer in crisis.

"Oh, *that* sounded optimistic."

"Not funny." Tony shot back faintly, his voice slightly rough.

"I thought it was, but then panic attacks tend to temporarily dull a person's sense of humor. You'll
laugh later, I guarantee."

"No... not a panic attack. I don't panic..." Tony countered, surging up into a sitting position and
beginning to breathe harshly once more.

"Easy... easy, Tony. You need to try and relax..." Brad warned, but the words only made Tony more
stressed out.

"I am! I didn't have a... panic... attack! Why won't... you believe me?"

Lewiston grasped Tony's face in both hands, locked their gazes together and spoke quietly.

"Tony, stop. You're over-reacting. We're not trying to provoke you. That's the last thing either of us
want right now. Slow your breathing... and calm down. Good... much better."

"Sorry..."

"Don't. You have nothing to apologize for. This wasn't your fault." Lewiston assured him, dropping
to the edge of the bed as he released his hold. "Can you tell me what happened while I was gone?"

"I... I heard her voice... Sheppard. I knew if she was here then everything I cared about... every
damn thing I'm in here working to get back to... it was all lost. My career, my life, maybe even my
apartment, if I can't find another job... all of it, just... dust in the wind."

"That won't happen, Tony. Jethro and I won't let it."

Tony merely grunted, but Lewiston had a good idea of what his response would have been if the two
of them had been alone. When Brad slid the bell of his stethoscope onto Tony's back a moment later,
the younger man seriously considered shrugging the offending object off, but he was simply too
tired, so he allowed it to stay.

"Don't make any major effort, Tony. Just normal breaths... that's it. Nice. Stay relaxed..."

"You tell me that one more time..."

"I know, I know. Bang, zoom! To the moon, Alice! Just quiet down for a minute, will you? I need to
listen."

Fifteen minutes later, Brad had checked Tony's lungs, his blood-pressure and his heart and was
convinced his friend was doing well for the moment. As he packed up, however, he took the risk of
angering Tony again, knowing his conscience would never leave him alone if he backed down.
"Everything seems to be fine. Your pressure's a little high, but not enough to really be worried."

"I've been under a lot of stress."

"I know. That's why I'm coming back to give you a full work-up. With Dr. Lewiston's permission, of
course."
"I don't have a problem with that." The other doctor agreed.

Tony's head came up suddenly and he glared at Brad.

"You better be kidding."

"Do I kid when it comes to your health?"

"There's a first time for everything..."

"This isn't it."

"Damn it..."

"I let you slide, Tony. If I'd kept up with you, kept in touch..."

"No. My being here isn't your responsibility. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I also didn't do what was right. If I'd made you come in, maybe I would've seen how you were feeling before it got this bad..."

"If is a really useless word, Brad. You know damn well I'm a shape-shifter when I feel like it. You saw what I wanted you to."

"True. Okay, so I'll stick the 'why didn't I' routine where the sun doesn't shine. That doesn't change anything. I still won't rest easy until I know for sure that you're completely okay."

Tony sighed and winced.

"That means needles, right?"

"I know I promised, but blood tests are essential, especially with a recent infection, no matter how minor."

"God..."

"You know what an expert I am. You'll barely feel it."

"I hope your guilt over that gigantic lie costs you some sleep tonight. Can we do it day after tomorrow? I've got lost time to make up for with the world's second biggest nudge." He requested, shooting a sidelong glance at Lewiston, who smiled brightly and replied.

"I consider that a compliment."

"You would." Tony grumbled, but the tiniest hint of a smile curved his lip, proving that he wasn't feeling nearly as cantankerous as his words might suggest. Brad grinned and finished gathering up the things he'd brought with him.

"I'll see you day after tomorrow, buddy." Brad intoned quietly, squeezing Tony's shoulder. Tony briefly acknowledged the supportive touch, patting his friend's hand and gazing evocatively into his eyes.

"I know I'm a pain in your ass sometimes. I don't mean to be. There are reasons... things I've gone through that I'm not ready to tell anyone but my therapist. Not yet anyway. Thanks for understanding... and for not leaving me on the battlefield all by myself. I wouldn't be here now if you'd given up on me all those weeks ago..."
Fighting back tears, Brad crouched, dropped his bag and fiercely embraced the other man. Pulling back a few moments later, he swiped at his face and corrected Tony's assumption.

"You're the one who inspired me, Tony... you and that incredible bunch of people you work with. I've never seen faith like that before and I doubt I'll ever witness it again. Abby and the others... they took your strength and will to live and just multiplied it until every single person in the hospital believed you'd survive. Find that will again, Tony... find it and hold onto it. Between the three of us and your support system at NCIS, you'll get back on track, I swear. Just don't let go, okay? Promise me..."

"I promise. See you in two days."

"Two days."

After a final, quick hug, Brad retrieved his gear and left. Tony stared at the floor for several minutes before he found the fortitude to look up at Lewiston again.

"I didn't know. I was still so sick in the first couple days outside the isolation unit... I barely remember anything. I don't understand it. If they felt like that, how could they be so cruel just a month or two later? It makes no sense..."

"I agree. Let's go catch a few rays and have some quiet time in the sun-room. Then we'll come back and see if we can't straighten it out."

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TBC.......
"Okay." Lewiston began as he settled back into his usual seat. "We're all in our places with bright shiny faces... let's get going."

Tony snorted a quiet laugh.

"God, don't make me think about school. Anything but that."

"I think we need to, don't you? That's the most likely place for you to have learned the survival technique you talked about."

"I thought we were gonna talk about work."

"We will. Later. Right now, I'm interested in hearing what forced you to figure out how to split off and shut down whole sections of your personality."

Tony grimaced.

"God, you make me sound like a-a... psychopath. It's not like that..."

"You aren't mentally ill, Tony. I never said that. What you described is a coping strategy. Abused kids typically develop one or more just to get them through day to day life."

Lewiston could see the instant denial rise and then die in Tony, all within seconds.

"I... I'm trying to get that. I am. I know abuse doesn't have to mean being beaten bloody 24/7... I just never put myself in that category. I assumed most kids my age had to go through what I did. I thought it was normal... like most abused kids do. Shit... I've done the research. How did I miss that huge red flag for so long?"

"From what you've told me the material you sought out concerned the abusers, not the victims. Besides, you couldn't afford to dig too deeply into your past while you were out in the world. Get introspective while someone else's life is on the line and they could lose it in the time it takes you to turn around. In here... it's safe and acceptable to focus only on yourself."

"Yeah, but easy... not by a long shot."

"I never promised easy. So talk to me about those first few months on your own at school. Is it the emotional aspect that really stands out, or something else?"

"I don't know... I think I was trying not to feel. Not to show it, anyway. Kept me from getting slapped down ten times a day... by the other boys *and* the teachers. Inside... I was lonely, terrified, and angry. A week into classes I realized the stress was way more intense when you didn't have somewhere else to go at night where you could decompress... somewhere you didn't have to think about school. I knew I was smart... but suddenly I was struggling just to stay level with all the other kids. Maybe... maybe that is where it started after all. When I was studying I had to shut out everything around me and put every ounce of focus on the work... so I was sure the material would sink in and stay in my head. I put so much effort into that... that when I got on the field to compete, all I wanted to do was forget formulas and equations and Custer's Last Stand ever existed. I dropped conscious thought, opened up to instinct and my physical side... and just played. Is that like... classic? I mean, have you heard of any other cases where someone taught themselves to do that?"
"I'm not sure there really is such a thing as a "classic" survival strategy. Many people develop similar methods, yes, but each child puts their own spin on it based on the situation and how severe the abuse was."

"Could... could what I've been doing... turn into a serious personality disorder? I mean, if I don't fix this could I end up with MPD?"

"I haven't seen a single sign of you being likely to degenerate that way. You're far too self-aware for that. There have been very few genuine, verifiable cases of MPD and the ones I know of came about after years and years of suffering sadistic torture, violence and sexual abuse. Unless there's something you haven't told me about..."

"No! God, no..."

"Okay then. Let's not even go there. I'm not trying to downplay what you went through. Abuse is abuse, whether it's your body or your self-esteem that was kicked across the room night after night."

"But doing that... splitting myself apart that way. That's not good, right?"

"Actually, it is. Instead of collapsing and giving up when you were forced out of your home, you found a way to stay on your feet and keep moving forward. That's a sign of innate strength and courage. You're a survivor if I ever saw one, Tony, and surviving is never a bad thing."

Long minutes passed while Tony processed and sorted through the information he had been given and the myriad emotions switching on and off inside him. When he looked up, his eyes were wide and realization shone from them, but deep fear lurked in the background and Lewiston sat forward slightly, ready for anything.

"No... maybe it was like that... but it's turned into something else. Something nasty..."

"What are you thinking about, Tony?"

"The hotel. You called it a... a rage-blackout... but I just compared the two and it felt the same. When I had to go from books to sports it was like... there was a switch. Flip it and one side goes dark while the other lights up. In the hotel room I felt the same change happening... at least I think I did. Why did I end up with only darkness?"

"Powerful emotion could've made the difference. Going from everyday intellectual challenges to physical ones wouldn't tend to carry a lot of strong feeling with it. In that hotel you were scared, angry and intensely worried, both for your partner and for yourself. Then again it could have just been your mind protecting you from what you were about to do. You did say you beat that suspect pretty badly. Acknowledging that you have that capacity, that you can get so angry and just lose control... it isn't something that would be easy for a long-time law enforcement professional to accept about himself."

"If it hadn't been for..."

"What? Don't censor yourself, Tony. If it hadn't been for what?"

"Who. I knew they'd kill Ziva without even thinking about it. I couldn't let it happen..."

"Like Kate."

"That loss... the failure is always with me. I never had much chance to step back, take time and grieve the way I should have. Maybe what I did to that guy in the hotel... maybe part of it was
grieving for her... and making up for the worst mistake I've ever made."

"Who told you that you failed?"

"They'd never say it straight out... but they all know. I see it in Gibbs' eyes sometimes when he looks at her desk... what used to be her desk. Still should be..."

Lewiston shifted from his chair to Tony's side.

"Tony, no. I can almost guarantee that what you're seeing has nothing to do with you. It's a hard truth to hear, but when a tragedy like Kate's murder happens, the people closest to the victim can get pretty self-centered. They don't see it that way, of course. They're in excruciating pain and it's hard to look past that. What they're doing, though..." he said, dropping a hand on the younger man's shoulder, "... is blaming themselves for everything they didn't do to prevent the person from dying and they're certain everyone else holds them responsible, too. Gibbs thinks he should have saved Kate, Abby thinks it's her fault... but what none of you can understand yet is that nobody is to blame except the one who pulled the trigger."

"That... that's what shreds marriages when a child dies, right? Both parents are hurting so bad they can't spare anything for the other person... and they end up hating each other."

"That's not always the case, but more often than not... yes."

"After he threw me out... he wouldn't let my mother call... or send letters. I was persona-non-grata as far as he was concerned. That lasted until I was 16. Suddenly he wants me to take a trip with the two of them. God knows why... but I went. I think I understand his reasoning now. He must have been starting to lose her somehow... emotionally, mentally. With his social and business position, he couldn't let that happen. For one thing, in his circles, a loyal wife on your arm is essential and for another... if he'd let her divorce him or even just separate from him, he ran the risk of all the mud and blood spilling out his front door for the world to gawk at."

"So he tried to draw you back in."

"And as soon as he felt like he had her back under control, he forgot I existed again. To the extent that he took her home and left me in the hotel. He only sent me plane fare back to school when he got the room service bill. I wish... I wish it had hurt more... but I just took in stride. It sucks that I was able to do that. I just accepted that he was an ass who didn't give a damn about me unless I could get him something he wanted. I should've been pissed... I had every right to be."

"That's something else that can happen to abused kids. They learn the meaning of 'jaded' much too early in life. Nobody ever seems to think about their needs and wants, so they stop asking and expecting."

Tony chuckled brokenly.

"And they start making masks."

"Aren't connections wonderful things? Tell you what... I think it's past time for lunch and we both need a break. I'll go get trays for both of us and be right back. We'll eat, catch our breath..."

"Yeah... sounds good about now."

"Okay. Hang in. I won't be long."

As he left, Lewiston winced slightly, feeling guilty. He fully intended to go back and eat with Tony,
but he also knew he had a vital call to make, so his first destination was his office and the phone.

"NCIS."

"Agent Gibbs. I'm so glad I caught you."

"I just got back to the office. You don't sound happy."

"Believe me, I'm not. What was Director Shepard doing here this morning?"

Gibbs straightened abruptly and his expression darkened.

"What?"

"She had a psychiatrist in tow and insisted I let the man assess Tony."

"And you said..."

"I'm surprised you even have to ask."

"Right."

"When he realized she knew where he was... let's just say his reaction was justifiably extreme."

"Is he alright?"

"I calmed him down eventually. He's fine now. This can't happen again, Jethro. He's doing so well right now and anything that pulls his focus away from the issues he's working on..."

"I understand. I'll take care of it."

"Thank you."

"No problem. Whatever he needs, you call. Day or night."

"Hopefully I won't have to. I need to get back to him. Take care."

"You too."

Gibbs hung up the phone slowly and carefully and sat looking down at the device for several minutes, working to calm himself and thinking deeply about whether his plans now needed to be accelerated. Watching McGee and Ziva enter and re-settle at their desks, he pushed his anger down even further, drawing deep breaths and gradually releasing them. He knew from long experience that letting emotion talk you into charging ahead only ruined plans and destroyed lives. He would soon be having a talk with his former lover, but the topic would be nothing she was expecting.

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TBC......
Chapter 22

As he moved slowly up the stairs to the level where the Director and MTAC resided, Gibbs considered and rejected a few different ideas as to how he should handle what Sheppard had done. He had no doubt that the ill considered idea hadn't been her own, but that didn't mitigate his anger in the slightest. Still, he knew what his best course of action was and he resolved to follow it, despite the knowledge that he would likely be disgusted with himself for days, or perhaps weeks, afterward.

He had to keep her off balance in order to keep her from looking too closely at what he was doing and keep both her and Ziva out of his way until it was too late for either one to prevent their own destruction. That meant confusing Sheppard even further by showing her a Jethro Gibbs she hadn't seen in a very long time. Instead of fury, threats and possibly violence, Jen was about to receive the surprise of her life. The deception would cost Jethro some self-respect, and probably a sour stomach later that night from repressing his true feelings, but the sacrifice was one he was more than willing to make.

Walking stiffly into the outer office, he gave Cynthia a surprise as well by calmly waiting for her to announce him. He smiled thinly and responded to her raised eyebrow.

"I'm not sick. Just go on..."

"Director... Agent Gibbs is here to see you."

The reply that came a moment later was clearly tense and concerned, despite the tinny quality of the intercom speaker.

"Send him in."

"Already on his way." The young woman replied as Gibbs opened the door, stepped into Heppard's inner sanctum and quietly shut it again behind him. He studied Jen behind her desk for a long moment then moved to a nearby bookcase and ran one hand lightly over the volumes. He stayed silent and deliberately slumped his shoulders, projecting sorrow and confusion. Eventually, his ruse had its intended effect and Jen spoke first.

"Agent Gibbs?"

"Why would you do that?" he asked softly, finally turning to look at her. "I don't want to believe Tony could have done something to make you hate him that much, but if he did I need to know."

"Hate... I don't hate Tony. I was trying to help him... to make sure his position at NCIS will be here waiting when he returns. That won't happen without an evaluation by someone answerable only to the people above both of us."

"That means you've been in contact with SecNav." Jethro asked, now genuinely concerned.

"Not yet... but I'll have to eventually. I swore the staff psychologist to silence for the moment, but I can't keep it that way much longer."

Gibbs released a real sigh of relief, ignored the detour his plans had almost been forced into and moved close to Sheppard's desk, laying a hand over hers.

"Thank you, Dir... no, thank you, *Jenny*. You have to understand, Tony's kind of on a ledge right now. You showing up like that today... it nearly sent him into freefall. His doctor had to fight to pull
him out of it."

Her mouth hanging open slightly, Jen gazed down at their hands then back up at Jethro. He pulled
back suddenly, laughing darkly in his head at the hope he saw briefly shining in her gaze. His
expression, however, showed only regret and a faint reflection of her own jumbled emotions.
"Sorry."

"No... no, it's alright. I didn't realize how fragile Tony was. As I said, my intention wasn't to cause
any further damage. I was doing what I thought I had to... I'm sorry."

"I appreciate that."

"As for keeping this secret, I can give you a few more days, but that's all. I have superiors too..."

"I know. I'm grateful for whatever time you can buy me."

After a few seconds of staring deeply into her eyes, Gibbs leaned in, barely touched his lips to her
cheek and whispered in her ear. "Thanks again."

As he rose and moved back out of the office, Jen watched him go with an expression that was
composed of both shock and cautious joy.

Gibbs moved at a moderate pace back down to the bullpen, struggling not to run to his next
destination; the bathroom. Washing his hands, McGee surreptitiously observed his boss swishing and
spitting out two paper cups of water and starting on a third and felt he had to speak up.

"Boss? You get a bad coffee?"

"Bad something..." Gibbs replied, finally crumpling and tossing the cup. "You make progress on that
cold case you were looking at?"

"Actually... I did. There are a-a couple of things I spotted that may have been overlooked before. If I
could just have a little more time..."

"Take all you need. Just remember what we agreed to..."

"If we get called out I put it aside and focus on the new case. You can depend on me, Boss. You can
trust me..."

Gibbs turned from drying his hands, disposed of the paper towel and responded, slapping the young
man lightly on the back.

"If I didn't, you wouldn't still be here, Tim. Now let's get back to work."

"Right behind you, Boss."

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BETHESDA:

Once a nurse had cleared away their lunch trays, Lewiston spent a few minutes silently watching
Tony, trying to gauge how much stamina he had left. Finally, Tony grinned wearily and gently
called him out.

"Why don't you just say it?"
"Because I assume you're getting sick of being asked how you feel and if you're okay."

"You'd think... but if somebody had asked a long time ago, maybe I wouldn't be here."

"Would you have told them the truth?"

Tony laughed, knowing he was caught.

"Doubtful. If I knew the person really wanted an answer, though... who knows."

"It's true that most people don't. They're afraid to be obligated to do something about the problem, whatever it is. The people I talked to the other day... I didn't get that sense from them at all. I think if you'd opened up to Ducky or Abby months ago, you really might not have ended up wanting to hurt yourself that night."

"And there's the segue I was waiting for. We were going back to that topic, weren't we..."

"Absolutely, but only if you feel up to it. You've been through a lot today."

"I'm tired... but I can hold on a little longer."

"Okay. Let's go back to that night. Close your eyes and see it as a still picture. Tell me who's actually there in the office with you."

"Gibbs, McGee, Abby and Ziva."

"Not Ducky or Jimmy?"

"No. That doesn't mean Palmer's innocent, though. He still went to the damn party."

"How aware do you think he was of Ziva's deception?"

Tony's frown eased and he sighed quietly.

"Honestly? Not much, if at all. Let's face it, Jimmy is great at what he does and he's got a terrific mind, but... he's probably always been treated like a nerd. Nerds don't get looked at by beautiful, exotic women, never mind invited to parties. He couldn't be expected to refuse, I guess... and he wouldn't wanna jinx his luck by questioning her motives or why I wasn't there."

"Conclusion?"

"Off the hook."

"Good. Now study that frozen moment in your head. Look at their faces... and tell me what you really see. Try to step outside of what your emotions are pushing you to say. Tell me what's actually there in the expressions."

"Abby... she's happy, excited... relaxed. She was just talking about the party as if it was any other night that she had something fun to do... and couldn't wait to tell me."

"Meaning?"

"She wasn't hiding anything. She must've actually thought I just had someplace else to be that night. She didn't know..."

"Tim."
Tony produced a knowing smile, but it dissolved into a confused scowl as he worked through things logically.

"He was gloating... he always gets that smirk when he gloats. Wait, though... if he's taken on the place of middle child, like you said, then he would've jumped at the chance to get in on something cool without having to stand in big brother's shadow for once. God, that's where the look came from..."

"Gibbs."

Tony's eyes popped open and he stared sadly at Lewiston.

"He was just playing dad, wasn't he? One of his kids missed a family event for something he considered a lot less important. Ziva probably told him I was out chasing skirts or drinking..."

"That sounds likely from what little I know of her. So the final answer on Gibbs would be..."

"He didn't mean it either... he wasn't trying to hurt me. Damn... so what am I supposed to do now if I can't be mad at them anymore?"

"I'm afraid this is where the really hard work begins. You've worked out where your anger deserves to be directed and where it doesn't. Now you need to look inside."

"Figure out what I did to get myself to this point, you mean."

"I'm not saying there weren't factors beyond you that helped put you in that apartment with a knife in your hand, but it's vital that you understand the things you *were* in control of."

"Hell... I don't think I'm strong enough for that."

"You are. I have absolutely no doubt."

"Well as long as one of us is sure..."

"Don't worry, I'll get you over the finish line, Tony. Kicking and screaming, maybe, but I'll get you there. Now lay down and get some rest, alright? I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Tony countered the proposal, even as he fought off a yawn.

"Not that tired. You must have some books in this place, right? Can I get something to read? My brain's turning to oatmeal without input and stimulation..."

"I'll bring a selection with me when I come back, but only if I see your head on that pillow in the next ten seconds."

Tony reluctantly complied, grumbling as he pulled the blanket up to his chin.

"Gibbs, Ducky, now you... I need a third dad like the world needs clones of Ziva..."

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TBC........
9:30 THAT NIGHT: GIBBS' BASEMENT

Barely sipping at the inch or so of bourbon in his usual tumbler, Jethro sighed as the liquid was swallowed down, pacifying his conscience and his soul even as it freshly insulted the tissues of his throat. Carefully setting the glass on the stairs, he turned and gazed at his unfinished boat. For the first time in months he had no interest in completing it and that made him vaguely sad. He knew he would never destroy it as he had the others he'd tried to build, but the passion for this one was slowly leaching out of him and he didn't know how to make it stop.

Just as he was about to make the effort, apathy or not, the bell upstairs rang. Frowning, he re-settled the tumbler somewhere safer, made his way up to the house and answered the door.

"McGee. We got a case?"

"Kind of. Well, not a new one, but it is..."

Tim paused and took a deep breath, calming himself. He was excited and happy and the last thing he wanted was to drive his boss in the opposite emotional direction with his enthusiasm. "The cold case I was looking into? I did it, boss. I really think I figured it out."

Gibbs' eyebrow shot up.

"Yeah? I'm sure you're right, but can it wait 'till work tomorrow?"

Tim paled and his smile faded away as he began to back up slowly.

"Oh... it is kind of late. I was just so psyched... I'm sorry, boss. It's lasted this long, of course it can hang on a few more hours..."

Gibbs closed his eyes, grimaced faintly and surrendered.

"Tim, wait. C'mon in here and let's have a look at what you've got."

His restored grin still a little unsure, McGee moved cautiously into the house, dropped into a chair across from where Gibbs was now perched on the couch and handed the older man the file. At several points over the next half hour, Tim caught himself starting to speak up or make a point and stopped just in time. He trusted Gibbs to understand his notes and come to the same conclusion. When Gibbs looked up at last, his expression was grave and Tim knew his faith had been well placed. "You have a current address for this guy?"

"Right here on the first page, boss."

"What's the other material at the back?" Gibbs asked, looking down at the thick folder once more. "It all looks too new to be... shit." He swore softly, his color draining as he realized the truth.

"I know, boss. It twisted my gut into knots too. Our cold case was just the beginning for this bastard..."

Gibbs rose and Tim followed suit quickly, taking pride in the fact that he didn't fumble or drop the file when Gibbs slapped it back into his hands.

"Okay, get on the phone and tell Ziva to meet us back at the office ASAP. It's gonna be a long
SIX HOURS LATER:

Gibbs watched a grimly joyful Tim McGee march a balding middle-aged man past the bullpen and toward the corridor leading to the interrogation rooms. Stifling an enormous yawn, he briefly debated whether to also allow the young agent the privilege of questioning the serial killer his diligent work had uncovered. At the moment, however, all Gibbs could think seriously about was his warm bed and ten hours of sleep.

Slowly moving off, he followed Tim's path, catching up just as he was settling the suspect into a chair. Through the glass, Gibbs crooked one finger and the other man left the brightly lit cell to join his boss in the hall.

