If I Ever Get Out Of Here

by Jacie

Summary

After a warden becomes suspicious about the death rate in his prison, Tony is sent undercover as an inmate. Within days, he goes missing. Gibbs is told Tony died from injuries sustained in a fight amongst the prisoners and his remains were cremated. After Abby determines the remains are fake, Tim offers to go in undercover as a guard to find out what is going on in the prison and to locate Tony.

Notes

Warnings: Graphic violence, language

Author Notes:
Tony's *fake* crime was inspired by an episode of Forensic Files.

Many thanks to my beta, Naemi. Any remaining mistakes are mine alone. And much gratitude to my artist, Ibrahil, for the beautiful artwork!

The first three chapters were titled after prison movies. The story title and the last three chapter titles are from the song Band On The Run by Paul McCartney.

Written for the 2015 NCIS Big Bang Challenge, hosted at the ncis_bang community on Live Journal.
Gibbs was acting more amorous than normal and Tony certainly was not complaining. From the nibbles at his neck and earlobes to the gentle way Gibbs was mapping his body with calloused hands, Tony fully relaxed, enjoying his lover’s attention.

They had woken up early. Darkness still shaded the sky, but it was about to begin lightening up at the horizon. Gibbs was spooned up behind Tony, his cock pressing against the crack before him suggestively.

With his lips pressed against Tony’s ears, Gibbs whispered softly, “One more for the road?”

Although he was facing the other way, Tony smiled. Grasping Gibbs’ hand, he brought it to his lips to kiss the palm, then sucked one of the fingers into his mouth while grinding his ass against Gibbs’ cock.

“I’m not going to last long if you keep that up,” warned Gibbs.

Finally rolling over, Tony faced his lover. “We do have to go into work today.”

“Eventually. I promise you won’t get in any trouble for showing up a little late.” Pulling Tony close, Gibbs kissed him, taking his time. There was no hiding the fact they were both hard.

“I guess we should do something about that. Before the op,” said Tony, nodding toward their cocks.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Knowing Gibbs was talking about his upcoming undercover mission, Tony replied, “Yes, I do. Who else are you going to send in? Tim? No, don’t tell me. Ziva!”

Gibbs laughed, then kissed Tony’s cheek. “I could go.”

“They’d spot your Marine ways in a heartbeat.”

He was right. And Gibbs knew it.

“Be careful, okay?” pleaded Gibbs.

“That’s the plan.”

“I love you, Tony DiNozzo.”
“Don’t let my dad hear you say that. He might get the wrong idea.”

“You’re afraid he’ll find out you’re living here and disinherit you?”

Tony chuckled, which made Gibbs smile. “I’m afraid he’ll think you love him and want him to move in.”

“You’re the only Tony DiNozzo I want.”

Wrapping an arm around Tony’s torso, Gibbs cupped his ass, kneading it as they kissed. Tony rolled onto his back, bringing Gibbs on top of him.

“We have time,” said Gibbs, nodding at the clock.

“Yes, we do,” Tony agreed.

Leaning across the bed, Gibbs grabbed the tube of lube from the night stand. They had some time, but not much. He quickly lubed his cock, noticing the pre-cum at the tip. After pushing a pillow under Tony’s hips, he liberally spread lubricant around his lover’s hole, then worked two fingers inside to make sure he was ready.

Tony loved the feel of having Gibbs inside of him. It didn’t matter to him if it was quick or slow, as he always enjoyed their love making sessions. Most people didn’t appreciate the deep passion that Gibbs had for all the things he did, including sex. It was obvious to Tony, in the way Gibbs built his boats and the way he did his job. Gibbs knew what he wanted and was determined as hell to work hard to achieve what he desired.

Tony kept his eyes open. He enjoyed watching Gibbs in motion, whether it was sanding a boat, interviewing a suspect or pounding his cock into Tony’s ass. Gibbs continued kissing Tony, moving between his lips and neck. When he was close, he stopped kissing and concentrated on his breathing and rhythm.

Tony adored the sight of his Gibbs’ face in the morning, especially right after sex when he looked perfectly sated and content.

The first rays of sunlight caught the drops of sweat glistening on Gibbs’ skin, until he wiped them away. He watched as Tony began stroking his own cock. Their eyes met again and Tony began pumping faster, until his orgasm took over his body. Not caring about the sticky mess between them, they clung to each other, kissing deeply for long minutes.

“Gonna miss you,” Tony said softly. “Gonna miss this.”

“Take care of yourself in there.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

“I will worry,” Gibbs confessed.

“I’ll stay safe. I’m just going in to observe. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

“Horrible things happen in prisons. And if the warden is right, the guards may be involved in illegal activities. You won’t be safe if anyone figures out that you’re a federal agent.”
“You don’t think I can pull this off! Remember the op with Jeffrey White?”

“Do you? He suspected you could be a plant. It was in your report. That was why he pulled you into the creek and crashed the truck that was conveniently left in place for you. He put our tracking bugs out of commission. Remember?”

“Yeah, there is that. But, I got the job done.”

“Yes, you did,” Gibbs conceded.

“So, don’t worry. I’m going to be fine. I’ll go in and observe. No one will know I’m a fed. When I figure out what’s going on in there, I’ll get the message to you and we’ll take down the bad guys like we always do.”

“Don’t trust anyone, other than the warden.”

“I won’t,” promised Tony.

“Don’t let anyone get you alone and take advantage of you.”

“I will stay in my cell or in very public places. I won’t give anyone a chance. Don’t forget to wear a suit and bring a briefcase when you visit. And those sexy specs.”

“I’ve been around enough lawyers to have their act down.”

“And I’ve been around enough criminals,” Tony teased, before leaning close to kiss the tip of Gibbs’ nose.

An hour later, they’d both showered, shaved, dressed and had arrived at the NCIS headquarters building for a quick meeting about the case. It was deemed too risky to try to hide anything on Tony, so he’d be going into the undercover op with no way to contact anyone, other than the warden. That was risky enough.

Warden Pete Mattingly was former Navy and had called some old buddies when he began to suspect some of his guards were participating in illegal activities. He wasn’t sure of the full extent, but had a gut feeling there were issues in his prison. With retirement coming closer, he wanted to make sure his prison was clean before he left and made it someone else’s problem. It was a matter of pride to him. And his job.

Although Mattingly had suspicions of things going on, but didn’t want to accuse an innocent man who was not involved. What he did know was that his prison appeared to have a greater death rate than other prisons. Not a lot higher, but it was noticeable. Someone was obviously bringing in illegal substances. The warden thought one or more of the guards may be involved in looking the other way, or may be bringing the drugs in themselves to make a little extra cash on the side. He wasn’t sure about anything, only suspicious.

When Gibbs’ team first began investigating, they discovered that two of the prisoners who had been listed as dying recently at the prison were former sailors. One of the deceased was the son of an admiral. The father had his own suspicions about the prison and the death of his son. The bodies of both former sailors were supposedly cremated before being returned to their families. However, the lab tests Abby ran showed there were no human remains in the cremation urns.

McGee and Special Agent Adam Barber posed as marshals. The story was that Tony had bonded out, but had been convicted in court that morning. Abby had prepared a realistic court file and Tony wore a suit that was appropriate for a court appearance. McGee had wrapped chains on him and
settled him in the backseat of a borrowed marshal’s car.

“Be careful, Tony,” Tim said softly.

“I will, Probie. Don’t worry. I’m going to be fine.”

Tony understood their concern. The only person who would know his true identity was Warden Mattingly.

The warden had come to NCIS himself a few times, sitting in on meetings with Gibbs and being introduced to Gibbs’ team. Tony remembered him as graying and in his early sixties.

As Special Agent Barber drove, each of the passengers was lost in his own thoughts about the case. They were stopped at the front gate, where McGee and Barber flashed their fake credentials. They were waved on to a second gate where the car was searched. Once cleared, they were directed to the drop off point. McGee clenched his fists. He had a bad feeling about leaving Tony on his own to spend who knew how long with these criminals. In the field they all had his six. Here, Tony had no backup.

Both agents disguised as marshals wore uniforms, hats and mirrored sunglasses, so their eyes were not visible. Once the vehicle was parked, McGee set his expression firmly and opened the backdoor of the car.

“Get out,” he said sternly.

“Sure thing,” Tony replied.

Tim grabbed hold of one arm near the elbow and escorted him to the locked door. Barber announced through the intercom that they were dropping off a prisoner. He held a file in his hands. It had been carefully prepared by Abby, complete with crime and court reports for Tony’s alias.

After being admitted, two prison guards were summoned to take Tony away. As soon as they signed the transfer sheet, they were gone from view, taking Tony and his file with them through another door for processing. McGee stood and stared at the door longer than he should have, until the Barber bumped him.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed.

Tony was led down a long hallway at a pace that was almost too fast for someone whose legs were chained. It was difficult to keep from tripping and stumbling as he was hauled along.

“Hey, can we slow it down a little?”

One of the guards escorting him shoved him against the wall. “What? Did you say something? We have rules here, scum. Rule one, no talking without permission.”

“How do I get permission to talk if I’m not allowed to talk?”

“Next rule, don’t be a wiseass.”

“Are you going to write these down for me or is there an orientation handbook you’ll be giving out?”

The first guard pulled back his arm and punched the wall an inch from Tony’s head. Tony stared back at the guy coldly, without flinching.
The other guard nodded down the hallway. “Let’s get him processed.”

“Your ass is mine,” warned the first guard, his finger poking at Tony’s chest.

Cocking his head, Tony replied, “I don’t give it away for free.”

