With a Little Help From My Friends

by BuffyAngel68

Summary

As Gibbs and Tony grow closer, an outside force is working to destroy the younger man. Meanwhile the rest of the team find their joy in varied and interesting places...
Chapter 1

Disclaimer: Don't own them, never did, not making fundage off them. I have to believe, however, that they'd like my plane of existence much better than the one they live on under DPB's rule...

Notes: As usual, a shorty to start. Won't last, you know that...

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Sunk deep into his living room sofa, staring at his hands where they curled around a rapidly cooling mug of coffee, Jethro contemplated the unexpected twists and turns his life had taken. Things had slowly begun to shift and alter around him, until very little seemed familiar to him anymore. Once that feeling would have driven him crazy in a very short amount of time, as he was not someone who easily tolerated change in his environment or his routine, but now Gibbs found himself eagerly awaiting the next surprise, the next new element Tony's presence would add to his days and nights.

After a short period of adjustment and awkwardness, both men had settled in well and were comfortable with each other. Tony was smiling more and more often and Gibbs had discovered that, willing or not, first cup of coffee or not, he was returning most of the grins and smirks thrown his way. The only problem was sleep. Gibbs found it perverse and weirdly ironic that since Tony's restless night and subsequent cathartic breakdown at the office, the younger man was consistently logging a solid seven to eight hours a night and the older was the one who struggled to even close his eyes.

He spent time working on his boat, as always, but it was nearly complete, with only finish work left to do, and was no longer enough of a distraction to fill all the hours he needed it to. His beloved bourbon also called seductively whenever he descended the stairs, but with the very real possibility that Tony might suffer nightmares or simply need someone to listen, Gibbs was now strictly avoiding alcohol past a certain hour of the evening. Therefore, no matter how much he wished it were still an option, he was visiting his basement less and less.

Instead, to his chagrin, he kept surrendering to a desire he knew he should fight, one that he was struggling to make sense of. Every second or third night, he slipped into the guest room and spent an hour or two watching the man he loved sleep. The measured rise and fall of Tony's breathing, the stillness that indicated how deeply he slept, seemed to calm and reassure Gibbs, after which he was able to retreat to his own bed and find rest.

Sighing, Gibbs rose and walked his nearly full mug unerringly through the dark house directly to the kitchen. Again, without the need for any light, he found the sink, sent the dark liquid down the drain and left the mug to be washed in the morning. Hesitating, hands braced on the counter, he tried to convince himself that what he was doing was creepy, wrong and the next best thing to stalking, but the arguments never made it past the logical half of his brain. The other half over-ruled all other opinions, insisting that regularly checking on Tony, who remained physically and emotionally brittle, was an act of love. It also reminded him that, even though tomorrow was Friday, it wasn't 'casual Friday' in any way shape or form, he needed sleep to keep it from looking as if he thought it was and there was only one way he was going to get it.

Unfortunately, as he moved soundlessly to stand just inside Tony's room Gibbs received a surprise and felt heat rise up his neck to stain his face. As a fully awake Tony spoke quietly to him, Jethro swore under his breath, grateful that the physical evidence of his shame couldn't be seen.
"Look... this is the third night this week. I'm not about to run downstairs and christen one of your sharp tools with *any* of my bodily fluids, okay? I promise not to even spit on the cement floor, so you can stop hovering."

Gibbs breath suddenly froze in his chest and his heart stuttered briefly. The thought had never passed through his mind, but now he had to fight down a powerful urge to run off and lock the cellar door. Getting his emotions and pulse back under control, he finally made himself face the true reason he'd been sneaking into Tony's room. When he knew he could speak without stumbling over the terrifying words, he gave that truth to the other man.

"That's not what it's about. I trust you and Dennis Lewiston too much to think that either of you made a bad decision about you coming home. This... what I've been doing... I'm not pushing for anything, I swear. I just can't sleep. I think I need... can I just lay down with you? I have to be here, that's all..."

Now it was Tony's turn to momentarily stop breathing. Once his brain processed the stunning admission Gibbs had just made, the younger man drew in a slow, cautious amount of air and responded guardedly.

"Sure. That... that'd be fine."

"I didn't ask if you wanted whipped cream on your apple pie, DiNozzo. This is important."

Tony considered turning over to look at Jethro, but stopped himself, sensing that being eye to eye might kill the potential of the conversation, which was the last thing he wanted. In compensation, though it was a move he also wouldn't have chosen, some of the stress and fear that would have shown in his expression inevitably transferred itself to his next words.

"I know. God, don't you think I know? Can you handle the real, honest-to-God, it'll-probably-scare-you-away answer? I mean, without that... actually happening?"

"Don't know. Try me." Gibbs told him, suddenly breathing just as shallowly as Tony was.

"Yes. I want you to lay down with me... every night... for the rest of my life. I want your presence and your voice and your touch, whether you're just brushing my hair out of my eyes or soothing me back to sleep by rubbing my shoulders. I want your breath against my ear first thing in the morning and last thing at night. I want your warmth and your laughter to send me to sleep and your..."

{shit, shit, shit. just say it!} he admonished himself, fighting for the courage the words required. 

"...and your morning wood to wake me up before the alarm does. Okay? Clear enough?"

A chuckle and the shifting of the mattress and bedclothes was all the answer Tony received. It wasn't until he actually felt Gibbs slide in behind him and a hand move forward to cover his abdomen, the fingers making subtle, comforting movements, that Tony finally began to relax. His first deep breath in several minutes rushed in on a gasp and out on a half-controlled sob. "God... so this is what's been missing my whole life..."

"Yeah. Me too. I'll give you all of it, Tony. Every single thing you asked for..."

"How did I not know? How could I look in your eyes every damn day... and not know?"

"I missed it too. No... I was too damn scared to try and find it. Never again. I'll never do that again, Tony..."

"I believe you. My heart does, anyway. My brain... may take longer to catch up. Please, be patient..."
"Always. Go to sleep..." Gibbs urged, but the words were unnecessary. Tony was already on his way. Settling into what he now considered his half of the pillow and the bed, Jethro followed moments later.
Cracking his eyes open to greet the soft gray light of early morning, Tony, still mired in semi-awareness, startled slightly at the heat radiating over his body from behind. His first reaction was self-shaming, his second compassionate and confused. Both were swiftly set aside by a gruff, mildly edgy response to his barely verbalized thoughts.

"Oh shit... I hate morning-after amnesia. What'd I do? What'd I make somebody *else* do?"

"Nothing... and what you said you have every right to take back."

Tony tensed and held his breath for a moment before speaking again.

"I don't want to... kind of."

Gibbs warmth began to retreat and Tony frantically called him back, though his apprehension of the previous night still kept him turned away. "Wait! Don't go... I was only trying... I didn't mean... hell, I can't make my brain and my mouth interface before my first cup of coffee. Damn you..." The younger man replied, grinning lightly and shivering when a soft chuckle ghosted over his neck.

"The corruption process is slow, but steady. Take a minute and a deep breath... then try that again."

"Okay... I meant every word I said last night. I guess I just need to be clear about timing..."

Tony paused and gasped quietly when a subtle shift of his body, in a search of a more comfortable position, unexpectedly brought him into close contact with the subject he was struggling to discuss. "... oh boy, especially with... that is you... right? Against my hip? Crap... I know what I said and I absolutely did want... I *do* want it, I just wasn't... it's just a little soon, you know? I swear, if you gimme a couple weeks... maybe a month..."

"Easy. Shhh. Relax, Tony... relax. It's okay. 'Morning Wood', as you call it, isn't something you can really control, you know that as well as I do. I don't expect anything from you."

Tony sighed and finally turned to face Jethro, willing to take the risk in spite of the pity he was afraid he'd find in the blue eyes he adored.

"Of course you do... and it'll happen, but like with that first amazing kiss... we both have to be ready."

Gibbs caught a flash of something in Tony's eyes that made him wince and he leaned in to place a brief kiss on the younger man's forehead, drawing him gently into a loose embrace.

"God, babe... still? I thought it was getting better..."

"It is, I promise it is. The old wounds and scars are almost healed now. It's just... there are a couple new ones. Pushing my father away once and for all... sometimes I think about that last conversation and all the negative bull he threw at me as a kid seems so fresh... like he's still right in my face, yelling and calling me names... words Satan wouldn't use on his kid. If I don't stop right then, suddenly I'm looking around, thinking about where I'll go when you get sick of me and that leads to worries about finding a new place, which leads to fear that I won't be able to pay for an apartment if I'm never strong and healthy enough to take my job back... When I finally wake up and start to pull myself out of the tailspin, I'm exhausted and it's twice as hard as it should be."
At last, Tony took a pause, breathing another deep sigh against Gibbs' white cotton t-shirt. When he started again, the words came more slowly and softly, as if the fatigue he'd talked about were even then dragging him back down into oblivion. "I want to make love with you, 'Ro... to explore every way of touching and connecting that exists... and to memorize your body with my hands and my mouth until I know it better than my own. I'm just asking for some time. Please, love... just a little more time..."

"Eternity, if that's what you need. Whatever I have to give up, whoever I have to make a deal with, I'll still be here at the damn end of the world, Tony... anything for you..."

As the light beyond the window gradually shifted from gray to orange and then to pale yellow, Jethro dropped languid kisses over Tony's brow and hair, held him and spoke soothing nonsense in his ear until he was sure that the young man was resting peacefully once more. Only then did Jethro allow himself to also slide back into sleep.

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THREE HOURS LATER:

As he sipped carefully at a partial cup of scalding coffee, Tony scrubbed a hand through his hair and frowned mildly at Gibbs, who stood across the kitchen, gathering his things to leave for work. The older man chuckled.

"What, Tony?"

"You're late... and I didn't get my run. I can't believe you just let me fall back to sleep and I *really* can't believe you went with me."

Gibbs slipped his cell into a pocket and strolled over to where Tony leaned against the counter. When Tony finally looked up and met his eyes, Gibbs smacked him lightly in the back of the head.

"Somebody gives a damn about you. Get used to it. I'll be home regular time." He told him, dropping another light kiss on his brow to somewhat counter the reprimand.

"Don't bother picking up dinner. I'll cook."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow, but otherwise masterfully covered his skepticism.

"Sounds good."

Tony grinned into his mug, pleased at the simple, confident response. "If anybody invites themselves along, I'll give you plenty of notice."

"Good. Now get out of here, or you'll make it to work just in time for lunch."

"I'm the boss. The title has privileges."

"Ah, did we forget the new head honcho upstairs? She might have something to say about that."

"Mackenzie's a Marine." Gibbs answered him, as if that fact alone was a sufficient explanation. Tony realized he probably thought it was.

"She's also gonna be under pressure to clean up Jenny's mess and prove there's actually somebody in charge." The young man reminded his housemate, dumping the remnants of his coffee and shyly touching Jethro's hand, just for a moment. "Fly under the radar for a while, willya?"
"Do my best."
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NCIS:
As Gibbs strode into the bullpen just past nine-o'clock, he grinned to himself when Tim kept his head down and his eyes on his monitor, unsure, as usual, just what mood his superior might be in. He decided to reward the young man for his show of common sense and used his first name instead of his last.
"Tim."
"Morning, boss. Ummm... word's come down."
Gibbs grunted. He hadn't been looking forward to this at all.
"So it's D-Day." He responded quietly as he sat down behind his desk. Tim finally looked up, shooting Gibbs a mild grimace and a mumbled retort.
"We can only hope it's that successful. Personally... I'm preparing for Little Big Horn."
To Tim's relief, the other man smiled and joked back instead of reacting negatively to his attempt at humor.
"Yeah, well, at least say hello to the new guy before you surrender South Dakota, okay?"
"Not even sure it is a guy. Director Mackenzie left you the agent's file when she came in this morning. I thought about sneaking a peek, but... I didn't let it get further than that."
"Good choice." Gibbs told him brusquely. Breathing deeply, he pulled the thin folder toward him and flipped it open. His eyes widened slightly, but overall his expression was brighter and more positive than Tim could have hoped for and the young agent released a muted sigh of relief. Before he could ask for details, however, Sarah Mackenzie's gentle voice spoke up from a few feet behind him and both he and Gibbs rose to greet her.
"Good morning, gentlemen."
"Ma'm."
"Agent McGee. Gibbs."
"Director."
"I have an introduction to make, but I wanted to wait until both of you were here. I hope everything's alright at home?"
Gibbs paused for a moment, searching her face cautiously. Finding only genuine concern, he responded with as much truth as he thought prudent in front of the stranger patiently waiting a foot or so behind Mackenzie's left shoulder.
"It's slow going, but it's good."
"I'm glad to hear it. Have you had a chance to look at the file I left for you?"
"I just opened it."
"That's alright, you can examine it in detail later. I really want the settling in process to get started as soon as possible. Timothy McGee, Jethro Gibbs... this is your new team-mate." She said, stepping aside and gesturing to invite her companion to move forward. The petite young woman took a single step, all too aware of the concentrated scrutiny she was suddenly under. To her credit, however, any apprehension she might have felt was swiftly suppressed and the men saw only a bright smile and confident manner. Brushing a long dark ponytail off her shoulder and resettling the back-pack she carried, she introduced herself smoothly

"Adrianna Maxine Vendazzo. Good to meet you both." She announced, holding out her hand. Tim grinned tentatively and briefly shook the offering.

"That's a mouthful."

"Don't I know it. Sorry, but my mom drilled the formality thing into me practically from birth. Max'll do fine."

"Tim. Welcome."

"Thanks."

"Vendazzo." Gibbs intoned solemnly, pumping her hand once before retreating and dropping into his chair again. Max looked to Sarah with a discreet raised eyebrow and received a soft chuckle in return.

"You'll get used to it. Special Agent Gibbs isn't much on dialogue, but you won't find a better supervisor, or a better man, anywhere in D.C. Just do your best, trust him and everything will work out fine. I need to get back to my office. Have a good day, everyone."

The director moved off, headed back to the stairs, and the trio left behind lapsed into awkward silence until Gibbs waved at the empty desk and gave a gruff command.

"That's yours. Get your stuff stowed, but make sure you can get to it in a hurry. Cases come up fast, I need my people ready."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm a gunny sergeant, Vendazzo."

"Of course. Sir is out. So I should call you..."

"Talk to her, McGee." Gibbs snapped mildly, turning his attention back to Max's file. Tim grinned ruefully at the newcomer.

"Tony and I call him Boss."

"Tony?"

"Senior Agent DiNozzo. He's been out on leave, but he's coming back on Monday."

"Ah. Wow. Sorry if I seem a little overwhelmed. I'm not, really. I can do this job. Right now it's just... "

"I know. Try and hang in 'till lunch. We'll go out to one of my favorite places and I'll fill you in on everything you need to know."

"I'd really appreciate that." She replied, gratitude warming her voice as she booted up her computer.
A few moments later, Tim heard a familiar quacking and blushed to the roots of his hair. "Uhhh... Tim? Is this some bizarre hazing ritual, or..."

"Oh, no, not at all! It was... well... I'll explain at lunch, I swear. Just be patient, okay? I'll run downstairs really quick and get that fixed..."

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TBC...
JUST PAST NOON: BETHESDA

Draped sideways in an overstuffed chair in Lewiston's office, Tony sighed deeply, making no effort to hide the grin plastered across his face. His therapist returned a milder version of the sappy expression.

"Okay. Ten minutes into our first session and you still haven't said a word. It's obvious nothing's really upsetting you... so what's up?"

"Ohhh... life, lightsabers... and lips."

"Really." Lewiston laughed. "Could you maybe elaborate?"

"Hmmm? Yeah, sure. Life... is really something to celebrate. Big change from when you and I started, I'll tell you *that* right now. I'm celebrating, at least in part, because Gibbs gave the whole team toy lightsabers to remind us that we're supposed to protect, defend and support each other... and make sure the darkness can't ever get so close to any of us again. I also got a present just for me. Then... then he kissed me... on the lips."

"Tony, that's great!"

"Yeah. God, yeah. It... I mean... it was..."

Unable to put the right descriptive words together, Tony settled for throwing his head back and his arms out and producing an inarticulate sound of sheer joy, prompting another chuckle from Lewiston.

"Wow. So happy the words just vanished, huh?"

"Pretty much."

"So what was this other gift?"

Tony tugged his jacket cuff back to expose the bracelet and held out his wrist. "Gorgeous. Looks like platinum. The inscription stands for..."

"Jedi Forever, Stronger Together. It's an extra reminder for me... that I'm not alone and there's always somebody I can turn to if I need help, no matter what."

"Sounds like everything is terrific."

Tony's smile slowly morphed into something closer to a grimace.

"You know better."

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

A few days after I got home, the team came over for dinner. I haven't told any of them the details of how exactly I tried to... anyway, Gibbs grilled steaks and... let's just say the silverware ambushed me."

"Knives. God, I'm sorry, Tony. I should have prepared you..."
Tony now swung around and sat in the chair properly.

"No. No way. I needed a lot of intense work and you had a limited time to get it done in. You had to pick your battles. Far as I'm concerned, you made all the right choices. Hell, you got me home."

"I had a lot of help. If it hadn't been for Jethro..."

Tony shifted spontaneously back to the goofy smile and his doctor sighed and grinned. "Oh boy."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. So he's winning me over. The bracelet... I mean, who wouldn't give in a little? I'm starting to figure out that he has these strategies... ways of showing me how he feels that let him skip the talking part."

"If he's expecting to get away with that in here, he better think again."

"In here? What are you saying?" Tony shot back, sitting up much straighter.

"Jethro agreed to start sessions of his own."

Tony's eyes widened and his jaw dropped open slightly.

"Did not."

"Did too. He called me, actually. I've been trying to get him to tell you, but you know better than anyone how stubborn he can be."

"Too well. God, I can't believe... Why?"

"He loves you and he knows his issues could derail what you two are building."

"Just like mine. You've gotta be... no joke? He really asked you to take him on as a patient?"

"No joke."

"Damn. So... do you think maybe... once he's had a while to get used to doing this... do you think he'd come with me so we could work through some stuff together?"

"We can ask. I don't see why he wouldn't."

"Do you do that kinda thing?"

"Couples work? All the time. Is there something specific you think the two of will need to talk about?"

"Yeah... uhh, it's... a little delicate, so maybe you and I should go through it alone first..."

"Delicate?"

"Uh-huh... it's... well, the subject of... I don't exactly know how to... it could be..."

Tony stuttered to a halt, suddenly unwilling to look at Lewiston and the other man got the point.

"I have a feeling I know what this is about, but I'm going to make you say it."

"Cruel and unusual punishment." Tony groused.

"Not even close. C'mon, prove to yourself you really want a full, satisfying relationship. Say it."
The younger man huffed out a short breath in frustration and embarrassment, but he eventually complied.

"The subject of physical intimacy among people of the same gender has come up in discussion between Gibbs and I."

Lewiston laughed heartily this time, one hand on his chest. "What? I said it, didn't I?"

"Technically, but I don't think I've ever heard such a simple topic turned into something so convoluted."

"It's not simple."

"It doesn't *have* to be difficult... but I can understand how it might be."

"I... damn it, this never crossed my mind before Gibbs. I wasn't ready to feel this... to look at him or think about him... and want things I never did before. It terrifies me."

"Are we talking about just the physical urges, or is something else going on?"

"The... urges are a big part of it. The rest is mental... and emotional. After what I went through with my... my male parent, being skittish and gun-shy about commitment never struck me as anything but normal and natural. Why risk getting too close and let somebody near my heart again, right? All they'll do is put it through an industrial wood-chipper and who needs that? Now... I catch myself wondering if Gibbs'll let me stay at his place forever. It's harder and harder to think of being by myself again... not being around him."

"I know you trust him."

"To watch my six at work, yeah. This is different. I wanna give him everything... not hold back a single thought or feeling that he has a right to... but those parent tapes you told me about won't shut off. I did have a big victory last night..."

The sappy grin resurfaced, accompanied by a deeply shaded blush.

"What? C'mon, Tony, don't leave me hanging."

"Since I started staying with Gibbs, he's been coming into the guest room a couple nights a week and... watching me. Just for an hour or two, then he hits his own rack. Last night, I finally spoke up... let him know I was aware. He explained why he's been doing it. He said... he said he couldn't sleep and he asked to stay. There was no pressure for anything... intimate. He just wanted to lay down under the covers and be near me."

Lewiston sat forward a bit, genuinely drawn in.

"And you said..."

"I told him it was okay with me. Tell the truth, I said a lot more than that. I told him I needed his voice and his laugh... and just to know he was close by. I was so scared, figuring I'd just sent him running for the hills... but he just slid in beside me and fell asleep... like we'd been doing it for years."

"And it wasn't until this morning that it got awkward?"

"Yeah. He, uhhh... he woke up and... he was..."

"Tony, look at me. Say the word. It's not taboo and God won't strike you down. You're a grown
man, you're allowed to use frank sexual language when we're discussing the man you intend to share your life and your bed with."

"I know, it's just... hell. He woke up with an erection, and it wasn't the situation in general that freaked me out, it was... put it this way, okay? Size definitely matters."

"Are you saying he'll be buying the petite Trojans or the XXL?"

"For God's sake, doc!"

"Hey, we're being frank here, remember?"

"As if you'll let me forget... Okay, thing is... the man is huge. I felt it against my hip. What I've started dreaming about, what I fantasize about doing to him... now I don't know if I'll be able to face it in real life."

"Well we can certainly talk about that, dispel a lot of the myths and misconceptions so you know the truth of what sex with another man will really involve..." he explained, pausing when a faint buzzer sounded from his desk. "... but not 'till Wednesday, I'm afraid."

"Already? It can't be an hour yet..." Tony protested, standing and reluctantly grabbing his coat from the floor nearby.

"Sorry. If I had unlimited time, we'd keep going as long as it felt comfortable, but I just can't do that today. You know you can call if anything comes up or you have more questions." He assured Tony, rising to walk the young man to the door.

"We can start working on the knife thing next time? I really wanna get that settled... in my head I keep seeing a suspect pull a switch-blade and instead of doing my job I panic and let Tim or Jethro get hurt... maybe worse."

"First thing next session, I promise. You're doing really well, Tony. Try to get as much rest as you can before you go back on Monday and no skipping meals. That'll help keep the stress and anxiety to a minimum."

"Will do. See you next week."

"Okay."

Once Tony was out of sight, Lewiston shut the door and slowly moved back to his desk, a thoughtful expression on his face as he picked up the phone to talk to his assistant in the outer office. "Janie? I need you to do an article search for me... oh, and pick up a book that isn't on my shelves. The title? Not over the phone..."

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TBC.......
1:00: A DINER NEAR NCIS

"That's not fair!" Max protested mildly, laughing. "I haven't even met him and he's retiring?"

"Not for another month or so. You'll have plenty of time to get to know Ducky by then, and it's not like he's moving a thousand miles away. One thing you have to understand, Max, is that the bunch of us are really close... a bigger, stronger family than some of us have ever had. You'll see us argue, insult and fight, especially once Tony gets back... but if anybody outside the team tries that the walls are going up and the swords are coming out."

"I need to find a way to be inside the castle when the enemy attacks, is that it?"

"Yeah... and I'm willing to give you the key to the front gate."

Max grinned lightly and sipped at her tea before she looked up and responded.

"There was an ulterior motive behind this lunch. I think I've just been informally evaluated."

"Sort of. The agent who had your position before... we never had much of a choice in taking her on. In the end, she betrayed all of us and we almost lost someone because of it. I'm not risking my family that way again."

"So... why am I being extended a hand to shake?"

"I get a good feeling about you. I really think you'll fit right in like you were always here. Please don't make me regret trusting my instincts."

For the briefest moment, the lingering pain from the incident Tim had sketched out flashed through his eyes and the power of the fleeting emotion made Max's stomach clench.

"I... I won't. I promise, I won't let you down."

"Good, 'cause you do *not* wanna see what Gibbs is likely to do if it happens again. Shoot, we're late! We need to get back to work fast."

"Right behind you..."

The pair made it back to the office fifteen minutes past the end of their lunch hour, but Gibbs didn't seem inclined to bust them for it, much to Tim's relief. After checking to make sure nothing urgent had come up while he was out, he took Max back down in the elevator to introduce her to the other members of the team, stopping at Abby's lab first. To his shock, not only did his companion seem to recognize the sounds blasting from the stereo, she was nodding her head and smiling as they entered. Abby turned from whatever machine she was currently engrossed in the workings of when she heard the door open, but her smile faded when she realized Tim wasn't alone. Max's next words, shouted at the top of her lungs, changed things considerably, however.

"God, I love 'Brain Matter'! This must be their new song, 'Splattered Across My Girlfriend's Dungeon'!"

Abby looked at her curiously, her head tilted, and Tim whispered a timely warning in their new teammate's ear.
"Brace for impact. You're about to be hugged like you've never been hugged before..."

The sudden embrace staggered Max back a step, but she grinned and even wrapped her arms around Abby in return, holding on for the few moments that it took the young woman to retreat and move away to shut the CD off.

"Nobody appreciates good music around here! Who is this obviously brilliant woman, Timmy?"

Max laughed.

"Hug first, ask questions later. Unorthodox, but better than pulling an automatic, I guess."

"Definitely." McGee concurred. "Abby, this is Max Vendazzo. She'll be replacing Ziva."

Abby's mouth tightened, her eyes narrowed and her expression turned grim. She responded to Tim without once taking her gaze from the other woman.

"You told her?"

"Over lunch. I didn't go into detail... but she understands what we just went through and that we'll defend each other without a second thought against anyone or anything that threatens the family. Then I offered her a chance at adoption."

"You think she's worthy?"

"I do. I like her, Abs."

"Do I have to give you the Buffy speech, Max?"

"Not necessary. Death by shovel is a given if I hurt the team."

"She gets the pop culture references, too. I think you're right, Timmy, she'll be fine. Ducky'll be the final vote, though."

"That's where we're going next."

"I'll expect an update when you and I get together tonight."

"Yes, ma'mm." He told her, dropping a quick kiss on her cheek before leading Max back out. The newcomer released a long slow breath as they walked away.

"Wow. And I thought you were tough."

"We're all more protective, now. Have to be."

"This Ziva must've been some piece of work..."

"That's one way to put it. I might use stronger language. Matter of fact... I have."

"You? I can't picture it."

"You should've been alone with Abby and me last weekend. She finally made me mad enough that I just let everything go. Your ears would've burned to a crisp and fallen off."

"Avoid seriously pissing Tim off. Check."

"It's not usually a big deal. Normally, I'm an easy-going guy. This past month just got to all of us..."
changed the whole team. We don't do things the same way anymore." He clarified as the door whooshed open to admit them to the morgue.

A step or two inside the enormous space, Max halted Tim gently with a hand on his forearm.

"If I'm prying or you just don't want me to know, I understand that... but the more you talk about it, the more it sounds like something I *need* to know if I'm going to avoid being thrown over the battlements with the boiling oil."

"You're right... but the only person who can tell you everything isn't here and if I just started laying out the whole story without permission..."

"... it'd be another betrayal. I get that. Ducky's not the last vote, then."

"No. C'mon. Looks like he's just putting his latest body back in storage." He said quietly, directing her to where Ducky waited.

The coroner turned to see who had arrived and produced a pleased smile when he found Tim and Max approaching.

"Timothy. Good to see you, my boy. This is the new agent, I take it?"

"Yes, sir." She responded, a touch surprised.

"Jethro let me know you'd probably be coming down to introduce yourself."

"Oh. Of course. I'm Max Vendazzo."

"No, no. Not right at all. Full name?"

Max hesitated, wondering, but she complied.

"Adrianna Maxine Vendazzo."

Ducky considered her for a long stretch of seconds before replying.

"Ah. Has no-one ever called you Addie?"

"Uhhh... only my grandmother."

"Yes, that makes a great deal of sense. You wouldn't object to my using it as well, I hope?"

"No... no, it'd be an honor."

"Good, good." He told her, moving away as he spoke. "I'm afraid I'm hopelessly old-fashioned when it comes to certain things and calling such a lovely young woman by a traditionally male appellation just wouldn't seem right. You're settling in alright?"

"Yes. So far it's been fine. I've been christened and approved by Abby and Tim filled me in on the team and how you work over lunch."

"Yes, receiving one of her sudden embraces is definitely a positive sign..." he began, pausing as Jimmy entered. "This is my assistant. I'd make the introduction, but I have paperwork and I'm sure he's quite capable of speaking for himself. Welcome, Addie. Trust in the young man beside you to guide you through your first few days. He won't steer you wrong."
"Right... I, umm... I will..." she stammered, shooting fascinated glances at Jimmy while trying desperately not to let Tim know what she was up to. The object of her scrutiny was making no such effort at concealment. He approached her slowly, tilting his head right and left.

"Hi..." Max finally managed. Jimmy tried to speak, but seemed unable to at first, in spite of Ducky's pronouncement. After several seconds, he swallowed and produced a croaky word or two.

"Eyes... your eyes..."

"I have ears too. And a nose..." she returned lamely, mentally kicking herself for showing off the sudden drop her IQ had apparently taken.

"But... your eyes are... they're so brown..."

"Ohhh... thank you."

Jimmy abruptly backed up, turned and took off running, leaving Tim's laughter floating along behind him. "Who was that?"

"Jimmy Palmer. The next conversation will go better. 'Course he'll have to pick his tongue up off the floor and turn his brain back on first."

"Jimmy. Huh."

Tim laughed again, took her by the elbow and turned her around.

"And apparently so will you. C'mon. Let's see if we can finish the tour before the end of the day."

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4:30 THE BULLPEN

"Right. Yeah, I'm on my way."

Gibbs hung up the phone, rose and headed for the stairs. When he'd first done this the week before, he'd expected to hate it. If it had been Jen Sheppard, he'd have used every ounce of his considerable cunning to avoid it. Something about Mackenzie's leadership style, however, had shattered his expectations. Instead of trudging to the upper level, he was moving quickly, almost eager for what was ahead. An added benefit, he reminded himself, beyond the problems that good communication could prevent, was that making himself open up to her would increase his chances of being able to do it with Dennis Lewiston.

"She's waiting for you, Agent Gibbs." Cynthia told him as he approached. "Go right on in."

He favored her with a rare smile and made a mental note to send her a small gift and a note praising her strength and resilience in the wake of Sheppard's departure. He knew they had been close and the loss had to have shaken her, though she refused to show it. He admired the way she had handled the situation and, in keeping with his new policy of more frequently telling those around him when they'd done well, he felt she deserved some token of recognition.

After knocking softly, he entered and dropped into one of the visitor's chairs in front of Mackenzie's desk.

"Afternoon, Director."

"Gibbs. So?"
He thought for a moment, considering pushing her buttons by strictly formalizing the report she was waiting for, but he swiftly rejected the idea. He'd liked her since the moment they'd first met during the murder investigation involving her current husband and he had no real wish to irritate her.

"McGee took her out to lunch... read her in on the team and the little stuff she needed to know. She's met Ducky and Abby..."

"Hug?"

"Within an inch of her life. Same taste in music."

"God help us all, but if Abby approves that's a pretty good start."

"According to Tim, something sparked when Max saw Jimmy. Not sure I wanna know where that's going... but if it looks like it might catch fire, I won't get between 'em. The kid deserves a chance."

"Good to know. Tony?"

"Solid so far."

"He had his first out-patient session today, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Not worried?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"He was nagging me to be careful with you when I left this morning. Don't think he was too wound up about his appointment."

"Me?"

"The pressure you're under to clean up Jen's disaster... we're all aware how that could trickle down."

"I won't let that happen."

"I believe that. I'm depending on it."

"You can. Go ahead and head home a little early. However it went, you should be with him."

"Thanks." Gibbs responded, rising to his feet.

"See you next Friday."

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TBC........
Chapter 5

As he entered the house that afternoon, Gibbs' normal routine was halted before it even began and his breath momentarily frozen. His hand, the gun in it halfway to the side table where he always placed it while he prepared to secure it for the night, was motionless except for a slight tremble. The sight before him had caught him utterly by surprise and it took nearly two minutes before he could force himself into action again.

Tony was stretched out on the sofa, cocooned up to his chin in a dark green blanket, nothing showing but his head and one hand, which lay curled into a fist close to his face. The clarity and innocence that dominated Tony's expression in sleep wasn't a total shock to Gibbs, but at work, constantly around the others, he'd had good reason not to pay it much attention. Watching Tony at night all Jethro had ever seen was his back, and that not very clearly in the dark.

Finally gazing down at the hand that still hovered over the table, he slowly lowered the gun and released it then turned around to lock the door. Looking back over at Tony, Gibbs took one step, paused and took another. The third and fourth step came closer together and gradually he managed to cross the distance between himself and the younger man. As he dropped to the edge of the coffee table, myriad emotions flitting over his face, Tony shifted slightly, groaned and slowly began to open his eyes. When he found Gibbs sitting only a few inches away, an easy smile graced his lips and the other hand emerged from his blanket.

"Hey..." he murmured, producing another quiet groan as he stretched out any stiffness his nap had left him with. "You okay?"

Gibbs nodded, reached out and picked up Tony's hand, examining it. Letting it go, he proceeded to gently stroke the young man's hair, face and neck. Tony closed his eyes for the duration and arched slightly into the contact, tiny sounds of pleasure escaping from his slack mouth. After a last caress, using his thumb to trace Tony's lips, Gibbs pulled back and the other man looked up at him again, his smile even wider. "Love you too, 'Ro."

"Too?"

"You didn't have to say it. You never have to." Tony explained, sitting up and embracing Gibbs lingeringly. "God, when you touch me like that... I'd have to be brain-dead not to know what you're feeling."

Jethro shook his head in wonder and grinned.

"Wonders never cease..."

"Not around here. Man, what time is it? Hang on... it's barely five o'clock. What are you doing home?"

"Mackenzie. She knew your first session was today so after we talked, she told me to take off. Thought you might need me."

"Always, but today... it's for all the good reasons. It went fine with Lewiston."

"Nothing you wanna talk about?"

"Well... I told him you kissed me. He thinks you rock. He promised to start helping me get over the knife thing next time. We got into the mano-a-mano sex issue a little bit and he said we could work
on that too. He's gonna walk me through the basics, separate fact from fiction..."

"And you'll bring the info home."

"Of course, but... there is another option. Once you've had a few hours with him and you're used to the routine... maybe you'd be willing to share a session or two with me?"

"Maybe. We'll see, okay?" Gibbs said, dropping a quick peck on Tony's lips before rising to his feet. The other man smiled from ear to ear, laid a hand over his eyes palm up and fell heavily back onto the couch in a mock swoon, tossing Gibbs a passable Southern drawl.

"He kissed me! Oh glory be and heavens above, he kissed me!"

"Yeah, yeah. Up off your ass, DiNozzo. You promised to make dinner."

"Is that any way to act when I'm trying to be romantic?"

"Romance later, slicing and dicing now, or I'm going out for Chinese and you're staying home."

"Hmm. I'll have to hear your idea of romance, first." Tony replied as he strolled into the kitchen.

"How does the "Philadelphia Story" and sundaes on the couch sound?"

Tony whimpered faintly and raced to the fridge, pulling out the bowl of salad he'd prepared when he arrived home, the pork chops he'd been marinating since that morning and a few other ingredients. Jethro chuckled.

"Hey, I knew the session would leave me a little wiped out, so I did some stuff ahead of time."

"Best way to do it." Gibbs agreed, grabbing a beer before the door closed.

Taking a glass baking dish from a cabinet, Tony lined it with a double layer of foil, laid the chops in and covered them with sliced fresh mushrooms and the contents of two cans of cream of broccoli soup. Washing his hands, he half-turned and spoke to Gibbs uncertainly.

"That was only half a joke, you know. It really does make me a little wacky when you kiss me..."

"You don't exactly leave me cold, either, Tony." Gibbs whispered, kissing the back of Tony's neck and then gleefully touching the beer bottle to the same spot for a moment before he continued on to the living room.

"Yahhh! You didn't need to demonstrate the difference, boss! I get it!"

The only response he received was laughter and the sudden noise of the sports channel starting up on the TV.

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PRIVATE LIVES: JIMMY

Striding confidently into the small back room in the local community center, Jimmy adjusted the strap of the messenger bag he carried and smiled lightly. Every time he came here, it amused him to consider what his family at the office would think if they could see him in this environment, doing what he was about to do. Although it was a perfectly normal, reasonable endeavor, he was still sure they would be shocked, Tony especially.
Tugging the bag off his neck, he set it carefully on the long table in the center of the room, opened it and began setting out the contents. Once everything was arranged to his satisfaction, he checked his watch, made sure the clock above the door read close to the same time then moved to grab two chairs from the stacks leaning against the wall. He'd just set the second one up when he heard hesitant steps behind him. He turned to find a petite young woman standing in the doorway wearing a curious, yet anxious expression.

"Ummm... is this where I'm supposed to be?"

"Are you Lindsey?"

"Yeah. Lindsey Strong."

"Then c'mon in. Hi, I'm Jimmy Palmer." He offered, waiting patiently for her to come forward on her own instead of moving toward her. He'd learned long ago that first timers in this situation were more likely to reject the help they needed if he seemed even the slightest bit aggressive. When she was close enough, he pulled out one of the chairs and she sat down, clearly still undecided as to whether she would stay. Jimmy took the other seat and smiled gently at her. "I can see you're not sure about this. If you really don't want to do it, you're free to leave... but before you do, I hope you'll let me tell you my story. Then maybe you'll talk to me a little about what brought you here."

The young woman tucked her long sandy blond hair behind one ear and returned his smile nervously.

"It's not that I don't want to. I know this is important. It's just... embarrassing, that's all."

"Absolutely. But it's just you and I here. The materials I give you are your business, nobody else's. Not even your family. You have a right to keep this completely private. In fact, I can even hold some of the stuff for you and we'll only use it here. A few things you'll need to keep with you so you can practice, but I'll help as much as I can."

"Thanks. You're so nice... and really young. I guess I was expecting somebody more like... teacher age."

"Like I said, I've got my own reasons for doing this."

She studied him for a long moment.

"Sad reasons?"

"Very. Would you like to hear the story?"

"After. I'll let you in on my drama too, I promise, but I wanna get started before I talk myself out of this. Okay?"

"Okay. Your teacher said you were reading at a first grade level. Is that right?"

"I wish it wasn't. Seventh grade and I can barely manage books my six year old brother's already blown through."

"We'll fix that, Lindsey. A little testing to see if we can uncover the bottom-line problem, if there is one, a few months of work and you'll be the one racing past everybody else."

"That would be so amazing."
"You just wait. I guarantee, you can't imagine how good you're going to feel when reading starts clicking for you." he vowed, pulling a book close to him and opening it so they could both see.

"An eye chart? I don't get it, my eyes are perfect."

"I believe that. Just read the letters for me. One at a time and go slowly..."

7:30: A LOCAL RESTAURANT

"So?"

Sarah Mackenzie sipped her mineral water and threw Edward Sheffield a faintly dirty look.

"Smugness is so unattractive."

"But it feels wonderful. You're having a good time, then."

"I love it. So far. I've never been this engaged, this involved... It's not like anything I've ever done. The position actually lets me get things done and make a difference. It's a heady experience. Understanding that goes a long way to explaining what happened to Jennifer." She sighed, taking another sip.

Sheffield lifted an eyebrow.

"It does?"

"People in powerful positions need stress relief... need to find a way to give up the responsibility for a while. The strong ones find safe, acceptable diversions. The weak ones... all too often they go the other direction and end up damaged or destroyed."

Sheffield took a long drink from the beer in front of him and grimaced at the reminder.

"I just couldn't see it. I never pegged Jen Sheppard as weak."

"It wasn't your fault, Edward, you know that. You aren't a predator. David apparently was."

"And predators have a way of sniffing out and taking advantage of vulnerability. We have to be more careful, damn it... look closer. You're sure this new woman..."

"Adrianna Vendazzo."

"Yes, Vendazzo... you're sure about her?"

"There hasn't been enough time yet for that. She came up from within NCIS this time, her record is impeccable and Gibbs says her first day went well. Let's just say I'm as sure as I can be."

This time both eyebrows went up and Sheffield choked slightly on a mouthful of beer before he was able to swallow it.

"Wait... Gibbs says? He talks to you?"

"Every Friday before he goes home. Mutual decision to keep the lines of communication open. He and I have some history, don't forget. That makes it easier."
Her dinner companion wiped his chin and smiled wickedly across the table.

"Three months my ass. You're not going anywhere."

"Don't you start..."

Picking up his menu, Sheffield made a show of being deaf to her protests and chuckled quietly.

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TBC........
SATURDAY MORNING

Grinning, Tony snagged the last slice of bacon, broke it in two and dropped the larger piece on Jethro's plate. The older man studied Tony's plate and satisfied himself that Tony had eaten well before accepting the gift. Tony grimaced briefly.

"Dad-mode belongs at work."

"Dad-mode will be pulled out whenever and wherever I think it's necessary until I know you're a hundred percent in every way."

The grimace returned then dissolved into a somber, intent look.

"And if I never am?"

Gibbs grunted faintly and rose to refill his coffee, but didn't answer. "We can't pretend this won't be an issue, 'Ro."

"What's Lewiston think?"

"He believes in me... believes I'll come all the way back. At least he says he does. Of course, it's his job to be encouraging and positive... so who knows how far to trust?"

Gibbs reclaimed his chair slowly, his expression reflecting his tangled feelings on the subject.

"He helped you pull yourself up out of a pretty deep hole and got you back to us... back to me. Far as I'm concerned, he's earned my trust and any favor he might ever ask for. Now for the tougher question."

"Yeah... no kidding. I wanna feel like I can get completely better and put it behind me... that those hopeless, desperate feelings will never swamp me like that again. It's just too early to really believe it."

"He didn't give you meds."

"Thank God. I wanted to get strong enough to leave the hospital, so I tried hard to cooperate and tell him what he needed to know. He says as long as I keep it that way... the talk therapy should be enough." Tony responded, draining the last of his orange juice and rising to take his dishes to the sink. "He's never ruled out pills completely, though."

Gibbs sighed quietly, stood and grabbed his own dishes. Placing them beside Tony's in the sink, he let the water run over his fingers for a moment, enjoying the heat, then laid a brief, but tender kiss on the near side of Tony's neck.

"If he makes that decision, the three of us will talk about it... make sure we know everything about the drug he's picked and why he feels like you need it. Just remember that it'll be your choice in the end... and I'll have your six no matter what."

Tony leaned back slightly, resting some of his weight against Jethro's body as he continued to clean up.

"I know."
Abruptly, Gibbs found himself forced to slow his breathing as yet another shift took place deep within him. Tony's warmth was soaking into his skin through all the layers of fabric separating them, making the older man feel as if he were standing in the full brilliance of the mid-summer sun and stimulating thoughts and images Gibbs hadn't known his mind was capable of producing. For a few seconds, he seriously considered pulling back and ending the encounter before either of them did something that neither was ready for, but he was all too aware of what his retreat might do to his love's already uncertain self-confidence. Instead, Gibbs composed himself and leaned in to speak softly in Tony's ear.

"Do you feel this?"

"Yeah. Something's... we could be about to... have a moment, here."

"If you want me to walk away..."

"No... no, I'm good. Que sera sera..."

"I'm not planning anything huge. Not planning at all, tell you the truth. Just... I've got a picture in my head... wanna try it, okay?"

"Very okay." Tony replied, slightly breathless as his curiosity took over. Gibbs grinned and stepped into Tony another fraction of an inch. Tony's eyelids fell to half-mast and he unconsciously moved his feet a bit farther apart, allowing the toes of Jethro's shoes to slide up, barely touching the baseboard below the under-sink cabinet. Next, Gibbs hesitantly laid a hand on each of Tony's elbows, gliding forward and down until he could gently wrest the dish sponge and the plate out of the other man's now trembling fingers.

Of necessity, Gibbs' arms wrapped around Tony a bit as the sponge was slowly rotated over the dish, which was then rinsed under the stream of water and set aside. By the time Jethro had progressed to the silverware, every inch of the body he was pressed against was shaking, his lover had begun groaning under his breath and Tony's hands were tightly clamped to Jethro's denim clad thighs. A few moments later, the shivers were suddenly interspersed with a series of stronger, more intense jolts. Gibbs flushed and mentally head-slapped himself, emptying his hands and holding Tony securely until he relaxed and slumped as far as his lover's arms would allow. Gibbs was marginally aware of a damp stickiness rapidly cooling against his own skin, but he couldn't deal with both their issues at the same time, so he focused on the young man in his arms.

"Tony?"

"Tony can't come to the phone right now. Leave your message after the beep..."

"Jokes. Guess that's a good sign, hmmm? Look, I didn't... I mean, I knew what could happen... I never should've started... I wasn't thinking clear..."

Huffing out a sigh, Tony straightened, steadied himself and turned to face Jethro, determinedly not looking anywhere but his beloved's face.

"Did I say stop? Did I push you away or kick you where it hurts?"

"No, but..."

"But nothing. I knew what was going on. I may be a Probie when it comes to guys..." he reminded Gibbs, kissing him lightly on the mouth "...but I'm not exactly a newcomer to sex. I wanted it... I said it was okay and I meant it. That being said..."
"Right. Too fast, too much. I understand."

"Hey, don't get me wrong, this was sweet and inspired..."

"... and hot as hell." Gibbs murmured, returning the kiss.

"That too, but it was also spur of the moment. If I'd had any time to let my other brain throw its two cents in..."

"I know. Not sure I'm ready for planned whoopee either. Spur of the moment feels like a good first step... for a while."

"Yeah. For a while. I'm, uh... I need to go clean up and... change clothes." Tony admitted, tossing Jethro a half smile tinged with awkwardness and backing away, clutching a strategically placed dishtowel. Recalling that he was in the same mildly humiliating condition, the other man made a face, nodded and turned away quickly, his strain and concern only relieved when a final shouted comment drifted back to him through the house. "I never looked. Didn't even peek..."

When they met up again almost an hour later, Gibbs smiled and felt his desire faintly reawaken at the sight of Tony in tight jeans, an old t-shirt and battered sneakers.

{Shit... if that gets me going I am in so much trouble next time I see him in one of those tailored suit and tie combos he loves. Or God forbid... a tux.}

Mentally stomping on thoughts that he didn't have the time to indulge, the older man refocused on the task and the day ahead of them, which would be anything but easy.

"You ready to do this?"

"Can't put it off any longer. No sense in it, is there?"

"You can wait as long as you want. I told you I'd help with the rent 'till you decide it's time..."

"It is. I need to get this over with. I appreciate the offer, you know that. It's just stupid for either of us to pay to keep the landlord from emptying my apartment and auctioning off my furniture."

"You'll still be paying for storage."

"A quarter of what rent is, maybe even less. That I can handle on my own once I'm back at work and off the pittance they were giving me for medical leave." Tony retorted, grabbing and slipping into his jacket, patting the pocket to determine if his keys were there. When he felt the reassuring weight and shape, he returned Jethro's grin and turned to see the other man was already set to leave. "Let's do this before I change my mind."

Gibbs smiled, brushed Tony's hand lightly and led the way out of the house. After a few deep breaths, Tony followed.

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Keys dangling from his tightly closed fist, Tony paused outside his apartment, a spot he hadn't seen in over a month and had been trying not to even let into his thoughts. He continued to try and keep himself calm, but deep breaths were no longer helping now that he was actually at the point of re-entering the space where fear and despair had nearly cost him everything he now cherished.

"Tony?"
"Yeah."

"You're strong enough to do this, Tony. I believe that. It doesn't have to be now. I kept trying to tell you that all the way over here."

"I know. My answer's still the same. Waiting isn't gonna make this easier. Just... don't go too far, okay?"

"Not an issue."

"Didn't think so. I had to say it." Tony replied, finally moving to insert the key in the lock and open the door. "Okay... here goes."

As Tony took a single step into the apartment and hit the light switch near the door, Gibbs trailed behind, torn between showing support with a word or a touch and giving Tony space to rediscover strength and independence on his own. Before he could decide, he glanced at Tony and the younger man's pallor caused his lover deep concern.

"Tony?"

"It's in here somewhere." Tony said in a near whisper.

"What is?"

Tony tried, but the word refused to come out of his mouth. Instead he pointed in the general direction he believed he might have thrown the knife that terrible night.

"Over there. It's there... I think. I'm not sure. I don't wanna remember right now..."

"What are we talking about, Tony?"

"I can't. I just... I need you to find it and get rid of it. I don't care how as long as I don't have to see it."

Gibbs studied Tony a few seconds longer, wondering just what he was getting himself into, then sighed and touched the younger man's shoulder.

"Go get started on what you need to do, alright?"

Tony nodded, wiped suddenly damp hands on his jeans and headed off to his old bedroom. Gibbs waited for the sounds of rummaging to begin before he moved off in search of whatever had caused the extreme reaction in Tony. He had a definite idea about what he was looking for, but when he finally found it, lying dusty and untouched on the floor under a small table, it still sent a shiver through him. It took almost a full minute before he could make himself reach out and carefully retrieve the light, thin-bladed knife.

Rising out of the crouch he'd dropped into to pick the item up, Gibbs carried it rapidly back toward the kitchen, once again forcefully dragging his thoughts away from paths he couldn't afford to let them follow. Snatching the pair of dish towels that hung above the sink, he laid them out on the counter and wrapped the knife up then stood looking at the brightly colored fabric and wondering what to do with the distasteful object inside. Finally, he decided just to strip out of his jacket and use it to cover the bundle. When they were ready to leave, he could simply pick up both and Tony would be none the wiser.

Just then, Tony strolled back into the main space with his arms full of various things. He set the load
on the sofa and turned to look at Gibbs, who merely nodded, letting him know that the knife was gone.

"Thanks. I couldn't stay here and get this done if..."

"I know. You wanna come down and get the boxes with me?"

"Yeah." Tony sighed. "Good idea, I guess."

"You got all the small stuff out of the bedroom you wanted?"

Tony flushed, but tried to hide it.

"Absolutely. Everything I need."


Tony wanted to say something, to prevent the discovery the older man was about to make, but he knew nothing would stop Gibbs when he thought he was doing what was best, so he snapped his mouth closed and turned away, his face colored an even deeper red.

Gibbs re-emerged from the bedroom carrying a stuffed turtle and brought it to Tony. "You wanna tell me? You don't have to."

Tony's response was barely audible as he reached out and took the toy.

"After I, uh... after I got out of the isolation unit and made it home... Kate brought this over. She sat on the bed and made me listen to that story... the one about the rabbit and the tortoise."

"Made you?"

"You know Kate. In her way... she could be as strong and as stubborn as you are."

"Taught her everything she knew."

"But not everything *you* know. Old joke, boss." Tony laughed softly. "Anyway... she said the story was to remind me that even though it might be really slow going to get back where I was before the plague... if I could manage to be patient and take it slow, I'd make it."

"And you're leaving it behind."

"Lewiston made me realize that when she died... I never had the time to grieve for her the way I should have. I'm starting to do it now and... it feels like I lost her ten minutes ago. It's hard to remember..."

"Damn hard. Can I?" he asked, holding out his hand. Tony reluctantly handed the turtle over. Gibbs gazed at it for a long moment then walked it to the couch and added it to the pile. Returning to Tony's side, he squeezed his shoulder firmly.

"You ready to go get those boxes?"

"Ready."
TBC.......
MID-AFTERNOON:

Staring around at what was now a mostly bare apartment, Tony shook his head and fought off the melancholy that was creeping in on him. Finishing a call, Gibbs looked up, recognized the effort the younger man was making and moved to stand close to him.

"It's okay. You're giving up something big here."

"I was in this apartment longer than I ever thought I would be. You and NCIS broke my streak..."

"I know a natural investigator when I see one. I don't let someone like that slip through my hands without a fight."

"Yeah, well I've given you more than your share of those over the years. Truck on the way?"

"He'll be here in twenty minutes."

"I knew you had pretty deep connections in the area, but I never would've put the manager of a U-Haul on the list. Not that I'm not grateful..."

Gibbs grinned lightly.

"He's the son of an old buddy. I saved his dad's sorry ass a few times overseas... our families got close when I came back. He's a good kid..."

"Must be if he's willing to bend the rules to get the truck to us instead of making us go pick it up." Tony agreed, still gazing around the space. "Thank God the elevator's running today. We'd never get all this furniture down the stairs, even with three of us."

"More like six or seven. David said he was stuffing a few friends in the truck before he brought it over."

"Damn. You must've saved his dad from Godzilla. Mothra at least..."

Gibbs briefly clamped his lips together and turned away. The event was one he was proud of, and his actions had even seen him labeled a hero by many of his fellow soldiers, but accepting and basking in accolades wasn't in his nature. He had compelled silence from the man involved and his son David had taken on the vow in his turn, but, in compensation, neither one had ever refused an appeal for help from Gibbs, nor would they take payment for the assistance they gave.

"Sand fleas, more like it." he grunted. "Let's get started humping the boxes we're taking in my car."

"No way they're all fitting. We may have to make more than one trip, but I hate to do that..."

Each man took two cartons out to the elevator and down to the street, only to discover, that, aside from the enormous U-Haul truck, one of David's friends was also waiting with a pickup. Gibbs smiled ruefully, shook his head and strode forward, gripping David's hand.

"You're sneaky, kid. 'Course, so was your old man..."

"I'll take that as the compliment it is. Good to see you again, Jethro."
"Same here."

"You're keeping these ones?" David asked, gesturing at the boxes Gibbs and Tony had carried out.

"Yeah."

"Let's get 'em in the pickup then."

Just under two hours later, the apartment was truly empty and both trucks had been loaded. After giving David directions to the restaurant where they were meeting later on, Jethro turned to find Tony standing utterly still and staring up at the building.

"We're about ready to head out."

"I know. One more minute."

"Take two." the older man countered wryly.

"Gee, thanks. How generous." Tony joked back, never taking his eyes away from the window to his former home. "Moving on's not exactly new to me. It shouldn't be this hard, damn it..."

"You ever leave without a real clear idea of what's ahead of you?"

"No... I was always smart enough to have the next city and the next apartment set up solid before I left a job."

"Then give yourself a break. The next week or two's gonna be tough, a little shaky maybe... but you'll get through it if you lean on your family."

"It's that or fall on my ass. I don't feel like doing that again."

"Good to hear." Gibbs replied, the timbre of his voice betraying more of his true feelings than he intended. Hearing this finally drew Tony's gaze away from the window and toward his lover. Gently touching Gibbs' hand was the most he knew he should allow himself in public, but he made sure he held nothing out of his expression and his quiet response.

"That won't ever happen again, Jethro. I swear, if it ever even looks or feels like it might, I *will* come to you."

"Or Ducky or Jimmy or Abby..."

Tony shot a quick peek around Gibbs to make sure they were unobserved for the moment then dropped a swift peck on his jaw before answering.

"If I can't find you. You first... always."

Gibbs flushed and grinned, making sure to keep his back to the rest of the group until his coloring normalized. When he felt the heat withdraw from his face, he turned and walked back to the pickup, Tony trailing behind. "Guess I'm ready now. Whatever's ahead of me... it's gotta be better than what I've already seen."

"Guaranteed. Damn, I forgot my coat. Keys?"

Tony tossed him the bunch of jingling metal. "Be right back."

Upstairs in the apartment for the last time, Gibbs lifted his jacket and slowly unfolded the towels.
Staring down at the knife, he rapidly came to a decision as to what he would do with it. Bundling it back up, he picked up both items and headed back downstairs.

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GIBBS' HOUSE:

Once the boxes from the pickup were transferred into the house and the keys to the U-Haul transferred to Jethro's pocket, the men in the smaller truck pulled away, headed for the restaurant, leaving Tony and Gibbs standing by the car, gazing at each other fondly over the roof.

"Backing it right up against the garage doors was pretty smart. Should be safe from any idiot criminals 'till we get back from dinner." Tony commented, studying the truck briefly.

"Best I could do for now. Too late to hit the storage place tonight. Besides, we won't be gone that long."

"Speak for yourself. I'm starved."

"I figured, after all the work you put in this afternoon. Why do you think I chose a Chinese buffet for dinner?"

"I can stuff myself and it won't max out your credit card?" Tony tossed out, grinning broadly.

"I'll believe that when I see it. C'mon, get in the car, willya? I wasn't sittin' on my butt today, either..." Jethro replied, sliding into the driver's seat.

Tony hesitated, contemplating Gibbs' words for a moment, then slowly got into the passenger's side and shut the door. Before the older man could start the engine, however, the sudden tension he could sense in Tony delayed the trip for another few moments. "What?"

"You must've been talking to Lewiston on the phone, setting up your sessions and all that. Did he... what's he been telling you about me?"

"Nothing he isn't allowed to. Why?"

"I wasn't eating when I first checked in... he got me to admit I hadn't been really interested in food for a long time. I just..."

"You think I'd still have a job if I wasn't observant, Tony? I knew... I saw it happening, but if I'd pushed or nagged it just would've pissed you off. I didn't have the right to open my mouth back then. Now I do... least I hope so. I hope loving you gives me that."

A light smile blossoming on his lips, Tony loosely gripped Jethro's upper arm and nodded.

"Can you drive like this? I... I feel like staying in contact right now, even if it's only with your jacket. We had to be so careful this afternoon..."

"Yeah. If I get too intense about being close, or you start feeling pressured..."

"... you'll know. Trust me, you'll know."

"Okay." Jethro responded, releasing a slow breath as the atmosphere of the car shifted from anxiety to calm and relative peace. "Okay. Let's go catch up with David and the rest."

Tony whooped happily and began babbling about his favorite buffet choices as Gibbs brought the
car to life and backed out of the driveway.

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MANHATTAN:

"Yes, sir? You asked for me?"

"Come in. Close the door."

The young man entered slowly and did as he'd been told, approaching the large desk on the other side of the room with caution. He'd never been summoned to this office before and spent a good part of his work life in continual prayer that he never would be.

"W-what can I do for you, sir?"

"I've been told you're the best we have at procuring sensitive information without being discovered. I think your appropriate title is "hacker"."

"I... I have been known to... to do a little of that... only in the company's interests, sir, I swear..."

"Good" The executive interrupted, handing the other man a sheet of paper. "Get me everything you can on this agency... and this employee in particular. I don't care what methods you use, as long as you're thorough, you don't get caught and it never lands back on my doorstep."

"Sir... this is the Federal government... not just federal, military..."

"Does that mean you can't do it?"

"Noooo..."

"Then get to work."

"Yes... sir."

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TBC.......
8:00 SUNDAY MORNING

Moving carefully down the stairs with a towel draped across his wet hair and hanging over his eyes, Tony halted and sniffed appreciatively. His sensitive nose told him his favorite blend of coffee was on and that breakfast would soon be in the offing, bringing a smile to his covered face. He'd felt an upsurge of energy that morning and decided to double the mileage on his usual run and now his body was screaming for his gas tank to be refueled. As he stepped off the last riser and onto the floor, an amused voice greeted him,

"Well, well. Good morning whoever you may be."

but it wasn't the one he was expecting and the surprise caused him to stumble slightly. Regaining his balance, he peered out as the front of the towel was lifted and a face gazed in at him, confirming his suspicion and making his heart leap.

"Oh, I see. Let me correct myself... good morning, Tony."

Whipping the towel off and tossing it aside, Tony wrapped his friend in a gentle, joyful hug.

"Ducky! Hey, it's good to see you!" he told him, frowning a bit when he pulled back. "What are you doing here so early on a Sunday?"

"I thought I might come and have a bite of something with you and Jethro. Then... I was hoping you and I could take a little drive."

Hearing a familiar sound, Ducky tilted slightly to look around Tony and consequently tried to get him out of the line of fire, but couldn't speak fast enough. "Ah, do take care, dear boy, or you may be... eating standing up. Good Lord..." he said, grimacing when his warning came too late. Tony rubbed his stinging butt and turned, outraged, to find Jethro holding the wet towel that the younger man had carelessly dropped to the hardwood floor.

"Gibbs!"

"Put it in the laundry chute next time." He responded wryly, doing the task himself before heading into the kitchen. "Grub's on. Both of you get in here and eat, or it'll be cold."

Ducky led the way to the kitchen and dropped cautiously into a chair. After a long moment of hesitation, spent waiting for his butt to cool off, Tony followed suit, resuming their conversation as Gibbs started placing dishes of food on the table.

"So you said a drive. Where to?"

"Mmmm. I wasn't sure about broaching this subject to you. My heart tells me that it's very much the right thing to do... but I'm concerned about how you might react to the suggestion..."

Tony reached out and squeezed Ducky's hand briefly.

"It's okay. I know you only have my best interests at heart. Whatever it is, just tell me."

"Yes, well... if you're amenable... I'd dearly love to take you to church."

"Church? Praise the Lord and pass the collection plate... open your hymnals to page ninety-five..."
church?" Tony replied uncertainly.

"Something along those lines, yes. It's really quite an experience, Tony. I believe you'll enjoy yourself immensely."

"Wow... uh, let me think about it while we chow down, okay?"

"Absolutely."

The conversation over the course of the meal was relaxed and happy and by the time they'd finished, Tony had made up his mind about Ducky's proposal. Before he could speak up, however, Jethro stood and grabbed his place setting and Tony's.

"You helping me with dishes?"

Tony's smile, lowered eyes and intense blush confused Ducky, but he quickly decided it wasn't anything he needed to know. It took several seconds for the young man to compose himself, but eventually he looked up and answered both men, one after the other.

"Uh... don't think so. Maybe when I, uh... when I get home. If you're sure you wanna take me, Ducky... I'll give it a shot."

"Excellent." He replied, handing Tony his keys and rising to his feet as well. "Why don't you go out and get the car warm?"

"Oookay... what's up?"

"Nothing, my boy, nothing. I simply wanted to talk to Jethro alone for a moment."

Tony hesitated, but after a moment he also stood and moved off to grab his heavy winter coat. Once he was sure Tony was out the door, Ducky turned his focus to Gibbs, who was piling items carefully into the sink. "Jethro... you are aware of what today's date is, aren't you?"

"Huh? Yeah, of course. February twelfth."

"And that would make Tuesday..."

"The fourteenth."

Ducky sighed loudly. He knew the problem wasn't just his friend's normal, if rare, denseness, but the fact that he hadn't truly loved anyone in so many years. Lack of emotional connection made romantic holidays irrelevant. This fact earned him near-infinite patience.

"And the fourteenth of February would be..."

Finally, Gibbs whipped around to face his best friend, eyes wide and mouth working fruitlessly. Ducky smiled and patted him on the cheek. "Good. I see I've gotten through. You might want to spend your free time today making plans and tomorrow executing them. I'll deliver the boy safe and sound early this afternoon, my word of honor."

Ducky walked away with a light step, softly humming one of his favorite hymns. Dishes abandoned and his head spinning, Gibbs pulled a pad of paper and a pen from a drawer, dropped back into his chair and slowly began to write.

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Sitting in the padded wooden pew beside Ducky, Tony made a concerted effort not to do what his brain insisted on labeling as "gawking", but the sanctuary where they waited for the service to begin was stunning and he couldn't seem to help it. Every window sill held craft projects, obviously made by the youngest members of the congregation, the walls were hung with various handmade pieces created by the adults and the ceiling, constructed of antique tin panels painted a soft cream, soared above him, continually drawing his eyes. Watching as his young friend fought to pull his head down one more time, Ducky laughed and spoke up quietly.

"It's alright, Tony, really. Everyone viewing this place for the first time does a bit of... well, I like to call it sightseeing. There's nothing wrong with it."

"I don't mean to, I swear. It's just... this isn't anything like what I expected."

"In what way?"

"I don't know... I guess I always pictured the church my parents went to as being sterile and formal and totally silent... like a library run by a priest, you know? One word and everybody in the room frowns and turns to look and does that shush gesture, but without actually making any noise. This place... you know real people go here. I keep hearing conversation, babies laughing and yelling... and nobody minds. I could be comfortable here. It's warm and happy... and alive."

"A lovely description, my boy. Yes, this church is indeed full of joy and life. That's one of the reasons I love it so. You said 'pictured'... were you never allowed to attend?"

"No." Tony replied, his tone saying details might emerge later, but that for the moment, he wasn't going to discuss it further. "One of the reasons?" he asked, offering a change of subject.

"One of many. You're about to see the biggest." He said pointing to the raised dais at the front of the room. Tony raised his head to look at the spot Ducky had indicated and felt his mouth drop open in shock as a beautiful dark-haired woman, draped in white robes and a multi-colored stole, rose to her feet and approached the lectern.

"Good morning!" she enthused, a bright grin on her face. The congregation echoed her greeting with just as much energy. "Welcome to the worship of God here at the First Federated Church of Georgetown. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, we want you to know that you are welcome here. If you're new or visiting, please take a second to sign one of the guest books by either door at the back, so we'll be able to get in touch if you ever need us..."

As she continued with the morning announcements, Tony got his mouth closed at last and swore silently, digging out the hymnal and opening his bulletin to seek out the tunes they were expected to sing. Luckily, most were vaguely familiar and he felt somewhat confident with attempting to sing them, but he was still grateful that he'd have the words in front of him. As the organist began playing and the pair rose alongside everyone else, Ducky grinned and squeezed Tony's forearm in reassurance.

"You aren't auditioning for the choir, Tony. Just do your best, alright? One of the other things I adore about this place is that absolutely nobody is perfect, we all know it and we don't expect it of anyone else... newcomers or not."