"Yeah, boss?"

"I know you're anxious to get started, but neither of us is in any shape to go after him right now. Have him moved to the holding cells until we are."

"Right..." Tim responded wearily, looking at his watch. "Almost four-thirty. I might as well catch a nap at my desk since I have to be here in about three hours anyway."

"I respect myself *and* you more than that, McGee."

"Ahh... you already arranged the day off with the director."

"For cracking this fossil you deserve two weeks in Jamaica and I told her so."

Tim looked shocked and mildly hopeful, but Gibbs, regretfully, shot him down. "I said you deserve it, not that she'd go for it. Tomorrow free and clear is the best I could do."

"I'd go nuts away from work that long, anyway, boss, but thanks for trying. I'll see you day after."

"Actually... there's a place I've been wanting to show you. I was planning on going this weekend, but seeing how things have worked out... if you wanna come along..."

"Of course, I'd love to, but..."

"Yeah, I wanted to show Tony, too. I will when he's back with us. Right now is your moment. You did the great work... you get the reward."

"Okay. After lunch?"

"I'll pick you up at two. Don't wear anything you'd be pissed to get dirty."

"Uh... got it. See you then, boss."

"Night, Tim."

As Lewiston was approaching Tony's room with an arm full of books, he recalled something he'd
wanted to request of one of the nurses and he detoured to the desk, only to find a familiar face already engaged in conversation with the person he'd hoped to speak to.

"Abby. It's good to see you. What in the world is that you're holding?"

"Just something I wanted Tony to have. The nurse was explaining that she'd have to get your permission. Now you're here, so... can I?"

"You stay right here a minute. I'll be right back. Promise you'll stay?"

Abby nodded solemnly, so Lewiston, after dropping the books on the desk, gave her a reassuring smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Good. I won't be long."

Striding quickly back to Tony's room, he entered and was pleased to find his patient already up and finished with breakfast.

"Morning, doc."

"Morning. I have a question for you. Since we worked out yesterday that nobody but Ziva meant you any harm that night... can we discuss expanding the visitor's list?"

Tony hesitated, but only for a few moments.

"I guess. They've probably been bugging you, huh?"

"Not at all. When I went to the office they all seemed anxious to see for themselves that you were doing as well as I claimed. There was some mention of forgiveness, too."

"Going which direction?" Tony asked, genuinely curious.

"You forgiving them, of course. Even though I'm sure everyone knows rationally that they weren't to blame for what happened, their emotions are still in control."

"And letting your emotions lead doesn't always help you recognize the truth."

"Exactly. Of course as I said earlier, eventually you'll need to ask their forgiveness as well. We'll talk about that a little today."

"Zippe-dee doo-dah."

"In the meantime, someone has anticipated your agreeing to more visitors."

"Who?"

"Abby. She's waiting out at the desk."

"Can... I've been craving more sun. Can I see her down there?"

"Absolutely. Whenever you're ready, I'll walk you out."

As before, getting Tony out of the room was a slow, patient process on both their parts, but it eventually succeeded. A few minutes later, Lewiston had Tony settled comfortably on a window seat in the sun room and sent a nearby orderly to find Abby and direct her to where they waited. Tony's heart broke when he saw her approaching uncertainly, her expression clearly telling him that she was afraid of what she might find. As she got closer and he realized what was in clutched in her arms, his face opened up into a bright smile and he even laughed quietly. To his great relief his obvious joy
switched the Abby he knew back on and she rushed forward, dropping to her knees in front of him and releasing what she held in order to wrap him in a fierce embrace.

"Tony... Tony..."

"Hey, Abs. Easy... it's okay. *I'm* okay..."

"No you're not or you wouldn't be here..." she countered, thumping him almost viciously on the arm she knew hadn't been injured.

"Ahhh! Okay... I guess I deserve that."

"Yeah... you do." She told him as he finally pulled away. He stroked the back of one hand down her cheek and tugged gently on one pigtail. She moved up to sit beside him and he turned a little to face her.

"I know. I was mad and sad and mixed up... everything just seemed to crash in on me all at once. I didn't know what to do..."

"Not that."

"No... not that." He promised, reaching down to retrieve the item she'd left on the floor. "Good to see him again, too. I haven't had much to laugh about these last few days and Bert could always do it..."

He grinned at the stuffed animal for a long moment then handed him back to his mistress. To his surprise, she pressed Bert back into his hands.

"That's kinda why I brought him. I want you to keep him... at least 'till you come home again."

"Abby... no, I couldn't. I can't take him from you."

"I'll survive. You need him more than I do right now. Besides, if I squeeze Timmy hard enough, and in the right place, he does the same thing."

Tony erupted in laughter once again and drew Abby back into his arms.

"Too much information, Abs. Thanks for this. It means more than I can tell you..."

"Come home..." she whispered into his neck, her tears staining the neck of the scrubs he wore.

"Soon. I'm not ready just yet... but soon."

"Swear."

"I swear."

"Swear on your car."

Pulling back slightly, he mock scowled down into her face.

"Hey, I wouldn't ask you to swear on your GC mass-spec now would I?"

"Too far."

"Damn right."

"I should go. I'm late already and if Sheppard finds out..."
"I get it. Go on."

Reluctantly, Abby rose to her feet after giving Tony one more powerful hug. "Tell everybody I'm doing good, okay?"

"I will. Bye..."

"Bye, Abs."

Once she was out of sight, Lewiston took his own look at the hippo Tony was holding.

"Dare I ask what she was referring to?"

"You mean what she can make Bert and Tim both do if she squeezes?"

Tony looked around to insure himself that nobody was close enough to be offended then applied pressure to Bert's middle. The one-trick pony did his trick and suddenly it was Lewiston's turn to belly laugh.

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TBC.....
Once he'd recovered his composure, Lewiston sighed and petted Bert gently.

"That's one cool hippo, I have to admit."

"Yeah... he really is. Not as cool as Abby, though. This... this thing isn't just a stuffed animal to her... it's a combination best friend, confidante and security blanket. You can't know what a sacrifice it was for her to give this up... even temporarily."

"Pretty special."

"More than anybody outside our team will ever understand. Umm... when I told her I wasn't ready... I was talking about going home. What, umm... what's your opinion on that?" Tony asked quietly, sudden fear rendering him unable to raise his eyes from the glass ones staring up at him from the circle of his arms.

"Three or four more days. Maybe not even that long."

The response to his question brought Tony's head up and around swiftly, his gaze locking with his doctor's.

"That's all? Four more days? That can't be right. I'm still having trouble getting out of my room, for Gods' sake..."

Lewiston chuckled.

"Take it as a compliment, Tony. You're doing very well. We've got the toughest issues to work through still, but you're definitely a lot stronger than you were going in. Another few days will be more than enough time, trust me."

"And... after that?"

"Five to six months of outpatient treatment."

Tony dropped his eyes again and leaned forward, shifting Bert to a two handed grip and focusing on the hippo's bland features, hoping to calm his racing heart and mind.

"Wow... I can't figure out the next five minutes. Looking that far ahead..."

"You don't have to, not yet, anyway. Let's take your new buddy to your room and settle in for a talk, okay?"

"Do I have to? The personal reasons I ended up holding that knife to my wrist... I'm just afraid they're buried in some majorly unattractive sludge."

"That's a good bet."

"Then why dredge them up?"

"Because hoarding noxious secrets isn't good for any part of you; mind, body or spirit. Plus, exposing them to the light destroys them and lets you start to heal, which is never a bad thing."

"Like a serious infection has to be drained and cleaned before the anti-biotics will do any good."
"Perfect analogy. That's exactly how it works."

"So the outpatient therapy... is like not stopping before you take all the pills... even though you're not seeing the doctor every day anymore. If you don't take the whole course of medicine, the next time you get sick... it'll be worse and the same treatment won't work as well, if it works at all."

Lewiston whistled softly, surprised anew by the quickness and flexibility of Tony's mind.

"Boy, that insight of yours is one powerful tool. No wonder you're Gibbs' Senior Agent."

"It wasn't my charm or my pretty face." Tony joked feebly, standing and carefully hugging Bert to his chest once more. "Let's get going, huh? I've still got a mile high mountain of crud to sort through and only four more days to do it."

Lewiston nodded, rose and followed silently. As they approached Tony's room, the doctor took a quick detour to pick up the books he'd left on the desk and trailed Tony into the more private space. Closing the door behind him, he was pleased to see Tony's eyes light up when he saw the stack of paperbacks.

"Cool." Tony commented, taking his usual seat on the bed and reluctantly laying Bert aside. "Can I."

"Of course." Lewiston agreed, handing over the books and claiming his chair. Tony sorted rapidly through the stack, setting aside all but one non-fiction book. Lewiston's eyebrows lifted momentarily at the choice of subject matter. "'Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee'? Interesting."

"I have a big section of books on Native American culture and history at my place. I love the subject, but anything I read has to be from their point of view or show them in a positive light."

"Sympathy for an unfairly displaced people who never really got the justice they deserved. Completely understandable."

Tony looked up in surprise from his perusal of the back cover of the book.

"Yeah... yeah, I guess it is. No comparison between our experiences, though. I could never have survived what they've gone through."

"You were forced out of the only home you knew and into a consistently stressful situation with no real chance to prepare and few tools to help you survive. The people who promised to protect you and give you a fair return on your loyalty and trust ended up betraying you. I'd say there's a comparison."

Tony stared at Lewiston in shock for several seconds before finding his voice.

"You know, it's really unnerving when you do that."

"So I've been told." Lewiston replied, laughing quietly. "My friends keep insisting that if they didn't know it was an unconscious habit they wouldn't still *be* my friends."

"Yeah, well... disturbing or not, I'm grateful. It's useful for shifting my perspective around when I'm focused on the wrong thing... or in the wrong direction."

"You never really had anyone to do that for you, did you?"

"No... not 'till NCIS. Gibbs, Abby, Ducky, they all kept me so grounded... they kept my head in
proportion to my body."

"Kept? Past tense?"

"I want that back... but it's like you said, the forgiveness has to go both ways and I don't... I'm just not sure..." Tony confessed, exchanging the book for Bert once more.

"They do have a right to be angry, even if they don't realize it yet. It won't be easy when they do. You did a good job with Abby earlier, accepting that minor reprimand she threw at you out of nowhere."

"She's good at that. Spend any time at all around Abs and you learn to shift gears and the topic of conversation as fast as she does. Those who can't keep up don't last long in her world."

"No, I would guess not."

"I don't know how I'm gonna handle them being pissed with me. I may not be able to help getting defensive. They weren't there, they weren't inside my skin or my head... they don't know what I was going through."

"Are you completely sure about that?"

"No, of course not. How could I be?"

"There's one way."

Tony mused for several minutes, once again gazing deeply into Bert's deep eyes as if they were a teleprompter and the answers would suddenly appear in them, ready to recite. Finally, he smiled thinly and gave a subdued response.

"Is there a space here that's big enough for me to talk to all of them at once? Someplace where you do group therapy, maybe?"

"Absolutely. I can set that up."

"Okay... God, I know I have to do it, but... looking around at their faces and not seeing the one I most need to talk to... that'll drive me right back in here for another week, I know it."

"What would Kate's reaction have been to all this?"

"Katie... would have kicked my ass to Miami and back for even thinking of suicide. 'DiNozzo, you stupid bastard! The damn *plague* couldn't take you out, why the hell would you try to find the afterlife voluntarily?!' I need that more than anything else right now. No pity, no tears... just a boot upside my head to knock sense back into me and that voice yelling at me to get over and get on."

Tony suddenly burst out laughing and dropped over on his side, hugging Bert tightly enough that he made his trademark noise again, which only got Tony cackling harder. When he'd finally calmed down, Lewiston questioned him.

"What was that about?"

"I-I always wondered why her parents named her Kate... it's such a simple, kinda sweet name and she wasn't either one. I just got it... Shakespeare... Taming of the Shrew..."

Laughter suddenly devolved into tears and abject grief as Lewiston moved to perch on the edge of
"I miss her, damn it... I want her back...

"Would she want this, Tony? Think about what you just told me...

"No... no, she'd hate knowing I was still grieving her... her loss."

"Try that again."

"What?"

"You talk about that day in euphemisms and general terms, but I haven't heard you actually say the words. Sit up... that's right. Now, look me in the eyes. No evasions this time. Look right here and tell me what happened to Kate."

"She... she was shot."

"No. What happened to Kate?"

"A terrorist murdered her..."

"No, Tony."

"I don't understand... what are you doing? What is it you want?"

"The truth. Tell me. For Kate and for you... what happened to her that day?"

"I can't... I can't let her go..."

"Not your choice. Someone else made that decision and it was over before you even realized what was happening. Now the only thing you can do is acknowledge that. C'mon, Tony... you can do this. Say the words."

"She... the bastard shot her down... she was just laying there... her eyes open... I looked down and... I knew... I knew she was dead... the son of a bitch killed Katie...I couldn't stop him... and I couldn't save her..." Tony sobbed, falling face first onto the mattress. Lewiston stroked his hair and patted his back.

"Since her death you've barely had time to slow down, Tony. Pushing your grief aside and charging ahead isn't the same as going through the process. You've got time, now, and someone to guide you through it. You're not fighting every battle alone anymore, remember? I'm here... I'm right here."

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2:45

Pulling his arms around his body, Tim shivered in the wind off the water and wished he'd also brought a jacket to go over his old t-shirt and the flannel shirt that flapped loose in the chill breeze. Gibbs grinned as he retrieved the keys from the ignition, exited the car, closed and locked the doors and moved to stand beside the younger man.

"The wind can whip out here sometimes. I've got a coat in the back seat if you want it."

"No... I'll be fine once we get inside, boss. This place is huge. What is it?"

"One of the cornerstones of my life these past few years. Kept me from goin' crazy more than once."
"Okay... that's good to know, but it doesn't answer the question."

The smack to the back of his head surprised Tim, but a moment later he grinned from ear to ear, realizing that he'd just received a sort of baptism. "Eyes and ears open, mouth closed. Got it, boss."

"Good. Now let's go."

As they approached, a sign answered Tim's question for him, but that only sent more curious thoughts racing through his head:

ALEXANDRIA SEAPORT FOUNDATION

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TBC.........
Joe Youcha is a real person and the real head of this amazing foundation. Go google it or him. I swear, you'll be as pleased as I was.

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Just as the pair were about to enter the building, Gibbs' cell rang and he paused to retrieve and answer it, hoping against hope that it wasn't a work emergency ruining his plans. He had little enough time to get to this special place and now, with McGee in tow, he found more than the usual excitement singing through his veins and along his nerves.

"Gibbs. Yeah? That's great. He what? He did. Okay... no, I knew it'd happen, just... Yeah. Whenever you are. Right. That soon? Is he... oh. That's good news... really good. Yeah, just phone or e-mail me the details. Okay. Thanks for the update. I know you said you would... hey, back off my cynical nature, willya? It helps me do my job," Gibbs chuckled. "Maybe so. Thanks again. Okay. Okay. Bye."

Gibbs flipped his phone closed and looked up to find McGee studying him with a curious expression. "Tony's put us all on the visitor's list. Plus he wants to set up a group meeting... so we can all put this behind us at the same time."

"All except you know who. Right?"

"After the attitude she was throwing around when we all met in the office? That goes without saying."

"Good. That's good."

"When he gets the when and where arranged, Lewiston will let me know. He, uh... he says Tony should be ready to get outta there in a few more days. Says it's goin' better than he could've hoped."

"That's a huge relief, boss."

"Yeah... yeah it is. Don't call me that in here, by the way."

"What, boss?"

"Off-duty or out of the office... it's just Gibbs."

"Gotcha, b... I mean Gibbs."

"Nice catch. One thing you need to know before we go in here... you can be surprised, but stay aware enough not to look it. I know I told you first impressions are usually on target, but this place is an exception."

"Understood. I'm ready."

"Hope so. Let's get moving. Lots to do, only a few hours to do it."

McGee nodded slightly and followed Gibbs through the door and into the immense space. As he glanced up and around, struggling to absorb the entirety of what he was seeing, he was deeply grateful for the older man's warning. The long, high building was filled with various shapes and sizes of boats, all in different stages of construction. Most were unattended, but a few were being
diligently worked on, and the workers, Tim knew, were what Gibbs had been talking about.

"Wow. This is incredible, Gibbs. The kids... they aren't what they look like, are they?"

"They were. Gangs, drugs... general bad attitude and bad behavior. This place is a new chance for them... a shot at something better."

Tim smiled.

"The discipline, the need to listen and remember or the boat will never be right, the sense of accomplishment and building instead of tearing down... I get it. That's so cool. How did you find out about this place?"

"Old crony grapevine. A lot of the volunteers are ex-military. One of 'em was a good friend. He brought me down, put a sanding block in my hand..."

"... and you were hooked. So the basement grew out of working here?"

"Not really. I had the interest before this place... but no knowledge, no understanding. I'd start a boat, get it part-way or mostly done, then realize it was crap, destroy it and blame it on whichever marriage I'd just blown to hell. Volunteering here... I learned what it really meant to *want* to build something... to need to instead of just futzing around 'cause I was bored or frustrated. I also learned how good it felt passing that lesson on to these kids. That... that's what hooked me."

"And now it's my chance. Gibbs... I'm really honored."

"Don't thank me yet. Once you get the hang of this place, you'll be expected to do some passing on and teaching."

"I understand that. That's why I'm honored." Tim replied quietly, working to control his emotions, which were suddenly close to the surface. Sniffing, and praying Gibbs would think he was just taking in and enjoying the diverse carpentry aromas, Tim grinned and subtly changed the subject. "Can we start now? I'm getting charged up about this..."

"When he says we can." Gibbs told him, indicating the stocky man striding in their direction. When he reached them, the stranger enveloped Gibbs forearm in a tight grasp and cuffed the former marine heartily on the shoulder.

"Jethro. Long time no see, my man."

"Hey, Joe." Gibbs greeted, returning the grin the other man was beaming at him and squeezing his hand firmly before he was released. "Tim McGee, this is Joe Youcha. He runs the place."

"Nice to meet you, sir." Tim said, offering his hand. Youcha shook it firmly.

"You too. Good to finally meet a member of this famous team Jethro's been telling me about for so long."

Tim flushed slightly and found other things to look at, making Gibbs' smile widen. He focused on his friend, allowing Tim to recover his composure.

"Got anything we can work on, Joe?"

Youcha turned and gazed quickly around the space, his eyes running appraisingly over all the works in progress.
"Nothing that isn't claimed, I'm afraid. I don't like to let anyone mess with something one of my kids has put their mark on... why don't you start fresh? I've got the materials for a new boat all ready to go down the other end."

"That'd be great, buddy. Thanks."

"No problem." He responded, turning a solemn, intent expression on McGee. "You prefer first name or last, young man?"

"Uhhh... Tim, please."

"We have two major rules around here, Tim. I expect both to be followed without exception. One; never, ever dodge any safety precaution Jethro shows you, no matter how silly or unnecessary it might seem. Two; before you pick up or touch any tool, listen to Jethro and watch him use it first. Clear?"

"Eyes and ears open, mouth shut. I know that rule intimately, sir."

"Working under a marine, I was sure you would, but I had to say it anyway. I'm supervising a newcomer right now, but I'll come check on you two in a while, okay? Have fun, 'Ro."

"Do my best. Thanks again, Joe."

"You know you and anybody you drag along are always welcome. Be nice if we saw you more often, matter of fact, but I know how dedicated you are to NCIS. Dinner for three when you've worn the kid out?"

"Sounds good."

Youcha walked away and Gibbs grimaced. Tim fought down his urge to grin and the even stronger desire to ask the origin of the nickname.

"I swear, nobody will ever hear about it from me, Gibbs."

"I'll hold you to that. C'mon..."

Tim followed Gibbs to the other end of the building and, over several trips, gathered the pieces of wood the older man pointed out, piling them carefully in a secluded area a few yards away. After donning heavy gloves and protective goggles, he observed how Gibbs worked the sanding block over a long plank that had been lifted up and balanced between two sawhorses. His stomach mildly twisted in apprehension when Jethro stopped and silently held the tool out to him.

"Are you sure, Gibbs? All of a sudden, I'm not..."

"It's not a big deal, Tim. Just go with the grain and take your time."

"The grain?"

"Here... see how it is..."

"Oh... oh, yeah. Okay. I just... like this?" Tim asked, making a tentative swipe with the block.

"Yeah, but put a little effort in. Don't be afraid to put some weight behind it... there. Better. Much better..."

When Joe was finally able to come and check on the pair almost two hours later, Tim had moved on
from sanding to planing and his joy in Gibbs' occasional praise could be felt and seen. As the other approached, Tim looked up and carefully laid the tool down, his arms dropping immediately to his sides. Youcha grinned, realizing that the young man was exhausted as well as ecstatic.

"Hey, guys. How's he doing, 'Ro?"

"Not bad. He's got a natural feel for the wood and he's picking up the techniques faster than I thought he might."

"Hmmph. You're right. Not many first timers have such a gentle, easy touch with the plane... not exactly the style for a shipwright, but an instrument maker or a carver... definite possibilities."

Youcha murmured, closely examining the work Tim had been doing a moment before. "Nice job, Tim. Time to shut down, though. I don't know about you two, but a medium rare T-bone steak is calling my name and I don't plan to keep it waiting much longer."

"It hasn't been that long, has it..." Tim countered, checking his watch. "Wow. I was so wrapped up in the wood and what I was doing... I didn't notice."

Gibbs and Joe both laughed as they guided Tim away from his work and back toward the outside world.

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AN EMERGENCY ROOM SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE OF D.C.

"Miss..."

"I told you, it's Jenny. Just call me Jenny, alright? No last names."

"That's your choice. Are you sure you won't tell me how you got these injuries, Jenny? I can help you and I swear you'll be safe from whoever did this..."

"No! I mean... I said I was mugged this morning. Just... do something about the pain, please..."

"I want to believe you, but some of these wounds are whip marks and one or two are clearly several days old..."

"Stop it! I told you what happened and that's all I'm saying. Do your job, for God's sake!"

"Okay, I hear you, Jenny. This will take a while, I'm afraid. The infection is deep on a few of the older wounds."

"I understand. Just do it... whatever you have to do, just do it."

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TBC....
Chapter 26

LATER THAT EVENING:

"Yes? That's marvelous, Jethro. Just what we were... well, of course. Hmmm. I don't know. I'm sure he'd be glad to if... no, that's very true. Tony hasn't seen him in quite a long while. I'll ask, of course. Do contact the doctor and Anthony and get confirmation, just in case. You did? At last! I've been pleading with you to take both of them there for an eternity. I did predict that, didn't I? The boy is sensitive and creative. One can fairly see it in his face... instrument maker? Yes... yes, I can easily believe that. That doesn't preclude his further work at the foundation, however. A touch and talent for wood is a touch and talent. It can be expressed in a variety of ways. I do, actually. She makes guitars. Yes, I absolutely will contact her. No... no problem at all. She's been looking for an apprentice for a few months now. Good. When the details of our meeting with Anthony are finalized... excellent. Yes. Well, I wouldn't expect you to be anything *but* exhausted, dear boy. Yes... good-night."

As Ducky hung up the phone, his face alight with happiness, Gerald approached and joined him on the sofa, handing his lover a cup of tea. "Oh, thank you, love. Just what's wanted..."

Gerald kissed the older man softly on the cheek, a large part of his recent burden of worry falling from his shoulders on seeing Ducky's expression.

"You look wonderful. The phone call must have been good news."

"Indeed. Tony has agreed that all of us can come and visit. As a matter of fact, Doctor Lewiston has even persuaded him to participate in a... I believe they call it a 'group session', so that we can all air how we've been feeling since that awful night."

"That's fantastic." Gerald responded happily, pulling his legs up and snuggling close. "He really must be getting better, then."

"Yes, it would seem so. Timothy appears to be having his own growth spurt, so to speak. Young Mr. McGee has been revisiting a few very cold cases, hoping to find one he could provide a resolution for, and he succeeded. Quite spectacularly, according to Jethro."

"Great! What sent him in that direction in the first place?"

"He claims Tony taught him that justice delayed is no justice at all and he wanted to prove the lesson didn't go in one ear and out the other. The preparation and arrest kept he and Jethro up into the wee hours of this morning so they received today off. I did wonder about their absence. It's good to know the explanation was a happy one..." Ducky elaborated, drifting off into silence and contemplation until Gerald chuckled and nudged him gently.