“I know a few inmates you really need to meet.”

“Your harem?”

Stepping between them, the second guard took hold of Tony’s arm and waved the other guard ahead.

“Is this your first time in jail?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

“One rule you need to learn is not to antagonize the guards.”

Tony scoffed. “Whatever. All I have to do is spend a little time in here until my lawyer gets me an appeal and we get a jury of my peers, not those idiots who convicted me.”

“Maybe so. Maybe not. You’re facing up to twenty-five years. We basically have two kinds of guards here. There are those who will be aggressive toward you no matter what and those who will treat you with respect as long as you treat them with respect. Neither kind takes well to being antagonized. Wise up and keep that smart mouth of yours shut and your time here will be much easier.”

Tony listened, but didn’t respond. He was intentionally trying to push their buttons to get a feel for which of the guards he needed to watch more closely.

The guards escorted Tony through two more security doors in the hallway, then finally stopped. The door before them had a small window with wire running through the glass. Once the door was open, Tony was led into a large room with a caged area along one wall and several other doors along another. There were a few other inmates in various stages of processing. They all looked bored and were already dressed in orange jumpsuits, making them easily identifiable.

One of the guards approached the counter and was handed an orange jumpsuit, underwear, socks and a pair of white, slip-on shoes.

The attendant told him, “Two is open.”

The guard led Tony into the room marked with a two.

“Get undressed,” ordered the first guard as he unlocked Tony’s chains. “Then shower.”

Along one wall was a showerhead with a drain underneath it. Everything was out in the open, with no dividers to offer any privacy. Tony moved slowly to the short bench in the center of the room and began unbuttoning his jacket. Although the guards had given him a plastic hanger, there were no hooks or anywhere to hang his suit.

“Are you going to watch me shower?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” said the guard. “You better get used to it. This is the closest thing you’re going to get to a private shower while you’re here.”
“Is there somewhere to hang my suit at least? I don’t want it to wrinkle.”

“Does it matter? It’s going to be out of style by the time you get out of here.”

Tony smiled. “I told you, my lawyer is working on it.”

“They’ll hang it up for you out there,” the other guard said, nodding toward the door.

Tony finished undressing and showered quickly, then dressed in the clothing laid out for him. One of the guards locked the chains in place and led their prisoner back to the main room.

The guard indicated a place on a bench where Tony should sit, and said, “No talking.”

The other guard handed Tony’s clothing over the counter, where they took inventory, wrote down everything, then put it all into storage.

Other guards were in the room watching over the prisoners. They walked around or sometimes stood at the back, observing everyone. If an inmate moved or spoke without permission, they were given a warning. Tony noticed that the benches had welded metal rings. Two of the prisoners who were acting out more than the others were cuffed to the metal rings nearest to them.

One of the guards would occasionally call out an inmate’s name, then take him into another room. A few minutes later, he would return.

“Anthony Jackson.”

Tony stood up and approached the guard, before being escorted to an examination room. The doctor waiting inside checked him thoroughly, even inside his rectum.

“Anything up there?” the guard asked.

The doctor held out his gloved finger for the guard to inspect.

The guard chuckled. “You’ll fit right in.”

Tony wasn’t sure what he meant, but then he remembered he and Gibbs had engaged in sex only a few hours earlier. There certainly could be some evidence of their activity.

“Hey, lawyers are expensive,” he said.

“You let your lawyer fuck you?” the guard asked.

“I had to pay him somehow.”

“I hope he’s better in the sack than he is in the courtroom. After all, you are in prison now. At least he prepared you for that.”

The guard’s words worried Tony a little. Although he had heard stories about sex and rapes in prisons, Tony wasn’t going to show any fear. He had a plan to stay out of harm’s way by spending time alone in his cell or staying in crowded areas with a lot of guards when he was out of his cell. He could ask for isolation, but then he’d never figure out what was going on and who was responsible. He had to be out in the general population, talking to and watching everyone. Whatever was going on, it was probable that it involved both inmates and guards. And quite possibly this doctor who was making Tony rather uncomfortable.

The examination didn’t take long and Tony was soon taken back to the main room. Occasionally a
new inmate was brought in and processed. Tony was bored and wanted to take a nap, but the guards weren’t going to allow anyone sleeping privileges.

Finally, they were all told to stand and walk single file through another door and down another long hallway. They stood for a few minutes before Warden Mattingly stepped in front of them. He went over a few brief rules for the facility with a speech that was part welcoming and part warning. Although he had met Tony at NCIS before, he didn’t betray that knowledge. He made eye contact with each of the inmates during his speech as he paced back and forth, but he showed no sign of recognition when his eyes met Tony’s.

After the talk, the new inmates were taken back to the processing room and were given additional sets of clothing along with a pillow and a set of bed sheets. Anytime any of them tried to talk, they were yelled at and told to shut up.

They were marched through several hallways and security doors until they came to what appeared to be a barracks building. An older guard with a clipboard met them and began assigning each new prisoner to a cell.

Tony was led off somewhere in the middle, surprised to find an inmate already inside the small cell. The man was seated on the lower bunk, reading a book. He looked up when Tony walked in.

“Great,” he said coldly.

“I’m Tony.”

“Ed.”

“I guess the top bunk is mine.”

“Good guess.”

Looking around the room, Tony took everything in. The coldness of the cell caused Tony to shiver. It was all concrete and steel. The bunk beds were along one wall, with two sets of built-in shelving fastened to the opposite wall. One already had clothing, books and bathroom accessories on it. The other was empty. There was a metal stool bolted to the floor in front of a desk-like metal shelf bolted to the wall. The only other thing in the room was also metal. It appeared to be a combined toilet, sink and drinking fountain unit.

“Do us both a favor. Try not to take a dump in here,” said Ed.

“I’ll do my best.”

“The toilet is crappy. It doesn’t flush right. Fluids go down more or less, but shit sticks around awhile. It doesn’t take long to stink up the cell.”

“Can’t they fix it?”

Ed laughed. “Maintenance in the cells is not a high priority. As long as the locks work, they’re happy. And in here, if you make a mess, you clean it up. There is no maid service.”

“Good to know.”

“Don’t step on my bed.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Staring at the top bunk, Tony made a mental note to keep his feet on the
attached metal ladder. Still, it would be difficult to make the top bunk without stepping on the bottom one. However, he wouldn’t want anyone stepping on his bed either. Eyeing the stool bolted to the floor, he considered that as an option.

“What are you in for?” asked Ed.

“Murder.”

Ed put his book down. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t my fault. It just sort of happened.”

“Sounds like manslaughter.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Intent.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to kill the guy. I can’t believe they came back with a guilty verdict. My lawyer is going to appeal.”

“Good luck with that. Ever been down before?”

Tony lowered his voice. “With a man?”

Ed chuckled again. “I guess that’s a no. I was asking if you’ve done jail time.”

“Never. You been around awhile?”

“Been in and out. Mostly burglary and stealing cars. Last time I stepped up to armed robbery and was charged with accessory to murder.”

“What happened?”

“This friend of mine asked me to come along on a robbery. He said it was better than burglary because you could grab cash fast. It’s easier than carrying out stereos and televisions, then having to sell them. He was high and thought the clerk was too slow. He got nervous and shot the dude. We got caught. I was guilty of the killing just because I was there. I didn’t even have a gun myself. I didn’t know my buddy was carrying that night.”

Tony nodded as he began sorting out his things and organizing them on the empty shelf.

“What went down with you?” Ed questioned.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“Tell me your story.”

“I was out late one night. Went to a couple bars to hang out. When I was driving home it was raining hard. I saw this pretty chick on a corner. She had her jacket over her head to try to keep the rain off, but she was drenched. I asked if I could give her a lift. She said no. I got out and tried to explain to her that I was a good guy just trying to help her out and that I wasn’t trying to pick her up or imply she was a hooker or anything. Next thing I know, her boyfriend shows up out of nowhere and starts beating me. He jumped me, pushed me into the street and took me down to the pavement. It all happened so fast. My dad always told me to carry a knife and I had it that night. When her boyfriend surprised me, I grabbed my knife and next thing I know, he’s bleeding out in the street. It’s still
pouring down rain. The chick started bawling. The cops showed up. The bitch told them I jumped her boyfriend and killed him. She said he only came over to talk and I threw the first punch. That wasn’t true. He jumped me. I didn’t mean to kill him. If he hadn’t attacked me, he’d still be alive today. But the jury took her side, said that I used deadly force when I shouldn’t have.”

“How long are you in for?”

“Sentenced to twenty-five years. They were asking for second degree murder and got it.”

“That sucks.”

“We said it was self-defense. He attacked me. But his girlfriend lied and made it sound like the guy was standing there talking and I viciously attacked and killed him. She said she was sure I was going to kidnap and kill her, too. She said she wouldn’t feel safe if I was out on the street. The stupid jurors bought her story.”

“It’ll be better for you in here if you go with her story,” Ed suggested.

“Why?”

“You’ll be safer if people fear you. They’ll fear a murderer. If you tell them self-defense, someone might decide to test your skills.”

“Thanks for the warning. My lawyer is sure he can do something to get the sentence reduced or dismissed.”

“As long as you have money to pay him, he’ll try.”

“We have an agreement. I paid him what I could and worked off the rest.”

“What kind of work?”

“A bit of this and that.”

“If you traded sex, you’ll fit right in here. There’s always someone willing to pay for it. Or take it.”

“Take?”