"Thanks."

"Surely. Now sing..."
Tony released a deep sigh of relief as he watched the last of the congregation file past him and toward the doors and staircases that led to the small entrance hall one level below. Several people had stopped to speak with Ducky on their way out and, suddenly realizing he wasn't ready to either be addressed by strangers or to respond to them, Tony had done his best impression of the invisible man until the threat had passed him by, causing Ducky to gaze at him with empathy.

"I do apologize, Tony. I'm known quite well by the people here... even so, they wouldn't normally *all* stop by to say hello. I'm afraid many of them, especially the younger women, felt the need to indulge their curiosity..."

Tony chuckled in response, scrubbing his face with his hands.

"It's okay. I survived. God, I only spent two weeks in the damn hospital. You'd think I'd been in there most of my life the way I reacted..."

Ducky didn't respond immediately and Tony could almost feel the tension and emotion flooding the area around where they sat. Just as he was about to speak again, asking what he'd said wrong, Ducky finally cleared his throat and replied.

"I'm sure you must feel as if everyone can see straight through... as if they've been witness to all you've endured the past few weeks. That can be terrifying and inhibiting, I know... but I pray you won't let it drive you back into yourself. You are loved and needed, Tony... please believe that. Your family will do everything possible to keep you here with us and to keep you feeling positive about yourself... but nothing we do will ever be enough if you cease trying..."

Tony half turned in his spot to face Ducky and grasped one of the coroner's hands gently.

"Whoa, whoa... Duck, where is this coming from?"

"Bitter experience, I'm afraid."

"But you're not ready to talk about it yet?"

"No, not yet. Soon, perhaps... in fact, it might help both of us... one in the telling and one in the hearing. It's not a story... well, let's just say that unlike the other tales of my madcap, adventurous life, this is one that very few people have heard."

"I understand."

"I know you do, dear boy... I know you do." Ducky said quietly then seemed to shake himself a little. "Maudlin is highly over-rated as a state of mind. What do you say to a random drive to nowhere in particular and then a hearty lunch that would cause our cardiologists to have tantrums?"

"Sounds fantastic."

"I thought you'd approve. Can you withstand another few moments among the throng? I should at least make an appearance down in the vestry, if only long enough to grab a coffee and run."

"Coffee... any chance of something to go with it? Like cookies... or brownies, maybe?"

"Something in that vein always shows up. I'm sure we can satisfactorily indulge your sweet tooth."
"Don't be so sure..."

BEDTIME: THE HOUSE

"So?"

"So..." Tony teased lightly, knowing exactly what Gibbs was asking about. He got a mild tap on the back of the head for his trouble, but it was accompanied by a soft chuckle.

"When you left here this morning anybody woulda thought you were headed for the gas chamber, not church."

"Hey, I'd never been, not even as a kid. I had no idea what I was in for."

"Never?"

"My parents went once in a while... and always on Christmas and Easter, but it was just for the "see and be seen" factor. They had no reason to show me off... so I stayed home. I wanted to go... really bad, actually. Guess they couldn't be bothered with all they questions they knew I'd have..."

Gibbs arm briefly tightened around him and Tony smiled and snuggled closer, reveling in the silent love and solidarity the older man was trying to convey.

"Go on. Tell me about today."

"It was... good. Strange, but good. Knowing Ducky I was kind of expecting Catholic, maybe Anglican..."

"What, 'cause he's a Brit?"

"No!" Tony protested mildly, adding a gentle elbow back into Jethro's midsection. "I try not to make judgments like that. It's because he's so traditional and old-fashioned. When he took me to that combo church..."

"Combo? You get communion with fries and a soda?" Gibbs interrupted again. This time Tony flipped over to face him, glaring faintly. "Okay, okay. Shutting up now."

"Thank you." the younger man said, sealing his acceptance with a quick peck on the lips. "Combo just means it's half one denomination and half another. Ducky's is Methodist and UCC. It's a really beautiful place... over three hundred years old, according to him. I was trying so hard to take in everything at once... I know my jaw was on the floor most of the time. I did pay attention to the pastor, though. Boy... her you couldn't possibly forget."

"Her?"

"I know, made me take a step back too, but she's funny and totally cool. It's not like I have anything to compare her style to... but just in general, she's a fantastic speaker. In the little bulletin you get on the way in, they didn't call it a sermon, which really surprised me. It was 'the message'. What she was saying, it hit me pretty hard. Felt like somebody knew exactly what I needed to hear today. The whole thing was about trust... and how hard it can be to get back when you've been hurt. She said the best way is to rebuild it in steps. Learn to trust and love yourself, then you can trust and love other people, which leads you back to trusting and loving God. When we got out... I told Ducky I thought it might take a long time for me to make it to the last stage, since I didn't know who God was. He got that smile on his face... the one where you know you said exactly what he was hoping
"I don't do that too often, so I'm only vaguely familiar."

"Me either. It was nice to see, for once. Anyway, I agreed to start going with him every week. He's gonna introduce me to the pastor, get me into his bible study group... It's all happening so fast, I should be terrified. Instead... I'm excited."

"Natural. You said yourself that church was something you craved as a kid, but never got to experience. Now you're free to go as much as you want... get all your questions answered."

"Maybe you could come with us next week?"

"I haven't been to church in fifteen years, Tony..."

"That doesn't mean you can't try again. The pastor, she said something right at the beginning of the service... 'Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.' I could tell it wasn't just a slogan to her. She meant it."

"I'll think about it, okay? Now settle down and get some sleep."

"Later. Gotta tell you about the spread they put on after church... oh yeah, and the little place Ducky took me for lunch..."

"Tony. Work tomorrow, remember? Maybe you can make it just fine on two hours of shuteye..."

"...but you can't. Okay, I'll quit, but we're going out for a beer tomorrow night so I can tell you everything."

Gibbs sighed through a grin, pulled Tony close to him and closed his eyes.

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TBC......
Chapter 9

MONDAY MORNING:

Studying his image in the mirror on the back of Gibbs' closet door, Tony grinned lightly as he watched the older man come up behind him. Jethro lifted one hand a few inches then dropped it again as he struggled with an overwhelming urge to maintain Tony's dependence on him just a little longer. Every minute he spent with Tony, in every expression and gesture, Gibbs could see his lover standing taller and feel him taking responsibility for his life back into his own hands bit by bit. For some reason he couldn't come close to explaining, this knowledge had left Jethro uncertain and off-balance, feelings he simply wasn't accustomed to dealing with. He fought down the temptation to let them transmute into the comfortable, familiar territory of frustration and anger and let the other man's next words draw a smile from him instead.

"It's perfectly straight." Tony observed.

"Never said it wasn't."

"Go on, you know you want to."

"Like you said... it's straight. No reason to mess with it."

"You wanna help... to do something for me. Go ahead."

Flushing just a bit, Gibbs reached around, pulled Tony's tie out from under his sweater and completely undid all the neat work the young man had put in a few minutes before. When it was perfectly knotted once again, he tucked it back under the V-neck, briefly smoothed and patted both it and the jacket over it, then let his hands fall to his sides.

"Thanks."

"Hey, what you need matters too." Tony replied softly, meeting Jethro's eyes in the reflective surface and stretching a hand up and back to touch the other man's face. "I'll always hand over little stuff like that. You don't even have to ask. Just take it..."

"God... barely a month and you're so damn strong already..."

"Not so much. It just looks like it 'cause I've got my own personal brick wall of love to lean on." He chuckled, suiting action to words. Gibbs slipped one arm around his waist and spoke to the mirror, his voice quiet and gruff.

"I made stupid assumptions, Tony, I know that now. You seemed so resilient, bouncing back time after time... I kept thinkin' 'This is why I made him my second. He never quits, never lets anything get to him for very long.' I didn't look... couldn't spare a minute to see what was really going on. It won't happen again..."

Tony turned in his grip and embraced Gibbs fully.

"Stop. Just stop. We have to let go of all that shit, damn it... just toss it in the dumpster behind us and face forward. There's too much good stuff we might miss out on if we don't..."

"Makes sense. Lettin' go of you, though..."
"Same here, but we have to head out pretty soon." Tony countered, pulling back a little. "You said our deadline for being late to work is lunchtime and it's already... eight-thirty." He announced, sneaking a peek at his watch.

"Damn clocks. It's not that late. We can steal a few minutes. Kiss?" he asked, his expression betraying a trace of anxiety. Tony swiftly relieved his worry with easy agreement and a sweet smile.

"Well... okay. But just one."

"One is enough to last me all day."

Tony smirked and shot Gibbs a curious look.

"You've been taking online romance classes behind my back."

"Shut up and kiss me."

"And apparently you need to study harder..."

"DiNozzo."

"Yeah, yeah... always so damned impatient..."

What started as hesitant, sweet and delicate rapidly flared into desire, passion and literal breathless intensity. With incredible effort, Jethro kept his hands strictly on Tony's back, making himself wait and prove to both of them how wrong that last statement was. Finally, Tony slid one hand around Gibbs' neck and squeezed, just barely. The movement was not strong enough to even cause discomfort, never mind pain, but the older man felt every muscle in his body tense and gradually relax, one region after another, head to toe, and he gasped quietly against Tony's mouth. His reaction distracted both men and broke the moment, but even so, they parted reluctantly. Even as Tony was shifting away, his eyes moving restlessly over Jethro's face trying to understand what had happened, his body was urging him to lean back in, restart the process and continue strengthening the gossamer threads of developing love between them. Jethro, however, needed a moment to process. As a consolation, he licked the corner of Tony's mouth, but then he dropped his forehead gently onto the younger man's, released a slow breath and spoke a few quiet words.

"I know... me too, but I... gimme a second, okay?"

"Of course okay."

"I... I've never in my life felt anything like that. Every bone, every nerve... everything was so... It wasn't a kiss... it was a pure connection. Like something was just... screaming how right you and I are."

"Singing... I heard singing..."

"It... I... God."

"That about sums it up. We need to go, damn it..." Tony commented, sneaking a glance at his watch.

"Another minute. Not sure my legs are... you know..."

"Mmm... I do. One more minute..."

The pair clung together for a while longer, holding on tightly, until the conversation lightened and the capacity for speaking full sentences was restored. Then they straightened, turned and moved
downstairs at last, still close together and still holding hands. Just as they were about to head out the
door, Jethro halted Tony and gazed at him intently for a long moment.

"What?"

"Wait here a sec. I've got something to give you," the older man responded, striding to where the
stereo sat, retrieving something and quickly moving back to join Tony. "You should've had this
weeks ago, but..."

"It's okay, I get it. CD's?"

Gibbs nodded, but it took him a few more seconds to muster up words.

"Thinking about what music to play for you in the hospital... I kept comin' up with so many songs
that said stuff I wanted you to hear. I finally picked one and Tim scorched the rest onto these..."

Tony laughed, tilting his head back slightly.

"Burned, boss... burned."

"Burned, scorched, same thing." Gibbs shot back, his tone mildly indignant

"You're right. Sorry." He said, dropping a brief kiss on Jethro's cheek and struggling to suppress
more laughter. "I'll start listening in the truck."

"Speaking of which..."

Tony grinned and happily allowed Jethro to pull him out of the house.

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TWO HOURS LATER: DAVID'S U-HAUL

Reaching up, Tony brushed the metal door of the now empty truck with his fingertips. Gibbs gently
pulled his hand down and held it.

"You're not leaving the stuff there forever. It's just 'till we have the time and energy to sit down and
get the details straight."

"I know. It's okay. I'll get this whole 'new life' thing down eventually." He replied, shaking his head
a little and managing a half smile that Gibbs read as genuine, if a bit stressed. "You gave the keys
back already?"

"Yeah, when we got here. You were busy transferring the music from the truck to the car," Gibbs
reminded him as they turned away, headed back for their own vehicle. Tony, showing a thoughtful
expression, waited until they were both in their seats before softly responding.

"What I got to hear of that first CD... huge wow factor, there, boss. A couple of tracks... they hit me
pretty hard..."

"How, uh... how far did you get?" Gibbs asked as they pulled out into traffic.

"About six songs in. I had no idea you like Billy so much. They weren't all ones I'd heard before.
That one about not having the words to say what you're feeling... God, at first all I could think was
that could have been your theme song."
"Could have? Still is."

"No. Not anymore. You do fine, 'Ro, trust me. Anyway... I went back to the beginning and really listened to that first song... the French one? It was so sad... and it was about *not* having the person you want. It didn't fit in with the others. Why that one?"

Gibbs breathed deeply. He'd been anticipating this question, but dreading it at the same time. The answer was by no means simple, as it would lead to a huge discussion they didn't have time for just then. He decided having Tony do a little of the work wouldn't be a bad thing.

"I'll explain... but I need you to swear we can wait to have the talk that's gonna come after."

"I can do that. No problem."

"Okay... you have to dig into the actual lyrics. Mostly the first verse."

Tony frowned lightly and focused his sight down at the floor-mat on his side as he thought about the song.

"The lyrics... he says he's drinking too much and talking to himself... regretting that the person meant for him isn't there..."

An image of Gibbs in the subdued light of his basement, alternately sipping from a mug of bourbon and sanding his boat, abruptly invaded Tony's thoughts and the young man slowly looked back up at his lover, eyes widening as the truth sank in. "He can find a few minutes of comfort in anybody, but it isn't enough... it'll never keep him from self-destructing. Gibbs..."

"No. You promised. Tomorrow night."

"But..."

"Tomorrow, Tony. You've got enough to think about right now. Our jobs are stressful on a normal day. This is gonna be anything but."

"Okay. Tomorrow night."

"Thank you."

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TBC........
Chapter 10

11:15 A.M. : MANHATTAN

"Yes? Come in."

"Sir? I, ummm... I have the information you wanted. All I was able to get my hands on, anyway. I
thought maybe... you might want to look at it over lunch " The young man responded hesitantly,
hovering in the doorway of the office that now defined hell on earth for him.

"Good. Bring it here and close the door behind you."

"Y-yes, sir... of course." He stammered, shooting forward and handing over the moderately thick file
folder. The other man laid it on his desk, flipped it open and began skimming random pages.

"This looks promising. Are you done with the search?"

"Afraid so, sir. Any other potential source I'd either never find a way in... or I'm guaranteed to be
caught."

"Hmmm. Understood. This will do very well. I assume you know enough to keep your mouth shut."

"Absolutely."

"I would hope so. You won't like the result if I find out you've opened it."

"No... sir. I-I'm clear on that."

"You can leave now."

Once again, the young man made a rapid escape, tossing out silent prayers of undying gratitude. The
man behind the desk waited until he was sure the door was once gain secure before going back to the
first document in the file and beginning to read, this time taking in every detail. "Leroy Jethro
Gibbs... former Marine gunnery sergeant... now leader of his own team of agents in the Navy
Investigative Service. Hmmmph. We'll just skip over the public face, shall we... move right on to the
things you pray the world never finds out. All the lovely tidbits I can employ to make you reconsider
standing in the way of what I want... if you're foolish enough to try."

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11:30 : NCIS

Keeping a close eye on Tony as they rode up in the elevator allowed Gibbs to realize his lover's
breathing had sped up considerably. He was showing no other signs of stress, but Tony's medical
history led Jethro to take the one he *was* seeing very seriously.

"Hey. You need me to do a Transformers on this thing?"

"Ummm... you'll have to explain that one, boss." The other replied distractedly.

"Elevator... conference room." Gibbs said, reaching out to slap the emergency stop with the flat of
his hand. Tony chuckled and visibly relaxed.

"Gotcha. Cute, boss. I hear the movie they're coming out with next year is gonna be pretty
spectacular. How'd you find out, though? You switch from US News and World Report to Variety when nobody was looking?"

"No."

A pause for thought was followed by much bolder laughter from Tony.

"Cartoons! You were watching Cartoon Network on my big-screen! I thought I heard it, but by the time I got downstairs for breakfast this morning you'd shut it off!"

"I don't watch kids programming. Barely watch T.V. at all, you know that..."

"Millions of adults watch anime, Gibbs. It's nothing to be ashamed of..."

"DiNozzo!"

"Okay, okay. Consider me warned." Tony said, dropping a discreet peck on Jethro's cheek as he reached across the older man to restart the elevator then straightened again, leaning against the back wall as they finished their journey. "Not like I'd tell anybody... *you* know *that*. I'm not the immature lunkhead you pulled away from Baltimore Homicide. Too much has happened for me to even know who he is anymore. You taught me to think before I talk... and most of the time I manage it. Even if I couldn't, I would never betray you. Doesn't matter how minor a secret is, it's still total disrespect to spill it to the world at large... and if anything could possibly outshine how much I love you, it's how much I respect you."

The doors opened a moment later and both men stepped out. Gibbs knew that he could use the interruption as an excuse for avoiding what he should be saying, but, for the first time in a very long time, he made a conscious, deliberate choice to speak. Turning, he halted Tony with a hand on his arm.

"I'm damn proud to have earned that from you, Tony and, believe me, it's mutual... but now there's something you need to hear. Maybe you were immature, but since you signed on with NCIS you've grown beyond anything I could've hoped to see. And just for the record... you have never been, and you will never be, stupid. I don't ever wanna hear that from you again. Understood?"

"Yeah... understood. Like I said... most of the time."

"Okay. Let's get going, then."

"Right behind you, boss."

Tony was as good as his word until they reached the bullpen. There he stopped, on his own this time, staring intently at the stranger now occupying Ziva's desk. Sensing his scrutiny, Max looked up, smiled tentatively and rose to her feet. After drying her suddenly damp palm on the side of her pants, she extended that hand to Tony, but slowly dropped it again when he didn't immediately respond in kind. Instead he turned his gaze to Gibbs.

"Boss?"

"Tonight. Over that beer, like you wanted. Now pull it together and be polite."

Tony paused another few seconds then shifted his attention back to Max, offering her a sweet smile and pushing his questions aside. When she held out her hand again, he shook it readily.

"Right. Sorry about that. You were just kind of... a surprise."
"I can imagine. It's no problem. Adrianna Maxine Vendazzo. Max."

Tony laughed.

"Tony DiNozzo. Sounds like a match made in Naples."

"I just hope we can work together well. I'll do whatever I can to make that happen."

"Yeah... same here. Good to meet you, Max." he said, turning away to move to his desk. Once there, however, he paused, a light frown creasing his brow, and spoke to her again. "Hey... anybody ever call you something else?"

"My grandmother and your coroner insist on calling me Addie. Other than that...no."

"Hmmph." He grunted quietly, his mind racing. A minute later his face lit up. "What would you think about Dazzle? Cause, you know... you do."

"Dazzle. I could live with it. Better than that... I like it." she replied thoughtfully. "Spell your last name for me?"

Grabbing a sheet from the plastic cube of notepaper on his desk, Tony quickly signed his name and handed her the small square. She studied it briefly, but with as much deliberation as he had, and eventually answered his grin. "Nice to meet you too, Dino."

"Dino? What am I, Fred Flinstone's dog?"

In response, Max hooked her thumbs in the belt loops of her khaki's, allowed her body to slip into a swaggering posture and produced a Brooklyn accent that dropped Tony into his chair, curled up into himself with laughter.

"Ay... Dino's a solid Italian name, ya know? You got somethin' against Italian's, huh? I tink you do. Ain't nobody gettin' away wid dat. I will put a fist right *trew* your nose, pal..."

"God... that is so perfect..." he panted, tossing her an NCIS ball cap. "Here... turn it backwards..."

The request was never fulfilled, unfortunately, as the hat was caught in the air between the two desks and thrown back at Tony by a scowling Jethro.

"Did I *ask* for summer stock auditions?"

"No, boss."

"No, Agent Gibbs."

"Tony get upstairs and see the director. She'll have your return paperwork and your schedule for the next couple days. Vendazzo, go down to the lab and haul McGee's ass back up here."

She briefly considered asking how he knew that was where Tim had vanished to, but thought better of it just in time.

"Absolutely. On my way." she said. As they split up, however, she and Tony shot each other wicked grins.

Even though he had a good idea what would be expected of him in the next week, and was dreading it, Tony forced himself not to linger on the stairs and made it to Cynthia's realm fairly quickly. On seeing him, she stood, moved around the desk and embraced him.
"Tony... it's so good to see you. You look amazing. I'm so sorry I never came to see you, but I just wasn't sure I'd be welcome..."

"Always, sweetie. Always. You're family too." he assured her as they separated. "How're you doing? What went down with Jenny...that had to be really hard on you."

"I'm better. It'll take a while. Some part of me is still trying to deny the truth, I guess. Director Mackenzie is wonderful, though. Very understanding."

"Glad to hear it. Gibbs seems to like her too, which is a miracle. She's waiting on me?"

"Uh-huh. Knock then go right on in."

"Thanks." He said, favoring her with a smile as he moved away. He found the door partially open, so he tapped on the frame. "Director?"

"Come in, Tony." She responded, rising to greet him. "Have a seat. How's everything going so far?"

"We only got here a few minutes ago. I just met the newbie. She seems pretty cool... I think we have the same sense of humor, which is gonna drive Gibbs insane." He confessed with a there-and-gone smile "In general...it's getting there."

"I can see that. You know I have to ask. I won't actually say the words, but..."

"I know. Yeah, I'm ready to be here. My doc and Gibbs both think so... I trust their judgment."

"What about your own?"

Tony looked up abruptly, showing Mackenzie a cautious expression.

"Do I have to answer that?"

"Eventually... yes. If I'm going to put you back in the field, watching your teammates backs, I have to know."

"The field won't be a problem. Any doubts I still have about myself involve private, off-the job issues."

"If you feel those issues are starting to bleed through, I need your assurance I won't have to hear about it from someone else."

"You won't. If anything starts feeling off, or I think I'm slipping... you'll be my first stop."

"Second. If you skipped over Gibbs I'd get a dope-slap for sure. I've seen him hand them out and the last thing I want is to be the *recipient* of one."

"Smart lady. If you did catch one, though... you should be proud. It'd mean you'd really become part of the clan. Plus... he won't bother unless he thinks you have potential. It's his way of telling you to wake up, pay attention and start living up to the best you can be instead of living *down* to other people's expectations and opinions."

"Hmmm. I never thought of it that way. Maybe I should be looking forward to my first one then."

"There is the downside, don't forget. It also means you screwed up somehow."

"True." She laughed, gathering up a stack of paper and neatening it before handing it across the
desk. She chuckled a second time at the disgusted look on Tony's face. "I know, but it's necessary. I filled in as much as I could for you, to save time and avoid writer's cramp. Your schedule's on top."

"When do I get back in the field?"

"Not this week."

"Director... ma'mm..."

"I understand, but you know the department psychologist has to sign off before you're cleared for full duty and your appointment isn't until Thursday. You also need time to adjust and decompress, Tony. I won't be responsible for you getting the bends because you tried to surface too fast. As long as your family and I have anything to say about it, you'll take things nice and slow. Matter of fact, I want you to spend this afternoon getting used to the place again. Go talk with Abby and Ducky, have a cup of coffee with Jimmy... make positive memories to replace the ones that aren't."

"Okay. Thanks." Tony conceded, standing and valiantly resisting the temptation to rip the hated paperwork to shreds. Mackenzie got to her feet as well.

"I'm available whenever you need me, Tony, day or night. Just call or come up and knock, okay?"

"I appreciate that... and I won't disappoint you, I promise."

"Not possible."

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TBC.....
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A.N.: Those of you who've tried the treats I mention below, you know they aren't as weird as they sound. If you haven't... just trust me, okay? They're out of this world. I recommend you start with the more familiar orange or raspberry (also fabu!) and work your way up to my fave... the one in the story.

MORGUE:

Peering around the edge of the door, Tony didn't see anyone so he called out quietly. His inquiry brought Ducky out of his office, rushing to greet and embrace his "grandson."

"Hey... anybody around?"

"Tony? Dear boy... it is *so* good to have you back."

"I missed it, Duck, I'll admit that. Not that being around Gibbs is ever boring, even 24/7, but I really need to get back to my work... back to what I'm good at."

"Indeed you are. Come into the office... we'll sit and have a cup of tea and a chat, something *I* have sorely missed."

Tony grinned and trailed behind. In the past his chances to spend a quiet half hour or so talking and sipping with Ducky had been far too infrequent so, knowing his time today wasn't limited, the young man eagerly grabbed the opportunity when it was offered. He stopped just inside the door, however, staring transfixed at the small box on Ducky's desk and failing to hold back a soft whimper.

"Pims... Ducky, you are just plain cruel."

"No, Tony. Cruel would be if I said that you could look but not touch." Ducky countered, gesturing Tony into a chair. "I bought them this morning, hoping you'd have a few spare moments. Go on... I'm craving a bit of indulgence myself and these are my favorite flavor as much as they are yours..." he said, pulling a tea kettle off a small hotplate and shutting the device off. He then filled two cups with dark, fragrant liquid, replaced the pot and came to sit down.

Slowly, almost with reverence, Tony opened the box of delicate, decadent cookies and selected one. The first bite made him shiver with pleasure as the light sweetness of the cookie was followed by the mild shock of pear-flavored filling and perfectly capped off by the richness of the dark chocolate on the bottom.

"Uhhhmm... this is just... Ducky, I will never be able to repay you for showing me the U.K. side of the cookie aisle..."

"No need, dear boy, no need. The surprise and joy on your face the first time you tried a Pims was more than enough thanks for me." Ducky replied, finishing his own cookie and choosing another.

"Gotta stop by the store on the way home. Now I'm craving those other ones, too... the shortbread and chocolate?"
"Ah, yes, the Petite Ecolier. Lovely things..." he agreed, adding a squeeze of lemon before sliding Tony's tea across the desk with a napkin under the saucer. "There you are."

"Thanks... mmm, Earl Grey perfectly brewed as always. You have to teach me that someday. You swore you would, if I'd keep your technique secret."

"Soon. Perhaps after church this week you'll come over to the house. Mother would love to see her 'Italian gigolo' again." The older man smirked. Tony chuckled and wiped the chocolate off his fingers.

"It couldn't hurt, I guess. She's a sweet lady, really."

"She certainly can be. Speaking of sweet, you've met your new team-mate I assume?"

"Uh-huh. She seems cool... good sense of humor. Five minutes in, we both had nicknames. That's gotta be a good sign, right?"

"Nicknames? Oh, do tell." Ducky requested, a gleeful twinkle in his eye.

"She's Dazzle... and I'm Dino."

"The young lady certainly does sparkle and shine, so I'd say that's an excellent fit. Dino... taken from your last name, one assumes. It doesn't seem to bother you too much, but... knowing how well you sing and that you enjoy the Rat-Pack era, you might think of it as a reference to Dean Martin, perhaps."

"Yeah... yeah, that's a great idea." Tony mused, grinning happily.

"You and Addie got on well, then."

"First blush... we did. Like I said, she made me laugh and that's never a bad thing. Have to see her in the field, check out her work ethic before I give her a final grade, though."

"Of course." Ducky replied, offering the box of cookies. Tony hesitated, then accepted one more with a sigh.

"The way you spoil me, it's a really good thing I get plenty of exercise, otherwise I'd weigh three hundred pounds... though I can't say I exactly hate how good this feels." He admitted, biting into the treat.

"Let Jethro be the disciplinarian. The wonderful thing about being an uncle-slash-grandfather is that I get to indulge you and attempt to thicken your waistline a bit and never have to feel guilty."

Tony frowned lightly.

"So... you're my un-father."

"Hmmm. Not that you've revealed very much about the man, but from the little I *have* heard... I do believe that un-father is a title I'd be proud to carry." Ducky responded quietly, holding out his teacup. Tony touched his to it carefully then decided not to resist the siren call of a fourth cookie.

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**BULLPEN:**

"I know, boss, I know. I should've come right back up, but Abby wanted me to help calibrate some
of her machines and she never asks me to do that. I got caught up in the work and..."

One look from Gibbs was all it took to end Tim's rambling and get him back on task. "Right. Here's the envelope you sent me down for. She said everything you asked for is there, plus a couple of things you didn't. Specifically, a shopping list and some coupons. She also sent back a message... 'Don't argue, just follow instructions and it'll all work out great.' That's verbatim."

" 'Course it is. She made you memorize it."

"How did... never mind, I probably don't wanna know."

"Smart man. You got that report from Friday ready for me, yet?"

"It's on your desk, Boss. If there's anything... hang on." He said, reaching for the phone that had interrupted him. "McGee. Uh-huh... yeah. Right. I've got it." he muttered, scribbling on a notepad and tearing off the sheet. "We'll be there ASAP. Okay... no, keep everybody else out 'till we show up. *Especially* the local LEO's. Yup. Bye."

When Tim looked up again, Gibbs already had his jacket on and was sliding his weapon into place.

"What is it?"

"Assault on a Navy Lieutenant. Pretty brutal from the sound of it. Here's the location."

Gibbs glanced at the paper then handed it back and tossed Tim the keys.

"Go get Vendazzo and grab the truck. I'll meet you in the garage."

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A ROADSIDE, JUST OUTSIDE KEMPSVILLE:

"Tim. Pictures?"

"Yeah, boss. I was... I couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong. It took me a few minutes to figure out what."

"He's back in the office. Won't be long before he's back out here."

"I know. The waiting, it's... tough. He's worked so hard to get back on the job. He deserves to be here today, not a month from now..."

"It won't be that long."

"God, I hope not."

"You can take him to lunch tomorrow, talk things out..."

"...but get the pictures before the cops and the rubber-neckers mess everything up." Tim replied, grinning lightly. 'Gotcha, Boss. Thanks."

"That's what dads are for. Go on... get moving."

Tim jogged off to start documenting the crime scene and Gibbs strode over to the damaged car and their victim to check up on Max, who he'd left to conduct the interview.
"I wish I knew... wish I could remember all of it. I was just cruising... right under the speed limit. The truck came up behind me... no plates, I know that... and it forced me off the road and up against this tree..." the man stated wearily, pointing vaguely at the passenger's side of the vehicle, which had been crushed against the trunk of a tall oak. "I... I was in shock for a second... then I started trying to get out the driver's door... but this guy pulled me out almost before I had a chance to move. The first punch caught me on the temple and... the whole damn world went gray. I never even saw his face, really... I woke up with this massive headache, laying back across both front seats of my car. I'm sorry I can't help more."

"You did fine." Gibbs reassured him. "The EMT's are waiting. They're gonna take you to get checked out, make sure there's nothin' more serious than scrapes and bruises."

"Okay. Like I said, If I could remember anything else..."

"Don't worry about it. A blow to the head like that... it'd put anyone's lights out. Just feel better and call ASAP if anything else does come back in the next few days." He said, handing the man a business card.

"I will, I promise."

Gibbs turned and began walking back toward the truck, Max trailing slowly behind. When she finally caught up to him, she leaned against the cold metal and scowled.

"Something bugging you, Vendazzo?"

"The whole scenario. Not that I don't believe the lieutenant... my opinion, he's too beat up and confused to be lying."

"What then?"

"It doesn't make sense. Why would somebody do this? Contrary to what the nightly news would like you to think, out-of-the-blue, motiveless attacks are pretty rare. I just don't get it. It almost feels like..."

"Yeah? Like?"

"Like somebody planned this knowing we'd show up."

Gibbs grunted, the memory of Ari's deadly games flashing vividly into his head, but he consciously kept his expression neutral, not wanting Max to know how close her hunch might be to reality.

"These days... that's always a possibility. McGee! You done yet?"

"Just about, Boss. Another few minutes."

"You know how to use a casting kit, Vendazo?"

"Absolutely."

"Go do some measurements, figure out which ones are more likely to belong to the truck the vic described and get me casts of 'em. Then we're outta here."

"So you feel it too?"

"Didn't say that... but I'm not takin' any risks, either."
Max hauled the proper satchel from the back of the truck and moved off to do as she'd been ordered. Two hundred yards away, a figure well hidden by the surrounding forest lowered his sophisticated digital camera, studied the crime scene, then lifted the device back up and took a few more shots. Satisfied, he moved quietly back through the foliage, climbed into his truck and traded the camera for a cell phone.

"Yes. I got what you wanted. Worked like a charm. Yes, well, I'm sure that helped too. At least twenty or thirty photos. Of course. Trust me, after I have this thing painted, detailed and get some body work done, nobody will ever recognize it. Payment on delivery and approval, as always? Good. Yes, see you in forty-eight hours."

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TBC.......
Chapter 12

1 HOUR LATER:

Having approached the lab quietly, Tony reveled in being able to watch Abby work for a few minutes without her knowing she was under scrutiny. He loved her boundless energy, her skill and how effortless she made her myriad tasks look. The music pounding from her stereo speakers wasn't anywhere close to his taste, but he knew it was a vital part of what kept her mood consistently high and, despite what others might think on first hearing it, what allowed her to focus and concentrate as intently as she did.

After savoring a final few seconds observation of his "baby sister" in action, Tony finally stepped inside and waved to get her attention, as she would never have been able to hear him speak. When she realized he was there, the music was instantly silenced and Tony was enveloped in an enormous hug.

"Tony! Tony, Tony, Tony! You're here!"

"You knew I was starting this week, Abs..." Tony wheezed faintly.

"Yeah, but you're here, in my lab! This is so great!" she enthused as she finally released him. A second later, however, the mile-wide grin became a confused frown. "Hold it... why are you in my lab when the rest of the team is still... he made you stay behind! I'll hit him the minute he shows up, I promise... on second thought, he *is* a Marine, and he probably knows how to slit my throat with a fingernail clipping, so maybe I better make that a stern talking to..."

"Abby, sweetheart, take a breath!" Tony laughed

"Sorry. I'm just so excited! You're back!" she cried, hugging him again. Tony endured the powerful embrace stoically, reminding himself how much he depended on her infinite capacity for love and cherished her lack of inhibition when the chance came to express her feelings. Eventually, he was set free a second time. He opened his mouth to exonerate Gibbs, but Abby wouldn't let him sneak a word in.

"Ohhh! I can't believe I almost forgot your welcome back present! Wait right there, don't move a millimeter! Except for holding out your hands! Oh, and close your eyes!"

Tony sighed, grinned and did as she'd asked. Abby was back in a few moments, placing a medium sized, fairly heavy box on his open palms. "Okay... open."

When he realized what he was looking at, Tony was left speechless for several seconds. He recovered relatively quickly, but the words, when he found them, were strained and almost inaudible, at least at first.

"Abby... God, where did you... I can't believe you did this..."

"It helped when you were... didn't it? I thought..."

"Yeah, it did... helped a lot. Having it... that meant I had at least one person out here waiting... that I had somebody willing to forgive me, even I couldn't do that for myself." He explained, still transfixed by the contents of the box.

"I know how hard it was for you to give him back when you got home." She confessed, sliding her
arms around his neck and squeezing, much more gently this time. "Now, if you ever need it, you'll have your own hippo to look at and hold... and he'll remind you how much we all love you."

Fighting down how badly his throat wanted to close up, Tony chuckled and managed a response.

"She."

"Huh?"

"I think this one's a she."

Suddenly, Abby's typical bright smile was back.

"Bertina!"

"Works for me. Tina for short."

"We *have* to get them together, you know? I mean... it's just destiny! Give 'em a year to date and fall in love... we'll have baby farting hippos all over the lab!" Abby shouted, dancing back to where she'd left the remote and re-starting the music. Tony laughed, shook his head and placed the box safely on the counter. Grasping her hands, he danced with her until, exhausted and still giggling, they collapsed onto side-by-side stools.

"God... I needed that." he panted. "Little sisters have their perks..."

"Damn right we do." Abby concurred, lifting her head from where she'd plopped it on his shoulder. "So why are you still here instead of out in the field?"

"Red tape, that's why. Paperwork, evaluations... if everything goes right, I'll be back out with the team next Monday."

"Ugggh. You have to see that creep upstairs. They need to take the last part right off his title. He's just a pyscho..."

"Yeah? I heard he was okay. Fair, at least..."

"New guy. Trust me, keep your answers short and to the point and think *hard* before you say anything. He'll twist the littlest comment and use it against you."

"Really." Tony said, wrapping one arm around Abby's waist as he felt nervousness start to creep up on him. "What'd he do to you, anyway?"

"You know how Shepard threw that dress code at me when she started, but it didn't stick? This jerk-off looks me up and down and starts talking about me having "authority issues". *And* he dared to bring up Chip! Says Chip must've "challenged" me and that's why I went medieval on his ass. Then he tells me he'll be *watching* me to make sure I can handle the stress of my job without having another "violent episode." Part of me *so* wanted to show him my duct tape hog-tying technique... but the rest was just scared. He could trash any of our careers in a second, Tony... but especially yours. Be careful."

"You know it. Thanks for the head's up."

"No problem. I don't wanna lose you again..."

"You won't. I'm back to stay, Abs. Sacred vow..."
The two fell silent and cuddled close to each other until Gibbs entered the lab a few minutes later.

"Abs. Got something for you. Not much, but see what you can do with it."

"On it, Gibbs." She responded, kissing Tony softly on the cheek before she got up. "Hang in there, Tony. Everything'll be fine."

"Thanks."

Gibbs smiled briefly as she moved away and Tony echoed it.

"Hey, I'm just doing what Mackenzie told me to. She said to spend the afternoon getting used to the place and saying hi to my family."

"I thought she might."

"Ducky and I had tea, cookies and conversation. It's been too damn long..."

"He bring out those shortbread things? I love 'em, but I'd look like Santa if I took as many as he's offered me..."

"Uh, no. The Pims."

"Damn, he *is* determined to put some weight on you."

"I know. Abby..."

"Lemme guess. She was happy to see you?"

"Her hugs are one of a kind, just like her. She, umm... she bought me a present." He said, reaching around to retrieve the box. Gibbs' eyes widened slightly when he saw it, but he was soon grinning.

"Little sisters."

"Yeah... You know, I was hoping to catch Jimmy today, too, but I couldn't find him and Ducky wouldn't talk about where he is."

Gibbs tensed slightly and turned away.

"Duck doesn't know. None of us do. Every year Palmer gets this afternoon off... he's never told anybody why."

"The director must know."

"Probably."

"... and if Jimmy wanted us in on his secret, he'd have said something. Got it, boss. I won't pry."

"It's past three now... there's not much more we can do on this new case tonight. You feel like getting out of here early?"

"Long as mom says it's okay... I'm fine with it."

"Mom? Don't let Mackenzie hear you call her that." Gibbs retorted as Tony stood and stretched up with the arm not holding his gift.

"Somehow I don't think she'd mind all that much."
"Maybe not... but then she doesn't know this bunch all that well yet."

"True. You go ask and I'll meet you down in the garage?"

"That'll work."

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4:15 A PRIVATE CEMETERY OUTSIDE D.C.

Shivering in the brisk wind, Jimmy eased his legs out of the near lotus position he'd been sitting in and worked kinks out of his muscles for a few moments before settling down again. Running one finger over the icy stone in front of him, he sighed then grabbed the bottle of water lying beside him in the snow. After taking a long swallow, he re-capped it and dropped it back into place. The light was fading quickly and he knew he'd have to go soon, so he finally began what had become an annual ritual for him; a ritual that had to be completed before the sun went down.

"Man, I wish that was something stronger. I keep my promises today, though... and I told you I wouldn't. My new student's named Lindsey. She's scared out of her mind still... but I think she'll do fine. I'm taking it slow and easy, just like always. She'll come around. She wants to learn... to figure out why it's so tough and how to make it better. I never thought I'd still be doing this. When I started it was like... it's just therapy... a way to get over what happened and see that something good came out of it. I know better now. It's about changing lives... saving people from ending up here before they're supposed to."

Wiping his face on a sleeve, Jimmy pulled his coat tighter around him. He could have zipped it up, he could have stayed on his feet instead of sitting, but to him this day was, at least in part, about penance and atonement, and being able to truly feel the cold seemed right to him. Pausing to slow his breathing and get his emotions in check, he stared out at the horizon and continued. "I talked to your mom and brother at lunch. Another promise kept. They invited me over for Easter dinner. I'm just getting a real connection going with my work family, so I'm not sure if I'll go or not. They said to tell you they miss you... but you know that. I miss you too. I shouldn't, damn it... but I do. This is so wrong..."

Standing, Jimmy angrily brushed loose snow from his pants, ending with both hands tightly fisted at his sides. "One more year, Brandon. I'm only doing this one more year. It hurts too much. Yeah right... how many years have I been saying that, now? How could I stay away from my best friend? I'm gonna go drink a beer for both of us. See you next February."

Turning away, Jimmy began the slow march through the ankle deep snow, back to the mostly cleared asphalt path and his waiting car. Once there, he stopped to watch the sun disappear behind a distant hill. Then he zipped up his jacket.

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TBC......
4:45:

After a long, rambling drive to let Gibbs release the anxiety and stress involved with the mystery assault case, he and Tony ended up making almost a complete circle, finally stopping at a small bar and grill less than a mile from work. Gibbs was the only sipping beer, however. Tony, not feeling like drinking, had volunteered to drive home. Looking up from his glass of soda, he nudged Gibbs subtly, directing his attention toward the door.

"Hey. Look who's here."

Gibbs eyebrow arced slightly on seeing Jimmy, but other than that he didn't seem surprised.

"It's popular, DiNozzo. Close to the office, not too expensive... NCIS and the Navy Yard staff practically fund this place all by themselves."

"Yeah, but... Jimmy?"

"He's over twenty-one and mentally competent. Let him be."

"Whatever this day means to him... it can't be good if the kid is in here sucking down Coors..." Tony speculated, his eyes still glued to his young friend, who had now claimed a seat at the bar and was halfway through a bottle of beer.

"You made a promise to me back in the lab." Gibbs reminded his lover, voice low and edgy. Tony turned back to face him, tension radiating from his face.

"I made a promise to myself too. After what you guys showed me in that group session... I swore that if I saw my family hurting I wouldn't just ignore it."

"It only lasts for the one day... and it's nothing anybody can fix with a pat on the shoulder and a kind word."

"So you do know what it's about."

"He'll be fine tomorrow. Drop it."

"He's in pain, for God's sake..."

"Yeah he is, but he doesn't need our help. He may look thirteen, but he's a grown man, Tony, and he wants to deal with this alone. You stick your nose in... you'll only make a bad day worse. Let him have his beer, think his private thoughts and go home. Besides... don't we have our own stuff to talk about?"

"You really want to, or are you just hoping I'll shut up about Jimmy?" Tony asked with a small smirk.

"Now whadda you think, DiNozzo?"

"Both? I hope, anyway."

"Good guess."
"Which one first?"

"The song." Gibbs replied softly, after a moment or two of intense thought. "I, uh... I never intended to say anything to you about that time. I'm not exactly proud of being so... stubborn and pessimistic and cynical. I've been in love once before. She was... I thought it was gonna be the last. One person, forever. Kids, a house, growing old and never wanting anything more. That was taken from me so fast and sudden I never really had time to understand. Jumped headfirst into three more marriages trying to forget... and at the same time, trying to get back what'd been stolen from me. Doomed to fail... 'course I couldn't see that. I just knew if I quit swimming, quit trying... I'd drown."

Uncaring of who saw or what they might think, Tony boldly reached out and enfolded Jethro's fingers in the warmth of his own. The older man paused, looking down at their hands then back up into Tony's eyes.

"Barbara Walters could be standing behind me with a camera crew... and I wouldn't care right now. Keep going. Please."

Jethro nodded slowly, took a sip of beer with his free hand and continued.

"Yeah... Truth is, I *was* drowning. Lost, about to try and fail a fourth time... then you showed up. When you and I met... I felt it... the same jolt I got when I first saw Shannon. My heart sped up and I could feel my pulse everywhere, all over my body... my nerves were going off like strings of firecrackers on Chinese New Year... and then I remembered the agony of having that and losing it. I shut down, hard and fast... decided I couldn't take the risk. For so long, I just refused to look that direction... to look inside. I let the bourbon and the boat and the basement convince me I didn't want or need you. Gunnery Sergeant Leroy Jethro Gibbs doesn't get lonely... Marines are in total control of their minds and their emotions, at all times and in all situations. Then I got that damned call... found out what you'd tried to do to yourself. It hit me that I could've lost my second chance without ever knowing... All the locks broke, the doors opened up... and I couldn't do anything to stop it."

Tony squeezed Jethro's hand fiercely, just for a moment, and responded hoarsely.

"Thank God... 'cause I might not have made it if you had. Ziva?"

"Long, long story. Jist of it is, her father found out she was the one who actually killed Ari and he showed up to drag her back home. Scuttlebutt says she was killed not long after she got there."

"Where the hell did he get that from?"

Gibbs provided the squeeze this time, while draining most of what was left in his beer glass, but offered no verbal reply. "Jethro..."

"It's complicated, Tony. Most of the story is ugly and you don't need to hear it... in fact, I hope you never do. She can't ever hurt any of us again. That's what's important. I..."

Tony waited for Gibbs to finish the aborted sentence, but instead his lover's gaze shifted to a spot above Tony's head and he smiled lightly. Tony frowned then half-turned to find Jimmy standing a few inches behind him.

"Hey, kid. Saw you come in, but..."

"Yeah... I appreciate the privacy and I wanted to thank you both for the respect."

"Wasn't easy, I'll admit." Tony confessed "After what you said in the hospital... it was really hard to stay back and not try to help. Gibbs practically had to sit on me..."
"Just the fact that you wanted to shows you really listened that day and took what we said to heart... that means more to me than you'll ever know. Maybe we could have lunch at my place Saturday? You can vent about your first week back, I'll just nod and agree with everything you say."

Tony and Gibbs both laughed.

"Come to the house instead." Jethro countered. "We'll grill burgers and veggies, relax..."

"Okay. It's a deal. Night, guys."

"You are taking a cab, right?" Tony asked, only partially joking.

"Already called it."

"Good man. See you tomorrow."

Once Jimmy had been safely collected and driven away, Tony and Gibbs spent a few more minutes talking then finished their drinks, paid the tab and left to make their own way home. When Tony turned the engine over he found the radio had been left on the country station after he'd retrieved his CD earlier. He was about to shut it off, but the first few notes of the song seemed familiar so he turned it up and waited to see if he actually knew it. It wasn't the one he'd been thinking of, but he let it play regardless, because what he was hearing seemed like utter serendipity, a phenomenon he never believed in before the events of the last year.

* A man, filled with doubt, down and out and so alone.  
A ship, tossed and turned, lost and yearning for a home.  
A survivor barely surviving, not really sure of his next move.  
All of this I would've been, if there hadn't been you.

If there hadn't been you, where would I be?  
If there hadn't been you here for me?  
I made it through times I never would've made it through...  
If there hadn't been you.... *

Gibbs found Tony's gaze and held it through the rest of the song and the surprising words of the D.J that followed, knowing he would soon be starting a new list of songs for Tim to put on CD, starting with the one he was currently hearing.

* A man filled with hope, who finally knows where he belongs.  
A heart filled with love, more than enough to keep it strong.  
A life that's alive again, no longer afraid to face the truth.  
All of this I would've missed, if there hadn't been you...  
... If there hadn't been you on my side, you in my life.  
All my dreams would still be dreams,  
If there hadn't been you. *

' That was Billy Dean "If There Hadn't Been You." by multiple request. I know we don't normally do that kinda thing 'till Friday night, folks, but this was a special case. We got over thirty calls begging us for that song this afternoon, so we finally surrendered. We love our listeners and when so many of you ask... well, what can we do? Hope you all enjoyed hearing your tune... '

"Who... who did he say that was?" Tony finally rasped out, reaching blindly to lower the volume and somehow touching the right control on the first attempt.
"Dean... Billy Dean. I think..."

"Another Billy..."

"Thirty calls..."

"As my best college buddy used to put it... God dances weirdly, but it's beautiful to watch."

Gibbs laughed uncertainly.

"God? Sounded more like a text-message prank to me. Let's go home, huh?"

Tony considered pushing the issue, asking if Gibbs really didn't believe, but the day had been so positive for both of them, and the other man was so clearly uncomfortable, that he was willing to let it go until Gibbs brought up the subject on his own.


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PRIVATE LIVES: ABBY

7:00

"Straighten the back a little more, Abigail. Good... there. Perfect. Now let's try the sequence again. One, two, three, four... turn, six, seven, eight... maintain the posture... seven eight, one, two, three... en pointe... you can do it, darling... almost done... five, six, seven and finish! Excellent! Yes, you've got it down! I'm so proud, little one!"

Abby gleefully rushed across the floor toward her much older teacher and accepted an embrace that was nearly equal in ferocity to one the younger woman might have given out.

"Thank you... thank you so much, Belle. I never thought I'd get it right..."

"Yes, well, I knew from the moment you stepped into my studio that you had the potential to be an exceptional performer. All I had to do was quiet your brain and redirect the energy into your feet. Enough for tonight. Go shower and change and we'll get something to eat, hmmm?"

"Cool! Be right out..."

Dashing to the locker room, Abby sat down on the bench and quickly began unlacing her toe shoes. She was exhausted from the nearly two hour rehearsal, but her exhilaration over the praise she'd been given came close to negating her fatigue. She'd only been taking ballet for a year and, at the start, had harbored no illusions about how long it would take her to become proficient, if she ever could. However, her teacher, Belle, had insisted from the beginning that she had natural grace and would be a wonderful dancer and, to Abby's shock, the next few weeks had proven the other woman right.

As she stripped off her tights and leotard, Abby went over the steps again in her head and even did a few on the way to the shower, only stopping out of fear that she would fall on the slick tile. Her mind was buzzing, as always, with the lingering beauty of the classical music and her muscles twitched occasionally, wanting to repeat the movements she'd worked so hard to learn. She giggled as she finished her ablutions, thinking about what her work family would think if they ever saw her swaying, spinning and leaping to Haydn and Tchaikovsky, instead of slam dancing to punk or rocking out to her favorite modern bands. She would let them see someday, but she simply wasn't ready yet. Unlike other areas of her life, and most everything else she'd ever tried, this she wasn't at
all secure about, which was why she was taking private lessons.

Drying off and diving back into her street clothes, Abby paused only long enough to gather her dance-wear back into her bag before re-joining Belle in the studio.

"Ready!"

"Good. Perhaps over supper we will discuss once again letting your family come and see how talented you are, hmmm? Just perhaps?"

No, Belle. I'm not there yet. I just don't think they'd understand. I mean... they've never seen me like this. I'm afraid of what they'll think...

"So you've said a hundred times, but you will never know unless you take the chance. They love you, darling Abigail. I can't conceive of them rejecting or ridiculing you."

"No... me either, but..."

"Hush. You need to eat. We will talk later."

"Okay. I could so use a cup of coffee right now..."

"Ah, the recital is when?"

"Two weeks."

"And what is my rule?"

"No caffeine, alcohol, or sex two weeks before any major performance. Belle...

"No. Water, juice or herbal tea. That's all."

"Aw, man..."

"Yes, yes. Come. I'll make it up to you with plenty of carbohydrates shall I? Those you seem to burn off as if they'll be outlawed in the morning..."

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TBC.......

TBC.....
Chapter 14

TUESDAY 4:30 P.M.:

The day had passed almost normally for Tony, as far as a workday went, which was a great relief for him. The only difference was that he hadn't seen Gibbs since the moment they'd gotten in. The older man had dropped Tony off in the bullpen and promptly vanished, claiming he had some leads to run down concerning the case they'd taken on the day before.

Forcing faint anxiety and niggling worry to the back of his mind, Tony spent most of the morning going over cold cases with Tim. He praised him for the work on the one he'd solved while Tony was gone, making the younger man blush and grin, which led to good natured teasing that finally reassured Tim everything would eventually get back to normal. Lunch was spent with Max and Abby, laughing and teasing over old stories, remembering and missing Kate and telling the newcomer about her, and stuffing themselves with as much junk food as they could hold.

Mid-afternoon, he had enjoyed another quiet tea-time with Ducky and was now waiting patiently in Abby's lab for her to be done with a test, as she had eagerly said yes to driving him home. She, of course, knew exactly where their boss had spent the majority of his day, but was doing a masterful job of playing along and hiding the secret she had worked so hard to help Gibbs arrange.

"I can't believe he just never came back." She lied smoothly. "This case is a weird one, I'll admit that... but it shouldn't have kept him out this long. Maybe he caught a break..."

"Hope so. Weird how? Gibbs wouldn't talk about it last night."

Intently studying images of the car, Abby answered distractedly.

"Somebody ran a Navy lieutenant off the road and beat the crap out of him... but didn't take anything or even ask him any questions. The guy just forced the officer's car into a tree, punched him in the head and took off again."

"Ookay. That would definitely qualify for the WTH files."

Smiling sweetly, Abby turned and patted Tony on the cheek.

"Good for you, Tony. I would've made it an F instead of an H."

"F... Abby!"

"Hey, like Popeye said, I am what I am and that's all what I am." She retorted lightly, facing her computer screen.

"Yeah, but with your brain you don't have to use that kind of language."

"Technically I didn't use it, I abbreviated it."

"Close enough. Popeye would've passed out if he heard his woman talk like that."

Abby turned back around and leaned on the counter, a scornful expression on her face.

"Please! Olive Oyl was nothing but a player. All she gave him and Bluto were head-games. Popeye deserved *so* much better."
"Yeah? Like who?"

"I always wanted to see him with Betty Boop. She would've raised his main-sail, guaranteed..."

Tony shook his head and backed away, palms out.

"Changing subject."

"What? Sailors like that kinda girl, don't they?"

"How do I get myself into these conversations..."

"Then again, the way he and Bluto fought all the time, you never know. Anger like that can be a sign of a really bad break-up... or maybe they're both denying how they really feel about each other and going after the same girl gives them a reason to fight and release all the UST in an acceptable manly fashion! Where does the spinach come in, though..."

"I swear, Abs, one word about natural male enhancement and I'm walking home."

Abby crowed and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Way to go, Tony! I knew something about you was twisted besides your shorts!"

"Taxi!"

"Relax... sheesh, I'm just trying to loosen you up a little, big bro."

"Well, it backfired. I can never, *ever* watch that cartoon again."

"Sure you can. Now you and Gibbs can just use it as fantasy material..."

"Abby!"

"Okay, okay, the test results can wait 'till morning. Let's get you home."

She acceded finally, praying Jethro'd had enough to complete his preparations.

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5:15

As she dropped him off, Abby kissed his cheek and apologized sincerely for letting her enthusiasm get out of hand.

"I don't mean it, you know that. It's just... me."

"I know, Abs." He told her, returning the peck, but dropping it on her brow. "It's okay. Wasn't all you. I wanna be with Gibbs so much, but I've never done this before, have no idea what, why or how... it makes me a little sensitive about the subject."

"Hey, you and bossman go at your own pace. Slow and steady's the only way to get it right and make sure it stays that way," she advised gently.

"Slow and steady... yeah, try and tell that to my body... certain parts of it, anyway."

"Oww. Been a while, huh?"

"Most of my talk... is just that. My heart's had its idea of the perfect one for me for a long, long time."
I kept trying to go in a different direction, but it felt so wrong, so much like betrayal... it was always a
disaster."

Abby reached out and touched his shoulder.

"He was doing the same thing. Point is, you both wised up and fixed it. He's got your heart and
you've got his. When you're ready to give up your bodies too, it'll happen, but you can't rush it.
Pressure can be death to just-born love."

"Stamp that on my forehead, willya? Every time I look in a mirror I'll be reminded..."

"I'll think about it. Go on, get in there." She chuckled, pushing him lightly. As he got out, rounded
the car and began the trek up to the house, she tossed out one last piece of sage advice. "And if he's
not home yet, don't you dare skip dinner! Even if it's only chips or crackers, you eat something."

"Who, me?"

"You hate eating alone and if I didn't kick you in the butt, you'd think it was okay to go hungry 'till
breakfast tomorrow."

Tony's eyes narrowed.

"Should I be scared you know me that well?"

"Oh yeah..." She told him, laughing as she drove away. Tony watched her go with a small grin then
turned back and walked to the house. Focused on what Abby had told him, he opened the door and
stepped inside, but was stopped immediately by a sound on the floor that confused him. Looking
down, he realized he'd kicked a small block of wood with a sheet of paper attached to it. More and
more bewildered, he leaned over and picked up the object, staring at it in wonder. Glued to the paper
side by side were two white candy conversation hearts, and it wasn't until he read them that he began
to understand.

TO NEW LOVE

Glancing up, Tony carefully studied what he could see of the house in the last of the daylight
streaming through the windows. The kitchen seemed to be the only place where a light had been
turned on. He was tempted to go straight there, but his curiosity about the game Jethro was playing,
and his motives for doing it, won out. Still holding his first clue, Tony walked a few feet and picked
up the next one. Three hearts this time, purple, pink and white, respectively.

AND TO HOPE

He was halfway to the kitchen now and suddenly realized he was grinning from ear to ear. Rising
out of his crouch, he swiftly moved to retrieve his next message, laughing out loud when he saw the
words, even as he grimaced at the garish color combination; pink and orange.

MY MAN URA 10

The last block of wood brought Tony to the threshold between the living room and kitchen. Though
he hadn't thought it was possible, the final candy sentiment widened his smile even more. Two
white, followed by a pink heart bearing a smiley face.

KISS ME ANGEL

This time Tony straightened up slowly, certain that something much more exciting than a block of
wood was waiting for him. Arms crossed over his chest, Gibbs greeted his lover with a single word and a restrained grin, the joy shining from his eyes more than making up for what his face didn't reveal.

"Well?"

Dropping his armload of unusual gifts onto the counter, Tony launched himself at the older man, wrapping both arms around his neck and claiming his lips in a fierce kiss that left them both flushed and struggling for air by the time they parted. For a long time, Tony's entire world consisted of Jethro's eyes and the desperate, passionate love he saw there, but a tantalizing aroma soon began to tease the young man's nostrils and he turned his head toward the table to find it loaded down with pizza, cheese-covered breadsticks, hot-wings and soda.

"Wow... " he breathed, looking back to Gibbs. "... okay, you got your kiss, do I get to know what this is all about?"

"Guess I'm not the only one who had too much on his mind to remember what day it is."

"It's Tuesday. We're celebrating Tuesdays now? I can totally deal with that..."

"Now I know how Ducky felt the other day..." Gibbs mumbled, rolling his eyes a little. "I should've said the *date*, not the day. What *date* is it?"

"Uh... hang on, I know this... yeah, it's February f... fourteenth. Oh. Oh damn..."

"Happy Valentine's Day, love." Gibbs said, placing a briefer kiss on Tony's mouth.

"Shit... I'll get you a present tomorrow, I swear... I can't believe I forgot..."

"Take it easy. Ducky had to dope-slap me to make me remember and if Abby hadn't helped out, none of this would've happened. As far a present goes, you're alive, you gladly put up with a moody, coffee-addicted, by-the-book Marine... and you're willing to give him the chance to make up for all the time he wasted. That's the best gift I ever got, bar none."

"Ro... hell, you're getting way too good at this 'expressing feelings' thing..." Tony replied hoarsely, hugging Jethro again. "Gonna have me blubbering in my Pepsi and watering it down..."

"Better the soda than what's for dessert."

Tony pulled back, grinning.

"Yeah? Hint, maybe?"

"Not a chance. C'mon. Let's tear into the food before it gets ice cold."

For the next hour, Gibbs reveled in seeing Tony eat his fill, and more, of the food in front of him. He had worried that the younger man might always wrestle with the changes in himself since his breakdown, not able to put aside the 'before' picture and fully, comfortably settle into the reality of living in 'after'. The Tony sitting across from him, however, seemed relaxed, chatty and joyful and that perception eased Gibbs' anxiety, at least for the moment.

Once he'd stowed the leftovers and the minimal clean up had been dispensed with, Gibbs returned to the table with a plastic grocery bag and set it in front of Tony, who grinned and folded his hands.

"It *is* for you... just in case you were wondering. You can open it now." Gibbs laughed, but it died
when Tony only then reached for his gift, as if he really had been waiting until the other man granted him permission. His instinct and training told him that Tony's reaction to his present was learned behavior, probably with negative reinforcement, and had gradually developed into something automatic that he wasn't even aware of anymore. He also knew that when one such trait showed up, there were often many more lurking in the shadows, and those weren't likely to be as innocuous as what he'd just witnessed. These thoughts disturbed Gibbs deeply, but, not wanting to spoil Tony's moment, he pushed them away. Later in the week he'd find some time alone and contemplate whether he could help on his own, or if Lewiston would have to be informed.

Grinning, he turned away for a moment to hide what he'd been thinking, forced his mind back to the kitchen and enjoyed watching a stunned Tony pull out his first present.

"Lindor truffles... Gibbs, this is..."

"Top of the line. According to Abby, at least. She said to get the variety pack, 'cause she wasn't sure which kind you liked the best. Guess she knew I'd be clueless."

"You've never had one?"

Gibbs shook his head and Tony immediately jumped up, but after a moment, he sat down again, his face a study in anger and frustration.

"What?"

"I want us to share one. The outside shell is thick... I can't just break it with my fingers. Not without making a mess..."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, Tony. I told you that. Matching something I can do to something you can't manage yet... that's what love's about. You pick the candy you want and I'll cut it."

Tony hesitated, obviously not much appeased, but eventually he opened the bag, chose a dark blue wrapped piece and handed it off. Gibbs returned a few moments later with the two halves on a napkin.

"God, I can't wait for tomorrow. I wanna get this off my back so bad..."

"And you will. You gotta realize it may not happen all in one session, though. It's not like this fear just showed up outta the blue. It's got a source an' you'll have to deal with that, too."

"I know. I'm just dying to get started." Tony said, his eyes on the floor. Abruptly, he looked up at Gibbs, expression transformed from extreme aggravation into remorse. "Tonight has been great, totally amazing. I'm not saying I want it to end, you know that, right..."

"Hush. Eat your chocolate." Jethro admonished softly, holding the tid-bit up to Tony's lips. The younger man sighed, relaxed and opened his mouth to accept the treat, after which he returned the favor. Both were quiet until the luscious, high-quality morsels had utterly dissolved. "Holy... that's good. Really good." Gibbs commented at last, licking his lips to see if any trace remained undiscovered. "Better than I've had since I was overseas."

"Well..." Tony replied, examining his fingers in vain for a last smear he could lick off, "... the company *is* Swiss. At least I think so. The Swiss make some of the best chocolate in the world."

"Yeah, they do. One more?"
"I couldn't. I'm so full right now I'm pretty sure one more sip of Pepsi would put me in the E.R..."

"How about you check out what else is in the bag, then?"

"More?"

"See for yourself."

Tony opened the bag again and pulled out an envelope with his name written on the front in Gibbs' familiar, neat handwriting. The card inside brought laughter, but also made tears threaten.

" 'Love doesn't care if you make lousy coffee... ' I do not! You'd rather drink mine than the office stuff and you know it!"

"Yeah, yeah, just keep reading."

" 'Love will still kiss you if you have the flu.' It hasn't happened yet so we'll have to wait and see on that. 'Love moves the driver's seat back if you need it, tells you to wear sunblock and cares if you do. We may not have time for intimate dinners, sometimes we'll make do with a night of T.V., but love will stand by you, defend you, remind you... you're never alone in this world; you have me.' "

Tony slung one arm around his neck and kissed Jethro's cheek lingeringly and Gibbs leaned into the touch, cherishing the choked words whispered in his ear a few seconds later, "How'd the hell did I get so lucky?"

"Same way I did, probably. Can you handle one more thing?"

"Don't know. I'm barely holding onto my dignity as it is... but I'll give it a shot."

"In the bag... I wanna read this one, though, okay?"

"Good. Not sure I could without breaking down."

Retrieving the final item in the bag, Gibbs showed Tony a lovely wood frame with a certificate behind the glass panel. The paper was clearly a commercial, store-bought product, but Tony couldn't have cared less. The words were so perfect, so geared to the two of them, that Jethro might as well have typed it up himself. Afraid he wouldn't be able to hold back his tears this time, Tony stood and moved around behind the chair where Gibbs sat, causing the older man to twist and look up at him in confusion.

"I have to do it this way. Someday you'll get to see me lose it and bawl like a baby... just not now. I've got work to do in therapy... I'm not ready yet."

Gibbs nodded and looked back to the frame, steeling himself for getting through the recitation without his voice breaking.

" 'I love you not only for what you are, but for what I am when I'm with you. I love you not only for what you've made of yourself, but for what you're making of me. I love you for passing over all my foolish and weak traits that you can't help but see. I love you for drawing out into the light my beauty, that no one else had looked quite far enough to find.' "

Swallowing to clear his throat, battling valiantly to be stronger than the emotions that were flooding through him, Gibbs turned all the way around in his chair, intending to speak to his lover, but Tony had vanished. Rising, Jethro strode to the archway into the living room. He could just make out Tony
sitting on the couch, facing away from him. "Take all the time you need. I'll, uh... I'll be downstairs."

He thought Tony nodded, but in the dark it was nearly impossible to be sure. He knew it didn't really matter. Tony still needed space and privacy, so Gibbs went down to the basement to continue work on the project he'd begun earlier that day.

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TBC......

Card and certificate are real, though I changed the words just a bit on both.

(c) hallmark licensing, inc.
(c) kalan VAW 152
Almost forty minutes later, Jethro released a quiet, relieved breath as he finally heard the upstairs door open. Now in t-shirt and sweatpants, Tony slowly padded down and dropped onto the second step from the bottom, elbows on his knees, hands clasped, head bowed. Laying aside the board he'd been measuring, Jethro moved to greet the younger man, one hand sliding into Tony's hair above his ear, the other settling flat on his stomach. Tony grinned, nodded and shifted back, leaning his elbows on the step above and behind him, and Jethro began to move his fingers in calm, random patterns over Tony's abdomen.