"And? I know that can't be the whole story. You were on the phone for forty minutes."

"Oh. As a reward, Jethro finally took Timothy to the foundation for an hour or two."

"About time. How did Tim do?"

"Very well. Jethro seems to think the boy is a natural. The resident expert agreed, though he did mention Tim might make a better instrument designer than a shipwright. His delicate touch...

Now Gerald lit up.
"Susannah."

"Yes. I do believe she and Timothy will get along quite well."

"Maybe he'll even learn to play."

"Wouldn't that be splendid?" Ducky sighed, setting his cup carefully on the table in front of him. Gerald wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close.

"Another?"

"No... no, one is fine for the moment."

"It sounds like everything is getting better at work. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind?"

"Anthony's troubles are only a small part of the reason for my decision, love. You're finally healed, body and mind... you deserve this chance. Besides, who knows how much time you and I may have left?"

"Don, don't talk like that, please..."

"Oh, I know you dislike hearing it, but I am no longer young, Gerald dear. How ever many months or years remain for me to love you, they will be much more satisfying if both of us are happy... and this choice makes me happy."

"Okay. I can accept that. I can accept anything as long as you stop looking so haggard and lost. I've been so frightened for you..."

Ducky leaned in and kissed away the tear tracking down Gerald's cheek.

"No more than I have for myself. Trying times... but as you said, things are slowly getting better. Jethro asked if you'd like to attend the group meeting with the rest of us. I told him I'd present you the option, but don't feel obligated..."

"Wow... it's been a while. Considering Ari was causing such havoc and grief back then, seeing me might just bring back bad memories for Tony."

"Well, Jethro is going to contact Lewiston and check on it from Tony's end. Why don't you just think on it until we hear the result?"

"Yeah... I'll do that."

"Good. Now, I do believe it's time for bed."

"Tired, hmmm? It has been a long day."

"I said bed... not sleep. I think a celebration is in order for all the positive news that found its way to us today. If you're agreeable?"

"Always." Gerald replied, kissing Ducky until both were breathless.

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Sipping his soda, Tim winced slightly at the noise waxing and waning around him. He had resisted coming here at first, but he could never hold out against Abby for long and this was where she
wanted to go when she heard and saw how excited he was following his afternoon with Gibbs. He grinned as he watched her devouring pizza.

"That's your tenth slice, Abby. You'll explode if you don't quit soon."

"You can never have too much pizza, Timmy. It's a universal law. Besides, I'll work it off when we hit the games. Man, I love Chuckie Cheese!"

"And I love you, so for one night... I'm good with it." He laughed, leaning in and placing a kiss in her hair.

"So? You were telling me about last night."

"Oh... I almost talked myself out of going over to his house, but I just knew I was right, so I just... took the plunge. I didn't think he'd even let me in, but he did, he looked at the file and my notes... and he agreed. It was such a... a moment, feeling like I was worth something in his eyes. Then we did the prep work and went and got the guy. Bringing the SOB in, it was... I can't describe how it felt. I've never been that high on the job... that into what I do."

"And this afternoon?"

"That was incredible. I've never worked with wood before, but it felt absolutely right. I watched and listened to Gibbs before I tried it myself, you know, but... when I got the tools in my hands it was like I'd been doing it forever. And knowing that he thought enough of me to take me there... it was a major shock. I'm still absorbing everything that happened and the things he said..."

Turning a sober look up at Tim, Abby studied him carefully before speaking again.

"And when Tony comes back?"

"I don't know. I'll deal with it... I'll have to."

Abby reached over and touched Tim's face caringly.

"I'm proud of you for taking the initiative, baby. Gibbs won't just forget what you've shown him these past few days. You know he isn't like that. Even if he was, Tony wouldn't *let* Gibbs forget."

"Tony wants his place back. If he steps on me to get it... I won't really be able to blame him."

"Timmy, stop. That won't happen. Remember what you told Lewiston that day we all met at work? You said Tony pushed you and teased you to make you stronger and better. How can you think he won't be thrilled to see how well it worked? You stepped up and had Gibbs' back when Tony couldn't be there. He'll be so proud of you for that..."

"You think?" Tim responded uncertainly.

"I know."

Tim brightened.

"Sounds good, but when we're all together again... then I'll know for sure. Skee-ball?"

"Oh, you don't wanna challenge me at skee-ball, Timmy."

"I was the champion at my high school *and* at MIT."
"Yeah, but I come here at least once a week. You are so going down." Abby chortled, rising and tugging Tim up to his feet.

"Okay, okay. You'll see. Prepare to have your butt kicked."

"Fewest tickets has to trade them for whatever the other person wants at the prize counter?"

"You're on."

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**GIBBS' HOUSE**

Taking a slow sip of his coffee, Gibbs contemplated his current boat and gradually admitted to himself that this was the one that would reach completion. Turning away, he laughed quietly at the reasons and the thought that he had revealed things to Tim McGee earlier that day that no one else knew. Truthfully, he had been a bit shocked himself to hear the words. Finishing off the mug of coffee, he greeted the visitor who had stopped halfway down the basement stairs.

"Tobias. Come on down."

Fornell acceded to the request, but when he spoke, his tone was not friendly or casual.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at, Gibbs?"

"Uh-oh. Somebody's pissed. What are we talking about?"

"David. He's on a flight here as we speak."

"Yeah?"

"Don't mess with me, damn it. You knew all about this. What have you done?"

"I told him a few truths... left it up to him to decide what to do with them."

"Truths? Like what?"

Gibbs was silent. Picking up a sanding block, he moved to the boat and began cleaning up a rough edge he'd noticed. His response was proved unnecessary a few moments later when Fornell suddenly realized what Gibbs meant. "Jethro, you didn't. God, tell me you didn't do what I think..."

"Okay. I didn't."

"Oh, hell... he knows about Ari?"

Gibbs smiled lightly and gestured at his mug.

"You want a cup of coffee? There's bourbon as usual..."

"Shit, Jethro..."

"... is about to hit the fan. I suggest you stay out of the line of fire."

"You expect me *not* to interfere? You are out of your ever-loving mind..."

"For God's sake, Tobias, how long have you known me? I don't do anything without a damn good reason."
"And this time?"

"When it's over and done... we'll go have a beer and I'll tell you everything. For now, just back off."

"Jethro..."

"I'm protecting my family. That's all you need to know."

"Family... you mean DiNozzo."

Gibbs threw Fornell an icy warning glare. "I know he hasn't been at work, that's all. As to the reason, I don't have a clue."

"Keep it that way."

"Jethro... your ass is on the line here, even if nothing goes wrong with whatever you're planning."

"You don't think I know that?"

"I'm sure you do."

"Then either have a drink or pick up a tool and help with the boat."

Fornell sighed and shook his head.

"Where's the bourbon?"

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TBC.....
8:30 A.M. THE FOLLOWING MORNING

When Tim arrived at work, he found Gibbs in a familiar state, making very familiar sounds. The older man was leaning close to his computer screen, growling and muttering under his breath. Grinning, McGee approached with caution and spoke quietly.

"Boss? Can I help?"

"Stupid... machines are supposed to *help* you, not make you wanna start a bonfire with 'em..."

"What are you trying to... oh, I think I see. If you want I can do that on mine."

"Yeah... why not? Go on..."

Tim moved back to his desk, powered up his system and pulled up the website Gibbs had been trying to enter.

"See. With all the lawsuits from the artists... you have to pay for this kind of thing now. I have an account on this site. The price is minimal... like a buck a song, and it's really worth it, at least for me, since I don't download a lot... there we go. Signed in. What artist were you looking for?"

Gibbs gazed around quickly, as if he were worried about being overheard, then took the extra precaution of lowering his voice a little, just to be sure.

"One smirk, one giggle..."

"Of course not, boss. I take my music seriously."

"Billy Joel."

"One of my favorites. I have a lot of his CD's at home." Tim responded, typing the search request in and bringing up a list of albums and the songs they contained. "Any song in particular?"

"I wish I knew. It was one of those where the title isn't real obvious. I heard it on the way in this morning on the oldies station. Something about how the simple lines are already written and the radio just repeats them..."

Tim's grin returned full force.

"I know just which one you mean... here. This is it, right?" he said, waving Gibbs over.

"'If I Only Had the Words'... yeah, I should've guessed that. He says it enough in the course of the song. It just doesn't *sound* like a title..."

"Billy has a way of putting out songs like that. Some of his titles are easy to pick out, some you really have to work at it."

"Can I... how do I get this so I can take it home?"

"I'll burn the song to a CD for you."

"Burn? I didn't mean it about the bonfire, McGee..."
"Burn like transfer the song to a disk that will play in a CD stereo or a portable... please, don't hit me, boss, but I have to ask..."

"Yeah, I have a CD player at home. You won't get smacked, 'cause you begged me not to, but just for future reference, age and or techno-phobe comments..."

"Smack is imminent. I understand."

Directing one ear behind them, still listening for Ziva or anyone else that might be getting in earshot, Gibbs asked another question.

"So... you can do more than one song?"

"Yeah. Up to twenty, maybe, on a regular CD. Way more than that on a quality MP3 player. See, an MP3..."

"Whoa! I don't ask, you don't explain."

"Got it."

"Is there someplace where I can just go read lyrics?"

"Sure. Hang on..."

Moving back to Gibbs' desk, Tim typed in the address of his favorite lyric site and bookmarked it so Gibbs could go back and check it again if a case interrupted his search. The older man followed, examining the images and text and liking what he found.

"Here. This is the best one I know of. It's easy to navigate, they have a huge collection of artists and titles, and I've only found flubbed lyrics two or three times. Pick which ones you want and I'll download them for you anytime."

"That'll work. Damn... elevator. Must be Ziva. If she catches you with that on your screen I may have to get verbally medieval on your ass..." Gibbs warned him, reclaiming his seat and sending Tim scurrying back to his area.

"It's all for show, I understand. No problem, boss. One repentant flunky geek coming up..."

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

BETHESDA:

Lewiston entered Tony's room with Brad right behind him and their mutual patient groaned and turned over in bed so that he faced away from them.

"Oh, hell..."

"Pardon him. Manners haven't been high on our list of discussion topics. Now I see I'll have to correct that oversight." Lewiston quipped to his colleague.

"Don't bother. He'd only ignore you."

Tony produced a sound that was half laughter, half sheer pathos.

"You're not here. I'm hallucinating."
"You only wish that was true."

"And if I had a genie's cell number, you'd be in Antarctica instead of here, torturing me."

"Tony, give it a rest, okay?" Brad warned. "You agreed to this and you know how important it is."

"I'll give it a rest when you promise me there are no sharp objects anywhere on your person."

"The needles again..."

"Yes, the needles again!" Tony asserted, rolling back over and sitting up to confront Brad. "You *never* took me seriously when I tried to tell you I was developing a phobia about the damn things."

Brad sighed and moved to perch on the edge of the bed.

"I did believe you, Tony, I swear I did. With something like pneumonic plague, there was just no way around the frequent blood tests. Neither one of us had a choice then... and we don't now."

"You can do anything you want, including a hernia check. I'll turn my head and cough as many times as you want..."

"You don't have a hernia."

"Find me something heavy, I'll give myself one!"

"Tony..."

"I can't, Brad. I just can't. Look at me, I'm already freaking out..."

"Tony, people with Y-Pestis, if they recover, can relapse without warning. Having a new infection, even one that barely got started, increases the chance of that happening. Too many people care about you and want you home for me to just give in on this."

"Relapse? You never told me that. Why didn't you say something?"

"You've done so well... I guess I hoped I'd never *need* to tell you. I was wrong not to warn you that it could happen, I admit that. I'm sorry..."

"God... I could be that sick again? At a moment's notice?"

"I won't allow it, Tony."

"Neither of us will." Lewiston added.

Staring blankly at a wall, Tony continued to speak as if the others had not made any reassurances at all.

"I won't go back there. The creepy blue lights, the fear, the loneliness... I won't go back. Never..."

Lewiston moved to kneel by the bed and turned Tony by the shoulders so that they were face to face. The contact brought the young man out of his momentary state of shock.

"It's okay, Tony. You'll never go through that again if we have anything to say about it."

"I can't face that a second time... but the needle is... What am I supposed to do, here?"

"Let me help you through it."
"It's too big. I've tried over and over..."

"Talk to me about it. Talk to me, Tony. This is all we've been doing since the start, right? You know how the process works by now. Trust me... open up to me and we'll fix this."

Below Tony's line of sight, Lewiston shifted his hand subtly and tapped Brad's ankle. The other man instantly understood that he was being given the gift of a few minutes distraction and he'd better take advantage of it quickly.

"You know how I feel about the whole modern medicine thing... and why. I spent days and days in that isolation unit and that... damn IV never left my arm. Once I got out, I would've blown off after-care altogether, but my job was on the line. I had to go, or I would've gotten ratted out for my own good. Thing is, every time I showed for a check-up, there he was with another needle... it got so I hated the sight of the building and the parking lot..."

Feeling the rubber strip being knotted around his arm, Tony whipped his head sideways and started to protest, but Lewiston drew him right back.

"No. Over here Tony. Tony... don't look at what he's doing, pay attention to me. That's right... keep talking. Tell me the whole story."

"I can't... he..."

"Yes, you can. Focus, Tony. You hated the building and the parking lot..."

"It... it got harder and harder to make myself go. Finally... I just stopped. I kept waiting for the hammer to fall, for some memo to come down saying I was in trouble... but it never happened. Like Brad said, he... he let me slide. He settled for hearing from me over the phone... I figured out how to sound happy and healthy even when I was far from it..."

Despite Brad's best efforts, Tony was so on edge anticipating the needle that when it slid under his skin he cried out and would have pulled away if Lewiston hadn't grasped his free hand. "God... get him off me... make him stop! Please..."

"Name the seven dwarves, Tony."

"What?!"

"It's not that hard. Name the seven dwarves. C'mon. You can do that..."

"Bashful, Dopey, Doc, Grumpy... Sneezy, Sleepy and Happy."

"Perfect. Now give me all the factors of forty-eight."

"Shit... you want me to do math *now*?"

"Absolutely. Let's go. Factors of forty-eight."

"Um... One, two, three, four, six, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty-four, forty-eight."

"Fantastic. Ah-ah, eyes front, okay? Brad's almost finished, but not quite. Tell me about Gibbs. What's he really like?"

"He... he's strong... strongest, most intuitive investigator I've ever known. He loves boats. He's building one... in his basement, of all places. How he'll ever get it out is one of the... the world's great mysteries... God almighty, Pitt, will you hurry up?!"
"Okay, okay. Almost... there. Everything's sealed and put away. Bend your arm to hold... good. Now we band-aid over the cotton... done. I'm sorry, Tony. You know I mean that, don't you?"

Tony refused to look at Brad for a long stretch of minutes, but finally he sighed, rubbed his eyes and faced his friend.

"Hey, irresistible force always wins, right? One more point on your side of the scoreboard. I won't hold it against you."

"That's not what this was about. You're not just a patient to me, you're a friend. With a lot of help and your unbelievable determination I saw you recover from a disease you shouldn't have had a chance against. I won't lose you now to something I might be able to prevent with a simple test. I truly do regret the pain you just went through. All I can say is that... I did it because I care about you, too, Tony... and I want you back in my life as much as everybody at NCIS does."

"I've missed our friendship. Nobody else can keep up with me on the basketball court..."

"I'll give you all the games you can handle when you get out of here. That's a promise."

"That's not what this was about. You're not just a patient to me, you're a friend. With a lot of help and your unbelievable determination I saw you recover from a disease you shouldn't have had a chance against. I won't lose you now to something I might be able to prevent with a simple test. I truly do regret the pain you just went through. All I can say is that... I did it because I care about you, too, Tony... and I want you back in my life as much as everybody at NCIS does."

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"I've missed our friendship. Nobody else can keep up with me on the basketball court..."
Chapter 28

1:00 P.M : NCIS

As he settled back into his desk after lunch, part of Gibbs was craving a fresh case and something interesting and juicy to sink his investigative teeth into, but for the most part he was hoping the unusual lull would continue. The private, personal areas of his life were demanding so much more attention than was typical that he was grateful for a little time to manage and sort out the jumble in peace. Booting up his computer system, he navigated to the Internet and sat for a long moment, staring at the screen and trying to remember what it was he wanted to click to get to where he needed to go. McGee strolled in a few minutes later, correctly interpreted the quandary his boss was in and directed Gibbs' cursor to the right place without comment. The older man smiled, but didn't let Tim see, and got back to his task. McGee did the same.

An hour later, Gibbs had a long hand-written list on a legal pad. He tore the page off, rose and dropped it on Tim's desk. The young man looked at the paper, frowned and gazed over to where his boss was slipping into his jacket.

"Boss..."

"Yeah? What?"

"Ummm... you do know... well of course you do, you picked the songs, but... played together, back to back... these songs..."

"They'll send a message. I get that, McGee."

"Okay. I'll, uh... I'll get these downloaded tonight."

"Thanks. Let me know the final total on the money and I'll write you out a check."

"You don't have to, boss..."

"I pay my debts. And it's hush money, of course. I trust you to keep your mouth shut about it... but incentive never hurts."

"Gotcha. You're going home?"

"For a drive. If the Director asks..."

"You're re-interviewing witnesses on a cold case."

Gibbs grinned openly this time.

"I knew there was some reason I kept you around."

"I'm loyal?"

"And not afraid to be sneaky. I may be back or I may not. If a case comes up, I have my cell."

"Understood. Take it easy, boss."

Gibbs moved away toward the elevators and Tim let his gaze drift down the list on the paper in front of him, murmuring a few titles under his breath. With each one, his eyebrows went up another notch,
in perfect synch with his amazement.

"' I Can Be Your Hero, If You Are Not Mine, Never Gonna Give You Up, To Make You Feel My Love...' Oh, Boss... I hope I know who this is for. God help both of you if it isn't... or if it doesn't work."

His expression grim and sober, McGee sent up a hopeful prayer of his own that his hunch was right and settled in to begin studying another cold case.

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SEC-NAV: TWENTY MINUTES LATER

"My God, Director... please understand that I don't doubt you for a moment... but I'll need to confirm these things for myself."

"Absolutely. I deeply appreciate your patience and attention."

"No, no... I should be thanking you for giving me a chance to avoid potential catastrophe. If all you've told me is true..." the Sec-Nav countered, rising and shaking David's hand as the other also gained his feet.

"My source is eminently trustworthy. And I did my own checking, of course."

"Of course... my Lord, I can hardly believe that Jennifer Sheppard..."

"Nor I. She has been a close family friend for quite a while. I am reluctant to accept this kind of thing about acquaintances, never mind those I know well."

"Oh dear... it's long past lunch. May I treat you to a meal? I know several fine restaurants only a few minutes drive from here."

"I would be honored. Discussing such topics can leave the atmosphere of a room decidedly... heavy. It makes one eager to escape."

"I totally agree."

As the men left and moved into the outer office, David split off to the men's room and his colleague stopped to speak to his secretary. "I won't be back this afternoon, Marci... or, most likely, all of tomorrow. Re-schedule anything on my calendar and make appropriate apologies for the delays. Oh and call my driver. Tell him to meet me in the usual spot."

"Done, sir."

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

ONE HOUR LATER: GIBBS' CAR

Pulling quickly and expertly to the curb in front of the enormous building, Jethro retrieved his cell and dialed a long number.

"Fornell. Talk to me."

"Tobias."

"Gibbs? How the hell did you ever get this number?! Nobody's supposed to have this number..."
"Why do you bother to ask useless questions?"

"Because I keep hoping someday I'll get a straight answer outta you?"

"Keep hoping. Take the rest of the afternoon off."

"Give me a reason. And it better be a damn good one."

Gibbs sighed and when he spoke again his usual authority and confidence were absent from his voice. Fornell went into a mild state of shock, but chose to listen instead of interrupting with more questions.

"I asked you to. I need my best friend right now, Toby."

Fornell's surprise deepened and he found he had to swallow forcefully in order to reply.

"You... God in heaven, Jethro, you haven't called me that name since... what the hell is going on with you?"

"Come take a ride with me and I'll tell you. I'm parked across the street."

Fornell hesitated for a long moment, the phone gripped tightly in his hand. He clearly remembered the last time Gibbs had used the nickname in his presence. It had led to a few harrowing, emotionally enervating days spent in the home of the NCIS coroner, suffering with Gibbs while he worked through the devastation and excruciating pain of losing his daughter and his first wife. For Gibbs to call him Toby now meant that the situation was of equal importance and he had to respond, no matter what else might be happening or what swing dance moves the possibilities were making his stomach do. Ten minutes later he was standing at the driver's side window of Gibbs' car.

"Jethro."

"Get in?"

"You're asking?"

"I'd really like it... but I can't force you."

"Whatever it is it's bad, right?"

"Part of it. The rest could've been, but... damn it, Toby, I'm not doin' this for the whole world to hear..."

"Okay. I hear you." Fornell replied, moving around the car and sliding into the passenger side. He buckled his belt, cinched it tightly and turned to watch Gibbs rolling up his window. "Well? Go on."

Gibbs grimaced, checked the street and pulled out into traffic.

"You'll never believe it, and it sounds stupid no matter how often I say it or think about it... but it all started with a party..."

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

BETHESDA:

The examination was long over and Brad long gone, leaving abject apologies in his wake, but Lewiston was still fighting to get Tony to speak two consecutive words. Curled into a fetal ball,
swathed in blankets and cradling Bert in one arm, the young man looked and acted like a child who'd just survived a car accident or a plane crash instead of an adult who'd endured a simple physical. Lewiston empathized with the fear his patient had suffered, but he felt it was his obligation to help Tony get back closer to his normal reactions, so he persisted.

"Tony?"

"That's my name. After today I may change it and go on the lam to escape that sadist who calls himself my doctor... but for now, I'm still Tony. Talk fast before I become someone else..."

"Thank God, the stethoscope didn't suck out the language center of your brain. I was so worried."

"Ha-ha. If you were thinking about amateur night at the comedy club... don't bother."

"I actually did that once. I did pretty well, according to the owner. I didn't get anything thrown at me, at least."

"I don't have to do that again, before I leave do I?"

"Absolutely not. Even if Brad asked, the way you've reacted... I'd have to say no."

"I wasn't trying to give him *that* hard a time... I couldn't help it. The needle freaked me out so much... and I just wasn't able to shake the anxiety after that. I still can't."

"Bert isn't helping?"

"Yeah... he is. Some. Thinking about Abby giving him up is doing more good than anything. She's really upset. She wants... needs me home. I need to be there for her."

"Let's talk about that. I'd like to set up the group session for day after tomorrow. Then, depending on how well it all goes, you should be able to get out of here the following day."

Tony slowly sat up, still clutching the hippo.

"Too soon."

"I don't think so. I keep telling you, you're doing extremely well. As I said, out-patient therapy will continue the work we've started, but once you and your colleagues talk things out... I really think you'll be ready to go home."

Tony thought for a long time, a frown coming and going as he worked through various things in his head. Finally he looked up and spoke.

"Well... I know this is a lot to ask and your schedule probably won't let you do it... but can I have all your time tomorrow? The whole day, breakfast to dinner."

"Of course you can have it. My schedule of appointments is actually very light. I have a couple of meetings, but I'll take any excuse to get out of those. The whole day is yours."

"Okay. Thanks. Can... can we go sit in what's left of the sun for a while?"

"Whatever you need."

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TBC.....
Chapter 29

90 MINUTES LATER: A PARKING LOT NEAR THE WATER

Leaning heavily back against the front bumper of his car, Gibbs shifted his hips, changing position slightly, and took another pull on the cup of coffee in his hand. He knew his knees wouldn't let him stay on the ground much longer, not if he wanted to get up again, but he wasn't ready to give in to the demands of his traitorous bones just yet. He had just finished his story with a bombshell and he was determined to stay right where he was until he got a response from the man sitting next to him. He'd been waiting several minutes, however, so he drove a careful elbow into Fornell's ribs to hurry him along.

"What?!"

"I'm waiting."