“As long as you get the word out you’re in for murder, you should be okay. They usually go for younger dudes. The ones who take. They’ll attack like a pack of wolves. They’ll cut the weakest one out of the herd. He won’t even realize what’s going on until it’s too late. Rapes in here are typically gang rapes where there are at least a couple guys holding one down while another guy fucks him. They all take turns, usually three or four guys. Then there are those looking for a relationship. Some are just looking for mutual fucking benefits. Some guys prefer to take care of themselves. All different kinds in here.”

Tony considered asking Ed what type he was, but decided against it. “What’s the schedule like?”

“They wake us up around five-thirty. Camps are taken to chow in a random rotation.”

“Camps?”

“Different barracks.”

“Oh.”
“Meals and yard time are all on random schedules. It kind of sucks. They wake you up early and you might not go to chow for an hour and a half. I’m one of the lucky ones. I work in the kitchen, so my schedule is a little different on most days.”

“Is there anything else to do around here?”

“There’s a day room and a fitness room. You’ll get a job, too. Might be laundry or kitchen. Some inmates clean the common areas.”

“Do we get a paycheck?”

“Yes and no. We’re not paid hardly anything. You’re supposed to save it up and they give it to you when you get out. You can spend some at the canteen, though. We don’t get everything we need. All taxpayers are interested in paying for is more locks and more guards.”

“And that’s why a lot of maintenance isn’t done?”

“Who wants to do maintenance in a prison? They know a lot of inmates will just keep tearing stuff up. Why bother fixing it?”

“They could let the inmates fix it themselves.”

Ed laughed loudly. “Man, you are green! Like they’re going to give inmates tools. Sure, let’s give them all a blowtorch and a saw. Toss in a couple wrenches and screwdrivers. Why not? There are people in here that could kill you with a toothbrush and you think they’re going to hand out actual tools?”

Tony nodded. Ed did have a point.

Ed eventually continued. “Usually only the trustees are allowed to use most tools. Every tool is signed in and out and some are chained up to a service cart or shelf. They keep track of that shit. Every couple of months, the guards get us all out of here and lock all the cells down while the trustees are allowed to do basic maintenance. It isn’t much. I think they’re more responsible to check if anything is loose.”

“Wouldn’t do to have a shelf fall down.”

“Some guys in here could kill you with a shelf.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” admitted Tony.

After climbing up to the top bunk, Tony set about making the bed, then settled down in his bunk. Holding his head with his hands, fingers laced behind, he stared up at the ceiling. This whole experience was going to suck. It hadn’t truly hit him how bad prison was and that he wasn’t going to get any special treatment while he was here. He made a mental note to find the nearest bathrooms for when he needed to take a dump.
Gibbs looked up when Tim returned to the squad room. “Anything to report?”

Tim walked behind his desk and sat down. “It all went as planned. We dropped him off and the guards took him away.”

“He’s going to be okay,” Gibbs said, as if he was trying to convince himself.

Tim smiled weakly. “Of course he is. He’s Tony.”

Tony fell into his new routines easily. Taking Ed’s advice, he let it slip that he had murdered a man in cold blood. He also made it clear that any man who raped him would be found dead with his severed dick shoved into his own mouth. Most of the other inmates steered clear of him after the threat made the rounds. Which, he was fine with. It was better for him to stand back and observe the interactions of others.

A few days after he was incarcerated, he had a visitor.

“Jackson,” the guard called. “Your lawyer is here to see you.”

Tony acted like it wasn’t a big deal. In truth, he couldn’t wait to see Gibbs. He couldn’t hide his smile when he was led into a room where Gibbs stood, dressed in a tailored suit and wearing a pair of stylish glasses.

“You’re looking good, Douglas,” he offered.

“How are they treating you, Tony?”

“Can’t wait to get out. How’s the appeal coming along?”
“These things take time.”

“How long do I have to stay here? A week? A month?”

“It’s complicated.” Taking off his glasses, Gibbs looked down and cleaned them before putting them back on. “A lot of paperwork must be completed before I can get time in front of the judge. I have to convince him to grant an appeal.”

“Then do it! I’m innocent and you know it! Make this right, Douglas. Do your fucking job.”

It was all an act. Tony was supposed to play the role of an infuriated inmate, anxious to get out of jail and insisting on his innocence, while Gibbs was to portray a calm and collected attorney doing his job. Courts were slow. Everyone knew that as well as they knew that innocent men didn’t like to wait for their release.

They both played their parts well.

“I understand your frustration,” Gibbs said. “But there are procedures. You’ve had your trial.”

“That witness lied. And the stupid jury believed her. If they threw out her bullshit testimony and focused on the evidence, I would have been found innocent. Because I am innocent!” Tony pounded his fist on the table for emphasis.

“Apparently the jury found her credible. I’m sure she believes the story she is telling.”

“But it’s a lie.”

“There are always different versions of the truth. In this case, there is her version, your version and the actual true reality which usually lies somewhere between.”

“There is a huge difference in our stories. In one, I’m a cold blooded killer, in the other it is self-defense. I swear, I did not mean to kill the guy. He attacked me.”

“Perhaps she felt you were a threat and he was just trying to protect her. Alcohol was involved. It was late. People were tired. It was pouring down rain.”

“Whose fucking side are you on?”

“Yours, of course. But I think you need to accept that she may not be lying in her own eyes. She honestly may have perceived you as a threat no matter how innocent you actually are. If her boyfriend sensed her fear and reacted to it, he was trying to protect her. Had he killed you, he could have claimed self-defense as well. She may have convinced the jury because she honestly believed every word of her own testimony.”

Tony blinked his eyes. “Wow. I think that is the most you have ever said at one time.”

Gibbs smirked. “Our next step is to get you out of here and I am working on that.”

“But it takes time,” Tony said, purposely drawing the last word out.

“Yes, it does. Be patient and keep your nose clean. I will work on getting you another shot.”

Tony nodded and softened his voice. “Okay.”

“And next time, don’t glare at her like you want to kill her.”
“She was lying!”

“She was telling her version. When you glower at her like you want to kill her, you feed her fears and make her sound more believable. The jury can feel it.”

Leaning back, Tony closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “This is my fault? I made the jury think she actually was afraid of me?”

“Maybe. Don’t sweat it. What’s done is done. All I can do is go over all the evidence again and try to convince the judge to give you another trial.”

“I’ll do better next time. I promise.”

Gibbs stood up and patted Tony’s back. “Take care of yourself.”

Rising to his feet, Tony leaned close and whispered in Gibbs’ ear, “Hella sexy in those glasses. I’d do you right now if the guards weren’t watching.”

A guard came into the room, and warned, “No touching.”

“I was just leaving,” said Gibbs.

“Yeah, me, too,” Tony added as he attempted to trail after Gibbs.

The guard caught Tony’s arm and pointed him in the other direction. “Inmates, this way.”

Gibbs and Tony had worked out a few hand signals beforehand. Tony had successfully let his boss know that he was safe and hadn’t come across any of the guards doing anything suspicious, yet. With a slight wave of his hand, Gibbs had signaled back that he got the message.

An hour later, back at NCIS headquarters. The ever present stack of paperwork sat atop his desk waiting for his attention. Gibbs sat at his desk for hours, reading through case files and reports. After taking off his glasses, he rubbed his eyes before looking up to see Abby standing before him chewing her bottom lip.

“Abby, speak.”

“How is Tony?”

“He’s okay.”

“I can’t believe you let him go in without any backup. Prisons are dangerous places.”

Gibbs smirked as he looked into her eyes with confidence. “He’s doing fine. If he needs to contact
us, he can go through the warden. I have his back, Abs.”

“I was thinking. I could whip up an ID and go visit him. I could be his sister.”

“No.”

“Wife?”

“No. We need to give him time. The sailors who went missing didn’t have any visitors. Whatever is going on, it’s happening to people who won’t likely be missed.”

Abby sighed and nodded. “I’m still going to worry about him until he’s out of there.”

Gibbs returned his attention to his paperwork as she walked away. “Me, too,” he whispered softly.

Tim looked up from his desk. “I could go in. I could be his backup,” he offered.

Gibbs looked over his glasses at Tim. “Really? Last week you were a Marshal dropping off an inmate and this week you’re in jail?”

“I was wearing sunglasses. I don’t think anyone would actually recognize me.”

Gibbs scowled at him.

“Getting back to work, Boss.”

Tony spent his time observing. He made mental notes of which guards tended to hang out together and which inmates had conversations with the different guards. He got along with Ed. They had plenty of time to talk when they were locked in their cell overnight.

“Anything illegal going on in here?” Tony asked one night after lights out.

Ed laughed. “There’s always something illegal going on.”

“Really?”

“It is a prison. Plenty of criminals around.”

“So what kind of stuff goes on in here? Drugs?” Tony questioned.

“Dude, if you have money and grease the right palms you can get just about anything you want.”

“Freedom?”

“Maybe. If you had a million bucks to drop.”
“Oh sure. I keep it hidden in my underwear,” Tony teased. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“That secret is safe with me.”

A couple minutes of silence passed before Ed spoke again. “What are you looking to get? High? Drunk? Laid?”

“Always one of those?”

“Lots of that stuff going on around here. Things get smuggled in. Some guards are paid to look the other way. Some trustees are paid to help.”

“People ever OD in here?”

“Probably. Doc gets paid off, too. Dangerous stuff can happen in here. Some inmates don’t have anyone come in to visit them. Who’s going to care how they died?”

“Do a lot of prisoners die in here?”

“A few,” Ed said. “Inmates who have been around other prisons say there are more deaths here than in other prisons. Mysterious deaths, too. Perfectly healthy young men disappear and we’re told they died. Guess they get ahold of some bad stuff. Some of the more superstitious people around here swear the place is cursed.”