As he reveled in how wonderful the touches felt, Tony was abruptly hit with the revelation that he was starting to not only depend on this simple act of comfort and peacemaking, but on Gibbs knowing when he needed it and providing it without question. This implied absolute trust on his part and that thought momentarily frightened Tony beyond all reason, but he swiftly suppressed the instinctive response and shoved it aside for examination in Lewiston's office the next day. When Jethro spoke to him softly, Tony made himself relax and get his mind back on the topic he'd come down here to discuss.

"Hey."

"Hey. I, uh... can I explain? About upstairs?"

"You don't need to."

"I know. Want to."

"Okay. Go for it."

"I've never seen myself as really strong or focused... or brave. I wanted to be... more than you can imagine. The day we met it was like... damn, there's everything I'm not, all in one person. He can show me, teach me. I guess... I know it sounds so elementary school, but I sort of hero-worshiped you. I actually made a list... "What L.J. Gibbs Would Never Do." Number one, in big huge letters..."

"... was cry." Gibbs finished, gently beginning to use the hand in Tony's hair to mimic the one already in motion.

"Yeah. I watched you, paid close attention... you were the best example I'd ever had and I tried so hard to get it right. I thought I was pretty good at it. Even in that damned isolation unit, I used up a lot of energy joking and trying to *seem* tough... inside, I could feel myself slipping away, but I wasn't about to let it show. When I was stuck in that prison cell, you saw and heard so much more than I meant for you to. I kicked my own ass for days and days after that slip-up. Then Ducky came to see me at Bethesda. He told me you lost someone close to you and kinda went crazy... said you cried and cried. I yelled at him and accused him of lying... I just refused to believe what he was saying."

Gibbs' fingers hesitated for a second or two before resuming their soothing movements.

"He didn't lie."

"I get that now... sort of. I'm still hung up on the idea that I have to be a Vulcan in front of you, though. Mind over heart, all the time. It'll take a lot more sessions with Lewiston before I can move past that." Tony cautioned, sitting up and locking gazes with his lover. "I just wanted you to know I'm working on it... but until I get there, there'll probably be more times when I have to walk away. It
doesn't mean I don't feel love or gratitude or happiness over something you did. It just means it's hard for me to face you when those emotions overwhelm me. Okay?"

"Okay. You know... when I get such a big reaction to a gesture that was so small and simple... I start to rethink all the rules and stupidity I've put between me and the idea that I could ever have love again."

"Small? You're kidding, right? Tonight was huge!"

Gibbs snorted.

"I bought some candy, picked up dinner from the pizza place and stapled paper to blocks of wood."

"For you. This was huge for you. I mean... your speed bumps must be as high as mine are."

"Some of 'em, yeah. How... specific did Ducky get, exactly?"

"He said it was your daughter you lost... but no details."

"Good."

"Huh?"

"You'll hear the story when I'm ready. Until I am, nobody else has the right to talk about it."

"He was trying to help, Jethro. He wanted to convince me you didn't belong on that pedestal I've put you on... that you were just a human being and I had the right to love you and expect love back. Don't jump all over him for that..."

"I won't. He and I are gonna have a serious conversation... but not a loud one. You feel like popping in a movie?"

"Maybe... tell me what you're working on first?"

"That's your last present. C'mere..." he said, offering his hand. Tony took it, rose to his feet and allowed himself to be led to the far corner of the basement.

"Shelves?"

"Close. Bookcases. Mosta your books are still in boxes 'cause there's no place to put em. Long as you're okay with it... I figured we'd turn that guest room into a library."

"Hmmm. And, uh... if one us gets pissed at the other and kicks him out of bed?"

"Couch. It's tradition."

"Yeah, well, three exes...I'll defer to the expert." Tony joked, keenly anticipating the crack to the skull and grinning through the mild aftershock.

"Movie, smartass."

"I'll make the popcorn." Tony announced, headed back up to the main floor of the house.

Though he knew it was an excellent sign and it made his hope soar, Jethro felt his part-time dad status required a token protest.
"Popcorn? I thought you were stuffed!"

"That was an hour ago! We can share another truffle before we brush our teeth..."

Gibbs thought for a few seconds then strode for the stairs as well

"Okay, but I get to kiss you with the chocolate still in your mouth this time..."

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NOON THE FOLLOWING DAY: BETHESDA

"Tony, c'mon in. Sit, sit..." Lewiston urged, gesturing Tony to a chair before settling into his own
"So did anything happen yesterday? Ah-hah, there's that goofy smile again. Tell me."

"Should I be scared that you're suddenly channeling a twelve year old girl?" Tony quipped

"More like my grandmother, the biggest yenta ever known to man. She'd be so proud that I've finally taken over the family business." He laughed.

'Don't waste your talent on us. Gibbs and I have already found each other and we're doing fine."

"Right now, maybe, but there are major issues left to overcome. You and Jethro both deserve fabulous, amazing, complete love and I'm going to make sure neither of you gets shortchanged. So what did he do last night?"

"Abby dropped me off at the house... I stepped in and I kicked something on the floor. Gibbs took a little square of wood, staple-gunned a sheet of paper onto it and glued two of those little conversation hearts to the paper. There were three more blocks laid out, leading me to the kitchen... he got all my favorites; pizza, hot-wings, cheese bread and root beer..."

"Okay, now we've got you eating on a regular basis, maybe it's time to talk about food choices."

"Do you wanna hear this or not?"

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"Thank you." Tony huffed lightly, only mildly irritated. Reaching down to retrieve the plastic grocery store bag he'd brought with him, he handed it over to his doctor. "I knew you'd wanna see, so I put everything in there. Except my chocolate. Nobody touches the Lindor truffles but me and Gibbs."

"Lindor? Wow... he knows the way to your heart."

"That was Abby's idea. And when it comes to the wow factor... check out the certificate. Just... don't read it out loud, okay? I had a little... problem when he did that for me last night."

"The weakness issue, I'm assuming. I'm sorry that happened."

"Yeah... me too. I talked to him about it, though. I explained the why's and wherefores... that I really do love him and I appreciated what he did, it's just sometimes..."

"I know. We'll put that on the schedule for Monday, alright?"

"Good. Thanks."
"URA 10... KISS ME ANGEL...that is so cute. Not at all what I'd expect from Gibbs."

"I know. He's really trying. He wants this to work as much as I do."

"Oh... oh, Tony." Lewiston exclaimed softly as he read the framed item to himself. "Doesn't get much more perfect than this, does it?"

"Nope. Look can we get to the phobia work, before just thinking about that certificate makes me start leaking at the eyes?" the younger man asked through a tense smile.

"I've seen it before. I've also seen how good breaking down can be for you. It's a big stress reliever."

"Later... maybe. I need to concentrate, not exhaust myself before I even get started. Let's work..."

"I understand." Lewiston acceded, slipping the frame back into the bag and returning it. "Okay. Sit back... get comfortable. Breathing slow and relaxed. Slow... that's good. Now close your eyes... and picture yourself in a movie theater, looking up at the screen. One long, blank, stretch of white canvas. Now it's slowly expanding. It gets bigger and bigger until it fills your whole field of vision... then it stops. The white is all you can see. Got it?"

"Yeah..."

"Great. Now I want you to think about male friends, colleagues you've had over the years, and pick a married one. See his wife's image on the screen and describe her to me."

Tony opened one eye, arched an eyebrow and questioned the other man silently. "Trust me."

Lewiston stated calmly. Tony subsided, shut his eye again and went with the flow.

"My college buddy, Wesley Carter. His wife, Lisa, is really beautiful. Long dark hair in a ponytail, heart shaped face with this amazing smile... she's kind, sweet, funny and she really loves him."

"What's she wearing?"

"Last thing I saw a picture of her in. Cute little yellow sundress and a half apron. It was last Fourth of July and she was helping Wes grill burgers... I think. Been a long time since I got that letter..."

"Good work. Let the screen go blank again. Take a deep, easy breath or two... and bring up the board game Life for me. Can you see the cover?"

"The way it was when I was a kid, yeah. I only saw it at my friend's houses, so I'm not sure all the details are right..."

Lewiston fiercely resisted the urge to ask why Tony had no games of his own and moved forward with the technique.

"They don't have to be. Just tell me as much as you can bout how the game was played."

"You had these little flat plastic things that were supposed to look like cars. They had holes for sticking tiny pegs in when you got married and had kids..."

Lewiston took Tony through two more similar sounding items, pulling all the detail he could from his patient and working as slowly as he reasonably could given the limited time they had. At last, he went for the real point of the exercise, steeling himself for Tony's reaction.

"You're doing so well, Tony. One last one. Stay relaxed... breathe easy. Good. Now you're seeing a steak knife."
Tony paled and visibly jolted in his chair, but he kept his eyes closed and remained in the visualization, which drew a hopeful sigh from his doctor. "You can do this, Tony. I believe you can do this..."

"A... a steak knife? Just that? And I can wipe it out if I want?" 

"Absolutely. Just give it a few seconds... long enough to describe it."

"God... okay. It... it's about two inches long... maybe a little more... dark wood handle, with gold rivets... and wavy, sort of... to fit your hand. It's got a... serrated blade. That's enough... I need to get rid of it! Now!"

"Go ahead. Blank the screen. Only white... white is all you can see."

When Tony began to relax, Lewiston added one last change. "Slowly, very slowly, the screen is filling up with colors. Swirling and shifting around each other..."

"Yeah... blue and green... and white. Deep water... ocean colors"

"Sounds wonderful. Stay there as long as you need to. Follow the patterns... let the colors ease all the tension out of you... all the fear... let it go... when you're ready to be back here in the office, slowly open your eyes."

Several minutes later, Tony finally felt able put aside the beautiful vision in his mind and return to reality. "Okay?"

"Better."

"You did an amazing job, Tony. Obviously, visualizing is easy for you."

"Right up to that last thing. Talk about giving a guy a false sense of security..."

"I meant the concept. In general, it seems to be a simple thing for you to do."

"I guess. I'm a visual person, mostly. Movies, T.V... a book has to bring up the pictures in my head right from the start, or I'll probably drop it before I'm halfway through. I liked that room... the theater. It worked."

"That's your place, now. Anytime you're stressed or need to calm down, you can close your eyes for a minute and go back there."

"I hope so. I'm gonna need it the next few weeks. Look, can we just... not talk for a little while? Have we got time for me to just sit here and chill out?"

"There's about fifteen minutes left. I'm fine with being quiet."

"Thanks." Tony responded, laying his head against the back of the chair and staring at the ceiling.

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2:00 MANHATTAN:

Seated in a narrow, uncomfortable chair that he knew was meant to discourage any visitor from staying too long, the big man nevertheless tried to both practice and project complete patience. Despite the minimal seating he provided for guests, his occasional employer had never been one to rush himself to please others. He would be finished when he decided he was and you simply had to
wait him out. The chairs just meant that he didn't want you hanging around afterward.

Finally the slighter man behind the desk closed the folder of photographs, slid it back into the envelope it had come in and exchanged it for a thick packet from one of his file drawers.

"Excellent work, as usual."

"This is more than our standard fee. A good deal more." The other said carefully, examining the size of what he'd been handed.

"The excess is a the first installment on a retainer. I want you available exclusively to me for the next month or so. I assume you haven't changed your standards? You'll do whatever I tell you as long as the... incentive is provided beforehand?"

"That's still the way it works."

"Glad to hear it."

"Details?"

"You'll receive them when and if it becomes necessary. I have a bit of reconnaissance of my own to do first. Then I'll know more."

"Very good, sir. I'll be leaving now, if it's alright?"

"Yes. You're dismissed."

Rising to his feet, the man turned smartly and exited the office, already making plans for an extended stay in the area.

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TBC.......
Thursday morning dawned bright and clear in the outside world, sunlight transforming thousands of bare, ice-covered tree branches into prisms and revealing myriad snow covered evergreen sculptures, almost worthy of placement in a museum. After a pleasant, relaxed morning and afternoon at work the previous day, with a productive therapy session in between, the winter sparkle and seeming weightlessness of spirit should have been reflected in Tony DiNozzo, but instead the Gibbs household was mired in tension. Tony's critical interview, with a man Abby had described as the antithesis of his normal therapist, was coming up later that morning and the prospect had Tony anxious and worried. This had resulted in Tony doing far more pacing and muttering than eating, meaning Jethro was also anxious and worried.

"Tony... breakfast?"

"Sorry. Can't right now. Too wound up."

"I noticed. It's just gonna make things worse if you go in there hungry, you know that."

"We can grab some donuts and coffee on the way in to work."

"Coffee, yes. Donuts, no. You need an actual meal."

"Bagel breakfast sandwich, then..."

"Forget it. Will you come sit down? You're wearing out our floor and all the back and forth is giving me a headache."

"You didn't hear what Abby told me. This guy is smart, tricky *and* an SOB. That's a deadly combi... wait. Did you say our floor?" Tony asked, jolted out of his misery by the unexpected words. Jethro's response was to hold out one hand, gesturing for Tony to come back to the table. The younger man complied readily, grasping the offering as he finally settled into his own chair.

"Yeah... that's what I said. I know those first few days we talked about you going back to a place of your own when you were ready. If that's what you want, if you think it's best... I'll step aside and let you go. All I want... you should be happy, whatever that means."

"Mm-hmm. And you really think I could just walk out the door whistling Dixie, stepping over your stomped flat heart and your guts strung out across the hardwood?"

"Disgusting."

"Symbolic. I hope that's how bad it would hurt. I know it'd be ten times worse for me. I understand we're just starting and time could change things, change us... but I don't wanna leave here 'Ro. I don't wanna leave *you*.

Gibbs nodded and gripped Tony's hand a little tighter.

"Then you'll never have to. From now on, this is your home as much as mine, Tony. Long as you don't go painting the bedroom in pastels or putting chalkboard paint on the fridge... we'll be fine."

"Deal."

"You know I'd be in there with you today if I could."
"If wishes were horses..."

"Yeah. Lemme nuke that plate for you a little."

"Thanks."

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10:15

Sitting in the miniscule waiting area outside the psychologist's office, Tony was so determined not to do anything that might betray his nervousness he had ended up completely still. Finally realizing how ridiculous that was, not to mention a tiring strain on his muscles, he reached for a magazine and began to leaf through it, not caring that it was geared toward parents of infants and toddlers.

He was just getting interested in a sweet photo spread involving various babies' first steps when the door opened and his nemesis strolled over to him, peering at what he was reading. A light sneer briefly appeared on his face, just fading as Tony looked up. The young man's first thought was 'That is *so* unattractive.' Followed swiftly by, 'I've seen that before. He's a born and bred bully. Man, am I in trouble...' Knowing his actual thoughts would get him off on anything but the right foot, Tony swallowed his initial reaction and looked up with a wary smile and a question.

"You're him?"

"I'm Doctor Wall, yes." The man confirmed, turning and walking away before Tony could even consider making a friendly overture. Reluctantly, the young man rose and followed, as it seemed he was expected to, faintly grimacing at the next words out of the stranger's mouth. "If you could move it along, please? I have a lot of work ahead of me and not a great deal of time to complete it. Mackenzie expects your evaluation tomorrow morning, though how she thinks I'm going to make a proper conclusion about your mental state by then I wish I knew..."

Standing by the plastic chair in front of the desk, Tony watched the other man move around the desk and settle into a padded leather executive's version.

"Well? Sit down. I told you our time is limited."

"I was trying to be polite." Tony said as he sank into his seat.

"Why? We won't be seeing each other again until next year's eval. If you're still with NCIS at that point." He added, showing a touch of the smirk Tony so disliked and feared. The young man didn't rise to the bait, so the other man sobered and picked up a sheet of paper. "Let's start with the basics. Tell me today's date."

"February 16, 2006."

"That means eleven days ago the date was..."

"The fifth."

"What day was that?"

Tony thought carefully, made sure he had it right, then responded, his tone not yet betraying his confusion.

"A Sunday."
"The state?"

"Of what?" Tony asked carefully, fairly sure of what his inquisitor was asking him, but not wanting to assume.

"Is this building in Florida?" the other clarified tersely.

"No. It's in Virginia. Uhhh... what is this about?"

"I'm asking the questions."

"I understand that. What I don't get is why you seem to think I've lost all touch with reality."

At last the other looked up from the paper he held, his eyes cold and narrow. Tony fought down the instinct to shrink back in his chair and held his body straight, angry at the man across from him for causing the reaction, but staunchly refusing to reveal it. He knew he had to stay in complete control if he were going to survive this meeting with his career intact.

"You spent two weeks in a locked mental ward, that's why."

"That's true... but it was for depression and stress. I always knew where I was and what was happening."

"You were there for attempting to kill yourself. That implies a break with rational thinking."

"Not in my case..."

"Are you going to answer my questions or should I just end this now, hmmm? I'll write my report and you can leave to get a head start on finding another job."

His entire body thrumming with repressed tension, Tony slowly sat back in the chair. He endured another fifteen minutes of absurd questions, answering each one calmly and with patience. His lack of reaction, however, only seemed to make the department psychologist even more determined to force an emotional outburst.

"Hmmmph. You seem to be functional at present. Describe the incident that landed you in the hospital."

"I checked myself in... and I'd rather not."

"You don't have a choice."

"I haven't even told my family and friends what happened that night."

The nasty grin emerged once more, this time making Tony's stomach clench.

"They don't hold your life in their hands. You will tell me. Now, or this interview is over."

Tony was silent for several minutes, struggling to hide his fear and figure out how little he could say and still satisfy the other man.

"I held a knife to my wrist. When I realized I didn't want to go through with it, I put the knife down, found a cab and checked into the hospital."

"At least you knew enough not to drive."
"Which shows I was thinking clearly."

"Actually, all it means is that you had a few moments of reason. How long you were mentally unstable before that is yet to be determined."

Despite how intensely he was shaken by the term the other man had used, Tony took a deep slow breath, released it and responded as evenly as he could.

"I have never been... that."

"You're not qualified to judge."

"My doctor is."

"Mmmm. This is the same doctor who released you, even though he was aware of at least one severely violent episode in your recent past? One you claim not to recall?"

"He and I talked about that..."

"Yes, I see that in your record. 'Talk therapy is working very well for this patient. No change is recommended for the foreseeable future.' Huh. Just the fact that he isn’t even *considering* a tranquilizer to control the violent tendencies, or at the very *least* anti-depressants and mood stabilizers... that shows his qualifications are at approximately the same level as yours."

Tony continued to breathe deeply, but clamped his lips shut to prevent any damaging words from breaking through his defenses. He now understood what this man was trying to provoke and he adamantly refused to let it happen. Closing his eyes, he turned inward and began the visualization Lewiston had shown him. The screen was filled with rapidly shifting red and black shapes. Presuming they were symbols of his anger, frustration and fear, Tony cleared them away, bringing the screen back to white, then allowed his preferred ocean colors to gradually overwhelm the untainted surface. Within a few minutes, his breathing and heart rate had both slowed considerably and he felt much more capable of handling the stranger's continual assaults.

"Agent DiNozzo. Agent, are you listening to me? Open your eyes immediately."

Tony complied a moment later, a gentle smile curving his lips.

"No need to get angry. All you had to do was ask."

"What were you doing?"

"Just relaxing. If you really do have my complete record, you know that I barely survived pneumonia not too long ago. I have to watch my breathing pretty carefully."

"Yes... that's here. Quite surprising you were allowed to remain a field agent with a medical history like this..."

"My fitness evals should be in there too."

"I'm aware that you passed every one. Can't imagine how..."

"Do you have any more questions for me?" Tony inquired lightly, his smile not waverling. This earned him a sharp glance from the other side of the desk, but Wall found no sign that the younger man was mocking him or even suppressing laughter.

"I should make you repeat the competency exam... but I won't. We're finished."
"Thank you."

Rising, Tony turned and strolled out of the office without a backward glance or another word. The elevator trip back down to the bullpen was no problem, but by the time he approached his desk his legs were trembling. He made it into his chair just in time, fighting the urge to fold his arms on his blotter, lay his head down and surrender to the shakes. When a quiet voice spoke up close behind him, he responded without turning around.

"Hey, Tony."

"Tim..."

"It didn't go so great, huh?"

"I know you mean well and I appreciate it, but..."

"Just bend your head forward... and trust me."

Realizing it was easier to give in and endure until he could have his mini-breakdown alone, Tony sighed and did as Tim had asked. The shock of the damp, heated cloth on the back of his neck made him jump at first, but it soon became soothing, chasing off the chills he hadn't even realized he was suffering. The easy shoulder massage that followed calmed him even further, until the idea of a solitary crash and burn became a distant memory, then vanished altogether.

"How'd you know?"

"Had to see him a few months ago. He pushed all my buttons... had me so afraid of stammering my way through the whole thing that I just shut up completely. That made him smile... my skin tried to crawl off my body when I saw it."

"Yeah... I know. Thanks so much, Tim. Just for being here, you know?"

"No problem." McGee replied adding a final squeeze before moving around to face Tony. "It's what brothers do." He added, ruffling Tony's hair and laughing brightly when the other man made a face and instantly whipped out a comb.

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TBC....
FRIDAY MORNING:

Both men settled into their desks and their work fairly quickly after arriving, but Gibbs couldn't find it in him to be as attentive as Tony was to the piles of paper awaiting him. Knowing Tony was still stressed from his ordeal the previous day, Jethro's gaze kept straying to the desk across the aisle, looking for any sign that the younger man needed a break or even to go home and catch up on the sleep he'd missed the night before. After enduring several minutes of Gibbs' scrutiny, Tony finally sighed and tore his attention off what he was doing to gently admonish his lover.

"Seriously... you can quit checking up on me. I have the weekend to rest and recharge. That'll be more than enough time."

"I know. After yesterday..."

"Forgotten. I'm sure I passed, in spite of what that anal-retentive jackass tried to do. Now if I can just finish this paperwork without my soul-mate making me crazy..." he snarked, grinning and refocusing on the screen to monitor his typing for mistakes.

"Gimme a break, DiNozzo. With all you've been through, I'm allowed to worry."

"And I appreciate it. Reminds me you really care. It's just... hang on, boss. One sec..." Tony said, picking up the receiver on his insistently ringing phone. "DiNozzo. Hey, Adam.... me? By name? He give you an I.D.? Damn... I, uh... you better approve him. I'm okay... this just won't be pretty, that's all. No, you refuse him it'll make it ten times worse. Okay. Thanks for the heads up. I know it's your job, I'm still grateful for the extra five minutes to gird my loins. Yeah... okay, bye."

Recognizing the name of one of the lobby security personnel, Gibbs was instantly on his feet and moving to Tony's side

"Tony? What is it? Why'd security call? Look at me, Tony. What's wrong?"

"I... he's here.... on his way up. I have to go... I can't... have to get out..." Tony stuttered, rising to his feet and trying to move toward the stairs. Gibbs gripped his shoulders and held him in place.

"Who are you talking about? Who's here?"

"My father! You don't... I was planning on telling you everything, I swear, but it's too much and I'm not ready..."

"Tony, slow down..."

'No, you don't understand, I can't be here when he shows up, Gibbs! I can't!"

"Stop. Okay? I'm right here, Tony. Look in my eyes... breathe slow and steady. Better."

"Gibbs..."

"We'll get into the details later. Yeah?"

Tony nodded uncertainly.

"Good. You're not alone... in this or anything. Look down at your wrist and tell me what those letters
"Jedi Forever, Stronger Together."

"Damn right. One call and the rest of your family will be here, you know that. Ducky, Jimmy, Abby... hell, if Abby gets to him first they'll have to look for the pieces with a microscope."

"True..." the younger man responded with a broken chuckle. "My bad, boss. I just freaked out for a minute. Thing is, you don't know him..."

"Don't want to, don't have to. I got your six no matter what."

"I know."

"Then we're doing this."

"You didn't bring a real light-saber, did you? We might need it before this is over..."

"Gun's in my drawer. If it comes down to it...that'll do fine."

"Not so sure about that... but thanks for the offer."

"Anytime, anywhere." Gibbs replied just as the bell announced the elevator had arrived. Turning to face the invader, Gibbs felt Tony go rigid under the hand he'd left on his inside shoulder. "Ease up. Never let 'em see you sweat, baby."

Tony laughed, a bit more genuinely, and relaxed a little. "That's better. You want me to stay right here, or..."

"No. I need to give this a shot on my own first, but if it starts to go south, north or any other direction..."

"Understood." Gibbs assured him, backing off a few steps toward his own desk, but never taking his eyes off Tony. A moment later a tall stranger stepped around the corner into the bullpen and stopped, staring at the younger man. Gibbs could instantly see the resemblance, which meant Tony could as well, and he assumed that accounted for the momentary flash of dismay that rolled over Tony's face before he regained control.

"Michael."

This time, Tony visibly flinched, despite how hard he was fighting to keep his real feelings buried.

"My name is Tony. How did you find me?"

"I've known where you... *work* for nearly a year now, in spite of your efforts to shut me out. Efforts which I must admit don't make any sense to me."

"They don't?" Tony asked, his surprise clearly authentic.

"Of course not. Admittedly, we've become estranged, but your stepmother and I are practically the only family you have left in the world. After that bizarre phone conversation we had a few weeks ago, I concluded you must be in some kind of trouble and decided to come and see you in person to find out what's happened."

"Why?"
"Pardon?"

"Why are you here?"

"I just explained..."

"No, the truth. Why are you really here?"

His father stiffened abruptly and scowled.

"Fine... but is there somewhere more private we can go to discuss it?"

"No."

"Michael..."

"I'm not going anywhere alone with you and I told you that isn't my name. Don't use it again."

"I know it's a great deal to expect from someone with your obstinate, intractable personality... but be reasonable. I'm not asking so much, am I? Just a few private moments to talk..."

"I don't trust you. I'm not sure I ever have. If I left with you... I'd prove I'm the idiot you've always believed I was. My family is here. I'm not leaving."

"*I* am your family."

"You made the decision. You have no right to walk in here and claim a change of heart after all this time."

The elder DiNozzo straightened and tensed, his expression growing darker by the second, and Gibbs felt his own body immediately follow suit, preparing for whatever he might have to do in Tony's defense.

"As your father, I have every right."

"I haven't had a father since I was twelve years old. You mean nothing to me anymore."

To Gibbs surprise, this comment drew a cruel smile and a taunting response from their adversary instead of the explosion he was anticipating. Tony's reaction, however, shocked him even more. In a flash, the younger man had backed away, ending up pressed against his lover until there was hardly even air between them.

"Bluffing with a weak hand, as usual. You've never had a backbone, *Michael*... certainly not enough to challenge me and win."

Tony's breathing sped up and he fought to speak, taking several seconds to force his throat to relax. When he was finally able to push out a single hoarse word, it was clearly not what his father wanted to hear and the other man's face showed his fury.

"Gibbs..."

"Making the call, Tony." He affirmed, reaching to pick up the receiver and dial Abby's extension. "Abs? Skywalker. Right."

Hanging up, he consulted Tony once more. "My turn?"
At Tony's nod, Jethro slid smoothly in-between the other two men, moving forward until he and Michael DiNozzo were almost nose-to-nose. Locking gazes with him, Gibbs returned an echo of the smile his enemy wore, instantly wiping away all trace of the original. "Do I?" he asked quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"I said... do you think I have the balls to go against you?"

"You're intruding on a private conversation. Get out of my way."

"I'll go if he tells me to, Tony?"

"No. Stay."

"That settles that. Out."

"You don't dictate to me. I don't even know who you are..."

"Me? I'm the man that's about to throw your ass in a holding cell."

"Oh? On what charge?"

"I'll start with threatening a federal agent, refusal to leave a federal facility when ordered... after that I'll wing it."

"Michael..."

The constant use of the hated name by the man he felt even more strongly about finally brought Tony back to himself and he erupted.

"Stop calling me that! My name is Tony! I never wanted to become you... it makes me sick that I'm even *named* after you. That call was supposed to be a clean break, for me at least..."

"Break? From what you are at the most basic level? You were born Michael DiNozzo the second and despite the persistent, galling disappointment you've been to your family, you will *be* Michael DiNozzo the second as long as I'm alive."

"Then you might as well lay down and croak right here, because I haven't been that person since the day I came home to find my bags packed and waiting for me by the front door. The only names I will *ever* answer to again are Anthony or Tony. If you can't wrap your brain around that concept, you should leave... before he really does arrest you."

"Who is he and how bad can I hurt him?" Abby suddenly piped up from behind the elder DiNozzo. Startled by the new and unexpected voice, he spun around. This got him mostly out of her way, opening a path to Tony that she swiftly took advantage of.

"It's okay, Tony... everything's okay, now. You need to get out of here?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go. See you in the lab after you finish cleaning up, bossman."

"Go on. I won't be long."

As she and Tony walked back toward the elevator, his father suddenly stepped in front of them, preventing them from exiting the bullpen.
"You're not taking my son anywhere until he and I are finished speaking."

When Abby met his eyes, it chilled the older man in a way even Gibbs hadn't been able to manage. He tried to continue, disconcerted by a tiny woman being able to stop him cold, but she cut him off.

"See the boots? I can and will turn your skull into foccacia bread. Now move."

Shaken, confused and starting to realize that his simple plan had been blown to hell and back, Michael DiNozzo backed away a step and turned slightly, allowing the pair to escape. Looking back to Gibbs, the other man's anger flared once more at the smirk on Jethro's face.

"We're finished. You can leave now." Gibbs told him matter-of-factly, sitting down at his desk and pretending to resume his work.

"This is far from over, believe me."

"Uh-huh. I can get you a security escort..."

"Not necessary."

"Didn't think it would be."

A few minutes later, when Gibbs had heard retreating footsteps and the elevator open and close, he picked up the phone again and called security anyway, ensuring that Tony's so-called father would never be allowed in the building again. As soon as that was done, he raced up the stairs to make sure Mackenzie heard the true, full story before the distortions of the office rumor mill reached her. Cynthia gave him a sympathetic look as he entered so he knew he was just in time.

"Somebody already phone you?"

"Yes, but I haven't told her yet. I knew you'd want her to hear the truth, not gossip. Can you tell me anything?"

Gibbs stopped, head lowered for a moment as he caught his breath and let his mind settle.

"All the director's appointments go through you? Every single one?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I've got a name for your personal watch list; Michael DiNozzo. Already got him banned from the building, but he could try to get her to meet him somewhere else. If he calls, do everything you can to keep him away from her. He'll just cause more trouble Tony doesn't need."

"Is Tony alright?"

"He's been better. Abby's got him downstairs with her."

Cynthia breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

"That's good. She'll take wonderful care of him."

"Always has. She in a meeting or anything?"

"No. KSAE, like usual." She told him, pronouncing it "kay-say". Gibbs grinned. The acronym was familiar to him, but he hadn't known she was aware of it.
"Knock, speak and enter. Thanks, Cyn."

"No problem. I'll call tonight to check up on Tony... if that's okay?"

"He'd be disappointed if you didn't." Gibbs assured her as he moved toward the closed door and knocked lightly.

"Come in."

Gibbs slid inside and shut the door behind him.

"Director... we had a incident down in the bullpen."

Mackenzie straightened a bit and waved Jethro to a chair, waiting until he'd claimed it before she spoke.

"Serious?"

"Nobody hurt... not physically."

"Thank God. Tell me..."

---------------

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER:

Taking long strides, his pulse-rate and anxiety both too high for his liking, Gibbs frowned at not finding Abby or Tony anywhere in sight. A moment later, however, the question was loudly resolved.

"In the office! Hurry!"

Jethro turned swiftly and moved in the direction of Abby's alarmed cry to find Tony curled up in fetal position on the futon she kept there. Abby knelt behind him, rubbing his back and talking softly, but it was clearly doing little good.

"I can't get him breathing right, Gibbs. He's gonna hyperventilate in a minute..." she pleaded, turning anguished eyes up to her second father.

"Not your fault, Abs. Go on out for a while... give us some space, okay?"

"Sure. Boss is here, baby. I know he'll make it better. I'll still be right outside..." she assured him as she rose and made room in the tiny space for Gibbs. Once she'd left, the older man lay down behind Tony, wrapped an arm around him and began the finger massage that seemed to be the secret to calming his lover, no matter what the situation.

"It's me, darlin'... I'm here. Relax for me... please, Tony, relax... you're scarin' me here..."

Watching from outside, Abby was astonished to see Tony actually stop breathing for a few seconds and then release one long slow breath and collapse in on himself, surrendering all his tension and fear between one moment and the next. Suddenly in need of a cuddle from her one-and-only, Abby changed her mind about staying and ran off to find Tim.

"God... I thought he hurt you... that's what he does. Anybody who gets in his way... tries to tell him he can't have something... they get hurt."
"No. He never touched me."

Abruptly, Tony began to tremble from head to toe.

"What? What is it?"

"I can't believe I did that... what I said to him... shit, I am so screwed... he'll kill me..."

"Shhh. It's over, sweetheart... all over... easy..."

"No, I mean it, he will see me dead for standing up to him... nobody does that..."

"Never happen. That was so amazing... you really showed him what kind of man you've become. You were brave and focused and strong... everything you said you wanted to be... my Tony. Tony, Tony, Tony..."

Soothed and lulled by soft repeats of his name, the young man in Jethro's arms relaxed once more and even slipped into a light doze. Feeling the need to be vigilant, Gibbs didn't follow him down this time.

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TBC........
ONE HOUR LATER:

Having taken off her boots at the outer door of her lab and done all she could to silence any potentially noisy accessories, Abby approached the office with a somber expression and spoke very quietly.

"Gibbs?"

"Abby."

"Tony's asleep?"

"Barely, and I'm having trouble getting him to stay that way, so keep the volume at this level."

"Oh... I thought... I mean...."

"Don't blame her, Jethro." A new voice interjected, also in a near-whisper. "Abby just wanted to let me know Tony wouldn't make our appointment. It was my bright idea to come down and check on him."

Hearing this had Jethro quickly up on his feet and greeting the newcomer.

"Doc."

"Good to see you again. Look, I didn't mean to butt in on a private moment..."

"No..." Gibbs told him, pulling the other man away a few steps so they could talk more normally. "...no, actually... I'm kinda glad you're here. Tony has to've told you more about this SOB than he's told me..."

"SOB? Only one person fitting *that* description in Tony's life. That I know of, anyway. I can't believe a call would leave Tony this devastated, though."

"You're right."

"You're not saying... oh God, his father showed up here?"

Gibbs nodded, certain that if he tried to express himself on the subject, his anger would shake the building to its foundations. Abby, however, had no problem with letting her resentment show, despite how softly she was still speaking.

"Man, if the three of us hadn't decided on an emergency code, I don't know what would've happened. I was up there the minute Gibbs gave me the word and I got Tony away as soon as I could, but if you can believe it that piece of... of elephant poop that calls himself Tony's father tried to stop us from leaving and I was so mad I was just totally seeing red, you know, and I threatened to stomp on his face and he could see I meant it so he finally backed off..."

"Abby."

Gibbs' simple statement of her name finally brought the young woman's tirade to a halt.

"What? Oh..."
"It's okay... I felt the same way. I just don't have the lungs or the energy to say it." he soothed, dropping a kiss on her forehead then pulling back slightly to fix her with a 'dad' look. "Elephant poop?"

"Blue whale? It's the only animal that's bigger, right? I don't know if they do, though. I guess they have to, but in the water how could you tell... "

At Jethro's mild glare, she grinned and drew her thoughts back where she knew they belonged. "Right. Focusing on Tony. Sorry." She addressed to Lewiston.

"No problem. I'm just as angry on Tony's behalf, trust me. Not that I would've flattened his father's head, mind you..."

In the background, Tony slowly sat up. Gibbs was reacting and turning back to see to him before either of the other two had even noticed the change occurring.

"Hey... you're supposed to be resting." He chided gently.

"Later. I... I need to talk to him."

"Sure... yeah, of course. I'll be right out in the lab..."

"No. Alone. He knows things... he's seen things I can't..."

"What we talked about in the basement, you mean."

"I'm sorry, Jethro. I want things to be different, to move faster..."

"Shhh. I know." he soothed, pulling Tony briefly into his arms. "When you're ready..."

"Yeah. When."

Reluctantly, Gibbs released the younger man and rejoined Lewiston and Abby.

"He, uh... he wants to do his session here, if you're okay with that." Jethro addressed to the doctor.

"It's fine. Whatever he needs."

"Thanks. C'mon, Abs. Let's give 'em a little privacy."

"But, but..."

"Abby." He said, a little more gruffly. She released a whine and a frustrated puff of air, but she went with him. They barely made it two steps toward the elevator before Gibbs' cell rang. "Yeah. What, Vendazzo... damn, another one? I'm on my way back up now. Tell McGee to gas the truck and be ready to go when I hit the garage."

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40 MINUTES LATER:

"This... is spooky." Max declared softly, gazing from the pictures of the previous crime scene to the new one in front of her. "They're just about identical."

"Big difference." Gibbs shot back as he pulled on his latex gloves. "Victim's not talking this time."
"Yeah... yeah, I see that." Max agreed almost under her breath, staring at the body slumped over the wheel of the car.

"You can't handle this..."

"I'm fine. I've been working scenes for three years. There isn't much I can't deal with. This guy is just starting to piss me off. The madder I am... the quieter I get."

Gibbs grinned.

"Knew you'd fit in."

"I'm trying. Damn it... this bastard needs to go down hard..." she commented as she gently tilted the victim's head back so she could examine and photograph what was left of the man's face. Ducky striding up to look over her shoulder brought a light smile to her face as she scooted sideways to give him access. "Morning, Doctor Mallard. I know I shouldn't have moved him..."

"Ducky, please, and no worries, Addie dear. I'm a bit late and I understand the need to get photos while one can. Good Lord, this poor fellow must have suffered terribly before he passed... from the condition of his face, I'd guess there are multiple fractures here... his hands seem to be thoroughly battered as well. He may have tried to fight back."

"That *may* be why he's dead. The last victim was blitzed and knocked out cold... never saw his attacker."

"Ah... I'd say that's a valid theory. Quite valid indeed. Well, go ahead and click away, my girl." He told her, slowly straightening up to his full height.

"I won't be long. You should be able to transport him in about ten minutes."

"That will do fine." He replied and moved off to consult with Gibbs, who was closely examining the ground around the car for evidence.

"Well?"

"He was severely beaten. His face looks like, as Abigail might put it, 'several miles of bad road.' I don't like this, Jethro. Not at all. I get a very sinister feeling..."

"Me too, Duck. Me too. You plan on picking Tony up again on Sunday morning?"

"I had thought about it, yes."

"Good. He was like a little kid when he got home last time. This week... I think he'll really need the boost."

"Mmmmm. Whilst searching for Timothy, Abby came into autopsy... she gave me a brief synopsis of what occurred in the bullpen. A boost is the very least Tony will need, I'm afraid."

"We've already got Palmer coming over for burgers tomorrow. As for tonight..."

"Of course. I trust Tony will receive all the care and devotion he can absorb. You're quite good at that... or you used to be. At any rate, it's encouraging to know you're listening to your heart again, my friend."

Gibbs finally looked up, his face stony.
"Quit pushing."

"Push? I? What an absurd suggestion." Ducky responded with a wry smile, moving off in response to Max's summons. As he left, Tim jogged up, closing his phone.

"Boss... I checked with the local LEO's and they got an anonymous 911 about two hours ago. Somebody driving by saw a pickup take off after the hit-and-run. Blue and silver with a matching camper shell. Nothing like the description the first victim gave us."

"Changed it... bet any tire tracks we get won't match either. What kind of sick game does this son of a bitch think he's playing?"

"No clue. All I know is we won't catch him until we figure out what the rules are."

"And we won't manage that standing around jawing. You finished evidence collection?"

"I set a four hundred yard perimeter, Gibbs... I didn't find anything. Literally nothing but dirt and trees. Looks like this guy maybe swept up everybody *else's* trash, too, just to make sure he left no trace."

Gibbs swore under his breath. Tim colored slightly, but felt safe responding. "My sentiments exactly... whatever it was you said."

Gibbs chuckled and swiped a hand through his hair.

"Tow-truck on its way?"

"Should be here any minute."

"Okay... do one more sweep, just to be absolutely sure... then catch a ride back with the driver."

"Gotcha, boss."

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NCIS

Gazing fondly down from his chair to where Tony was still seated on the futon, Lewiston reluctantly began to wrap up their session.

"The hour's almost up. Anything else you need to get off your chest?"

"No way. Can't be..."

"Hey, I miss the freedom of our sessions in the hospital. too, but I wouldn't see you back in there for anything. Not when you're doing so well."

Tony snorted and stared down at his folded hands.

"Maybe before. Today? Not so much..."

"You still haven't really told me what you saw or heard that made you back off."

"I... it's hard. The words to describe it..."

"Just try. I can decipher it, I promise."
"It was in his eyes. See... he intimidated me as a kid... scared the crap outta me sometimes, but only because I'd seen him keep his promises. I knew if he said it... he'd do it without even stopping to think. He always said he'd hurt me... that someday I'd get what he gave my mother. It never happened, though. I think... I think it was 'cause he didn't know me well enough."

"He couldn't be sure what you'd do... how you'd react."

"Yeah."

"And today?"

"His eyes... they were... different. It was like he'd found out a secret... or he understood something he didn't when I was a kid. Whatever was holding him back... isn't anymore. If he can catch me by surprise or get me alone... he'll hurt me now. More than hurt me. What I saw in his eyes... is that he doesn't care if I live or die as long as he gets whatever it is he wants."

Lewiston frowned lightly.

"Do you have any idea as to what his new motivation might be?"

"Maybe." Tony conceded, but would say no more. Lewiston waited a few more minutes, but when the younger man stayed silent, his doctor stretched to retrieve a package he'd left on the desk when he arrived, solemnly handing it to Tony.

"About time..." the other grumped mildly as he tore through the simple wrapping. "I hate waiting for presents."

"That'll happen when you're not used to getting them."

Tony gave him a sharp, faintly wounded glance before turning his attention back to the object in his hands.

"A diary?"

"A journal. I know there are things you're not ready to talk about. I wanted to give you a place to write them down, if you feel the urge. You don't have to, though. You're free to write anything you want, or nothing at all. You can even draw in it, if you'd prefer."

"I like drawing..." Tony admitted, running his fingers over the deep blue leather cover, the silver lock and the matching key taped to the back.

"Another gift comes with it... a promise from me. Unless you specifically ask me to read or look at the contents of your journal, I'll never touch it. I won't even bring it up. Your thoughts, your pictures, your privacy."

"Yeah?"

"On my honor."

"You've got a buttload of that... so I'll take you at your word. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Lewiston responded, rising to his feet. "I'll see you Wednesday?"

"Absolutely. I'm really grateful... you coming all the way down here, the book... everything."

"It wasn't a problem, really. Whatever you need. If anything else happens with him..."
"... somebody will call."

"I'll be praying it doesn't come. 'Till next week."

"Next week."

When he was alone, Tony turned and lay down again, clutching the journal to his chest and beginning his peaceful meditation. By the time Abby re-entered the lab a few minutes later, he had shifted back into a light sleep.
Chapter 19

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Between travel back to the office and getting what little evidence they had distributed properly, it was another hour before Gibbs could get back down to check on Tony and by that point the older man was slightly frantic. As usual, not a trace of what he was feeling showed on the surface, but the minute Abby saw him she knew and gave him a gentle hug.

"He's okay, Gibbs. Talking to super-doc helped him a lot. He dozed off for a while after, but he's been awake for the last few minutes. It's like he knew you were on the way..."

Gibbs snorted, but deep down the idea of their bond being that strong pleased him immensely, even though he struggled to believe he could have that kind of awareness and sensitivity with a mate. Not twice in a lifetime, at least.

"Love that imagination, Abs."

"You taking him home?"

"Lunch first. Then we'll see. We'll probably be back. Hell, now that he's here finally, I'll probably have to drag him out by the collar to get him to leave."

Abby's eyes widened and she grinned wickedly.

"Now that's an image to warm up a cold night..."

"Only for you, Abby. Only for you." he replied fondly, dropping a quick kiss on her brow.

"You mean you guys... you haven't even..."

Gibbs expression became stern and the young woman changed her tack instantly. "Oops. MYOB, Abby."

"Thank you."

"But if it doesn't start working soon, you will tell me and let me help, right, 'cause I know a ton of tricks and techniques that totally work *miracles* for older men..."

"Abby!"

"Okay, okay." she protested, backing away a step or two with her hands up. "Sheesh, try to help..."

Gibbs glared her all the way back to her computers before turning and moving into the office to kneel beside the futon. He was immediately pulled into Tony's arms.

"Missed you."

"I couldn't tell." Gibbs joked. "You okay?"

"Better. Lewiston helps me clear my head... put things in the right order. You'll find out Monday."

"Still not convinced about that. Never needed a therapist once in my whole damn life, not sure I need one now."
"But you're still going, right? You're gonna at least try?" Tony asked anxiously, pulling back.

"Yeah. I promised you an' him both, didn't I?"

"Whoa, hold up. If that's the only reason you said yes...

"Isn't that a good enough one?"

"Not by a long shot. I don't want you sitting in that office for an hour every week, resenting me because you felt pressured into being there. You know yourself better than anybody, including me, so if you really don't think there's anything Lewiston can help you with, cancel the appointment, okay? You have to do this for you, or it makes no sense."

"Damn it, Tony, I do have reasons and issues. It's just...

Gibbs trailed off and Tony's expression abruptly shifted toward regret.

"Oh. Your version of I'll tell you when I'm ready.' God, my foot just never leaves my mouth, does it? I must have athlete's tonsils by now..."

"Quit, will ya? You and I are both still figuring out how to do this. We say stupid stuff, we misunderstand... but most of the time we get it right. Amazingly right. The little crap, all the everyday things... if you think you really wanna hear it, I'll give up as much as you can carry. The ones that hurt too much to let go of yet... they'll keep until the need is stronger than the pain."

Troubled, Tony reached up and lightly touched Jethro's hair.

"I wish I'd been there. You must've felt so alone... so empty."

"Yeah... when I wasn't mad enough to pull down the Great Wall with my bare hands and smash every brick into dust."

"I'd help."

"I'd accept. Hey, what say we go get lunch, hmmm? It's about that time."

"I could eat."

Gibbs laughed heartily as he slowly got back to his feet, groaning a bit as his knees creaked. A few moments later, Tony rose as well, the two said their good-byes and thank you's to Abby and they headed for the parking garage.

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TEN MINUTES LATER:

Squinting against the sun streaming through the window of his hotel room, Michael DiNozzo's hired gun sighed almost inaudibly, shifted his phone to the other ear and focused on not lashing out at the man who was irritating him so intensely.

"I might believe you were lying to me... if I weren't so certain that you're fully aware of the penalty for doing so."

"You contracted for my services. That gives you temporary control over my time and how I spend it. It does *not* allow you input on my judgment or the right to threaten me."
"You weren't supposed to kill! I specifically told you that I want witnesses to keep those imbeciles running in circles and make sure their focus stays off me!"

"Then it wasn't exactly smart for you to go waltzing openly into NCIS was it?"

"How dare you...

"Your money also doesn't buy tolerance of your indignation or your tantrums. If you have something for me, fine. If not, this call is over."

"Damn it, I demand respect from my employees..."

"Earn it. Is that all?"

Even though he had to force it, after a few strained seconds, DiNozzo Senior had enough control over his fury to finally speak.

"Take the next step in the plan. Timing is up to you, as usual."

"And afterward? I don't have any written instructions beyond the next attack."

"I won't know for a day or two. I have one last card to play and if I get the result I anticipate... let's just say that more than one person will discover the danger of attempting to back me into a corner."

"You have a contingency, then."

"I do. Call when you've completed the next phase. I should have an answer by then."

"Fine " the other responded flatly, terminating the conversation. Turning from the window, he left the room, careful to secure the door behind him, and made his way down to the lobby. Approaching the fountain that dominated the area, he dropped onto the bench that circled it and pulled a map from his inner coat pocket. Under the guise of searching for something on the huge sheet of paper he reached behind him and slid the phone silently into the water. His expression as rigid and impassive as always, he folded the map, rose and exited the hotel.

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NCIS

"Abby? Earth to Abby. You okay?"

"Oh... hey, Timmy. I'm fine. Why?" she inquired vaguely.

"I don't know... maybe because I've been here almost ten minutes and you haven't looked away from that computer screen once. Whose baby is that? Is it one of your cousins?"

"Nope."

"A niece or a nephew, then."

"No... do you think he's cute?"

"Cute? He's adorable. Look at those chubby cheeks, that great smile... and I've never seen eyes that color. What is that, aquamarine?"

"I know. Really unusual... but that can be a good thing, especially for guys."
"True, if they grow up learning how to handle their uniqueness. He's gonna be a heartbreaker someday, that's for sure."

Tearing herself away from the image at last, Abby scowled at the young man behind her.

"How can you say that, McGee? How can you just casually put such a negative spin on his future?"

"I... I only meant that when he finally picks one girl, the rest of them will be crying for weeks."

"Much better, McGee " Abby conceded, her expression softening. "Nice save. C'mon..." she decided, turning off the monitor, sliding her arm through Tim's and dragging him away. "... let's go to lunch."

"Uhhh... are you gonna tell me what that was all about?"

"Not a chance."

"I didn't think so, but I had to ask..."

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A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT: 12:50 P.M.

After wiping his mouth, Gibbs crumpled the napkin, stuffed it into his empty coffee cup and gazed fondly at Tony.

"You ready to get home?"

"Sounds nice, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"My return paperwork. If I don't finish filling it out and put it in the director's hands before she leaves today, I don't get back in the field next week. He can throw his weight around all he wants... but he can't stop me from going back to work. I won't let him."

"Good man." Gibbs praised, adding an easy clap on the shoulder. "Best part of life is makin' sure the bastards don't win."

"You won me." Tony replied with a smirk.

"That's different." Gibbs countered, standing and beginning to clear the table.

"Oh, is it." Tony challenged mildly, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet.

"Real bastards think they know everything. You teach me every day... and I keep coming back for more. That must mean I'm not the bastard I used to be."

"And do you... is that something you regret?"

"Not for a second. I never minded making changes, Tony, as long as the shift was toward something better. This is... we are, and I'll do what it takes to keep it. When you hugged me before... I haven't had that, haven't been needed..."

Once again, Gibbs let the sentence die then shook his head and turned to leave, moving back to where they'd parked. Tony smiled thinly and followed, responding only when they were outside.
"He said over and over that nobody would ever need or want me... and I just accepted that. Hell, I was a kid... you're supposed to trust your parents, right? If they say it, you take it as gospel and keep your mouth shut. What made me so scared and mad at you that day in the hospital was looking down... and suddenly realizing that everything he'd told me was bullshit. Seeing the truth in your eyes, seeing the love... on top of all the stuff I was hearing, it was just too much. That's why I fell apart."

As they both settled into their seats and buckled up, Tony paused, continuing once Gibbs had started the engine. "I haven't told anybody what you whispered to me that morning, not even Lewiston. It was too... God, forgive how sappy this sounds, okay, but what you said was so precious to me... I don't think I'll ever be able to share it."

"You're precious to me. That's why I said it."

"I'll uh... I'll make you a deal. I won't ever leave this world voluntarily, but this job... we've both seen how fast it can happen when somebody makes that decision for us. I promise to hang on if I lose you... you swear to hang on if you lose me."

"That goes against what I said that day. I gave you my solemn vow that..."

"I know, but you were only focused on me, you weren't thinking about the rest of our family. If you guys hadn't been there after Katie... I could've ended up in that little beige room a lot sooner than I did. Abby, Jimmy, Ducky... they'll need you."

"Okay. It's a deal."

"Thank you."

Gibbs grunted. Tony squeezed his shoulder once, kissed him quickly on the temple then pulled back, staring out the windshield at the road spooling out in front of him. Neither said another word the entire trip back to work.

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TBC...
Chapter 20

3:45: NCIS

"Director?"

"Tony. I'm so glad to see you. Come in and have a seat."

"Thanks." Tony responded wearily, dropping slowly into one of the visitor's chairs. "You, uh... you heard about this morning, I take it." He said, his gaze on the papers clutched in his hands.

"From Jethro. I'm sorry that happened. Trust me, your father won't ever be allowed back onto the grounds, never mind into this building."

Tony didn't respond, but he didn't have to speak for Sarah to understand. His furrowed brow and shifting expression spoke volumes. "You're not so sure you want that. Or should I say, you're not sure whether you're *supposed* to want it."

"How can I? No matter what's happened, it doesn't change biology, right?"

"DNA gives nobody automatic privileges, Tony, and it puts no obligation on you. The man isn't just entitled to your love or respect."

"I know, and most of the time that makes perfect sense to me."

"But sometimes you desperately want and need the father he never was." She finished softly.

Tony's head came up swiftly and he threw a penetrating glance at the woman across the desk from him.

"Director?"

"You're not the only one, Tony. Remember that."

"Aw. No story?" he joked lightly.

"Someday... maybe. Those are your return forms, I take it?" she deferred, reaching out a hand. Tony passed over the paperwork with a resigned smile.

"Mmm-hmm. All done. I'm really anxious to get back to work. At the very least it'll get my mind off this lousy week."

"Something more than this morning?"

Tony flushed a little and grimaced.

"I should ask a question first. Did I pass my psych eval?"

"As far as I'm concerned? Absolutely. In Doctor Wall's opinion, by the skin of your teeth."

"Okay... I should explain..."

"Not necessary. I read his report carefully. The man's an idiot."

Tony barely suppressed a snort of laughter.
"I wanted to tell you... but with my future on the line, I didn't dare..."

"Your career at NCIS will never be dependent on someone like him, Tony. Not while I'm director. If his report on you is any indication, the man needs to spend a few months with his own therapist..."

This time, Tony laughed audibly.

"Thank you, director. You can't know how grateful I am you understand... about everything."

"No problem, Tony. Now go collect Gibbs and head home, alright? It's been a long, stressful week and I'm sure you're both eager to start recovering."

"An hour early? Really?"

Mackenzie grinned.

"Take advantage of my generosity and sympathy while they last. Starting Monday you're back on full duty and I expect your usual exemplary performance."

"You'll get it, director. I promise you that." Tony responded, smiling just as broadly as he rose to his feet. She followed suit a moment later, shaking his hand.

"I know I will. That doesn't mean there isn't room for rest periods or a little alone time if you need it. I want you to keep taking care of yourself."

"Gibbs and Abby will kick my ass if I don't."

"I'll happily join in. Gibbs says you're one of the best investigators NCIS has. I won't lose you before I get a chance to see that for myself... and before I get to know you as a friend."

Just before he stepped out, Tony paused, turning back to give her one last bit of soft-spoken assurance.

"I love the job, director. I know I make a difference and even if I didn't have anybody behind me... I'd fight to keep doing this work. Maybe I acted like a goof sometimes, but I'm a *really* good investigator and I'm willing to prove it any day, anytime... to any*one* who wants to challenge my word. I will show you that your faith in me is justified. I will *not* disappoint you."

Sarah swallowed hard, surprised and deeply touched by Tony's solemn speech.

"I believe you, Tony, and I'll do everything I can to live up to the trust you've put in me."

Tony blushed, grinned and exited quickly, jogging back down to stairs and into the bullpen, feeling so suddenly unburdened he was sure he'd be floating away towards the ceiling any minute. Max grinned at him as he strolled in.

"You look about three tons lighter, Dino."

"Feel it, Dazzle. Nice of you to notice."

"So you'll be in the field with us Monday?"

"God willing and the risers don't creak."

"Good. From everything I've been hearing, you're practically an urban legend around here. I can't wait to see you in action."
"You better mean as an investigator." Tony chuckled, collecting his gear and his coat. "Gibbs is possessive as hell."

"Really? You two? On second thought, I guess I can see it. You were working together before there was a team, you're both incredibly sexy... wow. *My* dreams won't be boring tonight..."

"Glad we could help, Vendazzo." Gibbs tossed out lightly as he returned from the men's room. "You all set, Tony?"

"Yeah, boss. Paperwork's in and we've got orders to head home early and rest up for Monday."

"She read my mind. You might as well take off too, Max. Nothing more we can do on this damn crazy case."

"I suppose. I hate letting this go for even a second, but the only real evidence we have is up to Abby and Dr. Mallard to sort out. I can't do anything... and it's frustrating the living hell out of me." She growled faintly, impressing both men, even if she didn't know it. "I'll see you both next week."

"Looking forward to it." Tony replied with a droll half smile. Max's face transformed as she returned the wicked little smirk, punched him easily in the shoulder, turned and walked away. The young man hesitated before looking over at Gibbs with a much more cautious expression.

"She doesn't know she's doing it, Jethro and she doesn't mean it. Dazzle and I...we're gonna end up real close friends, but nothing more. I'm positive she understands that."

"I agree. Just the same... I'll keep an eye on her for a while."

"I'd expect nothing less from the caveman I adore." Tony quipped, lifting his backpack onto his shoulder.

"What?"

"Down in the lab I heard you talking to Abby... something about dragging me around by my collar?"

"That was a contingency plan in case you refused to go home."

"Awww." Tony responded with mock disappointment. "I always figured you only smacked us in the head 'cause they wouldn't let you use your club at work."

"Very funny. Go, willya?"

"Hey, the way you grunt at me all the time..."

"Tony..."

"I can grow my hair if you'd rather use that instead of my shirt."

Gibbs raised a hand and Tony prepared to accept the imminent dope-slap as his proper punishment for questionable humor and running his mouth after being warned to quit. The impact never came, however. Instead, Gibbs wrapped the hand around the back of Tony's neck and tugged his lover's head down so he could murmur into the young man's ear.

"Ya know what, sweetheart? When I'm ready to haul your gorgeous ass back to my cave and stake my claim, we'll see who does more grunting... and who gets reduced to a drooling, panting Neanderthal."
After slowly releasing Tony, Jethro strode off toward the elevator, leaving the other man gaping and frozen in place for almost a full minute before he was able to turn and follow, talking all the way.

"Gibbs? Damn it, Jethro, what've you been reading and where do I get a copy..."

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AFTER DINNER:

From his spot on the couch beside Tony, Jethro watched the young man shift position, roll his shoulders and grimace for the fifth time in an hour and finally decided he'd seen enough.

"Turn around."

"Huh?"

"Turn so your back is to me. I'm not lettin' this go on another minute."

Tony warily did as he'd been commanded and was soon sighing with relief, his head lolling forward as Jethro patiently eased away his post-stress aches with gentle, skilled fingers.

"God... thank you so much. I won't ask how you knew. Didn't think I was being that obvious, though..."

"Only to me. Yeah... that's gettin' better."

"It is... it really is. Ow! Okay, it was. Crap..."

"When these knots start to let go, it can hurt. Hang in there. You'll sleep better if I get it all unlocked now."

"Pandora's box... if you can let all the bad stuff go..."

"... you end up with hope. Sounds a lot like what we've been doin' for each other these past few weeks."

"Mmmm... exactly."

At last, every knotted muscle had been turned to limp spaghetti and every ounce of nervous tension had been coaxed from Tony's body. For what felt like the first time that day, Tony drew and released a long slow breath, after which he began to lean back slightly against Jethro's hands. The move surprised the older man at first, but he swiftly realized what Tony wanted and supported him down until he was laying face up across Jethro's legs. A minute or so later, Tony half-opened his eyes and favored his lover with a drowsy smile and a quiet greeting.

"Hi there."

"Hi, yourself."

"I feel soooo good right now. Happy, at peace, relaxed... usually it takes me days to come down after seeing him. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, you know that? You gave me a job I love and I'm good at... a place with people I can count on, where I really wanna stay. I've never had any of that... never given myself the *chance* to have it. I've always been the guy who runs when it even looks like things might get comfortable and familiar. Now... now I have so many reasons to never be that man again."
"God, Tony, you don't know..." Jethro responded hoarsely. "I'd trashed so many relationships, burned so many bridges... I figured if anything better actually existed, I didn't deserve it. I'm still not sure I do... but I'm trying, Tony. I'm trying to deserve you. I waited too damn long for this second chance. I'm not letting it slip away without a fight."

Sliding both hands behind Tony's head, Jethro elevated his lover's upper body, bent in and kissed him with a level of intensity and passion Tony had never experienced. When the older man finally pulled back a little, taking a moment to catch his breath, Tony was stunned by what he saw in Jethro's face. Staring down at him was every emotion, every ounce of love he'd always longed for, but thought was impossible. Then Jethro spoke, just a single quiet word, and Tony was suddenly struggling not to break apart. The word should have sent dozens of majestic film images racing through his head, but, considering their earlier conversation, it swelled his heart instead and it was all he could do not to sob. "Precious..."

Fighting against the tears and the blockage in his throat, Tony nodded and sat up the rest of the way under his own power, wrapping both arms around Jethro's neck.

"Yes... you are."

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TBC....
9:30 SAT. MORNING
A LOCAL COMMUNITY CENTER:

PRIVATE LIVES: TONY

"C'mon, Toto. Make a play."

Tony looked down at the trio of cards in his hand and smiled lightly. When he'd first been gifted with the nickname, supposedly because his hair and personality often reminded the gifter of the Cairn terrier in the 'Wizard of Oz', any mention of it brought a grimace. Now that he'd been here a year or so and become close to the group of Saturday regulars, being called Toto made him inordinately happy. The familiarity of it told him he belonged and that they were comfortable with him, despite the age difference between them.

"Alright, alright. Can't a guy get a chance to think?"

"You've already *had* five minutes. More than one of us in this place could croak waitin' on you, son."

"Don't say that." Tony cautioned. "The man upstairs has sharp ears and he might take you up on it."

"He also has more patience than I'll ever have. Play, will you?"

"Yeah, yeah. 24." He finally announced, placing a card face up on the table.

The elderly black man across the table chuckled and made his play.

"7 for 31. Two points... and I am out." He said with satisfaction, lifting his gleaming silver peg from its hole and shifting it two spaces farther on, ending the match.

"Man... not again."

"Hey, you're still learnin' the game, Toto." His opponent reminded him, the depth and strength of his southern drawl soothing to Tony's ears. "Least I didn't skunk ya this time. That's progress."

"But not much consolation."

"You got the basics of cribbage down, boy. Now all you need is t'learn the strategy. Why, when an' what to play, when to go for maybe a lower hand if you think it'll get ya the higher crib. You picked this up real fast. Hell, you can already beat half the players in here of a Sat'dy mornin'. You just ain't got to the next step yet."

"Being able to compete with the champ four years running, namely you?"

"Dang right." The other man confirmed, standing slowly with the help of the cane he'd hung on the arm of the chair.

"Where you going, Christo? Usually we have time for at least three..."

"Your best girl wants a game."

Tony's face lit up.
"I thought Aggie couldn't make it this week."

"Her trip got canceled... not that she was real upset. She's missed you somethin' awful."

"Yeah... it was something I just couldn't put off anymore."

"I'm sure you'll tell her all about it. You two are thicker n'thieves, I swear..."

"She understands me."

"She also don't let you get away with keepin' anything hurtful locked up inside. Leastways, not for too long. Have a good game, Toto. You whoop Aggie's butt real good an' I'll be back to whoop yours again after."

"No doubt. See you in a while, Christo."

The other man limped off slowly to find another card game just as a lovely older woman approached and lifted Tony onto his feet for a fierce hug.

"Toto. My Lord, it's good to have you back." She murmured in his ear, her voice breaking just slightly. In the weeks before he'd checked himself into the hospital, she'd known something was wrong, was dragging him lower and lower, but she hadn't been able to make him reveal the source. Despite Christo's assertion that Tony told Aggie everything, this he had determinedly hidden from her. His affection for her was simply too deep for him to want to burden her with the weight he'd been carrying at the time.

"Good to be here, Aggie." He responded softly, rubbing her back once or twice before they separated. She dropped into the chair across the table, tightly clasping his hand.

"Where were you, honey? Three weeks? You've never stayed away from us that long."

"I know. I... I was getting some help. You were right all that time... something was bothering me. It just got worse and worse until... until I knew I'd do something dumb and permanent if I didn't find someone to talk to. I went to Bethesda hospital... and I told them how I was feeling. They put me together with a great doctor, Dennis Lewiston... he's a lot like the way you describe your Dr. Mason, actually. Anyway, Lewiston straightened me out, got me back on my feet... now I'm doing great."

"Oh, Toto..."

"I should've told you first. I wish I had, but... it just seemed too much to dump on somebody who loves me."

"I do, very much." She affirmed, wiping her eyes discreetly with a tissue from her purse. "Any medication?"

"No. He says he's happy with how open I am and how I answer his questions. He hasn't said no pills in the future... but for now, he doesn't think I need it."

"That's a blessing, honey, trust me."

"I know. Seeing what the medicine has done to you..."

"Yes, well my dosage is correct now and I'm fine. All that is in the past. What about your handsome secret paramour, hmmm?"
Tony flushed and began re-setting the board as a distraction. "Toto. Talk to Dear Aggie, sweetheart."

"It's not so secret anymore, okay? When I got released from the hospital... my place had too many bad memories, so he picked me up and took me back to his house. I thought I'd just stay there 'till I could find a new apartment, but it turns out he feels the same way I have all along..."