"You expecting anger? Disgust, maybe? Go somewhere else. Hell... I've known for years, Ro. The day he joined up with NCIS, you met me for a beer after work and I knew you'd been shocked outta your shoes by *something*. You kept your own counsel, though, like you usually do. I had no clue what'd shaken you up 'til the first day I walked in the office an' saw DiNozzo. I caught you lookin' at him when you didn't think anybody else was payin' attention... a little smile, curiosity sparkling in your eyes and 'I want' written all over your face. Just the way you used to look at Shannon when she said something really insightful or did something that made you especially proud. I knew what it meant if Tony'd earned that... earned what you hadn't given anybody since your first and only love died. I also knew you'd never take the chance on getting your heart ripped out again. At least that's what I thought... but I hope I'm wrong. Am I?"

Gibbs sighed and dropped his head back, thumping it gently on the car.

"I don't know. Just telling you... saying the words out loud felt so damn right."

"But you're not sure you can say it to him."

"Yeah, I can. The issue... is should I? I want this news to make Tony happy, not freak him out and add more stress to the load he's already carrying. I couldn't stand knowing I was responsible for that..."

"What's his doctor been telling you?"

"Lewiston says he's doing a lot better... that he's come a long way from where he started."

"You trust the guy?"

"Absolutely. I trusted him the first time we talked, and you *know* I don't do that. Ever."

"True..."

"You were right, Toby... about the other three. I never loved a damn one of them. I couldn't. You can't love and be terrified at the same time. It... it came out as me being distant and angry and a workaholic, but the bottom line was fear. I couldn't get too close just in case..."

"If you really want Tony, you're gonna have to fix that. The chance of losing him..."
"I know." Gibbs interrupted sharply, suddenly unwilling to hear that particular piece of truth.

"You do want him. You love him, yeah? That's what all this jawing's been about?"

"I love him."

"Then do what you're best at, damn it. Make a plan and execute it."

Gibbs grunted, tossed the remnants of his cold coffee away from him and dropped his chin back down to his chest.

"We've both got so much shit to slog through just to get to each other..."

"Not quite."

Gibbs looked up at his friend, confused.

"Come again?"

"DiNozzo's got a two week head start on you."

"You're saying... I can't do that, Toby. Some of the stuff I've seen and been through... nobody should have to hear that."

"Were you lyin' when you said you trust this Lewiston?"

"No, but..."

"And he works with military patients all the time, right?"

"Right..."

"Then I doubt anything you tell him will overload his circuits."

"But..."

"But nothin', Ro." Fornell cut him off. "I've been tryin' to get you to do this for a long damn time. Now it's put up or shut up. DiNozzo's worth it and he deserves it. So do you."

Fornell slowly made his way back to his feet then held out a hand to assist Gibbs. The other man stared at the offering for a long moment before accepting the help. Once he'd dusted off his clothes, Gibbs transferred the stare to his companion.

"I tried it once. About a year after Shannon. I sat there for an hour... and I couldn't talk. I just couldn't say anything. I never went back."

"You had no reason to... nobody that needed you to stay and tough it out. This time is different. You'll be doing it for yourself... but it'll be for him, too."

"Why do you sound as if you know what you're talking about?"

"Come take a ride with me... and I'll tell you."

Gibbs grinned faintly and unlocked the car.

"Okay, but we're stopping for more coffee."
As he slid back into the passenger's seat, Fornell grimaced.

"The first thing you need to get help with is your caffeine addiction..."

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NCIS MORGUE: 5:15 P.M.

Ducky was just finishing his going-home tidying ritual in the enormous main room when the entrance doors sighed open, announcing someone's arrival. He turned from his task with a joyous greeting on his lips, hoping his visitor was Abby or perhaps Jimmy. That hope was dashed, but seeing who it actually was drove all other thoughts from his mind.

"Jennifer? Good Lord, you look terrible." He exclaimed, rushing to meet her. She took a step back, almost seeming afraid of him, and gazed up momentarily at the security camera. Confused, Ducky halted and spoke to her again. "Jennifer?"

"What... what is this?" she asked, holding out a sheaf of papers which began to visibly shake, causing her to frown and drop the hand down to her side. Ducky took one step forward and was mildly relieved to see her hold her ground.

"What has happened to you, Jenny? You look as if you're about to collapse..."

"I'm fine. Will you please explain these?"

Ducky briefly looked down to the papers she held and abruptly realized what she was talking about.

"Oh... yes, of course. Well, they're precisely what they seem to be."

"You can't."

"On the contrary, I certainly can. I must. It's long past time, as a matter of fact."

"You're the best in the country. I can't lose you."

"One of the best, perhaps. I've a good friend out in Las Vegas who'd give anyone a run for their money..."

"Ducky! Stay on topic for once, please?"

"I'm sorry, my dear, I believed I was. As to the subject of my retirement, all the relevant details are in the paperwork. It's already a "done deal" as they say."

"Why? I thought you loved your work?"

"I do. It's just that... the truth is my priorities have changed. I've been considering this for quite a while, but just recently something nudged me into finally making a decision."

"You'll have to stay until a replacement can be found..."

"That's already taken care of. Gerald is more than ready to come back to work and the upper echelons had no problem with his appointment when I proposed the idea... Jenny, please come and sit down. You really don't look well."

"No. I told you I'm perfectly fine. So there's nothing I can say to change your mind?"
"I'm afraid not."

"Alright. Thank you for indulging my questions, Ducky. I'll approve your papers in the morning and send them right out."

"Jennifer..." Ducky began, but Sheppard had already turned, albeit unsteadily, and made her escape. After a few painful moments of uncertainty, the coroner rushed back and picked up the phone.

"Jethro? Would you mind letting me in on what the bloody *hell* is going on with Jennifer?!"

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ONE HOUR LATER: TIM'S APARTMENT

Deeply engrossed in finding and retrieving the songs Gibbs had requested, Tim was only peripherally aware of Abby moving around restlessly behind him. Sighing in frustration, she stalked up behind him and smacked him between his shoulder blades with considerable force.

"Hey!"

"We had a date to go bowling, Timmy."

"I know. I'm sorry, but I have to finish this first."

"Finish what? What are you downloading?"

"Music. Somebody at work wanted a CD burned and they're willing to pay me back what I spend. Maybe even a little extra if it comes out well, so this has to take priority right now."

Abby dropped into a chair close to Tim and casually reached out to pick up the list of songs. Her reaction was much the same as his had been earlier.

"Whoa. Whoever it is, they are seriously, deeply in... love. Oh... my God. McGee, this..."

"I know whose handwriting it is, Abs. I was there when he gave it to me."

Abby suddenly beamed a smile that lit up the entire room and started bouncing in her seat.

"So he's finally ready to say it? He's gonna tell him?"

"I really hope so. I've been praying off and on all afternoon that he will. But until or unless it happens, you can't say a word. Promise me."

"Tim..."

"Promise me, Abby, right this minute. I swore to Gibbs that nobody would find out. He's starting to really believe in me and I can't let him down..."

"Timmy, it's okay. My lips are sealed, I swear." She vowed, touching his face gently. "I'd never sabotage you like that... not when things are going so good."

"Yeah... I know that."

"You need to have as much faith in yourself as Gibbs has in you. He sees a potential super-agent, Timmy, and so do I. Why can't you?"
"You know why. I'm trying, I seriously am. It's gonna take time..."

"We're staying in tonight."

"No. This won't take that much longer, then we can go bowling like we planned..."

"Bowling tomorrow. Comfort and cuddle-time tonight. Now let's get back to work on the music. This is a long list... think you should split it onto two disks?"

Tim gazed deeply into her eyes, smiled and kissed her softly before replying.

"Great idea."

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TBC.......
EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING:

As he drove into work, Gibbs fought to keep from staring at the passenger seat one more time. He'd dropped his cell phone there, thinking that 'out of sight, out of mind' would be as effective as it had always been, but his treacherous thoughts refused to allow that or any of his usual evasion tactics to succeed. Even though dawn had barely arrived and he could hardly see the seat, never mind the phone, his brain knew the device was there and his conscience incessantly reminded him of the decision he'd come to after talking with Fornell the previous day. Snarling under his breath, Gibbs tugged on the steering wheel and pulled the car in close to the nearest curb. Shutting the engine down, he flipped the switch to activate the interior lights, grabbed the phone, dialed and slapped the small metal square against his ear.

"Dennis Lewiston. Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Yeah... yeah, it's, uh... it's me."

"Jethro. Good to hear from you."

"Surprised to hear you. I figured I'd be leaving a message and we'd meet up later or something..."

"I'm usually in this early. I need the time to look at the overnight reports on my inpatients so I can be ready if something unexpected happened when I couldn't be here. What can I do for you?"

"I... I don't know yet."

"You don't?"

"Okay, I do, but... Look, I talked to a friend yesterday... he opened my eyes to a few pieces of difficult truth... things I've been avoiding looking at for a long time."

Lewiston settled back in his desk chair, preparing for however long a conversation Gibbs might require.

"Such as?"

"Stuff to do with why my marriages all failed... along with other things. He... this friend, he's been telling me for years that unless I start meeting with somebody I trust... somebody who knows what they're talking about, nothing in my life will ever be good again... not like it used to. I think... I finally decided maybe he's right."

Lewiston pulled the receiver away from his face, released a quiet, deeply relieved breath, turned his gaze to the sky and said a brief, silent prayer of thanks before returning to his conversation.

"I can help you with that."

"Thing is, talking... it's not something I do real well."

"You did fine at the group meeting in your office. Admittedly, you didn't speak up a great deal, but I get the feeling that's just who you are. When something needs to be said, you say it. Otherwise, action and facial expression are more than enough to get your point across."

"That doesn't apply when it comes to... there are things you have to know if you're gonna straighten
out any of what's twisted up inside me. Things I swore I'd never tell anybody..."

"I'm a patient man, Jethro."

"I hope to hell you are. Persistent too."

"If you genuinely want help, I'll do everything in my power to make sure you don't give up. Everything except manipulation, blackmail or force."

"Those never crossed my mind."

"You'll need to put an awful lot of trust in me."

"I left Tony in your care, didn't I? That should tell you something."

Gibbs replied, breaking the connection, turning the light off and slipping the phone into his pocket. On the other end, Lewiston hung up as well, chuckling and sending up another grateful prayer before returning to his notes in preparation for his marathon session with Tony.

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TWO HOURS LATER: DIRECTOR DAVID'S HOTEL

Expertly flipping open his napkin and spreading it in his lap, David gazed skeptically at the man seated across from him.

"I was aware of a... I hesitate to call it a relationship, but I suppose that is what they consider it. It is extremely difficult for me to believe, however, that my... that Ziva could or would lower herself in such a manner. In fact... it is almost inconceivable."

He said, turning his eyes momentarily toward the folder sitting on his companion's side of the table and then refocusing on his breakfast.

"I spent a good part of the night finding and retrieving this."

The SecNav explained, laying one hand beside, but not actually on the manila folder, his expression clearly telegraphing that he considered the mere contents too unclean to touch. "I nearly failed in the attempt, but my position as her superior finally convinced them. This... I resisted understanding the implications at first, but eventually I had to accept... You say you were aware that the two of them were involved?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Many times I have considered expressing my opinion to Ziva... making it known, in no uncertain terms, how wrong I believed it to be... but she is grown, now. My influence over her is much more limited than it was when she was a child."

"Then how do you plan to execute this today if she won't listen?"

"I said limited... not vanished altogether. She will respond to what I am telling her. If you don't mind... I will keep my own counsel on the method I will employ."

"Of course, of course. My apologies if it seemed as if I was prying..."

"No, no. It is not that I wish to hide anything from you. I simply think she will be easier to handle if she is surprised... if you know nothing, she cannot detect it in your eyes or manner and I have a far greater chance of success."

"Of course, I completely understand. You know, I tried to come up with another explanation for these pictures and the medical report, but if they really were in an exclusive relationship..."

"I believe that to be true."
"Then Ziva must be the one who did this... dear God."

"A wise thing, appealing to him in crisis. I think, just perhaps, he is the only one who may be able to save my daughter now. Please, eat. Confronting Jennifer will not be an easy task. You will need all the strength you can muster."

"Hmm? Oh... oh yes. Thank you..."

Reluctantly, the SecNav turned to his own meal, slowly beginning to eat, despite the fact that his appetite had utterly deserted him.

Half an hour later, David was finished and sipping the last of his coffee and the other man had barely eaten half of his small meal. The Israeli heaved a resigned sigh and smiled.

"You are disturbed. I understand. Let me pay the bill and we will go. Perhaps it is better to see to this distasteful task sooner rather than later."

"I was hoping you'd say that. But we share the check?"

"As you wish."

Soon the pair were back in the SecNav's limo and heading for NCIS.

"My wish... if I had my wish none of this would be happening. I'll have to let her know what I've discovered... remove her from her position. She won't make it easy on me."

"What is your famous phrase... if wishes were horses, even beggars would ride? I am currently longing for the ability to go back in time and safeguard Ziva from all the experiences that led her to this point... but I must face that it is not possible."

"In your area of the world children see and learn things no-one, even adults, should ever have to."

"Indeed. I will make it a prayer, then... for all those who have their innocence stripped from them long before they are even aware they possess it."

The SecNav nodded slowly, staring out the window. The rest of the forty-five minute ride passed in heavy silence. It wasn't until they'd made it through NCIS security and were gliding upward in the elevator that either man spoke again. "You will not call and let her know you are coming, hmmm?"

"At the right time... yes. I'm afraid I know what she'll do if she's allowed too much advance notice. Despite her recent aberrant behavior, she was a top agent once and I'm sure she still possesses escape and evasion skills. I want her to get the help she needs, not run away and force a search."

"Very true. If only Ziva would make it so easy as to run from me. Another futile wish..."

As the men stepped out of the elevator and headed toward the stairs, the SecNav placed a cautionary hand on David's arm to halt him and finally pulled out his cell-phone.

"Jennifer?"

"Mister Secretary. How nice to hear from you."

"I'm on my way up to see you. We need to talk."

"Oh..."
"Is there a problem?"

"No. No problem."

"You sound upset."

"Upset? No, not at all. I'm fine."

"Good. I'll be in your office in about fifteen minutes, then."

"I... I'll be waiting."

"Good-bye, Jen."

"Sir."

Beginning to tremble, Sheppard let the receiver drop back into its cradle then rose, snatched her purse and coat and hurried into the outer office, startling Cynthia.

"Director? Is anything wrong?"

"Not really... there's an emergency and I have to go. I'll call later about tomorrow's schedule, alright?" Jen responded breathlessly, rushing out before the younger woman could ask any more questions or delay her flight any further. Halfway down the stairs, however, her headlong rush was stalled by a much more formidable obstacle than her assistant; the two men awaiting her at the bottom. "Sir, I thought... you told me..."

"I know. A necessary deception, I'm afraid. Please, join me down here, Jennifer."

"Of course..." she replied hesitantly, moving down to the floor one slow, cautious step at a time. "I don't understand this, Mister Secretary. What's going on?"

"I'll tell you everything in a moment. Let's go find somewhere a little more private, shall we?"

A confused frown creasing her brow, Sheppard finally looked away from the SecNav and focused on the other man. Her heart seemed to stutter in her chest and she instantly paled when she recognized him.

"No..."

"Jennifer, don't, please. Not here. The whole of NCIS doesn't need to hear this discussion." Her superior reminded her, leading her to the nearest conference room and shutting the door behind the three of them. David stayed by the door, determined not to interfere unless he felt there was absolutely no other option. The SecNav dropped into a chair and waved at the one across from him. "Sit."

"This is beginning to feel like an interrogation." Sheppard replied stiffly

"I don't want it to devolve into that. I just really need to ask you about some things I've learned recently. It could take a while... and you'll be more comfortable if you sit."

Jen paused for a minute or two, but eventually she sank into the indicated chair, her eyes fixed rigidly on her boss.

"Go ahead. What is it you think I can tell you?"
"Firstly... I'd like to be sure that you still consider me a friend. On a personal, not work level."

"Of course I do."

"Good. Then why didn't you feel you could turn to me when you got into such deep trouble?"

"Trouble? I'm not in trouble, Edward."

Looking down at his hands, he grimaced then laid the file on the table between them. "What is that?"

"Your medical record... from the trip you took to the emergency room recently."

"You can't... that's not possible."

"For a man with my influence, anything is possible. And don't you mean 'what trip to the ER'?"

Sheppard gaped for a moment, then closed her mouth decisively. "Please answer me, Jennifer. Why didn't you come to me when it got this bad?" he repeated, slapping the folder.

"Nothing's wrong. You don't understand... you couldn't possibly comprehend the depth of... of what we have." Jen replied quietly, rising to her feet and pacing away, her back turned to both men.

"So you're admitting that you consented to be abused this way?"

"Abuse? No!" Jen shouted, whirling back around. "I knew you wouldn't be able to see the truth... Didn't your father or mother ever spank you?"

"When I was a child, yes... once or twice."

"She's my mother, now, Edward... and I'm her child. She teaches me and like any student, when I make a mistake... she corrects me. I cause problems, I say the wrong thing, I fail when she gives me instructions... I haven't learned my place yet, so sometimes... the correction has to be harsh."

"Jennifer... dear Lord, can you hear yourself? Are you even really listening? It appears there's been more than one sort of abuse going on. I can't let this continue. You and I are leaving here together today... right now, as a matter of fact."

"You can't be serious. I have a full day of work..."

"No. You don't. Not here."

"Edward..."

"I'm sorry, but I won't accept any arguments or rationalizations, Jenny. You're going to get help and you're going to get away from her."

Abruptly losing even more color, Jen took a single, unsteady step backward and Sheffield moved to support her, afraid she was about to collapse. She wouldn't allow him to touch her, however.

"No!" she responded in a husky shout. "No, I won't. Ziva... I depend on her. I need her, can't you see that?! I'll die if you separate us!"

"You won't... I promise you. I'll make sure of that, but you have to trust me..."

"I only trust mistress, that's the first rule. Only trust her... no-one else."
Heaving a frustrated, sorrowful sigh, Sheffield used the one weapon he was hoping he wouldn't have to.

"You don't have a choice, Jennifer. Director David is taking her home with him. She won't be coming back... she won't ever hurt you again."

Without warning Sheppard seemed to regain her equilibrium and rushed for the door. The SecNav snagged her around the waist and prevented her from going any farther. David took a step toward them, his expression deeply concerned.

"Do you need help?"

"No. I can handle this. Please, just go get Ziva out of here..."

"Yes... of course. I realize my apology can never be enough..."

"This wasn't your fault, I understand that. Go..."

David nodded, retrieved the medical file and left the room. It took him only a few minutes to make it to the bullpen and Ziva's reaction at his appearance was what he'd been expecting. Gibbs, however looked equally as shocked, confirming for the Director what an accomplished undercover agent the man must once have been. When Gibbs rose to confront the supposed "stranger" in their midst, David played along.

"Can I help you?"

"Director Aviel David."

"Ziva's father. Good to meet you. Special Agent Jethro Gibbs." he said, briefly shaking the hand David offered. "What can we do for you?"

"Give me a moment of privacy with my daughter, if you would."

"Of course. McGee, let's go."

"No." Ziva demanded, staring up at the man towering over her. "If you have something to say to me... they can hear it."

"Indeed." He replied, laying the file on her desk. "I would think this is something you would not want anyone to know about... most especially your colleagues."

Ziva marginally opened the file to peek at what was inside. When she saw the photograph of Sheppard's injuries, the young woman slammed the folder shut again before Gibbs or Tim could see and glared daggers up at her impassive father.

"My life is my business. You have no right..."

"But, I do. Not only as your father, but as one who has always sought justice on behalf of those who cannot... or will not seek it for themselves."

"Father..."

"On your feet. Now."

Her face radiating contempt and fury, Ziva slowly rose out of her chair. "Empty your pockets and leave everything on the desk."
"I am a woman, *not* a little girl! You cannot simply stride into my world... *my* world, and act as if you still control me! I do not bend to your orders any longer!"

"No? Let us find out how true that is." He countered, grabbing for the folder. She slapped her hand on it, keeping it where it was. After a long moment of simply staring into his eyes, Ziva finally realized he hadn't changed; he would stand in her path for eternity if necessary, patiently waiting until she gave in. Finally, she lowered her eyes and hissed her capitulation.

"Alright..."

"Wise as always, little one. Pockets."

Only when everything she carried was on display did her father smile and speak to Gibbs.

"Agent Gibbs, is it? If you would collect these items and the file, please?"

"Father, no!"

"Is this further defiance I hear? Have you been away so long that you forget the meaning of my name?"

"No."

"Then tell me."

"Aviel... my father is God."

"Where you are concerned, yes I am, and at this moment God is not feeling particularly merciful. Will you force my hand? It is, ultimately, your decision, but you should know that unlike God in heaven I am perfectly willing to walk away, with never a backward glance or a second thought... leaving you to suffer the consequences of your sins alone."

"What do you want?"

"You already know that. I told you during our last conversation."

"I don't want to."

"Understandable. But you will." He said, confidently holding out his arm in invitation. Her face now a rigid mask, Ziva stepped out from behind the desk. "Agent Gibbs. I am afraid my daughter has been... let us just say wicked and leave it at that, shall we? Because of this, I am taking her back to Israel and she will not be returning."

"The SecNav knows about this?"

"He does. At the moment he is in one of your conference rooms dealing with the other side of this unfortunate tragedy. The file... well, it is up to you if you choose to examine its contents. It may help you understand what you find in the room with your Secretary of the Navy... or it may not. Personally, I believe it will take a very long time and a good deal of fervent prayer before I understand, if I ever do. Thank you for your indulgence. Good day."

Gibbs watched David stroll away toward the elevator, Ziva tucked close to his side, then grabbed McGee and hustled him off to find the SecNav and help him clean up whatever mess he had been left with.
TBC......
Yeah, I'm aware that I slightly time-shifted the events of "Frame Up" to put it before "Boxed In". I wanted it to be part of what was weighing so heavily on Tony. Go with it, if you would, please and thank you...

"Sorry. Absolutely not. Forget it."

"Doc..."

"No, Tony. Unacceptable."

"You don't understand. Gibbs... he's been burned over and over. He won't risk his heart that way ever again... and I won't make him. Besides, it would interfere at work. He'd end up spending more time protecting me than doing the job... No. Just give me permission, okay? Tell me I can shield him and still be true to myself."

"I can't do that. Or rather, I won't. Love is the most precious gift any human being can give or receive, Tony. I refuse to give you carte blanche to turn your back on it simply because you think it's a noble gesture."

"Noble? No, this is self-preservation. I won't hurt like hell when he rejects and fires me, he won't have to feel guilty about doing it, we can both move on."

"How do you know he wants to move on? How do you know what he wants *period* if you never ask him the question?"

"Can't go there. Not buying a ticket, not even looking at the bus schedule..."

"This has nothing to do with Jethro, we both know that. It's about you and the fear you talked about the last time we got into this subject. You remember, that he'll actually give the answer you're longing to hear, but the possibilities will overwhelm you and you'll take off running?"

Just because it made him feel a little better, Tony glared daggers at Lewiston, even though he knew it would take actual lasers shooting from his eyes to get the other man to back down. Once he'd gotten it out of his system, he turned away, brought his knees to his chest and grabbed Bert.

"Fine... I'm doing it because I'm scared. It doesn't change anything. Loving him means protecting him."

"Have you ever known him to need protecting? What would Jethro do if he heard you say that?"

Tony drew and released a deep breath before he responded.

"Crack me in the back of the head and tell me to smarten up."

"Right. You're projecting your panic onto him. You have absolutely no basis for thinking he'll either run *or* reject you out of hand."
Tony dropped his head onto his knees, turned it sideways and looked at Lewiston obliquely.

"Assumptions without evidence."

"Partially. You’ve been badly hurt, Tony, no-one’s questioning that, but those experiences mean you only see relationships through that filter. ‘Keep it light and casual because anything else is too much of a risk. Damage before I get damaged, walk away before I get abandoned again.’ Admittedly, that thought process keeps the pain at a safe distance, but it keeps the positive emotions out there too. Love doesn’t work if it can’t touch you."

"He doesn't feel that way. I've never seen even a trace of that in him... and believe me, I've looked."

"So maybe you're not the only one who's a master at creating masks and putting up walls."

Tony slowly sat up straight, eyes open wide and revelation dawning on his face. Lewiston mentally whooped with excitement, feeling he had just substantially increased the odds that he’d be able to get through to both men and help them help each other. Just then a commotion in the corridor distracted him. He tried to ignore it, all too aware of what happened last time, but when he recognized one of the voices, he knew he had to go. "There's something going on outside..."