“There are no autopsies or investigations into what happened?”

“Don’t need that if they’re under Doc’s care,” explained Ed.

“I guess not.”

“You planning to OD in here or something?”

“I don’t do drugs.”

“I wouldn’t trust the booze. Who knows what you’ll get? Might be piss and water with a little added flavoring.”

“Got someone on the outside, so paying to get laid is out, too,” Tony said.

“There are still guys that can smuggle in just about anything you want. Food, magazines, books. You might lose your contraband if the guards find it.”

“I’m a simple man with simple needs.”

“I’m not buying that.”

Lowering his voice to a whisper, Tony asked, “Has anyone ever escaped from here?”

“A few try now and then. As far as I know, they’ve all been caught and brought back. Or killed. At least the ones I’ve heard of. Guys get the itch, but it’s not easy to get out, so it doesn’t happen very often.”
Tony found himself assigned to a janitorial job. He hated it from the start. It included cleaning up if anyone puked or peed on the floor or walls. Sometimes it meant cleaning up blood after a fight. Most of the time, his job consisted of sweeping and mopping the many floors of the prison with a strong disinfectant on a daily basis, along with replacing paper towels and toilet paper in the rest rooms when they ran out.

Some of the guys that were assigned to the laundry told him they didn’t have it much better. They were stuck in a hot, muggy room with no windows for their full shift. At least Tony got to move around. It occurred to him that the warden may have set it up to give him more access to a greater number of guards and inmates.

Warden Mattingly spent much of his time in his office, but would occasionally walk around the grounds. Ed had warned Tony to never complain about anything directly to the warden or the guards would pay him a visit afterward.

“Guys get beaten up in here?” Tony asked.

“All the time. Sometimes by the guards, sometimes by other inmates. It seems like a fight breaks out somewhere around here every day. If you want to be a trustee, you need to stay far away from any of that shit. If you’re caught fighting, your name goes on a list.”

“What if I didn’t start it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

As the days passed, Tony saw a few scuffles here and there. Following Ed’s advice, he did his best to distance himself from any trouble. Despite his efforts, he found himself in the midst of a tussle in the cafeteria one day.

The guards were quick to break up the fight, but Tony was grabbed along with a handful of other inmates and marched up to the warden’s office and made to stand still in a line. Each prisoner was
cuffed with chains running between their wrists and ankles.

Deputy Warden Hackett finally stepped out of his office with one of the guards at his side. He looked over the line of inmates, scowling.

“I won’t tolerate this fighting, especially with so many involved,” the Deputy Warden said sternly. “Who started this fight and why?” he asked as he paced in front of the inmates.

No one dared to answer.

“Give them all solitary,” he ordered.

“Yes, Deputy Warden,” confirmed one of the guards.

“Wait,” Tony said. “This had nothing to do with me. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The Deputy Warden moved in front of him. “Do you know who started the fight and why?” he asked.

“No. I was struck from behind and pulled into the middle. I was trying to get away when the guards grabbed everyone.”

“Solitary.”

“Please, may I speak with Warden Mattingly?”

“The warden had a stroke. He’s at the hospital in a coma. I’m in charge, so anything you have to say, you can say to me.”

Tony took in a deep breath, but said nothing more. He wondered if anyone at NCIS knew about the Warden Mattingly’s stroke and if Director Vance was doing anything to get him out of the prison. With the warden gone, he was truly on his own with no way to contact anyone at NCIS.

The guards marched the inmates to a different part of the prison where the solitary confinement cells were. The guards called it segregation. The prisoners called it the box. Tales from inmates had spread throughout the prison. Some said it was easy time as they were locked up alone and had plenty of time to sleep. Others claimed to have been raped, beaten and tortured. Tony hoped those stories were not true.

The first thing that hit Tony was the horrible stench of feces and stale urine.

“Hey, can we talk about this?” he asked as a guard grabbed his arm and forced him inside a cell.

The guard removed the chains and closed the door. “Goodnight, princess.”

The room was small. The only window was tiny and in the door. It had bars so he could see out, but couldn’t get an arm through. At least it let in the slightest bit of fresher air. There was another small opening in the door. It was a slot with a cover over it and a small shelf below. Tony was certain it was for passing food trays through.

“How long do I have to stay in here?” Tony yelled through the door. Even pressing his face against the bars in the small window didn’t offer him much of a view.

“Your ass will be in here until the deputy warden says you can go back to your camp,” one of the guards yelled back at him.
He wondered if Ed would be given a different cellmate while he was locked up in solitary. Tony had gotten used to sharing the small cell with Ed and was certain he had no part of whatever illegal activities were going on in the prison.

How could Tony figure out what was going on from this isolation cell? Would they let him out to see Gibbs when he came to visit?

*It’s okay, Tony assured himself. Gibbs will show up and will demand to see me. If the guards give him any grief, he will try to see Warden Mattingly. When he learns about the warden’s stroke, he will do whatever it takes to get me out of here. It’s going to be fine.*

Solitary wasn’t easy time. Tony found himself locked in the tiny room for twenty-three hours a day. For one hour each day, he was taken into what one could only describe as a cage outside. It was maybe four times the size of the cell and reminded Tony of a large dog kennel. It wasn’t like the yard the other prisoners had. There was nothing to do; no balls or hoops for shooting basketball. Tony would enjoy the sunshine when it wasn’t too cloudy. Often he would lie down and get some much needed rest.

He found it difficult to try to sleep in the cell. Although he couldn’t see the other inmates in segregation, he could hear them. There didn’t seem to be a single moment of the day or night when one of them wasn’t yelling, cursing or ranting about something. No matter what he did, he couldn’t drown out the din. He’d tried stuffing wadded up toilet paper in his ears and putting his pillow over his head. Nothing seemed to help much. Tony never slept well in solitary.

On his third day in solitary, his worst nightmare stepped into his cell. Four guards came in, one holding a baton out.

Tony blinked his eyes. “What?” he questioned, still groggy with sleep.

Without a word, two of the guards stepped forward, each one grabbing an arm. A third guard stripped Tony’s clothing off while the fourth guard stood behind him smacking the baton against his open hand.

“What?” Tony asked again. Closing his eyes, he kept hoping he would wake up to realize this was just a dream.

But it wasn’t. It was really happening.

“Let’s if he can fight,” suggested one of the guards, punching Tony in his side.

Tony gasped in pain.

“Come on, Jackson. Can’t you fight? I thought you killed someone.”
“Not going to fight you,” Tony spat out.

The guard punched Tony in the back. “You scared, punk?”

“If I touch any of you, I’ll never get out of here.”

The guards laughed as Tony eyed the door. The five men barely fit in the small cell. The guards shoved Tony into the middle and began pummeling him.

Minutes later, one guard stepped over to the door. “That’s enough. Let’s get him down to sick bay so the doc can look him over.”

After letting Tony redress, chains were put on him before the guards hauled him out of his cell and down the hallway.

“Got one for you, Doc,” one of the guards said as they entered sick bay. “Guess he was hurt worse in that fight than we originally thought.”

“Put him over there,” the doctor said, pointing to an open bed. “I’ll get the report written up.”

“We’ll be back for him later.”

The moment the guards left, Tony looked at the doctor. “They did this to me.”

“Yes, you were in a fight. With other inmates. Prison can be a brutal place.”

“The guards. They beat me up. Please help me.”

The doctor looked him over, making notes on a chart. “No worries. I’ll patch you up. You’re going to be fine in a few days.”

“You have to report them to the warden. Please.”

Tony saw the doctor pick up a needle and a vial, drawing the liquid into the syringe before approaching him. “You’re tired. I’m going to give you a little sedative to help you sleep.”

Tony shook his head. “No, please. You can’t. You can’t.”

“You’re a handsome one,” the doctor observed. “He’ll be quite pleased.”

Within seconds, Tony was unconscious.
Tony woke up slowly in pure darkness. He could feel the sensation of movement, but knew he was lying down. The air around him was thick and warm. At first he was certain he was still in the isolation cell, until he tried to get up. Panic set in when he realized he was literally inside of a box. Feeling smooth, solid wood close above him and to his sides, Tony pounded on the enclosure and yelled as loudly as he could. He kept it up until he was too exhausted to continue.

When they finally stopped moving, Tony did his best to steady his breathing. It was so warm that he could feel the sweat rolling across his skin. It was a relief to him when the lid was finally removed and fresh air surrounded him. His eyes were closed.

“Get him out.”

Rough hands reached in and pulled Tony out of the box, before dumping him onto a cold, concrete floor.

“Is he awake?”

Hands shook his body, but Tony didn’t respond.

“Put him in the cell until he wakes up. The sedative will wear off eventually.”

The days in isolation and the ride in the close confines of the box had left him completely wiped out. It was easy for him to go back to sleep.
“What do you mean he’s no longer here?” Gibbs asked. “I’m his attorney. I have the right to visit my client. Get him down here. Now!” he demanded forcefully.

“I’m sorry, but he’s not here. Perhaps you should see Deputy Warden Hackett,” suggested the guard at the sign-in post.

Gibbs was escorted to the Deputy Warden’s office. “Isn’t Warden Mattingly available?” he asked.

“Warden Mattingly had a stroke. He’s been in a coma at the hospital for a couple of weeks.”

Gibbs’ gut churned. They didn’t want to contact the warden too often. He had trusted the warden to watch out for Tony, but no one had been assigned to watch out for the warden. He silently cursed the oversight.