"Oh, how marvelous! I told you! Didn't I tell you? All you had to do was open your mouth and your heart, I said..."

"You did, you told me a hundred times. You know what place my head was in. I didn't think I deserved him." Tony sighed, shuffling the deck of cards absentmindedly.

"Is he worthy of you, that's the point. Well?"

"Oh yeah. More than worthy. He treats me like... like now he's got me, I'm never getting away. I'm so loved and cherished it's coming out my ears."

"Good to know. Now I want details."

"Aggie!"

"Not *those* details, dear... though I will admit a lonely widow like myself isn't above a bit of vicarious living once in a while, as long as you don't get too graphic. No, what I want is the romance, the hand-holding, the quiet moments when neither one of you feels you need to talk, but you can both feel the love growing in your hearts..."

"Good grief, Aggie. You take a job with Hallmark while I was away?" he teased, dealing out the cards.

"Anthony."

"Oooh, real first name, I'm in trouble. Okay... last night, he called me precious.... and I could see in his eyes he really meant it. He treasures me... me, the wisecracking, comic book loving, former disciple of every mischief god anyone ever thought up... me, he thinks is precious. Hard to believe... but it's true."

"That's more like it. Go on."

"He touches my hair at home, runs his fingers through it... man, I totally melt into a puddle. He has a way of getting me to sleep you won't believe... oh, and wait 'till I tell you about Valentine's day..."

11:45 GIBBS' HOUSE:

"Hey, Palmer. C'mon in."

The younger man stepped slowly into the house, his nose lifted and a smile of appreciation on his lips.

"Wow... that really smells good."

"My special recipe burgers. You want a beer?"

"Ummm... is there any soda?"
" 'Course. It's in the washtub out back. Follow me..."

"Where's Tony?"

"He said he had some friends to reconnect with, but he'd be home by noon." Gibbs explained, tossing a familiar red and white can into Jimmy's waiting hands and taking one himself. The pair sat down on opposite sides of the handmade picnic table a few feet away. Jimmy stared silently down into his can for several minutes. Gibbs waited him out, but eventually felt the need to prompt him.

"What's wrong, kid?"

"Huh? Oh... it's not wrong, not really. Well, it is for me, I guess. I just... I'm a little lost. Not lost, lost isn't right. More... confused and-and worried..."

"Jimmy."

"Sorry. I... I need some advice."

"About what?"

"Well... see, after the group session at the hospital, I didn't feel like being alone, so I went back to Dr. Mallard's house with him. Gerald was there... and that's when I found out Dr. Mallard was retiring. Gerald said he wanted to get to know me, so we could work as a strong team... but I don't want that and I can't figure out why. You have to understand, I don't get angry, or if I do, it doesn't show. I'll channel it into something else or hit the batting cage and get rid of it. The past week, though..."

"You're suddenly ready to blow up all over Ducky and the morgue and you don't know how to handle it."

Jimmy finally looked up and held Jethro's gaze steadily.

"Exactly. That's exactly it. What's wrong with me, Agent Gibbs?"

"Let's see... how about it's past time you learned that first names are okay when we're not actually *at* NCIS."

Jimmy smiled and relaxed slightly, just as Gibbs had intended. "Other than that... you're perfectly normal." He said, draining his can of soda and placing it on the table. "Your file says you've been through some major losses in your life."

"One or two..."

"There you go, then. Ducky's a mentor and a father figure. You feel like he's abandoning you and sticking you with a step-dad you barely know. It's natural to get angry with him and you'll probably stay angry until the truth sinks in."

"Truth?"

"You'll figure it out." Gibbs replied, standing and grabbing the empty can. Jimmy watched him with curiosity. "What?"

"I don't know... I guess I was waiting for you to... crush it."

"Last two lessons for the day, kiddo. I happen to love quiche and I recycle."

Jimmy smothered a laugh.
"Still a real man. Got it..."

Gibbs walked away to grab another drink and tend the burgers and a few moments later Tony strolled into the yard and up to the table, sniffing and smiling beatifically.

"Mmmm. Gibbs mega burgers... thank God, 'cause I am starved beyond belief! Hey, Jimmy. Glad you could make it, man." Tony greeted him, dropping down beside him on the bench.

"Me too, the minute I smelled the food. What makes his burgers mega, anyway?"

"Oh, little brother, you are in for a treat like you've never known. First... he mixes in some quality spices, like cumin and freshly grated ginger, but in real small amounts, so the flavor stays subtle. Then, he puts buffalo mozzarella and onions or maybe mushrooms on one patty, another patty on top and seals the meat together before he throws them on the grill. No ketchup, no mustard... these things barely need a bun. Believe me, fast food will no longer have any appeal after you taste one of Jethro's creations."

"Wow. Now I'm glad I skipped breakfast."

"Not yet, but you will be in about ten minutes. So... drinking soda?"

"If you'll tell me where you were this morning."

Tony raised an eyebrow, but he was pleased with Jimmy's bold response.

"Deal."

"You go first."

"Okay. You remember Ernie Yost? He walked in insisting he'd killed one of his buddies..."

"I remember. That was pretty intense."

"It was. Well, something he said really got to me. He told me his Medal of Honor let him fly anywhere he wanted for free, but he had nobody to go visit. I couldn't believe it, ya know? A genuine hero, all alone just because he had the strength and guts to keep living. One day a few months later I was driving home and I saw this big building... I'd never noticed it before. Turned out to be a community center. I went in to have a quick look... found out there was a big group of people around Ernie's age that all met there on Saturday mornings. They played cards, enjoyed some of the junky snacks their families wouldn't let them have... and they watched out for each other. Seemed like maybe that was what he needed, so I took him there one Saturday. He found cronies the minute he walked in. He loved it and it gave him what he'd been missing since his wife died... someone who cared about him. From that moment until the day he passed away... he was happy, just like he deserved to be."

"Tony, that's amazing. What a wonderful thing to do."

"Ernie was a pretty cool guy when you got to know him... plus he earned it. Your turn?"

"If you promise it stays between us."

"Absolutely. Pinky swear." Tony offered, holding out his little finger. Jimmy stared at it wide-eyed for a long stretch of seconds, fighting off shivers at the memory the gesture sent rushing through his head, but eventually he completed the ritual.
"Okay... I only drink once a year... and always two Coors..."

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TBC.....
Briefly embracing Jimmy at the door, Tony smiled and got a lighter, shyer version in return.

"I'm so glad you showed up, man." He offered.

"Yeah, me too. Between the burgers, the grilled potatoes and everything else, I won't need dinner *or* breakfast tomorrow"

"Hey, none a'that. Taking care of ourselves is the new rule, mind, body and emotions. You said you're going to the indoor golf range tomorrow to get some early season practice in. Even if all you have is toast in the morning, have something."

"Boy, you're taking this big brother thing seriously." Jimmy chuckled.

"Damn right. I'm really sorry you thought you couldn't share your story with any of us before... that you didn't think we'd understand."

"It wasn't that so much. It was just such a... big hurt. Maybe next year you'll come with me. I'd like Brandon to meet part of my new family... and maybe you'd take me to see your mom." Tony paled, his grin became tight and a shadow seemed to drop over his gaze, muddying the normally bright color of his eyes.

"The first part, sure. The second... no. He... he monitors who goes to see her. I'm walking through enough of a shit-storm with him right now. Last thing I need is a nasty phone call raking me over the coals just for wanting to stand at her grave."

"But you..." Jimmy began, but Tony stopped him with an upraised hand.

"Between us, remember?" the other reminded his friend quietly.

"Tony."

"I know. Someday."

"I'll go with you... when you're ready, you won't have to do it by yourself."

"Thanks, bro. See you Monday."

"In the field." Jimmy added, struggling not to crow, but unable to keep his joy and pride from showing on his face.

"I'm pretty excited too, kid. Night."

"Night, Tony."

As Tony closed the door and turned back, he found Gibbs standing a foot or two behind him.

"Gibbs, don't start..."

"Not startin' anything, Tony. It's been a great day, no reason to shoot it in the foot. If you need
anything, though..."

"A mutually acceptable DVD, a few hours with you on the couch and a truffle or two." Tony suggested, kissing Jethro's cheek as he passed on his way into the kitchen.

"That's all?" the other man asked, turning halfway around to follow Tony's progress.

"It'll do for now."

"What about later?" Jethro asked, a grin slowly blossoming.

Searching through the bag of candy, Tony blushed at the thoughts racing through his head and silently thanked whatever deity might be watching over him that his back was turned.

"We'll talk about it when it gets here. Pick a movie, okay? I'll be right in."

Jethro shook his head slightly, grinned and moved off to the stacks of thin boxes beside the T.V.

"Which do you want?" Tony called, unable to decide among the various flavors.

"A dark chocolate and a hazelnut."

"Mmm. Good choice. Okay... push the button, I'm coming..."

This time it was Jethro who shifted to keep his face hidden until the crimson Tony's words unintentionally brought to his face had retreated. Tony placed their treats on the table in front of them and settled in snug against Jethro's side without a sign that he'd noticed anything strange.

Halfway through the film, Jethro hit pause and Tony picked his head up off his lover's shoulder.

"What's up?"

"Dessert." He clarified, picking up one of the chocolates, removing the dark blue wrapper and holding it out toward Tony. The young man grinned wickedly then extended his neck and gently bit the diminutive sphere in half. Jethro popped the other piece into his own mouth and held it on his tongue, closing his eyes in pleasure as it slowly liquefied. When his had done the same, Tony repeated the process for Jethro with the hazelnut truffle. He wasn't content, however, to sit back and simply enjoy the decadence on his own. Leaning in, he softly pressed his lips against the other man's. In moments the kiss had moved from tentative to open and seeking, the mixture of chocolate and their individual flavors swiftly driving both men crazy. Eventually, his body's inevitable response made a strong enough impression to get Jethro to pull back a little.

"Tony... Tony, ease up, baby..."

"Don't wanna... feels too good..." Tony countered, licking Jethro's mouth slowly.

"I know... but this is goin' somewhere... an' I'm not sure we're ready to be there yet..."

Tony finally disengaged, looking intently at his lover.

"We?"

"You sayin'..."

"When I was laying in your lap the other night, and we started kissing... I could feel how it was affecting you. Literally feel it. That morning at the sink a week ago..."

"I remember."
"God, I hope so. I'll never be able to forget how it felt. Your arms wrapped around me, your back pressed right up against mine, the heat of the water on my skin... oh great, now I'm picturing us showering together, taking a long hot bath..."

"... making love in a Jacuzzi."

"You're not helping."

"Suppose not." Gibbs chuckled.

"What I was trying to say is that I think we're ready for another step... physically."

"We let our bodies make this decision we could end up regretting it. Take a second, breathe... and figure out what the rest a'you wants."

"My heart and soul are laughing, cheering and doing cartwheels. My brain's drooling and setting up the video camera. You?"

"Same here." The older man replied hoarsely.

"So shut off the movie."

Reluctant to take his eyes off Tony, Jethro fumbled with the remote and finally hit the right key, after which he tossed the device behind him, uninterested in where it landed. Eyes wide, he raised a hand and swept it over Tony's brow, letting his touch linger.

"What was that for?"

"Not sure. I'm just trying to... take it all in. I have to wonder how I got here... how I got so lucky a second time. You've got so many gifts you bring to the job. To offer me your heart and your body on top of that... to look in your eyes an' know you mean it when you say you love me... sometimes I just have trouble gettin' it to register, I guess."

Smiling, Tony kissed Jethro deeply in lieu of the passionate words his emotions had choked off. Gripping his lover's hand in trembling fingers, Tony gradually drew it over and into his lap. Shocked, Jethro curled his hand inward slightly, the fingertips just grazing Tony's hardness through the fabric separating skin from skin. The younger man whined under his breath at the contact and broke the kiss, fighting to control his air intake.

"'Ro..."

"Hell, Tony..." Jethro whispered.

"Please, just... I need you, love... please..."

"God, you are so beautiful this way. I never dreamed... hang in, baby. I'll try an' make it last..."

"Don't care... just do something, I'm begging you..."

"Like this?" Jethro asked as he began to gently press and rub along Tony's erection.

"Yes! Oh... so good..."

A few moments later, Tony found the courage to reciprocate, mimicking what Jethro was doing. Their free arms went around each other and both leaned closer, murmurs and harsh, short breaths echoing between and around them.
"Tony, I'm not gonna... I can't..."

"S'okay... s'okay, 'Ro..."

"Isn't..."

"Yeah it is... I'm here... right here, love... I'm scared too... let go..."

"Damn, Tony... it's... I have to..."

"Shhh... I love you, 'Ro... love you so much... ahhhh, God... ha-happening... so st-strong!"

"Little more, Tony... just once more... ahhh, hell..."

In the aftermath of release, both men clung to each other, struggling to calm racing hearts and ease labored breathing. Finally, Jethro found the energy to turn his head and place another kiss below Tony's ear.

"Don't you go starting up again..." Tony joked tiredly. "...kissing's what got us in trouble before." "Just showing my appreciation. You're amazing... and a damn sight braver than anybody else will ever know..."

"Mmmm... not yet, but I'm getting there."

Too tired and too wise to try and argue the point, Jethro chose instead to lay back along the sofa, drawing Tony down with him. "What're we doing?" the younger man asked around a half-stifled yawn.

"Napping."

"Movie..."

"We'll finish it when we wake up."

"Oh... okay. Good idea..."

Within minutes Tony and Jethro were deeply asleep, easy smiles gracing both faces.

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LONG ISLAND:

"You've misread the address I gave you."

"Not possible. Face it, he isn't there anymore."

"He must be. I would've known if he'd moved."

"And the delusions keep on coming..."

DiNozzo senior rose to his feet fluidly, his eyes flashing and sparking with barely leashed anger and a desperate desire for an excuse to liberate it in whatever manner would do the most damage.

"Excuse me?"

"Calm down. It was only a joke."
"This is not humorous. Not in the slightest."

"Obviously."

"Get out of here and find him."

"I'll add the extra work and wasted time to your account."

"I don't care. Just find him. I want to know the minute you discover where he's staying. Nothing can move forward until you do."

"Fine. I'll contact you Monday."

"You'll call tomorrow."

"No. I warned you when we first met that Sundays were mine and mine alone."

The other man sneered.

"Now who's deluded? Believe me, God has no wish to hear from mercenary thugs playing at morals and faith."

Abruptly, there was a shift in the younger man's expression from calm tolerance to unmistakable viciousness and the potential for violence at a moment's notice. The change cleared any trace of sarcasm or glee from the other man's face. DiNozzo's hired gun waited until the man in front of him had stumbled back a few steps, finally backing against a wall, before he turned with ingrained precision and moved efficiently out of his employer's well-appointed home office, regrets about ever agreeing to this particular job swiftly piling on top of one another.

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TBC.......
Chapter 23

9:30:

In the process of carefully snapping the DVD back into its case, Tony stilled, grinning and shaking his head. He still couldn't quite believe he'd found the guts to just ask for what he wanted earlier that night. What amazed him even more was that Gibbs had agreed and let it happen. After napping peacefully for almost two hours they'd woken slowly and spent a few lazy minutes kissing and talking, reassuring each other that the regrets Jethro had feared weren't an issue for either man. They'd finished the film almost half an hour before, but stayed close together on the sofa, reluctant to abandon the way they were feeling for the drudgery of putting the house to rights. Finally, Tony had volunteered to finish what little clean-up there was and sent Jethro upstairs to take his turn in the bathroom. This thought caused Tony's mind to produce vague fantasy images of his lover in the shower, a steam-shrouded silhouette pushing at the edge of his thoughts and demanding he allow it the mental space it needed to become more detailed.

"Bad brain. Give it a rest, willya?" he laughed, popping himself in the head, closing the plastic box and walking over to slide it back into place among all the others. "Slow down, damn it, DiNozzo... he's right and you know it. The big brain and your emotional health have to stay first in line. Wonder if Lewiston can give me something that'll make my body back off 'till the rest of me catches up, 'cause after tonight... boy am I gonna need it."

The phone buzzing a moment later pulled Tony gratefully away from the train of thought he was trying not to follow. "Yeah, hello."

"Tony? I'm so glad you're still up. You are, aren't you?"

"Relax, Abs. I talk in my sleep sometimes, but I'm always awake on the phone."

"Okay... that's good. Really good, 'cause I didn't wanna wake you up, you know..."

"Abby what's going on? You in trouble?"

"No... not trouble. I just... I thought maybe somebody was watching when I came home from bowling tonight. Then a few minutes ago... I swear I saw him again out the window..."

"I'm on my way over."

"Tony, no. You've got church tomorrow."

"Ducky..."

"Hey, nothing's secret in a family... especially ours. The slightest sign that you or anybody else I love is going south again, I wanna know so I can help."

"I'm fine, Abs, and so is the rest of our freaky, left-of-center clan."

"I know... for now. I'm not taking chances. Hey, that's right, Jimmy was over there for lunch today. It went okay?"

"Went great. He actually had a talk with Gibbs. Asked him for advice, if you can believe it."

" Barely. On what?"
"Sorry, sis. Some things have to stay private. He's fine, I swear. It was nothing major. Important... but not urgent."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay."

"There ya go. Now go make sure the door is locked and don't open it 'till I get there."

"No, it's okay... you know me, after some of the stuff I've been through... I'm paranoid. It was nothing."

"You're not paranoid when they're really out to get you, Abigail." Tony replied sternly.

Abby made a face at the use of her full name.

"Hey, that's Ducky's tactic and it only works for him."

Tony chuckled, but it only lasted a moment.

"I know what you've survived, Abby. I was there when that bastard Ari tried to... holding you on that floor, you can't know how scared I was. I thought..."

"You didn't lose me, Tony and you won't now. Like I said... I really think I was just nervous. You made me feel a lot better. I'm fine."

"I know... for now. I'm not taking chances." He repeated, knowing it would make her laugh. "You absolutely, totally, completely sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Get to bed or you'll be falling asleep during the sermon."

"Right. If you start feeling..."

"Hide in the bathroom and hit your speed-dial. Got it."

"Okay. Love you, little sister."

"Love you, Tony."

Hanging up hesitantly, Tony sighed at the receiver, moved around the room turning off the lights and headed upstairs.

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SUNDAY 11:15 A.M.:

"Tony? The service is over. We're allowed to go to lunch now." Ducky teased gently. Tony still wouldn't look at him, just as he hadn't since they'd entered the sanctuary and settled into a pew. "Tony? What's disturbed you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. You're right, let's head out..."

Ducky gripped the younger man's forearm and prevented him from rising.

"No." he countered firmly. "Not until you tell me what's happened."
Finally Tony lifted his eyes, quickly scanning his environment. His bewildered expression added to his quiet words made Ducky wince in sympathy then fight to control his outrage.

"Maybe you should skip picking me up next week. I don't think I belong here."

"Was someone cruel or rude to you when I wasn't present? Heads will roll and derrieres will be kicked, I guarantee it..."

"Nothing like that. Everybody's been amazingly nice. I guess I'm just not sure what... *he* thinks."

"He? Oh... capitalized."

"It isn't the pastor's fault... she has no way of knowing. All the same she... freaked me out."

"For heaven's sake, why?"

"I know she meant God... but she kept saying father. Not my all-time favorite word these days."

"Oh... oh dear. No, it's entirely understandable, my boy. You were never shown that unconditional love exists. Of course you'd automatically assume that anyone with that title... your namesake was nothing but a biological source, Tony. He can lay no claim to the word 'father'. He doesn't know the first thing about cherishing the precious gift of a child. I suppose all I can ask of you is to give worship a bit more of a chance... give yourself a chance to learn what a parent is truly supposed to be."

"But... God is perfect... she said that this morning. That means he doesn't want me... couldn't possibly. Right?"

Ducky smiled and rolled his eyes to the ceiling briefly, after which he half-turned his body so he partially faced Tony and grasped the other man's face lightly in both hands. His reply was filled with easy humor, but the memory of the last time he'd heard the words still made tears threaten for Tony.

"Anthony, Anthony... Once again I feel the need to remind you that you are a silly, silly boy."

"Sometimes, maybe... but it's not my fault I don't know what unconditional really means. I grew up with nothing *but* conditions. Be this, do this, show me this... then I might treat you like I actually had something to do with your birth."

"Yes, well... like the love of your family, this love you've never needed to earn. It was always yours and always will be. In time... you'll come to understand that. I just pray you will do as I asked... and continue trying?"

Tony stretched out his tightly compressed hands along his thighs, breathed deeply and lowered his eyes. He stayed this way for a minute or two, his face telegraphing how hard he was thinking, then looked up at Ducky again.

"Yeah... okay. I'm still not sure, but I owe it to you and myself. I'll be ready when you show up next Sunday."

"Thank you." Ducky murmured, pulling one hand away and using the other to gently pat Tony's face. "Why don't you go out and warm the car, hmm?"

"You're not coming?"

"I will. I want a quiet moment to pray."
"Oh. Sure." Tony said, standing and stepping back into the central aisle between the ranks of pews. "I may grab a coffee first... maybe."

"Good for you. Ill look for you first in the vestry, then. Go on, now. I'll be along presently."

Ducky waited until he was sure Tony had left the large area before bowing his head and releasing a slow breath.

"My Tony through and through... and I wouldn't trade him for anything the world could offer... well, anything I don't already have. Lord, I beg your forgiveness for hating a fellow human as much as I do the boy's so-called father. The dark filters he planted in poor Tony's young mind... the man may just be unredeemable. I leave him to your judgment, of course, but... if you'd forgive, also, my fervent wish that I know what that verdict will be, I'd be forever grateful. Stephen... Lord, you know what I lost. Tony has filled such a dark and empty place in me. Thank you for helping us realize that keeping him here was in our hands as much as his."

After a quiet amen, Ducky rose to his feet and moved out of the echoing chamber, a faint smile gracing his lips and a lightness in his heart that he cherished more in that moment than he had for a very long time.

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TBC..............
Chapter 24

1:00: LOCAL RESTAURANT

As Tony opened the car door and shifted around to get in, a sedan a few yards away caught his eye and he hesitated.

"Ducky?"

"Hmmm? Yes, Tony?"

"That car... you recognize it?"

"No... not especially."

"I think it pulled in here when we did. I swear I've seen it around before, too..."

"I'm sure it's someone else from church. This place is family friendly and reasonably priced, making it very popular."

"Yeah... yeah, sure. That makes sense. I must've seen it in the lot over there."

Ducky grinned.

"Perhaps, but I can see you don't believe it."

"I do... I'm just not totally convinced, that's all." Tony replied, making his companion laugh as he slid into the driver's seat.

"More evidence that I was right to abandon a career in investigation. My mind was never suspicious enough."

"Okay, okay... I work with Gibbs, for God's sake. You expect me to still be perfectly trusting after all this time?"

"Not at all, dear boy. You forget I've known him quite a long time. I remember what it is to have to fight off the corrupting influence of his cynicism and his temper."

"Temper? At work or when he thinks he might not get justice for a victim... maybe. At home, I never see any trace of that."

"No... no, you wouldn't." Ducky commented as he pulled out onto the street.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying he fakes how he's feeling? Does he think I'm still that breakable?" Tony asked, his tone betraying how much the implication disturbed him.

"No, no. Pardon my distraction, or I would've finished the thought before you got the wrong idea. I simply meant that Jethro truly loves you. Because of that he's putting much more effort into taming his worst qualities. He is protecting you, granted, but it has nothing to do with whether or not you're still fragile. He's protecting you from the parts of him that he fears might drive you away. At this point... I firmly believe he needs you as much as you need him."

Tony produced a half-smile, flushed lightly and turned away to look out the passenger's window. His happier mood lasted only until he happened to check the side mirror.
"Damn it..."

Ducky tensed, his hands tightening around the wheel.

"I'll need more information than that, Tony."

"That car is behind us. Three or four back."

"Well, that doesn't necessarily mean anything sinister..."

"I haven't told you about last night."

"Do I want to know?"

"Abby thought someone was watching her when she got home. When she actually saw a guy out the window later, she got scared enough to call. Just talking made her feel better... said her imagination must've been messing with her. I accepted it."

"But now you don't think so?"

"I didn't think so on the phone. Wasn't about to scare her any worse."

"Wait, Tony. Look..."

"It's turning off." Tony acknowledged, breathing easily again. "It was nothing... they were just leaving at the same time we did. Damn... what's wrong with me?" he asked, running a hand over his face.

"Your parentage... but that's only my opinion of course." Ducky stated firmly. To his relief, Tony laughed. It was shaky, but it still eased Ducky's mind.

"Yeah... you aren't the only one. Abby threatened to turn his face into a pizza and Gibbs swore right to his face he was gonna arrest him if he didn't walk out of NCIS on his own. With your skill set... I'd really rather not hear your thoughts on the subject."

"Considering that we've both just eaten... quite reasonable."

Tony returned his gaze to the window, frowning and spending several minutes silently working out how, and whether, he should ask the question repeating itself over and over in his brain. Finally, he spoke up, quiet and tentative.

"Do you think there is? Something wrong with me, I mean? Is he... will the crap he's done always be a part of me? I can't stand thinking I'll be like this 'till he's dead... that maybe that's the only thing that'll set me free."

"Tony... did you go with him that morning? Did you meekly bow your head and follow where he led?"

"No. But Gibbs was ten feet away..."

"... and he didn't utter a word until you said you wanted him to. He trusted that you could do exactly what you did. The stand you took that day... my God, Tony, how can you doubt how strong you've become?"

"Sure, I stood up to him... then I fell apart like kleenex in a monsoon. I never hold out very long. Being in the same room with him... that's all it takes. He makes me feel so..."
"... insignificant, incompetent... small." Ducky finished, almost inaudibly. Tony twisted around to look at him.

"Ducky..."

"Many fathers seem to have that ability, Tony. Ours were... especially talented, I'll admit, but the pain of a youth spent under an unbearably strong hand... well, it can be overcome, I promise you that. I managed it and more than one person I love has had cause to be grateful."

"Your mother."

"It was always *her* home. It came down through her family. He wanted to sell it... shut her away in some... facility or other. I refused to allow it. He took me to court... I won. From that day until the moment he died, we never spoke again. As you said, I thought it might... that his being gone would set me free. I waited and waited to feel light or incredibly happy... what I wanted was much more impressive than what I got. It took me many more years before I understood that I had the key to my own chains."

"I've tried... so many times."

"Yes, as did I. The secret is not to stop."

"What was that key? How did you do it, Ducky?"

"Mine won't be yours, Tony. You'll have to keep searching until you discover it for yourself. Your family is there to help, don't forget."

"I know. I said a prayer for all of you this morning... I think. I don't know if it was right, if I said enough or too much... I mean, I have less than no clue how to do this stuff..."

"Making the effort is what counts. He's been sorting out his children's prayers for a long time. You could pray in code or in Klingon... he'd understand."

"Klingon. You're a Trekker? Seriously?"

"From the beginning."

"Oh wow... that is so cool! Man, have we got all new territory to explore over tea and cookies!"

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1:45

Having carefully calculated how long it should take his targets to travel the rest of the distance to where he waited, the mercenary watched from the cover of bushes, allowing himself a light smile when he saw the car approaching. As he observed, he stole a look at the house a few yards away, thinking about the man who lived there. The occupant was, in most ways, a man he could've liked, perhaps even been close to, under other circumstances. They both had military backgrounds, both maintained codes of honor, loyalty and conduct that they rarely, if ever, strayed from. His mild respect for his fellow ex-Marine hung in the balance, however. His next few minutes of observation had the potential to shatter any regard he held for Jethro Gibbs.

As the car slowed, preparing to turn into the drive, he slowly moved deeper into shadow, becoming silent and still; nothing that would draw notice, nothing to tickle the well-honed senses of the young man just stepping from the vehicle. He watched the driver lean out slightly to say goodbye, also
providing a comforting pat on his passenger's hand. The target added an affectionate squeeze before pulling away and moving up toward the house, freeing the driver to back onto the street again and pull away.

He held his position, ever patient, until the target opened the door and stepped inside. Only then did he shift, barely enough to raise a small pair of powerful binoculars to his eyes and focus in on the front window. The sight of the two men embracing, even offering gentle kisses to each other's cheeks, twisted his stomach and sent bile flooding up into the back of his throat. Despite his disgust and anger, however, he did not break protocol, his own or any the Marines had burned into his memory. He moved away carefully and gradually, forcing himself to wait until he regained his own car before he allowed himself the luxury of the time it took to spit over and over into a handkerchief and rinse his mouth thoroughly with bottled water. Grimacing, he breathed deeply, calming himself as much as he could before he pulled out a newly purchased cell phone.

"Michael DiNozzo."

"I found him. He's living with his supervisor, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. No idea how long he's been here."

"Living."

"It means exactly what you think it means."

"You have proof?"

"No. With Gibbs' past, there's not much chance I'll get any, either."

"I need proof before I authorize action."

"He's hyper-vigilant and the target learned at his knee. Near impossible."

"Near isn't... oh, well. You know your business. At least I know how to get to him, now. Things can move forward. I'll let you know tomorrow how to proceed..."

"No, you won't. For treading on my Sunday, you sacrifice Monday *and* an extra ten thousand."

The other could almost see his client's face turning bright red as he struggled to suppress the furious response that wanted to burst across the phone line. Eventually, though, what he got was a strangled version of acceptance, obviously shoved through clenched teeth.

"Fine... on both counts."

"One hopes."

"You have all his phone numbers, I assume."

"I do."

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8:30 P.M:

Yawning and stretching, Tony laid aside the beginner's woodworking book he'd been perusing and rose to his feet. He wanted to keep on for another chapter or two, but he knew he'd be no good for work the following day if he indulged that urge. Just as he was moving to the cellar door to alert Jethro that he was headed for bed, the phone chirped and he turned back to answer, sure it was Abby needing more reassurance.
"Again, Abs? I'm gonna start thinking you really *are* paranoid."

"Don't hang up on me, Michael."

"What the... how the hell did you know to call me here?"

"Language, Michael. Vulgarity isn't tolerable for people at our level of society."

"Pretty words are nothing but a nice cover for the crap underneath. I don't have anything I need to hide that bad. Just answer the question. How did you know?"

"I've always had my private resources. It wasn't difficult. I won't just accept that we're to have no more contact."

"God... I *thought* I was speaking clear English the other day. Do I have to get a restraining order? Is that what it'll take?"

"Hmm. I call to express my regrets for how things happened and that's the response I get. I should have known better."

"Regret? You've never regretted anything you did. You plan, you strategize, you calculate, all so you never have to think about regrets."

"I work hard to minimize errors. Are diligence and competence negative traits now?"

"For God's sake, just once, can you maybe tell me what it is you want without the damn games? I am sick to death of the games..."

"You may not believe it, and I suppose that's your prerogative... but I never wanted that meeting to devolve into a confrontation between myself and your colleagues."

"I never wanted it period."

"And as usual, your wishes are the only ones that matter."

"I'm hanging up..."

"All I want is a few moments of conversation. Are we so completely estranged that you won't even grant me such a small request?"

"Yes... we are. We always have been."

"Anthony."

"Don't call me that either. Don't do this anymore. Live your life, forget you ever had a child... and I'll do my damndest to convince myself I'm an orphan."

"Who have you spoken to, Michael? Just tell me that and you'll never have to hear from me again."

"Spoken to... I don't understand."

"Let's just say I was a bit... confused by our last phone call. It made me wonder just who you might've been talking to. I think perhaps you've broken your promise again."

"What? How can you... no. God, no..."
"Someone's been teaching you about forgiveness, Michael. I have to assume you told them I've done something that requires it. I want a name, that's all. Just give me that and you'll be free. My solemn promise. You know how dependable I am when it comes to keeping my word."

The receiver slipping from his suddenly numb fingers, Tony backed away, halting only when his calves struck the couch and his knees failed him. Falling more than sitting, he shoved back until his whole body was on the sofa and curled into a shivering fetal ball, staring out into the room, but seeing nothing of what was actually in front of him.

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TBC......
Chapter 25

With A Little Help 25/?

Nasty language and a possible Kleenex warning, constant reader. I know I had to take a long break after writing Tony's dialogue in this first section. You've been duly notified...

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Patting one last swath of clear sealant onto the first of two new bookcases, Jethro grinned and laid aside his brush. Grinning lightly, he turned his gaze to the spot across the cellar where the second case waited to be assembled. Initially, he'd been unsure about voicing the idea to Tony, but the idea had turned out to be a good one, bringing out the smile that always made Jethro's heart do Olympic-caliber gymnastic moves. Now he was becoming genuinely excited about making over his former guest room, the emotion increasing when he contemplated getting Tony's input on the details.

Retrieving the brush and moving to the sink to clean it, he allowed the events of the previous evening to drift into his head, even though he knew the memories would only arouse him all over again. As the warm water flowed over his fingers, the surprise and pleasure of 'sensual Saturday', as he'd begun to think of it, also returned and for a few moments he reveled in how spectacularly both encounters had gone. Desire, communication and a mutual willingness to put aside fear and uncertainty had served them both well in the physical arena so far, but Jethro held no illusions about the future. If only to himself, Gibbs freely admitted that he and Tony would sorely need whatever counsel Lewiston was willing to provide if they were going much further.

Placing the brush on a drying rack, he wiped his hands and turned to gaze at the boat, picturing Tony's name painted in graceful script across the wood. Reaching out, he touched the exact spot where he'd place it and, for the first time in years, felt immensely satisfied and grounded. He'd always assumed there'd be another wife, another divorce, and that this creation would go up in flames just as all the others had, freeing him to try again in both arenas. Accepting Tony, acknowledging how much he wanted and needed the younger man, had shattered that miserable, stagnant pattern and finally pushed Jethro from existing back into living. Even if nothing else went right in their relationship from that moment on, though he adamantly refused to think about that possibility, Tony had given him the priceless gift of hope. That alone would name this boat, keep it whole and someday see it touch the water.

Glancing at his watch, Jethro frowned at the display, realizing they were both late for bed. Turning, he swiftly headed for the stairs, turning off the lights with an absent flip as he stepped up to the main floor of the house. As he shut the door, a faint, pulsing buzz drew him toward the living room to find the phone receiver laying on the floor, its cord trailing back to the base unit. Hanging it up, his eyes found Tony and the instrument was dropped a second time as he raced to his lover's side. His touch, unfortunately, brought semi-incoherent words and panicked movement, but not complete awareness.

"Tony?"

"Ahhh! Sorry, sorry... I'm really sorry... so sorry... gotta believe me..."

"For what?"

"Rules... I know I broke the rules, I understand, I swear I do... never leave the phone off the hook... important calls can't get through... never do that... bad Michael, stupid Michael... now you have to be punished..." Tony mumbled, beginning to rock back and forth.
"Tony, look at me. It's Jethro. You're okay... it's over. Just look at me, please, baby... see me..."

"Bad... careless... s'your fault, so stand there and take it... you listen to every word... not like last time when your mind went somewhere else... this time you deserve it... stay here and listen! Told you to always hang it up... useless, brainless... can't follow directions, can't remember anything you're told... should've had you ripped out of her... should've flushed you like the little shit you are... wish you never existed... up to me I'd kill you, feed you to the furnace, start all over... fucking waste..."

"God, Tony, stop... listen to my voice. I'm right here..."

"No! No... Michael... you said... always Michael, never Tony... common, ugly name... not fit for your son..."

Realizing words weren't going to be enough to reach his lover, Gibbs reached out and pulled him into a fierce embrace, praying physical contact would be the solution. This move instantly ended Tony's agonized verbal barrage, but the trembling only worsened. It was almost another thirty minutes before the younger man stilled. A few moments later, he pulled back and finally looked with comprehension at the man holding him.

"'Ro?"

"Hey... welcome back, love. You with me all the way now?"

"Don't know. What, um... what time is it?"

"A little before 9:30."

"Hell... that late? We need to get to sleep... man, what was I thinking?" Tony murmured, uncurling and starting to rise. Jethro gripped his hand and tugged him back down.

"In a minute. First you tell me what happened."

"Happened... nothing. I'm fine."

"Now you are."

"It's... I don't remember. I really need to go to bed..."

"Tony, relax a second..."

"No, can't... I have to go... work tomorrow..."

"That was him on the phone, wasn't it? Your father called here?"

Tony nodded vaguely and ceased struggling to escape, but his gaze dropped.

"Can't believe he found me. He won't back off... I just want him to leave me alone, for God's sake... he doesn't hear that... won't listen..."

"What'd he say?"

"He figured out I'm seeing somebody... telling family secrets. He... he wants to know who it is. I refused... the doc's in so much trouble if the bastard gets a hold of his name..."

"It won't happen, Tony. We won't let it."
"Have to protect him... at all costs. The two of you are my biggest lifeline right now, 'Ro. I can't lose either one..."

"You're not losing anything. Look at me... look up, baby. Yeah, that's it. See? I'm still here. You've got my heart, Tony. How the hell could I go anywhere without you?"

"You better not try." Tony joked back, showing a fleeting trace of a grin and burrowing back into Jethro's arms. "God, my whole body hurts..."

"You were shaking pretty hard."

"Yeah? I don't remember. Anything I said..."

"Forgotten."

"Thanks."

"Time we headed upstairs."

"Way past."

"Love you, Tony." Jethro told him, squeezing the other man tighter for a few seconds. "Love you so much..."

"Not more than I love you."

Gibbs smiled down at Tony and teased him gently.

"You tryin' to start a fight? Huh? That what you want?"

"Nope... too tired."

"I hear that..."

His arm firmly around Tony's waist, Jethro helped the younger man to his feet then steered him toward the stairs, berating himself for the lie he'd told. His silence about the frightening event he'd witnessed would last only until his first session with Dennis Lewiston at lunchtime the following day.

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NCIS: 11:00 THE NEXT MORNING

Watching from the corner of his eye, Gibbs scowled at seeing Tim's expression register sudden confusion and distress for at least the tenth time in three hours. On top of the fatigue his episode had caused, and despite a liberal application of the never-fail massage technique, Tony's sleep the previous night had been fragile and he had been taking out the resulting sour mood on Tim all morning. Gibbs had been hanging back, hoping the pair would work it out and he wouldn't have to step in as peacemaker. He'd initially thought that Max would open her mouth at some point, rescuing her new boss from the unpleasant task, but she was staying strictly out of it. As he focused his hearing intently on the area around the two men's desks, he was deeply dismayed by what he heard.

"I just wanted to help, Tony, that's all..."

"God, hold your nose and use the air in your head to clean out your ears, Probie! For the last time, there's nothing to help *with* and even if there was I wouldn't ask *your* advice! Back off, damn
it!" Tony declared so loudly that it was likely everyone in a ten-foot radius heard him. Unwilling to let an already devastated Tim suffer any more abuse, Gibbs shook his head and dropped his pen to the desk, knowing he couldn't stay neutral any longer.

"DiNozzo! Get over here, now!"

Tony winced at hearing only his last name and lowered his head slightly, but he didn't immediately move to comply with Jethro's summons. A second one a few seconds later changed that. "In case you missed it, that wasn't a suggestion. I know you're hearing me, Tony..."

Finally, the younger man turned and moved to stand beside Gibbs' desk, furious expression still clearly in evidence. Gibbs rose, dragged him over to the file cabinet area and spoke to him in hushed tones that never lost the sternness of a command. "That's it, Tony. Enough."

"I didn't do anything..."

"The *hell* you didn't. Tim didn't deserve a word of what little you've said to him so far today. You've had a really rough time lately. I get that, he gets that, we *all* get that, but it's no excuse for stepping on somebody who looks up to and cares about you."

"I know. I'm pissed and scared... and he was convenient. I didn't mean it."

"Okay. Get your ass *back* over there, drop your pride and your attitude in the shredder and tell him that!"

"Dad-mode sucks at work too." Tony grumbled.

"Only when you know you're wrong and you're stalling the easy fix. Go."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony replied under his breath, reluctantly moving back to where Tim waited. "McGee... Tim. I need to make up for this morning. Can we go get lunch?"

"Sure. I get to pick."

Tony grinned sheepishly, unsure he deserved Tim's seemingly easy forgiveness.

"Just this once."

As he watched the two men walk off, Gibbs breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He had only had one child so sibling issues weren't something he'd ever had to deal with. Grateful he appeared to have gotten it right, he moved back to his desk, opened up the file on the second attack and, even though he knew he now had less than half an hour before he needed to leave, began scanning it for points of commonality and connections, praying they didn't have an escalating serial on their hands. Just in case, however, he pulled a number from his Rolodex and set it next to the phone.

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TBC........
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Credit Josh Groban for the song at the end. Whatever language he sings in... I utterly melt. I beg you, explore beyond "You Lift Me Up' You will never regret it.

Pacing the tiny waiting area just outside Lewiston's office, Gibbs tried to force himself to sit, to show the discipline he prided himself on, but he simply couldn't manage it this time. The idea that he must look a lot like Tony at that moment made the older man grin, but thoughts of his lover brought back the distress of the previous night, wiping the smile utterly away. He was just beginning to silently fire up his mental DI to get his brain back on positive ground when the door opened a foot or so away, pulling his attention and his gaze there.

"Agent Gibbs. Good to see you. C'mon in."

The unexpected formality sending one eyebrow climbing toward his hairline, Gibbs turned and moved past the doctor into the private space. As Lewiston claimed a seat in the middle of the room, Gibbs wandered the perimeter, studying various objects and pausing to read the spines of a few random books on the ceiling high shelves. The other man simply observed with a wry smile until Jethro seemed finished.

"Everything ship-shape, Gunny?"

"What?" Gibbs grunted, whirling around to stare at the doctor in surprise.

"You seemed to be conducting a security sweep. Or maybe it was just the investigator doing what comes naturally."

"Either... probably both. It wasn't conscious." Gibbs muttered, striding to stand behind the chair he assumed was meant to be his. His hands clenched and relaxed on the back of it, but he held his ground.

"You don't have to sit."

"I might... later. Not sure yet. So how does this work? What are you looking for?"

"Whatever you feel like giving me. For the most part, what happens in here is up to you."

"Qualifiers. Never liked those..."

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Tony. We're not here to talk about the Redskins or the latest op-ed in the Post. If I ask a question, it'll be on point and necessary."

"And if I choose to keep my mouth shut... I might as well have stayed at work."

"Pretty much. Think of me as the magic mirror in 'Snow White'. I'm here as a sounding board and to answer questions. The twist is that you may not like what I have to say."

"The mirror always told the truth." Gibbs challenged.
"So will I, but as I said..."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it." Jethro replied, taking off on another slow circuit of the room, this time halting at the window that overlooked a small patch of lawn and a large swath of parking lot. He was quiet for several minutes, long enough for Lewiston to consider prompting him, but, finally, the older man cleared his throat and spoke. "Everything's been good with Tony... more than good, fantastic. He's happy, getting stronger every day... but last night, something... something happened that scared the shit outta me and I think maybe... I'm losing him again."

"Can you tell me?"

"I can try... don't know if I can describe it so you'll understand, though."

"I'm an expert interpreter. Just do your best."

"Right... I was, uh... I was down in the basement. First time in weeks I felt safe to go down at night and really focus on a project for hours... I've been so on edge, thinking I had to be close by if he needed me. Anyway, his bas... his father picks right then to call the house. *My* house! How the hell he uncovered where Tony was I'll never know, but if I find out..."

"I'll be right behind you with a bat twice the size of yours. Finish the story?" Lewiston urged, quietly rising and moving to stand a foot or two behind his newest patient.

"Yeah... I looked at my watch, saw how late it was an' I headed upstairs to check on him... nudge him into gettin' ready for bed. The phone... it was hanging from the cord, doin' that damn busy signal buzz. Tony, he was curled up on the couch... wild-eyed and shaking... I touched him, but he had no clue I was there. He started talking like... like I was his dad... I guess not leaving the phone off the hook was a huge rule in that house. He kept sayin' he was bad... that he deserved to be punished, to stand there and let the son of a bitch say things to him... I can't repeat that part. I won't."

"It's okay. You don't need to. Is that it?"

"Almost. Words weren't breaking through to him, so... so I just pulled him in... held him and rocked him. Finally, he came out of it... looked at me like he knew who I was. He claimed he didn't remember what happened or anything he said... not sure I believe him."

"We shouldn't jump to conclusions." Lewiston warned, thinking of the incident in the hotel. "If he is lying, it's a shield... protection from memories he can't face yet. It's entirely possible he's telling the truth, though."

"And if he is?" Gibbs questioned, turning around to face the other man.

"I'd be concerned, but it's nothing he and I can't work through in his private sessions."

Gibbs grimaced and flushed guiltily.

"Yeah... not without him wanting to punch me in the nose. I promised him anything I heard last night was forgotten."

"Telling me was the right thing to do, never doubt that, Jethro. You and Tony both know that some secrets should never be kept."

"Now it's Jethro?" Gibbs asked, a trace of a wry smile curving his lip.

"In here, when it's just you and me, always. Out there, where anyone could've heard... not a chance."
Letting me use your first name was a sign of trust and respect... one you don't just grant to anyone off the street. I would never dishonor you by just throwing out your name on a whim."

"No... you wouldn't." Gibbs affirmed, his regard for the doctor stepping up significantly. "So what am I supposed to do when he gets pissed at me?"

"Let him rant and yell until he gets it all out. Then tell him honestly how scared you were for him last night and remind him that I'm helping both of you now. This is your session, you needed advice and I couldn't give that to you unless I heard what happened."

"Blame it all on you. Good strategy to keep me outta the dog house."

Lewiston snorted out a brief laugh.

"Trust me, I've been the scapegoat before. I can handle it."

"I'll bet you can." Jethro retorted, swiping a hand over his face. "Well, that's Tony's trouble left in good hands. Time to get down to all the crud I've buried, hmmm?"

"Only if you want to. I'm perfectly willing to start out easy today."

"Like?"

"Work, your military background, your life growing up."

It was Jethro's turn to laugh, now.

"I loved my father and I had nothing but regular old affection for my mom."

"I never said you didn't, but learning about the past from your perspective is important for me. Your beliefs, your strengths and weaknesses, the process you go through when you make decisions... you learned all that somewhere. Knowing who you were, or who you *think* you were, helps me get a clearer picture of who you are now."

"So I can see it better, too."

"Precisely."

"Makes sense... I guess."

Brushing past Lewiston, Jethro walked back to the chair he'd rejected earlier, studied it carefully, then slowly dropped into it. The other man resettled himself in his seat and favored Jethro with a light smile.

"You can start wherever you want to."

Gibbs nodded once, locked his gaze on his tightly clenched hands and hesitantly began to speak.

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When he returned to the office, Gibbs was surprised to see Tim and Tony already there, huddled with Max at Tony's desk. Curious, he strolled over to see what had them all so intent and found the trio studying and quietly discussing the files on their two latest cases.

"Hey, boss. Good lunch? Max asked vaguely, unable to tear her gaze away from the paper in front of her.
"Not bad. You see anything fresh, Tony?"

"No... not yet. Sorry, Gibbs. I'm not giving up, though..."

"Didn't think you would."

"I wish something would just jump out at me.... but the only thing I get is a really bad feeling."

"Yeah... "Max echoed. "... I got the same thing. Creepy..."

"Bad feeling." Gibbs prompted Tony.

"I know, not real specific. There has to be a motive here, right? I just can't get a clear sense of it. I mean, if there's no motive... whoever this is, they're sick and dangerous. Maybe more dangerous than anybody we've faced since Ari."

"Think your intuition would get a boost if you went to the scenes?"

"It might... it just might." Tony responded cautiously.

"Drive him out there, McGee." Gibbs suddenly ordered, pulling the keys to the sedan from his pocket and tossing them in front of Tim.

"Can I go along?" Max asked, praying her eagerness didn't show too clearly.

"Yeah, why not. It might take a while, so make sure you three grab all your gear. That way Tim can drop you two off and head right home, instead of anybody having to come back here."

Tim raised an eyebrow, but otherwise chose to simply accept Gibbs' show of faith.

"You got it, boss."

"Keep your phones on in case something new comes in... but I'll do my best not to need you for the afternoon. Go on. Pull your stuff together and get going. Hang on, Tony. You've got your house keys?"

"Yup."

Tim frowned.

"I thought you never locked you door, Gibbs?"

"Never had anything irreplaceable in the house before." Jethro replied, never taking his eyes off Tony.

Tim and Max both hid amused smiles as they moved to their own desks. Tony grinned lightly and fought off an urge to fiercely embrace his lover. Gibbs read the need in his eyes and responded warmly, but very quietly.

"I know. When we're home... we'll see what the spirit moves us to. Get outta here, now. See what else you can get me on this freak of a case."

"Okay... okay. See you then."

Surreptitiously, Gibbs watched his team move out toward the elevators, inordinately proud of the way they'd allowed Max in and seemed to be accepting her as a normal part of the group.
Checking one more time that the phone number he'd pulled out hadn't migrated under another pile of
the paper that constantly inundated his desk, Gibbs turned and headed downstairs to find out what
new info Ducky had discovered about the second victim.

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KEMPSVILLE:

The minute Tim pulled up and parked, Tony was out of the car, beyond eager to get back to the
work he'd been longing to do. Tim chuckled softly as he and Max made a slower, more composed
exit, watching Tony head directly for the flapping strips of crime scene tape that still remained.

"Wait for us, willya, Dino?" Max tossed out lightly as they approached.

"You guys can afford to be casual. She knows what you can do. I don't have that advantage."

"Tony, c'mon." Tim protested. "You don't have to prove yourself to anybody, least of all Director
Mackenzie. She's on your side a hundred and fifty percent."

"Not yet she isn't... but I'll get here there." Tony muttered. "Where was the car exactly?"

Tim sighed and surrendered, knowing he couldn't win. Max patted his shoulder in sympathy and
studied the sketch in her hands.

"About ten feet to your right... pretty close to the trees. In fact if you look..."

"I see it."

Pulling his gloves on, Tony moved in to examine the damaged trunk more closely. "Man it must've
hit hard..."

"No kidding." Max responded. "The driver's lucky to still be breathing."

"Not like the second victim."

"That wasn't from the crash." Tim reminded them, a scowl on his face.

"True." Tony replied, kneeling to check out the ground. "We've got full reports, tire treads, photos
and drawings of the area around the car?"

"Complete." Tim confirmed.

"And the evidence collection really turned up nothing? That is so weird..."

"Not here, not at the other scene. This guy is scary good." Max growled.

"Yeah, well... he can't be too good for NCIS. Such an asshole criminal doesn't exist. He'll make a
mistake. When he does we'll be standing behind him with cuffs in our hands and full clips in our
guns." Tony asserted as he rose and rejoined the other two, holding out a hand for the file Max held.
She gladly handed it over. "Measurements... good. Nice pictures, Tim. Clear, perfect composition...
you've gotten really good behind the camera."

"Thanks." The younger man replied, his voice filled with genuine gratitude.

"This it, Dazzle? That's all we have?"
"Afraid so. Like I said, there's not much more at the other spot. The only real difference between the two is this victim went to a hospital, the second one went to a morgue."

"Mmm. Can't wait to make this SOB pay for that... Guess we're done here."

He conceded, returning the file and rubbing his neck. "Let's head to the second site. It may not do any good, but you never know."

"Whatever you need, I'm in." Max agreed.

"Me too." Tim said, pulling out the keys.

As the trio hiked back to the car, Tony fell behind a little, looking around and fighting off shivers. The nasty sensation he'd gotten from just skimming the file at the office had persisted, even gotten worse, and he couldn't shake it off. His instincts told him he had to stop the person who'd committed the assaults, but they also warned him that doing that would in no way be as easy as he'd claimed a few moments before.

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5:30 : THE HOUSE

When Gibbs arrived home, he was greeted by delectable smells coming from the kitchen. He strolled in that direction and found Tony just starting on a homemade pasta sauce. The younger man turned and started to speak, but Jethro lightly placed a finger across his lips. Tony gave him a confused smile, but received no clues as to what his lover was thinking, so he turned the heat off under the ground lamb he was browning, just in case. For several minutes Jethro simply held Tony's hands and gazed into his eyes, while the other man's curiosity grew exponentially.

Finally, Jethro tugged Tony out into the living room and over to the stereo. Fooling with the multi-disc machine until the CD he wanted was in position to play, he slid the case out, checked which track was right, put the case back and advanced to that song. He then urged Tony out into the center of the living room, wrapped his arms around the young man and waited. Grinning softly, Tony reciprocated, keen to discover what tune they'd be dancing to. It wasn't anything he might have been expecting.

* Like the sound of silence calling,
I hear your voice and suddenly, I'm falling
Lost in a dream...
Like the echoes of our souls are meeting,
You say those words my heart stops beating
I wonder what it means

What could it be, that comes over me?
At times I can't move,
At times I can hardly breathe.

When you say you love me,
the world goes still, so still inside.
And when you say you love me,
for a moment, there's no one else alive. *

As the lyrics began to hit him, Tony felt tears threaten, but fought them off valiantly. Fearing he wouldn't be able to do that much longer, and certainly not if the song became any more emotional, he buried his head in Gibbs shoulder and concentrated on the movement of his feet as Jethro swayed
them both gently back and forth.

*You're the one I've always thought of,
I don't know how but I feel sheltered in your love,
You're where I belong.
And when you're with me, if I close my eyes,
There are times I swear I feel like I can fly
For a moment in time.

Somewhere between the heavens and Earth,
Frozen in time, oh when you say those words...

Tony's grip tightened and, as the song finished, Jethro stopped moving altogether and simply held his lover against him, soothing his trembling with smooth strokes of one hand up and down his back.

*... And this journey that we're on
How far we've come and I celebrate every moment
And when you say you love me, that's all you have to say,
I'll always feel this way...

... And when you say you love me,
In that moment I know why I'm alive...

... When you say you love me,
Do you know how I love you?*

"It's okay that you told him. I knew you would..." Tony finally choked out, his face still firmly hidden.

"I was so damn scared... I couldn't get through to you, I couldn't go back and change what happened..."

"What I said..."

"I only gave him the gist... none of the words. I didn't know how to say it. Hurt me to even think about it..."

"I can't remember... I swear I can't..."

"You don't have to. We'll never talk about it again, okay?"

"Okay. I do love you, 'Ro... I love you."

"Never doubted it, baby... not for a minute."

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TBC.........
FOLLOWING MORNING:

Stretching, arching and yawning, Tony dragged himself back to consciousness, only gradually realizing that he was alone in bed. Frowning and reaching behind him, he found the empty space had not yet cooled and was relieved to know Jethro hadn't been gone long. A moment later he heard footsteps moving back to the bedside and his hand was gripped gently. A smile blossoming, Tony flipped over so that he faced his housemate and lover. Jethro greeted him with a grin of his own and soft, affectionate words.

"Hey. Thought you were still asleep."

"I was 'till you left and took all the warm with you." Tony quipped sleepily, pushing up into a sitting position and leaning in for a light kiss.

"Us old guys can't always control when we have to hit the head, kid."

Without hesitation or a second thought, Tony used the hand not holding him upright to smack the other man in the side of the head. Gibbs' eyes widened and his brow furrowed briefly as he dropped to the edge of the bed. When Tony shrank back a little in obvious apprehension, however, the grip on his hand tightened. "Don't. I'm not mad, Tony. Challenging me is a good thing... most of the time. Shows you're still willing to stand up for yourself. I'd like to know what I did to earn it, though."

Tony paused, uncertain how his reasoning was going to sound, but he eventually responded.

"You're not old. Mature, responsible, wise... those I'll agree with, but never old."

"Tony, c'mon..."

"No, if I'm not allowed to put myself down anymore then neither are you. Deal?"

"It wasn't a put down."

"Sounded like it to me, and I should know. Do we have a deal or not?"

"Okay." Jethro conceded with a quiet sigh. "You're right, I guess. Not like it's deliberate... the words just come out. Maybe I do need to start paying more attention to how I think about myself. My favorite DI always said that if you train the mind first you don't have to worry about the body. Whatever's supposed to happen... just will."

Tony grinned broadly, flushed and turned his eyes away.

"My, uh... my mind must be getting trained, then, 'cause anytime I think about the other night and the chocolate and the break we took from the movie..."

"Yeah. Yeah, me too. Always lived by that mind/body principle. Never thought it might embarrass me in public."

Tony stroked the back of Jethro's hand with his thumb and murmured agreement.

"The kitchen, the couch... you need a reason to think positive, just remember those. Old, my ass..."

"Funny... your ass looks pretty young and firm to me." Jethro whispered in Tony's ear then rose and
began to walk away. As he watched his lover stride out of the room, Tony bit his lower lip slightly and commented under his breath.

"Yours isn't exactly lumpy oatmeal, 'Ro..."

Gazing at the clock, Tony found it was still a few minutes ahead of five o'clock and jumped out of bed. Dashing to the guest room, he rapidly sorted through a drawer in the dresser, pulling out a singlet and running shorts.

While he dressed, he pondered when, or if, anything of his might shift into Jethro's bedroom. Leaning on the dresser with one hand, he started running through the facts as he understood them. The mutual decision had been made to create a library out of the guest room and the two of them were in the same bed every night, even if nothing more than deep, contented sleep was occurring. Otherwise, the intimacy between them seemed to be moving forward at just the right pace; slowly, but always progressing. He tried to go on, knowing there were many more positives that pointed to long-term success for their relationship, but his analysis faltered under the weight of his insecurity. If he pushed even as far as moving his clothes, he still feared it might cause a level of discomfort which would develop into an expanding fissure that could drive the two of them apart.

Despite the logical part of his brain nagging that if he didn't get out for his run soon he'd have to cut it short or abandon it altogether, Tony remained lost in his contemplations for a while longer, only pulled back to reality by the sound of knuckles lightly rapping on the door frame. He looked up to find Jethro watching him. The flush and rueful grin his appearance had engendered made the older man smile in return. Shaking his head, Tony moved to greet him.

"You say a word about smoke coming out of my ears..."

"Wasn't going to, promise. Don't make the run too long this morning, okay? Looks cold and damp out there."

"Yeah, yeah, so I'll wear my hoodie." Tony replied, sticking out his tongue a bit.

"Brat."

"You wouldn't have it any other way." Tony countered, dropping a kiss on Jethro's cheek.

"True. You know, one of the bookcases is ready and I should have number two finished by this weekend. Why don't we move 'em up here Saturday and get your dresser moved across the hall? Not like I'm short of room over there... what?" Jethro questioned when he realized Tony was staring at him intently.

"How the hell do you do that? I mean, I've always suspected you could read all our minds, but having proof... kinda freaks me out."

"Uh-uh. That was *not* what you were standing there thinking about when I showed up."

"Yeah. It was, actually." Tony told him somberly. "I figured moving my clothes was a good idea... but I wasn't sure how you'd feel. Everything is going really well right now and if I took that step... I thought you might see it as too fast... too soon. The last thing I want is to push you."

Reaching up, Jethro tangled his fingers gently into Tony's dark locks.

"Not possible, precious. I went over the cliff all on my own the first time you were brave enough to kiss me. I wouldn't stop the free-fall now even if I had the power. Feels too damn good." he confessed, tugging Tony's head down and placing a lingering kiss on his brow before releasing him.
"Go. Run. I'll have coffee and breakfast waiting when you get back."

Grinning from ear to ear, Tony quickly pressed their mouths together and slipped past, jogging down the corridor toward the stairs. "Hoodie!" Gibbs shouted after him, knowing Tony would deliberately leave the garment at home just to prove that he was strong and healthy enough not to need the extra layer of warmth.

"Aw, Dad!" floated back to him, laced with humor, but also holding a genuine note of irritation.

"Don't gimme any flack, DiNozzo! If I even *think* you're getting sick you won't be going anywhere *near* work, and you better damn well believe Mackenzie will back me up."

There was a significant pause before the reluctant answer met his ears.

"Where is it?"

"In the basket of folded laundry right by the basement door. And put it on, don't just tie it around your waist."

A final grunt drifted up as Tony moved away to comply with the commands. When he heard the front door open and close, Jethro turned so his back was against the hallway wall and slowly slid down until he was sitting on the carpet. After a few deep breaths and several minutes of firm mental self-talk, he finally felt as if his emotions were back under control. Raising his chin, he closed his eyes and contemplated what he was about to do. The main thing that held him back was the self-satisfied smirk he knew Ducky would be sporting if he ever found out. Regardless, Gibbs swallowed, licked his lips and plowed ahead.

"Okay... I'm gonna give this a shot, but don't you dare blame me if it comes out wrong. When Duck said he wanted to take Tony to church, it barely registered. I thought... it'll be good for him. The kid needs more than just us. Something to hold onto can't hurt. If it helps him to think there's a 'higher power', like the twelve-steppers say, let him have that. Not my place to be my usual self... speak my mind and take that away from him. If I spoke up, he'd stop going just to make me happy and for all that I can't see the purpose or the need... the place is good for him."

Pausing for a long moment, Jethro sighed, fisted and relaxed one hand then rested his head back against the wall before continuing. "I've been so pissed at you for so damn long... spent almost fifteen years hating you for what I lost. All I could see was that Shannon believed and it didn't save her or Kelly. Now... now I don't know what the hell to think. The kind of bond I had with them is back, growing inside me again... as strong as it ever was. Stronger, maybe."

Grimacing, Jethro shoved to his feet, both hands now compressed into tight lumps at his sides. "Tony... I love him with everything I am, so if he asks... if he asks I might just give faith a second chance. You do anything to him, though... damn it, if you take him away I won't ever trust you again."

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10:00 A.M. : MANHATTAN

"Yes?"

"I'm ready for the third stage."

"Mmmm. Good. Today?"
"This afternoon."

"Agreed, but there's been a slight change in plans."

"How exactly are you defining slight?"

As he listened to the alterations his employer was proposing, a malevolent smile slowly developed. "No problem. I won't even charge you extra."

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1:30: NCIS

"Uh-huh... right. Okay. We'll be there as soon as we can... I understand. Good... no, you did the right thing. I've got the directions. Yes. Okay."

Hanging up, Tim tore away the notepad page he'd been scribbling on and rose to his feet. It was only then he realized that the other three were staring at him intently, stress written boldly on every face.

"I don't wanna hear this, do I McGee?"

"Uh... probably not, boss. That was the local LEO's around Petersburg. Sounds like our un-sub is at it again."

Both of Gibbs' eyebrows shot up toward his hairline.

"Un-sub?"

"Oh... sorry, I didn't mean to... there was a 'Criminal Minds' marathon on cable last night and... grabbing my gear, boss."

As Tony gathered his things, he tried and failed to keep an excited grin off his face. When Gibbs approached, the younger man's smile turned apologetic.

"I know, this is serious, boss. It's just... I'm back. I'm back..."

"I know. Just hold it in 'till we're done, okay? We get home you can jump an' dance and scream all you want." Gibbs told him, fighting not to show more than a trace of the ear-to-ear smile that wanted to break out in response to Tony's excitement.

"Got it, boss. I know I can figure this out, Gibbs. In from the start, seeing the scene fresh... I can help get this bastard."

"I'm holdin' out hope, DiNozzo. C'mon, let's hit it. Your brother and half-sister are probably already downstairs."

"Hey... can I drive? It's way past time I started again. Can't make you drag me around everywhere for the rest of my life, can I?"

Gibbs hesitated, his stomach clenching and his heart twisting, but after a moment, he pulled out the keys and tossed them to his lover. Tony caught them deftly with one hand and strode to the elevator, never hearing the quiet words that followed him.

"But I want to, Tony. God, how I want to..."
TBC.......
Chapter 28

1:45:
"Director, please... you must calm down."

"Don't call me that, Peter. I warned you to watch your mouth where anyone from this hellhole could hear you. If they find out why you've been coming here, it could all collapse. I won't let that happen..."

"I'm sorry, I just can't help what I feel. The bravery and fortitude you've shown... no one in the world deserves the title more. Least of all that... that charlatan in your office." The visitor growled.

"Peter, stop, damn it!"

"You haven't seen! That little *cretin* has her wrapped around his finger! He comes in late, goes home two hours early..."

"Peter!"

The man seated a few feet away lowered his head and wrung his hands.

"Understood. I'm sorry."

"I know..." she admitted with a heavy sigh. "I know it isn't easy, but you have to hang on. Everything depends on this. I can't do it alone, Peter."

His head came up and he produced a simpering smile.

"Anything for you. Anything."

"Thank you." she offered gently, reaching out to brush his cheek with her fingers. "Now, let's have the update. And minimize the editorializing as much as possible."

"Of course. He was back on full duty as of Monday, but he didn't really get out in the field until yesterday... wait. What am I allowed to call you? It must be respectful and if I can't use your proper title..."

"My name will do fine."

"Full name?"

"If you insist."

"Very well then... Jennifer. To continue...."

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NCIS: 2:15

"Director?"

"Abby. Please, come in. Have a seat."

"You're sure? I'm not interrupting, or anything? If I am, I swear I'll go and I'll never darken your
door again. I know I can be kind of annoying sometimes, but I know how to go away and, despite what you're hearing right now, I also know how to shut up, all you have to do is ask me and you won't hear another word... out of me. Huh."

"You look confused." Mackenzie offered, showing Abby a gentle smile.

"Well... yeah. Nobody lets me do that. *Ever*."

"What, talk yourself out? It doesn't cost me or the agency anything to be patient or to listen. Besides, all you're keeping me from is paperwork and believe me, you're welcome to do that whenever you feel like it."