"I know... I just caught Jethro's voice. Can't tell what he's saying..." Tony replied, rapidly paling and tangling his hands together to hide that they were beginning to tremble. Lewiston moved to the bed and squeezed Tony's shoulder firmly.

"Try and stay calm, alright? I won't be long."

"Do my best..."

"I know you will. I trust you," he responded confidently, before turning and striding out of the room, leaving the door open slightly. Once out in the corridor, the problem became readily apparent, but Lewiston was still left awash in confusion. He found the powerful, determined woman he’d defended Tony against struggling in the grip of Jethro and another man, cursing, screaming and sobbing as she fought to get away.

"Jethro?"

"Doc... we could use some help."

"I see that. What's going on?"

"She needs to be taken care of first. Just trust me, you get her into a locked, safe room and I'll tell you everything..."

"I can't do that unless I have a reason. At least give me something..."

"She's been abused for months... and we just forced her away from the one who was doing it. That enough?"

"It should be, for now anyway. Hold on for a few more minutes, alright? I'll be back with help..."

"Don't take too long," Jethro grunted, shifting suddenly to avoid a kick Jen had aimed at a delicate area. "Damn it, Jenny, quit! It's over... it's done and you're safe!"

"I was *safe* with my mistress, you... son of a bitch! She loves me! Let me *go*! I have to find her!"
"That's not love and you know it, Jen. At least you used to. You'll remember. They'll help you do that here."

Jen screeched and renewed her efforts to escape just as Lewiston returned with a tall, muscled orderly who relieved Jethro and Sheffield of their burden and quickly transported Jen down the hall. Jethro sighed deeply, ran a hand through his hair and briefly closed his eyes, the only concessions he would make to his dragging fatigue.

"Jethro?" Lewiston asked quietly. Gibbs turned to him and grinned sadly, knowing he now had to elaborate on his abridged explanation.

"She was in a... relationship with Ziva. An abusive one. I didn't know... not 'till today."

"Abuse in what form?"

"Every way you can think of."

"She has wounds on her back... whip marks, I think. They've been bandaged, but... they'll need to be looked at again eventually." Sheffield added wearily.

"I'll make sure the medical staff knows. I'm Tony's doctor, Dennis Lewiston. We haven't met, have we?"

The Sec-Nav turned a confused, mildly angered expression on Jethro as he responded to the question then faced Lewiston again and shook hands.

"No. No, we haven't. Edward Sheffield, Secretary of the Navy."

"Oh? Welcome, sir. It's good to meet you."

"Thank you. Jethro. I'll be in the limo waiting for you. Don't be long, hmmm? It appears we have a lot to discuss." Sheffield intoned ominously. Gibbs nodded and solemnly watched the other man walk away.

"I'm so sorry, Jethro. Both feet in my mouth and not a leg to stand on." Lewiston offered.

"Don't. I'm the one who didn't tell him. I couldn't be sure what he'd do. In most things I trust the man with my life, but..."

"... but not with your heart?"

"Something like that. No... exactly like that. Not like I'd care what Tony did for work. I just know how much he loves where he is now... and how damn good he is at it. If Sheffield decided to take that away from him..."

"That won't happen. We won't let it. Do you want to see him?"

"Tony? I... that limo's waitin' on me outside. If I take too long *I'll* be the one out on my ass..."

"I understand. Oh, I set up the group session for tomorrow. Do you think that'll work for everyone?"

"With the director out of commission, it's a safe bet we've all got at least a couple days off, so yeah, that'll work."

"Good. I had an idea I'd like you to pass on to the others if you would..."
Gibbs listened intently to Lewiston's thoughts then favored him with a curious, meaningful look. "What's behind that intriguing expression?"

"You'll find out eventually, either from me or Tony. You're sure about this?"

"I am. The effect will be profound for the whole group, I guarantee."

"Okay... I'll tell everybody. We'll work on it together tonight."

"Great. I need to get back to Tony. I'll see all of you about ten tomorrow morning, alright?"

"Ten. We'll be here. Take care, Doc. And take care of Jen. She... I loved her once... loved the woman she used to be. Don't let her...

"I hear you. We'll do all we can for her, you know that. Now go talk to your boss and save your hind end."

Gibbs chuckled and strolled back out to the parking lot. He opened the door to the passenger compartment quickly enough, but hesitated to get in, fearing what was waiting.

"I'm not angry, Jethro. Concerned and puzzled, yes, but not angry. I just need to hear the story. I can't defend either you or DiNozzo if I don't understand what's been going on."

Suddenly feeling every second of every year he'd lived, Jethro conceded, sliding into the car and letting his head drop back against the dark leather of the seat.

"You know about how sick Tony was a while back... and the shit Chip dragged us all through. It was piling up on DiNozzo's shoulders. Then Ziva did something really cruel and idiotic... and the rest of us made it worse. Tony... he just finally dropped under the weight."

"Tell me everything, Jethro. Beginning to end."

"It's not over yet. Not by a long shot."

"Then take me through what you can. I need every detail you can give me."

"I don't need your protection. He does."

"Understood."

"Okay..."

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TBC......
Chapter 32

Lewiston cautiously stepped back into the room, prepared for anything, but Tony was valiantly controlling whatever he was feeling. Swiftly moving to sit beside his patient, the older man laid a hand on the bent head and spoke quietly.

"I can't tell you anything."

"I figured. Just... am I looking for a new job?"

"No. I don't believe so."

"That's a qualifier if I ever heard one." Tony replied, lifting his face to explore Lewiston's expression.

"I made a potentially damaging mistake, but I promise, if I have to move heaven and earth it won't harm you."

"Okay... again with the careful words. Just tell me what happened."

"The Sec-Nav was here too. When Jethro introduced us, I assumed, given his position, that his office had been informed when you first checked yourself in... and I told him I was your doctor."

Tony grimaced and slammed his head back onto his knees, making his pained response muffled.

"He didn't know..."

"No... he didn't. I'm so sorry, Tony..."

Heaving a sigh, Tony raised his head enough so that his chin was balanced on one knee.

"Not your fault, doc. Gibbs just forgot that part of being a dad is realizing you can't protect your kids from every stupid thing they do."

"He's been a father?"

"I don't know for sure. Always wondered, though. Once in a while he'll see a kid and it's like, just for a second... his heart clenches into this wad about the size of a ping-pong ball. Nobody else would notice. Not that or the pain in his eyes after. Avoiding eye contact is a well-known way to stay on his good side."

"But you aren't afraid to look."

"Yeah, well... we were gonna get into that... rage-blackout thing, right? Let's talk about that."

"No, actually, we weren't... but I'll let you slide for now. We have plenty of time left. We'll get back around to Jethro, I guarantee." Lewiston vowed, tossing his patient a knowing grin as he moved back into his usual seat.

"You won't change my mind."

"I don't have to. I just need to find a way to shift your perspective one more time."

Tony snorted.
"That* I'm not betting against. Since I never get any warning when it's about to happen, I can't defend against it." He responded, stretching out slowly and dropping onto his back, Bert hanging loosely from one hand.

"Don't spread that around. It's my secret weapon."

"And man, do you know how to use it."

"All in a good cause. So the hotel is what you want to talk about?"

"I need to. It sucks, but now that the Sec-Nav knows I'll have to face the official NCIS shrink at some point and I need to be rock solid to have any hope of convincing him I'm fit to get back behind my desk. No way I can do that unless I have a handle on what happened and how to prevent it."

"What happened at the hotel isn't the central issue, Tony. It's a symptom... an end result."

"Right... I get that. Kind of. I know now that other things had been affecting me before that... all the way back from when I was a kid. It's like all my life... I was building a tower of blocks... and over the last few months it got to the tipping point and finally went boom. Pieces everywhere... clean up the mess, start all over."

"And you've made a great start on that."

"Yeah, but one tantrum and it could all come crashing down again."

"You aren't that fragile anymore, Tony, not by miles, and I seriously doubt the rage-blackout you experienced will ever happen again."

"How can you know that? If things pile up and start dragging on me again... how can you be so sure I won't kill someone next time?"

"Let's find out. Close your eyes. I want you to visualize a room... and everyone who's ever hurt you or dismissed you or abandoned you is there... all lined up. They can't talk, they can't leave. All they can do is stand there and be targets for your anger. You have no restrictions on your words or your behavior. Anything is acceptable. You can feel the emotion swelling... getting more powerful. It makes you strong. Strong enough to finally take action and make every one of them pay for what they've done... pay for their arrogance and their blindness. Your heart races... your breathing is fast and shallow... your hands are clenched into fists..."

As he talked, Lewiston leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and carefully studied Tony's expression and body language. The young man was frowning and beginning to tremble and he was pulling back slightly, tilting his body toward the wall behind him. His lips were moving, but no sound was emerging. Pleased, Lewiston pushed a little harder.

"I know Ziva's there. Probably laughing at the nasty stunt she pulled on you and how it almost ruined the trust between you and the rest of the team. What about your father? I bet he still has his back turned on you. Do whatever you want to, Tony. No repercussions, no punishment. Let your rage just overwhelm the people who never deserved to be a part of your life. They're barely worth spitting on, I admit... but it would feel so good to just let go, wouldn't it? So good to strike out, just once..."

His eyes popping open abruptly, Tony scrambled away from his doctor and huddled, arms wrapped tightly around himself, in a distant corner of the room.

"Stop it! Shut up! How can you... what the hell was that?! I don't... I wouldn't! God, what the *hell* was that about?!!"
"Proving something to both of us." Lewiston explained calmly, walking to where Tony stood and gently touching his shoulder. "That was the exact reaction I was hoping to get from you."

"You *wanted* me to get pissed at you? I don't understand..."

"It isn't anger you're feeling right now, it's fear."

"Fear... so that was a test."

"And you passed with flying colors. You could have given in and seen yourself lashing out and hurting the people who've hurt you, but instead you rejected what I was saying. You're deeply afraid of ever getting that out of control again. That's why I can't see it happening. You're not a rage addict, Tony. You're not and never will be your father."

Eyes sliding closed again, Tony turned further into the corner, bracing himself on the wall as he mumbled his gratitude.

"Thank God... and thank you..."

"I'm sure he appreciates it as much as I do. This doesn't mean there aren't relaxation and restraint techniques you can learn to help you stay in control..."

"I'm willing, believe me... but lunch first. I need a humungous, gigantic tray of meat and potatoes covered in grease. And a loaf of bread. Oh, and a beer. Non-alcoholic."

"What, you want Brad *and* the nutrition department after me?"

"Fine. Whatever they've got will have to do.' Tony conceded, pouting mildly until further thought brightened his mood again. "Ice cream?"

"Now that I can arrange..."

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NCIS:

When Gibbs and the Sec-Nav finally made it back to the office, they found Tim, Abby, Ducky and Palmer all nervously waiting for them in the bullpen. Sheffield grinned wryly.

"Not as if I was expecting anything less. Good afternoon, people."

Ducky stood and moved forward to greet the secretary as the old friends they were.

"Edward. Not the typical morning around here, I gather."

"No, Don, I'm afraid it wasn't."

"Where is Jennifer?" the older man asked somberly, sorrow and worry furrowing his brow.

"Bethesda. The same wing as Agent DiNozzo." He replied, continuing swiftly in response to the stricken looks the group was suddenly showing him. "Please calm down, all of you. True, I should have been told when this first happened..." he directed at Jethro, "... but if there's one thing I've gotten very good at it's after-the-fact damage control. Your colleague's future with NCIS is in safe hands."

"Sir?" Abby began, tentatively raising one hand "What do we do now? Without a director, I mean?"
"Until a new candidate can be found, I'll be working with you. Beginning after you all come back from the forty-eight hour leave I'm granting you, of course. I wish I could give you more, but since three of you also do work for other teams, it just isn't possible."

Tim frowned and protested mildly.

"Sir, I'd rather work, if that's alright with you."

"It isn't. I'll need at least that long to start untangling the chaos Director Sheppard has undoubtedly left me. I understand that you'll be taking the morning off tomorrow anyway to meet with Agent DiNozzo at the hospital, so it all works out. Besides, I understand that you've been doing exceptional work in your friend's absence, Agent McGee. If anyone deserves a little time to rest and reflect... it's you. If you want me, Jethro, I'll be upstairs making a dent in the mess. Try not to want me for a while, alright?"

"Understood."

Somehow, the group managed to hold out until the secretary strolled out of earshot, but then the bullpen dissolved into a jumbled uproar. A shrill whistle from Gibbs was all it took to re-establish peace. "Better. Palmer; you Ducky or Abby got work you need to be doing right now?"

"No, sir. Not at the moment."

"Okay. I'll try to make this brief anyway..."

Over the next few minutes, he quickly laid out Lewiston's plan for the group session. "We're all going out to dinner together tonight to talk about it and give McGee what he needs to get us ready. Everybody clear?"

They all nodded. "Good. Okay, scatter, people. I need some peace and quiet."

Ducky and Jimmy quietly moved off toward the elevators, but Abby simply shifted seats from the corner of Tim's desk to the floor at Jethro's feet. He scowled down at her, but she turned her large dark eyes up to meet his and his resolve instantly took a nose-dive and went up in flames. "No talking." He ordered gruffly. Abby gave him a sweet smile, briefly hugged his leg and pulled out her PDA. Tim, however, was just coming out of a state of shock and hadn't heard the admonition.

"Boss. How did... you told him about me?"

"Some reason I shouldn't have?"

"No, of course not. It's just... I didn't expect..."

"He asked how the rest of you were doin' in the middle of all this and I told him the truth. Nothing more to it than that."

"Right. Understood, boss." he replied, a broad grin slowly blooming on his lips. "I'm just going to... go look at some more files in the cold case room. I'll probably be there a while."

"Whatever you do is fine. Just do it quietly."

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TBC.....
Lewiston leaned back in his chair and drained the last of his own drink, smiling as he watched Tony nearly swallow his plastic spoon in a vain search for a final trace of ice cream. The young man's appetite had come so far from where he'd started that, citing a not-entirely-truthful concern for his waistline, the therapist had willingly surrendered his portion of dessert to his patient when Tony had looked longingly at it. Now he chuckled and reached out a hand, palm up. Tony surrendered the utensil with a confused look.

"I can't hurt myself with plastic."

"Maybe so, but you were about to start chewing on it and don't try to tell me different."

"It's ice cream." Tony countered, as if that simple statement should clear things up for any reasonable person.

"I'm with you there. I just thank God the nutritionist thinks I'm cute or we never would have had a chance at her Ben and Jerry's stash."

"Cherry Garcia..." Tony moaned faintly, his attention drifting far from the hospital and anything connected with it. "New York Super Fudge Chunk..."

"Focus, Tony. Time to get back to work."

"I'd sell every computer McGee owns for some Chunky Monkey..."

Lewiston laughed again, but still fought to get things back on track.

"In two days you'll be home and the team will probably buy you every flavor in existence if you ask for it. Right now..."

"Talking, digging into my head... I know. Okay, so what's next?"

"That's up to you."

Tony turned his eyes down for a long stretch of minutes, obviously thinking deeply about what else he hadn't worked through. When he looked up again, Lewiston could see he'd made a difficult choice.

"Forgiveness." He finally said, the word almost inaudible. "I... I need help to figure it out. How to do it... who deserves it from me and who I should be asking it from."

"Well... the most important thing to know is that it has nothing to do with other people. Forgiving is about you."

"Me? That makes no sense. It can't just be about making myself feel better."

"Sounds strange at first, I admit, but that's pretty much it. Forgiving because others want you to, or because you think they expect it, just doesn't work. Nothing gets resolved. It has to be a process that *you* go through because *you* need to let go of something that's weighing you down. Anger, jealousy, resentment... whatever it is."

"A process. It can take a lot of time, then."
"Depends. Who are you thinking about?"

Another long, meaningful silence ensued before Tony was able to speak the name he had been trying in vain to permanently banish from his thoughts for so many years.

"Michael Anthony DiNozzo Senior... my father."

"Have you gone by your middle name all your life?"

"No. Most of it... since he kicked me out. He calls me Michael." Tony admitted with a bitter laugh. "He, uh... he refuses to accept that I might not want his name... or the reasons why, of course."

"That tracks with what you've told me about him so far."

"We... we talk maybe once a year, now, if that. Always on the phone. Face to face... I'd be too tempted to just let go and make a nasty, bloody mess... 'an unfortunate scene' in his words. When he calls me that name... it actually hurts and I have to pull the phone away from my ear and fight not to puke... so I know hearing it in real life and being expected to smile and act like nothing's wrong..."

"... would be too much. I understand. Do you initiate the calls or does he?"

"They always come from his end. The idea that I actually enjoy what I do and choose to stay in law enforcement... that's another thing he can't accept. One of so many..."

"Like what? Give me some other examples."

"He's an alcoholic and a rage addict and a batterer. He only wanted a son as another status symbol... and never gave a damn what it did to me. When it turned out I wasn't the perfect child, the ultimate genetic copy of him... he threw me away. When I tried to hurt... when I tried to take my own life, he didn't want to know why. He was ashamed... and all he cared about was hiding me and my... 'indiscretion' from the world... his world especially."

"Wow. Getting that out all at once took courage and strength. Impressive. I'd say your father is an ideal candidate for us to work the process of forgiveness with. You've already taken the first step; objectively stating the wrongs that were done to you."

"No big deal. You pulled all that out of me days ago,"

"The next part isn't so easy. You have to admit how you really feel about the things you just mentioned."

"How I feel? God... I can't... it's over and done. I don't *feel* much of anything about it anymore..."

"That's not true. You told me not two minutes ago that just hearing the man say your given name made you physically ill."

"But... no, it only lasts for that moment... then it fades away."

"Does it? Or do you *put it* away? Are you shoving all your genuine feelings towards your father into a little box because you still don't think you have a right to them?"

"No! That's not it. It just... it does no good to indulge that crap."

"It's not crap, Tony. Those emotions are yours, they belong to you. Haven't you given up enough? Isn't it time you stop honoring your abuser and the pain you suffered at his hands?"
"Honoring... how can you say that? That is so off base. I just learned to keep it to myself. Nobody wants to hear it..."

"I want to hear it, Tony. I'm listening."

"It wouldn't make a difference now... cursing the past won't change it."

"Maybe not, but you can change how you respond to it. You can change the effect past events have on you in the present and future. Reclaim the emotions he denied you, Tony."

"This is another test, right? You're trying to get me to blow up. I won't do that..."

"Not at all. You just can't move on to the next step of the process if you can't get past this one. Step one; state the injury. Step two; recognize that the injury did significant damage that's still exerting control over your everyday life. You can do this, Tony, I know you can. Just tell me..."

"I... I'm angry, hurt, sad... and disappointed? That can't be right... where the hell did that come from?"

"Don't dismiss it. This is really good. Give me more."

"It... it's so strong, but... I don't understand it... I never saw it before..."

"Disappointed in who?"

"I'd expect it to be me. He always treated me like I failed him and that made me a failure as a human being... but it's them. It's directed at them..."

"Why?"

"I... oh my God..."

"Don't stop now, Tony. Keep pushing..."

"Shit, I always thought it was just unconscious, that they had no clue what lousy parents they were... but they knew! They knew and they turned it back on me! They made me their scapegoat... because they couldn't face that *they* were the failures! Son of a..."

Lewiston moved immediately to sit beside Tony, grasping his hand. The caring touch undid the younger man and his anger dissolved into sobs. An arm around his shoulder drew him close and embraced him gently until the storm subsided. "Sorry. I can't seem to stop doing that..."

"That's part of what I'm here for."

Straightening slowly, Tony swiped at his face and smiled thinly.

"Okay... next step."

"Understanding that your parents are human. They may not be terrific examples of the species, but they are human. They made terrible mistakes, they dropped a lifetime's worth of their baggage at your feet... and that's on them, not you. It wasn't, it isn't and it never will be your fault."

"Oh. So that's what you meant. Forgiving means freeing myself from what they did... and believing they'll decide to make amends some day, but not feeling guilty for the rest of my life if they choose to stay the way they are."
"That's a big part of it. It allows you to have hope, for yourself and them, and that's huge."

"Hope... not sure I know what that feels like anymore. If I can get that back, it really will be major. I think I'll get there, though. Any more steps?"

"Just one. The hardest one of all."

"Forgiving myself. For letting my screwed up emotions affect how I saw my friends behavior, getting so low that I tried to kill myself... and not asking for help before it got that bad."

"Oh how I love that insight of yours."

"Look... I know I asked for sunup to sundown, but I'm about to pass out I'm so tired..."

"With good reason. Of course we can stop." He agreed, rising to his feet. Tony stretched out on his side, arms wrapped around Abby's hippo, sighed and closed his eyes. Lewiston tugged the blanket up over both of them and quietly left.

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THAT NIGHT: A LOCAL RESTAURANT

Gibbs sat back against the leather of the large booth they'd chosen, feeling some tension about how tomorrow morning would play out, but concealing it from the others. They had all eaten and were now working on the task Lewiston had set them. He would be the last to add to the slip of paper that had been moving around the group for the last half hour, as he already knew what he would write. When Ducky slid the list to him across the table, Gibbs took one last sip of his coffee, sat up and studied it carefully. Scribbling quickly across the bottom of the sheet, he looked up, smiling lightly.

"That'll do fine. It's in your hands now, Tim." He proclaimed, handing the list to the younger man.

"I won't let you down, I promise."

"I know. Jimmy, you're bringing the equipment, right?"

"Yeah. No problem."

"Good. Okay, everybody home and get a good night's sleep. We've got a tough morning ahead of us. We meet at nine-thirty in the hospital lobby."

The others slowly shifted and stood, filing out with expressions running the gamut from pensive to eager. Only Abby stayed behind for a last word with Gibbs.

"Is he sure? Tony can really come home in two days?"

"He seemed sure to me. The man knows his stuff, Abs. If Lewiston says Tony's ready, he's ready."

"I only hope this plan doesn't set him back another two weeks. Oh, and talk about irony..."

"Irony?"

'Well, I was at Timmy's the other night when he was, you know, working on that project and if I don't know your handwriting by now..."

Gibbs grimaced and rubbed his temple.
"You breathe a word..."

"Never! What the project was all about? It's destiny... meant to be. If I screw that up, the universe will start screwing with me and that is the *last* thing I need..."

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TBC......
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Huge credit to Jo Dee Messina, Hoobastank, Neil Diamond, Alison Kraus and Billy Joel, BTW. Their music made this chapter what it was. Hopefully, a heartbreaker, 'cause that's kind of what I was going for. lol

10:00 A.M. THE FOLLOWING MORNING

"Morning, Tony."

"It is? Again? God, that just seems to happen every day, now. Can't you do something about that?"

"Cute. The nurses said you refused breakfast."

"I can't. If at all possible, I'd like to avoid upchucking in front of everybody if this goes south."

"It won't."

"You have no idea how I'm defining south right now... so please, no happy talk. Let's just do this, okay?"

Lifting Tony's chin so that their eyes met, Lewiston smiled softly over his response.

"I'll rephrase. I won't let anything negative happen in that room today. That's not what today is for. Better?"

"Just slightly." He grumped, rising to his feet. "Do I have to go in there like this?" he asked waving vaguely at his scrubs. "I might *be* a mental patient, but do I have to *look* like one?"

"Fashion anxiety. Now I know you're ready to go home."

"Ha-ha. It is to laugh. I'm serious about these... things."

"The scrubs are clean, just like they have been every other day. Nothing wrong with them."

"It's how I look *in* them! Ducky and Abby have seen me, but the others..."

"They aren't here to critique your outfit, Tony. Your friends are here to support you and express their feelings about what's happened. You could be sitting there in tights and a Shakespearean tunic and I don't think they'd care."

"You don't get it! I'm strong now... strong and stable. I don't need or want their pity. Looking like this... I know that's what I'll see in their eyes."

"No. Sympathy, concern, apprehension maybe. No pity. They love you and they would never do that. Anything you see in their eyes is coming from that place. Got it?" he asked in a mock-stern voice, shaking Tony's chin back and forth at the same time.

"Yeah... I got it." Tony replied with a soft laugh.
"Okay. Let's get going."

Once more there was the hesitation getting over the threshold, but eventually they made it beyond the confines of Tony's small chamber.

"Can I at least get a minute in there by myself to breathe before they all show up?" Tony pleaded as they made their way down the corridor.