As they entered the office, the guard tapped on the door. “This is Anthony Jackson’s attorney. He came to visit his client.”

Hackett stepped from behind his desk and offered his hand to Gibbs. Looking over to the guard, he asked, “Is there a problem?”

“Anthony Jackson is no longer our guest.”

“Oh?”

“He was one of the inmates in the cafeteria brawl.”

“The one who went to the infirmary with injuries?”

“Yes, Sir.”

After Hackett leaned over to whisper something to the guard, he motioned for Gibbs to take a seat.

“As much as we try to maintain a safe environment, fights are a common occurrence in prisons.”

“Where is my client? If he’s in a hospital, I’ll visit him there. How bad are his injuries?”

“It’s a terribly sad thing. During the fight, he and several other inmates suffered a variety of bruises and a few lacerations, but we didn’t think much about any of them. None of the participants were complaining of any severe pain.”

Gibbs was quickly losing patience. “Where is Anthony Jackson?”

“He suffered some minor injuries, like the others. But he also suffered a concussion. We believe he was slammed headfirst into the concrete floor. As a disciplinary measure, we put all the participants
“into segregation.”

“He’s in solitary?”

“The guards went to take him out for rec one day and found he had died from his injuries during the night.”

Gibbs’ heart skipped a few beats as he processed the deputy warden’s words. “What?”

“I am sorry to say, Anthony Jackson succumbed to his injuries while in our care. His death is under investigation, of course. My guards aren’t physicians. We rely on the prisoners to communicate their injuries to us. Anthony never said a word.”

“Where is his body?” Gibbs asked softly.

“He had no immediate family listed. His medical records indicated his preference to be cremated.”

Gibbs saw red, knowing that was a lie.

The guard returned to the office with an urn.

“Thank you,” said Hackett, before turning back to Gibbs. “I can release his remains to you if you would like to get them back to his family. If you can find anyone. Otherwise, our policy is to hold them for one year and if they’re not claimed, we bury the urns on the grounds.”

“There will be an outside investigation of this incident,” Gibbs seethed. “I promise you that. My client was young and healthy. If he died in your prison, you are responsible for his death.”

“We do our best, but there is no way we can prevent every fight. Or every death.”

“A lawsuit will be just the beginning,” Gibbs said, grabbing the urn on the way out of the door.

The moment he was in the car, he floored it, rushing back to NCIS headquarters. Minutes after his arrival, he was in Abby’s lab, handing her the urn. “I want to know what’s in here ASAP.”

“Is that another urn from the prison?”

“Yeah.”

“Who’s supposed to be in this one?” she asked, pulling a fresh set of latex gloves from the box.

“Anthony Jackson.”

When Tony woke up again, he was somewhat refreshed. It was the best sleep he’d had in a few
days. Wherever he was, there was plenty of quiet and not much light. Glancing around the space, he wasn’t sure if this was another prison. From what he could tell, he was in a cell with four concrete block walls, painted off-white. The door was made of thick metal bars. He didn’t notice the cold until he shivered.

Looking up, he did notice a blinking red light. After he stood up and stretched, he went to see what it was and found it to be a digital camera installed at the ceiling, inside a plexiglass box, which was further protected by more bars.

The room held an old single bed, which consisted of a short metal frame and a narrow mattress. In a corner was a metal pail. Further investigation revealed a drain in the floor. There was no toilet or sink to use.

“Well, this sucks,” he said aloud.

Gibbs offered the customary Caf-Pow! to Abby on his next visit to her lab. “What you got, Abs?”

“Like the other urns from the prison, this one contained no human remains. It’s a mixture of concrete bits, dust and ash.”

“It’s definitely not Tony?”

“No, it is not. It’s not anybody. Tony has to be somewhere, but no part of him is in this urn.”

“But where the hell is he? Someone at that prison knows the answer. We need to figure out who that is. Thanks, Abs.”

“Find him, Gibbs. Please find him and bring him home safe.”

Gibbs wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her temple. “That’s the plan.”

Minutes later, Gibbs was back in the bullpen. “Any leads?”

Ziva hung up the phone and turned to Gibbs. “Warden Mattingly did indeed suffer a stroke two weeks ago while he was in his office at the prison. The prison physician was called as were the paramedics. He was transported to the hospital, but never regained consciousness.”

“He died?”

“They said he is in a comb.”

“A coma?”

“Yes, that is it,” she agreed.
“Find out everything you can on Deputy Warden Hatchett. McGee, anything to add?”

“We need someone on the inside.”

“We had someone on the inside. He disappeared.”

“And we have to find him.”

“This I already know. I’m not going to risk another agent,” said Gibbs.

“Only the prisoners are disappearing.”

“Your point?”

“Let me go in as a guard. We can backdate the paperwork and forge Warden Mattingly’s signature on it.”

“What if they recognize you from dropping off Tony?”

“I doubt they would. We were only there for a couple of minutes. Even if they do, we put that in my work record. I’ll have Abby set it up. We can say I was fired from the Marshals due to gambling. Borderline illegal would be a good way to meet whoever is responsible for Tony’s disappearance.”

Gibbs thought about it for a minute. He didn’t want to send in another agent without a backup, but Tim’s plan made sense. And it was true, only prisoners were said to be dying, not the guards. “Have Abby set you up. I want a deep undercover persona complete with using a safe house as your residence and a wife.”

“A wife?”

“A married man is less suspicious than a single guy.”

“I will have Abby set it all up and we’ll see who is available.”

“And Tim, be sure to use a house that’s at least thirty of forty minutes from the prison.”

“Too far for others to casually drive by too often. Got it.”

“Make sure you have an encrypted form of communication at the house. Maybe we can pull one of the female computer geeks to be your wife. Find someone who can do their work from the safe house.”

Tim nodded, then left for Abby’s lab.

An hour later, Abby had created a background and IDs for Tim McCallahan and his wife Ashley.

“Are you two going to share a bed?” Abby asked with a sly smile.

“What? No. The safe house has three bedrooms. There’s one for her, one for me and one for a safe communications room.”

“Are you taking Jethro?”

“Of course. What’s less suspicious than a man with a wife and a dog?”
In the dimness of the new cell, Tony couldn’t get a fix on the passage of time. No one came to get him for days, but every so often a meal would be shoved under the door. It was much quieter than the isolation cell he had been in at the prison. He spent much of his time talking to himself.

After a few days had passed, a man dressed in black came in to get Tony. He wore a fabric facemask, which only left his eyes exposed. Without saying a word, he roughly grabbed Tony’s arm and pulled him to his feet.

“Kidnapped by ninjas. That’s a new one,” Tony said. “Where are you taking me? Is this like our first date?”

His captor ignored his babbling as he led the way down a dimly lit hallway. Tony saw other cells identical to his own, but was moving too fast to tell if they were occupied. A short distance later, he was dragged into a room and thrown to the floor.

“Stay down,” his captor commanded as he quickly removed Tony’s clothing.

A familiar set of chains was snapped into place, connecting the chain around his waist to the cuffs at his wrists and ankles. A metal choke collar, attached to a black leather leash, was placed around his neck and fastened.

A few minutes passed before he was pulled to his feet and led through another hallway and into another room. This one was more brightly lit and had video screens on the walls. There was nothing playing on the dark screens.

“Are we going to watch movies now?” Tony asked. “I love movies.”

His handler pulled the choke chain tight. “This is one of those times when your silence may save your life,” he hissed.

Finally feeling defeated, Tony nodded slowly. He was in no condition to protect himself against this man and he had a gut feeling there were many more people around. For now he had to behave and learn what he could until he found a way to escape.

A few minutes later, several other men began filing into the room and the screens lit up. The other men appeared scruffy; unshaven and perhaps unbathed. They were all wore shorts of various colors. Tony noticed each color group seemed to stick together. Other captors appeared; all dressed in black and watching wordlessly.

Tony saw a schedule appear on the screen. The first item noted was an auction. After that, he saw what appeared to be a fight schedule. Each listing had two sets of initials. The other men in the room looked over the schedule and some began mumbling about the matches they saw. Tony caught a few words here and there. The men were indeed talking about winning or losing battles with the others
listed on the schedule. Some were talking about fight strategies.

Tony’s gut churned.

A bell rang out three times and the line on the schedule noting an auction was highlighted. Tony’s handler tugged on the leash, leading Tony through a doorway. On the other side was a narrow hallway, which led to a small open area which was brightly lit. Tony was soon aware of the seats that surrounded the open area. The seating was filled with figures sitting in the dark and making murmured comments.

Moments later, a voice boomed through a speaker system. “This is AJ2, fresh and untrained. Bidding will begin at one thousand dollars.”

Tony shook his head, again hoping he was dreaming, but fearing he was not. “I don’t belong here,” he said softly.

His handler tightened the choke chain until Tony was unable to speak and making it difficult for him to breath. The handler tugged on the leash and walked him around the edge of the open area. Tony heard the auctioneer’s voice booming through the speaker system as the dollar amount rose.

After a few minutes, the voice asked, “Do I have any more bids? Going once, going twice. Sold to owner LC.”

Another tug on the leash pulled him to the side of the ring where he was marked with the letters L and C on his shoulder. Afterward, he was led through a different hallway and into a new cell. He found this cell had a pail, but no drain. As he stood there, someone came by and threw a couple blankets into the cell. That was when he noticed there was no bed.

Next, he was pushed to the floor and his leg chains were removed. Another captor appeared in the hallway and threw a pair of purple shorts at Tony.

“Put those on,” demanded the man.