"Wow. Tony was right, you *are* totally cool!"

"Thank you." Mackenzie chuckled. "Was there something specific you wanted to see me about?"

"Oh... right." Abby responded, hurrying forward and claiming a chair. "We need to get some things straight... you know, just... clarify a few points."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Career Girl Barbie."

"What about her?"

"I can't work if I have to dress like her. Testifying in court, I know I have to look nice and cover up the tats and all, but in the lab, I have to be me... and this is me."

"I have no problem with that. I'd much rather you be comfortable and productive than be held to a standard that's really meant for field agents who have to deal with the public on a daily basis."

"Yes! I *so* agree. Next point is assistants..."

"I'm fully aware of the... Chip incident. What a horrible thing to have happen..."

"A thing... that's what he was alright." Abby snorted. "He sure wasn't human."

"How he ended up here in the first place, I have no clue, but I'm working on finding out. The point is that nothing like that will ever happen again."

"Vow?"

"Solemn."

Abby finally smiled, just a little, and the sight made Sarah feel as if the sun had suddenly peeked out and significantly warmed the room. The delightful sensation broadened the new director's own grin.

"Good. Just one last thing."

"Agent Gibbs?" the older woman guessed quietly.

"Their history... it caused a lot of problems. She wasn't exactly shy about bringing it up, even in front of the rest of us. I know you and Gibbs don't have the same past, but... once burned, you know?"

"I do. He doesn't talk about what they had. I've wondered if he's afraid of how angry he might get if he did..."
"Maybe... probably. I mean... he thought he knew her so well and finding out what she was into with Ziva... I wouldn't be blowing up balloons and singing Happy Birthday, either."

"No... I have to agree with you there." Mackenzie conceded with a discreet laugh. "Hey... do you have to get right back or can you stay a short while?"

"There's nothing stat-worthy going in the lab right now. I can hang out."

Mackenzie studied Abby intently for a moment before replying.

"It's so interesting the way you come up with brand new words on the spot. You must keep up with the sci-tech journals and all that... I ran across an article a few weeks ago about the research being done on people who seem to be able to access the creative areas of their brains as easily as they can the analytical..."

"I did, I saw that! I couldn't put it down!"

"What did you think about their conclusions?"

"You mean about those people being a sign of where human brain development is headed in the future? It's fascinating, but kinda depressing at the same time. The idea that it's happening because of what we're doing to the environment... that for all of us to survive we'll need people who think that way? That makes me majorly sad."

"No argument there. Scared me a little too."

"Well, yeah... but you have to go back to..."

As Abby began to get seriously enthusiastic about the subject matter, Mackenzie sat forward and leaned her elbows on the desktop, eager to hear what the sparkling lab-tech would say and excited to see how well she herself could keep up, if it was at all possible. Every word Abby spoke revealed a little more of what the new director desperately needed to know and the former Marine soaked it all in gratefully, commenting as little as she could manage and still meet the definition of a conversation. It took nearly an hour for the topic to exhaust itself and by that time, both women were close to being in the same condition.

"Oh wow! It's been so long. I'm sorry..." Abby suddenly exclaimed, rising to her feet. Mackenzie stood as well, holding out a placating hand.

"It's okay. Like I said I needed the break. Not to mention I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I'm really looking forward to doing this again."

"Me too... a lot. I uh... I better get back. Thanks... for everything. I feel a lot better."

"Glad I could reassure you. You and I will do fine, Abby. I won't interfere with your lab or how you feel you need to run it..."

"... but if I need help, I have to promise to let you know. Works for me. Come down sometime. I'll show you around, introduce you to the gang and Bert."

"Bert... pet lab rat?"

"Nope. You have to see him in person."

"Okay. Soon, I promise."
Abby giggled, nodded and turned away, bouncing her way out of the office. Mackenzie laughed as well and dropped back into her chair, wondering if it was something in her genes that kept leading her to places where she was surrounded by eccentric, endearing co-workers. Sighing, she realized that Gibbs and his team already felt as much like family as the group at JAG.

"Here I go again..." she mumbled under her breath as she re-focused on her paperwork, but she was still smiling.

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PETERSBURG: 3:00

"What, McGee?"

"I know this is the last thing you wanna hear right now, Boss..."

"Then why the hell are you about to say it?"

"Uh... because there's no other choice?"

Gibbs sighed heavily, dropped his chin to his chest and waved at the younger man to continue. "It's practically identical to the other two scenes. No trace on the victim or in the car, no debris anywhere in the area, even casual trash we can be pretty sure has nothing to do with the crime... we've got nothing."

Gibbs rounded on the younger man with a deep growl and a fiery glare, knowing he was unfairly taking out his frustration on Tim, but unable to stop himself.

"We've got another dead sailor. That's nothing to you, McGee? Huh?"

"No... of course, not, Boss... I just..."

"Go on... go find the other two and bring 'em back here. Maybe they found something useful..."

"Right, Boss. Okay."

Tim reappeared a few moments later with Max in tow.

"Where's Tony?"

"No clue." Max reported, looking over her shoulder at the large open space behind her and the wooded stretch that bordered it. "He said he was doing one more sweep, just to be totally sure his sketch of the scene was accurate. He walked off... I haven't seen him since."

Jethro's hands briefly went numb and his heartbeat ramped up suddenly.

"Where did you last see him, Vendazzo? Show me exactly."

"I'm sure he's fine. He was just walking the perimeter, that's all..."

"Damn it, Agent Vendazzo..."

"Okay, okay. Right over here..."

Several minutes of increasingly frantic searching yielded no results for Gibbs or Max, but Tim had more luck, even though he couldn't manage to think of it in those terms.
"Boss! Look..."

Gibbs jogged up to where McGee was kneeling and carefully examined the section of disturbed leaves and soil his young agent was pointing to. "I don't see any signs of struggle, but it definitely looks as if somebody fell right here... and there are two sets of footprints and some drag marks..."

In a flash the numbness returned to Gibbs, accompanied by paralyzing anxiety and a rapidly spreading chill. He tried to move, to take some kind of action, but the only thing he seemed able to do was speak.

"Photos, McGee. Vendazzo, you keep looking for him. If he's still out here, he could... he might need help. And call back to the office... get some backup out here."

"On my way."

As Tim ran to get the camera back out of its case, Gibbs dropped slowly to one knee and reached out a shaking hand toward the spot Tim had found.

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TBC......
Forty minutes later, Ducky found Gibbs still in the same place and approached cautiously, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. The fact that it wasn't instantly shrugged off only increased his worry.

"Timothy called and said I was needed. Jethro... I'm so very sorry."

"For what? You know something I don't?" the other man responded darkly.

"No, of course not..."

"Then keep your regrets to yourself, damn it. DiNozzo's fine... he'll be fine." Gibbs asserted, trying, and failing, to rise to his feet, but subverted by his bad knee. He hissed in pain and swore vividly under his breath, prompting Ducky to slide his hand from Gibbs' shoulder down to his elbow.

"Slowly... slowly my friend. That leg will be stiff after so long..."

While he grudgingly accepted the assistance to gain his footing, Gibbs then pulled away, just as Ducky had anticipated, and struggled over to sag against a nearby tree. To see his close friend shutting down, just when he had begun to blossom for the first time in years, broke Ducky's heart nearly as much as Tony's disappearance and the elderly man felt compelled to step near Gibbs once more. "We will find him, Jethro. No matter what it takes, we will find him. You have to believe that."

"I do, Duck, I do. I'll find Tony... then I'll find out who did this." Gibbs asserted with a growl, straightening and initially lurching back toward the crime scene, his gait smoothing out and his speed increasing as his muscles warmed and his knee loosened. Ducky did his best to keep up, but he was swiftly losing the battle until Gibbs stopped and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Jethro..."

"Don't. Last thing I need is a lecture. This son of a bitch thinks he just took it to the next level... he doesn't know anything. Ball's in my court, now... my game, my rules. He has *no* idea... McGee!"

"Right here, Boss." Tim responded, jogging over to meet Gibbs.

"Anything new?"

"Another anonymous 911 report. They tried to trace it this time, but something went wrong..."

"You've got the pictures of the area you found?"

"Yeah. Already uploaded to Abby."

"Then go home."

"Boss..."

"Don't argue with me, damn it. You and Vendazzo've done all you could for now. Get outta here."

"Okay, Boss... I'll be in early tomorrow."

"I know."
Fighting to temper his distraught expression into something more hopeful, Tim nodded and turned away. Ducky made one more attempt at comfort and reassurance, but his efforts were rebuffed even more curtly than before.

"Please, Jethro... don't do what you're thinking."

"Quit, Ducky. If all you've got is sympathy, you need to get the hell away from me. Matter of fact, that's a good idea. You go home to Gerald. He's probably wondering where you are."

"I know how much you've lost in your life, Gibbs. Or have you forgotten who was with you in the depths of your grief over Kelly and Shannon? Sinking into rage nearly destroyed your life and your career the last time! It certainly did you no good and it won't help you find Anthony now."

"I could never forget those four days, Duck. I'm just never doing it again. Go home."

"Yes... you know where I am if you need a willing ear... or the basement."

"I know. You got the body back?"

"I did indeed, though only just. I'll start on it first thing. Timothy will have to try very hard to reach work before I do."

"Good. Duck... what I said..."

"I understand, if anyone does. Gerald and I will be praying for the both of you... with everything we have."

Gibbs held up a hand in farewell, but refused to keep the conversation going. Ducky finally moved off to wait in the truck for his friend to join him. Once he was sure the other man was gone, Gibbs turned his gaze up and glared daggers at the sky.

"I warned you..."

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NCIS: ABBY'S LAB

"Of course. No, I'm merely his representative. And hers, that's correct. Excellent. The authorization paperwork should be on its way to you soon. Yes, both parties are very excited. Your willingness and cooperation is so appreciated... no, thank you. I'm so glad I caught you before you left for the day. Yes... absolutely. Have a wonderful evening."

Clicking her cell phone closed, Abby grinned wickedly and performed a few celebratory dance moves. Her joy only lasted until she heard her name called, however. Spinning around she rushed to Tim's side and grasped his hand.

"Timmy. How much did you hear?"

"Not much. Abby..."

Good! I need to keep this secret a little while longer..."

"Abby..."

"You won't tell anybody, right? I know usually I can trust you, but I have to ask. I have to be sure..."
"Abby! Stop, just for a minute... please."

Belatedly, Abby noticed the pain in Tim's eyes and instantly sobered.

"Oh... oh no. What is it? What happened?"

McGee stared at her, mouth open and jaw working, but he couldn't seem to speak. Abby waited for a few seconds then dragged him to her office, pushed him into a chair and crouched in front of him. "Timmy? Talk to me, baby. You're scaring me..."

"Yeah... me too. I'm sorry. I just..."

"I can tell. I'm still not saying it." she asserted, though she favored him with a shaky smile, hoping to calm him and finally draw the information out. Tim chuckled weakly in response.

"I remember... we pinky swore. Neither of us is ever allowed to say 'It can't be that bad.'

"So don't. But I have to know, now... I have to."

Tim pulled in a deep breath, held it for a moment and released it slowly before he was able to make a start.

"The new crime scene..."

"The guy who's been forcing sailors off the road. I know, Bossman called and told me and I've got all the pictures. The last ones kinda confused me..."

"They weren't from the original scene. I swear, she didn't mean it. It wasn't Max's fault..."

"Mean what? Mean what, McGee?" Abby pushed, her eyes now sparking with anger.

"Those last photos... we think someone... oh God..."

"What did she do?"

"Nothing... she didn't know, none of us did!" Tim shouted, jumping up and pacing back into the lab, Abby right on his heels. "How could we? Tony was fine, how were we supposed to know we shouldn't leave him by himself?"

"Tony..." she whispered. The pain in her voice halted Tim in his tracks and got him turned around to face her again.

"He vanished, Abs. Somebody took him. It looked like they knocked him to the ground... those pictures were of the spot where we think he fell."

After a long, tense moment Abby reached up and touched Tim's hair then collapsed forward into his arms.

"No... not now, Timmy... not now..."

"Why?" he asked, pushing her away a little so he could see her face. "Abby, what's this secret you were talking about earlier?"

"I can't tell you. I can't tell anybody yet."

"Abby..." he warned, but she wouldn't relent.
"I can't. It's a really good thing..."

"It can't be so great if you think you have to keep it from your family..."

"It is, it's just not for sure yet and I don't wanna jinx it."

"Oh, no, no. You're doing something sneaky that'll get both of us in trouble. You for doing it and me for knowing about it and not telling."

"You don't know. I didn't tell you." Abby protested.

"Maybe not the whole thing, but in general! Whatever it is, call it off..."

"No! You'll see... when Tony gets back, you'll see." she retorted, shoving away and stalking over to her computer to study the crime scene photos.

"Oh man, Abby..."

"Go home, Timmy. I'll meet you there later."

"Abs, please come with me now. You know when you do stuff like this, it never turns out well."

"What I know... is that you trust me, Tim. Now go home."

McGee sighed, hesitated then spoke again.

"You swear you'll come? I'm gonna need somebody to help me not think too much... and make sure I sleep. You're the only one who knows how to do that..."

Abby moved back to where he waited and embraced him fiercely.

"I'll be there, I promise. I have a couple things to finish, but then I'll be there. I can't be alone tonight, either."

"He's okay... I feel it. Tony's okay."

Abby nodded against his shoulder.

"If you say it, I believe you. Brothers know that stuff."

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TBC.......
Chapter 30

PRIVATE LIVES: TIM

Staring at the house he'd just pulled up in front of, Tim frowned slightly and switched his attention back to the cell phone in his hand.

"Yes... I'm fine. Of course I still need you... no, I won't leave you in the lurch, I swear. I'm not canceling, I just need to shift the timing back a few hours, okay? Remember I told you about the woman Ducky arranged for me to... the instrument maker, right. Well, I called on the spur of the moment and she said she was free and I could start tonight. I don't know... working with the wood at the foundation... it calmed me down and made me forget everything else. I decided I needed that *and* you, tonight, okay? You'll still come to my place later? I know, it's for you as much as me... okay. Thanks. About ten? Good. Love you. Bye."

Stepping out of the car, Tim locked up, slid his phone and keys into a pocket and took a deep breath. In spite of the approval of both Gibbs and his friend, the younger man wasn't at all sure he could do it. His creative outlet was writing, not working with his hands, but for the past month or so the novel he'd been putting together had been resisting his attempts to complete it. He'd wondered if perhaps trying something else, something totally unfamiliar to him, would shake his muses loose, so when Ducky had proposed lessons with an instrument maker, Tim had jumped at the chance. Now, he was suddenly questioning his decision.

"Tim?"

McGee jumped at hearing his name spoken, but recovered quickly and turned to find a slender, older woman with short blond hair smiling gently at him from the open doorway. "You are Tim McGee?"

"Yeah... I mean, yes, I am. Nice to meet you, Miss Foster."

"Please, Susannah. It's what all my students call me. Come on in."

"Okay. Susannah. Do you, um... do you teach a lot of people to do this?" he asked uncertainly as he followed her into the house.

"Not really. Two or three a year at the most. It's an intense learning curve and I couldn't handle any more than that." she explained, leading him through the kitchen and out to her garage.

"How... how intense? I mean..."

"I wasn't trying to scare you." she responded with a smile as she flicked the light on. "You just need to know that not everyone is cut out for this. It takes focus, dedication, patience and the willingness to listen. I'm finding that fewer and fewer people possess all those qualities these days."

Tim replied without taking his gaze away from the workshop.

"I've worked with computers most of my life. I think I qualify."

"Yes, I think you might." She agreed with a low chuckle, drawing his attention back to her finally. :I'm sorry. It's just..."

"No, no. It's fine. Showing more interest in the tools and materials than you do in me is a good
thing... for now. First test: go to the small pile of wood over there and pick out a piece.”

Tim gazed at her curiously, but she merely waved him on and he eventually did as she’d asked. For a long stretch of minutes he studied the pile without actually touching it, just letting his gaze move slowly over the different choices. Following that inspection, with his lower lip firmly clamped between his teeth, he began to remove certain pieces one at a time and run his hands over them carefully. It took almost thirty minutes of selecting, handling and discarding before he found one that met his approval. Hesitantly, he turned and walked back to Susannah with the chunk in his hands.

"Here. This one."

"Uh-huh." She murmured, accepting his offering. "Why?"

"I don't know. It felt... right. I liked it more than any of the others."

"What else do you do, Tim? Off the job, I mean."

"I write. I've got a novel almost finished."

"On a computer, I suppose."

"No, actually."

"Okay. Keep going." She prompted, wondering why he was hesitating. "I won't laugh, I promise."

"You'd be the first. I... I use a typewriter."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Electric?"

"Nope. Manual."

"Wow. Shows a respect for the past and tells me you're not afraid of doing things the hard way. We're on, Tim McGee. Welcome to a year of the toughest, most exacting and most rewarding work you'll ever do."

"You've never worked for my boss."

"That must be the famous Gibbs Ducky always talks about. I've heard stories. I'll try to live up to the levels of stress and the screaming fits you're used to." She joked.

"Thanks. And thanks so much for this opportunity."

"Save that for after you graduate, apprentice."

"Right, of course. Would you... I mean, you wouldn't be willing to teach me to play, too, would you?"

"Lordy, you are ambitious, aren't you? I won't do it. Too much of a distraction from what you're here to learn. I'll give you the name of someone who can, though. He's practically a master musician and he won't charge you an arm and a leg."

"Hope not. Until and unless my book sells, I can only afford a couple of fingers and maybe a
Susannah laughed heartily, but sobered at Tim's next question. "What kind of schedule am I looking at, here? What exactly do you expect from me in this deal?"

"You're committing to two nights a week, three hours a night for at least the next eight months. I expect the best out of you every time and no excuses. If you bail on a lesson, your life or someone else's better hang in the balance. I realize with what you do, that's a distinct possibility..."

"More than I like to think about sometimes."

"Still, like I said... I need you to be dedicated to this. I called Joe Youcha for confirmation, you know. He said you've at least got the touch. Don says you have the brains, the heart and the attention span. It's up to you, though. Final answer?"

"Yes. Absolutely yes."

"Good. Let's get going, then."

"Everything went as planned?"

"Basically. I had to improvise a little, but no harm done."

"Secure?"

"Absolutely."

"I hope it's clear that in this case death isn't such a concern. Not as long as you get what I want first."

"Understood."

"Extracting information *is* supposed to be your specialty."

"Not to mention one of my great pleasures."

"Yes... I don't need to know about that."

"I shouldn't expect to see you here, then." He asked dryly, slightly mocking the other man and not bothering to try and conceal it. His employer, however, was oblivious as usual.

"Why would I bother? You're the expert in such things. I trust you can get the job done expediently and accomplish the clean up without any help from me. Contact me only when it's finished."

"I was going to insist on that myself. Interruptions make me cranky and when I get cranky my subjects may end up... damaged more severely than I planned."

"Didn't you hear? I said I don't want details."

The man on the other end of the line chuckled maliciously.

"No stomach, no backbone. Guess that's why you're the cash flow and I am... what I am."

"And never the twain shall meet. Go do your job." He spat, slapping the phone receiver back into its cradle with a decisive thud. Pulling the cell phone away from his ear, the other stared at it in disgust.
for a moment before shoving it back in his pocket. Storming across the large, dim space he stopped at a locked door and gazed through its tiny glass panel at the unconscious form on the floor. Shaking with fury, he spoke quietly, but with intense bitterness and clear purpose.

"Weak, stupid useless.... You just wait, little man. For the crime of birthing such an abomination, I may take part of my payment in *your* blood... once I'm done spilling his."

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11:15 P.M.: DUCKY'S HOME

"It simply... isn't... fair." Ducky forced out through clenched teeth. Grunting, he hurled a ceramic toothbrush holder at the wall they'd designed for that purpose. Hands on his lover's shoulders, Gerald released a barely audible sigh and squeezed a little.

"You're right, it isn't."

"They were doing so well! I even had hopes that Jethro might agree to come with us one of these Sundays... and now this. If we can't... a second loss of this magnitude could well destroy him."

"We won't let that happen. You need one more?"

"Yes. Please..."

"Here you go. After this, I think we should get to bed, though, okay? It's pretty late."

"Hmmm? Oh... I suppose it is. Alright. Just one more..."

A last vehement expulsion of air, a soft curse and another piece of garage sale crockery meet its untimely end against the structure at the far end of the basement.

"Better?"

"No... not really. It will have to do, however." Ducky admitted as they moved toward the elevator. "I expect I'll need to be even more alert and aware than usual tomorrow. The children will likely be turning to me for reassurance when, absorbed in his grief and anger, their ersatz father pushes them away."

"That sounds like Gibbs..."

"I dearly wish it didn't."

"The fool... why doesn't somebody slap him upside the head once?"

Ducky produced a brief, astonished laugh and smiled wearily up at his companion.

"I don't think anyone's ever dared to contemplate it, never mind *do* it. For all we know the universe may just take that as it's cue that the end has come and begin contracting in on itself."

"He puts unnecessary stress on the kids tomorrow, I'll be hard pressed not to test that theory..."

"You're coming with me to work?" Ducky asked, pausing and gazing at Gerald in surprise.

"I need to get reacquainted with the morgue sometime soon, right? Check out what's been moved where, get familiar with any changes in procedure. No better time to do it than when my second family needs an extra set of shoulders to lean on. Besides... I could never leave you alone when
you're feeling so much at loose ends."

"Have I told you what an amazing man you are?"

"Not in the last five minutes, no."

"Then let's go upstairs, shall we, and I'll correct that grievous error..."

"Sounds good."

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TBC........
Chapter 31

FOLLOWING MORNING: SIX A.M.

Stepping inside the room where his prisoner lay sprawled on the floor, still seemingly unaware of his surroundings, Mitchell Rossmore grinned and shut the door firmly behind him. The sharp click and slight ring of metal against metal didn't even bring a tremor from the other man, but his captor took nothing for granted. A seasoned agent, especially one who'd trained under someone with the background and purported temperament of Jethro Gibbs, wouldn't twitch if he played the William Tell Overture.

Instead of wasting time hoping DiNozzo would slip up and react to an overt assault on one of his other senses, he looked for the subtler physical signs that Tony couldn't control so easily, such as slightly uneven breathing and muscle tension that shouldn't be there. Finding those and more, Rossmore swiftly moved to Tony's side, knelt and spoke quietly.

"I know you're awake. You and I have business to conduct, so you can give it up, turn over and face me... or the pain can start a lot sooner than either of us wants it to."

He got no response, so he tried again. "You've doubled my workload on this job, screwed with my Sunday and forced me to kill... something I don't do lightly. I'm already angry. You *don't* want to make it any worse by continuing to play this stupid game. Open your eyes. Now."

When Tony still refused to comply, Rossmore growled softly, shook his head and murmured under his breath. "Right. Your choice..."

A moment later he laid one hand over the severe burns his stun-gun had left on his captive's neck and pressed down hard. The move not only sent a jolt of pain lancing through Tony, it drove his face into the floor, interfering with his breathing. Finally acknowledging that his first attempt at resistance had failed, Tony arched up just a bit, signaling the other man that, even if he gave in on no other point, he would accede to this demand. Though reluctant to let go, Rossmore knew that killing at this stage, satisfying as it might personally be, would lose him the rest of the money he'd been promised. Softly sighing with regret, he released his hold, privately enjoying the labored breaths Tony struggled not to let his jailer hear.

"Man... the stun-gun was overkill, don't you think?" Tony offered as he pushed up onto shaky knees, flipped around and sat down, facing the other man. "You didn't have to leave the damn thing on me that long..."

A brutal slap abruptly halted Tony's words and rocked his head to one side. Slowly shifting his gaze back to Rossmore, he held his tongue and raised a questioning eyebrow instead.

"I don't tolerate cursing."

Tony licked tentatively at his freely bleeding lower lip and nodded.

"Understood."

"For your sake, I hope so. Every repeat will earn stronger punishment. Hands above your head."

Tony hesitated, carefully studying the other man's face for any sign that he would tolerate further rebellion. Finding nothing, not even anger or disdain, the younger man slowly capitulated, raising his arms.
His reasonable, generally calm attitude lasted through the shackles that were snapped tightly around his wrists a moment later, but when Rossmore's next move was to retrieve a small jackknife from his pocket, panic flooded Tony and he scrabbled with his feet, desperate to get as far away as the chains attached to the steel cuffs would allow. "A healthy sense of fear. That's good to know." The bigger man acknowledged. As he slowly exposed the blade, however, an alternative came to mind, inducing a nasty grin. "Then again... maybe there's something special here? A reason you're so afraid? Mmmm... bonus for me, unfortunate for you. Knives are one of my favorite tools." He confessed, twisting the handle back and forth and studying the patterns of light on the glistening steel instrument. "When you have the luxury of drawing out the agony, they can be exquisitely precise... or you can let your issues have free rein and go for quick, brutal and messy. All depends on your mood at the time."

Rossmore glanced up from contemplating his weapon to find the chains had reached their limit. Despite knowing this, Tony was shaking, wide-eyed and still pulling, frantic to escape what was, in his eyes, a far greater threat than the man who had abducted him. He fought to speak, to plead that he would do whatever Rossmore asked if only he'd put the knife away, but his palate was utterly dry and his throat was so tight it ached. The other read his face and offered a dark chuckle and darker words. "Relax. I said you won't be hurt yet. Maybe not at all if you cooperate, and that extends right up to how you leave this world when we're finished. I can cause pain like you've never imagined or it can be relatively easy. It's on you. All you have to do is answer a few questions. Nod if you understand."

Tony had to haul in and force out a series of deep breaths, but he was able to comply. "Alright. First question: can you hold still?"

This received another jerky nod. "Do it."

Clenching his eyes shut, the young man envisioned the movie theater and repeated the routine Lewiston had taught him until he felt his muscle tremors begin to ease up. When he sensed Rossmore step close, however, Tony tensed again and struggled not to shy away or flinch, even though all his captor did was deftly slice the fabric of Tony's dress shirt until it could be easily pulled off and tossed aside. "Better. Second question: Why did you react like that?"

"I can't." Tony croaked. "Hardly told anybody I *trust*... can't tell some guy I don't know."

"Oh, you will, eventually... but for now I'll let it slide. Last question, and the most important one of all: Who have you been talking to?"

Tony felt a heady mixture of fear and anger surge up from deep within him and he shifted, trying to sit up straighter. When the emotions hit his brain moments later, he couldn't suppress the recklessness that momentarily swamped him.

" *He* did this?! If my father thinks... no. I wouldn't tell him, I'm not telling you. Go to hell..."

This time, Rossmore's penalty for cursing was a fast, solid punch to the solar plexus. The chain length rendering him unable to curl forward and double over, Tony settled for pulling his knees up close to his body. His breathing was suspended for several seconds as he rode out the shock, but it gradually resumed, though pained wheezes were all he could manage at first. "I warned you to watch your mouth. Trust me, you don't want to know what the next level is, so I'd start listening when I tell you the rules. Now... answer the question."

Tony blanched, but his common sense had begun to reassert itself somewhat, so he chose not to take the risk of speaking again and merely shook his head. "Rethink this course of action, Michael. Walk this path and you'll hurt more than you ever believed a human being could."
Hearing his captor use the detested name only steeled Tony's resolve not to let his father win. This time there was no gesture, no indication of assent or refusal. All he gave the man towering above him was a blank stare. "Alright. You won't believe me, I know, but I regret that things have to happen this way. Not that any of it on my conscience, of course. You made your decision. Whatever you suffer from here on out is entirely your own fault..."

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TEN-THIRTY: NCIS

As he rode up on the elevator, Ducky frowned and stared fixedly at the floor numbers, as if he could affect the speed of his ascent with just the power of his mind. Gerald had, prudently, stayed down in the morgue, fully aware how irritated his lover was with him. After their late night, and knowing the stress Ducky was under, the younger man had turned off the alarm clock and allowed the doctor to sleep in. Now the M.E. was anxiously contemplating what mental and emotional shape the children might be in and wishing the elevator had a turbo boost switch.

Finally, he reached the third floor. The moment the doors opened he was out and hurrying to the rescue, or so he thought. When he came in sight of Gibbs' area of the office, Ducky was pleasantly surprised at what he found. He watched Jethro clap Max gently on the back and offer her a momentary smile before moving across the aisle to inspect what Tim was doing. His progress clearly met with his supervisor's approval, as he also received a quick grin and a shoulder squeeze.

A moment later, Gibbs looked up and met his old friend's surprised gaze.

"Yeah, Duck? You need something?"

"No... not really. I simply... I suppose I thought..."

"You were worried I'd have the second B on full display and these two would be hiding under their desks?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"What, you think I don't learn my lessons? Nobody's ever had to put me back on track more than once. Outside of marriage."

"Hmmm... true, but that found a remedy in Tony. " Ducky replied, smiling lightly, despite how weighed down his heart became at even the mention of the missing young man's name. He watched carefully as Jethro fought off his own roiling emotions, relaxing only when his friend did.

"Damn right it did. He finds out I growled even once..."

"... you'll find yourself on the other end of one of your famous brain-rattlers. Justifiably, I might add." Ducky teased.

"I'm sure. You just checking up on the kids or did you have somethin' to tell me?"

"The former. Oh, you might like to know Gerald is here for the day. He wanted to reacquaint himself with any equipment and policy changes in the morgue and such."

"Abby know yet?"

"I left it to him. That way he can't blame me for any well-meant bruises he incurs."
Gibbs chuckled.

"Like he would. Tell him I'll be down to see him later, okay? I don't wanna walk away from the search right now..."

"He'll be more than willing to come to you, Jethro, no worries about that."

"He must be really happy to be back." Gibbs commented vaguely, never taking his eyes from Tim's screen.

"Very much so. As he'll be replacing me eventually, there are mixed feelings, of course... but as I said at the party, this is what's best for both of us."

"Mmm-hmm."

Realizing he was getting no attention whatsoever anymore, Ducky decided to go, but left Gibbs a gentle warning as he turned away.

"Right. Now that I know the children aren't being terrorized, I can return to my corner of the world in peace. If you should feel the urge to begin running facial recognition software..."

Gibbs finally glanced back at his oldest friend, his gaze sharp, clear and discerning, and the other man knew he understood.

"Message received. Thanks, Duck."

"Not necessary. We almost lost you during that period, as well. I watched you suffer and didn't say a word... but I won't do it a second time, so don't ask."

"Not gonna happen. Got too many other pairs of eyes on me this time."

Ducky smiled and began to move back to the elevator, but saw Gerald approaching and paused.

"Hello. Abigail let you go so quickly?"

"She wasn't there. I found a note on the doors to the lab that said she took today off."

"That isn't like her... not at all. It must have been something very important."

"Wouldn't she have told you? I thought she confided in you about pretty much everything."

"Yes... usually she does. I can't imagine what she could be up to..."

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"Well, the paperwork all seems to be in order, Miss Sciuto. Everything should be ready on our end in a few days. A week, at most."

"That's great. I can't wait to do this. I know it'll work, it just has to. You can't know how excited I am!" she enthused, bouncing in her chair.

"I can make a guess." The woman across from her replied with a soft laugh as she rose to her feet and extended her hand. Abby stood as well, vibrated for a few seconds in indecision and then threw caution to the winds, moved around the desk and enveloped the other woman in a hug.

"Thank you *so* much for all you've done."
"I appreciate the sentiment, but we haven't even started..."

"It'll all work out perfect, you'll see. I have a sense about these things." Abby assured her as she pulled away.

"I hope you're right."

"You have my cell number?"

"I do."

"Not that they'd make a *huge* deal about it at work, it's just, personal calls... you know."

"Understood."

"Call me the minute. The very minute. Promise?"

"As soon as all the ducks are in a row, I'll get in touch."

Abby squeaked happily and twirled, her pigtails flying wildly, then ran out the door. The other woman snorted and laughed behind her hand.

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TBC........
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Okay... say hello to another OC. After a sudden burst of inspiration as I started this, I was planning on a CM x-over, but quickly realized that wouldn't quite work. Instead I decided that CM (in this universe anyway) is based on real FBI agents, one of whom you'll meet below.

12:45 NCIS:

Gibbs seriously contemplated slamming shut the folder in front of him and escaping to the gym on the lower levels to find something he could beat on and not get reprimanded or jailed. Instead, he closed the file slowly and looked for the phone number he'd set aside earlier. He had to spend a few minutes digging under loose papers and slippery mountains of rigid manila, but eventually he found it. Lifting the receiver, he dialed quickly, grinning when he heard the familiar voice on the other end.

"Hey... who else would it be? Dead? No. Felt like it once or twice lately... really, I'm good. Guess I don't, do I. You wouldn't either... Professional. Need a consult on a case. I thought I could get a handle on it like always... but before that could happen it spilled over onto my team. Tony. Yeah, I know... I told him. It's great... it was. No, not that. He's... he went missing. Yesterday afternoon. I don't know... look, you had lunch yet? Meet me? Yeah, at the usual place. Irritating, annoying, fussbudget... Okay, okay. Yes, I'll be having more than coffee. Thanks. Ten minutes. I do not drive like... did I mention irritating and annoying? Fine, twenty."

Still smiling, Gibbs hung up, rose and turned to grab his jacket, but stopped mid-motion and sobered when he found Mackenzie standing at the entrance to the bullpen.

"Director."

"Any news?"

"Not yet."

"Damn." She said forcefully, her expression darkening. Gibbs hid a renewed smile by turning his face away, but she chuckled and brushed aside his effort at chivalry. "Bad habit for someone in my position. No excuses."

"Better than protocol, platitudes and political correctness. Lettin' fly with a curse now an' then just shows you're human."

"One more thing we agree on. You look like you're headed out."

"Takin' a break. I'm gonna meet an old friend... hopefully get some insight that'll point me in the right direction."

"You think the case and Tony's abduction are connected?"

"Yeah. Don't know why..."
"You don't have to know or explain. I trust your gut as much as you do, Gibbs. Whatever you think will bring him back, you have my official blessing."

"Up to and including?"

"Beyond, if that's what it takes. Not like I haven't done it myself more than once."

"I know." Gibbs replied cryptically as he headed for the elevators. Sarah watched him go with a sigh, praying intently that whoever he was meeting would give him what he needed.

As Gibbs pushed through the door of the small café, he paused, looking for a familiar face. Spotting him first, the other man rose and moved to greet Gibbs, grasping his elbow firmly.

"Jethro. It's been too long."

"Not all me, Jon. If I could get you to take five minutes away from your office over at the BAU..."

"Like you're not the poster-boy for why there needs to be a workaholics anonymous." His companion chided gently

"Kindred spirits."

"From the first. It really is good to see you."

"Yeah. Wish it didn't have to be about something like this..."

"So do I. C'mon, let's sit and you can tell me what's going on."

Leading Jethro back to the table he'd been occupying, he watched with a worried frown as the other man dropped heavily into a chair and instantly slumped forward, elbows braced on the gleaming wooden surface. "I am so tempted to launch into a full profile, right now."

"You added to your resume since I saw you last? Now it's Jonah Dunn; chef, master profiler and psychic?"

"Who needs ESP when I have your face to study?"

For several minutes, Gibbs' only response was deep, slightly erratic breathing, but finally he shook his head, grimaced and spoke up.

"I'm not supposed to fall in love, Jon. Every time I do... every time something really good drops into my lap..."

"... the universe takes it away. I know you don't believe that, Jethro."

"Not the universe."

"I would say God, but you've never been very religious."

"I'm still not." Gibbs intoned with such bitterness that Jonah's eyes widened a bit. "God, karma... call it whatever the hell you want. I just know somebody, somewhere made a rule that I can't be happy."

"Now I'm really concerned. It isn't like you to play the blame game..."
"I'm not in the mood to be analyzed, Jon. Can we just get to what I came here for?"

"We will talk about it later, you know that."

"Yeah, damn it, I know. After I find Tony."

"Fine with me. Now tell me about this guy."

For the next half-hour, as one drank coffee and the other tea, Jonah let Gibbs talk without interrupting, waiting patiently through the inevitable pauses he had come to expect from a man who was unused to speaking more than absolutely necessary. When Jethro seemed to be finished, the other man spoke up at last. "Wow... this guy sounds like somebody I wouldn't mind taking down myself. Now that I know the facts... what are you asking?"

"First off, is he a serial?"

"Could be, but if so, he's got a specific interest in your team or a heavy-duty grudge. The bumper cars ploy was designed to draw you out."

"He couldn't know we'd be put on that first case."

"It's likely he manipulated that too, somehow. You should look into the 911 call a little deeper."

Pulling out his notepad, Gibbs jotted that idea down.

"Max said it felt planned... like the guy wanted to see what we'd do, how we'd work the scene."

"So he'd know the best way to isolate Tony."

Gibbs looked up suddenly, his gaze sharpening.

"You think this was about him?"

"My professional opinion? Yes."

"Not a serial... a mercenary doing what he was hired to do."

"That sounds right. I know that look, Jethro. You just came up with a name."

"Yeah... but I've got no proof."

"Then we better finish up lunch so you can get back and start collecting some. Who's Max, by the way?"

"You feel like a consulting fee?"

"You kidding? I'm not turning down a chance to meet this famous team of yours."

"Good. I'll introduce you when we get there. You'll like her."

"Her?"

"When we get there, I said. Can't wait for you to meet Tim McGee. He's a big fan of the show they based on you guys."

Jonah laughed heartily.
"I can't watch it. He does know there's more angst and drama in one episode than we see in six months, right?"

"Probably. He's a smart kid. Does things with those damn computers I never could."

"You know who I wanna meet first? Your new boss-lady. All the stories I've heard... she sounds like a total character."

Gibbs smirked, snorted and raised his hand to catch the attention of their waitress, but otherwise chose not to respond.

2:15: NCIS

When the pair strolled into the bullpen, Abby was perched on the edge of Tim's desk, clasping one of his hands tightly between her own, her gaze intently locked into his. They weren't speaking, but Gibbs knew that didn't mean there was no communication going on. Max looked up as he and Jonah passed, a curious, but wary, expression on her face.

"Boss?"

"Vendazzo."

"New recruit?" she asked evenly, though he could see in her eyes she would very quickly get agitated if she didn't like the answer. Jonah laughed and both Max and Gibbs relaxed.

"I look that young still? Hallelujah..."

"I wouldn't call you ancient."

"Thank God for that. Jonah Dunn." He offered quietly, approaching and holding out his hand. Max accepted it readily, rising to her feet to greet him.

"Maxine... Max."

"Nice to meet you."

"Yeah... um, so... are you?"

"I've been recruited, but only to help find Tony. I usually work over at the FBI in the Behavioral Analysis unit."

This announcement swiftly brought Tim out of his Abby-induced stupor.

"You do? I mean, of course you do, you just said it... I can't believe... you don't know..."

As Tim continued to ramble, Jonah looked back to Gibbs, who was now at his desk gathering the files on the assaults.

"McGee?" he asked, grinning.

"How'd you ever guess?" Jethro snarked, passing off the folders as he walked by, headed toward the stairs. "Introduce yourself around while I go upstairs and get you approved."
"When your comp-tech winds down, will do."

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TBC......
Chapter 33

In the middle of one more intensive search through records, (public, private and those he would've been in deepest hot water for accessing, had anyone found out) the words doubled and tripled in front of Tim and he had to pause, closing and rubbing his eyes. When he opened them again, the desk calendar caught his attention and he groaned under his breath. He had to speak to Gibbs about what he'd just realized, but, even taking into account the older man's current gentleness and patience with all of them, Tim was reluctant. Still, he knew it had to be done, so he waited for a lull in the conversation between Gibbs and Jonah, cleared his throat and spoke up.

"Ummm... Boss?"

"What, McGee? C'mon, spit it out."

"It's Wednesday."

"Yeah. And?"

"It's way past noon. He... he'll be calling any minute. I thought you might wanna... head him off at the pass."

Now it was Gibbs' turn to close his eyes and breathe deeply. He badly wanted to head-slap himself for forgetting the significance of the day and time, but he knew if he shocked Tim that intensely the boy might have a stroke. He decided words of honest gratitude would be enough of a strain.

"Damn it... you're right. Thanks, Tim."

"Yeah... sure, Boss. No problem."

Jonah lifted one eyebrow slightly.

"Wednesday?"

"Tony's therapist appointment. The whole story's too long to go into now..."

"I get that. Later, though..."

"Later." Gibbs confirmed

"And after this is all over, we're not losing touch again. Right?"

Gibbs gazed up at his friend and grinned faintly, even as he lifted the phone receiver.

"Right. Yeah, connect me with Dennis Lewist... okay. Put me right through, huh? I thought maybe."

"Jethro?"

"Hey, doc."

"Where is he? What's happened?"

"He... Tony's missing. He was taken yesterday. I should've called, I know. We're all just so focused on finding him..."
"I understand. It was him, wasn't it? That son of a bitch is behind it?"

"Doc... a little zealous aren't you?"

"Certain unforgivable crimes against children affect me that way. By the way? Pot meet kettle."

"That was a completely different situation..."

"People you care about were hurt, you went all out to find the one who did it. Not so different."

"Listen..."

"I'm coming over there, we'll talk about it then."

"Hold on..."

"Everybody will need me. Especially Abby."

Gibbs grinned and shook his head. The man already knew his weakest spot, and he'd only had one session.

"I wasn't gonna say no. Compromise?"

"Depends on what it is."

"You don't show up 'till after your last appointment."

"That'll be early evening."

"We'll probably be here all night. Something like this, that involves family... it's how we do things."

"Of course. I'll see you around six-thirty, then. I'll bring dinner."

"Don't get fancy."

"Pizza and Chinese?"

"Okay. Thanks."

"See you soon." Lewiston responded quietly before disconnecting. Gibbs shot a sideways glance at an obviously curious Jonah as he followed suit. "I told you... much later."

"Agreed."

"McGee. Got anything for me yet?"

"Well... not as much as I was hoping." Tim replied, rising and moving to Gibbs' desk to hand him a sheaf of papers. "I've only had about two hours, so I was only able to find about thirty of the properties he owns. The first page, they're listed geographically by distance from the Navy Yard., second page is addresses, phone numbers and recent utility usage, the third is feasibility based on seclusion of the location and a few other factors."

Jonah's eyes went wide and he choked mildly.

"You did say two hours, not two days, right?"

"Yeah. That's not a lot of time, or I'd have more."
"Hey, I'm not criticizing. Frankly... that's pretty damn amazing. You better hold on tight to this kid, Jethro, or I'll steal him right out from under you."

"You try it and I'll kick your ass from here to Chesapeake Bay."

Jonah burst out laughing and held out a hand for the paperwork. Gibbs handed it over readily.

"Gotcha. Lemme see this and I'll try to help narrow things down a little. Hmmmm... can you tell me who you think is behind this? It'll give me a jumping off point for a profile..."

Gibbs' brow furrowed and he looked over at Tim, who nodded slightly.

"We're almost positive it's Tony's father. He's not the one holding him, but... he arranged it. The kidnapping ties in with three other cases we've had lately... you already have those files, right? Yeah, you do... Okay, we think this uns... um, this suspect was watching us, learning how we do things at a scene... so he'd know the easiest way to get to Tony."

"His father... God, I hate these cases. I could study and train from now 'till the apocalypse and never understand how parents can do some of the things I've seen."

Tim frowned for a moment as he handed off the files then spoke up uncertainly.

"Do you really want to? I mean, the hardest part of this job... has been not letting it all change me. I have to be able to look at the worst of human nature and deal with it... without becoming what I see."

Jonah whistled and spoke to Gibbs over his shoulder.

"I'll take that butt-kicking twice over, Jethro, if I get somebody with that much insight and the courage to speak his mind."

Tim blushed furiously and nearly ran back to his desk. Gibbs grinned briefly.

"Sorry, Jon. He's got a family."

"At least tell me there're more like him around here. Say he has a twin. A clone?"

"Afraid Tim's one of a kind."

"Then promise I can borrow him once in a while."

"Up to him."

"Well, Agent McGee?"

"Uhhh... yeah. I... I'd really... I'd love that."

"It's a deal. Now take me through what you've put together here, will you? Just so I understand it completely."

"Sure..."

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The thin, itching trickle down his cheek was driving Tony crazy, but much worse was the knowledge that he couldn't do anything about it. Still stretched toward the ceiling, his arms had gone numb hours before and his spirit was gradually following, but he continued to cling to the idea that
denying his father what he wanted so badly was worth anything he might have to endure.

Another stinging line was drawn across his brow with the tip of a blade Tony refused to look at and once more he forced down his extreme reaction to any kind of knife touching his skin when he had no way to stop it.

"Look... I'm having fun, but I know you hate this. It can end if you just talk to me. Seriously, answer the big question and I might even let the other one go. I only keep asking, really, because you're being so stubborn."

"It's not... my life... to sacrifice... and I won't." Tony gritted out.

"So you have been spilling your guts."

"You knew that... before you started... all this. Nothing... new there."

"True. What I require is the name."

Fighting to breathe, to resist the way his chest and shoulder muscles wanted to lock up and stop his breathing all together, Tony drew air in with agonizing slowness and released it the same way before he gave the same response Rossmore had been hearing over and over.

"No."

"I can shorten the chains. Lift your rear end about two inches off the floor... chain down your ankles so you can't pull your legs up to relieve the strain. How would that be, hmmm? How long could you hold out after that, I wonder?"

To his captor's surprise, Tony laughed. Only for a moment, due to his breathing issues, but it was clear what the sound was.

"Yeah... not long... I'll be getting my... harp and halo... pretty fast. No answers then. Daddy dearest... he'll be massively pissed at you..."

Rising lithely to his feet, Rossmore viciously kicked Tony in the ribs three times in rapid succession.

"Can't even remember one simple rule... he really has twisted your mind until you can't think or reason. Killing you will be a mercy. But first you answer."

Tony coughed faintly, wheezed again and repeated himself, grateful he only needed to speak one, easily understood word.

"No..."

"Again with the stubborn attitude. I suppose it's time to try something a bit more extreme..."

Stowing his knife, Rossmore grabbed Tony's ankles and twisted, flipping him onto his belly and crossing the chains, placing more stress on the younger man's already abused arms. Crossing to a gym bag he'd laid aside in a corner, the mercenary extracted a long whip with a sturdy handle and tiny metal claws on the tips of the thin, supple leather braid. Stalking back to Tony's side, he allowed the weapon to unfurl along the cement close to his subject's ear. "Why do you react to knives with such fear?"

He got no response except an increase in shivering and a quiet moan. "Who did you betray your father to?"
No response. Sticking the handle in his waistband to free his hands, Rossmore made good on his threat and shortened the chains, raising Tony's chest off the floor. "Alright. It's your choice, I told you that. Always your choice..."

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TBC........
5:45:

Still hanging face down a few inches off the floor, Tony fought with all his might not to give in to the nearly unbearable pressure in his chest. His head ached to the point of explosion and the fire in his muscles was getting worse by the second. Despite everything, he held on with all the strength he had left and refused his captor the submission he wanted. The mercenary studied the pattern of welts and lacerations he'd inflicted, seemed satisfied and put the whip away in the bag again. Crouching, he addressed Tony quietly, with genuine compassion, feeling he now appreciated the spiritual anguish priests experienced while trying to exorcise powerful demons that were fighting not to release their victims.

"My arm's getting tired, Michael. I'm about ready to stop for the night. I'll give you one more chance to talk to me before I leave you here... just like this. I know about your illness. Pneumonic plague nearly killed you... left you scarred and susceptible to so many things. This room is dusty, cold and damp... the last kind of place you want to spend another night. I can end your misery... end the terrible struggle against the perversion gripping your soul. Give me the answers I want and you'll be free of the pain and the fear. I know you want this to be over. No one could keep going with such darkness eating them alive. Tell me... tell me and I'll show mercy."

Though he knew it was likely to set off more pain, something he was desperately trying to avoid, Tony risked a few words, for no other reason than believing they could have been spoken by one of his movie heroes, and thinking about John Wayne and Indiana Jones reinforced his will to survive.

"You talk... way too much. If you're gonna go... then do it... quit... givin' me a... a migraine..."

Rossmore grinned tightly and slowly scraped his fingernails across the wounds he'd so recently left on Tony's back and shoulders. The younger man cried out pitifully and tried to twist away, but his mobility was so limited he could hardly move at all.

"Is this all you understand? I didn't think pain was getting through to you... but maybe I just have to increase it. Maybe if I switch to using a larger blade? Put the marks somewhere you can see?"

"I... I don't... give a damn... what you do..."

Intense pain abruptly blossomed in the left side of Tony's face as he was backhanded then punched.

"Considering what kind of man your father is I don't suppose I can really blame you for your personality. It's not exactly your fault that you make a person want to cut your tongue out and sew your lips shut. Perhaps once I get the answers I need... we'll have to see, won't we? No change of heart? Last time I ask..."

"No."

"Hmmmph. As I said, what happens is up to you. That eye's going to swell pretty badly in the next few hours. Painful. It's going to be a difficult night, I'm afraid. Still, you should try to enjoy the peace and quiet. When I return in the morning... you'll pray it had lasted a little longer."

The mercenary rose and moved to the bag, bringing back a pair of heavy ankle weights and strapping them tightly in place. After a final overall inspection he strode out the door, clanging it shut and locking it behind him. Tony sobbed once, almost inaudibly, but he soon had it under control. A
few minutes later, however, an involuntary response shook him brutally and he began to panic.

"No... please, God, no... can't cough, can't cough, can't cough..." he whispered hysterically, but his body was not to be denied. The shuddering expulsions of air not only stressed his already damaged muscles, they caused the ribs Rossmore had broken to shift and grind. The thought that it might only be a matter of time before a sharp edge of bone ended up puncturing his lung finally drew the response from Tony that his captor had not been able to achieve; tears.

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SIX-FIFTEEN:

Jethro hung up with lobby security and tuned back in to the discussion Jonah was having with the rest of the group. Max and Tim were huddled with the consultant at Tim's desk, poring over the papers McGee had offered hours earlier and quietly, but intensely, offering and deliberating opinions. Finally, Max straightened up and stretched her back. She had shifted her chair across the aisle to join the meeting, but even with that extra bit of comfort, leaning forward for such a long period of time had left her muscles cramped and aching. The other two sighed and followed her lead and Gibbs took advantage of the brief silence to inject a brief report on other matters.

"McGee."

"Yeah, Boss."

"The Doc's here. I'm gonna go meet him and show him downstairs. Be ready to update me when I get back."

"Right, Boss. No problem." Tim affirmed as Gibbs strode away, making it to the elevator just as the doors opened. Lewiston emerged with a trio of flat boxes in his arms and four white plastic bags slung over his wrists.

"Welcome back."

"Wish it was under better circumstances. How is everybody?"

"Tim and Max are good. They'll be better when they see some of this stuff. You, uh... you went a little overboard, didn't ya?"

"My wallet was full and so was my guilt-and-angst meter. I can't do much to help, but this... thanks to the women in my family, overfeeding in times of crisis is smack in my wheelhouse."

Gibbs allowed himself a brief smile then relieved the other man of some of his burden and led the way back to the bullpen

"This way. We'll drop off some of the food then go check on Abby and the morgue."

"Good. Haven't had a really decent hug since I was here last."

Gibbs chuckled and responded thoughtfully as they approached his team's corner of the office.

"She doesn't hold back, that's for sure. Easy to get addicted to how big she loves people..."

"Heh. I felt that the fist day I met her. She obviously has a huge heart."

"Matches her huge brain."
The aromas preceded them and the other three instantly rose to take their portion and offer gratitude.

"Wow... thanks Jethro. We never did eat lunch." Jonah reminded his friend as he dug into the pizza box.

"Help me get Tony back... dinner at Boheme is on me. Anything on the menu."

"That's not why I'm here, you know that. I don't want or need a reward... especially from you."

"Not that you won't take me up on it..."

"Damn right."

"Sit, eat. Just don't let your brain stop turning over."

"Will do."

As the men walked away, headed back for the elevator, Lewiston resumed their interrupted conversation.

"Abby's that bright, hmmm? Haven't seen a lot of that yet." He commented as they stepped in and Jethro punched the button for the lab level.

"She doesn't show it off for just anybody. Ask for evidence, though... you won't understand a word unless you make her dumb it down a little. Especially if it has to do with computers or technology."

"I have to deal with that all the time at the hospital." Lewiston commiserated as they exited the elevator and strolled toward the lab. "Just because I work there doesn't mean I know everything about every specialty. Some of the doctors... they act as if it's a given that I've kept up with all the most minor improvements and advances in whatever it is they do. I get disgusted looks and extreme snootiness when it turns out I haven't."

"It's not intentional with Abby. She just gets so wrapped up and excited about the stuff she finds, she forgets the rest of us don't have an Abby to English translator. Except McGee, he was born with one."

Lewiston snorted.

"Techno-geek is a native language for both of them?"

"Bingo."

The doors to Abby's sanctuary slid open and the two men cautiously entered, not seeing the tech immediately. Her typical pounding music was also absent, cueing Gibbs that something was very wrong. He looked around the main area, finally spotting her in the office, curled up on the futon. Turning back, he nodded to Lewiston and the pair moved in to comfort her, but the door wouldn't open. The doctor knocked softly, his heart clenching when her head came up and he saw that her face was streaked with tears. Recognizing her visitors, she scrambled to let them in, launching into her ersatz father's arms and clinging fiercely. "Shhh... it's okay, Abs. Easy..."

"He's hurt, Gibbs! He's hurt so bad..."

"We don't know that, Abby."

"*I* do! I know... He wants to scream, but he won't do it... he doesn't dare let it out in case he can't stop. We're losing him, Papa. You have to find him soon..."
Gibbs glanced at Lewiston and grimaced faintly.

"She gets these flashes sometimes... dreams about people close to her."

"You do too! Remember Kate? What you saw..."

"Not now, Abs, okay? We brought food. When we find Tony you'll have a lot to process so you need to refuel and recharge while you can."

Abby gazed intently into his eyes then slowly nodded and backed up, dropping into her desk chair. They placed one of the pizzas and a bag of Chinese in front of her, Gibbs kissed her on the head and whispered reassurances in her ear and the pair retreated silently.

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TBC......
"Duck?"

The ME glanced up and smiled broadly, rising and moving quickly to accept the food and greet the other two men.

"Jethro! You and the food are welcome sights, I must say. Mister Palmer! No need to go out! Supper has just been delivered! Go and collect Gerald, would you? Ah, and good to see you again Doctor. You'll be a great asset during this difficult time, I'm sure..."

Jimmy appeared a few moments later with Gerald and a clean white sheet. Together they spread it over one of the steel tables and turned back to grab the two rolling stools and a chair, arranging them on either side. Ducky laid the last of the food out on their ersatz dining table then paused, looking back to Gibbs and Lewiston. "Have you both eaten already, or..."

"Don't worry about us. I made reservations," Dennis told him. When Gibbs opened his mouth to protest, the other man jumped in before he could even get started. "Forget it, Jethro. Tony *and* your team are depending on you. If you don't get out of this pressure cooker for a while, you won't be any good to them."

"I told you, I'm not in the mood for fancy, frou-frou..."

"Just trust me, okay? This place... you're guaranteed to love."

"I *trust* you with Tony. My dinner's another thing completely." Jethro shot back, his tone almost, but not quite, petulant.

"I won't let either of you down in any sense, Jethro. Not any sense."

Gibbs studied him for a long moment and finally nodded. Turning back to Ducky, Lewiston smiled lightly. "If you or Jimmy need me after we get back, I'll be with Abby for a while and then upstairs for the rest of the night."

"Good of you to be a part of the support network, Doctor. Heaven knows we need all we can get."

"Not much I wouldn't do to help. If I want to be a real part of the family, I know I need to earn my spot. By the way, Doctor is my title. My name is Dennis."

"Yes," Ducky responded with a sly mischievous grin over his shoulder. "I was aware."

"Ah. Still in the process of earning, then, am I?" Lewiston replied lightly.

"Somewhat. Off to dinner you two. Relax as best you can and come back refreshed for the difficult hours ahead."

Shaking Ducky's hand, Lewiston turned and strode off, trusting Gibbs to follow. Once the other man had joined him in the elevator, he pressed the button for the parking level.

"For not being the boss, you're awful damn bossy." Gibbs growled faintly.

"Tony would expect me to take care of you and make you take care of yourself. If he finds out I didn't... It'd suck to be me."
Gibbs snorted faintly and shook his head.

"The kid... what he's been going through lately, it's pushed him into a place he doesn't wanna be. Matter of fact, he hates it. His nature is to be a care-taker... a worrier. If he's been hurt bad and he has to really let me take over, do for him... I don't know how he'll handle it. He'll need you to push him, make him talk about how pissed off he is, so it doesn't build up on him."

"I'll do everything possible... but I can only help as much as he lets me."

Gibbs grunted, but refused to otherwise respond to the subtle nudge. Lewiston backed off the subject temporarily, sensing that the other man would return to it on his own when he was ready. "I hope you're as much a meat and potatoes man as you seem to be. This restaurant... the food is simple, but really good, and they'll keep bringing it until you either cry uncle or beg somebody to call 911."

"Huh. We'll see. Sounds like Tony's kind of... damn."

"You don't have to be afraid of saying his name, Jethro. It won't make it any worse for him and later on, knowing he was on your mind every minute will give him the strength he needs to recover."

Gibbs was silent, but Lewiston could hear him fighting to control his breathing as they stepped out into the garage and started toward Lewiston's car. "Talk to me?"

"I have to find him. Who gives a damn how much either of us has to fight to help him get better after? I just need him back. I'm not letting the bastard have Tony, too..."

"You know the man who did this?" Lewiston asked, deeply surprised.

"You could say that."

"Who is he?"

"God."

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THR RESTAURANT: 1 HOUR LATER

"So. Are we going to discuss what you said back in the garage?" Dennis asked causally as they mutually finished off an onion blossom appetizer. "I mean... you throw that out and then clam up completely on the drive here and all through the first course. You had to know that was guaranteed to make me go digging."

When all he got for his trouble was a flat, emotionless look and Gibbs wiping his hands and face, Dennis merely grinned and tried again. "You know you slipped, right? You could have just said you weren't letting him have *Tony*... but then that traitorous three letter word slipped out. You know... the one that means you think he took someone from you before."

Gibbs rose, threw down his napkin and turned to leave, but one more statement from the doctor made him halt in his tracks. "I never asked you to flay your soul open for me, Agent Gibbs. What you say is up to you. I only ask that you be honest and at least *somewhat* open when you *do* speak."

"It wasn't intentional."

"It's still out there."
"You don't pull this shit with Tony." Gibbs growled very quietly.

"Tony's not you. Your skin's thicker, your quick is buried deeper... tough to find, never mind cut."

"Son of a bitch... you're wrong. You have no idea..."

"Yeah? Then show me."

Slowly, stiffly, Gibbs dropped back into his chair.

"Yeah... I lost somebody. So what?"

"So was it the same situation?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm asking. It's not worthy of you to act like you don't."

Gibbs sat forward, aggression vibrating in every taut line of his body.

"Why the hell are you pushing me?"

"Because of how you respond. I wanted you back in the right mind-set. Yes, Tony will need love and comfort, but more than anything he'll need you prepared to fight for him, provoke him and make him hit back. I know how much you care about him. You have to wind yourself up to do what's necessary."

"I can't love him and battle him at the same time. It'll screw us both up and we won't survive."

"If you can't keep him motivated and fired up the end result will be the same."

"You're assuming he's gonna come out of this damaged! You can't know that!"

"How sure are you that his father's involved?"

"Positive."

"And how ruthless is the man? How malicious?"

Gibbs paused, gaze focused intently on his shoes, then looked up and responded cautiously.

"Unconditionally."

"He'll do anything to get what he wants."

"Yeah. Shit, Precious..." Gibbs murmured, wiping one hand over his face.

"Precious?" Denis asked, much more softly and with a touch of humor and curiosity.

"It's something I call him sometimes. Don't ever tell him that slipped out. He's got secrets on me..."

"No problem. Tony... he believes?"

"He's tryin' to... wants to. Makes me feel good to see him excited over it."

"He hasn't asked you to go?"
"I put him off. I know he would've tried again. Wasn't time before..."

"There will be," The other man assured him, picking up his menu and studying it. A few minutes later he peered at Gibbs over the top of it. "Sick of me yet?"

Gibbs finally smiled. Just a trace, but it was enough for Dennis.

"Hell, yeah, but I'm starved. The minute we get back to the office..."

"I'm out of your hair. No idiot, I."

"Didn't think you were. They do a good steak in this place?"

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TBC.........
Chapter 36

5:30 A.M.: NCIS

Gibbs woke slowly, brushing away the hand that was gently vibrating his shoulder. Since midnight, he'd barely managed two hours of restless sleep, all of it saturated with fear-centered dreams, so he was not yet ready to wake up, but the hand was insistent, soon joined by a gentle voice.

"Jethro. Jethro, I'm aware how badly you slept. I wouldn't disturb you if it wasn't very important."

Gibbs sat up by increments, cautiously testing muscles and joints that had stiffened and cramped, as they always did when he conked out on one of Ducky's autopsy tables.

"What's up?"

"There seems to have been some progress upstairs. Timothy phoned and asked if I'd wake you and send you up to hear the latest."

"Thanks, Duck."

Gibbs offered, rising to his feet, stretching and heading for the automatic doors. Just before he got there, however, he paused and spoke to his oldest friend without turning back.

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"What you're doing for Tony... the Sunday thing... it's really good for him. Once he's back with us, he may try to use my attitude about the whole thing as an excuse to quit. Don't fall for it, okay? Don't let him stop going."

"I won't. My solemn vow."

As he rode up in the elevator, Gibbs was deeply grateful the trip was so short. It gave him no time to dwell on everything that could already have gone horribly wrong, or might in the next several hours. Until Tony was found, Gibbs needed to think logically and strategically and keep his mind focused on a positive outcome. When his senior agent was safe and his kidnapper behind bars, then, and only then, would the older man allow his emotions any real control, and only when the two of them were alone.

"McGee!" Gibbs barked as he strode into the bullpen. He added nothing, aware that, by now, Tim knew precisely what was expected without being told.

"Here, boss. It took us most of the night, but we narrowed down the list to three locations. Director Mackenzie is working on warrants as we speak."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "She stayed with us until around one, crashed in her office and was back at it as of half an hour ago."

"More power to her." Gibbs murmured and dropped into his desk chair. "Distances?"

"Ummm... hang on. I swear... why can't I find it... God, I can't believe... this isn't right, I know I had it on here..."

Max grasped Tim by the chin and pulled his attention up for a moment.

"Stop. It's okay, Tim. We're all exhausted. Close your eyes, take a breath... and look again."
"Yeah... okay. Got it. Forty-five miles... twenty-two and fifteen point six.

"That close?" Gibbs asked.

"To each other. It depends on whether we start with the one that's farthest away, of course. I can recalculate if you think..."

"Don't. That'll be fine. Good work, all of you. Be ready to go as soon as the paperwork comes down."

"Two hours," a faintly disgusted voice announced from the entrance to the bullpen, drawing all their focus there. Realizing who it was, Gibbs stood and moved to greet her.

"Morning, Director."

"Morning."

"Two hours, huh?"

"I did the best I could. Judges and clerks seem to think sleep is a necessity. I don't know where they get that."

"Wimps."

"Agreed. Why don't you all go hit the cafeteria for food and caffeine? I promise you'll know the minute the warrants come through."

Gibbs hesitated. Mackenzie smiled and added quiet reassurances. "You're not letting everything go, Agent Gibbs. You're just handing it over for a while. You know I'll take good care of it."

"Yeah... guess I do. Let's go people! Time to fuel up while you've got the chance."

Mackenzie watched the others file out and turned an expectant look on Gibbs. "I'll be there. Got a call to make first."

"The kids are depending on you, Gibbs. This would be a really bad time to dim their North Star."

"I twinkle and I'm a sailor's best friend. Yeah, that's me alright." He retorted lightly.

"I know you get my point."

"I do."

"Good. See you downstairs." She said, turning to follow the same path the rest of the group had taken a few minutes before. Gibbs shook his head and reclaimed his chair, picking up the phone.

"Put him on, Abby."

"Gibbs? How did you... I mean how..."

"Have I ever answered that question?"

"No, but..."

"Then put him on, willya?"

He endured a few moments of silence before Dennis came on the line.
"You've ticked off the little lady, Jethro. Not a good idea."

"Buy her a Caf-Pow and tell her it's from me. She'll get over it so fast your head will spin. We've got a couple promising leads. Soon as the warrants come down, we'll be gone. Try and keep Jimmy and Abby's minds on something else, huh? Ducky'll help."

"I'll do everything I can. Hope it's acceptable if *I* pray."

"Do what you want." Gibbs grunted. "Good news or bad, we'll be back late evening. Before midnight, definitely."

"Here's to only good."

"Thanks... for everything."

"Even making you want to strangle me earlier?"

"Especially that." Gibbs replied and disconnected firmly. Dennis followed suit, a bit more gently, and turned back to Abby.

"Now, young lady. You were going to tell me about something you're feeling guilty for?"

"Kind of. I mean it's like... time machine guilt, 'cause I haven't actually done this morally questionable thing yet, I've only set it up so I *can* do it..."

Dennis held up a hand and she fell silent instantly.