"Sorry. They're waiting for us already. Don't worry, alright? You'll be fine."

"So you say..." Tony grumbled under his breath. When they reached the designated room, he moved into the large open space slowly, his expression neutral except for his eyes, which were telegraphing his fervent wish for a weapon in his hand or permission to flee. Lewiston had provided neither, both deepening and heightening his patient's anxiety.

Tony gazed around at the half-circle of chairs, noting the empty one that faced them, and smiled tightly at the people ranged before him, most of whom he hadn't seen or spoken to in what felt like an eternity. When he realized how much effort Abby was putting into staying in her seat, his smile softened, he nodded and she flew into his arms. Once she decided she was done squeezing the air out of him and had stepped back, the others approached and greeted him one by one. Finally, the group found their seats again and Tony reluctantly claimed the chair obviously meant for him.

Standing behind him, hands protectively curled around Tony's shoulders, the doctor quietly addressed the group, aware that the acoustics allowed him to be heard clearly without shouting.

"Welcome, everyone. I'm grateful for your presence today. Tony needs to hear what's on your minds and weighing down your hearts, but I have one requirement; please think very carefully before you speak. I've prepared him for the fact that some or all of you may be angry about what he tried to do, but the purpose of this is to avoid any more pain or misunderstanding. Be truthful... but try your best to be kind at the same time. Would you begin, Abby?"

"I guess they did put me on the end for a reason..." she replied softly, reaching under her seat and pulling out a portable stereo, plopping it in her lap. To her dismay, Tony sat up straighter and his previously impassive face now became wary and fearful.

"What the hell, Abs?" he asked

"Just trust me, okay? That amazing guy behind you... he said we could talk, we could choose a song that spoke to how we feel about everything that's gone down, or we could do both. I picked the third one. I'll talk to you after it's done. I really need to do that more, I know... talking to you, I mean. And making you talk, even when you don't want to. Anyway, this is my song..."

Ignoring Tony's further mumbles of protest, Abby hit play and the CD began. Tony pushed up, trying to rise out of his chair, but Lewiston held him down and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"You've managed to keep faith in me all this time, Tony. Just hold on a little longer... please."

As the lyrics of the song began to flow out of the speakers, Tony found himself relaxing almost against his will as he became caught up in the words he was hearing; words that left him stunned and frozen in place.

* So on we go
His welfare is my concern
No burden is he to bear
We'll get there
For I know
He would not encumber me
He ain't heavy, he's my brother...

It's a long, long road
From which there is no return
While we're on the way to there
Why not share
And the load doesn't weigh me down at all
He ain't heavy, he's my brother... *

By the time the song finished, Tony had found his voice again, but when he spoke up, his only response was pained shock and anger. Abby, however, seemed to have come prepared.

"Abby! God, I can't believe... son of a...

"Shush. You can be pissed about the ambush later. Right now, you have to listen to me. I didn't need anyone to tell me you're my big brother, Tony. I knew that the minute we met. I could see in your eyes that someone, maybe even everyone, had let you down big time... and what you needed was someone you could stand in front of and protect from the world. I never had that and it's something I always wanted, so I was totally psyched. I loved that we could sort of... fill holes in each other. But I didn't know how big your holes really were. If I had, I would've found a way to patch 'em or sew 'em or something, I swear I would. All I needed was time. The idea of you stealing that time away... that you decided to turn your whole self into one big hole and make a big sucking, aching exit wound in my world, too... that's gonna take some work to get over, but I will. *We* will, 'cause you'll always be my brother... and I still love you, no matter what."

Face buried in his hands, Tony missed the stereo being passed left into Tim's hands. The younger man's choice of music nearly broke Tony completely, but he fought to keep it together, though he couldn't imagine how he'd make it through three more songs.

"You, um... You've given me so much, Tony... and I know I'll never be able to tell you all of it... or repay even a tenth of a percent. I'm so glad you're okay... but I'm with Abby on the taking yourself away from us part. If you weren't there anymore to-to tease me or teach me, or if I couldn't look up and see you sleeping at your desk when a case goes way overtime... I just have no idea what I'd do. You being gone forever... there are moments when that thought hits me and... I get so mad I can't see straight. The thing is, it never lasts long. I know that what happened that night... it wasn't really your fault. I played my part in how you ended up feeling and I willingly take my share of the responsibility. This song... well, I couldn't say it any better than this, so... I'll let them take over."

* I'm not a perfect person
There's many things I wish I didn't do
But I continue learning
I never meant to do those things to you
And so I have to say before I go
That I just want you to know

I've found a reason for me
To change who I used to be
A reason to start over new
and the reason is you

I'm sorry that I hurt you
It's something I must live with every day
And all the pain I put you through
I wish that I could take it all away
And be the one who catches all your tears
That's why I need you to hear...

Tony twisted in the chair and spoke low and harsh to Lewiston.

"Don't make me do this anymore... I can't..."

"Accepting what they have to tell you will be the hardest thing you'll ever do, Tony, but it's probably also the most important. I believe you can handle this. I believe in you..."

"Bastard..."

"On occasion. You can leave if you absolutely feel you have to... but I have faith in your strength and your heart. Give them the chance, Tony. They deserve it..."

Tony emitted a low, mournful sound, ruthlessly swiped at his cheeks and eyes and turned back to face whatever Jimmy might have to present. The young man looked to Ducky for the words he didn't seem able to produce, but the ME simply shook his head and patted his assistant's shoulder. Jimmy smiled, breathed deeply once or twice and finally looked up at Tony.

"I... this may come out sounding totally lame. Talking, especially when it's emotional for me... that's not something I do really well. I just know that if I don't, all the feelings will stay twisted up inside me and... nothing will ever be right between us again. I want things to be right, so... here goes."

Lewiston grinned when he saw Gibbs flinch in surprise at hearing a version of his earlier words come out of Jimmy's mouth. Suppressing a chuckle, the doctor refocused on what Jimmy was saying. "When Ducky told me what you tried to do and where you were... I expected to be mad. Really, really mad. I mean... you're a mentor to me, even if you never knew it. And then it hit me. You never knew. I started looking at everybody else and... I saw the same guilt and disappointment in them. All I could think was... you mean none of us ever told him? Five people who work with him every day, who see him all the time and know what he's gone through the last few months... and not one of us ever said a word about how much he means to us? That's when I got mad... not at you, but at all of us. It seemed like we were all so self-involved that... we couldn't even look up for a second and see that someone we claim as family was drowning. Well... I know it's probably too late now, but this song is what I should've said, okay? All I can hope for is that... you hear what it's saying and take it to heart."

* Another day has almost come and gone
Can't imagine what else could go wrong
Sometimes I'd like to hide away somewhere and lock the door
A single battle lost but not the war.

But tomorrow's another day
And I'm thirsty anyway
So bring on the rain

It's almost like the hard times circle round
A couple drops and they all start coming down
Yeah, I might feel defeated,
And I might hang my head
I might be barely breathing - but I'm not dead, no...
... I'm not gonna let it get me down
I'm not gonna cry
And I'm not gonna lose any sleep tonight,

'Cause tomorrow's another day
And I am not afraid
So bring on the rain *

Jimmy passed the stereo to Ducky, who wiped his own eyes gently and stared at the black plastic weight in his lap, struggling to force sound past the softball that seemed to be lodged in his throat.

"Yes... dear Lord, after all those heartfelt words, I... I'm afraid I'm quite unable to-to speak very much at the moment. I'll just warn you that... this song may not be as lovely and sweet as the others, but it is relevant... as well as being a special favorite of mine. As Mr... as James has so eloquently put it, this is what I should have said..."

* You're having a hard time and lately you don't feel so good
You're getting a bad reputation in your neighborhood
It's alright, it's alright
Sometimes that's what it takes
You're only human, you're allowed to make your share of mistakes

You better believe there will be times in your life
When you'll be feeling like a stumbling fool
So take it from me you'll learn more from your accidents
Than anything you could ever learn at school.

Don't forget your second wind
Sooner or later you'll get your second wind...

... You've been keeping to yourself these days
Cause you're thinking everything's gone wrong
Sometimes you just want to lay down and die
That emotion can be so strong
But hold on
Till that old second wind comes along

You probably don't want to hear advice from someone else
But I wouldn't be telling you if I hadn't been there myself
It's alright, it's alright
Sometimes that's all it takes
We're only human
We're supposed to make mistakes. *

When Ducky first tried to pass the stereo on so Gibbs' song could be played, Jethro refused it. It took a few minutes of whispering back and forth between them for the younger man to accept the machine. Once that was settled, however, the team dad chose to make his own rules. Standing, he looked to Lewiston, his gaze steady and not even faintly questioning. The other man laughed out loud this time.

"You're not asking for permission, you're warning me that you're about to do something outside the box and telling me in no uncertain terms that I have no say in the matter."

"Word for word. If I'd said it."
"Trust me, you did. Your eyes spoke volumes. Your show, Jethro."

Grinning sadly, Gibbs walked forward, knelt in front of Tony and laid the stereo on the floor at his senior agent's feet. Tony shrank back, putting as much distance between them as he could without getting out of the chair.

"No. No, you SOB, you just back off, damn it... this isn't right... please, God... Gibbs, I'm begging you not to do this..."

"I know. Scared the hell outta me to even think it and if I had even one more step to take, it'd be different... but I don't. I'm in, Tony. You know what it means when I really commit... when I want something this bad. No surrender, no retreat. If that doesn't sink in... I just have to hope the song makes you understand." Gibbs vowed, pitching his voice so that only Tony and Lewiston would hear. Then he leaned closer and grasped Tony's face in both hands. The young man fought and flailed, terrified of what he believed might be coming, but, as his doctor had declared a moment earlier, one look from Gibbs and Tony settled down, realizing Jethro would never kiss him in such a public forum, even if the "public" was only their fellow team members. Instead, Gibbs used his grip to bring Tony's ear close to his lips, whispered a few more sentences then pulled back and hit the play button.

* Some people stay far away from the door
  If there's a chance of it opening up
  They hear a voice in the hall outside
  And hope that it just passes by

Some people live with the fear of a touch
And the anger of having been a fool
They will not listen to anyone
So nobody tells them a lie

I know you're only protecting yourself
I know you're thinking of somebody else
Someone who hurt you
But I'm not above making up for the love
You've been denying you could ever feel
I'm not above doing anything
To restore your faith if I can...

... I know you don't want to hear what I say
I know you're gonna keep turning away
But I've been there and if I can survive
I can keep you alive
I'm not above going through it again
I'm not above being cool for a while
If you're cruel to me I'll understand

Some people run from a possible fight
Some people figure they can never win
And although this is a fight I can lose
The accused is an innocent man....

... I'm not below anybody I know
If there's a chance of resurrecting a love
I'm not above going back to the start
To find out where the heartache began

Some people hope for a miracle cure
Some people just accept the world as it is
But I'm not willing to lay down and die
Because I am an innocent man... *

In the silence that followed the final message from those who cared the most for him, Tony could only stare around at the team, the tears he hadn't wanted to show them now streaming openly down his face. Eventually, he pulled his feet up onto the edge of the chair, wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head. Gibbs grabbed one of his hands and held it tightly and when the rest of the group surged forward, swiftly coalescing into a large, warm zone of comfort around Tony, Lewiston stepped back several feet and simply observed, content that, at least for a while, he wouldn't be needed.

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TBC....
Chapter 35

AFTERMATH:

DUCKY, JIMMY, GERALD

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Following a somber lunch with the other four, Ducky made his way slowly out to his car. Jimmy had driven himself, also, but he trailed along behind the older man instead of heading for his own vehicle. As they reached the space where Ducky had parked, he finally turned and addressed his dejected tag-along.

"Yes, Mr. Palmer? Did I leave something behind?"

"Huh? Oh. This isn't my car, is it? Sorry..."

"Hold on. Clearly, there's something you wanted to say."

"No. I mean... it's okay."

"James. Did you not listen to yourself earlier? Take your own very wise advice, my boy... and speak your mind while you have the chance."

"I... okay, here goes. I'm still kind of shaken up about this morning and I don't have a roommate, so I'd be going back to an empty apartment or wasting gas driving around until I found a movie I had no interest in, but would go to anyway just to not be alone, but then I'd realize that I didn't know a single person in the theater so I really *was* alone, which kind of defeats the purpose of going to the movie in the first place..."

Ducky smiled and laid a hand briefly over Jimmy's mouth. The younger man showed his boss a repentant grin and replied softly. "I need to spend less time around Abby."

"Obviously. Drop it down to its most basic components, would you?"

"Can I... would it be alright if I followed you back to your house? I wouldn't stay forever. I just... I think I need to talk... a little."

Ducky lightly cupped Jimmy's face in one hand and responded gently to his request.

"Of course you can join me. And you're welcome to stay as long as you need. I owe you an enormous debt of gratitude after all."

"You do?"

"Indeed. Thanks to you, I gleaned a very important lesson from this morning’s gathering. Pay swift attention to the needs of those we care about, no matter what else may seem to be more pressing... and take the time to show those same people just how *much* we care, before they can no longer hear us say 'I love you' or 'I'm sorry'."

"Wow. I said that?"

Ducky laughed and patted Jimmy on the shoulder.
"You did. Go on lad, head for your car. I'll wait for you..."

Less than forty minutes later they were walking into Ducky's elegant home, the older man in the lead. As they moved from the foyer into the living room Gerald appeared from the direction of the stairs and strode quickly over to the pair, sweeping Ducky into a powerful embrace. Jimmy gaped slightly for a moment then turned away out of respect, moving farther into the room and sitting carefully on the front edge of what looked to be a very old chair. When the other two had finished soothing themselves in the other's presence, at least for the moment, they finally pulled apart a little.

"How'd it go?"

"As I thought... very moving. Heart-rending in fact. Poor Tony found all the love and concern very difficult to take, but that's to be expected. He still seems so confused... You were right, I'm afraid. Having you there... might just have been too much for him."

"It's okay, love. When the changeover happens at work, Tony and I will find plenty of time to talk. I'll make sure of it."

"I have no doubt. Come, let's go rescue James, now, shall we? I'm sure he's feeling rather awkward over what he just witnessed."

"Hmmm. Time to re-think our non-disclosure policy, maybe?"

"As far as our team is concerned... yes. Watching Tony struggle has opened my eyes to the painful impact of keeping certain secrets... time is far too short for such foolishness. I'm no longer willing to hide who I love or how deeply."

"Okay. You've got my vote. You always had it."

"I know. It isn't that I loved you any less than I do at this moment. I was simply... frightened."

"The world's good at doing that."

"Yes... well, the world can bloody well descend to Hades if they choose to align against us. From this moment forward, my only one, you and I are going public and all the negative voices be damned." Ducky declared vehemently, leaning in to place a lingering, passionate kiss on Gerald's lips.

"My God..." his lover chuckled when they finally pulled apart. "I was just gonna send this doctor a fruit basket for all he's done for the team, but for inspiring such a sea-change in you I'm thinking an upgrade to a Ferrari or maybe a Rolex is in order..."

"Something in the middle of those two price ranges will suffice, I'm sure. In deference to our soon-to-be tighter finances, we should probably lean more toward the fruit..." Ducky responded, as Gerald took his hand and tugged him into the living room to sit on the long sofa. The former assistant ME studied Jimmy for a long moment then held out his free hand. After a brief hesitation, the young man accepted the offering and was gently pulled over to sit beside Gerald.

"We haven't had a lot of chances to talk, Jimmy. I'd like to correct that. I need to know more about you. How you like to work, what's easy for you to handle and what disturbs you... tell me everything."

"Okay... but why? I don't understand."

Gerald turned to gaze reproachfully at Ducky.
"Damn it, Don... you couldn't find a minute to warn the poor kid you're retiring?"

"At heart he's a sensitive boy and I knew it would cause him pain and anxiety... so I avoided talking about it. My apologies, Jimmy, truly. I just couldn't bear to see the hurt in your eyes..."

"Retire... you're leaving?"

"Yes. Quite soon. Gerald is taking over as chief medical examiner. That's why he asked you about yourself. The two of you really don't know each other very well and working together will go much more smoothly if that changes."

"I... not right now, okay? I need time to... absorb this... think about it. Can we talk about this morning instead?"

"Absolutely. Go ahead." Gerald conceded graciously, hoping he'd learn at least some of what he needed to know just from listening to Jimmy talk about his emotional experience at the hospital earlier that day. Ducky squeezed Gerald's hand firmly and leaned slightly against his taller lover, gratefully allowing his weary body and mind to sink into the deepest source of comfort he had ever known.

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ABBY, TIM:

Sighing, Tim extended a hand and touched one of Abby's pigtails. He considered tugging on it gently, just to tease her, but instead he let his fingers sift through the soft dark hair in an effort to soothe. Through most of lunch, she had been atypically silent and grave, unwilling to respond to anyone's attempts to lighten her mood. By the end of the meal, the atmosphere had contaminated the rest of the group as well and they'd all left the restaurant with grim expressions, bent shoulders and lowered heads.

Even now, when he'd parked just outside the fence of a small local airstrip and they were laying side by side on the hood of his car, in imitation of a scene from one of her favorite movies, Tim couldn't get her to talk to him and he was becoming more and more worried.

"I'm an idiot, Abby. I'm so sorry..."

At last she turned her head, looked at him quizzically and spoke up.

"For what?"

"I don't know. I just need something... anything to be my fault. At times like this, if I don't have something to be making amends for... I go crazy."

"Timmy, what are you talking about?"

"That's what's got you so mad, right? What I said to Tony? I can't help it, Abs, it's what I do. When things go wrong, I step up and take the blame so the pressure's off everybody else and... and things can get back to normal faster. It makes me sick to my stomach when the people around me are tense and anxious all the time... I hate it, so I have to do something. I had to try and fix it..."

"Like you're doing right now." She responded. Tim picked up his head and looked at her sadly, but when he opened his mouth to speak again Abby held up a hand. "No. Stop it, okay? The way I've been since the meeting had nothing to do with you, McGee. I was remembering what you guys said and trying to... run it through my computer up here, so I could make sense of it... get it all organized
and in context." She told him, tapping her temple. "To do that, I needed it quiet... so I had to shut the rest of you out for a while. I'll admit, at the time I didn't understand why you'd claim responsibility for something you didn't do. Now I know the answer. It helps make the picture even clearer for me. Thank you." She murmured, kissing him gently.

"So... you're all set now? All the deep thinking's over?"

"For a while."

"We can get down to business?" he asked, grinning wickedly.

"You start."

"I always start."

"You know it better than I do. I only started really listening in the past few months."

"I still can't believe that. As eclectic a music collection as you have and you never...""

"Timmy..."

"Okay, okay. ' Mama, I just killed a man. Put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger now he's dead... ' "

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GIBBS:

Back at his desk, Jethro tried to find something to occupy him, but he just couldn't focus and this realization disturbed him more deeply than anything he'd heard or said at the session. Concentration and single-mindedness were more than simply a part of the discipline that ruled his life, they were essential to his picture of who he was and it shook him to the core that he could lose sight of them even for a moment. Finally, he surrendered and headed up the stairs, hoping against hope that the Sec-Nav would let him help sort out the disaster his old lover and partner had left behind. Wading knee-deep into someone else's problems was the best way he knew to place your own firmly on the back burner.

When he stepped into the outer office, he was a little surprised that Cynthia was gone. He knew she would be invaluable in putting Sheppard's mess to rights Curious, he knocked lightly on the door frame to the inner sanctum, as the door was wide open.

"I thought I sent you home for two days."

"You know me."

"Unfortunately, yes." The other man shot back with a half smile. "C'mon in. Sit. How'd this morning go? General terms only, of course. I don't expect details."

"It was... enlightening."

"That's all? I know I said no details, but..."

"If I have to, we'll talk about it later, alright? For now... I'm here to help. What can I do?"

"Nothing. Even Superman needed R&R once in a while, Jethro. Go find your own fortress of solitude and take a break, damn it."
"And let my brain talk to me for hours on end without anything to distract it or make it shut up? No, thanks. I need... I want to get my hands dirty."

Sheffield huffed out a frustrated breath and pushed at the myriad folders scattered across the desk.

"Can't avoid that... I've spent about ten hours, now, going through the assigned cases for the last month. I knew I was seeing a pattern, but I couldn't make it gel... couldn't quite get it to come together. Then I took a look at her private journal. It was all right there, in depressing black and white." He growled, tossing a small book into Jethro's hands "She's been steadily decreasing the number of cases your team was given in order to keep her... to keep Ziva David close by. I'm shocked none of the other team leaders came to you and complained about the extra workload."

"Me too. They wouldn't have gotten any satisfaction from her, that's for damn sure."

"No... God, I need a drink. More like ten..."

"Mind if I join you, sir?"

"Not at all, Jethro. Not at all."

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TBC......
AFTERMATH PART 2:

TONY

Gazing fondly at the tense back of his patient, which was the only part Tony was currently willing to show him, Lewiston chuckled and broke the long silence he'd let spool out since they'd returned from the group session.

"Ooookay. Let's see how my psychic powers are working today, hmmm? Your family sucks for making you show so much raw emotion in front of them, I suck for getting them to do it and the world sucks just on general principles."

Tony grunted something that sounded enough like an assent that Lewiston felt comfortable in assuming it was one and proceeded accordingly. "The weakness thing again. We never did really settle that issue completely, did we?"

Finally, Tony turned over, sat up and confronted his doctor.

"It's not an issue, it's a fact! Why don't you get that? The world I work in, the people I have to deal with... if I slack off or hesitate for even a second, an innocent could die!"

"And how many hours do you work on a normal day?"

"Eight to ten. If it's a life-or-death thing we might go all night, but that's rare."

"The rest of the time?"

Tony grimaced as the point sank in.

"I can't separate work and down-time. Not the way you're suggesting. A cop is always a cop. The instincts don't just... vanish when you aren't on duty."

"Burn-out is real, Tony, you know that. Vigilance becomes hyper-vigilance, becomes unending stress, becomes stress related health problems. I know you don't want to hear it, but your health is still pretty fragile and it will be for a while. For you, burn-out could mean ending up in the hospital for days, or even weeks. Considering your opinions on modern medicine and all related topics..."

"I get it, okay? I get it. I just... I don't understand to let it go. When he... when I got kicked out, I had to do something, you know? Staying in fight-or-flight all the time meant I survived one more day. By the time I hit college it was just... normal. Changing that, consciously relaxing and letting down my guard every time the impulse hits... it makes me tired just thinking about it."

"I understand that. I didn't say you have to figure out how to do it right this minute. After you go home tomorrow, you'll have six months to ease into it and learn the techniques."

"Home... God, that's scary. I'm not sure I'm ready... but I guess that's typical, huh?"

"Pretty much. You are ready, though. You've accepted your support system again, you've gotten a lot of issues straightened out that could have snuck up and sabotaged you and you have the security of knowing I'm always here if you need me."

"You think I will? After the six months, I mean."
"I'll evaluate how you're doing after that and we'll decide together if you need to keep going. I can't see that happening, but life can throw you curves."

"This morning was more like bean-balls. I felt like they kept hitting me right in the chest and the head. I couldn't think or breathe..."

"It did seem as if the songs were affecting you pretty powerfully."

"Tell me about it. Jimmy... man, who would have thought the kid is so damn deep? And Abby knows way more about what's going on inside me than she has any right to."

Lewiston grinned and shrugged.

"Sisters."

"I guess." Tony conceded, finally finding it within himself to produce a tiny smile. "I'll get used to this... family thing in time, right?"

"Guaranteed."

"They're a lot better for me than my real one ever was."

"No comment."

"Another one of those things therapists aren't supposed to say?"

"Uh-huh. You feel like telling me what Jethro whispered to you?"

"Do I have to?"

"Of course not. I was just curious. That song... it even took my breath away a little. Hard to miss the message there."

"Yeah, I heard it."

"Tell me."

"He was trying to say... he understands that I've got issues and I'm still in a lot of pain from things that happened in my past... but he wants to help me heal and he's willing to take everything slow and wait 'till I'm ready for each new step. The one thing he won't do is give up on me."

"So you don't think he chose that song randomly."

"As much as Billy is his style and I'm sure he's a fan... no. They probably all put serious thought into what they wanted to say."

"What were you hearing from them?"

Tony drew and released a deep breath, clearly fighting to maintain control of his emotions.

"That... that they care about me and don't want me going anywhere. All the stuff that Jimmy was ragging on them and himself for not saying long before now."