Tony quickly pulled the shorts on, raising his hips when needed as he remained lying on the floor.

This place was worse than the prison. The lighting was poor and the smell was musty. They’d left the wrist cuffs and chains in place, making it difficult for Tony to get comfortable as he wrapped himself in one of the blankets and settled on top of the other one.

“This really, truly sucks,” he said aloud.

When he awoke, he was sure he’d been left to sleep for hours. After relieving himself in the pail, he noticed a tray of food and been pushed beneath the door. The tray contained an individual box of
cereal, along with a carton of milk and a small bottle of orange juice. Two pieces of very cold toast also included.

Tony’s stomach growled. He quickly finished the meal and pushed the tray back underneath the door. Unable to get back to sleep, Tony spent his time pacing around the small room and trying to rub the LC initials from his shoulder. He only succeeded in slightly smearing them.

Like the previous cell, this one had a digital camera with its little red light glowing behind the protection of solid metal bars and a plexiglass box. A dim lightbulb glowed from the center of the ceiling, the fixture was encased by wire. Checking the door, he found the bars were too close together for him to put his head through. He would need a hand mirror to get a view of much in the hallway.

Sitting down, he leaned his back against a cold wall as he tried to gather his thoughts into a plan. His first goal was to survive. His second goal was to escape.

A short time later his thoughts were disrupted by loud banging and yelling. It sounded like someone was running a metal pipe against the bars in the cell doors. Tony immediately stood up and went to the front of his cell.

It wasn’t long before one of the captors came to open his door. The man was dressed in all black like the others had been. Tony nodded toward the captor as he stepped into the hallway. It was the first time he saw the other men from the cells around him. He counted five.

Like him, they wore no shirts, only a pair of purple shorts with no pockets or zippers. Elastic bands around the waist kept them in place. None of the men wore shoes. Each man had a similar mark with the initials LC on their shoulders. One thing that struck Tony was that he was the only one in chains. It hardly seemed fair. Each man stood with his back against the wall opposite his cell door. Tony did the same.

Moments later, the men all turned to the left and began walking. Tony was at the end of the line. He turned and followed the others with their handler a short distance behind him. At the end of the hallway, they turned, taking a staircase upward. As their captor came through the doorway, he locked the door at the bottom of the stairs.

At the top of the staircase was another locked door. Their handler moved to the front of the line and opened the door, allowing each of the men to walk through. The door was closed behind Tony and locked once more.

Tony looked around the area. It appeared to be a metal building with a sprinkler system installed. It wasn’t huge, but certainly larger than the area where he had been auctioned off the night before. The building had no seating he could see. Another man, also dressed in black, inspected the captives.

“Can you take the chains off?” Tony asked when the man stepped before him.

The man punched him hard across the jaw, sending him sprawling to the dirt floor.

A younger man stepped out from a small side room and set up three folding chairs. Two video screens were on the wall nearby. One was displaying a chart with initials and numbers, the other was dark.

Tony remained on the ground as the three captors stood together, chatting quietly. Moments later, one of the captors stepped back into the room and the second video screen came to life.

Tony watched as the captives moved into two rows facing the screen. One of the captors stepped
over to Tony and prodded him with a stick.

“Get up. Follow the video.”

Tony stood up and saw the video showing was a work out. He did the best he could to follow along with his chains rattling with each movement. They began with warm up stretches and moved on into calisthenics and finally a cool down stretching session.

When the video ended, one of the captors circled his finger in the air and Tony watched the other five captives begin running laps around the area. One of the handlers grabbed Tony’s arm, then shoved him in the direction the other men were running.

“Run,” was his simple command.

Tony considered bringing up the issue with the chains restricting his movements, but thought better of it. His jaw was still sore from the first punch he had received.

By the time the other men stopped running, Tony was hot, sweaty and thirsty. He was also tired of fighting the chains. There was nothing he wanted to do more than to drop to the ground and rest. When he saw that his fellow captives were standing in two rows once more, facing their captors, he remained standing as well.

The captors chatted amongst themselves again. Another minute later one of them pointed to a tank. Tony watched as the other five captives went to the open trough and began scooping up handfuls of water and drinking. Standing back, Tony allowed the other men to drink their fill first, then went to the trough alone. Cupping his hands together, he scooped up cool water and drank.

By the time he had finished, the other five men were standing in a circle until one of the captors pointed to two of them. The two chosen moved to the center and began fighting while the others watched.

One of the captors came toward Tony and swatted him with the stick and pointed toward the circle.

Tony would have liked to jump into the full trough of water and bathe himself, but thought that move unwise. Instead, he gulped down his last handful of water and joined the others.

The two fighting before him seemed to hold nothing back. Occasionally the captors interfered by separating the fighters. It appeared they would not allow the fighters do any serious damage to each other.

After watching the first match, Tony’s chains were removed and he was pushed to the center with one of the other captives.

“I won’t fight,” he declared defiantly.

“You will,” said one of the captors. “You will fight or you will suffer the consequences.” Turning back toward one of the other captors, he asked, “Wasn’t he in for murder?”

The younger captor tapped at his laptop then looked up to reply. “Yeah, he stabbed a guy who bled to death in the street before the paramedics arrived. Maybe he needs a knife to do his battles?”

“Only in a TTD fight.”

“What’s TTD?” asked Tony.
The other captor pushed Tony to the ground. “To the death,” he explained. “There are two types of fights. Most are until a winner and loser are declared. The other is until one of the fighters kills his opponent.”

Tony swallowed deeply.

“You can fight or you can lose. Losing has its consequences.”

Tony looked at the three captors. The older one appeared to be the master trainer. The youngest kept statistics on the laptop and also was the one to run errands. Whatever the master trainer wanted, the younger one would fetch. The other was the one who had brought them up from their cells. Tony thought of him as the equivalent of a prison guard.

As Tony lie in the dirt, his opponent charged at him, kicking him in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind from Tony’s lungs. Next his opponent knelt down and pummeled him. Still Tony did not fight back.

The master trainer conferred with the other two captors and shook his head. The cell guard waved the other fighter off and pulled Tony to his feet before pushing him against the wall. The cell guard tugged off Tony’s shorts.

He had spun Tony around so he faced the wall and pinned Tony’s neck with his forearm. Leaning in close, he whispered in Tony’s ears. “For starters, losers are punished by their trainers.”

Tony wanted to yell ‘Bring it on!’, but he thought better of it. Instead, rested his head against the wall and waited for the inevitable.

Everyone in the room watched as the guard pulled out a baton and began striking Tony’s back and buttocks. When he finished and backed away, Tony dropped to his knees.

His punishment wasn’t over though. The master trainer stepped forward and nodded to the cell guard. “Take them over there to practice. I will deal with this one.”

The younger captor grabbed Tony’s arm and pulled him to his feet, then dragged him over to the master trainer.

“Can I put my shorts back on?” he asked. “I’m feeling a little exposed.”

“You haven’t earned the right.”

Tony caught a glimpse of something dark in the master trainer’s hand. When he felt it against his skin, he knew exactly what it was: a stun gun. The first shot put him down. The trainer hit him two more times.

“You owner paid good money for you. He paid too much for a man who refuses to fight. It is my job to make sure he gets his money’s worth. If you don’t win in the ring, it is up to me to train you until you do. It’s up to me to decide the best way to train you. Until you fall in line, I will take away all that you have.”

“All that I have?” scoffed Tony. “I have nothing.”

“Shorts, gone. Blankets are a luxury. Gone. Do you really deserve a pail to piss in? I think not. Sleep in your filth. If you think you deserve any sleep at all. And from here on, bread and water is all you will be fed until you cooperate.”
As Tony struggled to bring his breathing back to normal, he wondered how miserable this man could make things for him. The stun gun hit him again, and then once more.

“I’m not sure you even deserve the luxury of lying down. Rig him up!” demanded the master trainer.

The other two captors quickly cuffed Tony and used a pulley system to hoist him to his feet. They tied the line short enough that it caused Tony a great deal of pain. He thought they were done with him, but the master trainer stepped over to him and began striking him with a wooden bat.

Tony cried out in agony until he lacked the energy to do so.
Tim gathered all the paperwork and IDs Abby had prepared for him. The motor pool had assigned him a car to use that wouldn’t be traced back to the agency. He went back to his apartment to pack some clothing and Jethro’s things. His next stop was to pick up the German Shepard from his doggie day care. He explained that he was taking the dog with him for an extended trip, but would call them as soon as he returned.

An hour later he pulled into the driveway of the safe house. Using the keys he’d been given, he unlocked the door and stepped inside. The home was furnished. Looking inside the drawers in the kitchen, he found a garage door opener and moved the car into the garage. There was already a small red SUV parked inside.

As he wandered through the house, he checked the bedrooms. Each room had a bed and two dressers. The master bedroom had an attached master bathroom that had a gloriously large tub. Tim immediately thought how luxurious a long soak would be, but then he suddenly remembered he was going to offer the master bedroom to Ashley. He wondered if she’d gone for a walk as he assumed she had driven the SUV.

As quietly as he could, he checked the walk-in closet in the master bedroom and found some obviously feminine clothing already hung up, three suitcases and five pairs of shoes. In the bathroom was a toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash, shampoo, crème rinse, a comb, a brush, hairdryer and an assortment of make-up, perfumes, moisturizers and deodorant.

“She must be here somewhere,” he said to Jethro.

The dog barked in response. Reaching down, Tim patted the dog’s head.

As he passed by the kitchen, Tim looked out the sliding door to the deck and backyard. The area was enclosed by a fence, which looked sturdy and high enough to keep Jethro in.