"Gibbs and the rest... they let you get away with that?"

Abby's eyes widened and she pasted on her most innocent expression.

"With what?"

"Abby."

"Okay... more than you just did. Usually."

"And none of them have ever figured out why you really do it?"

"Only Gibbs... I think."

"I'd bet on it. So... no more of your favorite diversion tactic, hmmm? Just tell me."

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6: 45:

Rossmore drained half a bottle of cold water, used his handkerchief to dry his mouth and gazed down with satisfaction at one of his finest creations. Pain and blood were his art, his craft, and he considered himself a master. He had no doubt that if DiNozzo's remains were found within a reasonable amount of time everyone who saw them would reach the same conclusion.

Capping the bottle, he set it on the floor, moved to where he'd placed his latest tool before his break and retrieved it.

"You're running out of chances, worm. I've already decided you won't die easily even if you give up
the information. You've been too much trouble and too stubborn to have earned that. The pain you're suffering in the moment, however... can end. Two words, one name. That's all I'm asking. You can't have known this person very long. The call you made to my client, the... advice on forgiveness... it was only a month or two ago. You owe your so-called confessor not a damn thing. Put your loyalty back where it's always been, scum... with yourself. Show me the self-serving, self-centered little brat he said you are."

Tony held his breath for a few moments, briefly hoarding what little he could pull in, then used the precious air to continue his campaign of resistance.

"You both can... go play... chicken... with a backhoe..."

"Uh-oh. Not as bold and defiant that time. It seems your sarcasm is running out as fast as your strength and your ability to breathe." Rossmore mused, running one hand over the wide portion of the long paddle he held and studying the soles of Tony's feet. "Hmmm. The color of the bruises is quite pretty... but not exactly what I was going for. I'll just have to keep working, I suppose..."

Too depleted to scream, Tony was only able to moan softly when the paddle began to slam into the sensitive area again. Though he hadn't learned enough in his visits with Ducky to know if a church-probie was allowed to make an attempt at a 'this is an emergency' prayer, Tony nevertheless sent up a silent mayday, pleading for his release to happen soon, not caring anymore whether it came as rescue or death.

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AN: The search begins! Strap in and hold on tight, boys and girls...
9:15 A.M.:

"Agent Gibbs... slow down." A tense female voice gritted out from the passenger seat as Jethro made another of his typical traffic-avoidance maneuvers. He smiled grimly, but chose to leave his focus on the road ahead instead of looking at his new director even briefly.

"You insisted on coming along... and you picked my car. Deal with it."

"You laying bloody on a roadside won't help Tony."

"Never have accidents."

"I'm not paying tickets."

"Never have those either. McGee has a theory that cops can sense when I'm coming... and they're either too smart or too scared to get in the way."

"Okay..." Sarah responded, gripping the door with her right hand and the edge of her seat with the left. "... let's try this. Slow down or I cut Abby's productivity in half. Every mile over... equals one day the Caf-Pow machine is unplugged."

Gibbs growled audibly, but he eased off the accelerator until he was a fraction under the speed limit and began looking for reasonable opportunities to pass other cars instead of persistently astonishing the unwary drivers ahead of him. "Better. My lungs, heart and colon thank you..." she said, her breathing relaxing incrementally as the vehicle's speed dropped. Gibbs glanced momentarily in the rear-view to assure himself that Jonah was keeping up then flexed his fingers slightly, relieving the pain and numbness caused by his unyielding grip on the steering wheel.

"How much farther?" he ground out. Studying the papers in her lap, Sarah replied quickly.

"Another four miles. Left at the next set of lights. No matter what... this will all come out right, Gibbs. If, God forbid, the worst happens, you have my guarantee that I won't stop until we get the SOB who did this. None of us will. I also promise you a fair chance at satisfaction before the system takes over."

"You do that there won't be anything left for the system. No... I want him in a courtroom. It's the only way."

"Whatever you and Tony want, I'll make it happen."

"It, uh... it was a big relief... seeing you that first day. We'd all been through hell the week before, with Sheppard and Ziva... I was sure we were gonna get stuck with somebody who didn't understand us and couldn't care less what we needed or who we were. A familiar face...a *friendly* face made all the difference."

"You don't know how lucky you actually were. I almost didn't let Sec-Nav talk me into it... but he told me who else was lobbying for the job. Lobbying very hard, as a matter of fact."

"Who?"

"Deputy Director Vance."
Gibbs' expression turned grim and tight.

"Don't trust the man as far as I could throw the Lincoln Memorial."

"It's supposed to be 'as far as I could throw *him* '."

"Nope. If I wanted to I could throw him across Chesapeake Bay. Felt like it a few times. The man is... what'd Abby call it the other day... a psychic vampire. One a'those people who walk in... all of a sudden you can't breathe right an' every ounce of life in the room just gets sucked away."

"That's a pretty accurate description. I only met him once... it was more than enough. When Edward told me Vance wanted the top job I got in touch with a few contacts. The intel they sent back made my decision for me. I'm glad I did it... the adjustment period's just taking longer than I thought."

"What I've seen so far, you're doing fine. Savvy with the politics... but you don't forget it's human beings you're in charge of. Keeping up that balance isn't easy."

"No... no, it isn't. This is it, here." Sarah told him, pointing out the windshield to a set of low buildings coming up on her side of the car. Jethro checked once more that the other car was still close behind then made a fast, screeching turn into the parking area for the complex. Braking to a stop, he tore off his belt and started to exit the car, but paused at the last moment and turned his intense gaze on the woman beside him.

"Rules. You will wear your vest at all times. Keep your eyes wide open and never put your walkie down where somebody can get between you and it. If you find the son of a bitch, securing him and calling for back-up comes first... even before taking care of Tony. No matter how bad he is, do your damndest to keep emotion out of it until the both of you are completely safe, got it?"

"Understood."

"Good. Let's go." He commanded, moving gracefully out of the vehicle and striding around to the trunk. Sarah watched him go, slightly in awe, finally seeing the man that so many would willingly follow into any kind of hell, and finally understanding why.

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90 MINUTES LATER:

Jonah swiped his sleeve across his forehead, grimaced and murmured to nobody in particular.

"Mission one of three complete. Click when ready to proceed to mission two."

Standing nearby, Tim instantly recognized the words as part of his favorite on-line combat game and it made him grin as he responded under his breath, not realizing just how sharp Jonah's ears were.

"Re-supply successful. Weapons at the ready, prepare to move out..."

" 'Insurgency' is the best, isn't it?"

Tim startled then nodded slightly. "Pyschobuster." Jonah said, offering his screen-name followed by his hand. Tim accepted the gesture, his face registering powerful surprise.

"No way! I'm LLD28."

"Seriously? Man you kicked my butt last week! Might I add, without even trying. I've always wondered about the name. Laughed myself sick coming up with possibilities..."
Tim flushed and looked down.

"It's nothing... just something my Mom used to say when one of us kids would drive her up a wall. I
don't get to see her very often, so... the name is a way to remember her."

"Yeah? C'mon, don't leave me hanging, kid..."

At first Tim deliberately mumbled the response, but Jonah had waited too long and spent too many
hours wracking his brain, so he wasn't about to let him get away with that. "No you don't. Try that
once more."

"Okay, okay... it stands for Lord Love a Duck."

Jonah suddenly burst out in laughter so intense that is was quickly mixed with coughing. Once he
recovered, with the help of a little gentle back-patting from Tim, he gave the younger man a grateful
smile. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fantastic. You brought back one of my favorite memories, that's all. My paternal grandmother
used to say that, too. *Especially* when we were making her crazy, but sometimes just when little
things irritated her."

"Swearing didn't come naturally to their generation, I guess... not like it does to ours."

"Hey, don't include me in that. My mom taught me to use every possible verbal option before I
resorted to a curse word."

"Me too, though I had incentive. To this day I can't even stand the *smell* of a bar of Ivory soap."

Jonah grimaced, but it was still backed by a smile.

"The work I do, the pain I have to witness and deal with, sometimes a taboo word slips out, you
know, but... I try really hard not to let it happen very often."

"Yeah... I get that."

"Thanks, Agent McGee. This is bound to be a very tough day... tough few weeks, probably. I
needed a laugh more than I knew."

"No problem. And it's Tim."

"Tim, then. Here come the others. Looks like no luck there either."

Tim started to speak, but he hesitated before he replied.

"Darn it?"

Jonah chuckled and shook Tim's hand.

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MANHATTAN:

As he sat staring down at the evidence of what might be his employer's imminent downfall, he
scowled and chewed on a knuckle, uncertain what to do. Since he was the only one who knew what
was happening, it was technically his obligation to inform DiNozzo Sr. of the warrants that had been
issued on his properties and his innate honesty and loyalty were pushing him in that direction. His
instincts, however, were bellowing that the man who frequently terrorized, demeaned and tormented him had no claim to those virtues. Sighing, he gazed around cautiously to be sure he wasn't under observation and began to quietly clean every personal item off of and out of his desk, slipping the items into his pockets and briefcase. The info on the warrants went deep into a drawer under a pile of innocuous paperwork, the drawer was locked and the keys vanished silently into his suit-coat.

Swiftly penning and signing a brief letter of resignation, he rose to his feet and made his way to the elevator. If his boss had done something that had a federal agency searching his warehouses, the creep could fend for himself.

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TBC......
"I appreciate that you have policies in place... but there must be some way I can see Director Sheppard. Can't you contact her doctor and get permission?"

"He's taken a day or two off and asked not to be disturbed. With the things our doctors have to deal with, the administration does their best to be very flexible when they need a little extra time to relax outside of their normal vacations and breaks. Even if that weren't the case, this particular patient is under... special restrictions. Nobody gets in to see her without a member of staff present. Nobody."

"Look, I don't understand any of this. I was only informed last night that she was here. I flew to D.C. immediately without taking time to get a lot of details... what the hell happened?"

"That's also something you'll have to discuss with her doctor. I'm sorry, Assistant Director Vance, but I can't help you. If you leave your information with the admitting nurse, Doctor Lewiston will contact you when he returns."

Vance favored the bureaucrat with several seconds of his darkest look, but swiftly realized the man wasn't about to be intimidated. Huffing slightly, he turned away and headed back for the desk, left his cell phone number and hotel info and stalked back outside, pulling the phone out of his pocket.

"Doctor Wall."

"No go. Her psychologist is on a break, he can't be reached and they won't let me in without consulting him."

"Break? That may be what he told *them*, but it's a lie. I just found out he's *here*."

"At NCIS? Why the hell is he there?"

"Offering himself as a crutch for DiNozzo's pathetic coworkers. The ones that aren't out vainly searching for him, that is."

Vance's eyes briefly went round and his eyebrows climbed.

"There's a great deal you haven't told me."

"It wasn't worth mentioning, believe me. Supposedly, he's been kidnapped. It's much more likely that he's somewhere recovering from a massive hangover. I wouldn't even put it past the narcissistic glory-hound to have abandoned his job with no notice for one that pays more money and gets him in the media spotlight a lot more."

"I take it you're not a fan."

Wall snorted.

"What shocks me is that everyone else *is*. How they haven't seen straight through that smug..."

"Doctor. Back on topic if you don't mind?"

"Of course. Apologies."
"How did you get in to see her alone?"

"I told them she was my former patient, she trusted me and would never harm me. Asserting confidentiality didn't hurt either."

"And you're convinced her mind is whole and sound?"

"She's agitated, no question. Who wouldn't be in her place? But the so-called allegations of violent and irrational behavior? Absolutely false. She's as sane as you or I."

"Alright. I'll be over there ASAP. I promise, I'll get to the bottom of this and we'll get her out of this place."

"Thank you so much, AD Vance. I knew if anyone could make this disgraceful situation right, it would be you."

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12:45:

"Gibbs... stop. It isn't helping..."

"I told you we should keep moving. It's quitting! Quitting is unacceptable!"

"We all needed food and bathrooms, Gibbs. The second one, especially. I was on the verge of making that car uninhabitable."

"I could've stuck it out till hell froze over! There's no damn reason the rest of you can't be just as strong! This isn't about what we need, it's about saving Tony!"

Jonah approached and squeezed his friend's forearm.

"You're scaring the kids, Jethro."

Gibbs shot a furious glance behind him to the spot where Tim and Max were standing close together, waiting out the storm that had abruptly overtaken their boss. Slowly Gibbs' expression and body relaxed and he turned back to the other two.

"I hear you... I know."

"McGee knew what he was doing." Jonah told him calmly. "The third location is less than ten minutes from here. It's our best shot at finding DiNozzo, but we need to go now."

"If you'd listened to me we would've been there already and Tony'd be getting help!"

"Jethro, cut it out. The break and a meal weren't a waste of time... temper tantrums and panic *are*."

Gibbs rounded on Jonah and went as far as raising his fist, but another glimpse of Tim, now looking fearful, and the fury and indignation drained away. A moment later, his hand dropped as well.

"Better, old buddy... much better." Jonah praised, clapping Jethro on the shoulder. "The rest of us aren't working against you, okay? I can see how bad it is... hell, if it were my Lizzy out there, I'd be insane. I get it..."

"Yeah... yeah, I remember. Let's get the hell out of here, huh?" Gibbs conceded, tossing the keys to Sarah. She caught them easily and without comment, smart enough not to question his surrender of the driver's seat. In moments both cars were back on the road. A little over eight minutes later, they
pulled into a larger complex than either of the previous two had been. Once vests had been donned, the group had gathered around the rear of the second vehicle. Sarah could clearly see the strain and fatigue weighing Gibbs down, but his voice when he issued assignments was as steady and reassuring as it had been all day and once again she marveled that the myth wasn't far from the man.

"Jonah, Max, start over on the left. The rest of us will take the one next to it. Keep moving on until you've gotten through all of them. Stay in communication."

"Boss... if I take one on my own, it'll go faster."

"Not a chance, McGee."

"I can handle myself, you know that. I can do this. Give me the chance, boss... give me your trust."

"You never lost that. Damn it... okay, go."

Tim grinned and took off for the third building at a run. Grim-faced, Gibbs managed to let him go without shouting any further admonitions or cautions. Jonah, standing close behind his shoulder, spoke to him quietly.

"If you trained him like I know you can... he's right, he can handle it."

"He better. He gets hurt I'll drag him into the gym and kick his ass 'till he can't walk straight. Look, call Ducky, will ya? Get him and the EMT's out here."

"But if..."

"I feel him, Jonah... he's close. Make the call."

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"Time's almost up, Michael." Rossmore offered lightly, drawing the tip of a large knife down Tony's left leg and studying the resulting blood intently, fascinated by the flow and shift of the long red trail. He had flipped his young victim back over so that he was face up, but he'd done it so that the chains twisted even further. Tony, by this point, couldn't muster the strength to even make a sound. "Very pretty. You make the most wonderful canvas. Don't you care if the pain goes away? All it would take now is one name and a short statement of repentance. Simply show me that you understand how filthy your soul has become... how far that deceitful old lecher has pulled you from the pure spirit you could've been. I promise to give you last rites before I release you."

"Love... him. You... don't understand... anything... except... hate..."

Sadness and regret overwhelmed Rossmore's expression.

"You're not going to give in. I can see that now. I'm so sorry, Michael. I had hope that you might realize the truth..." he intoned, rising to his feet and reaching out to the chains. With one swift movement he released them and Tony fell to the floor. "I wanted to make this fast... but you refused to do what I asked, so you didn't earn it. At least I'll be having fun, so..."

Abruptly the mercenary's head snapped up and he canted it toward the door. "It appears we have visitors. It won't take long to resolve this, but you should take advantage of the delay to make your peace. I'm not saying God will listen, but it might make you feel better."

Snarling, furious over the interruption, Rossmore moved to a spot where he'd be hidden when the intruder opened the door.
ТВС......
Chapter 39

Creeping through the empty, echoing room one cautious step at a time, acutely aware of every scrape of his shoes over the dirt on the floor, McGee approached the door at the far end slowly. Peering through the tiny window, his heart stuttered at what he found and it was several seconds before he could get his feet to work well enough to let him back away. Thanks to the shaking suddenly wracking him, his hands nearly failed him as well, but he somehow managed to extract his walkie, depress the button and speak, though he kept his voice as quiet as he could.

"Boss..."

"What, McGee?"

"Boss... oh God..."

"Stay where you are, we'll be right in. Wait for us, you hear me?"

"Huh? No! I can't!" Tim whispered harshly. "He... Tony needs... I'm at the rear of the building, Boss! Make it fast!"

Shutting off his walkie to prevent noises that might betray him, Tim stowed it away and swiftly moved back to the door. Gripping the handle, he braced himself for a hard pull with no result. He was therefore thrown slightly off balance when it opened with no effort. He recovered almost immediately, but the reality of Tony's condition froze him in the doorway for a moment. A second or two after that, however, he was kneeling at his friend's side. "Tony? Can you hear me? God... you have to hold on, okay? Gibbs is on the way, so you have to try and hold on. Please..."

His last reserve of energy nearly depleted, all Tony could manage to do was crack open the eye that hadn't swollen shut, direct his gaze over Tim's shoulder and mouth the word 'Ari'. The younger man instantly understood that danger was behind him and stiffened in fear. Unfortunately, neither Tony's warning nor his own comprehension were enough to overcome his shock and allow him to react to the threat before Rossmore decided to take control.

"Stand up."

"I can't."

"I may be a mercenary and I may have killed, but even I have lines I won't cross. I will not murder a man when I haven't looked him in the eyes and seen who he is. Get up off your knees and face me. Now, boy!"

Tim gazed back down into Tony's face, but the other man appeared to have slipped into unconsciousness. Bereft of the help and guidance Tony consistently provided, even if DiNozzo wasn't aware of it, Tim knew he was being confronted with the moment he'd always known would come. He would have to salvage the situation on his own, knowing the team he depended on, the people that were closer than his biological family could ever be, were not immediately available. To his amazement, the recognition brought with it calm, clarity and the ability to get to his feet and turn around, despite what might be coming. "Better. Now move aside."

"No. That I won't do."

Rossmore's eyes widened briefly, but his expression soon settled back into mildly disdainful and subtly dangerous.
"Pay attention, mouse. I have a job to do, but I have no problem taking you out first rather than second. You *will* get out of my way and let me earn my money or I'll shut the door, lock it and do the same thing to you that I've been doing to him."

"No. He's been through enough."

"You... telling me no. That's the best joke I've heard in a very long time. One might almost think you understood the meaning of self-sacrifice. That's ridiculous, of course. These days people barely understand two plus two. I can see you're one of the rare ones, though. You can speak coherently... you seem to actually have a brain in your head. That means you're smart enough to know when the battle *and* the war are lost. Now move out of my way."

"No."

In response to this simple reply, the smile Rossmore produced was thin and tense and almost feral, but it was no match for the sheer malice in his next words.

"Again with the negativity. With such a... warped, perverted *thing* as your only mentor, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. He probably infected you with his disease under the guise of teaching. My only regret... is that I'll probably never have a chance to get that sick old man in here and wash the world clean of his filth and DiNozzo's at the same time."

The vile speech caused deep anger to begin rising up in Tim, but thanks to what Gibbs and Tony had actually taught him, he knew exactly what to do with the unwanted, potentially lethal emotion. Turning his gaze down for a moment, he drew a slow, measured breath and released it just as evenly then looked up again and responded with a single word and a smile.

"Sorry."

Seeing no result from his ploy to get Tim angry enough to lose his head and rush him, Rossmore's fury pushed him into that position instead. Growling and incoherent, he raised his gun and stepped forward, but the distinctive feel of a second weapon being shoved against the nape of his neck stopped him in his tracks.

"On. Your. Knees." Gibbs intoned quietly from just behind Rossmore's left shoulder. The mercenary chuckled bitterly and shook his head and Jethro could see the man's muscles tense in preparation for fighting back, but the former marine wasn't about to let that happen. "You should know I don't give a damn whether you live or die."

The utter certainty he heard in the threat told Rossmore that if he so much as twitched, there was no doubt which outcome Gibbs would choose, so he slowly unclenched his fingers, let the gun drop and sank to the floor. Realizing that it was all over, that he'd done his best and kept Tony safe long enough for help to arrive, Tim followed suit a few moments later, collapsing into a crumpled heap and struggling to breathe. Max and Jonah rushed in, sidling around Gibbs and the now cuffed suspect, and the young woman ran to crouch at McGee's side, pulling him into a fierce embrace.

"...t's okay, right? I did it... did it..."

"Yeah, sweetheart... you did. You were awesome."

"Got it right... gonna go to the lake... camp out..."

"Come again, kiddo?"

"Boss said facing a gun... 's like fishing. Breathe slow... be patient 'nough to-to let them take the
bait... and don't talk too much."

Max laughed softly, though tears were also streaking down her face, and urged Tim to move to the side so that Ducky and the paramedics, who had just entered, could get to Tony. Once they were out of the way, she sat down against the wall and pulled Tim in even tighter. Part of her desperately wanted to participate more fully in the rescue effort, but she recognized that as part of the family, comforting her brother was just as important. Fighting down her own emotions, she breathed deeply and rocked Tim back and forth, content for the moment to watch the drama unfold a few feet away.

"It's alright, Jethro. I'll take him now." Jonah insisted benignly.

"Hell you will..."

"Tony needs you. You can trust me to get this SOB taken care of, you know that. Go see Tony... tell him it's all over and he's safe. Go on..."

Reluctantly, Gibbs handed Rossmore into Jonah's custody and turned away, intending to do as his friend had suggested, but he was held back by Ducky's gentle hand on his chest. That simple gesture wouldn't have even slowed Gibbs down, but the expression on the ME's face was more than enough to halt the team leader.

"No, my friend. Please..."

"Ducky... don't you dare. Don't you tell me he's..."

"Anthony is alive, have no fear. Unconscious, but most definitely alive. But his injuries... they're nothing anyone who loves him should have to see."

"Anyone else, you mean." Gibbs corrected, squeezing the older man's forearm.

"Yes. The... the medics will care for him now. We should focus on the ones we can be of use to. Timothy and Addie both require attention..."

Reminded of what his youngest agent must have been through while he waited for backup, Gibbs searched until he found the pair huddled together on the far wall. Carefully, he approached, knelt down and touched Tim's ankle.

"Good work, Vendazzo. Is he..."

"He'll be alright... eventually. I can only get bits and pieces of the story, so far. What I'm hearing, though... if nobody else will write him up for a commendation, I'll do it myself." She related through a fresh flood of tears. "And if you don't really take him fishing someday, I'll knock you on your ass and then tell everyone in the office that you do needlepoint and sing show tunes."

"Fishing..."

Slowly, a long ago lecture to a then greener-than-green Tim McGee came filtering back to Gibbs. "Breathe, be patient.... damn. Spot like he was in, I can't believe he remembered that." Gibbs murmured. Eyes down, as if it were hard to look at either of his agents just then, the older man squeezed Tim's ankle briefly and gently. "You did me proud, Tim. Did the whole team and the agency proud. You'll have your fishing trip, I swear. And *I'll* put you in for the commendation."

Max grinned faintly.
"You better. Is Dino..."

"He's hurt... maybe real bad. Ducky wouldn't let me see. He'll recover, though. Tony's too tough and he's got too much heart to let somethin' like this beat him." Gibbs told her as he rose to his full height again. "You take care of the kid. Get him to Abby and the two of you stay with him tonight... give him whatever he needs. Within reason, on your part, of course."

"Of course."

"If you need me I'll be at the hospital from here on in. Try your damndest not to need me."

"Gotcha, Boss."

As she watched Gibbs stride away, Max gave Tim a quick, firm hug and rubbed his back vigorously to get him motivated. "You ready to get outta this place, Tim?"

"More than. Way more..."

"You can stand okay, now?"

"Think so..."

He was still a bit unsteady once she'd helped him up, but managed to walk mostly under his own steam as they left the disturbing little chamber behind them.

"By the stunned look on your face he, uh... he doesn't say things like that too often, does he?"

"More lately... but no. Loving Tony... it's made Gibbs a different man. Just as strong.... but different. He can't lose..."

"Hey, don't you dare. I'm sure I'm allowed to crack you one in Gibbs' place, no matter how big a hero you are." Max admonished him lightly as she held open the door and led him outside.

"Probably. I'm not, you know. I did what I had to... what Gibbs and Tony trained me to do..."

"That's for other people to decide, Tim. You can't be objective. Anyway, we shouldn't worry about the future. Right now, we need to get you back to your sweetie so she can see you're okay." Max told him as she lowered him carefully into the passenger side of the car she and Jonah had arrived in. "Then the three of us will decide how we're celebrating tonight. Sound good?"

"Anything that involves seeing Abby. I really need one of her patented hugs right now..."

"I hear you, Tim. Me too..."

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TBC...
Leaning against the left front fender of the remaining car, Jonah turned from watching the ambulance and the other car pull away to study the grim faced woman in the driver's seat.

"Director?"

"Mostly present and accounted for." she replied quietly.

"It looked worse than it was. Your ME said he'll be fine eventually."

"No, what he said was that Tony *should* be fine if the muscle damage isn't too severe and *if* they can get on top of any infection that's already setting in. I appreciate your offer of the rose-colored glasses, but for the most part... I prefer to see things as they are. It helps me keep perspective. Do we have enough evidence to make the other arrest?"

"I wish. We can definitively tie the warehouse to Michael DiNozzo Senior, but there's no connection between him and the man we grabbed here."

"Yet." She declared, shoving the key into the ignition and twisting it fiercely. "You getting in?"

Sensing he only had a few seconds to decide before she roared off without him, Jonah swiftly moved around the front of the car, slid in and shut his door. Moments later Sarah peeled out and her passenger had to struggle just to stay upright and buckle his seat belt.

"Been taking driving lessons from Jethro, have we?" Jonah joked breathlessly. Almost instantly, the car's speed dropped and he received a sideways glance and a brief, rueful smile.

"Okay... so I'm not exactly all there right now."

"I was in there. Trust me... I completely understand. I don't even know DiNozzo, really... only through stories Jethro's told me. I still nearly lost it when I saw what that son-of-a-bitch did to him..."

"Hopefully he's as much a mercenary as you think. They tend to be amazingly self-serving."

"True. We may not have to offer him much of a deal to get everything we need on Tony's father. If, uh... if it's alright with you, ma'mm... I'd like to take lead on that end of the operation. I realize I'm not one of yours and I'm sure everybody on Gibbs' team probably wants the job, not to mention half the agents in the building..."

"Give me a really good reason."

"I can give you a bunch. One; Jethro's likely to kill him. He trusts me, and he won't fight too much if he knows I'm the one doing the job. Two; he needs a reasonable excuse not to leave Tony's side. I'm more than happy to give it to him. Three; ... taking out abusive parents is my overwhelming passion."

"Down."

"Sorry?"

"You meant taking down. Right?"

"Yeah. I guess I did."
"You better stop guessing or I'm not letting you anywhere near Michael DiNozzo."

"I swear I won't hurt him, Director. Too much. And only if he resists arrest."

"Oh, I expect he won't be too happy. I can see some amount of restraint and... persuasion being necessary. A bloody lip, a bruise... those I can explain away. Anything worse..." "I hear you loud and clear."

"Good."

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NCIS:

Abby was wrapped around Tim as soon as he stepped into the lab. They held on silently for several minutes, hands alternately clutching hard and running soothingly through dark hair, while Max and Dennis turned aside and shot each other mildly embarrassed smiles. Finally, Tim pulled back and kissed her softly on the forehead.

"We got him, baby. We got him."

"Tony..."

"In the hospital, but he'll be okay. The SOB who took him is in a holding cell waiting for Gibbs."

This brought an almost feral smile to Abby's face.

"He'll be lucky if he gets outta there with all his parts intact. Control over bodily functions will definitely be lost before Bossman gets through."

"Gibbs can glare all he wants, I'm not cleaning up the floor in the interrogation room." Tim asserted. Abby laughed, dropped a quick kiss on his mouth and gently disengaged to move back and embrace the other two.

"Tony's safe... he's safe." She murmured in Lewiston's ear.

"Thank God..."

"Thank Tim" Max corrected. McGee tried to hush her but she was having none of it.

"Max, don't..."

"What? They'll find out eventually anyway. I'm officially turning Gibbs' order into a celebration."

"Order? What order?" Abby asked, excitement blossoming in her eyes at the thought of a little fun after all the hours of worry and fear.

"You and I are supposed to stay with Tim tonight and see that he's taken care of."

"Yah! Beer, Red Bull, Doritos and Little Debbie!" Abby enthused, drawing a raucous laugh from Max.

"I'm good with that. Whose place should we use for party central?"

"Can it be Abby's?" Tim asked. "It's bigger than mine and I feel... comfortable there."
"Of course, Timmy." Abby responded tenderly, hugging him again briefly. "I expect the whole story once we're there and settled in, though, okay?"

"There's no story, I swear. I didn't do anything special..."

Both women reached up simultaneously and popped Tim in the back of the head. This time it was Lewiston who burst out laughing.

"Good grief... I'd heard about it, but seeing it happen..."

"You're allowed to use it on Tony if he gets uppity or too sarcastic." Abby assured him. "You won't have to explain or anything. He knows what it means."

"I'll have to clear it with Gibbs."

"Oh, he won't mind. Nobody outside the family is allowed, but you're in now so you can feel free to just smack Tony, but only when he *really needs* it. Like if he won't shut up... or in your case, I guess it'd be if he won't talk and you think he needs to so he can work something out and start feeling better..."

"Abby!" Tim interjected loudly. She halted, grinning, but Lewiston turned a mock look of disapproval on the hero of the day.

"Ah-ah. Patience with the youngest sibling, McGee. Always patience."

"I have to yell. Gibbs is the only one allowed to slap her in the head." He countered.

Max smothered another bout of laughter and took Tim and Abby by the hand.

"C'mon you two. Time to hit the grocery store."

"But Jimmy..."

"You go ahead and take off." Dennis offered. "I'll give him the good news."

"Thanks!" Abby told him, bussing him on the cheek as she was tugged past him. Dennis followed them out and into the elevator, but exited at the morgue level. When he entered, most of the lights were off, leaving the large open space dim and difficult to navigate visually. He knew someone was there, however, because he could hear rapid footsteps moving across the floor.

"Mr. Palmer? Is that you?"

"Doctor Lewiston!"

Jimmy rushed over to greet his visitor and shook his hand vigorously. "Sorry about the lights. When I'm worried the dark calms me down... then I pace... a lot."

"Well you can turn the lights on and have a seat. I just got the good news. They found Tony."

"Good news? That means... he's okay?"

"He's safe and in the hospital. I don't have an update yet on his condition."

"Oh... if you don't mind I'll go back to pacing."

Dennis reached out and lightly gripped Jimmy's wrist.
"It won't do Tony any good and it'll just wear you out. Come sit and talk to me, hmmmm?"

"I... but... okay. We could go in the office, I guess."

"Good idea."

Once both men were settled in the brightly lit office, Jimmy's eyes locked onto the packet of cookies at the back edge of the desk. Dennis read the name and frowned slightly.

"You've never heard of them?" Jimmy asked.

"No."

"They're an import. Tony and Doctor Mallard are addicted. Not that they usually have much time for tea, but when they get a few minutes to sit and talk... that's the only brand of cookie they ever have. Do... would you like to try one?"

"Sure."

Jimmy carefully extracted one of the treats, placed it on a tissue and handed it over. The first bite sent Dennis' senses reeling. The softness of the pastry melded with the dark chocolate and the unique flavor of the pear filling and surprised a quiet moan of appreciation from him.

"Oh... oh my Lord. That... is exquisite. Aren't you having one?"

"Not right now. I wish somebody would call. I've been waiting and waiting..."

"He wouldn't let you go with him?"

"I tried... I begged him practically. He said... he said Tony could be hurt and I shouldn't have to see that. Plus there was nothing I'd be able to do but watch and get more upset. I tried to make him see I could handle anything, even feeling helpless. I just wanted to provide *some* kind of support... to be able to tell him later that I was there for him."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. I always wished... but I was a late baby for my folks. No time for more after me."

"So Tony's role of big brother in the family... it's really important for you. Very special."

"Very." Jimmy almost whispered. "I've only had a couple people like that in my life. I know it's probably not healthy, but when one comes along... I tend to hold on kinda tight. It makes it a lot harder when they leave, but I figure... the time you do get to spend with them is worth it."

"It is healthy, actually. The attitude and the coping mechanism."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"I could tell you about one of them... I already told Tony."

"Only if you trust me the way you trust him."

Jimmy's eyes widened for a moment, but then his expression slid back into melancholy.
"You're a good person and I know you've helped Tony a lot..."

"... but not yet?"

"I'm sorry..."

"No need. I set the condition, remember? Down the road, if you feel like you need or want me to hear the story, I'll be around."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Do you have to go? I mean... can you stay 'till Doctor Mallard or Agent Gibbs calls?"

"Glad to."

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TBC.......
Chapter 41

LOCAL HOSPITAL: 1 HOUR LATER:

Perched on the edge of Tony's E.R. bed, Gibbs struggled with the exhaustion he could no longer beat back. The adrenaline that had held him up and moved him forward since those first terrifying, shocking moments on the roadside had finally dried up, leaving him barely able to keep his eyes open. Still he had refused every attempt to coax, reason or pull him away from the spot he'd claimed. Even Ducky's gentle logic and a firm, empathetic hand on Gibbs' shoulder garnered no immediate response.

"Jethro. Please..."

"Not 'till I can touch him. I told you that before. You know how bad he needs contact... to steady him, to boost him, to focus him... "

"Hmmm, indeed. So much so that he perceives a shuddering clout to the back of skull as a form of affection."

"It is... sometimes. It's discipline, mostly, but not always. He knows the difference."

"Yes, well, right now..."

"Right now there's hardly a spot I dare lay a finger on... If there's nowhere I can touch without him hurting, then he at least needs my presence... needs to know I'm here. Why can't you understand that and just let me be?"

"What I understand is that you are on the verge of becoming ill yourself. Without a few hours of solid rest and a good meal or two, you'll soon be claiming not only a bed of your own, but an IV pole and a bag of reviving fluids to hang on it."

"Damn it, Duck..."

"You and Anthony are too close for a short separation to do any damage. Your bond is more than strong enough to survive you taking a bit of time away to care for yourself. The next few days and weeks will be so difficult, Jethro... how will you ever even get him started on his journey back if you aren't at your absolute best? I agree that he needs you... but he needs you at one hundred percent."

Gibbs heaved a quiet sigh.

"Tell me again what we're facing."

"Jethro..."

"Just remind me once more. Then... then I'll go. Okay?"

"I'm holding you to that bargain, my friend. Firstly, the muscles in his arms, chest and back have been severely damaged. There may also be nerve involvement... at this early stage it's not easy to tell. The cuts and welts should heal well, now that he's on antibiotics. A few of the ones on his back and legs may scar. Time will tell. The doctors don't think there will be any tooth loss or permanent damage from the blows to his face, however bad the bruising may look at the moment. Once the swelling recedes..."
"His feet, Ducky. What about his feet?" Gibbs interrupted, his voice low and harsh.

"Ah... yes. There, too, a reduction in swelling needs to happen before a true assessment can be made... but in time, and with physical therapy, I believe he'll walk normally. His lungs, of course, are the biggest concern. Hours in a damp cold environment, with so much additional stress on his body and immune system... they'll be watching his breathing very, very closely."

"When can he be transferred?"

"Transferred? Oh, no. He shouldn't be moved..."

"He needs to be in Bethesda Naval with a doctor he knows and trusts. Otherwise when he's conscious he'll fight everything they try to do for him."

"The boy is likely to do that no matter what facility he's placed in... still, you may be right. I'll speak to his current doctors in the morning about the possibility. Now I believe you made me a promise..."

"Did you call Jimmy and let him know the score? He and Tony... they've gotten pretty close lately. The kid's probably sitting around your office chewing his nails down to the cuticle..."

"I phoned just before I came to see the two of you. Dennis Lewiston was with him and assured me that he'd see Jimmy got home safely."

"The others..."

"... are tucked up behind locked doors at Abigail's and require no reassurance from either of us. No more excuses, Jethro."

Gibbs reached out shaking fingers and lightly traced around the edge of the oxygen mask obscuring half of Tony's face.

"I can't. I just got him back... he'll be pissed if I leave him so soon. And don't try and tell me he won't realize anything's changed. I know better..."

"He'll be even more furious with me if I don't make you care for yourself. I won't risk that. Come, my friend... please."

Though he continued to shake his head, Gibbs allowed Ducky to assist him up and onto his feet. Leaning in, he dropped the gentlest possible kiss he could manage near the spot he'd smacked in that long ago isolation unit, hoping with all his heart that the same message would somehow find its way through the drugs and injury.

"A few hours of sleep, a sandwich and I'm back here." Gibbs insisted as he was guided out of the room.

"We'll see."

"Hey, I'm still a Marine. I can kick your ass a hundred different ways, old man..."

"And I am a Medical Examiner. I can flay you open, remove all your organs, sew you back up and leave only the slightest sign that I was ever there at all."

"You win."

"Never a doubt, my friend. Never a doubt."
TWO HOURS LATER:

Max paused in the middle of finishing the last slice of pizza then cautiously dropped it back to her plate, focusing intently on Abby. Tim had concluded his version of the events at the warehouse only moments before and the younger woman was now glaring at him furiously. Swiftly wiping grease and crumbs from her hands, Max prepared to intervene and defend the man she considered a hero from the third member of the group, who clearly didn't agree.

"You did what?!"

"Abs, come on..."

"No! He said he'd shoot you and torture you... if Gibbs hadn't shown up just in time who knows what could've happened?! Why would you *do* something like that?!!" she demanded, flailing at him with both hands. Max leaned in and firmly grabbed her wrists, effectively immobilizing her.

"What else could he do, Abby? It was the only way. He saved Dino's life... Tim stood up to a brutal psychopath and saved his brother's life."

"I *know*! *That's* why I wanna hit him!"

Struck by an idea to defuse the situation, Max smiled lightly and countered Abby's statement.

"Ohhh, no. Dad put me in charge tonight and if either one of you are banged up when he gets home, I'm the one who'll end up grounded. No bloody lips or bruises on my watch. Got it?"

The younger woman simply stared, temporarily unsure how to reply, prompting her new colleague to release her grip. Max's final edict snapped her out of the stupor and left Abby and Tim gasping with laughter. I'll send you to your room if I have to. No triple ripple ice cream, no movie."

Once she recovered her breath, Abby posed a question.

"Triple Ripple? Never heard of it, but I'm willing to try just about anything with the words ice cream on the package."

"No package. I make my own. This one's got a vanilla bean base with swirls of chocolate, peanut butter and raspberry running through it. Thus the name."

Abby's eyes widened.

"Ooooh. I bet it's fantastic."

"You bet your ass. Best in town, including what you can get in the stores."

"Can we have some now? Like... now, now?"

"No more trying to claw poor Tim's eyes out?"

"Scout's honor."

Max chuckled and rose to her feet, gathering up the pizza boxes and other trash.

"I'm trusting you. I'll go fill up three bowls, you and Tim pick a DVD, okay?"

Abby nodded enthusiastically. The minute Max vanished into her kitchen, however, her smile
softened and she turned to Tim.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"She's decided what her place is gonna be."

"Her place? You mean..."

"Yeah. In the family."

Tim became silent and deeply contemplative for a few minutes.

"Big sister. Just a little younger than Tony. Is she still adopted?"

"Oh yeah, but it doesn't matter so much anymore 'cause she couldn't care less. It's like Director Mackenzie is step-mom, but she's a really good one, so who cares, right?"

"Right."

"She really was good to you today? She really helped you?"

"I wouldn't have made it without her. Once I knew Gibbs had the guy, I sorta... went to pieces. Just a little."

Abby squeezed his hand.

"You didn't say that before."

"It was embarrassing. After what I found it in myself to do for Tony, to just crash like that..."

"Are you crazy? I've seen it happen to him a hundred times."

"No... not possible."

"The day after that undercover case, the one where you stood up to that witch and told her to stick it? Tony showed up at my place and fell apart like somebody karate kicked a Lego castle. He never cried... don't know why, exactly, but that's something he just doesn't do... but he shook like he was having seizures. I held him and talked him down for like... three hours, until it was out of his system. If you're not human, Timmy, you aren't a good agent. Crashing post-stress is *totally* human."

Max, who had been lingering in the background and silently absorbing the conversation between her new pseudo-siblings, now cleared her throat and pretended to cough.

"French roast, anyone?"

"Mmm, yeah!" Abby agreed. "Microwave popcorn?"

"What? You ate two thirds of a pizza all by yourself." Max chuckled.

"Trust me," Tim offered in rebuttal. "... she could inhale two *whole* pizzas and still want dessert, popcorn with the movie and a snack before bed. She'll never gain a pound, either, unlike some of us." He groused faintly. Abby couldn't decide whether to punch him in the arm for the first statement or kiss him on the cheek for the second one, so she did both, one after the other.
"Hey, I said no bruises, remember?"

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GERALD AND DUCKYS HOME: 11:15 P.M.

"Jimmy? What're you doing here so late?"

"Gerald. I'm sorry. I... you were probably just heading to bed. I'll go..."

"Hang on, now. You wouldn't have come all the way here if it wasn't important. Come on in and talk to me."

Slowly, hesitantly, Jimmy made his way inside and allowed Gerald to guide him to a seat on the sofa.

"Did Dr. Mallard call you?"

"Not since this afternoon. I'm assuming between overseeing Tony's care and dealing with Gibbs, he's run off his feet."

"I thought it would get better when he called to let me know everything was alright... that they'd found Tony alive. It just got worse..."

"What did?" Gerald inquired gently.

"The tension, how I'm feeling. I never had any brothers or sisters... but I had a friend. He was a couple years older... Sophmore to Senior, you know? I looked up to him so much. He said he wished he had a little brother like me... said he cared, and I knew he meant it. Then... then without a sign or a warning or anything... he wasn't there anymore."

"Wasn't there... how?"

"What Tony tried to do... my friend succeeded. My mom told me... and all of a sudden I felt like I was falling and falling... and it would never stop. I couldn't make it stop..."

"So when you found out about Tony... oh, buddy, I'm so sorry." Gerald murmured, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on Jimmy's bent shoulders. To his surprise, the young man flinched, jumped up and moved away a step or two.

"Don't. Please... don't call me that, okay? Brandon called me that all the time."

"I hear you. Jimmy... what is it you need? How can I help?"

"Dr. Mallard... he told me once about your basement... what you set up down there to fix dark stuff inside... make you feel better. I want... could I use it?"

"Yeah, of course. C'mon..."

Both men took the elevator down and Jimmy paced while Gerald got the lights on. Once he had his soon to be assistant geared up for safety and he'd explained what to do, the older man stepped back and let Palmer go at it. Though he began in silence, soon Jimmy was murmuring, growling and spitting words born of grief, fear and intense anger; at his friend, at Tony and at himself for what he perceived as a second failure to intervene quickly enough. A failure that almost lost him a second big brother.
It took some time for his emotional roller coaster to wind down and run out of fuel, but when it finally did, Gerald was there to support the exhausted youngster, get him back upstairs and tuck him into bed in one of their two guest rooms. As he left, shutting off all but one small, dim light next to the bed, he made a silent promise to God that every member of his family would survive the turmoil they were struggling with, no matter what he might have to do to make it happen.

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TBC............
Chapter 42

Wandering through the house in nothing but his boxers, a t-shirt and heavy socks, Gibbs sipped absently at a cooling mug of coffee and wished he hadn't been so drained and used up the night before. He'd slept deeply and without dreams, something he felt guilty about since Tony hadn't been beside him. He was now wide awake, left facing three lonely, silent hours before he could reasonably get back on the road to visit Tony.

Ducky had dropped him off and headed back to the hospital the previous evening, anxious to check on his patient, and Gibbs, despite his friend's many admonitions and gentle threats, had written off food and hydration, heading straight up the stairs and crawling under his covers on Tony's side of the bed. Now, as the world beyond his windows turned inexorably toward sunrise, he tipped the last of the dark liquid down his throat, made a detour into the kitchen to exchange the empty mug for a glass of cold water and shuffled into the living room to continue gradually slaking what felt like a days long thirst.

He knew he should be eating as well, but the desire simply wasn't in him. He wanted, more than anything, to return to bed and bury his head in Tony's pillow. The faint touch of the younger man's peppermint scented shampoo was already gone from his senses and he felt almost feverish with the need to re-establish it. Laying one hand beside him on the sofa where Tony had sat the night they'd shared the chocolate, he imagined he could feel the warmth still lingering. A moment later, however, he pulled back, scowling and shaking his head.

"What the... God, what is goin' on with me? I'm actin' like he's dead!"

Frustrated with himself, Jethro began to sweep items off the table in front of him and into his arms, knowing a normal, everyday task like cleaning would get his equilibrium back. Among the newspapers and flyers, though, he found something that stopped him cold. Dropping the rest of the jumbled mess onto the couch cushions, he held up the small device, experiencing a rill of familiarity when two thin cords unraveled and hung down nearly to the floor. Turning on a nearby light, he took a better look, but he still wasn't sure he was right about what it was. Grasping the thing tightly, he raced up to the bedroom, flipped the lights back on there as well and, after a brief search, found his cell phone in the jacket he'd hastily discarded in his quest for sleep.

"McGee. I can hear you're awake. I'm glad your typewriter's working again... No, I haven't eaten... DiNozzo's doin' okay... damn it, will you listen for a second? I need you to describe something for me. That H-seed... the music thing Tony always boppin' around to... I-pod, right... hell, I don't care if they used hieroglyphics or Martian to name it, just tell me what it looks like. Uh-huh... good. How fast can you get to my place? That'll have to do. Just push it a little, willya? I'll pay the ticket if you end up with one." He reassured Tim then, as usual, ended the call without warning and hurried to wash and dress.

Fifty minutes later, he was opening the front door for his youngest agent.

"Morning, Boss."

"Morning. Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Once Tim had his cup of slightly doctored brew, both men settled on the sofa.
"Here. How do I work this thing?" Gibbs asked, handing over the music player.

"Well... you start with this right here... then this lets you run through what songs he has stored. Oh... oh wow. Tony likes... oh, my God."

"He's a major talent, McGee. He can keep up with Billy Joel an' Elton John on the piano, that's for sure."

"Yeah, but... Boss..."

"I like him too."

"Right. Of course. Major talent."

"What makes it play?"

"This one. I can ask it to just do part of the list or one song..."

"Yeah." Gibbs agreed, squinting and pointing. "That one. Show me."

"Okay. Like that... and that. You wanna try?"

"Not a hell of a lot... but I will."

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NCIS: 9:30 A.M.

"Sir, I don't know what else to tell you. She isn't on a set schedule. If she has a breakfast meeting or attended a dinner the previous night, she sometimes doesn't make it in until ten..."

"You're her assistant, you must have her cell number. Call her. Now."

"Sir, I..."

"Not necessary." Sarah announced from behind both of them. "Thanks, Cynthia. You can take your break now."

"Yes, ma'am." The young woman replied gratefully as she hustled out of the line of fire. Sarah watched her go then moved past Vance and into her office, not looking back to see if he was following. The tense, solemn expression he wore told her he wouldn't be far behind. As she settled in behind her desk, he closed the door and strode to within a foot or two of where she sat.

"Why haven't I been kept in the loop as to what's going on around here?"

"I wasn't aware you were out of it. What, precisely, are we talking about?"

"Precisely? Let's start with what the hell Jennifer Sheppard is doing in a locked mental ward."

Sarah hesitated for a moment then felt herself begin to tense up as well.

"She's receiving treatment."

"For what?"

"Was she a friend?"
"Is. She *is* a friend and I demand to know why she's been locked up." Vance growled, stepping even closer to the desk. Sarah, instantly recognizing an attempt at intimidation, smiled up at him and refused to rise to his feet or to the bait. She knew full well that the power in the room was still hers, his bullying tactics aside.

"I assume you're familiar with 'The Andy Griffith Show'?"

"Excuse me?"

"Andy Griffith. Mayberry, whistled theme song, Goober and Floyd..." 

"Of course I know about it. What does that have to do with anything..." 

"I'm the sheriff. The nameplate on the outside of my door might as well read Andy Taylor. I don't know exactly what yours says... but I'm sure the word deputy is on there somewhere." She calmly replied, leaving the rest unspoken, knowing he would get the point. Despite her dislike of him personally, she respected and would never underestimate his intelligence or his capacity to make her life miserable if she gave her tongue free rein. She might have been bristling internally over his attitude, but she knew subtlety and restraint were the best way to go.

"Message received. Will you tell me what happened... please?"

"I wish I could." Sarah told him, softening just the slightest bit. "For her sake it's being kept very quiet and the reports on the incident have been sealed."

"Was David involved somehow? The way she was just hauled out of NCIS and back to Israel... it doesn't make sense."

"That was a result of what happened." She answered curtly. Her unwillingness to go any farther made Vance's lips tighten and his hands clench into fists.

"Damn it, Sarah..."

The disrespect brought Mackenzie to her feet at last.

"You barely know me well enough to use my title. My first name is *miles* out of bounds." She retorted quietly. The obvious anger he'd caused made Vance back off, but only a little.

"Understood. Look, I apologize, but you have to see things from my perspective..."

"No, I really don't. You can go now."

"Director..."

"I said, you're dismissed... *Deputy*.

His expression telegraphed that there was much more he wanted to say, but instead Vance merely nodded, spun on his heel and moved stiffly and rapidly out of the office. Moments later, Sarah sank back into her chair, panting lightly and recalling Gibbs' description of psychic vampires. Now she was even more certain Vance fit into the category. Once she'd recovered her breath, she lifted the phone receiver and dialed.

"Edward. We have a problem."
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

AN: The song belongs to the Marvelous, Magnificent Mr. Manilow. He (and whoever may have co-written it) own all the rights.
You really should check out his album of Sinatra covers, people. Pure magic...

THE HOSPITAL:

As Gibbs approached the ICU cubicle where Tony was laying, he stopped abruptly and silently placed the small gym bag he held on the floor. Due to the darkened glass, he could barely make out the figure sitting by Tony's bed, but even the idea that someone else was that close to the man he loved caused tension and fear to run rampant in him. Instinctively, he reached for his hip, growling softly when he remembered he'd been forced to leave it at home. After a moment, he shrugged off the frustration. He'd been taught to use his hands and body just as efficiently as any manufactured weapon and, as his team could testify, he had lost none of his skill. Gliding around the corner and stepping into the room, he was again brought up short when the figure spoke to him softly without ever turning around.

"Relax, Jethro. I just found out DiNozzo was here. Wanted to see for myself that he's gettin' good care."

Snarling audibly now, Gibbs closed the distance between himself and Fornell and delivered a swift, powerful head slap that rocked the seated man forward slightly. Tobias leapt up and swiveled to face his attacker. "Hey! What the..."

"You have *no* idea what he went through, Tobias, and the man who instigated it all is still running around loose! For all I knew..."

"Okay, I get it. Mea culpa. Doesn't mean you had to gimme a concussion."

"Trust me, if I'd had my gun you might've gotten a lot worse than that little wake up call."

"Wake up call?! How hard do you hit when one a'your kids really screws up?"

"They don't. You can leave now."

"I just got here."

"I want time alone with Tony."

"So do I. I care about both a'you, damn it. Was it so bad you couldn't spare five minutes to call and tell me you weren't still runnin' all over God's creation tryin' to find him?"

Gibbs released a slow breath.

"Bad enough. I couldn't think about anything else, Tobias. I should be back at NCIS mentally beating the shit outta the bastard who hurt Tony this way... but all I want is to be here. I wasn't trying to shut you out. I just..."
"I know. Gimme a couple seconds with him? To say goodbye, tell him I'll be back..."

"Take as long as you want." Gibbs conceded, moving out into the hall to retrieve the bag he'd left behind. Fornell sat back down heavily.

"Hey, kid. Jethro's here, so I'm gonna go. Not for good, mind you. I'll be keepin' an eye on you, makin' sure you come outta *this* mess strong enough to face whatever you trip over *next*. And don't start with the protests, we both know it'll happen. Findin' trouble is in your damn DNA. Rest up, take care a'Jethro... get better. He won't sleep or eat right until he knows you're gonna come back to him. Oh, and, uh... when you two are ready, call me about a coordinator for the ceremony." He confided, lowering his voice. "Maybe Diane an' me went south, but the guy who put the wedding together... best in the business."

Tobias rose to his feet and watched, intently curious, as Gibbs settled a stuffed animal on either side of his young lover. "The lion I recognize. Haven't seen it in a hell of a long time, but I still recognize it. The turtle... that's new."

"Kind of. When he was recovering from the plague, Kate gave it to him. I guess I'm hoping..."

"... that he'll feel her? Take strength from the memory? Good idea. You know my motto. Anything is worth a shot. The lion, though... he never knew about her."

"You know how strong she was. Strong and a heart the size of Alaska and Texas combined."

Yeah, well... she was her daddy's girl."

"Nah. She was that way right off the bat. She would've loved him. If there's any way she can get here... any way at all... she will."

"You swore nobody'd ever know who wasn't close to you at the time. That's me and Ducky."

"Things change."

"Damn. You really are in love." Tobias joked mildly. "You want a protection detail outside, here?"

"Can you?"

"I think I've still got enough pull to manage that."

"Thanks. You're welcome any time, Toby. Just call first."

Tobias laughed quietly, turned and made his way out.

Gibbs perched on the extreme edge of the bed and pulled the last two items from the bag. The first was a small quilt his mother had sewn. He hadn't pulled it out in years, the memories it stirred up simply too much for him to deal with every day. This he spread over Tony's hands and lower body. The I-pod he programmed carefully, following all the steps Tim had demonstrated, then slipped one ear bud in for Tony and kept the other for himself.

"I know how deep they've got you under, precious. It's so you don't hurt, but it means I can't tell you what I need to. I'm hoping the music gets through somehow. I'm here. I'm here and I don't regret a minute, no matter what."

--- Goodnight . . .
Don't be afraid.
Sleep tight in my arms.
I swear you'll be okay.
I'll keep you from harm.
'Cause I love you.
And I always will.
And you know I'm gonna be true.

And whenever you need me.
I'll be here for you.

I know
Times have been hard.
Life has treated you bad.
Well baby, let down your guard.
Try not to be sad,
'Cause I promised to stay by your side.
And now that's what I'm gonna do...

And tomorrow if trouble should come,
You can count on me to come through.
Because now and for always.
I'll be here for you.
Come rain or come shine,
Through thick and through thin.
For better or worse.
I'll be here for you.
So Goodnight.
Don't be afraid.... ---

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NCIS: ABBY’S LAB

"I know, but... Belle... yeah. Maybe you're right. I get that, I'm just... Okay. Yes, you crazy nudge, I'll ask. Tomorrow night, 5:00 sharp. I'll be there. Thanks for calling. Okay, bye."

Tim reached over from his seat next to her and gently grabbed her hand.

"What's up?"

"I... I have to tell you something, Timmy. The whole family, actually."

Tim gazed over at the open office door at a sound asleep Max, who had taken up residence on the lab tech's futon.

"I'll wake her up, you call the morgue and make sure Ducky and Jimmy are both there, okay?"

Abby nodded solemnly and initiated the summons. A few minutes later Tim and Abby were guiding their half-awake colleague into the large space. Max shook herself and joined the other three in leaning against or sitting on a single autopsy table.

"Okay, Abs. Go ahead. We're all ears." Tim encouraged.

"Yeah... you guys know how easy I get bored."
A light snort from McGee earned him a scowl, but Abby continued without verbally scolding him. "About a year ago, I found something new to try, and get this... I'm not sick of it yet!"

"That is quite an accomplishment, my dear." Ducky offered. "What, pray tell, could this miracle activity be?"

"Ummmm... ballet."

When eyebrows went up and mouths opened, she rushed forward, knowing if they spoke she'd be tempted to use the distraction as an excuse not to finish her explanation. "I've got a recital tomorrow night, and with everything going on with Tony, I was just gonna not go, but when I told my teacher, she said it might be good for us, that dance, like, lifts up the soul in bad times, so you're all invited to the studio, three dollar suggested donation but you don't have to, and if I hear even one snicker when you see me in a tutu I'll get Gibbs to go Marine medieval on every one of your asses."

Tim gave her a few moments to recover her breath before striding over, wrapping her in a fierce embrace and briefly lifting her off her feet.

"Are you crazy, sweetie? You could walk on stage as Goth Godzilla or Sleeping Beauty. I'd still be incredibly proud of you."

Gradually, the others gathered around the pair, offering their congratulations and happily stating their intention not to miss a moment of her recital. All Abby could hear was Tim's heartbeat, all she could feel were his arms and the weight of the secret she still held deep inside.

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TBC.........
LUNCHTIME: THE MORGUE:

Ducky briefly consulted the photographs and the open textbook before him, hummed, nodded and finally spoke.

"And this structure? Name and associated system if you please. Jimmy? Mister Palmer?"

"Huh? Oh... I'm sorry, Doctor. I really was listening."

Ducky raised one eyebrow at him. "Okay, I was trying..."

"Forgiven. Last night was exceedingly difficult for both of us." Ducky responded sympathetically. "You didn't get much more sleep than I did and you made it to bed at least two hours earlier. We'll make up for it tomorrow, hmm? A much needed day off, plenty of time to rest."

"Actually... I was planning on spending a few hours at the hospital. I'm hoping Agent Gibbs will let me relieve him for a while."

"I'd say there's an excellent chance of that. He asked about you last night."

"He did? Why? Is he mad? I wanted to go with you on the rescue but you said no. Did you tell him you were the one who said no?"

"James, calm yourself. He merely wanted to be sure you'd been informed that Tony was safe and being cared for. He's aware how close you two have become and he didn't want you worrying unnecessarily."

Jimmy dropped his gaze to the notebook in front of him and mumbled a reply.

"Nice thought, but it didn't work..."

"Yes... so Gerald confided to me this morning. Your vocabulary quite surprised him, I must say. He wasn't aware you knew any words of that stripe, never mind that you were willing and able to speak them. He, ah... he said you told him something very personal... something that was a large part of what drove you to ask for use of the basement. I was warned that I could inquire, but not to cajole or press, even a little, if you declined to repeat the tale to me."

"I've told it too much lately. I just wanna put it away for now, if that's okay."

"Of course it is."

"Where is he anyway?"

"Gerald? I believe he left to fetch a meal for all of us."

"Abby, too?"

"I'd be horsewhipped were I to exclude her. Perhaps literally..."

Jimmy produced a tiny smile and straightened up a bit, refocusing on his notes.

"Okay, what was the question again?"
Ducky gently closed the book and slid it aside.

"Gerald should be back any moment. Time for a break from your studies to 'stoke the furnace' as they say. Why don't you go seek out Abby and pass the message that sustenance is on its way?"

"But..."

"No rationalizing. In these stressful days, we are all responsible for each other's health and well-being, Mister Palmer. It's what a family is for."

"Okay. Back to the books after lunch, though, right?"

"Indeed."

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1:30: THE HOSPITAL:

Just barely dozing in the chair beside Tony, Gibbs tensed and immediately went on full alert when he sensed someone enter the room. Only when he recognized the visitor did he relax even slightly.

"Brad. They call you in? Something up with his lungs?"

"No on both counts. At least as far as I know. I'm sure the staff here would've contacted me eventually, but Dennis Lewiston beat them to the punch. My God... tell me you caught whoever did this to Tony." He pleaded on a slow, exhaled breath.

"Yeah. In the act. Close enough, anyway. Another agent on my team held the bastard off until I could get there... saved both their lives."

"That had to be Ziva." Brad commented with a grin as he closed the gap between himself and the bed.

Gibbs felt his shoulders tighten again at the mention of the Mossad agent's name, but he fought the reaction down.

"Nope. Tim McGee, actually."

"Yeah? That's fantastic. Tony will be so psyched. The kid'll be getting a commendation, I assume."

"Damn right. They won't tell me much of anything... just walk in, spout medical gobbledy-gook and walk out. How's he doing?"

"I looked at his chart before I came in. All things considered, he's in decent shape. They have him on strong antibiotics to get rid of any infection in the wounds on his back and legs. The same drugs should help prevent pneumonia from getting a foothold. The rest of it... the only answer is determination, guts and time."

"He's got the first two in spades. The third one... I guarantee he'll have all he needs."

"Once they stop the sedation and he comes around, the doctors and therapists will be pushing him to get up." Brad warned. "They're right and you know it. The longer he stays flat on his back, the harder PT will be later."

"I know. I get the message. No growling, no roaring, no yelling at nurses."
"I didn't say that. I'm sure a bellow once in a while will reassure Tony no end. Just let the staff do their jobs... and try to avoid tossing anybody out a window, okay? We're pretty high up."

"No promises... but I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask. Is there anything you want me to relay to the doctors?"

"Yeah. Long as you and Lewiston are willing to keep in touch and check in every couple days... tell 'em I won't insist on transferring Tony to Bethesda."

"You were going to?" Brad asked, mildly surprised.

"At first. I wanted Tony with people we know... people who know us. If that can happen here then he should stay."

"I don't know if I deserve that level of trust from you anymore... but thank you."

Gibbs grunted and returned his focus to the occupant of the bed. Brad grinned, nodded and quickly strode out, intent on finding the man who had gotten him there and passing on Gibbs' request.

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TBC.......
THE HOSPITAL: 3:00

To ease the deep aches the plastic chair had ground into his hips and back, Gibbs was up and slowly pacing around Tony's room when their next visitor arrived.

"Agent Gibbs."

"Director. Come on in. And outside of work it's Jethro."

"Jethro. How is he?"

"Holding his own. Soon as the danger to his lungs is past... he'll be fine."

"That's great. I'm thrilled to hear it. I know what it means to you to be close to him right now..."

"No. All due respect, you don't."

Lowering her head for a long moment, Sarah drew and released a deep, slow breath. Gibbs could clearly see she was struggling with how to begin, so he gestured to the wide area below the window, followed her down once she was settled and sat quietly with her, waiting for her to compose herself.

"I only told you part of the reason I accepted the position here in D.C. The larger part of my decision... involved my husband. I know exactly what this is like, Jethro. I'd give anything to still be ignorant."

"I hadn't heard. Is Rabb okay?"

"Not really. He's alive, but..."

"Alive isn't enough."

"No... not for him. Harm's never been one to shy away from risk if it meant saving someone else or getting to the truth. Neither am I, for that matter. Still, I don't think I ever reached his level. I was so committed, so in love... I thought I could deal with it, no matter what, no matter how long. This last time, though... it was just too much."

"What happened?"

"He did what he always does; listened to his own instincts, ignored everyone else's advice and convinced himself he was the only one who could get the job done and save the day. It wasn't enough this time. For three weeks I wouldn't let anyone pry, coerce or drag me away from him except to shower and use the ladies room. When he finally opened his eyes... it opened mine too. I went home, packed a couple suitcases and moved into a hotel."

"I don't understand."

Sarah laughed darkly and turned her head to stare out the window.

"The first thing he asked me was whether the woman he tried to rescue had survived. I could see I never really had all of his heart or his soul... and I never would. I wanted so much to believe. I gave it all I had... but I just couldn't do it anymore. We've been separated ever since. When Edward offered me the job out here... it was the kick in the butt I needed."
'Rabb?'

"He'll never be a hundred percent... but he'll recover eventually. He could've ended up in a wheelchair."

"That's good news. What's it have to do with you being here?"

"You have unfinished business at NCIS. I'm offering to sit with Tony while you wrap up what you started in that warehouse."

Gibbs lips thinned and he rose to his feet.

"You just said that's what drove you across the country and away from the man you love. I won't let that happen to me and Tony."

"Gibbs..."

"No. The job used to come first for me too. Always, practically no exceptions. It has to change now. If he finds out I left just to..."

"To what? Make sure the men who did this to him spend the rest of their worthless lives in prison? He'll understand there was no point in you hanging around here worrying and waiting for him to wake up. He'll expect you to be the proactive man he knows and fell in love with, depending on the doctors to do their jobs while you do everything in your power to protect the one person who means everything to you."

Gibbs stalked a few steps away, his hands tightly fisted, then slowly turned and moved back to where Sarah waited. When she realized he was too torn to make any decision, she continued her plea, hoping it would tip him off the emotional fence he was riding. "I don't trust anyone else with an interrogation this important, Jethro. If we get this wrong, the next step will never happen. I won't be responsible for letting DiNozzo Senior get away with what he's done."

"Damn it, Director..."

"I won't leave Tony until you get back. Not for a second. He'll be under my personal protection."

"If his sperm donor tries to get in here..."

"I've already got hospital security on alert and posted downstairs. He won't make it six inches inside the doors."

"Yeah, but if he does..."

"I've got my sidearm. I'll put neat round holes in both his ankles and if that doesn't stop him, I'll move to his knees. The level after that..."

Gibbs grimaced and held up a hand.

"I get it. Just remember to warn him first, huh?"

"Briefly. And very quietly."

A momentary grin, one more sigh and Gibbs was snatching up the coat he'd shed hours before. He paused at the door before striding out into the hallway.

"You know... I wasn't so sure about another female director... but I think you an' I will get along
Just wait 'till the first time you go ten miles outside the lines to close a case. You won't like me so much."

"We'll see. Thanks."

"No problem."

5:15: NCIS

"James? Mister Palmer?"