"So don't you think maybe they deserve to hear the same from you once in a while?"

Tony gaped in shock as Lewiston's question hit home with breath-stealing effect.
"Shit... you're saying... if one of them was... I could be the one who keeps somebody from... oh my God."

Lewiston rose and laid a hand on Tony's shoulder, gripping gently.

"I'm not saying you should be hugging Tim in the middle of a fire-fight, Tony... but there is a time and place for showing the people who love you that you don't want them going anywhere, either. Think about it, hmmm? I'll see you tomorrow for a celebration breakfast."

Tony watched his doctor exit with a stunned expression still in place and tears streaking down his cheeks as he pondered the potential power of a few simple words.

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ZIVA:

THAT EVENING:

Pacing frantically, Ziva silently cursed her father and the luxurious temporary apartment he had imprisoned her in. Two of his most trusted guards were stationed directly outside her door with orders to keep her where she was until Aviel David chose to return and deal with his wayward daughter. Said daughter was on the verge of crawling out a window in order to escape the boredom, frustration and, though she was loath to admit it, the faint trace of fear that tightened her chest.

Stalking over to the table where a simple bar set-up had been left for her, she poured her third tumbler of whiskey in the last few hours and downed half of it quickly, grimacing at the fire, but sighing gratefully as the burn diminished, fading into a warmth that faintly relaxed the tension in her shoulders. Swiveling on her heel, she began her pacing routine again. A moment later, however, she halted, listening intently to the new voice that was quietly arguing with her jailers. Recognition struck abruptly and she ran to the door, pounding on it.

"Micah, Jacob! Let her in, damn it! Please!"

After a long stretch of minutes, the lock finally clicked over and the door swung inward just enough to admit Ziva's visitor.

"Your father will have us both flogged if he finds out about this." One of the men warned Ziva affectionately.

"I won't be telling him." she replied, kissing him swiftly on the cheek and turning away as the door closed again behind her, choosing to focus on the much more joyful presence before her. "Mother... Shia, it is so good to see you. I've missed you more than you can imagine..."

"My daughter... my poor, deceived child... don't fear. Mother is here to save you."

Pulling away suddenly, Ziva frowned at the other woman.

"Beloved? You know the things he did and you still call him beloved?"

"He had a cause. It was not a just or righteous one, but he believed in it and that is more than you
have ever had. Yes, he was lost in darkness, but given enough time I would have turned him back to the light. You stole that chance from me... and now his soul can never be with God. Your only hope is to go and be with him...to make amends for what you have done and beg God's forgiveness."

Intent on her mother's flushed, anguished expression, Ziva almost missed the motion of Shia's left hand as it rose, steel shining in the light from a nearby lamp. Unfortunately, even with some warning and the benefit of exceptional reflexes, Ziva couldn't completely ward off the blow that drove shards of bright pain through the core of her body and sent shockwaves outward from the point of impact. Gazing sadly down at the floor where her daughter had collapsed, Shia slid the weapon back into her evening bag, composed her expression into one of relief and joy and walked away. Knocking softly, she waited for the door to open, slipped out and shut it quietly.

"She's gone to bed. Please try not to wake her."

"Of course, Madame."

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TBC......
A LOCAL D.C. CAFE: FOLLOWING MORNING

"Jethro, I say again you look positively dreadful. Go home." Ducky

Gibbs sipped cautiously at a glass of tomato juice and Tabasco sauce, grimaced and rubbed his temple.

"I'll be fine once I get this down. Go on... eat your breakfast."

"If you insist. Just be glad I was amenable to your choice of venue this morning instead of dragging you to my preferable eatery."

"Which would've been..."

"Traditional Scottish fare. I'm sure you couldn't have dealt with those who order haggis for their morning repast."

Gibbs looked away and struggled against the indignity of covering his mouth.

"Ducky, for God's sake..."

"Mmm. Apologies for the lack of tact, but you can't deny that you deserve *some* sort of penalty for drinking into the wee hours instead of coming to us and making use of the basement."

I didn't feel like breaking things. It wasn't that bad...."

"No? You're considering backing away from whatever promises you made to Anthony yesterday. That's very bad."

Gibbs looked at his friend sharply.

"You're wrong."

"Please, Jethro." Ducky responded, exasperation written clearly on his face. "You act as if we've just met! I was there when you first began to grieve for Shannon and Kelly and I've watched you cut and run from every serious commitment you've made since. I know, better than anyone else in your life, how much it cost you to say whatever you said to Tony... and how much those words are now haunting you and frightening you."

Gibbs dropped his eyes to the tablecloth and took another brief pull on the anti-hangover concoction in front of him.

"I want it... want something with him. It's just... I look at him and then I look in a mirror... and I can't see what I have to offer him. He's so damn young..."

"Chronologically, perhaps. This last year, however, has stripped a great deal from Tony. His illness, Katelyn's death... he's had to grow up quite a lot in a very short time."

"I know. He made me so proud with how he handled it all."

"Ah. So that's it."
"What?"

"You feel that not seeing how close he was to falling down makes you unworthy of him."

"No. You're way off."

"Of course. Well, as Mr. Palmer stated so succinctly, none of us recognized what was going on with Tony. So, according to your theory, we are all undeserving and should all now abandon the poor boy in order that he might find a better family... perhaps a psychic one who can read and instantly respond to his every emotional fluctuation."

Gibbs managed a severe glare, but only for a few moments.

"Sarcasm is really, *really* bad for a hangover, Duck."

"True, but a small increase in your headache is well worth it if my point was driven home."

"Bastard."

"When the need arises, absolutely. Now get the rest of that evil brew inside you and be quiet for a few minutes. If you're looking for something to ease your pain, that should do the job."

Gibbs grunted, his face dark and brow furrowed, but he followed Ducky's advice. Thirty minutes later, the older man was finished, the bill paid and both men rose to leave. As they approached their respective cars, another drew up to the curb. To Gibbs' surprise, Abby spilled out of one side with her typical boundless energy and Tim emerged more sedately from the other side. Ducky greeted them both with a bright smile.

"Right on time, you two. It's so good to see you happy again, Abigail. I must admit I was terribly worried about yesterday..."

"Me too, Ducky." She confessed as she embraced him gently. "You ready to go?"

"I am, indeed."

"What's going on, Duck?" Gibbs asked.

"Oh, Timothy called just after you did this morning. He invited me to join them for a long relaxing drive in the country and then a bit of horseback riding. It sounded like just the thing."

"Yeah... yeah, it does."

Abby grinned and laid an easy hand on Jethro's arm.

"We'll do another trip later... just you me and Timmy. Some fishing, hiking maybe. You've got way higher priorities today. You've gotta go get Tony."

"I'll take care of him, Abs. I promise."

"I know you will." She whispered, hugging Gibbs far more fiercely than she had dared to with Ducky and whispering in her ersatz father's ear. "Bring him home, Papa. Bring him home..."

Jethro felt his heart twist, but he held the reaction deep inside, knowing she wouldn't understand. As she and Tim headed back to the car, Ducky, able to see subtleties of emotion in Gibbs that others would never guess at, spoke quietly.
"What did she say?"

"She... she called me Papa. I haven't heard that in so long. And she sounded just like..."

"Ah. I really don't think Kelly would mind, you know. In fact... I think she'd heartily approve." The ME responded, pulling a CD jewel case from his pocket. "Here. Listen to this in the car."

"What is it?"

"A song of encouragement for you. I anticipated your fear and your past trying to overwhelm you. Just trust me, my friend... this will help." He said cryptically then strolled away and slid into his own vehicle, preparing to follow the young couple over to Tim's apartment building, where he would safely park his car and join them in Abby's for the day.

Gibbs silently watched the cars pull away, his gaze moving between the diminishing forms and the case in his hand. Finally, he got into the driver's seat, turned the key to the accessory setting and pushed the disk into the slot. As the first verse began to flow from the speakers, he flushed and caught himself reaching out to stop the song from playing. Instead, he curled the hand into a fist and forced himself to listen to the rest.

* ... You can run but you cannot hide
This is widely known.
And what you plan to do with your foolish pride
When you're all by yourself alone?
Once you tell somebody the way that you feel
You can feel it beginning to ease
I think it's true what they say about the squeaky wheel
Always getting the grease.

Better to shower the people you love with love
Show them the way that you feel
Things are gonna be just fine if you only will
Show the people you love with love
Show them the way that you feel
Things are gonna be much better if you only will... *

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BETHESDA:

Leaning back on his bed, once again dressed in the sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers in which he'd arrived at the hospital, Tony sighed and laid a hand across his stomach.

"Full?"

"Yeah. I'm surprised I recognize the condition. It's not a normal state for me."

"It looks good on you. You look satisfied... and happy."

"Of course I do. I'm not thinking about what's about to happen."

"Big day."

Tony nodded, rising and moving to the door, which for once had been left open. Laying a shaking hand on the frame, he responded softly.
"Gigantic."

Lewiston joined him, staying back a foot or two to give Tony space.

"You've done all the work you needed to do for now, Tony. I swear, you're ready to go home."

Tony produced a dour chuckle and looked back at his doctor.

"God, you always sound so damn sure of how strong and capable I am. All that certainty gets a little irritating, you know?"

"I'll work on it." Lewiston told him, laughing. "I'm not the only one who believes in you. You heard that yesterday."

Tony now turned around completely to face the other man, his expression curious and guardedly hopeful.

"You believed them? You think they were really being honest and not just... I don't know, saying what they thought you expected to hear?"

"They were completely truthful."

"Family that might actually give a damn... it's just such an alien concept to try and get my head around."

"I know. We'll keep talking through that and everything else in our weekly sessions. For now, we better wrap up. Your ride will be here soon. Anything else you want to ask?"

"Will you answer me?"

"If I possibly can."

"What would your song have been?"

"Wow... I didn't see that coming. Let me think a minute..."

The silence spooled out for a long stretch of seconds before the right choice suddenly struck Lewiston. "Okay. I think, if I had to choose... it'd be Mariah Carey's 'Hero'. After what I've seen in you these last two weeks... the courage, the strength, the willingness to try and to slog through some really tough issues... that song pretty much says it all. I truly believe you're a hero, Tony. Like the song says, you just have to look inside and not be afraid to see the truth."

"Hmmph. You're pretty cool yourself, doc. I'm, uh... I consider myself damn lucky you were the one on call when I stumbled in here that night."

Lewiston, his throat too tight to enable an immediate response, simply swallowed and ducked his head to hide the flush rising in his cheeks. He was immensely grateful a few minutes later when Gibbs entry at the far end of the corridor provided a convenient distraction and a new topic of conversation.

"Jethro's here."

Abruptly, Tony tensed and backed away a few steps. "Tony?"

"I'm okay... I will be. Gimme a minute."
"No problem. Breathe slowly... try to relax. We talked about this, remember? You feel safe here, so it's normal to get a little scared about facing the world again..."

"Not scared, terrified. Everything that shoved me to the edge of a cliff is out there."

"So are the people who will keep you from ever facing a moment like that again. You just have to let them in... let them be there for you."

Eyes squeezed shut, Tony chuckled brokenly and blindly reached out a hand. Which was firmly grasped.

"No trying to fight the war all by myself."

"That's right. You're not alone anymore, Tony. I swear, eventually I'll help you see that leaning on other people isn't shameful. Even falling on your ass isn't so bad knowing that when you look up there'll be five pairs of hands waiting to pull you back up on your feet."

"I'm trying... I am. Faith just doesn't appear because I want it to."

"I know." A new voice agreed from the doorway. Tony's eyes popped open abruptly and when he realized the speaker was Jethro, the younger man took another step back. "Looks like I'm a little early."

"No, Jethro. You're fine." Lewiston reassured him. "We're just dealing with some going home jitters."

"How... how much did you hear?" Tony asked tightly, fighting to calm his nerves.

"The part about letting us be there. And you not trying to fight all alone anymore. Kind of ironic... that goes with the present I bought you."

Tony's expression lightened and his gaze swiftly searched Gibbs body.

"Present? Where?"

"In the car. They wouldn't let me bring it in, so you'll have to go to it."

"Yeah. I, uh... I have a problem getting out of the room. It's..."

"... not easy. I get that."

"You do. I can see it... in your eyes."

"I'll tell you the story someday. For now... yeah, I think maybe I can help. Can I..." he asked, gesturing into the room.

"Of course." Lewiston readily acceded, eager to see what Jethro had in mind. Gibbs strode up to Tony, gently claimed the hand the doctor had been holding then enfolded the other as well.

"Okay. Close your eyes again, Tony... and think back to a couple Christmases ago when you and Abby talked me into that Claymation DVD marathon."

"Between her collection and mine I think we have every one that exists." Tony commented, grinning

"I wouldn't bet against it. I'm thinking about the one with Mickey Rooney and Keenan Wynn... the one about the origin of Kris Kringle?"
"Man, that's my second favorite."

"Behind Rudolph, I know."

Lewiston produced a deep, comprehending hum as something clicked into place for him.

"That makes so much sense..."

Gibbs' eyebrow shot up, but he respected the confidentiality issue and didn't ask, turning back to Tony.

"That song that Kringle sings to help the wizard learn to walk again..."

"You've gotta be kidding, Gibbs."

"If it doesn't work we try something else."

"God... okay. Do I *have* to sing?"

"Not unless you want the doc to know how good you are."

"What? How the hell do you..."

"Later. You don't even have to say the words. Just think about the song. When you're ready, you let me know and we'll do it just like they did."

After a few tense moments, Tony nodded. Gibbs tugged gently and Tony took a single step forward, echoed by Jethro moving back the same distance. To his surprise, Tony was actually murmuring the words to the song under his breath.

"Put one foot in front of the other... and soon you'll be walking out the door..."

Slowly, one halting step at a time, the two men engaged in a strange, but somehow captivating dance that gradually took Tony over the threshold and out into the corridor.

"Open your eyes, Tony. You did it."

"I did? Hey... I did. Thanks." He responded softly, staring at Gibbs as if something significant had suddenly changed about the older man.

"Abby needs you home."

"Abby. Right."

Lewiston joined the pair just then, holding out Bert.

"Don't forget your buddy. Little sis would never forgive you."

"Yeah, I'd get smacked for sure." Tony replied, reaching out to take the toy. "You'll call so we can set up an appointment schedule?"

"I will."

"I should say something... but you know, right?"

"I know. Go get your present."
"Yeah. C'mon, Gibbs."

The pair walked away slowly. Lewiston grinned as he watched them go, wondering if Tony was aware he was still tightly clutching one of Jethro's hands.

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TBC.......
As they approached the exit doors, the final barrier between them and the outside world, Tony hesitated once again. Gibbs drew a slow, deep breath, preparing himself for further coaxing and convincing, then looked over and realized the young man was squinting at the bright sunshine in the parking lot. Grinning, Gibbs slipped Tony's shades from his pocket and held them out. The other accepted them with a rueful smile and popped them on.

"Thanks. It's, uh... I kinda forgot I might need these. Stay isolated too long... you forget a lot of things, I guess."

"Just ask. I'll crack you in the head; rattle your brain a little. Whatever's missing is bound to shake loose."

Tony laughed.

"You know... anyone who doesn't know you and our team would think I should be dragged right back down that hall and locked up permanently... but I've actually missed you doing that. When you smack me I know I need to step it up... and I know you still believe I can."

"Always. You ready to go get your present?"

"Always." Tony echoed, sporting a wicked grin and adjusting his sunglasses as they pushed through the doors. Once he was actually beyond the hospital confines, standing on asphalt and feeling fresh, moving air for the first time in two weeks, Tony paused for a moment of gratitude and appreciation then moved forward again, following Gibbs to his car. Peering into the back seat, which was stuffed with long boxes sticking out of an enormous plastic shopping bag, Tony cocked an eyebrow and turned his gaze on his boss.

"Yours is the wrapped one."

Tony gazed more intently around the car's interior and found that a gift-wrapped box the same size and shape lay across the front passenger seat. Abandoning all dignity in favor of the sheer joy of tearing wrapping paper to shreds, he raced around the car and tugged on the door, only to find it locked.

"Gibbs!"

"Hold on. This thing doesn't have power locks, ya know."

At last Gibbs slid into the driver's seat and reached across to flick the lock on the passenger door. Tony immediately had the door wide open. Tossing Bert into the back seat with the other boxes, he pulled the gift out, placed it on the hood and dug his nails deep into the paper. A few moments later, the mystery solved, he brought the package and the remnants of wrapping with him as he slid in on his side. The smile had been replaced with a confused expression.

"A toy light-saber?"

"It's a reminder."

"Of what, how many times I've seen 'Star Wars'?"

Gibbs breathed deeply to help gather his courage, ran some of the lyrics of the James Taylor song
through his mind and then lowered his eyes before he responded. Expressing his feelings was a big
enough step in itself; boldly facing potential rejection while he did so would have to wait for another
day.

"That you're a defender of others, fighting the good fight... and that you have the strength of
character, the heart and the intelligence to win, even if you have to do it with a bionic hand... or in
spite of the darkness that brought you into the world."

Tony felt anger rise up inside him at Gibbs vague reference to what he knew of Tony's past, but the
emotion faded quickly. If anyone besides Lewiston could be trusted with that knowledge, Tony
knew it was Jethro Gibbs.

"Whatever information you have... I mean, I know you won't be calling the tabloids or anything..."

"I don't know a lot. They did background checks on you for the job. I read those reports... they
weren't exactly complimentary to your folks, but they didn't say you came from Dante's Inferno
either. A few things you've said gave me a clue. Mostly... it's a gut feeling."

"The famous gut."

"I trust it over anything or anyone else. Except you."

Tony flushed and swiftly changed the subject.

"So the other boxes in the back... you got a saber for everybody?"

"Our team, yeah."

"Ziva?"

Gibbs didn't respond. "What happened, boss?"

"Later. Let's get you home and settled in..." he said, starting up the engine. Tony paused, fear
swamping him, then shot out a hand to briefly cover Jethro's where it curled around the gearshift.
"What?"

"I... I'm not asking for anything you can't... I just need to... I need a favor. A huge one."

"Go ahead."

"I can't go back to my place. Not yet... maybe not ever. The thoughts, memories being there would
bring up.... I'm just not ready to face that yet."

"You're asking to stay with me."

"No, not if you don't want that. I've still got cards and cash in my wallet. You can drop me off at a
hotel... or pawn me off on Abby or Tim or..."

A sudden sharp rap to the back of his skull cut off Tony's ramble instantly. For a moment he
remained silently shocked, but sudden delight at a return to what passed for normalcy in his life
brought the boyish, mischievous smile back to his face.

"Right. Your place'll be fine, boss."

Gibbs allowed a half-smile of his own to grace his lips as they pulled out of the parking space. Once
on the road, his arm dropped down to rest on the center console between the two seats. When he felt
hesitant fingers drape over his wrist and squeeze faintly, the smile went from half to full in a flash.

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THE HOUSE:

They'd been parked in Gibbs' driveway for several minutes, and silence and inaction had taken over the car. Gibbs was using all his control to live up to the song he'd played for Tony and maintain the patience the lyrics had promised. Tony was having eighth and ninth thoughts and praying Jethro's forbearance would hold out. At last, the older man spoke, making sure his tone stayed even, calm and relaxed.

"Tony?"

The grip on his wrist tightened momentarily, then vanished.

"Yeah... I'm with you."

"Whenever you're ready. No big rush."

"I feel like there is... like I need to be normal right this second because everybody else is waiting on me to be okay so they can move on and be okay..."

Knowing a statement like that left no room to indulge his own insecurities, Gibbs turned in his seat to face Tony and took his hand again.

"No. First off, just because you needed help, it doesn't make you abnormal. It makes you human. Second, everybody else can handle their own crap for a while. Right now... you deserve to focus on you and what you need."

"I've been doing that for two weeks..."

"There's no time-limit here, DiNozzo. It takes as long as it takes. I'm not going anywhere, that's for damn sure."

"Long haul?"

"Long as you can stand me."

Tony smiled softly and responded the same way, head down as if he were studying his present more closely.

"Ditto."

"Good." Gibbs replied, unfolding himself from his side of the car and stretching. He waited until Tony joined him, then both walked into the house together. A few steps inside the door, Tony stopped, his expression slowly revealing mixed emotions. "What?"

"I was just thinking how great a long hot shower is gonna feel... but I remembered I don't have anything to change into."

"I'll handle all that. You go hit the guest room and take a nap."

"Nap? What am I, three?"

"You tellin' me you're not exhausted? 'Cause your bloodshot eyes and the bags under 'em say
"I guess... maybe. What about lunch?"

"After you get some rest. Go on. I'll be in and check on you in a while."

Tony scowled, turned and shuffled away, mumbling to himself.

"... thinks I'm a toddler. Next he'll be buying me a teddy bear and a sippy cup... he tries to potty train me I'll punch him right in the nose..."

Once Gibbs heard the door to the guest room slam shut, he pulled out his cell phone.

"Abs? Hey... no, he's home. Conked out in my guest room. He couldn't deal with it yet... I know it's normal... no I didn't get on him about it... yeah, he'll be here for a while, but that means he needs... Exactly. No, when you get back just head over there and pack a couple suitcases for him... I'll leave anything else up to you. Music, movies... whatever. Oh, uh... except for one certain DVD. Remember those claymation Christmas specials you got me to watch a couple years ago?"

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TBC.......
SIX HOURS LATER:

Moving silently into the guest room, Gibbs dropped slowly into a chair next to the bed and studied Tony as he slept. His immediate urge was to reach out and sweep the hair away from the young man's eyes, and he found himself actually starting to do it, but he quelled the impulse and dropped the hand back down. Instead, he let his eyes roam over every feature of Tony's face that he'd never allowed himself the luxury of really examining before. His heart and conscience both angrily criticized him for the sobering things he found.

{God almighty... those lines around his eyes haven't always been there, have they? And the ones on his forehead... How could I be so reckless and stupid? I was so afraid of getting hurt I let myself go blind to the pain *he* was in. I have to stop this, here and now.}

"You hear me, Tony?" Gibbs half-whispered, harshly forcing back the tears that were threatening. "No more. I almost lost you, damn it. That's not happening again..."

Suddenly, Gibbs realized that Tony's eyes were half-open and gazing at him sleepily.

"I hear you, boss."

"Boss is for work... not home."

"Home?" Tony repeated warily, pushing into a sitting position.

"Until you're ready for it not to be."

Tony considered the idea silently for a long stretch of minutes before deciding to move on to less confusing and difficult subjects.

"What time is it?"

"Just past five. You ready to eat?"

"When am I not? What's available?"

"Your choice of Chinese, Italian, Greek, a deli variety pack including chicken soup or a ten pound platter loaded with every pastry known to man."

Tony winced, but managed a tiny, strained smile.

"Tell me they just dropped off the feast and went home."

"Hope is always a good thing, DiNozzo. Not that it'll do you much good in this case..."

"Crap... I can't face them."

"It's not a party. Nobody expects you to be doing the Macarena with a lampshade on. They need to see you again... to be sure you're doing okay."

"I don't know if I am."

"Then say that, straight out. They'll understand."
"Okay... I'll give it a shot. I'm starved and I know you won't let me eat in here."

"Damn right. C'mon." Gibbs offered, holding out a hand. Tony accepted the help, slowly rising to his feet and shaking off the last crumbs and scraps of sleep. As they made their way back into the living room, Tony recalled his desperate lack of personal items and asked a hesitant question.

"Hey, I know they won't fit too great, but can I borrow clothes from you until I can arrange to... oh my God."

Tony's words and steps faltered when he caught sight of the boxes and cartons in a corner. He moved over to them, running a hand through or over various items. "My suitcases, my games and movies... when did..."

"Bossman called this afternoon." Abby explained, approaching and giving Tony a gentle hug. "He asked us to get your clothes and bathroom stuff, plus anything we thought would keep you from dying of boredom."

His breath hitched and he squeezed her tighter.

"Thanks, Abs."

"It's so good to have you home, Tony. I missed you like crazy..."

"Right back atcha..."

The pair finally pulled apart when Tim and Jimmy walked up, one slightly behind the other.

"Tony."

"Tim."

"I, uh... I hope we got enough... or the right things. I thought about books, but I decided it'd be better to wait and let you tell us which ones you wanted..."

"Good choice. I'll give you a list later, okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. Welcome back..." McGee responded, briefly embracing Tony as well.