“You might as well check out your new yard. Remember, though, this is just vacation for you. We are going back to the apartment when this assignment is over.”

Once his leash was removed and the sliding door was opened, Jethro wasted no time in scampering down the steps of the deck and running across the yard while barking at a rabbit that bounded out of his way before disappearing underneath the fence. Tim stood on the deck for a few minutes, smiling as he watched Jethro spend some time sniffing at everything and looking for more bunnies.

Next, Tim made his way down to the basement. The windows were covered with curtains. The open area of the basement was finished with a bar and television. Moving on, Tim found another room
with the door slightly ajar and the light on. He tapped lightly on the door before entering.

“Oh, hi,” said the young woman sitting at a desk surrounded by banks of equipment. “I'm Ashley.”

“Tim McGee.”

“McCallahan,” she corrected with a smile.

Tim remembered seeing her at NCIS headquarters, but hadn’t spoken to her before. She was an average looking brunette, slightly overweight. He guessed her height at five-nine, a little taller than average.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “I hope this isn’t too much of an inconvenience for you.”

“Not at all. Everything here is highly encrypted, just like at headquarters. This room is protected. No one can tell what’s in here. If the door is closed, they won’t even get a heat signature. It even has its own AC zone. It’s really cool.”

“Yeah. It is,” Tim agreed, nodding as he surveyed the equipment she was working with. “I’ll take one of the smaller bedrooms.”

“No need to. I’m more of a night owl. I will sleep during the day and you can have the bed overnight. It’ll give more of an illusion that we’re actually a happy couple. Since our cover story is that we married two years ago, we should probably keep up appearances.”

“I don’t expect them to spend too much time checking us out.”

“Yeah, but if and when they drive by, you want them to see the illusion intact. By the way, my hobby is gourmet cooking, so I will be happy to make your lunch and cook you dinner. It’s fine with me if you want to invite one of the suspects over for dinner. Just give me a little notice to put something together.”

“That would be great.”

“Did I hear a dog barking upstairs?”

“Yeah. I thought bringing my dog would help our cover story. That and I didn’t want to stick him in a kennel. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I love dogs. He sounded big.”

“German Shepard.”

“Awesome! I love German Shepards.”

“His name is Jethro.”

Ashley furrowed her brow. “Isn’t that Agent Gibbs’ first name?”

“Abby named him. The dog, not Special Agent Gibbs. I put him out in the backyard.”

“The dog, right?”

“Yeah, the dog.”

“I left one of the dressers open for you and some room in the closet. There are two sinks in the
master bathroom. I put my stuff around one, so the other one is all yours.”

“Thanks.”

“I checked the other rooms. One has a full bed and a computer. The other has twin beds.”

“I guess we have a lot of family that likes to visit.”

“It is a safe house. They need enough space to put up a couple agents and whomever they’re watching. Oh, there is another computer desk right in the kitchen. Everything is encrypted so we shouldn’t have any issues with hacking, but we probably should only use the upstairs computers for our aliases. Just in case one of the suspects gets suspicious and comes in to check things out.”

“What if they find this room?” Tim asked.

“They shouldn’t. It was built specially to be hidden in plain view. It’s directly under the garage where most houses wouldn’t have anything. The room is in the dark part of the basement and uses a keypad combination lock to enter. That’s hidden behind a picture. Most people wouldn’t even notice it.”

“Nice.”

“It’s also a storm shelter and completely safe. There is a hatch up to the garage, too. So if the bad guys are in the house and we’re down here, it’s an escape route.”

“I’m hoping we won’t need it.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It’s covered by a bunch of crap in the garage, so it’s probably not the easiest thing to open.”

“Do you have a job, too? Undercover, I mean.”

“My cover is that I work from home entering reports for doctors’ offices. Abby set me up with a bunch of fake reports, so if they search the computer upstairs, they’ll find files dated back about six months. She also put several more on a thumb drive so all I have to do is download a few reports every day or two and it will appear that I’m working on the reports from home.”

“When you will actually be working on your real NCIS job.”

“Exactly. I search for hackers and terrorists online.”

“I worked in cyber for a few months, breaking codes.”

“Nice. At least we have something in common.”

“I’m going to go unpack the rest of my stuff, and Jethro’s. I can feed him, but there are some treats he can have anytime. I brought some of his toys, too, some for out in the yard and some for inside the house. He’s retired Navy and is well trained. You can take him on walks if you want to. He knows to heal, sit and lie down on command.”

“I would love to walk him! And I think it would be good for our cover, too. It’ll make him more of a family dog, rather than your dog. Just for the assignment, of course.”

Tim nodded and backed out of the room. He needed to get some rest so he would be at the top of his game tomorrow. He hoped Abby’s paperwork was enough to get him inside the prison and onto the work schedule. He wondered what he would do if Warden Mattingly suddenly came out of his coma
and didn’t remember hiring another guard. It was nothing he was going to worry about. Abby’s paperwork would be convincing and surely a little memory loss with a coma was understandable.

Even after the rest of the captives were marched back down the staircase to their cells, Tony was left behind hanging from the rope and pulley system. The younger captor tapped away at his computer keyboard and listened to whatever the master trainer was telling him from time to time.

Every hour, the master trainer would approach Tony. He never said a word, but would zap him with the stun gun several times, or beat him with the bat or his fists. Then he would return to the other room.

Between the cuffs and the hoist system, Tony was terribly uncomfortable. He wondered if it was worth it to refuse to fight. In the back of his mind, he reminded himself that he was a federal agent. He had no reason to fight with the other captives. Like him, they weren’t here by choice. He didn’t want to hurt anyone who didn’t need to be harmed. Thoughts wrestled in his mind. His first duty was to survive and he may have to fight to survive this situation. The beatings were already taking their toll on him. Maybe it was best to play by their rules. He could fight. He imagined the owners bet on the winners of the matches.

Then he remembered the words of his captors: ‘Losing has its consequences.’. And Tony had already felt the consequences. Being beaten was what losers suffered. If he wouldn’t fight, they may beat him to death. He had no good choices here. Either he had to hurt someone else, or he would be injured or possibly killed himself. If he was murdered, he wouldn’t be able to get out and save the others.

‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one,’ he quoted internally. Star Trek two, The Wrath Of Kahn. Ricardo Montalban was excellent in that, he noted to himself. He smiled thinking Tim would be proud of him for making a geeky Star Trek reference in such a dire time.

His thoughts drifted back to his team. They had a set meeting. Gibbs would have donned his attorney façade to come visit Tony in the prison. What would they have told him? Gibbs would never believe he had been released. Did they tell him he had died? That must be it. Someone in the prison was feeding prisoners to this fight club and having the doctor declare them dead. If they were under a doctor’s care at the time of death, no autopsy would be required. The ashes in the urns that Abby said weren’t human remains indicated the deaths had been faked. Those two sailors had to be here in the fight club. And he had to find them.

If Gibbs was told that Anthony Jackson had died in prison, he would demand the remains. Abby would check them out and find they weren’t his. They would know he wasn’t dead. But how the hell were they going to find him? He had no idea where he was. Apparently the only way a captive got out of this was to be killed in the ring, or by the captors. He wondered about the TTD, to the death, matches. How often did those happen? How was it determined which fighters were in those
Sucking in a deep breath, he made a promise to himself, no, to Gibbs, that he would do whatever it took to survive this. If he had to win his fights or kill someone in the ring, then that is what he would have to do to survive. Gibbs would understand. Wouldn’t he?

“I’ll fight,” Tony said aloud.

“What was that?” asked the master trainer.

Lifting his head slightly, Tony repeated, “I said: I will fight.”

After eating a light breakfast, Tim dressed in an inexpensive suit and then drove to the prison. He was stopped at the front gate as he expected he would be.

“Here’s the letter from Warden Mattingly,” he said calmly as he handed over the paperwork.

“Hold on,” the security guard said.

Tim watched as the guard made a call. Surely he was contacting the office to verify the validity of Tim’s claim.

The guard soon returned and pointed through the gate. “You can park over there then walk through that door. They said you’re already in the computer system, so you can just give your name at the door. They’ll tell you where to go next.”

Tim nodded to the guard. It didn’t take him long to find a parking space. As he got out of the car, he looked over to the next security gate. There was a more aggressive search of vehicles going through the second gate. They had driven through that gate when they had dropped Tony off a few weeks ago. Glancing up at the building he wondered if Tony was still inside the prison or if they had managed to sneak him off the grounds.

It took a few hours for him to go through processing. Obviously either Gibbs had pulled some strings or Abby had successfully hacked into the system to get his alias’ file installed.

Tim was handed a pile of paperwork to fill out. He had memorized his undercover information and made sure to enter all of the information correctly and double check everything before turning it back in.

“You will need to speak with Deputy Warden Hatchett,” he was told.

“Not Warden Mattingly?”

“Warden Mattingly suffered a stroke. He was in a coma for a while and they don’t think he’ll be able
Tony woke up tired and sore. The master trainer had released him from the overhead rigging after he agreed to fight. The younger captor and the master trainer both assisted Tony back downstairs to his cell.

Tony stared at the bare floor. “No blankets?”

“We’ll see how you do tomorrow,” replied the master trainer as he turned and walked away.

Tony’s dinner was a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bottle of water. It wasn’t quite as bad as the bread and water diet the master trainer had promised, but close enough. Being in the cell was maddening. There was a dim bulb which he could not reach as well as similarly dim lamps in the hallway. Apparently, they were never turned off. Tony had no sense of what time it was or how many days were passing by. He suspected the training building was above ground, as it was drier and warmer than the cells, which he was certain must be underground.