Jimmy hurriedly squeezed through the barely open door and into the morgue, running and skidding to a slightly off-balance stop at Ducky's feet.

"Right here."

"Yes, I see that. The older man chuckled quietly. "Where have you been?"

"With Abby."

"I sent you up with those samples nearly an hour ago."

"She wanted to show me some of the ballet steps she's been learning. She is really, really good."

"Indeed? Tomorrow night should be a genuine treat, then. Is something disturbing you? You appear... confused."

"No... well, kind of. I'm... it's just not Abby, you know? Seeing her move that way... graceful and light, as if she's barely in contact with the floor... it threw me. Just a little."

"As I think it will all of us when we watch her perform. Still... she is such a beautiful young woman. I'm looking forward to the recital immensely."

Focusing on his assistant, Ducky laughed again at the dreamy look and faraway gaze. "I take it the dance wasn't the whole of the experience?"

"She took her pigtails out. Her hair was all loose and... I don't think I've ever seen her like that. It was... totally amazing."

"I can tell. You, ah... you haven't had much... experience with women, have you, my boy?" Ducky probed cautiously.

"Why would you say that? I've dated... some. Nothing serious, but I'm no wallflower."

"You also aren't a callous lothario."

"You mean like Tony pretended to be for so long."

"Precisely."

"No. I'm not that. It doesn't mean I've never seen a girl..."

"The way you reacted to Addie the other day, the way you're describing Abigail now... I thought
"I just haven't been around a lot of women like *them*, that's all. Abby and Max are so confident and strong and independent... I come from a pretty small town, Doctor, and back there... most girls aren't like that."

"But you seem to enjoy it."

Jimmy grinned and blushed furiously.

"Yeah. I think I do."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of, kid. Trust me." Gerald commented softly as he entered the room. "We've all been there... been that young. If you need advice..."

"No. I mean, not yet. Maybe someday..."

"Hey, I understand. I, and the basement, will always be available to you. Anytime."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. You two ready to go eat?"


"What about Abigail?" Ducky questioned.

"She's taking Max bowling so she can meet the nuns."

"Ah. I'll say a fast prayer for young Addie as we travel..."

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TBC........
7:00: NCIS

After grabbing a quick drive-through meal on the road, Gibbs trudged off the elevator and headed for the bullpen. He knew his business was elsewhere, but the need to stop for a few moments was unbearable. Approaching Tony’s desk, he ghosted his hand over the papers and items, heart twisting so strongly he felt physical pain. Nothing had been disturbed since the last time his love had been there, but that was about to change. The item he retrieved would likely never be missed, mostly because, as usual, it was buried under other things, but Gibbs was hoping that having it in his pocket, having a touchstone to remind him of their everyday, normal lives would be enough to buoy him until Tony was back where he belonged.

Secreting the object, he turned and headed for the holding area only to run into Ducky just short of the door to the stairs.

"Jethro! Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, he's the same. Mackenzie sent me back to start dealing with the bastard who did this."

"Kicked you out, more likely." The older man rebutted with a fond smile. "She's with Anthony?"

Gibbs nodded tiredly.

"Said she'd stay as long as she was needed."

"I'm sure. A marvelous woman, our Sarah."

"What're you still doin' here, Duck?"

"Oh, I sent the other two home after we had dinner. I should've gone as well, but... I ended up in my office."

"How come?"

"No real reason... I suppose I was thinking about the other afternoon when Tony and I had tea and biscuits there..."

Gibbs grinned sadly and showed Ducky what he had in his pocket. "His stapler. He does treasure the silly thing, doesn't he..."

"True, but he won't need it for a while... and it'll do me good to have it close."

Ducky's face fell and his next words emerged quiet, slow and cautious.

"Jethro... surely you understand..."

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

"We all must, at some point. The damage to his muscles and nerves..."

"Damn it, Ducky..."

"It's all well and good to have hope, Jethro, but the type of injuries he's suffered may well leave him
struggling to *feed* himself, never mind lift, steady and fire a weapon!"

"You don't know that!"

"I've since done the research, so yes... I'm afraid I do."

Gibbs lowered his head, breathing deeply, then abruptly punched the wall with all his strength. "Dear Lord," Ducky responded, examining the subsequent wound, "... I should've seen that coming... Come down to the morgue with me, my friend, and I'll patch you up."

Gibbs pulled away.

"No. Have to get the son of a bitch into interrogation..."

"Later."

"No, now!"

"Jethro!"

For perhaps the first time since he'd joined the Marines, Gibbs felt straightforward, venomous petulance try to creep in past his defenses and he was all for letting it have free rein. Fortunately, Ducky read Jethro's expression accurately and cut short a potential tantrum before it wound up in more violence and further injury. "Stop it right this minute, do you hear?" the doctor intoned, his voice low and intense. "No one else may comprehend the rage and sadness you're dealing with... but I do. I was there. I refused to let you harm yourself then, despite how insistent you were. Nothing has changed."

"Duck..."

"The bastard has waited this long. He will not perish before daylight. You are coming down to my office, I'm going to clean and bandage that hand and get a cup of hot sweet tea into you..."

"No way in hell."

"Pardon? Are you still challenging me?"

Gibbs shook his head slowly.

"No."

"I thought not. You will drink your tea, you will eat several of Tony's favorite biscuits and we will discuss only better times. I will then take you home with me and feed you, you will use the basement if you feel the need, you will go to bed and I will see that you sleep soundly... however it has to happen. Are we clear?"

"You just try drugging me, old man..."

"Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Are... we... clear?"

Gibbs fought against the life-long impulse, but hearing his full name spoken in that stern tone of voice still engendered instant obedience. Grudgingly, he nodded. "Very well. Into the elevator with you, at once."

Gibbs hesitated. "Well?"
"I'll go if you do me a favor and call Tobias. After this is over and Tony's... after his so-called father's behind bars the three of us... like last time."

"I'll alert him, of course. Now..."

"Yeah, yeah." Gibbs conceded, finally starting to move. "But I'm not drinkin' any damn tea..."

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7: 45 THE HOSPITAL:

Jimmy crept silently into Tony's room, intending, if he was asleep, to wake Gibbs gently and make his offer of relief. He was surprised to find the chair's occupant not only awake, but female.

"Director?" he murmured.

"Mister Palmer. I didn't expect to see you tonight."

"I was gonna wait 'till tomorrow, but I thought Agent Gibbs might be more willing to accept a substitute vigil-sitter if he was half-awake when I made my pitch. How did you talk him into going?"

"By reminding him that Tony's kidnapper was still waiting for him back at the office."

"I didn't think of that. 'Course, coming from me it wouldn't have carried much weight..."

"It almost didn't from me, either. I had to really push."

"I bet. So..."

"No thanks. I promised to stay 'till Gibbs comes back, which won't be until late tomorrow."

"How do you know that?"

"After I got Gibbs out of here, I made a call. By now Ducky's in the process of force-feeding the stubborn goat a good meal. Then, I suspect, he'll find a way to slip Gibbs a mild sedative and tuck him into bed for a few hours. Whenever he wakes up, he'll probably head right into interrogation and not come out until he has what he wants. Once he's back here, I'll go get some rest, but..."

"Oh. Okay. I guess I'll head home, then..."

"Whoa, I didn't mean you can't stay and visit." She told him, rising to her feet. "The chair's all yours. I'll go stretch my legs, get some coffee... you can have as much time as you need."

"Really? Thanks. I won't be long. I just wanna talk to him a little while."

"Will half an hour do?"

"That'll be great. Anything you want me to pass on?"

"Nah. I've been talking at him off and on since Gibbs left. Do you..."

"What?"

Sara paused, but eventually came out with her question.

"Do you really think he'll hear you?"
"Sure. No reason not to. There's so much about the brain we don't understand yet. What little we *do* know leaves tons of room for speculation... and some for faith and hope. I say if nobody's proven it can't be, then it still could be. Yeah... I'm a big believer in 'could be'."

Sarah smiled and squeezed his shoulder as he took her place in the chair.

"Me, too."

Once she'd exited the room, Jimmy reached out and laid his hand on top of Tony's.

"You listen to me, okay? Listen and remember what I said in that room back at Bethesda when we played you all those songs. You know, now. Finally we all sat there, came right out and said how we feel about you. Hold onto that, please. You hold onto every word. You wouldn't have made it this far in life if you weren't strong, Tony. If nothing else beat you all the way down, neither will this."

Jimmy stated boldly, in direct opposition to the message conveyed by the stray tears he paused to wipe off on his sleeve. "I know there are bound to be times when you feel like it's too overwhelming or it hurts too much. Those are the times I want you to reach for *us*. I'll be there to listen, Abby'll make you laugh, Doctor Mallard will always have a cup of tea and cookies when you need them... Tim risked everything to make sure you survived. Gibbs... Gibbs loves you more than anything in the known universe."

He dried more tears, swallowed and continued, even though his voice was cracking with emotion. "When they take you off the sedation, I know it'll be tough... but family doesn't give up on family and we're not leaving you. No matter what. That... I guess that's all I wanted to say. You think hard about it, alright? I'm just... gonna give you some quiet time now... always easier to concentrate when it's quiet."

With a heavy sigh, Jimmy laid his head and one shoulder on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes.

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TBC............
11:30 A.M. : SATURDAY

When the expected stomping and grumbling alerted him that Jethro had awakened, Ducky lowered the heat under the homemade sausage he was browning and moved toward the stairs to await his guest. The other man started in even before he'd made it down to the first floor, but Ducky halted the coming hurricane before it could gain much strength.

"You sneaky, conniving..."

"Yes, yes. I am that and the other things you're thinking as well. Apparently my little trick had the desired effect, however."

"What?"

"Your battery is recharged and you are, as they say, raring to go. Now if you're ready to refuel... a hearty brunch awaits." he offered, waving toward the kitchen. Gibbs stayed where he was.

"You had no right."

"I disagree. You were steadily depleting your resources and not doing a thing to replace them."

"Tony..."

"I understand that right now the man you love takes priority," Ducky said, lightly patting Gibbs on the cheek. "but not at the cost of your own health and well being... and not to the detriment of the other children."

On that cryptic note, he turned and headed back into the kitchen to make sure his sausage didn't burn. Gibbs had no choice but to follow.

"What the hell does that mean? Is one of 'em in trouble? Ducky!"

"No, no trouble, but there is an event tonight that Abigail would be devastated if you didn't attend. She's been taking, of all things, ballet instruction."

"She what?! How long?"

"A year or more, so she claims."

"And tonight's... what, a recital?"

"Precisely." Ducky affirmed, carefully pouring beaten eggs over the teasingly aromatic cooked meat. He slowly rotated the pan to get the liquid evenly distributed, then returned the vessel to the flame and his attention to Jethro. "You sound pensive. You're not actually contemplating leaving your seat empty, are you?"

"Ducky... damn it, I don't know..."

"The girl is thousands of miles from her blood relatives, Jethro. You've become her..."

"Yeah, and I never asked for the job." Gibbs interjected. "She just... snuck into my heart somehow... filled up some a'that hollow space."
"And Anthony filled the rest?"

Gibbs smiled briefly.

"He's as devious as Abby. One day I looked around... realized I'd adopted a grown daughter and I was so in love with Tony I couldn't see straight. Knocked me on my ass..."

"I can imagine. And when you discovered he felt the same?" Ducky asked, killing the heat under the omelet. He folded it, added shredded cheese to the top, divided it and slipped half onto his plate and half onto Jethro's. Bringing both to the table, he placed one in front of his friend and took a seat.

"I didn't know. Didn't want to, maybe. Then the group session at the hospital... it was in his eyes and the way he reacted."

Ducky took his time chewing and swallowing his first bite, thinking deeply. Finally, he decided he couldn't break a confidence that no longer was one.

"When I visited him at Bethesda, I revealed that I knew how strongly he felt about you. He became quite distraught, pleading with me not to say anything to you. He said he believed he could give anything that might be required, including love... but he didn't know how to accept it in return."

"When he never got the chance to learn, how could he?"

"Mmm. Very true. He wants so badly to be everything you ask... and everything you are."

Gibbs finally ate his own first bite.

"What he *thinks* I am. He's taken it to the point where he won't cry in front of me 'cause he thinks I don't."

Ducky startled a bit, suddenly recalling his unintentional revelation about Gibbs' past that day. He quickly looked down and began to eat in earnest to hide any guilt that might leak through into his expression.

"Indeed. You'll have to disabuse him of that notion. Eat, Jethro, eat. You have work to do at the office today and you'll need all your energy."

"Okay... thanks, by the way."

"Not a problem, dear boy."

"This is really good. No piles of veggies, no sauce all over it... just the basics, the way I like it. The sausage is amazing. Where'd you get it?"

"Gerald makes a batch every month or so. We freeze most of it and keep a bit fresh in the refrigerator for when the urge strikes."

"Think he'd make some for me?"

"Of course he would. I'll make the request when he returns from his run. By the way, are you going to finish your explanation?"

"Of what?"

"Why you might not go to the ballet recital tonight."
Gibbs held his breath for a long stretch of seconds before quietly answering.

"If you stop at the house tomorrow before church... I'll show you."

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NCIS 2:00

Gibbs approached the holding area breathing deeply and slowly. He had a plan in his head about how to handle this first confrontation and he knew it would be blown to hell if he surrendered control to the anger and pain he was feeling.

The guard halted him, thoroughly checked his ID, compared it to a picture in his pocket and accepted Gibbs' willingly surrendered weapon for safe keeping until he emerged.

"Keep doin' that." He praised. "Nobody gets to see him if you aren't a hundred percent sure they have a right to be in there."

"Only two names on that list right now; yours and the director's. Her orders."

"Add one more. Agent Tim McGee. You can get his photo from personnel."

"McGee... he's the one who stopped this bas... this suspect, isn't it, sir? The one who saved Agent DiNozzo?"

"He is. Guess it's all over the building, huh?"

"In the first five minutes." The guard replied with a slight grin. "Genuine hero stories move fast around here."

"Yeah, well, he's not sure about the H word yet, so if he does come down, just say thank you, okay? It'll save hours of blushing and humility. And I'm no sir." Gibbs chuckled.

"Got it, Agent Gibbs. Go on in." he told him, carding open the door and shutting it firmly once Jethro was inside. A pause and one more gradual inhale and exhale and Gibbs strolled forward until he was opposite Rossmore's cell. Just the sight of the man suffused Gibbs with a rage that he hadn't experienced since the loss of his wife and daughter, but he shoved that emotion into a small mental box and slammed the lid, determined that it wouldn't get in the way of how he wanted this meeting to go. Leaning back against the wall of the narrow corridor, he forced himself to relax completely, let his face go slack and blank and waited. Finally, the mercenary got tired of being stared at, sat forward on his bunk and began to speak.

"Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Can't say you're welcome... but you were expected. On Thursday night, in fact. Letting me stew this way just isn't your style, is it? I know a little about you. He told me... gave me a file to read. You've always been a man of action. Not one to sit around when a Sig Sauer or a few well-placed blows will get the job done. That cool façade be damned... you'd rather be knocking my head off my shoulders, right now. Trouble is, I don't give up control. Ever. I've made a nice life being the thumb, not the one who's under it and that's not changing."

Gibbs didn't smile, didn't twitch. "I'm not the one you really want, old man... but I can hand him to you on a silver platter. You won't pass that up and neither will your director. Even if she wanted to
say no, the ones above her would make it happen because the time he'll serve on your charges... that's only the start. You wouldn't believe how many law enforcement agencies are waiting for a piece of DiNozzo Senior. Trust me, Sheppard's more of a self-serving opportunist than I am. She'll cave, I'll do a year in Club Fed."

Gibbs still didn't respond, physically or verbally. "Go on, you perverted piece of garbage. You don't take her the offer, you're the one they'll sanction. Knowing you lost your position, that you couldn't influence and corrupt any more young men... that would be more than worth prison."

At last, Gibbs straightened, pulling an object from his back pocket. To his credit, Rossmore didn't flinch or look away from what could have been his last moments on earth. Still he momentarily held his breath, releasing it only when he saw that Gibbs held a newspaper. He tossed it through the bars and took a step toward the cell. "What is this... Sheppard gone. It can't be... Sarah Mackenzie..."

Now Gibbs let a faint grin touch his lips. He made sure Rossmore saw it, turned and walked casually away.

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Chapter 48

5:15: THE HOSPITAL

Sarah stretched and groaned, slowly working out the tightness in her muscles and joints, then shook herself lightly. She'd been asleep in the bedside chair for a few hours, judging by her watch, and she felt better for the respite. She'd sent Jimmy home as soon as she'd returned to the room the previous night and the FBI agents Fornell had arranged for had arrived not long after, greatly increasing her sense of safety, but she still had not been able to sleep or even close her eyes. She knew how illusory it was, but her husband's presence seemed to fill the small space and her memories of the last time she'd taken up such a vigil would not leave her alone.

Somehow, as it always did when she couldn't stop thinking about him, her distress communicated itself across the distance between them and, eventually, her cell phone rang. Indescribably grateful to hear Harmon Rabb's voice just then, she went down in the elevator and outside to speak with him. Their conversation took a long time, alternating between Sarah pouring out her heart's recent burdens and Harm offering the wise, compassionate responses she relied on.

When they finally ended the call, she hurried back up to Tony's room, but everything was peaceful and she settled back into her seat, falling asleep quickly now that she had unloaded everything that was weighing her down onto the only person she trusted to handle it and not resent her for occasionally needing to perform the emotional cleansing ritual.

Early morning had seen her awake and raiding nearby vending machines for snacks and soda, but after her impromptu meal and an hour or two of reading, with the help of a small book light, she'd settled back in and drifted to sleep once again. She performed a second raid for a late ersatz lunch and, in the middle of further reading, napped again. Now, she gazed down at the still form under the blankets, smiled and brushed back his hair.

"Morning, Tony. Hey, your breathing sounds really good. If the doctors think it *looks* good, they might start weaning you off the sedation tomorrow. Of course, that'll mean a serious up-tick in the painkillers, but trust me, you won't mind." She assured him. Her gaze fell on the stuffed animals and she reached out, lifting up the lion for closer inspection. "This is so cute. Not new, I can see that... but very cute. I wonder which one of the family left it for you? Hang on... there's a tag here... luckily it hasn't faded too much. Micah... king and proctor of the K.G. zoo." Sarah read, chuckling softly. "I think he or she meant protector. I was right, this was definitely loved by a child at some point. K.G., hmmm... oh. Oh God. I had no idea..."

Gently placing the lion back in precisely the same spot, Sarah touched Tony's face.

"I've been praying off and on since I got here. I don't think you'd object if you knew... I hope you wouldn't. Anyway... I'll add Jethro in this time, alright? Here we go..."

Bowing her head, she began to whisper quietly. Gradually, she sensed another presence growing in the room, a distinctly female essence this time, wrapping both her and Tony in warmth and peace. Sarah paused, looked up for a moment, offered a puzzled smile and then continued her prayer, feeling as if she and Tony had just received a huge blessing and an exceptionally powerful petition had been added to the one she was sending skyward.

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6:45 : BELLE'S STUDIO
Peering through a gap in the temporary stage curtains, still not seeing the one person she was waiting for, Abby moaned quietly and reached behind her, grasping her teacher's hand.

"Where is he? Belle, where is he? Everybody else is here. It's almost time. Where could he be? Ducky said he told him..."

"Please, you must relax, darling. Your Papa Gibbs will be here if he possibly can, you know that."

"He wouldn't just... not show up, right? He wouldn't ever do that."

"Perhaps if you had told him personally how much this means to you..."

"Hey, I told the rest of them, didn't I? You know why he wasn't there."

"I do. I also know this is not a discussion we should be having right now. You mustn't let yourself be distracted, Abigail. Concentrate on the steps, on the music... focus on what your family is here to see."

"I can't help it. Tony's supposed to be out there too..."

"There will be another performance in six months. He will be well enough to attend that. You must have faith. Now, do as I say and complete your preparation."

Abby closed her eyes tightly and quickly reviewed the positions and movements for the first dance in her mind. When she looked up again, Belle could see that the younger woman's worries had retreated and she gave Abby a proud smile and a brief, fierce embrace. "There. Better. I must go out and announce the start of the recital. Listen for your name, darling. No more drifting away into fretfulness."

"I hear and obey, General." Abby affirmed, saluting smartly.

"Cheeky girl." Belle chuckled, swatting her student lightly on the rear end as she moved out through the curtains

When she appeared, the audience applauded, but swiftly quieted when she held up her hands. "Welcome family, friends and patrons. I and the young people backstage deeply appreciate your support. Thank you so much for being here to show them how much you care. This evening, one of my most promising students will be the first to perform for you. She has only been with me a year, but her beauty, grace and obvious gift will, I believe, astound you. Ladies... gentlemen... Miss Abigail Sciuto."

Abby glided out through the drapes and posed, the recorded classical music swirled into the room and she began to dance. Tim stared, feeling as if his jaw were literally on the floor. He had never seen anything like this from her and he struggled to fit this new piece into his mental jigsaw of who Abby was; a puzzle he'd considered complete. Now he was both confused and enraptured at the same time. The gossamer skirt she wore floated around her as she moved and continually drew his attention. Her hair had been shaped into a bun instead of her normal braids or pigtails, and the few stray fragments left loose to frame her face by turns contradicted and then echoed the shift and sway of both her body and the material around her waist. Her feet were doing things he couldn't have conceived of as little as an hour ago. The image, as a whole, had overwhelmed him and he was utterly lost. Ducky's hand reaching out and gently squeezing his shoulder finally brought McGee back from the ethers and he smiled at the doctor gratefully, though he was blinking slowly and trying to recall just where he was.

In sharp contrast to Tim's bewilderment, the ME was overjoyed at what he was seeing. He'd always
felt that this delicate, yet thrillingly powerful, creature might be hiding somewhere behind Abby's usual preference for ear-splitting music, dark clothes and studded collars. His open-minded nature and keen attachment to her kept him from ever expressing himself on the subject in her presence, but deep inside he'd frequently contemplated whether the wonder before him was possible. Now he reveled and rejoiced in her triumph and in the butterfly-like emergence of a new side to the young woman he adored.

In-between watching Abby's amazing performance, Max gazed up and down the row, studying the other members of her adoptive family. Tim was dumbstruck, Ducky elated, Jimmy alternately enthralled and self-conscious. She realized that she was the only one who had the luxury of approaching the event without pre-conceptions or prior knowledge of Abby getting in the way. She was able to simply relax and appreciate the unmistakable aptitude for ballet that the other young woman possessed. Then her gaze fell on the third chair to her left, which had been empty minutes before, and her breath stilled for several seconds when she saw tears streaking down a now familiar face.

The music slid to an easy finish, Abby assumed her final position and the small audience rose to its feet, exploding into fervent applause. Lifting her head, she realized that the man, whose absence had earlier caused such anxiety, was there, watching with glistening eyes and an ear-to-ear grin. Her gaze moved over to Tim and the adoration and pride she found there prompted tears of her own. More than anything, she wanted to run to them and embrace them one after the other, but with a pas de deux and a group routine still to come for her, she settled for blowing each man a little kiss. Gibbs put up his hand and pretended to catch the offering, not looking over when Ducky spoke from the space to the right, having just exchanged seats with Jimmy.

"Thank you, Jethro."

"She's... hell, Ducky, she's incredible..."

"No argument. No, indeed..." he concurred, discreetly handing his friend a handkerchief. Gibbs took it, swiped at his face and returned the cloth to its owner.

Recital over, audience making their way back out to the street, Abby stood in the middle of the performance space surrounded by her family, but being held tightly by Tim alone. He only pulled back a bit when Belle strode out and joined the group.

"Well, Abigail. Was the reaction all you hoped?"

"Totally, completely, absolutely!"

"You've caught your breath?"

"Oh, yeah. Can we do it now?"

"If you're ready."

"Oh, I seriously am."

"Very well."

Belle patted her on the back, strode over to the stereo and switched out the classical CD they'd been using for one she brought with her.
"You guys go sit down again, okay?" Abby directed, gently pushing everyone but McGee back toward the chairs. "This... is just for me and Timmy."

"Abs, I don't... you know I can't..."

"You don't have to. Just follow my lead..."

Grasping Tim's hands, Abby began to swing their arms back and forth as a lyrical pop melody began to fill the room.

*** When I think, how life used to be  
Always walking in the shadows  
Then I look at what you've given me  
I feel like dancing on my tip-toes... ***

Releasing one of his hands, she went on pointe and turned in a slow circle. He raised the hand she still clung to and followed the movement.

*** I must say, every day I wake  
And realize you're by my side  
I know I'm truly

Blessed for everything you give me  
Blessed for all the tenderness you show  
Do my best with every breath that's in me  
Blessed to make sure you never go ***

Laying her free hand on his face, Abby glided around him and Tim pursued, worried about becoming dizzy but knowing he wouldn't change what was happening for anything on earth. On and on she led, guiding him until he yielded and sank beneath the waves of beat and rhythm, breathing only when she did.

*** There are times that I test your faith  
'Till you think you might surrender  
Baby I'm, I'm not ashamed to say  
That my hopes were growing slender

You walked by in the nick of time  
Looking like an answered prayer  
You know I'm truly...

...Blessed with love and understanding  
Blessed when I hear you call my name  
Do my best with faith that's never-ending  
Blessed to make sure you feel the same

Deep inside of me  
you fill me with your gentle touch... ***

Finally, as the music ebbed and faded out, Tim made a move not initiated by Abby. He swept her into his arms, rocked and cradled her and kissed her deeply. Belle smiled softly, shut down the stereo and moved off into the locker room. Jimmy offered his handkerchief to a damp-faced Max, who took it with a shy grin.

"Uh, I have to, uh... blow."
"Yeah, of course... go ahead. I-I have a lot more if you need them. They're back at my apartment, but... oh. Oh geez, I didn't mean to suggest... we barely know each other so that was totally *not*..."

A swift kiss on the cheek stopped his babble cold but made both young people instantly turn bright red. Gibbs and Ducky had to work to suppress their guffaws so they wouldn't embarrass the other two any further.

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TBC.....
After showing his ID to the current pair of FBI agents on guard, Gerald ducked silently into Tony's room and moved to the near side of the bed. He had difficulty breathing initially as memories rushed through him of the recent family gathering and the younger man's joy and shock at receiving his platinum bracelet from Jethro. Realizing suddenly that the item was no longer in its proper place, he made a mental note to ask his lover about it whenever he was home next.

Over a few minutes, Gerald's heart slowed and his anxiety eased a fraction, but witnessing someone he cared about look so battered and bruised was something he knew he would carry with him for a very long time. He now began to understand how some of the harrowing experiences Ducky had gone through might have helped to make the ME the gentle, compassionate professional he was, treating every corpse that came through his autopsy suite as the human being they once were, not lifeless flesh laying on his table.

A soft inquiry broke into his intense thought process and he looked up, finally noticing that the new director was awake.

"Doctor? What are you doing here so late?"

"Hey, Director Mackenzie. I'm your relief. And please, it's Gerald."

"Gerald. Thank you for the honor." She responded as she rose and moved around the bed to meet him. They shook hands then Sarah lightly touched his shoulder and joined him in gazing down at Tony. "I know it looks bad right now... but the doctors have assured me he'll be fine. They should be weaning him off the sedation tomorrow."

"Good... that's really good. I just wish..."

"I know. Sitting here, in the quiet... I've had a lot of time to think. There might be a tangible, meaningful way you'll be able to help. I read the reports on what happened to you... how you were shot and what you've endured since."

Gerald tensed.

"Uh-huh."

"Can you answer a question for me? As honestly as possible."

"I can try."

"Would you have given up on your physical therapy if you hadn't had Ducky with you all those weeks? If he hadn't been there to push you and keep your spirits out of your sneakers?"

Gerald turned away and took one step back toward the door, his chin on his chest. It was several minutes before he was able to answer.

"I probably would've given up on everything. Therapy, the family... my life."

"You understand what I'm asking of you?"

"I do. I'm just not sure I'm the one for the job. I mean... he'll want the man he loves... just like I had."
"No. Jethro will be the last thing he wants or needs."

Gerald swiped a hand over his face.

"Damn it... yeah, it makes sense. I felt helpless and embarrassed in front of Don the first few weeks... and all I was dealing with was a damaged shoulder. Tony... he'll be in a wheelchair for at least three weeks, maybe longer. He won't be able to really use either arm for a long while... God, you're right. Knowing Gibbs will be seeing him like that... the kid'll pitch a fit and fall in it."

"Plus, if anyone knows what kind of pain his PT will entail..."

Gerald groaned under his breath.

"The first yelp and Jethro Gibbs, the Marine's Marine, will melt like a stick of butter in the August sun. After that, Tony'll be able to get away with anything and his healing process will take three times as long."

"Agreed."

"I'm the only one who understands, aren't I? The only one who's been there and come out the other side with my sanity intact."

Sarah frowned.

"As far as I know. I remember reading something in Agent McGee's file... but I can't quite make the details come back to me."

"That's 'cause you're exhausted. Go on home and get some real rest. Let me take my turn."

'Ducky knows where you are?"

"I told him what I was planning before we left the ballet recital."

"Recital? Ballet?"

"Later. Much later. Head out, before the lack of sleep makes your brain shut down completely " He chuckled as he handed her the purse and coat that were lying on a table by the door. "I'll call you a cab on my cell. It should be here in ten or fifteen minutes."

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8:20 SUNDAY MORNING:

Ducky slowly walked he perimeter of Jethro's living room, examining various objects and joyfully uncovering the new elements Tony had added to the once spartan, aloof space, while he waited for the other man to emerge from the basement with whatever it was he'd promised to show his friend.

Pondering what it could be, Ducky's pleasure dissipated somewhat. He was fairly certain the revelation was connected to Jethro's slain daughter and anything that unexpectedly sent their thoughts back to those incredibly difficult days could, he knew from experience, take as much as a week to free themselves from. With all they currently had on their emotional plates, he was almost reluctant to add a new burden, but he was the one who'd pushed Jethro to do this, so he stuck it out.

Hearing Jethro climb the stairs, Ducky turned to look and was mildly surprised to see the former Marine carrying a large, old-fashioned cassette player.
"Hello. Haven't seen one of those in ages. I hardly remember what it looked like, never mind how to make it function."

"I feel old enough most days, Duck. Quit makin' it worse." Gibbs retorted with a wan smile.

"Please, kindly wait until you move a little closer to my stage of life before you begin calling yourself the O word, hmm? To my eyes you are, as they say, still a Spring chicken." He countered as Gibbs set the player down on the coffee table, dropped to the couch and slowly stroked the dusty machine with one hand. Ducky sat down next to him. "What is this about, Jethro? I have my suspicions..."

Instead of answering, Jethro merely pushed a button and started the tape inside whirring. Several minutes later, as the last echoes of careful piano notes and Kelly and Shannon Gibbs' voices were fading out, Ducky was wiping away tears and his best friend was struggling valiantly against them.

"I wanted so bad to be there for her recital. I wrote and told her as much. She said she understood... but you could tell how disappointed she was. Hard for little girls to hide it when they feel bad. I only play this when I think I'm startin' to forget, ya know... who they were, what they sounded like. You told me about Abby an'... it kinda felt like betrayal, I guess. Like I didn't have the right to go watch her dance an' if Kel somehow found out..."

"She could never hate you, my friend. Never."

"You didn't see or hear her the last time I left to go back overseas. I thought she was gonna scream the neighborhood to rubble."

"Hmmm, I can imagine. Military service is hardest on the children, I think. They can't understand the whys and wherefores. All they see is a beloved parent walking away... all they know is the loneliness and absence. Telling them it isn't their fault and that you'll be back simply doesn't compensate."

Gibbs' eyes widened as long-buried images and words flooded back to him.

"You know that as well as I do, but you had it even worse. Can't believe I forgot, Duck, I'm really sorry..."

"Please, don't. I *encourage* memory loss in everyone who knew Steven or I during those last few years, including myself. Far better to recall his youth and childhood... better to remember the peaceful times instead of the illness and turmoil that overcame him later on. I apply that to our friendship as well, actually. The days when you were grieving in my arms rarely cross my mind anymore. I prefer to dwell on joyful things... like the night we were all here together. That remarkable moment after Tony received his gift... it was passionate and tender and everything a kiss should be. I must say that it's since inspired quite a few similar encounters with Gerald. Of course, we're almost always on our own when they occur, so lips tend to wander until..."

Gibbs coughed. Ducky looked over and responded to his friend's highly amused expression with a slightly self-conscious gaze, a rueful smile and a faint blush. "Yes, those details should be kept private, of course."

"Yeah, they should." Gibbs agreed lightly.

"Oh dear, I must be going." Ducky said as he rose slowly to his feet. "They expect me a bit early this morning to assist with teaching the younger children a special song. I don't suppose... if I asked..."

"No sense in wasting questions when you know damn well what the answer is, Duck. Unless you're doing an interrogation."
"Ah. Rule 29?"

"28."

"Close enough. I'll count it a victory. You know, it occurs to me, Jethro... young Kelly blamed you for leaving her, for causing her heartache... but you actually bore no guilt. You loved her dearly but you couldn't change what was happening. Are you, just perhaps... reacting the same way to God? Just a thought. I'll return after church, shall I? We'll have lunch?"

Gibbs nodded half-heartedly, but he was no longer looking at his friend. Ducky favored him with a gentle grin, turned and left.

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TBC.....
Chapter 50

ABBY'S APARTMENT; 12:15 P.M.

"Timmy! Lunch is ready!"

"On my way." Tim responded eagerly, quickly drying his freshly washed face and hands. Abby's rules were few, but the ones she did create she took seriously and expected guests to follow them to the letter. As a scientist, she was keenly aware of what could be transmitted by dirty hands, so washing up before eating was an unbreakable decree, one that Tim, thanks to his own medical education, had no trouble complying with. He ordinarily would not have added cleaning his face, but he had been fixing various things around the apartment while Abby was at church and more than his fingers had gotten dirty.

Sure he would meet the cook's standards now, he strode into the kitchen and kissed her lightly on the cheek, holding up his palms for inspection.

"Very nice, Timmy. Lunch is on the table." She told him, pointing. McGee turned to find that she had made one of his favorites.

"Wow, Caesar salad and your homemade garlic bread. Thanks hon."

After another brief kiss, he took his seat. Abby gathered plates, utensils and drinks for both of them and joined him at the table. Grasping hands, they bowed their heads to say a silent grace, another requirement for eating at Abby's. She didn't dictate what deity, if any, you gave thanks to, but she believed it was only right to show some level of gratitude for the food you were about to consume and acknowledge that you were blessed to have resources that so many other people in the world lacked.

"I got the bathroom faucet to stop dripping." Tim began as he served first Abby and then himself from the large salad bowl between them. "That fidgety outlet in there isn't fidgeting anymore. Oh, and the hair dryer is all fixed."

Carefully slicing off two generous hunks of bread, she followed his example, offering him his choice and putting the other on her plate.

"You're a miracle worker, McGee."

"Not so much." He nudged, favoring her with a slight grin. "You could've finished all those repairs yourself in half the time it took me."

"No! You're Handy Timmy, my super-hero fix-it guy."

"Abby." He mildly admonished.

"Okay, maybe. But you need it. All the internet searches and the programming make you forget how good you are with the down an' dirty, grease-under-your-nails stuff. It makes you happy to work with wiring and tools... and I want you to be happy."

Tim's smile broadened considerably, accompanied by a blush and a struggle not to break eye contact.

"Yeah... yeah, I guess it does. You think the boss is okay? He looked kinda... shell-shocked last night."
"He did, didn't he? I can see it looking back. In the moment... I was just so happy he was there. I know he's not really Dad and I probably treat him that way too much but he's all I've got up here in D.C., you know, and he's never minded me depending on him before or coming to him with problems and he kisses me like I'm his daughter..."

"Abby, deep breath."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Think we should stop over there for a minute? Check on him to be sure everything's good?"

"I don't know. He's the polar opposite of an emotional mush ball on a *good* day. If he's pissed or he's not sure about things..."

"... waking up the bear in the middle of hibernation. And we'll see him on Monday anyhow."

"We can hope. I want us to go take a shift with Tony. We can find out how his lungs are and whether he's off the sedative... sit and talk to him for a while."

Tim paled, tucked his head down and began shoveling salad into his mouth. "Timmy? What, you don't want to?"

Tim kept eating frantically so he wouldn't have to respond, but after one bite too many and too fast, he started to cough and choke. Abby patted his back, fed him sips of his drink and soothed him until he was able to breathe freely again. "Okay, enough lettuce chugging. Just tell me why. Why don't you wanna see Tony?"

"At the warehouse, I... I've never been in any situation like that, Abby. I was scared out of my mind. Every time I think about it I just know it's all over my face. If Tony wakes up and sees... God, we're just getting to where we really respect each other and we're friends. I don't wanna lose that."

"Timmy. You think Tony's never been scared? He just hates to show it."

"Now we know why, don't we?" Tim mused. "His d... DiNozzo Senior probably saw it as weakness... as a flaw that had to be corrected at any cost."

"Probably? Definitely. The best thing you could do for Tony would be to *admit* to him how scared you were and let him see that the world doesn't get sucked into a black hole if you say it out loud."

"It makes sense. I don't know if I'm strong enough to do it, though..."

Abby gripped his hand once more, squeezing fiercely, and locked her gaze onto his.

"You could've backed off and waited for Gibbs and Max and the Director to get there. Instead, you thought about Tony, not yourself, and you went in that room. You stood between him and that... that evil piece of crap and protected your teammate. Tony's alive because you acted when it would've been easier and safer to turn away. If that's not strength, Timmy, I don't know what is."

"Abby... that was... wow."

"When you love somebody you tell them the truth." She offered easily, rising a bit so she could lean in and softly place a kiss on his lips.

"Right... right. Thank you."
"No problem. So... we finish lunch, clean up and go see Tony?"

"Absolutely."

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GIBBS' HOUSE : 12:45

Ducky smiled fondly at Jethro's half-full plate, realizing that his formidable mind was still rock-tumbling the thoughts and questions he'd been left with earlier. He knew that if given enough time and solitude, his friend would eventually smooth and polish any ideas that might have sprung from their previous conversation and come to what he believed was a reasonable, logical conclusion. Too much space to think, however, and Gibbs would start to see only the negative aspects of whatever end the process came to, so Ducky spoke up and broke into his companion's private musings.

"Did I tell you I spoke to Susannah about how Timothy's first lesson turned out?"

"Huh? I don't know... maybe."

"According to her, he has quite an aptitude for the wood. Strong instincts as well. She thinks he'll do splendidly."

"Yeah... Joe said the same thing. That's what got the whole thing started, remember?"

"Yes, well, I was wondering if you had a project... perhaps one that's languishing for lack of inspiration... that you might allow him to assist with?"

"Could be. I'll have to look."

"Susannah also said he asked if she'd teach him to play the guitar. Knowing how difficult her tutelage will be, she provided him with the name of a friend of hers. I must say, that young man surprises me at every turn, lately."

"Surprise? No, he shocked the hell out of all of us Thursday..."

Ducky sat forward a bit, curiosity lighting his face.

"Indeed. You haven't revealed much about what happened before I arrived."

Gibbs sighed.

"He's not really impulsive, ya know? I tell him what to do and he's on it. Gets it done in record time most days, unless DiNozzo... anyway, the point is he usually needs the words... needs to hear it from me. I told him to stay put in that warehouse, damn it, and wait for backup. I expected a 'Yes, boss.' or 'I will, Boss'. Something like that. Couldn't believe it at first when he said no. Before I could repeat the order, he told us where he was in the building, ditched his walkie and his phone... and he was gone."

"My God. You're right, that isn't much like the McGee we know. Thought we knew, I should say. Of course, he and Tony had been getting closer... developing a stronger bond as brothers. Knowing Tony was in such dire straits..."

"Yeah, but how? How'd he know? Unless... he must've looked through the glass in the door, then backed off and called me."

"Yes... yes, that makes sense. And he still decided to enter and do what he could to help. There are
obviously deeper levels to Agent Timothy McGee than anyone has ever guessed at."

"I'm with you there. When I moved in and took down the bastard that hurt Tony, looking over his shoulder... I barely recognized Tim. Strong, collected, self-confident..."

"Until he knew all was well. Then he did the perfectly natural thing and went to pieces. I do hope you told him it was nothing at all to be ashamed of. That retaining his humanity is a large part of what will put him in the ranks of elite agents one day...

"I haven't really seen him."

"What about last night?"

"After this past week... we all ran and hid in our comfort zones, Duck. You saw him and Abs. I wasn't gonna bust in on that."

"But you will tell him."

"Yeah. I promise."

"You'd best to keep that vow, my friend. His newfound belief in himself seems to be hanging on nicely so far, but without reinforcement it could slip away."

"Jeez, I'll call, okay? I'll invite him over to help finish up Tony's bookcases and get em' up to the new library."

"Library..."

"Used to be the guest room."

"Oh. Oh my." Ducky responded gleefully. "Does that mean..."

"We sleep, that's all. Nothing but sleep. It relaxes both of us to be close to each other." Jethro insisted as he got up and scraped his plate into the trash.

"Yes, but a beginning is a beginning. 'Once upon a time' always leads to a wonderful story."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. Just come wash your dish, will ya?"

-----------------------------------------

TBC....
"Gerald. Gerald, time to wake up." Tim said lightly, barely touching the other man's shoulder.

"Hummnhn? Oh... hey, Tim. I thought I was awake. Just goes to show, I guess. Get tired enough you can nod off anywhere."

Rising slowly to his feet, he paused to be sure his half numb legs were awakening as well then moved around the bed to greet Abby with an intense embrace. "Hey, sweetie. Good to see you. I'm so sorry I didn't get to say it last night," he offered, pulling back. "but you were magnificent. And gorgeous to boot."

"Ah-ah." She teased lightly "No flirting in front of the boyfriend. He gets massively jealous. How's Tony?"

"Movin' forward, slow and steady. The docs were in around mid-morning to start backing him off the sedation. They said if everything goes like they expect, he'll be waking up tomorrow morning. Could be a little sooner or a little later, maybe. No way to really know."

"His lungs?"

"Pitt said they don't sound any worse, so he thinks the antibiotics are at least holding the status quo. It's another case of wait and see. You guys here just to visit?"

"Nope, it's our shift." Tim replied soberly, tears threatening as he gazed at Tony. Gerald ruffled the younger man's hair gently.

"He'll be okay, Tim. Thanks to your courage."

"I just did what had to be done, that's all... what I'd do for anybody I cared about."

"Yeah, well... you're the only one who sees it that way. As I understand it, a commendation is already in the works."

"What? No, it wasn't... *I* wasn't..."

Abby tugged her lover's chin until he faced her and stared him down.

"Do you want me to sic Gibbs on you? He'll straighten you out and never break a sweat."

Gerald laughed.

"Or Don. He won't let you get away with that self-deprecating crap, trust me. None of his pseudo-grandkids are allowed to get down on themselves on his watch. Speaking of my safe haven, I'm gonna head there. Don't be afraid to talk to him, especially since he'll be startin' to come to the surface a little bit. Read him stories, sing to him... pretty much anything will work."

Abby briefly hugged the tall man one more time.
"We've got that covered. Sweet dreams. Tell Ducky we love him."

"I will."

Gerald collected his jacket and moved out past the protection detail. Abby watched him for a moment then perched on the edge of the bed, gesturing Tim to the chair on the other side. He grimaced and held his ground.

"We talked about this." Abby nudged. "He needs to hear it, you need to say it. Chair, McHesitant."

Tim grinned faintly.

"Honorable mention... but you're not as good at it as Tony."

"So I'll work on it. Sit."

Tim huffed in frustration, but he eventually did as he'd been commanded. It took him several minutes to even decide how to make a start, but once he began speaking the words flowed without much effort and the tears weren't far behind.

"Hey, Tony. I'm, uh... I'm sorry it took me this long to come see you. My head's been a little messed up since Thursday. I know I did the right thing going in there. Boss... if you can believe it, he actually said I made him proud. I wasn't proud of myself, though. After Gibbs cuffed the guy and I knew it was all over, instead of letting it go and laughing like you would have... I broke down and let everybody see how scared I really was. I sat there in a corner, shaking and stumbling over my words, while Max held me and kept telling me it'd be okay. I felt like such a baby. Still do, a little. The thing is... I'm starting to see now that what happened was normal... and human. I'd never been in a situation like that. I didn't realize how, in the heat of the moment, you control the adrenaline without even really thinking about it... how you use it to get the job done. When the danger was gone, I wasn't ready for it to suddenly get *out* of control again, so I fell apart."

Tim paused and extended a hand across the bed. Abby gripped it tightly and favored him with the sweet, loving smile that fixed everything in his world. "When you finally get to go home, Tony, I know it'll be incredibly hard. The pain, the fear, the frustration... it can seem like they'll never end. I swear, whenever you need me, I'll be there to remind you that it gets better. I'll be strong for you... so you can be human."

Also in tears, Abby released Tim's hand, moved to the other side of the bed and slid onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and dropping her head onto his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Timmy. You never talk about the car crash, so I forget." She whispered.

"I wish I could."

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17 1/2 HOURS LATER --- TONY: DREAMSCAPE 1

// This way. Look this way. No, over here.\n
Tony gasped, confused over abruptly finding himself standing in an unfamiliar room, surrounded by constantly shifting colors. He turned in place frantically, trying to discover who was speaking to him, and finally saw a large boulder several feet away. A beautiful, young blonde girl, knees bent to her
chest, was perched on the top, smiling happily down at him. She clutched a stuffed animal, but he was too distant to clearly identify it.

"Where the hell am I now? Last thing I knew, Tim just... is he okay? What happened?"

// He's not hurt. \\n"I tried to tell him, to warn him... but I couldn't talk."

// I know. He stood up to the bully. Tim saved you. \\n"Bully..."

// Don't worry. You'll find out when you wake up. Right now... you need to take a good look around. \\n"Colors. Wait, that's like... but... I don't understand."

// Sure you do. He showed you. Change the ugly colors into pretty ones... \\n"And change ugly feelings into peace and calm." Tony murmured. Reasoning that nothing made any sense, so he might as well give it a shot, he closed his eyes and attempted the same mental magic that worked on his movie screen. When he viewed the ersatz walls again, he saw they had indeed changed.

// Better. Not so scary and dark. \\n"Yeah. Better. What's going on here?"

// I have stuff to tell you and we don't have a lotta time. You need to really put on your listening ears, okay? \\n"Listening ears... I haven't heard that in decades. I remember back in kindergarten..."

The child cleared her throat, silencing Tony instantly.

// Ahem. That's not listening, it's talking. \\n"Point taken." He responded, struggling not to laugh "Go ahead."

Her smile vanished and she dropped her knees, sitting forward on the rock. Her next words were so grave and powerful that Tony found himself taking them to heart, though he had no idea why.

// After you wake up, there's three things you have to remember. You have to. If you don't everything'll go really, really wrong. You can't let that happen. \\n"Three things."

// Number one : No giving up. You were strong enough to fight it before and you can do it again, even though it'll be a lot harder this time. Say it back to me. \\n"No giving up."

// Two: You're gonna get so mad you'll break things and yell and hit people. Always, always say you're sorry and tell your family what's in your heart. \\
"Apologize when I get angry... don't hide my feelings. Got it."

// Three: Go back to church as soon as you can. That's super important. If you go, he'll go... and he really needs to. \

"Go back to church." Tony repeated dutifully, even though his stomach twisted violently and his mouth went dry.

//You'll remember? \

"I promise."

// Good. I have to go now and so do you. \

"Wait. Stay just another minute? I have so many questions and maybe..."

// I can't. You'll see me again, just not for a long, long time. When you're ready... I'll be there. \

"I don't even know your name..."

// He'll tell you someday. He promised himself and he doesn't break his promises. It's time to wake up, Tony. Open your eyes... \

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TBC.......
"Tony? Tony, I'm right here, baby, I'm with you. Just a little more. Open those gorgeous eyes a little more... McGee, will you go find the doctor?" Abby hissed quietly, but with all the tenacity for which she was so well-known. Tim, knowing what might befall him if he didn't obey that particular tone of voice, nodded briefly and moved for the door, crashing into Gibbs in the process. The older man braced McGee so neither one would fall and frowned at him.

"What is it, Tim? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Boss. It's good news. Tony's coming around. I have to go find the doctors."

Gibbs' brows shot up and he grinned broadly.

"Yeah, yeah, go. Get back as fast as you can."

"I will, promise."

Tim ran off and Gibbs hurried in to check on Tony. Abby hugged him briefly.

"What are you doing here, Gibbs? He just started showing signs, I didn't have time to call you and even if I did it would've taken you forever to get here..."

"Easy, Abs. I was already on my way in. How is he?"

"Shaking it off more every minute." She informed him gleefully then turned back to continue exhorting Tony. "Boss made it, Tony. Just like he knows when I have something to tell him, he knew you needed him and he showed up just at the right time."

Settling in the bedside chair, Gibbs kissed Tony on the forehead over and over before speaking softly to him as well.

"Morning, precious. C'mon, love... that's it, look at me. Good man. Welcome back, sweetheart."

Tony tried to turn his head, but found his neck and shoulder muscles locked down tight, so he shifted his eyes in the direction he thought Jethro's voice was coming from. Unfortunately, even that minute movement caused pain from the damaged side of his face to flare, sending a tear or two tracing down his cheek. His old fear of revealing that supposed weakness blossomed suddenly in his mind and heart, but Gibbs immediately kissed him again and spoke to soothe his lover. "Hey, hey... tears're SOP right now. You cry all you need to. Later we pretend it never happened."

Tony made a low sound behind the oxygen mask, clearly trying to speak. "Shhhh. Don't, alright? Let Brad decide if I can take that thing off. Then we'll talk."

Instead of calming or relenting, the injured man made an attempt to lift his hand and remove the mask himself, but overwhelming agony forced his eyes closed again and drove more tears down his face.

"Oh, Tony... I know it hurts." Abby sobbed. "Just stay still for now. The doctors are coming."

Tim rushed back in a moment later, but the first doctor in his wake was not the one any of them expected. Abby swiftly clomped over and gave Lewiston a long hug.
"Good to see you too, Abby."

"He's awake... he's awake and trying to talk...." she whispered close to his ear.

"That's great. Miraculous, even..."

Once they'd all been cleared with the FBI guards, the therapist was followed by a gaggle of other medical professionals, who swiftly urged the civilians out of the room, except for Gibbs who incinerated everyone in sight with his patented glare and refused to move. Knowing the exam could take quite a while, Lewiston guided Abby and Tim down the hall to a quiet family waiting room.

"Sit, sit. You both look ready to topple over any second."

The couple fell into chairs at the far end of the room and Dennis pulled a third seat close.

"We've been taking turns talking to him all night long," Tim admitted. "I'd nap while Abby sang to him and told stories... she'd try to rest while I read from newspapers and magazines."

Dennis flushed slightly and looked a bit guilty.

"I should've been here earlier. Every time I tried to get out the door, something else would catch on fire and I had to douse it."

"Anybody we need to know about?" Abby asked warily.

"Not exactly. There has been interest in her case from an NCIS deputy director. I can't know whether that's going to be trouble or not."

Tim paled and sat up straight.

"Was his name Vance?"

"Uh-oh."

"No... not yet. I know he and Director Mackenzie had a meeting... but from what I understand she didn't give him any satisfaction. I haven't heard anything new on the grapevine..."

"AKA Cynthia." Abby interjected.

"Anyway, it's been pretty quiet. I don't think we need to worry."

"He won't give up, though. If he starts really digging..."

"We'll handle it, Abs. Right now, the focus should be on Tony."

Lewiston studied Tim critically.

"What about you?"

"I'm a little tired. That's all."

"No. There's more, I can tell."

"Yeah, maybe... but I'm working through it. Believe me, if I need any help, people in Australia will hear me screaming."

"You're sure?"
"Positive."

"Abby?"

"Now that Tony's awake, I'm fine. I mean, I need some serious coffin-time, but other than that... I'm really good."

Dennis' eyes widened dramatically.

"Uhh... run that by me once more?"

Abby laughed. Tim grinned faintly and gave their new friend the most basic of explanations.

"Her version of a bed. Long, *long* story..."

"I look forward to hearing it when everything calms down a little." He replied, rising to his feet. Pulling out his wallet, he offered them both a copy of his business card. "My cell number's on the back. The next few weeks and months will be hard on the whole family. Please, if any of you need me, don't think twice about calling. I'll do everything in my power to help."

"I know." Abby assured him, quickly squeezing his hand. Unexpectedly touched by the gesture and her confidence in his abilities, Dennis fought back the tears that were suddenly threatening and grinned at her instead.

"Go on, you two get out of here and rest up. Jethro and I have the next couple shifts."

Abby embraced him again and Tim firmly shook his hand before both walked away, arms around each other's waists. Dennis sighed, composed himself and returned to Tony's room, waiting in the doorway until the last of the medical personnel had left. Then he moved in and stood at Jethro's shoulder.

"What's the verdict?"

"Better than they were hoping. He has to stay on the oxygen a while longer, but the antibiotics are doin' the job. His lungs'll never be a hundred percent again, we already knew that... but in time they'll get back where they were before all this. They realized he has three busted ribs on top of everything else. What those need is for him not to move around a lot, so they should heal fine. The rest..."

"... the rest still has you scared out of your mind."

"Close enough."

"No platitudes, no Hallmark-worthy sentiments, right?"

"No. None a'that."

"You've both got a long, brutal path in front of you. We're talking boulders, mud, fallen trees, the whole bit. Add in that you and Tony weren't exactly on easy paths to begin with... and it's pretty much going to be the road-trip from hell. What you need to remember is that it's not a dead end and you aren't the only ones making the journey. Whatever resources you don't have or can't get, Abby, Ducky and the others will be there to give you. If you can bring yourself to ask."

"Yeah, well..."

"Right. We'll work on that. They provided pain meds, I hope."
"Just enough to take the edge off so he can sleep. Something about not seeing symptoms of a serious head injury if they start showing up."

"I was afraid of that. He'll need you to keep him calm... to talk him through what they can't get rid of."

"Not a problem."

"That means screaming your throat raw and breaking vases and lamps somewhere else."

Gibbs looked up at Dennis with a thin smile and repeated himself.

"Not a problem."

"Uh-huh. So you have a spot in mind already. You feel like showing it to me sometime in the next day or two?"

This time the pair said it almost in unison.

" " Not a problem. " "

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TBC........
THE HOSPITAL: TWO HOURS LATER

"God's sake, Precious... quit, or I'll put the oxygen mask back on." Gibbs chuckled, kissing Tony's hair. "Once you're stronger, we'll have a day-long conversation if you want..."

Despite the pain meds working hard to drag him back into healing sleep, Tony kept trying to speak, knowing he'd lose the battle to the drugs soon and desperate to have his questions answered before that happened.

"T... T... im..."

"What'd I just say? Dad mode is in effect for the foreseeable future and you don't mess with a Marine in Dad mode."

"R.. Ro... ple... pleashh..." Tony persisted, only half aware of how the residual swelling in his face was mildly distorting his speech.

"Okay, okay, but only 'cause you used my secret name. Can't deny you anything when you do that. McGee's fine. He stood between you an' that bastard... held up solid 'till the rest of us could get there. He pulled off a hell of an eleventh hour save."

"Knew... it. Wanna shee h...im."

"Tomorrow, maybe. We'll see how everybody's feeling in the morning."

"Meansshh no. Ha... hate Dad mo... mode."

"Yeah, well you're stuck with it. And me." Gibbs told him softly, giving him another gentle kiss and stroking his hair.

"N't sht'ck. Love. I g't it bad..." Tony forced out, valiantly fighting the painkillers.

"Same here, precious. Same here. Anything else you just have to know about?"

"C... can't move. R... r'ly hurtsssh."

"I know. The position you were in all that time... a lot of your muscles were damaged. A few weeks and a little help, though, and you'll be back to normal, chasin' down perps and makin' dumb jokes."

"H'y, th're not dumb. Tell good j'kessh."

"Sometimes. Sleep, now, sweetheart. Sleep..."

"One m're th'ng..."

"Later."

"No... m'dad... he... he'll try a'gin..."

"Fornell posted guards outside day and night. You're safe 'till we're able to arrest him."

"H'rt him f'r me, Ro." Tony demanded as he slipped back into unconsciousness. "K'ck 'm hard..."
"I promise."
"T'ree t'messh."
"Three times. I got it. Go to sleep."
"Kay. Love you..."
"Love you, too, precious. Always and forever."

A few minutes later, Dennis eased into the room, making just enough noise that Jethro wouldn't be startled.

"Hey Doc." Gibbs responded, almost whispering. The other man used the same tone.
"He's asleep, then?"
"Just about. You here to relieve me?"
"Sort of. I know it hasn't been that long, but I thought you might be ready for coffee."
"You want some time with him."
"Everybody else has had theirs."
"Plus there's the confidentiality thing."
"There is. Not that I plan on waking him up, but just in case..."

Gibbs breathed out heavily and rose to his feet.
"I'll be back in an hour. Got that? Sixty minutes exactly."
"Understood. Thank you."

Jethro grunted a faint acknowledgment and left the room. Dennis dropped into the chair that, by now, was almost a member of the family in its own right, leaned back and rubbed his eyes, glad his mother wasn't in the room. She knew each of his expressions and exactly what they meant, in spite of what he tried to get her to believe. At that moment he was sure she would have unabashedly declared that the guilt he was feeling was unearned. He was nevertheless, reluctant to let it go.

He had only known Tony and his ersatz family a month or two, but somehow the connection to all of them had become deeper than he'd ever experienced with any case before. More than a few times, he'd wondered if allowing himself the familiarity was wise, but the people surrounding Tony had inexorably drawn him in. Once he knew their depth of feeling for his patient and understood the strength Tony drew from them, he surrendered to the welcome the other members of Jethro's team had so willingly offered.

Eventually, Dennis steeled himself and turned his gaze on Tony's face, grimacing at the faded bruising and the lines of dark stitches across his forehead and down his right cheek. He read, studied and prepared constantly, knowing he had to be ready for any issue his patients might present, and still the brutality parents were capable of inflicting on their children tore at him.

"I'm so sorry, Tony. Damn it. If only we'd had more time, maybe..." He murmured, then broke off and sighed. "Yeah, I know. Your so-called father makes his own decisions and I couldn't have stopped this, no matter what. Doesn't change my feelings or my wishes, though. I'll be here over the
next few months to help see you through the aftershocks. I promise that. Anyway... you rest easy, now. Cousin Dennis is watching over you 'till Dad comes back."

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NCIS: 12:30: DIRECTOR MCKENZIE'S OFFICE

"Yes? Oh. Good to see you again, Agent Dunn. Come on in."

Jonah moved a step or into the office and held up a large white paper bag.

"I was hoping you hadn't had lunch yet."

"Actually, I haven't. I was just going to send out, but it looks like I won't have to. Sit, please."

Cautiously taking the seat Sarah had gestured to, Jonah set the bag on a corner of the desk, opened it and began pulling out items.

"Two options. Roast beef and Swiss on a bulkie, or ham and mozzarella on wheat."

"If you were smart enough to ask for mustard on the roast beef, I gratefully accept."

Her visitor lightly tossed two small plastic packets across the desk then handed over the wrapped sandwich.

"I didn't know whether you liked mustard or mayo, so I picked up a few of both." He explained, also handing her napkins. He then set out three small dishes, pointed and described the contents. "Pickles, coleslaw, potato salad."

Sarah paused halfway through untangling the waxed paper around her meal and gazed at Jonah with growing curiosity.

"Should I ask about the catch now or wait until we've eaten so my appetite won't be ruined?"

"No catch. Not really. And it won't ruin anyone's lunch. Except mine, I guess... if you say no."

She resumed the process of revealing her sandwich and gave him an opening.

"Go on."

"Jethro and I have been friends for quite a while. He kept telling me I needed to go on a case with him. That I should see some of the crazy things his team trips over on a regular basis. With your permission... I'd really like to take him up on that offer."

Sarah pulled the potato salad closer. Jonah placed a fork on her side of the desk, opened the pickles and began chomping on a spear to help him stay patient while she pondered.

"Why now?" she finally asked.

"My section of the bureau... we see some of the worst inhumanity you can imagine. Not all the time, you understand. Not even once a month."

"It still accumulates. Like a gradual poisoning."

"Absolutely."
"We don't have it any better. We've dealt with serial killers, brutal sniper attacks, bodies in every condition you can name..."

"I'm well aware."

"Then there's one particular kind of case you're looking to get away from."

"Yeah. Finding out it was probably Tony's father that orchestrated what happened to him... I just suddenly feel like I've gotten beyond my saturation point with cruel, stupid, mentally screwed up adults who can't keep their hands off kids... for whatever reason."

Sarah swallowed a forkful of salad and thought for another long stretch of seconds.

"True, those kinds of cases are pretty rare here. Are you sure your superiors at the Bureau will just let you go?"

"No worries. I have so much time off piled up, they'll be ecstatic when I tell them I'm using some of it."

"So a leave of absence."

"To begin with."

Sarah considered this intently.

"And if there are no open positions here once 'to begin with' runs out?"

"Then the FBI will welcome me back, I'm sure. But at least I'll have had the break I need to recharge my batteries."

"Hmmm. I didn't see any drinks when you came in."

"Huh? Oh... crap, I knew I forgot something."

"It's okay. She soothed, rising and strolling over to a well-concealed mini-fridge. Extracting two cold bottles of cola, she returned, separated out two napkins, placed one in front of Jonah and proceeded to search the seemingly empty deli bag. Finding a tiny paper square with salt in it, she tore it open and sprinkled some of the crystals on each napkin before placing the sodas on them. As she reclaimed her seat, Jonah, clearly both delighted and confused, stared at her in wonder.

"And what was all that in honor of?"

"Condensation from the bottle soaks the napkin, the napkin sticks when you go to pick up the drink. Put salt on first... the napkin doesn't stick."

"Seriously?"

"Scout's honor."

"It works with glasses, too?"

"I've been getting strange looks in restaurants for years, but it works like a dream, so I don't much care. Now, can we get down to lunch *and* business?"

"Business?"
"Negotiating the terms of your contract."

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TBC.........
With a Little 54/?

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THE HOSPITAL: 1:30

“Gibbs. Boss?”

“Not asleep, Vendazzo.”

Hovering in the doorway, Max grinned mildly then swiftly made any trace of amusement vanish.

“Of course. I just thought I’d check in… see how things were going.”


“Yeah. I…”

“Quit it. Second-guessing yourself over the way things happen in the heat of the moment… it’s a waste of time and energy. Tony had Ducky and the medics, but Tim was all alone. You supported him without a second thought and I’m proud of you.”

“You are? I mean… compared to the others I’ve barely been on your team for a minute. Proving myself, proving I can hack it, no matter what…”

A weary, almost inaudible voice floated to her from the bed, cutting short her wondering, doubting soliloquy.

“Shut up an’ get th’ hell in h’re, Dazzle.”

Max chuckled and finally moved over the threshold, approaching the bed cautiously.

“Hey, Dino.”

“Hey. ‘Bout time you showed up.”

“I know, I know. Wasn’t sure if I’d be welcome, seeing as I’m the newbie and all.”

“It true about Timmy? You helped him after ‘t was all ov’r?”

“Yeah, I guess. Hope so anyway.”

“Makes you family, th’n. T’ke your coat off… stay a while.”

“DiNozzo…” Gibbs began, but Tony cut him off as well.

“No. You got work to do, boss. You gotta… go make the SOB talk. Make him… give up m’ dad.”

“He’s not going anywhere, Tony.”

“M’not safe, love. Wn’t be unless you do th’s now. Please…”
“Shhh. Alright, alright. I hear and obey.”

Twisting, Gibbs glared faintly up at Max. “No matter who else comes or goes, you stay in this room ‘till I get back, you understand?”

“I hear and obey.” She echoed, smirking as she offered a brief, perfectly executed salute. Gibbs rose, tapped her firmly in the back of the head and strode out. Gaping, she watched him walk away then sank into the still warm chair. “What the…”

“F’r bein’ a smartass. Now y’re *really* family.” Tony offered.

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NCIS : 3:10 P.M.

“Sir.” The guard addressed Gibbs as he let him into the holding cell area once again. “Have to say I’m really glad to see you back. This guy is off his rocker since you left last time. He yells, kicks the bars, spouts French and Spanish for hours. Now he’s switched to something out of a sci-fi movie.”

Gibbs paused, listening intently to the uproar.

“Gaelic. I think so, anyway. Only heard it once or twice over the years.”

“Pretty language, but I still hope you can make it stop.”

“I guarantee it.”

“Thanks. You know the routine, just knock when you’re done.”

Gibbs nodded, watching over his shoulder as the metal barrier swung shut. As he turned back to face the prisoner, Gibbs realized the noise had ceased the moment he entered.

“You son of a bitch…” Rossmore now pronounced darkly and almost under his breath. Suddenly, Tony’s presence filled up Gibbs head, his laugh and his style of wise-cracks flooding his lover’s thoughts. His own anger was so intense the coming confrontation would no doubt end with Rossmore on Ducky’s table, so Gibbs opened himself to the DiNozzo-ness in his mind instead. To his shock, the words flowed like water over Niagra Falls.

“I prefer bastard. No big deal, it’s just what I’m used to.”

“You left me herewith no contact for the better part of two days.”