"Thanks. Hey, Jimmy."

"Hi. Listen, I know what I said must've been hard to hear, but..."

"Stop. It's alright. I was mad that day... but not at you guys. Not really."

"I don't understand. It looked like..."

"I know. When I understand it better, I'll explain it to you. I wanna talk about the guts you showed in that room. You blew me away, kid."

"I... I did?"

"You've got layers and levels I never would've guessed were there. You and I need to hang out more. I'm gonna need somebody to talk to... somebody with insight and wisdom who won't shine me on. You up for that?"

"You mean it?"
"I wouldn't ask otherwise."

"Well... yeah, of course! Any place, any time. Whatever you need, Tony, I'm there. From now on, we all are."

"Good to know. Now, go get some of the food, before Abby and Tim inhale it all."

"Aren't you coming?"

"I'll be there. I just need a quiet minute."

"Oh... right. I'll make sure and save some of the moussaka for you. I know it's your favorite."

"Thanks, buddy."

As Jimmy walked away toward the kitchen, Tony paled abruptly and found himself struggling just to remain standing. Concerned, Gibbs moved to support him, but Tony held up a hand.

"I'm okay... a little drained, but okay. Dealing with their emotions on top of mine... and I'm still so tired..."

"I get it. Take your time. There's enough food for the next three months."

"Gibbs... I know you need to hold me up and protect me from myself right now... and I'm not saying I don't need or want that comfort... I'm just asking that you let me find my sea-legs first. Once I'm sure I can get stronger on my own... then I'll feel better about leaning on you. I'm not pushing you away, I swear... please, tell me you understand that."

"More than you know. I told you, I'm not going anywhere, Tony. Whenever you're ready... I'll be waiting. You ready to get something in your belly?"

Smiling gratefully, Tony followed Gibbs to the kitchen and began filling a plate.

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NCIS: DIRECTOR'S OFFICE

"You have to at least consider my offer. You know what a huge step this would be for you."

"Mister Secretary, you're not being fair." The person on the other end of the phone chuckled lightly.

"Did I promise I would? I really need you. You know you were the only one I wanted when this position was open the last time."

"So you said"

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I do."

"So what's holding you back now?"

"Mostly? That you're being so evasive about what, specifically, happened to Jen Sheppard."

"I told you all I can. She's ill and being treated."

"Ill how? Ill with what? Is it chronic, terminal, contagious..."
"No, no... and only if she develops telepathy."

"Oh my God. You're saying she's... that it's psychological? It can't be. The Jen I know is the most stable woman on the face of the earth!"

"And she will be again, I'm sure of it. She got into a very abusive relationship and when she was separated from her abuser... let's just say she's lost right now, but I trust that won't last forever. Now please, no more questions, alright? I've said too much as it is..."

"Understood. I'm sorry..."

"No, you had a right to at least that much, I suppose." Sheffield conceded, removing his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. His fatigue and sorrow leaked into his next words, despite his efforts to hide how stressed he was. "All I can do is pray for her. I know it isn't enough... but that's all I have. They won't let anyone visit... they claim she's violent... a danger to herself, so she spends most of the time sedated..."

"Edward, I'm so sorry."

"Appreciated. Add your prayers to the list."

"You know I will."

"Okay, enough of that. I get maudlin much too easily lately. Back to business."

"My answer is still the same. My life is out here now...

"Okay... let's see what you think of this. Give me three months."

"One."

"Two at least. It took me four to find a replacement for Tom Morrow, and even then I felt a time crunch. A Jen Sheppard is what I get when I rush."

"That's blackmail!"

"Whatever works."

"I can't believe I'm even thinking about this... but I'll give you three and help you with the selection process, alright?"

"Thank you so much. My hand to God, you won't regret it."

"Yes I will..." his companion laughed. "... but you'll make it up to me. I expect a steak dinner at least once a week and your immediate presence when Gibbs steps too far over the line, which we both know he will at some point."

"Uh-huh. Do I hear a slight touch of hypocrisy slipping in on your end? Maybe more than a touch?" Sheffield retorted gleefully.

"Anything I did was always in the interest of justice or in order to save a life..."

"I know. You and Jethro will get along famously."

"That was sneaky."
"You sound surprised."

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TBC......
EARLY EVENING: THREE DAYS LATER

"You sure you're okay with this?"

"It's fine. I'll have all the solitude I need when you go back to work. Besides... it's not just a random visit. Ducky said he's got some major surprises for us, didn't he?"

"So he thinks."

Tony's eyes widened slightly and he turned from straightening a throw pillow on the sofa.

"Yeah? Really? I wasn't sure they'd ever be ready for that..."

"Things change. You don't say what needs saying... you may not get another chance. We all found that out the hard way." Gibbs replied quietly without looking up from setting the table. Tony grinned, inordinately pleased with Gibbs' small show of openness, but knew better than to call him on it, even teasingly. Instead, he kept the topic of conversation safely on the other members of the team.

"You giving them the sabers tonight?"

"Planned on it."

"Good timing. The night promises to be at least a little emotional, what with Ducky and Gerald and all. Might as well make everybody grab for the Kleenex, I guess."

Gibbs smiled lightly, thinking about the act of sheer guts, and perhaps utter stupidity, that Ducky's slightly hangover blurred advice and the music of James Taylor had pushed him to commit. Placing the last utensil just where he wanted it, Jethro stood back and sent up a silent, heartfelt prayer that what he had done would not blow up in all their faces. He sensed Tony strolling over to join him and turned to greet the younger man with the same soft grin, which instantly devolved into a concerned frown when he found Tony frozen in place, starkly pale and shaking.

"Tony? Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"Huh? I... nothing. It's nothing. I'm good..." he responded distantly, still unable to tear his eyes from the table. Gibbs followed his line of sight, trying to figure out what could have upset the other man so much. He finally realized Tony's focus was the nearest place setting. Myriad ways of attempting suicide flashed through Jethro's mind in just a few seconds and, combined with what he was looking at, the problem swiftly narrowed down to one source. Swiveling to face his second in command, Gibbs stepped between Tony and the table, breaking the spell it seemed to have cast on him and bringing DiNozzo's agonized gaze back up at last.

"Tony? Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"Boss... shit, I'm so sorry, I..."

"Stop it, okay?" Gibbs soothed, reaching out to gently cup Tony's jaw in one hand. "You've got nothing to apologize for. I just wish you would've told me, damn it. I didn't have to grill steaks, Tony. I would've made pasta or sloppy joes... hell, I'd serve Cream of Wheat for dinner if it'd make things easier on you."

"I know you would..." Tony responded, lifting one hand to briefly stroke the fingers still cradling his
... but the point is for me to re-adjust to the world, not for my world to cater to me. Knives are everywhere, Gibbs. It was bound to happen sometime. I'm just glad I got it out of the way in private, instead of freaking out in a restaurant or in a mall or something."

"I still wish... I want you to know you *can* tell me... whatever, whenever."

"Say what needs saying while you can. I was listening, boss."

Gibbs caressed Tony's cheek for another second or two then slipped the hand around and cracked the young man lightly in the back of the head.

"What'd I tell you about that?"

"Okay, so what am I supposed to call you, Gunga Din? I could use Old Blue Eyes, but that's taken..."

"Try my name." The other shot back, grinning once again as he moved off, headed for the stereo to set up some mood music before the others arrived. Tony dropped his chin to his chest and began to ponder the options out loud.

"Jethro... uh-uh, that's just wrong. I never thought you looked like a Jethro. Jet? Don't think so. Jet is somebody Austin Powers would hang with... L.J. maybe? Nah, that sounds like a guy on your Thursday night bowling team who thinks gold chains and showing off his chest hair are still in style. J.G. is awkward on the tongue, L.G. is already an appliance company..."

Lost in his contemplations, Tony didn't realize Gibbs had approached again until a hand was clamped over his mouth.

"Are you done?"

Tony nodded and the ersatz gag was removed. "Okay. I have a nickname already. Only three people in my life have ever been allowed to use it. I'm willing to make you the fourth, but if I ever hear it at work, or in public..."

"I understand."

"Not even with the team. Especially not with them."

"Gibbs, I get it. I see how important this is to you. Just tell me."

"My nickname... is Ro."

"Wow... I like it. Suits you. Not sure why... it just does. Do I, um... do I get to know who the other three were?"

"Two good friends... my best friends, if you wanna get technical about it... and my first wife. She actually came up with the idea."

Tony tilted his head, studying Jethro carefully.

"There's a huge story there. One more thing you'll tell me someday?"

"Anyone else, I'd say hell no. You... anything's possible."

"Possible is more than I've had in a long time. I can handle possible."
Without warning, Tony was struck with the thought that, even if it lasted only a moment, a kiss needed to follow that statement. The rightness, the perfection of it nearly overwhelmed him and he swept his tongue around his lips, preparing for what he was certain was about to happen. His neck began to bend, his body to lean forward, but the buzzing doorbell shattered the moment utterly. Blinking, as if waking from a fugue state, Tony took a step back and grinned uncertainly.

"I... um, that was... seriously, I don't know what I was thinking..."

Jethro merely smiled at him on the way to the door and squeezed his shoulder firmly. He spoke quietly as he passed, but the words radiated a warmth Tony could almost feel against the sensitive skin of his neck.

"The same thing I was. It's okay, Tony. We'll have another chance. It'll happen. When we're both ready... it'll happen."

Tony waited until Gibbs had reached the door before he sent up his own murmured prayer.

"I hope you're listening, big man... and I hope it hasn't been too long. I just wanted to say thanks... for Doc Lewiston and my family and Ro... Ro. That is just too cool... Basically, I owe you *huge* for granting me a second chance, especially after I tried to trash my first one. I will never do that again. That's a rainbow from me to you."

Feeling genuine peace settle into his heart for the first time in months, Tony smiled, winked at the ceiling and turned to join Jethro in greeting their friends.

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TWO HOURS LATER:

"Excellent meal, Jethro. The roasted corn on the cob was exquisite..."

"Thanks, Duck." Gibbs replied off-handedly as he began to collect the dishes to transport them to the kitchen.

"If I remember correctly, it used to be one of your specialties. You haven't made it in so long I'd nearly forgotten how wonderful it is."

Gibbs threw Ducky a mild warning glare.

"I had reasons."

"Yes. That... I haven't forgotten. Likely never will..."

"Ducky..."

"Alright, message received, my friend. Reminiscing aborted."

"Good. You two wanna do your thing before or after dessert?"

"Before, I think. Yes, that will make digging into the sweets even more pleasurable. Shall we repair to the living room everyone?"

Once the table was clear and the group settled in chairs and on the sofa, Ducky, standing in the center of the room with his lover, took both of Gerald's hands, gazed deeply into his eyes and began to speak cautiously. Despite his confidence in private, now that the moment had arrived he found himself intensely nervous about how his family would react.
Anthony is already aware of what we're about to reveal... from what he told me, this may not be a surprise to the rest of you, either. What may shock you, however... is the second part of our announcement. We realize there will be protest and perhaps even anger. Nevertheless, the two of us discussed it... and we decided to go forward with the announcement... for ourselves, if for no one else. Gerald and I have been a committed couple for several years. We're deeply in love... and in order to make the most of what time we may still have, I've recently made a very difficult decision. In two months, I will be officially retiring... and handing over the reins to Gerald."

The silence that greeted his words worried Ducky more than the outburst he'd been expecting. Taking courage from Gerald's solid grip and his reassuring expression, the ME turned back to face the group just in time to watch Abby rise and walk to meet him, tears streaming down her face, despite her sweet smile.

"Sorry... not such a shock. Timmy thought maybe... with how tired you've been looking lately and the strain of what Tony's going through, he thought maybe you'd go."

"And you're alright with it? All of you?" Ducky asked, gently pulling back from Abby's embrace a little.

"Of course we aren't." Jimmy responded, his voice shaky and sorrowful, though he too was grinning shyly. "We love you and we'll miss you... but we know it's the best thing. And it's what you deserve."

"Thank you, James."

Abby released Ducky into a hug from Jimmy, after which the others all expressed their support and encouragement. As Tony had predicted, the tissue box was passed to anyone who looked as if they needed it until, gradually, the tears faded and joyful discussion of retirement plans took their place. After another half hour or so, Gibbs abruptly changed the subject, causing raised eyebrows all around.

"Hey, Ducky. My turn?"

"Hmm? Your turn for what, Jethro?"

"To send the Kleenex on another tour of the room." He said, rising and moving to the large closet by the front door. He returned with the large plastic shopping bag in one hand. When Abby received her portion of the contents, she leapt into Gibbs' arms with a bright, carefree squeal into his ear.

"It's perfect, Gibbs."

"Yes, Jethro. I'd agree... if I had any idea what this item could possibly be."

Tony and Gerald, once again seated beside each other on the couch, burst out laughing and leaned into each other.

"I can't believe it... yours is a pop culture wasteland too?" Tony gasped through his chuckles.

"Afraid so." Gerald replied, wiping his face. "I'll explain it in detail when we get home, love." He addressed to Ducky. "All you really need to know is that it's from a movie. It's a weapon carried by warriors who fight for justice and protect the helpless."

"And the victims of the evil, dark forces who rule the galaxy." Jimmy added.

"Absolutely. How could I forget that? It's what the whole thing is about, really."
"Ahhhh. I see. Very appropriate, Jethro."

"I thought so. We all needed something to help us remember what we're supposed to be for each other."

Abby nodded.

"Loyal."

"Honest." Jimmy added softly.

"Strong... and protective." Tim continued.

Gibbs broke out in a broad grin.

"Yeah. That's it. Well... not completely it. Needs a finishing touch... here, Tony." He said, offering what should have been the empty bag the sabers had come out of. Instead, Tony could see a dark shape was still tangled in the bottom of the plastic sack. Stunned, he slowly reached out and accepted the gift, retrieving the square box and staring down at it for a long time. "There's more to it than the box, DiNozzo." Gibbs finally prompted. Tony looked up with a surprised expression and a half smile tinged with wariness and confusion, then back down to the item in his hands. When he opened it at last, quiet gasps and words of shock surrounded him. Chuckling, Gibbs reclaimed the box from Tony's numb fingers, removed the delicate platinum bracelet and fastened it around the younger man's wrist. They simply stared at each other, fully engaged, until Ducky finally found his voice.

"Jethro... dear Lord. It's lovely. J F S T." he recited, reading the simple inscription. "What does that mean?"

"Jedi Forever, Stronger Together."

Tony swallowed hard, reached out to grab Gibbs' hand and finally recovered enough to speak.

"Now?"

"Now what?" Gibbs asked.

"Ready... kiss... now?" Tony croaked out.

"Yeah... ready kiss now."

As their lips finally met, applause and hoots of joy erupted around them, but neither man really noticed.

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TBC....
JETHRO'S: LATE THE NEXT NIGHT

"Damn it, where are you, DiNozzo..."

Following an instinct he didn't quite understand, Gibbs had opened the door to Tony's room a few minutes before, needing to check on him. He'd been disturbed to find the younger man wasn't there. Now staring blearily into the dimly lit living room, Jethro finally made out the shape of Tony sitting on the sofa, curled tightly into the far corner. A small flashlight was gripped in one hand and he was holding what looked to be comic book in the other, though it was hard for Jethro to tell without better illumination. Bittersweet memories of the many times he'd taken a book out of his daughter's hands in similar situations flooded Gibbs' heart with sorrow and regret, but at the same time the sight of Tony in that position nudged the older man back toward laughter.

"Tony?"

"Hey." Tony responded quietly, his head coming up slightly. "What are you doing up?"

"That's my line. It's almost midnight." Gibbs countered, joining the other man.

"I have a decision to make... thinking about it was keeping me up, driving me bananas. I finally had to do what I always do at home."

"Read comic books in the dark?"

"Graphic novel. It's a graphic novel. And yeah, reading gets my mind off my problems."

"Can I help?" Gibbs asked, reaching out and finding Tony's hand unerringly, despite the fact that he couldn't see it.

"I wish. There's a call I should make... but I don't know if I can."

"To who?"

"No."

"Okay. I'm here. Nothing says you have to talk... but I'm here if you want to."

Tony sighed and clicked off the flashlight. "What was that for?"

"The preservation of my dignity. This won't be easy to say. If... if I don't handle it well, I don't want you seeing me get...emotional, okay?"

"Only if you promise me something."

"Which would be?"

"That you think about letting me down off the mile high pedestal you've got me on. I don't like heights so much. I get dizzy."
"Gibbs..."

"I'm no superhero, Tony. You check my closet tomorrow. No cape, no red boots, no utility belt. I'm a man, nothing more, nothing less. Men hurt... and if the hurt is bad enough you either have to let it out or go crazy. It took a big loss to teach me that."

"Yeah?"

"Later... I promise you, later. Right now we're talking about you. Will you make me that promise?"

"Okay. I'll think about it."

"Good. Now. You feel like talking or are we both gonna try and get some sleep?"

"It's my father... I have to call my father. Lewiston and I... we did some talking about forgiveness... how it's really for the person giving it, not for the one they're giving it *to*. I was lying there in bed and I kept thinking... it'd be such a big step for me if I could get him on the phone and just *say* it. Then it hit me that maybe I can't handle his reaction..."

"That's not on you, Tony. You settle things however you have to. How he deals with it is his problem."

"Yeah... maybe. No, you're right. I need to do this... tonight."

"Let's get some lights on then and get dialing..."

"No! I mean... I can't call from here. He's paranoid... caller ID, call monitoring, everything. I don't want him knowing where I am."

"You mean he doesn't?"

"No. He thinks I'm still in Baltimore. I can call from work. He won't know what to make of seeing the NCIS number on his phone display. I've been wanting to go back to the office anyway... the sooner I start adjusting to being there again, the sooner I can get back on the job."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. I'll go get dressed."

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As they stepped off the elevator, Tony paused, tensing momentarily, but he forced himself to breathe slowly and his muscles gradually relaxed. Gibbs saw and felt the brief hesitation and gently questioned the other man.

"You okay?"

"Fine... now. C'mon. let's get this over with."

Approaching the mostly dark section of desks where one of the worst nights of his life had kicked off, Tony stopped dead, slowly gazing around the small area. Gibbs was just about to speak up again, ready to suggest that the plan should be postponed until another time, but once again, Tony found a reserve of strength from somewhere and moved forward, turning on his desk lamp and dropping heavily into his chair.
"You don't have to do this. I'm here, whatever you decide, you know that." Jethro reminded him,

Tony shifted around slightly and gazed uncertainly at Gibbs, who crouched beside him.

"I can't move on if I don't. This one last thing... and maybe I can finally feel like I'm done... like I've
put it behind me."

"As long as you're doing this for yourself. Not me, not the doctor... you."

"I am. I need this."

Gibbs reached out and entwined the fingers of his left hand with Tony's right.

"Okay. Go on."

Grimly, Tony lifted the phone receiver, tucked it into the juncture of his neck and shoulder and
dialed a long number, reclaiming the receiver with his free hand once the connection had begun to
ring through.

"DiNozzo residence."

"Yes, hello... could I speak to Michael DiNozzo please?"

"If he's available, who should I say is calling?"

Tony hesitated, eyes shut as he drew deep breaths and shored up his failing courage.
"Sir?"

"I... I'm sorry. I was lost in thought for a moment. Tell him it's Michael DiNozzo junior."

The voice on the other end of the line responded with shock, suddenly far less formal.

"Mickey? Oh my God... I never thought..."

"Annette? Wow... you're still there..."

"I couldn't leave them."

"Of course not... How are you?"

"I'm fine. It's so good to hear your voice; though it's changed so much I didn't recognize it at first. You hang on, alright? I'll go get your dad."

"Okay. Thanks."

When he went silent for a minute or two, Gibbs looked at him curiously, but Tony merely mouthed 'later' and put his focus back on the humming phone, half of him praying to hear Annette return, the other half hoping his father would choose to take his call. In the seconds before he heard the receiver lifted, he couldn't decide which outcome he really wanted. Then, suddenly, the choice was no longer his.

"Michael."

Fighting down a sudden tang of bile in the back of his throat, Tony cleared his throat and managed to respond with relative calm.
"Hello, father."

"I never expected to hear from you again. Not after our last conversation. You made your opinions quite clear..."

"I know. I just... I've been doing a lot of thinking... and soul searching. I realized I needed to call... I need to tell you something..."

"Yes? What is it? My time is valuable, Michael. Please get to the point."

"I know... I wanted to... I had to tell you that I forgive you."

"Forgive me? Forgive me what, for God's sake? I don't understand."

"You don't have to. Good-night." Tony responded in a near-whisper, sliding the receiver back into its cradle. Even before it clicked into place, however, Tony was already falling apart. Using their linked hands to move the younger man forward, Gibbs tugged Tony out of the chair and into his arms then dropped down to sit on the floor. Tony ended up in Jethro's lap, warmth, love and solid arms surrounding him as he alternated between long periods of heartbroken sobbing and stretches of fast, shallow breathing that almost reached the level of hyperventilation. Gibbs rocked and soothed him as best he could, dying a little inside because he couldn't simply wave a hand and make it all instantly better. Unfortunately, he knew from experience that the agony Tony was suffering had to be released on its own schedule, and nothing he could do or say would make it happen any faster. Still, his heart pushed him to try.

"Shhh... it's done... you made it, Tony... shhhh, you're okay now... I'm here... it's all over... easy, love... easy now..."

"Son of a... bitch... I... hate him..."

"Don't, baby... he's not worth it..."

Abruptly, Tony began to struggle to get away, but Gibbs held him tighter.

"Damn it... I'm pissed... just let me be pissed! I have a right... to how I feel!"

"Yeah, you do. I know that... okay, so be mad. Hit me, kick me... whatever you need to do..."

For several minutes, Tony did just that and Jethro stoically absorbed the fists raining down on his shoulders, chest and legs and the vivid curses assaulting his ears. Despite knowing he would be a mass of bruises the next day, he let Tony release his pain, anger and loss until the younger man finally ran out of energy and ceased his barrage, forehead braced on the other's shoulder. Gradually the tense body in Jethro's arms relaxed, the harsh, panting breaths flowing over his neck slowed and calmed and Tony collapsed, allowing himself to be fully embraced once more.

"I'm sorry... God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it..."

"I know... hush, now... go to sleep, Tony... go to sleep..."

"Shouldn't... not here..."

"Yes, here." Jethro told him, scooting back to lean against the side of Tony's desk. "You're exhausted... and I'm not going anywhere, so just give it up and rest, okay?"

"I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry..." Tony sighed once again,
"So am I, baby... so am I..."

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NEXT MORNING: 7:45

Tim rushed in, anxious to place his things properly in and around his desk and frantically shuffling and organizing papers and objects, desiring perfection he knew he would not get in the ten or so minutes he had. What he had just witnessed downstairs had knocked him for a loop and he still had not quite pulled out of it when the noise he was making brought groans and muted grumbling from the two men on the floor, causing Tim to jump and his blood pressure to rise another few notches.

"Gibbs?! Tony?! What are you doing down there?"

"We *were* sleeping, McGee." Tony complained, slowly sitting up and pulling away from Gibbs' arms, allowing the older man to also change position.

"Here? Now? Get up! Both of you have to get up! Guys, don't just... you have to move, now!"

Tony slowly got to his feet, but Jethro, stiff with contusions and still asleep from the thighs down, was not able to rise as quickly. Tony extended a hand to assist him, but was waved off, so he turned to Tim, seeking the cause of his distress.

"What's wrong with you, kid? Is it a drill? Are we on fire? Wait, we're not are we, because..."

"No, none of that! The new director was filling out security paperwork as I came in downstairs. She'll be here any minute!"

Tony and Gibbs' hearts both sank when they heard the pronoun Tim had used.

"She..."

"Not again..."

Finally, Tim smiled, though it still showed the tension he was laboring under.

"It's okay... at least I think so. Wait until you see... you'll understand. There shouldn't be any problems this time..."

Tony was about to ask more questions, but the bell announced the arrival of the elevator and the three men turned to watch the doors open, uncertainty and hope warring for control in all of them. The sight of the slender, dark-haired woman strolling confidently over to greet them drew a bright smile from Gibbs, a relieved laugh from Tony and both from McGee.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Good to see you all here so early... though it looks like you and your second had a rough night, Special Agent Gibbs."

"More like a rough few months, ma'mm. You'll hear the details later from more than one source I'm sure. Welcome to NCIS, Colonel Mackenzie."

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