“The way every agent, secretary and janitor in this building feels about you… trust me, you’re better off in here. I let you show your face… not a prett y sight, my friend. They’d probably make me work the crime scene, too. All that blood, limbs ripped off and thrown to kingdom come… yuck. I’d really rather keep that outta my dreams, thanks. Then again, you ceasing to exist would make the world heave a *big* sigh of relief, so…”

“Shut the hell up! Shut up and just tell me what you want!”

“Let’s see… a taped confession would be a nice start. Not just about what you did to Tony, about every time you ever worked for your current employer. If you’re a good little monster and don’t leave out a single… solitary… word… then maybe Director Mackenzie will consider a sentence recommendation. Maybe.”

“Yeah? I think you want him a hell of a lot more than you do me. That leaves me room to negotiate.”
Smiling broadly, Gibbs moved a step or two toward the bars, still making sure to stay out of range of Rossmore’s strong hands.

“You just don’t get it, do you? This is about dropping you both in a hole so dark and so far down they won’t be able to find you even with Klieg lights and a combined battalion of Navy Seals and Army Rangers. This is about making sure that if you ever step out of a prison door again, your hair is white, or better yet, long gone, you can’t remember your own name and crapping your pants is the highlight of your day.”

Delight bubbled up inside Gibbs when Rossmore paled and actually took one small step back. “Taped confession. On my schedule.” Jethro commanded, then swiveled on his heel and moved to the door. Only when he was back out in the corridor with the guard did he let down and allow himself to crack, though the only evidence was a manic, stressed chuckle and the swiping of a hand over his brow.

“Are you okay, Agent Gibbs?”

“I’m fine… I now know what it’s like to be possessed, but I’m fine.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. He agreed to talk to a camera about everything.”

The guard pulled out his walkie-talkie.

“We can have that set up in half an hour…”

“Nah. It can wait. Make it Thursday. He says nobody’s been to see him?”

“We deliver his food, but we don’t speak to him. Director Mackenzie’s orders.”

“I like her more and more every day.”

“So do the rest of us, sir.”

Gibbs sighed, but he was also grinning.

“You’re not gonna give up that damned word, are ya?”

“It’s a sign of respect and not half of what you deserve… sir.”

“Fine, but only you, get it? I don’t need everybody makin’ me feel a hundred years older than I really am…”

“I’ll pass the word.”

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TBC……
Chapter 55

With a Little 55/?

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A FEW MINUTES LATER:

After stopping by Tony’s desk once more, just to make touchstone contact with some of the items, Gibbs moved on to the elevator. When the doors opened, he found the car already occupied and grinned softly as he stepped in and was briefly enveloped in a power-hug.

“Papa! I heard you were here and I had to come find you. You’re going home, right?”

“For a shower and a change of clothes, yeah, then back to Tony.”

“That is so perfect! Since I didn’t have to waste time looking for you, I have enough time to stop at your place and still make it to my doctor’s appointment on time.” Abby declared brightly then frowned. “Oh no, I think I said ‘time’ too much, it could create a loop, you know, then we’d all get stuck and Tony’ll never get better. Or I could’ve created a paradox, which would *so* not be good…”

“Abbs! How many?”

Abby smiled at him sheepishly.

“Ummm… 12?”

“Is that an evasion or don’t you know for sure?”

“Ummm… both?”

“Abby….”

“I know, but I’m trying to cram in as many as I can before my appointment. That’s kinda what it’s about.”

“You’re afraid he’ll take you off caffeine for a while.”

“She… but yeah. My blood pressure’s been creeping up this year and she’s worried about me.”

Gibbs reached out and stroked her hair.

“Me too.”

“Oh, papa… I’ll be okay. It isn’t that bad yet, she just wants to get it under control before it *is* bad.”

Gibbs twinged internally at the repeat of the nickname and gathered her into his arms for a moment in case the reaction showed on his face.

“Good. Now what’s this about you coming home with me?”

“There’s something I have to find and give you.”
“At my place? If I don’t already know it’s there, I’m not sure I wanna know.” Gibbs pushed, his skepticism obvious in the quirk of an eyebrow.

“You’ll see when we get there, now push the button for the parking garage, or we’ll both be late!”

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THIRTY MINUTES LATER:

“C’mon, Gibbs!” Abby exhorted, bouncing on her toes outside his front door.

“This is an old house, Abbs, and the key’s no Spring chicken either. Give it a second.”

“Yeah, but since when do you… oh.” She intoned quietly, stilling her frantic motions. “Tony is worth protecting. Definitely.”

“No argument here.” Gibbs agreed as he finally opened the door. “Gotta change the locks before he gets home, though. His keys weren’t found in the evidence from that damned warehouse. No telling what the SOB did with ‘em…”

Abby followed closely behind him then nudged past and raced up the stairs, as much as she could race in her favorite platform boots.

“Gibbs, it’s not here! You two are in the same room, right?” she called down after a few minutes.

“Yeah, but most of his stuff is in the guest room still. We didn’t have time to shift it over, before… before the crapstorm hit us.”

It took another minute or two before he heard from her again,

“Got it!”

and she appeared soon after her cry of success, this time moving carefully and slowly back down to the ground floor with her hands behind her back.

“Damn it, Abby, use the banister. You’re gonna lose your balance in those things an’ kill yourself.”

“I can’t. Just hang on, mister impatient.”

Once she was down safely, she gazed at him with somber eyes and began to explain. “When Tony was in the hospital before, after he tried to… I took him Burt for company, you knew that, right?”

“Yeah, and he gave it back when he got home.”

“Well, he said it really helped him not feel alone, so I gave him one on his first day back at work.” She told him, displaying Tony’s hippo. Gibbs snorted at the length of openwork lace Tony had secured around the animal’s neck by weaving narrow ribbon through and tying it.

“Lemme guess, he decided it’s a girl?”

“Bertina.”

“It’s cute, Abs… but what are you trying to say, here?”

“Bert reminded Tony we all loved him and he’d be coming home. As her Godmother, I’m authorized to lend you Bertina ‘till Tony comes back.”
Gibbs grinned, shook his head and struggled to swallow as he tentatively accepted the stuffed creature.

“So I won’t feel alone.” He murmured. Abby silently kissed the hippo’s head then Gibbs’ cheek, as if blessing them both, and quickly exited the house. Pulling out her phone to call a cab, she suppressed the barest twinge of guilt at lying to Gibbs about the appointment. It was for his own good, she firmly believed that. If everything went as she hoped over the next several weeks, all their lives would be better. ‘No.’ she corrected herself mentally. ‘Not just better, super-mega extraordinary!’

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PRIVATE LIVES: DUCKY AND GERALD AT HOME

Gently, Gerald lifted the china cup in front of him and held it to his lover’s mouth. Ducky took a cautious sip, fully aware how hot it was, then accepted the delicate vessel from the other man. He reversed the process with a second cup, which, after his own sip, Gerald took from him. Setting their drinks down, they clasped hands across the small table between them and both closed their eyes.

“Love is with us here.” Ducky began, his voice warm, deep and affectionate. “so may it always be.”

“We renew our deep connection as roots renew the tree.” Gerald finished, raising Ducky’s hand to softly kiss the knuckles. “I never get sick of this, you know? I’ve never had it with anyone else. This time just to… I don’t know, re-bond. Never been with anybody who wanted it so much and was willing to fight to keep it.”

“Mmm… yes. There’s been many a horrid week that our personal tea ceremony is the only thing that kept me going. If I recall, the best element of it was your idea.”

“You mean making tea for each other to prove we’re paying attention to how the other one’s tastes have shifted over time. I think it was me, yeah. Too long ago to really remember, though…”

“So… exceptionally intimate, giving sustenance to one you love. It involves such trust, such faith and… good Lord, Gerald, love, what is it? You suddenly look as if the heavens opened and laid all the secrets of life at your feet.”

“No… but it could be the secret to helping Tony and Jethro get through the next few months. I hope so, anyway.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“Not yet. It’s just the germ of an idea so far…”

“Understood. I have no doubt you’ll bring it to fruition brilliantly, as usual.” He declared, lifting his tea in salute. “To you and your amazing little gray cells, dear.”

Gerald touched his cup to the one Ducky offered.

“No… to us. Always.”

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TBC……………..
Chapter 56

With A Little 56/?

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TUESDAY MORNING: 9:15 : THE HOSPITAL

“But…”

“No. You can do this, dearest, and you *must*. None of the rest of us has the required knowledge, as you do… and as Anthony will.”

“My therapist was a complete bastard to me in the beginning, Don. Relentless, intentionally cruel… I just don’t know if I have it in me to do that to Tony.”

“It will be difficult, I know, and you’ll likely feel as if your heart is breaking… but that young man has everything at stake. He desperately needs you to dig down and find a heartless blackguard somewhere inside… to find the man who’s ready, willing and able to cause pain in order to eventually see it alleviated.”

“A professional…”

“He’ll have one, but Anthony will also need a familiar face, someone with whom he can safely release the pressure, but who he knows won’t let him surrender when it seems as if he’s losing the battle and the war, both.”

“Just like I had.” Gerald conceded, kissing Ducky lightly on the cheek.

“I was infinitely privileged to be with you, my love… and so honored that you allowed me to see you through those dark hours.”

“Allowed? Are you kidding? I never would’ve made it out the other side if it wasn’t for you. As far as I’m concerned, the honor was mine.”

“And so?”

Gerald sighed heavily.

“So I need to pass on what I was given. I need to love him enough not to care that he’s gonna hate my guts for the foreseeable future.”

“Indeed. Go on, now. I’m going to go speak with his medical team and call Dennis and Brad for updates. Shall I meet you back here in an hour or so?”

“Sounds good.”

Ducky moved off, leaving Gerald standing outside Tony’s room gathering his courage and praying frantically that he could access the ruthlessness and unwavering determination his lover seemed to believe he possessed. Showing his ID and submitting gracefully to the scrutiny of the current team of FBI agents, he stepped inside, moved quietly to the bed and softly touched Max’s shoulder. She turned her head to see who had arrived and, not recognizing Gerald, was instantly on her feet, placing herself between him and Tony.
“Who are you?”

“Easy, Agent Vendazzo. I’m Gerald Jackson. I used to have Jimmy’s position.”

“Oh. Okay, I read about what happened. You were injured pretty badly.”

“I was, but I’m about back to a hundred percent now.”

“That’s great.”

“It’s fantastic, actually. It’s also kind of why I’m here.”

Max frowned, but caught the point swiftly, turning her mildly confused expression into one of deep sadness and faint anger.

“Already? It’s only been a few days and you want to start PT now?” she asked in a heated near-whisper.

“Have you ever been where Tony is? Where I was?”

“No.”

“Then I’m sorry, but you can’t possibly understand and I don’t have time to waste trying to help you.” Gerald responded in the same hushed tone. “He doesn’t exactly have forever either.”

“The longer you wait the harder it’ll be… and he’s facing enough for three people as it is.”

Gerald’s brow furrowed.

“Yeah. You said…”

“I didn’t lie. It wasn’t me. My father broke his back in a motorcycle accident when I was fourteen. He had a hell of a long road… but he walked into the restaurant for my twenty-first birthday party.”

“I’m so sorry. I assumed and made an ass out of… well, I guess it was just me.” He apologized, grinning.

“No problem.”

“This is gonna be pretty brutal. You might wanna vacate for a while.”

“I can’t. I promised Gibbs I wouldn’t go anywhere until he came back.”

“And breaking a promise to Jethro Gibbs practically guarantees retribution.”

“Practically? The stories I’ve heard…”

“Okay, you’re right. Just stay back, okay? And make *me* a promise too? Do your best not to react or let him tug your heartstrings. It’s gonna seem like I’m a real son of a bitch… but it’s in his best interests.”

“I get it. I’ve seen it before, remember? I swear, no interference of any kind.”

“Thanks. Tony? Hey, bud. Can you wake up for me?”

“Hnnnggh. Wha’? Oh, G’r’ld… Hi. T’s good to see you.”
“I was here a couple days ago, but you were pretty much out for the count, so you wouldn’t remember.”

“Wish I could’ve stayed that way. This sucks…”

“I know. Been there, done that…”

“… got the bloody, ripped up t-shirt.”

“Amen.”

“’M glad you came back.”

“Yeah, well… it’s not completely the standard ‘comfort a sick friend’ visit. I’m here to help. I’m gonna be part of your PT team. I need to know what range of motion you’ve been left with so we have an idea how much work there is ahead.”

Somehow, even with one eye still partially swollen shut, Tony managed to look shocked.

“You’re crazy. Totally insane, tha’s what you are…”

“No, just a little early. By tomorrow, maybe even by this afternoon, the hospital will be sending somebody in here to help you sit up so you can start eating soft foods and drinking nutrition shakes to help rebuild your muscle strength…”

“They cn’t. ’M not ready… only been a couple days…”

“Four days. If we let you lay there much longer, it’ll be that much worse when you do try to start moving.”

“Go to hell. I’m in pain, damn it…”

“Maybe you *want* Jethro spoon-feeding you. Not to mention helping you in the bathroom, that’ll just be a party. You looking forward to that, hmmmm? Work’ll be out of the question, that’s for damn sure. Can’t be an NCIS agent if you can’t even pick up your gun, never mind fire it. No cooking, no basketball, no reading… well, not unless somebody holds it for you. Always books on CD, I guess. You’ll have all the time you could ever want to listen… at home all by yourself while Jethro’s still out doing the job you love.”

“No, he loves me. He’ll stay with me.”

“They’ll give him a little bit of leave, sure, but to keep the bills paid he’ll have to go back to work eventually.”

“Retire… he’s talked about it…”

“You’d do that to him? You’d make him choose? Most selfish thing I ever heard of…”

“Get out. You hear me? Go away… asshole…”

“I can’t. You forget, I know what this kinda pain’s about. If I’d been allowed to back off and give up… if I’d thrown in the towel, you think I’d be getting ready to take over for Don in a couple weeks? Not a chance. No giving up, Tony.”

Abruptly, a young, sweet voice resounded in Tony’s mind, accompanied by images from his recent strange dream.
“No giving up… say you’re sorry, say how you feel… go to church…” he mumbled, closing his eyes. “No giving up… say you’re sorry, say how you feel… go to church…”

“Tony? You okay?”

“No. ‘M scared to death, man. I don’t think I can do it…”

Gerald smiled softly and dropped into the bedside chair.

“Then it’s a damn good thing you’re not in this by yourself. You’re family’s not walking away, Tony.”

“Y’re not an asshole, I didn’t mean that. ‘M just…”

“I know. Consider it forgotten, okay?”

“‘Kay. You should know… range of motion is nil. Tried once… but there’s nothing.”

“I didn’t say pain-free motion.”

Tony blanched.

“Shit.”

“I hear you.”

For the next ten minutes, Gerald took Tony from lifting a single digit, to his hand and finally an arm, his heart sinking when he realized how close the other man had come in his assessment of no possible motion. “It’s okay, we’re done. No more today.” He soothed, running a hand through Tony’s hair over and over. “Try to go back to sleep… let the pain drift away… and sleep.”

Once he sensed Tony had settled back into at least a semi-restful state, Gerald rose and made his escape, but he only made it out the door and across the hall. Watching him brace his hands against the wall and begin to shake from head to toe, Max knew she had to go to him and swiftly did so, telling herself she’d deal with Gibbs’ wrath when and if he dished it out.

“Easy… easy. You did what you had to and both of you survived. Relax…” She told him, running her hands lightly over his back and shoulders.

“You don’t have to. I mean, you hardly know me…”

“Hey, every family has a designated comforter, right? The one who instinctively dries tears and hugs you and tells you it’ll be okay, no matter what’s actually going on? That’s always been me so I’ve got no problem taking on the job in my new family.”

“You may regret the decision” Gerald responded, laughing a bit brokenly. “This brood… we’re more than slightly left of center.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to figure that out. Still don’t have a problem.”

“Thank God…” Gerald sobbed, turning and wrapping his arms around her. She held him until Ducky appeared then began to pull away, expecting the older man to step in, but when he merely smiled, squeezed her shoulder and mouthed his thanks, she stayed put a while longer.
TBC........
Chapter 57

With A Little 57/?

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JETHRO & TONY’S HOUSE: 10:45 A.M.

Slowly coming around, Jethro groaned and craned his neck to gaze blearily at the clock. When his vision cleared enough to read the digital display, he was immediately flooded with guilt for not following through on his plan to go directly back to Tony once he’d cleaned up and changed. A moment later he realized something fuzzy and soft was wrapped securely in the crook of his left elbow and gradually remembered that it was Bertina that had waylaid him.

The previous day, after exiting the shower, drying off and dressing, he had moved to sit on the bed and put his shoes back on, but instead picked up the stuffed animal he’d left there after Abby’s departure. For a long while, much to his consternation, he couldn’t bring himself to release the toy, stroking its fur over and over and examining every detail while memories of both Tony and his first love flashed through his mind. Finally, he’d given up the fight, dropping onto his side and pulling the covers over himself, only half-aware that his fingers were lightly tracing haphazard patterns on the hippo’s belly as he descended into sleep.

Shifting the animal into his hands he gazed down at it with a mild frown.

“Okay, so maybe I needed the rest. Doesn’t mean you’re not evil. Black magic hippo…” he groused, setting it aside. The sound of the front door opening and cautious steps across the floor startled him slightly and he reached for his gun in the bedside table, but the familiar voice stilled his hand.

“Jethro? It’s Jonah. You okay?”

Gibbs swung his legs out of bed, stood and, after rapidly shoving his feet into a pair of loafers, made his way down the stairs. “There you are. When she found out you didn’t make it back to the hospital last night, Abby set the grapevine on fire trying to get someone to check on you. I was the only one stupid enough to say yes.” Jonah admitted with a wry grin.

“I fell asleep.”

“Uh-huh. Your new friend have anything to do with that?” he asked, pointing to the item still hanging from Jethro’s hand. The older man held it up for a brief glance then tossed it into a chair.

“It’s Tony’s. Gift from Abby.”

“Really. This story I have to hear.”

“Not now, you don’t. I gotta get going…”

“Agent Vendazzo has everything well in hand, from what I hear. Let me take you out to breakfast before you go rushing back over there?”

“Damn it…”

“Your life, your decisions, why doesn’t everybody else stay the hell out of it. I know. I’ve heard it at least a hundred times. They get in your business because they love you, Jethro. God knows why, but
they do. Breakfast?”

“Be lunch by the time we get anywhere…”

“God almighty, I forgot I’m talking to the world champion stubborn bastard. Call it whatever you want. If we don’t go eat soon, I’m likely to collapse on your floor and die from starvation and then you’ll never hear my fantastic news *or* see what I brought you.”

Gibbs grunted and stalked past him, stealing Jonah’s keys as he passed. “Oh, no! No way I’m letting you drive!”

He reached the car only a few seconds behind Gibbs, who squinted at him and contemplated the keys.

“We’d get there a lot sooner.”

“But we might not get there alive. Gimme.”

Jethro grinned and tossed the jingling bundle back. Jonah opened the driver’s door, reached in to retrieve a small paper bag from the center console, straightened and handed it to his friend. Gibbs’ eyes went wide when he drew out the contents.

“Tony’s keys… and his bracelet. Where’d you find ‘em?”

“I spent the morning helping Tim inventory the evidence from the warehouse. Those and a couple other things were in a small box nobody bothered to label. We almost overlooked it, but at the last minute… anyway, I got permission from your Director to bring them back.”

“Thanks. They, uh… they mean a lot.”

“Especially the jewelry, hmmm?”

“What?”

“I noticed the inscription. Not sure what it means… but the piece looks really special.”

“It is. ‘Jedi Forever, Stronger Together’. Supposed to be a reminder of how powerful family is… what we should be and do for ourselves and each other.”

“And… only Tony got one?”

“Enough, Jon.”

“I hear you. I’m not poking for the hell of it, you know I don’t do that. When we met at the café…”

“I do love him. Totally, down to my bones.”

“It’s mutual? He makes you really happy?”

“Like I haven’t been since the first time.”

“Okay, then.” Jonah relented with a relieved sigh.

“So what’s your big news?”

“I’m taking a leave from the FBI and joining your people for a while. I was hoping… since your
team’s met me and I have yet to be bludgeoned, suffocated or shot point blank…”

“You wanna fill in for him.”

“Like I said… I was hoping.”

Gibbs took a long time to respond, and when he finally did meet the other’s eyes, his expression was unreadable.

“After I see where you take me to eat… I’ll decide whether to think about it.”

Once they were on the road, silence reigned for several minutes. Jethro finally broke it with a quiet statement.

“I guess it’s later.”

“Hmmm?”

“I said I’d tell you about the phone call… from Tony’s therapist.”

“That’s the guy who provided the feast that night at your office?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to. It was strictly curiosity that made me ask, I don’t have any right to…”

“I know you don’t. I keep my promises.”

“Always have. Go on.”

“Tony’s been through kind of a firestorm the last year or so. Everything finally got to him… and he thought about hurting himself. Came to just in time and got help. He was in a ward at Bethesda Naval for two weeks gettin’ things straight in his head. He was doin’ so damn good.”

“He’ll get there again, Roy. With the support he’s got, he won’t be able to help it.”

Gibbs snorted and shook his head.

“How many times do I have to tell you…”

“… you never married anybody named Dale and you don’t sing. Heard *two* hundred repeats of that one. Back on topic, buddy. It wasn’t just the promise that pushed you to tell me all that.”

“If you’re gonna work with us you needed to know the subject isn’t touchy or off limits. Tony doesn’t mind the team knowing he’s in therapy. I feel the same way about my sessions.”

Instead of responding with shock and nearly driving off the road, as Jethro expected, Jonah was outwardly calm. His hands tightened on the wheel until his knuckles blanched, but his eventual reply was subdued.

“You’re serious?”

“My crap tanked my last three tries at marriage and screwed up three women who didn’t deserve it. I finally decided it couldn’t happen again. With a big shove from Toby, a’course.”

“Of course. It, uh… it can’t be easy, especially for you. Talking is near the bottom of your long list
of skills."

“Hard as hell, but I figure if I trust him to keep helping Tony… I can do the same with myself. You’re thinking about Lizzy.”

“No. No, she’s doing great. Matter of fact, the minute we separated her life started improving. Now that the decree is signed, sealed and delivered…”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jon. You tried every damn thing there was to try. It was never gonna be enough.”

“I know. I just remember her begging me to go to a counselor… saying the work was killing me and driving the two of us apart. It was the one step I couldn’t take. A criminal shrink being shrunk? It didn’t make sense to me then. I can imagine her voice if I called her up and told her an old friend inspired me to finally do it.”

“Yeah. I don’t have the balls to try that with any of mine.” Gibbs chuckled. “I can give you his number… just in case.”

“Not yet. Let’s see what a change of scenery does, first.”

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TBC………..
Chapter 58

With A Little 58/?

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JETHRO AND JONAH: 12:15

As the pair was making their way back out to Jonah’s car, Gibbs’ phone chirped and he paused, digging it out of his pocket and bringing it to his ear.

“Yeah? Hey, Director. Yeah, I said he can wait ‘till Thursday. Suffering a little loneliness is the least… Cruel and unusual? He wouldn’t dare. I know lawyers will stoop to any level and try every dirty… Whadda you mean, even you? Sounds like I’ve got beer and stories in my near future. Only if I agree? Yeah, I guess over a barrel’s pretty accurate. Okay, okay. The confession happens tomorrow. Damn right. Gotcha. Bye.”

Jonah grinned at his friend.

“Okay if I ask what that was about?” Jonah inquired as he slid behind the wheel.

“You just did.” The other man grunted as he dropped into the passenger seat and slammed the door

“Jethro, c’mon. Give the second B a rest for once, huh?

“Rossmore agreed to confess. He wanted to get it over with… but I told ‘em it could wait ‘till day after tomorrow. Mackenzie’s worried about legal stuff so we compromised on Wednesday.”

“And you plan to be there.”

“Every damn second.”

“Maybe not such a good idea. When you *aren’t* face to face with him, you’re raging, Jethro. Who knows how long it’ll take for him to get out all the stuff we need? I know how super-controlled you are usually… but you may not be able to hold out this time.”

“Tony can’t be there so I have to.”

Jonah smiled lightly.

“Same old Jethro, noble and loyal to the last.” He responded, obvious respect and deep affection coloring his tone.

“Nobility has nothing to do with it. I told you… I love him.”

“Yeah,” Jonah chuckled. “The hippo proved that.”

The reminder caused a brief grin to grace Jethro’s lips.

“I swear I left that thing on the bed before I came downstairs. Then you said somethin’, I looked down… there it was in my hand. Abby musta put a spell on it…”

“She does that?” Jonah laughed.
“Possible. Just in case, I maintain a strict ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy. Then there’s less chance I’ll catch it on the chin if she gets mad at me.. For your sake, I recommend you do the same.”

“Message received and taken to heart, my soon-to-be-fearless-leader. I think the spell was from Tony, though. Love… it’s weird and scary sometimes. You’re losing your mind one minute, and the next you’re so high it feels like hang-gliding on the moon. When it’s strong and joyful and you’re really connecting with the other person… love is the best thing in the world.”

Jethro turned his face to the window to hide the softness and the silly grin he knew he was broadcasting to anyone who cared to look.

“Pretty much.” He replied quietly.

“Look, I’m not trying to be a noudge, really. I know you feel like watching the confession is your duty, but… have you given any thought to what Tony would want you to be doing tomorrow? Don’t you have any other options? Anything to do, anywhere else on earth you can go..”

Jethro glanced at Jonah sharply then expelled a long, heavy sigh and pulled out his phone one more time.

“‘It’s Agent Gibbs. Is he in? Thanks. Hey doc, glad I caught you. Is there any way you can squeeze me in tomorrow? Nah, nothing serious… it’s just gonna be a tough day. Ten-thirty? I’ll be there.”

Disconnecting, he hit the third speed dial button on his phone and initiated another call.

“Tim. Nothing’s wrong, he’s gettin’ better every day. I want you to do somethin’ for me. Call everybody in the family an’ tell em we’re meeting at my place at one tomorrow afternoon. No, it’s not an order. More like… a request. Okay. Thanks.”

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THE HOSPITAL: WEDNESDAY 6:45 A.M.

TONY’S DREAMSCAPE 2

This time, Tony instantly recognized the face that greeted him when he once again found himself in the room with the kaleidoscopic walls. Grinning with sudden joy, he stepped forward, but the figure instantly glided back the same distance.

“Huh? C’mon, that’s cheating…”

// No, don’t touch is a rule, DiNozzo. Something you were never very good with. \ 

“Hey… no being rotten to each other, Katie. If my last time in here was any indication, we need to get things said fast.”

// Well, well. Look who’s grown up.\ she responded gently, offering him a soft smile.

“Not much choice. I’ve been through a lot the last year or so.”

// I know. I’ve been around. Hated seeing you struggle all on your own… but I wasn’t allowed to help. \ 

“God… I miss you so much. You’ve gotta know that if I could rewind I’d fix it or change it…”

// Yeah, well you can’t. That’s what I’m here to tell you. Nothing that happened that day was your
fault, Tony, and you can’t go back and save my life any more than I can throw time in reverse and rip out that bastard’s beating heart before he ever took you away. I’d give anything to be allowed… but that just isn’t how things work. \\n
“Why not? Everything would be so much better if you were still here…” Tony countered, fighting against the tears he could feel coming on.

// No. You and Gibbs would never have realized how you feel about each other. The team would never have become the strong family they are now. Sometimes… change has to happen for things to come out right. The downside is that the change almost always hurts. \

“Hurts like hell. You don’t… I mean, I can’t help thinking…”

// You didn’t let me down. You have to start believing that, Tony. This, me leaving when and how I did… it kept things on the right path. Knowing that and seeing how great you’re all doing… I’m happy. Look, we don’t have much longer…\n
“One more question? Please?”

// I never felt pain, Tony. Not a single moment. Now recite the lesson, goofball, before time runs out. \\

Finally, Tony choked out a sob and a few tears escaped.

“Damn it, Kate…”

// I know. The lesson. Hurry. \\

“I can’t change the past. The focus has to be on my present and future.”

// Perfect. Oh, one last thing. When you wake up in a few minutes, remind Max she has gigantic shoes to fill… \\

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TBC………..
With a Little… 59/?

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15 MINUTES LATER:

When Tony finally eased his eyes open, he found not only Max but Jethro sitting by his side. He cleared his throat cautiously and showed the older man the best smile he could produce, considering that all the facial swelling hadn’t quite gone away, yet.

“Hey, love. I missed you.”

“Killed me to not be here, but I had to set up things with Rossmore.”

“Rossmore? That’s the guy who…”

“Yeah.. yeah it is.”

“Had my own names for him. In my head, at least.”

Gibbs chuckled.

“I bet.”

“Kept wishing he’d give me something… anything I could use if I made it out…. but he’s too smart.”

“Smart enough to save his ass when he has the chance.”

“No.” Tony denied, fighting against the emotions that tried to overwhelm him at the thought of being safe again and free from his past. “You’re serious?”

“He’s giving it all up. Not just what happened to you, but every dirty job he’s ever done for your dad. They’re both going away, Precious.”

“No. Sorry, but… I won’t believe it ‘till we’re face to face… an’ Senior’s in cuffs.”

“Then I’ll make that happen.” Jethro vowed, brushing loose hair off Tony’s brow so he had a clear spot to place a light kiss.

“You can stay, now?”

“Only a while. I made an appointment with the doc this morning and I’m takin’ the family out to blow off a little steam later on.”

Max perked up.

“You are? I don’t guess… I mean…”

“Dazzle. Listen for a second.” Tony interrupted, shifting his eyes in her direction. “Anybody tell you about Kate Todd?”

“Yeah… yeah they did. Not everything, but the basics of the story.”
“I saw her in a dream… just before I woke up this morning. She… I’m supposed to tell you that you’ve got big shoes to fill.”

“I do, huh?” Max replied quietly, suddenly struggling against her own tears, but also smiling.

“Yeah. Now you’ve been officially welcomed by all of us. You’re a part of the clan. Quit doubting and take your place on the tree. Okay?”

“I hear and obey, Dino. Loud and clear.”

“Good.” Jethro announced firmly. “My place, one o’clock. Anyone else in the brood can give you directions. For now, go home and get some food and rest.”

“Got it, boss.”

Once she’d risen and exited the room, Gibbs placed the ear-bud in for Tony one more time. The younger man tried to ask a question, but a finger on his lips quieted him.

“I did this a couple times while you were asleep. Now… you can hear it direct. You’d probably never guess it in a million years, but this is one a’my favorite songs. Helped me get through some years where hope… it just didn’t exist for me. Don’t think about how corny it is, alright? Just let it sink in…”

* There’s got to be a morning after  
If we can hold on through the night  
We have a chance to find the sunshine  
Just keep on looking for the light… *

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10:30: BETHESDA

“Morning, Jethro.” Lewiston offered as the door closed behind his newest patient. “You sounded a bit tense on the phone. Everything alright with Tony?”

“Yeah, he’s better every day.” Gibbs confirmed, wandering over to the window. “The guy who hurt him is making a full confession this morning. I needed a major distraction to keep me from goin’ over there. All I’d be allowed to do is stare at him, wishing I really *could* bore holes with my eyes. Anyway, a friend convinced me there were more constructive ways to use my time, so… I’m here.”

“Hey, any way I can get you in for a session, I’ll take it. I assume you had to give up something pretty big to get the guy to talk.” He began, settling into his usual chair. Gibbs stayed by the window, but pleasantly surprised Lewiston by responding without the need for further prompting.

“I thought I might have to, but bastards like that… they’re opportunists of the first order. Far as he’s concerned, self-preservation is tops on his to-do list. I tossed out a potential sentence recommendation, told him in no uncertain terms where he was going if he balked. That was all it took.”

After a deep, slow breath, Gibbs turned, moved to a chair opposite Lewiston and sank into it.

“I can see how tough this is on you.” The doctor observed. Gibbs grunted and tipped his face down. “You don’t like that, do you? The world isn’t supposed to know you can be exhausted… be vulnerable.”
“Leaders don’t… they *can’t* show the cracks. Trust goes away when the people under you start thinking you’re as human as they are.”

“So you’re, what… a golden retriever? A kangaroo, maybe?”

“Funny.”

“Not trying to be. When Kate Todd was killed, you don’t think Tony and Tim caught at least a glimpse of the man behind the curtain? You’re so sure that in all those weeks after her death they never saw your grief or your anger even once?”

“They weren’t supposed to, not if I was doing my job.”

“That’s what the Wizard thought, too. If he could be a terrifying presence that barked commands and issued decrees, if he kept up the stage show of smoke and flames and anger everyone was afraid to get too close to, then they’d never look deeper and he’d always be safe.”

“My life isn’t a damn kid’s book!”

“Hey, if the analogy fits…”

Gibbs scowled, crossed his legs and his arms and shifted to the right as much as he could without falling out of the chair. “Oh, that’s attractive.”

“Go to hell.”

“Not without you.”

Jethro directed his infamous glare at the other man and felt something inside quiver faintly when even prolonged exposure seemed to have no effect at all. Mentally he back-tracked half a step, but made certain his expression didn’t show it.

“Come again?”

“If you’re going so am I.”

“I’m not asking.”

“You don’t have to.”

It was a minute or two before Jethro responded.

“My demons are twenty feet tall, doc. Claws, teeth and breathing fire.”

“You ever see that show about the teenage girl who fights vampires out in California?”

“I watched a couple episodes with Tony. Stupid… but I laughed.”

“From now on you can call me Buffy.”

“In public?”

“Anywhere you please as long as you open the door a little.”

Another long pause ensued, but at the end of it, Lewiston chalked up the first point on his side of the ledger in his head.
“Where the hell am I supposed to start?”

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TBC---------
Chapter 60

GIBBS’ AND TONY’S HOME: 12:45 P.M.

As Max pulled up, she found a scene of restrained chaos ebbing and flowing around Jethro and chuckled lightly. Jimmy was deeply engrossed in downloading information on his phone. Abby was alternately cradling something and holding it out to her ersatz father, a determined scowl on her face. Tim was shifting back and forth between the two, talking a mile a minute as he tried to get one of them to focus long enough to look at whatever he’d pulled up on his laptop.

Exiting her vehicle and locking it with the tiny remote hanging from her key ring, Max approached the group and began to try and calm the minor riot one segment at a time.

“Hey, Tim. What’s up? You find something intriguing?”

“Max. It’s so good to see you again. Yeah, yeah I did. I was running searches for the best deals on some of the equipment Tony will need when he gets home. See, I found a great price on this breath-controlled wheelchair. I know it was designed for quadriplegics, but I thought with his injuries...”

“Crap, that’s right.” Max interrupted quietly. “He won’t be walking for a couple weeks yet, and with the muscle damage in his upper body, crutches are out. Show me what else you’re looking at.”

The pair spent a few minutes going over the research Tim had done and Max whistled softly when he finished. “That is really impressive. Terrific job.”

“It’s not a big deal. I just needed to feel like I’m doing something… like I’m helping.”

“Trust me, Gibbs will appreciate it. Why don’t you go sit on the hood of my car while you keep working? Easier than standing and trying to use that thing at the same time.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

She watched the young man take her up on her offer then moved on to Abby.

“... and he’ll need a goal, something he can work for, Bossman, and this is so perfect. Tony will love it, I *totally* know he will.”

“But *I’ll* be the one doin’ all the work.”

“Only at first. The guilt’ll kick in so fast and he’ll push himself so he can take some of the weight off you. Plus I guarantee he’ll love her as much as you do.”

“Try that again?”
“You fell for this face the minute you saw it, Gibbs. You can’t fool me.”

“Damn it, Abby…”

Suppressing more laughter, Max gently broke into the debate.

“Can I see, Abby?”

“Max, hi! Yeah, sure, just be really careful, okay? The claws are murder…” Abby warned her, slowly disengaging a tiny bundle of orange and white fluff from her down coat. Max readily accepted the kitten with a quiet sigh of joy.

“I know. My family has always had cats. Hello there, sweetheart. Aren’t you just a beautiful little princess, hmmm?”

Abby squeaked and leaped in the air.

“Yes! That’s her name! I’ve been trying to come up with one ever since I picked her up at the shelter and that’s the first one that sounded right! She’s Princess!”

“She’s also shivering. Can I help resolve the issue here, Boss, so we can get her out of the cold?”

Gibbs huffed in frustration and ran a hand through his hair.

“I doubt it. Cats aren’t my thing, Vendazzo. Too delicate, too temperamental…”

Just then, Jimmy walked up, spotted the kitten and began cooing to it and gently stroking its head. Gibbs threw up his hands.

“Hell, I know when I’m outnumbered. You said you’ve got supplies, right, Abs?”

“In the back of my car.” She confirmed, kissing him on the cheek. “You’ll see I’m right, Papa. This’ll be so amazing for both of you.”

As Abby ran off to unload the items the shelter had given her, Max caught a flicker of pain and sorrow crossing the older man’s face.

“If you’re really upset about it, Boss, I’m sure one of us would be more than happy to…”

“It’s fine. Get her inside and help Abs get set up so she’ll be okay while we’re gone.” He told her gruffly, handing over his keys.

“You’re positive?”

“Yeah. Go on, get the little hellion warmed up.”

Max grinned.

“She seems so sweet. How do you know she’ll be trouble?”

“Never been a female in my life that wasn’t. Now I just assume. Saves time.”

Max laughed out loud and turned toward the house, tossing a response lightly over her shoulder.

“She may be a baby, Gibbs, but she has ears. You may live to regret putting ideas in her head.”

Privately chagrinned, Jethro watched Jimmy and the two women disappear into the house then
turned back when he heard Ducky’s beautiful classic car pull into the driveway. He moved to greet his old friend with a handshake and a brief hug.

“Glad you could get here, Duck. Wasn’t sure you’d make it.”

“Gerald is doing exceptionally well in my stead and your vague description of today’s activities has me intensely curious. How could I stay away?”

“That was the point. Lock up the Morgan, okay? We’re about ready to get going. McGee! Secure the laptop and get your butt over here!”

“Coming, Boss!”

Once the other three emerged and locked the front door again, and they’d settled the question of who would ride in Abby’s car and who would travel with Gibbs, the clan headed out with their trusted leader showing them the way.

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TBC........
Chapter 61

With A Little… 61/?

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30MINUTES LATER:

As both vehicles pulled into the lot in front of a small park, the trailing car began to buzz with curiosity and the lead wasn’t far behind.

“Jethro, what in the world are we doing here?” Ducky inquired, gazing out the window at the layer of snow still covering the grass. “I genuinely can’t imagine what you could have planned.”

“Yeah, Boss.” Max added from the backseat. “Spill the beans already.”

“How about you, Jim? Not gonna join the begging and pleading?”

“Not me. I like surprises too much.” The young man responded with a grin.

“Good man.” He intoned, offering a smile of his own in the rear-view mirror. He then climbed out of the car and moved to the trunk, surrounded by the rest of the group. When he opened it, the level of interest and confusion only rose.

“Boots? We need snow boots?”

“Yeah, Abs, you do. There’s a pair for everybody, all in the right sizes. Come an’ get ‘em.”

When Ducky moved to separate his footwear from the jumble, Gibbs touched his arm and held him back. “Nope. You’ll be with me.”

“Indeed. And where will the youngsters be?”

“Patience, old friend. Patience. C’mon, guys, get the boots on and get out there.” He directed, pointing at the grass. Once they’d traded in their shoes and wandered out into the barely ankle deep snow, Gibbs retrieved an enormous plastic shopping bag, deliberately hidden behind the boots, and closed the trunk firmly. Ducky got a glimpse of what was inside and guffawed with delight.

“Oh, Jethro… you do come up with the strangest ideas. Clever, admittedly, but very strange.”

“They need a release from the worry and anxiety. This’ll be perfect, you’ll see.”

Hands cupped around his mouth, he addressed the other four. “Okay, here are the rules. One point per catch. Most points gets a reward when we get back to the house. Bobbles count as long as you don’t drop. Pushing somebody in the snow to make a catch is acceptable as long as you’re not vicious about it and you help ‘em up after. We clear?”

Four bewildered nods followed and Gibbs reached into the bag, pulling out a brightly colored plastic disk. “Good. Game starts now.” He warned them and gently lofted the toy into the air. He then handed a pad of paper, with four first initials on it, to Ducky.

“Keep score for me?”

“Gladly, as long as I also get to make a few throws. I see more than the Frisbees here…”
“Oh yeah. Mini footballs, a couple softballs, beanie babies…”

“Those won’t go very far, will they?”

“You’d be surprised. One a’the exes beaned me with one from thirty yards an’ nearly gave me a concussion. Those suckers pack a lot more punch than you’d think.” He explained, tossing a softball underhand and watching as Jimmy and Max fought for it and both ended up in the snow, laughing until they were out of breath.

“It does seem to be working. Perhaps there’s more wit than wild hare about this after all…”


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TWO HOURS LATER:

Wet boots and toys in the trunk, and all shoes back on their respective feet, the two cars pulled into Gibbs’ drive once again. He grinned and shook his head at Jimmy and Max sleeping on each other’s shoulders in the back seat, but also felt his heart clench at the memories the scene recalled. There had been a time when he’d vehemently wished such moments away and prayed they’d cease tormenting him, but he was grateful to find the pain was no longer so intense. He could see through the images of his daughter, now, and appreciate the sweet picture his new family was presenting.

“Hey, you two…” he called gently, “…we’re back. C’mon, now. If Abby sees, you’ll never live it down.”

Jimmy stirred and scrubbed his eyes then swiftly straightened up, blushing brightly and shooting everyone in range an embarrassed half-smile. A few moments later, Max followed suit, her face nearly as pink as Jimmy’s. Ducky laughed.

“No need for all that, children. You made quite an adorable pair. Except for the drooling, of course, but thankfully there wasn’t much of that.” He teased as he opened the door and rose to his feet. The two younger people leapt to follow him, scrambling out of either side of the car. Jethro pulled the keys and finally made his own exit, bracing himself as Abby raced over and hugged him.

“That was fantabulous, Papa. I feel so good right now I could bust!”

“Not on my car, I just had it detailed.”

He allowed her a few more seconds of affection, then pushed her back slightly and voiced an almost inaudible question. “Abs… why do you call me that?”

“Papa? I don’t know. I mean… you are, to all of us except Ducky and Tony… but that’s not it. It just feels right. My gut told me to. If it makes you mad or anything…”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. Kinda like it, actually. I wondered, that’s all.”

Abby reached out and touched his brow tenderly.

“Uh-uh. I can see there’s more, but I won’t push. Just like you always wait me out when I’m twisted up about something, knowing I’ll eventually find you and do the pouring-out-my-heart thing… I can be that person for you. Whenever you’re ready. Okay?”

“I don’t do that, Abs.”
“Tony does, so… someday.” She assured him before running back to Tim and the others.

Gradually the entire group made its way into the house and shed coats and gloves. At the first sign of people tossing damp clothes on his hardwood floor, Gibbs scowled and everything was swiftly gathered and hung up to dry. While Abby, Tim and Jimmy ran off to find the kitten and make sure she hadn’t gotten herself into too much trouble, Gibbs started the coffee maker, leaving Ducky and Jimmy to settle on the couch.

“I should think you’ll sleep well tonight, young man.”

“Absolutely. That was so much fun.”

“Yes, I enjoyed myself as well. I only wish I’d been able to snap a photo of you making that diving catch for the stuffed dragon. It was quite a spectacular effort. At least Addie seemed impressed.” Ducky mused, surreptitiously watching his assistant for a reaction to his not-so-subtle probe.

“Yeah? I don’t know… I didn’t… I mean…”

“James.”

The younger man smiled, sighed and squirmed slightly, eyes lowered.

“There was something when I first met her… I couldn’t stop staring.”

“Neither could she.” The other man chuckled.

“Really? I kinda remember that, but… I was too foggy to pay much attention. A woman like her, though…”

“Ah-ah, don’t you dare denigrate yourself. Any lady would be lucky to find a talented, intelligent, compassionate man such as you. You are, as they say, a definite catch and if I ever hear you saying otherwise I will set Jethro on you. Are we clear?”

Jimmy momentarily switched from rose pink to pale, but he recovered his smile.

“Yes, Doctor.”

The other three returned a short while later. Gibbs met them, surprised not to see the little animal.

“She didn’t fall down a hole already, did she?” he asked, frowning mildly at Abby.

“No, Gibbs, and don’t be so negative. She’ll pick up on it and you’ll never bond.” She retorted, cracking him on the shoulder. “She’s asleep upstairs. I didn’t have the heart to disturb her. Here, look.”

Squinting at the screen on her phone, he discovered a photo of the kitten curled up on the bed between Bertina and a shirt of his that he’d left there after his shower earlier. “I told you it was meant to be, Bossman. She already loves both of you.”

Gibbs snorted.

“She picked the warmest spot, Abby. It’s what cats do. Duck, who’s our winner?”

“Hmm? Oh, let me see… It seems we have a tie. Abigail and Addie are co-champions. Congratulations, ladies.”
The pair high-fived and crowed, while Tim and Jimmy good-naturedly catcalled, booed and demanded a recount.

“Prizes, Gibbs! Hand ‘em over!” Abby ordered, bouncing on her toes. He silently complied, presenting each with a small envelope. When she opened hers and found a two-hundred dollar gift certificate to a ballet supply shop, she fought back tears and hugged him.

“Thank you, Papa. This means so much…”

“Just keep invitin’ me to those recitals, okay? I swear next time I won’t be late.”

Tugging the slip out of her envelope, Max gazed at it wide-eyed then slowly looked up at her new team leader and spoke in hushed tones.

“How did you know? Nobody knows.”

“And they won’t hear it from me. Who wants coffee?”

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TBC………..
With A Little… 62/?

5:45

Despite how deeply he loved all of them, Gibbs was relieved that most of the family had either gone home or elsewhere. Finishing off a third dose of his usual potent brew, he glanced at Max and Tim still on the couch, heads close together as they once again studied and quietly debated over whatever was on his laptop. Knowing better than to ask about their research, he headed toward the kitchen, but was diverted by an insistent knock on the door.

“Jonah. Something wrong?”

“Not wrong. Disturbing, sickening, depraved… any or all of the above.”

“C’mon in.”

Spotting the pair on the sofa, Jonah moved in far enough for Gibbs to close the door, but hesitated there.

“How’d the ‘de-stress the kids’ plan work out?”

“Perfect.”

“Yeah, they look relaxed. We better talk in the kitchen if you want them to stay that way.”

Gibbs brow furrowed, but he gave a short nod and led the way. He placed his mug in the sink and leaned back against the counter, waiting until Jonah had settled at the table before prompting him to talk.

“So? What’s goin’ on?”

“I attended the confession today. Just so you know, I got the green light from the director first. I freely admit I was overconfident. I thought it’d be no big deal after what I’ve heard working with the BAU… but I wasn’t prepared. You’ve told me so much about Tony, I felt like…”

“… like the bastard tortured Lizzy or Danielle.” Gibbs finished, naming Jonah’s ex-wife and eleven year old daughter.

“And that’s why you’re so disturbed.”

“Exactly. In a way, I’m glad I could stand in for you… take the hit so you didn’t have to, but it was almost too much. I want you to promise me, on everything you ever valued in this world, that you’ll leave the recording alone.”

“No. I have a right, damn it…”

“Rossmore is a massive freak, Jethro.” Jonah cut in, finally looking up and making eye contact. “He enjoys what he does. He called the blood on his hands righteous and justified. If you hear the other things he’s done for Tony’s father… if you take that in and make it a part of you, the kid will see it and feel it… and what you have with him will eventually break under the strain. I don’t beg anybody, ever, Jethro, you know that…”
“Yeah, I know. Okay. You have my promise.”

“Thank you.”

“Sounds like we have more than enough to take Senior down.”

“If I have my way, he’ll suffer in a bottomless pit until he dies and rots. Then I’m personally going to smash and burn what’s left… and salt the earth.” Jonah growled. Somehow, Gibbs found it in him to smile in response to his friend’s fury, grateful he would have someone to vent with for at least a few months. That safety valve would allow him to shield the rest of the family from his darker feelings.

“Good to know we’re on the same page.”

“Director Mackenzie says the warrants and paperwork won’t be ready until tomorrow night at the earliest. If that timeline works out, Friday morning bright and early we fly out and pick him up.”

“Not you. The second you saw his face…”

“He wouldn’t have one anymore. Damn…”

Jonah rose and began to pace the small area. Gibbs moved in and gripped his arm firmly.

“You said it yourself, bud, you took the bullet. You freed me up to lead the takedown and be sure the SOB gets back here in one piece.”

“Just one?”

“Well, bumps, bruises…”

“… a concussion, a broken rib or three…”

“Hey, turbulence can make for a rough flight.”

“And dare I hope his seatbelt won’t be working?”

“I’ll disable ‘em all myself. Go on home and get some rest.”

“Not a chance. Days like this… I wish I still had the option of picking up something eighty-proof and drowning out the world like I used to…”

The statement shook Jethro faintly, as he had been thinking about heading down the stairs and losing himself in just that way. After a momentary pause, he replied while working on alternate ideas.

“Your kid’s more than worth not having that easy out anymore.”

“Way more. She trusts me again, wants to spend time together. No bottle in the world could hold a candle to that. Hey… you okay with me spending some time with Tony tomorrow? I’d like to really get to know him… get his perspective on the job and make sure he’s good with me filling in while he’s recovering.”

“No problem. He’ll appreciate that.”

“Great. Okay, I’ll see you sometime between now and Monday, I hope.”

“If you’re gonna be at work, definitely. Paperwork is a bitch if you let it go too long.”
“Don’t I know it.”

The two men clasped hands fiercely and Jonah made his way out. Once the door was shut once more, Gibbs turned and delivered a restrained bellow in the direction of the couch.

“You may be family, but you’re not sleepin’ here tonight!”

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TBC…….
Chapter 63

With A Little… 63/?

HOSPITAL: 7:00 P.M.

Lightly drowsing after the meal of soft food he’d just, very reluctantly, allowed a nurse to feed him, Tony startled at the sound of someone entering the room. Turning his creaky neck through its limited range of motion, he frowned lightly on seeing who his visitor was.

“Fornell. Something up?”

“Nah.” Tobias offered as he settled into the bedside chair. “Just checkin’ up on you an’ my guys outside. Wanted to be sure everything’s like it should be, ya know?”

“The guards are FBI? Thought they were ours. Somebody probably told me, but…”

“… you’ve been out of it most of the time. Understood. I was here once before, when you were really down for the count. Ripped my guts out, kid…” Tobias admitted very softly.

Tony grinned faintly and closed his eyes for a few moments then eased his head back into a neutral position.

“I’ll be okay. It’s gonna take time, that’s all. Can’t ever count me out, you know that.”

Tobias chuckled and shook his head.

“All too well. The things you’ve made it through would’ve tested Hercules to his breaking point. I wouldn’t wanna see the odds that you could’ve ever made it outta that sewer… or a car with Jeffery White in the backseat. Getting pushed out of a plane after only a couple hours of jump instruction…”

“I screwed up my ankle on the landing. Could’ve been a lot worse, but like you said…”

“You what? Gibbs never said anything ‘an I hear about your every goose-egg and shaving nick.”

“He never knew. Ducky patched me up. I wore an Ace bandage at night… pushed through the days at work ‘till it finally healed.”

“Damned stubborn…”

“He expected it, Tobias. Still does. Working under Gibbs… being tough and resilient are mandatory. Letting him down once was too many times.”

“Excuse me? When the hell did you ever do that?”

“The stupid envelope. Everybody on the team could’ve been exposed… could’ve died. And to top it off, I almost wasn’t strong enough to pull through on my own. Gibbs saved my ass, like always. Seeing me like that, knowing it was all my fault… he must’ve been so disappointed.”

Internally, Fornell fumed and seethed, making plans for confronting Gibbs at the first opportunity, but he showed none of his anger to Tony. His response refuted the younger man’s statement, but with gentleness and reassurance.
“That’s not true, not a word of it. You... God, DiNozzo, I can’t explain why you’re still here, but I know it’s no accident. The man upstairs had a reason, that much I’m sure of.”

Tony found Tobias’ gaze with his own once more and whispered.

“Jethro?”

Tobias laughed softly.

“He’s still kind of a bastard, but he loves you to the moon and back. Pretty damn good rationale for why you stuck around, don’t you think? You couldn’t shuffle off to Buffalo when your ‘one and only, meant to be’... wasn’t yet.”

“You believe in that? After Diane and all of it?”

“She just about kicked the faith outta me... but I managed to hold onto a little shred. Just enough so if the right one comes along, she’ll have somethin’ to build on.”

“Good. That’s good. Listen, since you’re here, I need to tell you something I’ve been thinking about.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“You don’t have to say yes...”

“Just tell me.”

“When I get home... it’ll be rough on me and worse on Jethro. There are gonna be times when he can’t stand to see me in pain or he needs to escape how pissed and frustrated I am. I’m making him promise that he’ll only run to you.”

Fornell lowered his head for a few moments, contemplating the heavy responsibility Tony wanted to lay on him. When he looked up again, his chest was tight, but, as before, he showed none of his feelings to the man in the bed.

“I can handle that. Drop the other shoe.”

“When he shows up, I need three favors from you. One; take his side completely and agree with anything he says, no matter what.”

“Not if he’s talking you down, kid...”

“Yes, even if. He won’t mean any of it, we both know that. You job is to support him. Got it?”

Fornell sighed loudly and huffed once or twice, but eventually surrendered.

“Yeah, I got it. Number two?”

“If he wants to get drunk, don’t argue. Take him to a bar, let him get bombed at your place, whatever. If he wants something different, you do it. No questions, no attitude. Just don’t leave his side and keep telling him he’s right.”

“No problem.”

“The last one is the most important. Get him sober or do whatever else you have to... then put his head back on straight and bring him home. Don’t just send him, you hear me? *Bring* him back and
make sure he gets in the door.”

“Anthony, this is Leroy Jethro Gibbs we’re talkin’ about…”

“Like I said, you don’t have to…”

“No. He deserves it. You both do. You got my solemn vow, Tony. I swear I’ll stand by him and I’ll get him home in one piece.”

“Thank you.” Tony responded, seeming to visibly deflate as he relaxed and let his eyes drift half shut.

“You’re welcome. Look, you need your rest an’ I gotta get home. I’ll come back in a couple days, though, okay?”

“Mmm-hmmm. Night.”

“Night.”

Rising slowly to his feet, Fornell turned and slipped out the door, pausing by the two men stationed outside. “Nobody unauthorized gets in there, understand? You need to piss, you get hungry or thirsty, you call hospital security to stand in. *Anything* goes wrong you’re answering to Special Agent Gibbs, not me.”

Seeing both men pale and nod vigorously, Fornell grinned and headed down the corridor, secure that Tony would be well protected.

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TBC.....
THURSDAY, MID-MORNING:

“You sure, Boss? I should probably be at work running a few more cold cases…”

“You did your bit on that front, Tim. I really need an extra pair of hands here at the house.”

“Okay. Sure, I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“Just because you’re in the car when I’m behind the wheel doesn’t meant it was a teaching moment, kid. Make it thirty.”

“Thirty. Got it, Boss. See you then.”

“Yup.” Gibbs replied with typical brusqueness, hanging up his landline. As he turned to head to the basement, a quick, authoritative knock re-directed him to the front door.

“Tobias. Since when do you knock?” he questioned, stepping back and waving his friend inside.

“Getting in the habit can’t be a bad idea. Once Tony recovers, I’m not risking the sight of you two… getting it on, as the kids say.”

“Kids from 1995, maybe. What is it you wanted, again?”

“I went to see DiNozzo last night,” Tobias told him, pronouncing it, as usual, like he was accusing Tony of insanity. Gibbs smiled and shook his head. He’d missed hearing the name that way.

“Good. He needs all the support he can get.”

“An’ I’m as willing as anybody. I just have some questions.”

“Yeah?”

“Are the rumors I’m hearing on the level? Did his own father set all this in motion?”

“It’s true.” Gibbs admitted. Tobias turned his gaze toward the floor and took a deep breath, nodded slowly, then looked back up, his face dark and flames leaping in his eyes.

“You empty a clip into the son of a bitch yet?”

Jethro’s grin expanded.

“No, that would be wrong, Toby. Not that it wouldn’t be incredibly satisfying…”

“Jethro.” Tobias growled.

Abruptly, Gibbs scowled at the quiet word of protest.

“I’ve got other ideas, Fornell, okay? I want Tony to have the option of facing him down. Then it’s go directly to jail and meet your new cell-mate Snake, the three hundred pound biker who likes a
regular piece of tail and doesn’t care which gender he gets it from.”

Tobias let a few seconds and a few more breaths pass before he tossed out a new inquiry.

“You have the evidence, I’m assuming?”

“Warrants should be through early tomorrow.”

“My seat on the plane’s already booked, right?”

“Can be.”

“Like I’d let you talk me out of it.”

“Wouldn’t bother trying. I’ve got stuff to do downstairs, Toby, and McGee’s coming over to help. We done?”

“One more. After seeing him like that… how did you manage to sleep?”

“You sure you wanna know?”

“If I didn’t, I woulda kept my mouth shut, Jethro.”

“Stay here a minute. If Tim shows up before I get back send him right to the basement.” Gibbs ordered, turning to climb the stairs to the second floor.

“Will do.”

The request turned out to be unnecessary as it only took a short time for Jethro to return, Bertina under one arm and a tiny creature draped limply over the other. Tobias stared then burst out laughing.

“Hey, she likes it. Abby says she must be a Ragdoll cat. Part of her, at least.”

As the other man watched, still snickering, Gibbs lifted the kitten up to his chest and she clambered onto his shoulder.

“Speaking of Abby, doesn’t the hippo…”

“You blind? It’s got a ribbon. Means it’s a girl. According to Tony and Abs, anyway.”

Wincing as needles sank into his skin, Jethro moved closer and tossed the stuffed animal to his friend, who caught it with ease.

“Tell me it doesn’t…”

“Squeeze it. Find out for yourself.”

“No thanks. This is your answer, huh?”

“Only one I’ve got. When he was in Bethesda Abby lent him hers to remind him he had people who cared… family to come back to. After he got out, she bought him his own. Crazy thing’s one of his most prized possessions.”

“And? What’s it do for you?”

“Makes it feel like he’s there. It reminds me he survived an’ he’ll be home.”
“Makes perfect sense to me. I, uh… I’ve got one of Em’s baby toys on top a’my dresser. When I look at it… Anyway, Tim’ll be here in a second. I should go…”

“Not if you’re up for gettin’ a little dirty… maybe some heavy lifting. I’ll even throw in steaks and potatoes on the grill when we’re done.”

“You want me in your sacred man cave, actually doing something useful instead of just harassing you over your latest intentional breach of rules and regs?”

“If you think you can handle a sanding block, a brush an’ a can of paint… then yeah. I’ve given you the chance a hundred times. You always pick the bourbon.”

Tobias hesitated for a minute or two, a tiny smile playing around his lips, then threw the hippo back and started quickly stripping out of his overcoat and suit jacket.

“Not this time.”

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TBC……
Chapter 65

With A Little… 65/?

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45 MINUTES LATER:

“There ya go, Tim. That’s good. A little slower… yeah, take your time. That piece’ll have to dry for a day or two before we can get it upstairs, so no need to rush.”

“You sure it looks okay, Boss?”

“It’s fine. You picked up working with the brush real quick. Like you do most everything.” Gibbs responded, offering Tim a kind smile and a thump on the back. “Tobias, you about done?”

“All set. What’s with the varnish, Jethro? You said paint.”

“That’s upstairs in the old guest room. Drop cloths and all the equipment, too.”

Tobias frowned lightly.

“Old? I thought…”

“We sleep in the same bed. Sleep.” Gibbs retorted, a heated edge to his voice that Fornell instantly recognized and knew not to provoke into an actual fire.

“Hey, comfort, support… I get it. Been there myself more than once, you know that. Four big bookcases… you really think you’ll need all of them?”

Gibbs snorted.

“You haven’t seen how many boxes are waiting to be unpacked up there. I swear the kid’s got every novel ever written and half the non-fiction.”

“Yeah? You look at some of ‘em? Got an idea what he likes the most?”

“I scanned a few dozen titles. Lots of history, a ton of thrillers… lots of paperbacks based on movies an’ Sounds T.V shows. I might check out the CSI and Star Trek ones, myself. The World War One stuff looked interesting, too.”

“History… he got much besides the forties and fifties?”

“Everything from ancient Egypt to Vietnam. Why?”

“I’m just thinkin’, that’s all. C’mon you two, let’s get upstairs and paint, huh? We finish the first coat by dinner and I’ll buy.”

“I’ll take that deal.” Gibbs agreed readily. “Gotta clean up the brushes first, though.”

As he and Tobias moved to the small sink, he realized the youngest member of the trio hadn’t moved. He was staring at the bookcase he’d been working on, looking it up and down and studying it intently. Gibbs moved to his side and settled a hand on his shoulder. “Get a few months of Susannah’s lessons under your belt first. Once you’re established there, you come back and I’ll show
you how to do stuff like this. Okay?”

“You’d do that?”

A crack to the back of the head told Tim he already knew the answer. “Right. Gotcha, boss.”

Before Gibbs could add more reassurance, his phone trilled. He sent Tim over to wash his brush then answered the call.


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THE HOSPITAL: ONE HOUR LATER

Approaching hesitantly, Jonah stopped and displayed his wallet to the men posted outside Tony’s room. After studying it for several minutes and consulting their phones, one of the somber agents nodded slightly and stepped aside, but he followed the visitor when he stepped forward. Jonah assured himself that Tony was awake before speaking.

“Agent DiNozzo? May I come in?”

Tony directed his gaze at the guard.

“Agent Gibbs phoned and said he’d be stopping by. The picture he sent matches this man’s I.D., so…”

“If Gibbs says he’s kosher, I’m okay with it. Thanks.”

“No problem.” The agent replied, turning crisply and returning to his post. Jonah stepped just inside the room, but would go no farther until Tony spoke up again, producing a wary smile.

“You can sit. Just remember, if they even *think* I’m in trouble, those guys out there will shoot first and question motives later.”

Dropping into the bedside chair, the visitor returned the smile he’d been offered.

“Understood. My, uh… my name is Jonah Dunn. I’m an old friend of Jethro’s.”

“Nice to meet you. I’d shake, but…”

“I know. Jethro asked me to help find you. I was there in the warehouse. I got the distinct pleasure of hauling that SOB’s ass out and shoving him in a car. Thought about cracking his head on the roof or the door… accidentally, of course.”

“But Jethro wouldn’t approve. Might’ve compromised the case.”

“No chance of that now, thank God. If I’d known, I might’ve risked it.”

“Which acronym’re you with?”

“How’d you know?”

“Spend enough time in this job, you get to recognize the bearing… the sound.”
“I’m FBI. Behavioral Analysis.”

Tony laughed quietly.

“Timmy must’ve flipped.”

“Pretty much.”

“Why’d Gibbs send you? Taking over part of the case? Hoping to study Rossmore and write him up?”

“Nah. He’s a pretty typical violent narcissist. I don’t think he’s anything special. The reason I came to see you is that I’m taking a break from my unit for a while. I’d really love to work with Jethro’s team…, hold your place for you until you can take it back. I won’t even think about it, though, unless you say it’s alright.”

Tony considered the idea silently for a long time, staring at the ceiling and alternately frowning and looking pensive.

“I’d have to talk to Jethro and the director first… and I’d have to know a lot more about you.”

“Absolutely. I’ll gladly tell you whatever you…”

Hearing slightly raised voices outside, Jonah let his sentence trail off and quickly rose to his feet. A tall black man with rigid posture and an angry expression was confronting the guards and demanding entrance to Tony’s room. Jonah moved out to try and resolve the problem. When he returned a few moments later, he explained the situation curtly to Tony.

“Says he’s an NCIS A.D. Leon Vance. Wants to ask questions.”

Tony paled and felt his breathing accelerate.

“No. No, no, no. Out... make him get out…”

“You got it.” Jonah promised, striding back to join the guards. Before he could announce Tony’s decision, the intruder began imperiously pushing the guards aside. At that point, Jonah took charge and shoved the man back, not stopping until he had pinned him against the opposite corridor wall.

“How stupid are you? Those agents aren’t there because they enjoy standing around! A move like you just made could’ve gotten you shot.”

“As his superior I have a right…”

“I don’t care if you’re an assistant director or the second coming of Christ. Tony says you don’t get to talk to him… you don’t. I’m going to let go, you’re going to leave. Clear?”

Vance nodded slowly and Jonah released him, watching closely to make sure he actually got on the elevator. Moving back to Tony’s room, he stopped and spoke to the agents briefly.

“No fly list, guys. He’s second only to the kid’s dad. Right?”

“Understood.”

“Great.”

As Jonah re-entered the small space, he was grumbling to himself. Tony strained, caught a word or two and instantly relaxed. “Hey, laser lips...”
“… your mama was a snowblower.” Tony finished gleefully. Jonah turned to look at him and chuckled.

“You know ‘Short Circuit’?”

“Hardly a movie I *don’t* know.”

“Sounds like maybe I scored a few points.”

“And you weren’t even trying. Sit back down and we’ll see how many more you can put on the board.”

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TBC……..

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