He heard what sounded like a television and assumed the guard was stationed nearby. Since all the cells had cameras, Tony figured the guy had multiple screens where he could watch the captives, but also had a television to keep him company. It had to be boring to watch a handful of captives for hours at a time.

Throughout the night, Tony thought about the other men who were in the nearby cells. How did they keep from going mad? Did any of them attempt suicide? Did they hope to participate in the TTD battle, knowing the loser would be put out of his misery? Tony wondered what the motivation was to win a TTD match. If he didn’t have a job to do, he might welcome an out, even if it was death.

It became a regular routine that the men were all released from their cells and marched upstairs to
work out and go through what their handlers described as training. Tony was sure it was at least once a day that they were taken upstairs, but some sessions were longer than others.

After Tim spent most of the day filling out paperwork, viewing instructional videos and reading orientation handbooks, he was given a locker to use for storage, and then was sent home. The next day he was assigned to shadow another guard, Damon Cain.

“What did you do before this?” Damon asked.

“Marhsal.”

“That seems like an easier gig. Prisons are rough places.”

“I’ve dealt with more than a few tough criminals in my time.”

“Why did you leave the marshals?”

“I was sort of asked to leave,” Tim admitted, grudgingly.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing really. I like to gamble. I ran a March Madness bracket contest. I’d done it for years, but this year, I won. It’s not like I won every year. Everyone can see the brackets from the beginning, so it’s not like I could change mine after turning it in. Someone involved must have gotten pissed off and complained about it this year. We aren’t supposed to gamble or solicit anyone at work for anything like that. It was weak, but they sent me packing.”

“That’s sucks.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t tell my wife though. This doesn’t pay quite as much as the marshal job. Not yet, anyway.”

“What did you tell your wife? About changing jobs?”

“I told her I was tired of all the driving and that I was bored and wanted to try something else. I have to find a way to make a little extra cash though. I didn’t tell her this job pays less. You guys here, the guards, do you have anything like a regular poker game going on?”

“You sound pretty confident about winning.”

“I win some and lose some. Fortunately for me, I tend to win more than I lose. We had a poker night, me and some of the other marshals, but it was off hours. We took turns hosting. If you guys don’t have something like that, maybe I can start it up.”
“You must like to play for some decent stakes. Did these games include beer and chips?”

“We always had a BYOB policy, any booze of choice, and the homeowner provides some snacks.”

“There’s always someone around willing to gamble in hopes of winning.”

“Exactly. And here, win or lose, I can always tell my wife that I play for fun. It’s entertainment to me. What’s the difference if I lose a couple hundred dollars playing poker or if I spent in on concert tickets?”

Damon laughed. “So you’re not hooked, it’s just a hobby?”

“You could say that.”

“Do you gamble on anything other than poker?”

“Baseball, basketball, boxing, football, horseracing; anything where there’s a winner and a loser.”

“I hear that. I’m sure some of the guys around here would be up for a poker game, or something along those lines.”

“Cool. That will make me feel right at home.”

“And your wife won’t mind if you invite a bunch of guys from your new job over to play poker?”

“Not at all. She loves to cook. Even if I’m determined to serve chips and pretzels, she’ll be whipping up dips and sandwiches.”

“Have you been married long?”

“Only a couple of years.”

“Hell, Tim, you’re still newlyweds.”

“It’s been great so far.”

Damon slapped Tim on the back. “That’s good. So, back to work. One big difference between prison guards and the marshals: we don’t carry weapons.”

“Really? How do you control the prisoners? Don’t the guys in the guard towers have rifles?”

“Yeah, the guys in the guard towers are armed, but they aren’t in direct contact with the prisoners. An inmate can’t get into the towers to take the weapons. We never carry arms when we’re in with the prisoners. There are far more of them than us. It’s too high a probability that an inmate could get their hands on the gun.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“It’s up to you if you want to carry pepper spray or a telescoping baton. Or both. If you carry them, you better make sure an inmate doesn’t take them off you. If that happens, you won’t be allowed to carry them anymore. You have to remember, they’re all criminals. They’re all in here for a reason. Most of them wouldn’t think twice about taking your life if they could get away with it.”

“So what’s the secret of maintaining control?”

“You have to be tough, authoritative. Don’t show fear and don’t ever back down. It has to be more
than an act. If someone gets out of line, you cannot hesitate to jump in and take him down. We all
have radios. If we fall or an inmate takes us down, it sends an alarm. If there is a problem reported
anywhere, anyone available is expected to get there fast. We never leave another guard to fend for
himself. It’s best to always stay within eyesight of another guard or two if you can manage it.”

“I can do that.”

“You will get to know the trouble makers. Don’t ever make friends with an inmate. You can treat
them right and you can respect some of them that are honestly remorseful for what they’ve done and
are working to make themselves better, but any of them, given a chance…”

“Won’t hesitate to take you down?”

“Pretty much. I wouldn’t trust any of them. It’s much safer that way. We also have mandatory
training where we practice taking other guys down. Beyond the classes, the gym is open twenty-four
seven if you ever want to work out.”

“I try to stay in shape. I’ve had to wrestle with a few of the bad guys in my days as a marshal.”

“When it’s the inmates versus the guards, don’t hold back.”

“I won’t.”

“Lives may depend on your actions. Don’t forget that. Stay tough, stay fair, watch your ass and take
care of the other guards. That’s the best advice.”

“Good to know.”
The days blended together to the point that Tony had no idea how often he was taken out of his cell for drills and training with the other captives. His mind was numb to it all. It barely registered that he was simply following the orders he was given.

The workouts left him exhausted and he would collapse in his cell afterward. Whenever he awoke, he found a tray of food shoved beneath his door. His captors didn’t seem to follow a specific meal plan. Tony tried keeping track, but he might get two or three breakfast type meals in a row, then a few one would consider lunch or dinner. Sometimes he was hungry when he given more food, sometimes he still felt full. There was no way he could tell the passing of time or days by when meals were served.

“Now I know why Tom Hanks started talking to Wilson in Cast Away,” he said aloud to himself one day. Life for Tony now consisted of long bouts of boredom in his cell, which were occasionally interrupted by being taken into the training room for drills. Those could be frightening. He was often forced to fight one of his fellow captives and was beaten if he lost the match.

Eventually was given his shorts back, but still had no blankets in his cell. The chill often caused him to shiver. Some of the time he sat around thinking, other times he tried to move and exercise. It wasn’t to improve his body, but to relieve the boredom and to warm up. As much as he could, he tried to sleep. At first it was a welcome vacation from the horror his life had become.

Then the nightmares began.

The first bad dream he had, he was falling in an endless pit. Gibbs threw him a rope, but it was too short and he kept on falling. In other dreams, he was being held and beaten or raped. Gibbs was on the other side of a wall with a window or bars. He could see Tony, but couldn’t reach him to save him. Tony awoke from his nightmares with his heart racing. It was always unnerving to wake up in the same dim light and haunting quiet.

After one particularly bad nightmare, he woke up screaming. The guard rushed to his cell and told him to shut up. Instead, Tony screamed as loud as he could. Five minutes later, he found himself chained to the point that he couldn’t move, and with a ball gag shoved in his mouth.

That was the only time he cried during his captivity.
One day the captives were lined up and marched down a hallway. This time, they were accompanied by three captors; one was in the front and two were in the back chatting softly. Instead of going up the stairs for training, the group remained underground. They traversed a couple more hallways and went through a few locked doors.

Tony recognized the room they were led into. It was the same large room he had been brought to the night he was auctioned off. The captors motioned for their captives to sit on a couple benches on one side of the room.

The master trainer grabbed Tony’s arm and pulled him onto a different bench, then pointed at one of the other prisoners. “Teach him,” he said.

The other man stepped over and sat beside Tony. He kept his voice low. “I am SP1. There are four rooms like this. There are twelve stables. Each stable has its own color. The original stables were red, blue and yellow. Other stables were added later. You won’t fight someone in the same waiting room. Other than that, it’s random draw.”

“Fight?”

“That’s the whole point. We fight, the owners bet. If we win, we are rewarded. If we lose, we are punished.”

“What rewards?”

“It varies. Camp toilet so you don’t have to squat over a pail. A radio. CDs and a CD player. DVDs and a DVD player. A cot or air mattress. More blankets. Better food. Books and magazines. Reading chair. Reading lamp. A fan or space heater. Board games or a deck of cards. More clothes. If you win, you get to choose something.”

“DVDs?”

“It’s boring being locked up.”

“It is. I thought I heard a television, but maybe it was a DVD player.”

“Most likely. There aren’t many rules to the fight. You do not leave the ring, or you lose. You can’t grab your opponent’s hair, or you lose. You can’t grab your opponent’s shorts, or you lose. If your opponent is wearing a collar or wrist cuffs, you can’t grab those either.”

“Or I lose.”

“There is a referee and three ring judges who declare the winner and loser. And if you lose, that is only the beginning of your misery. You lose something from your cell. Sometimes they let you pick,
“Sometimes they just take something away.”

“They’ve already taken everything away from me.”

“Then they’ll feed you less or make you work out more, or they’ll chain you up and beat you.”

“Nice. Why fight for them? There has to be a way out.”

“Talk like that could get you killed. They are armed. If anyone tries anything, it makes it worse for everyone.”

“What about the TTD matches?”

“They are also random draw. The audience likes blood. They like to be entertained. If you win a TTD match, the audience will love you. At least until you lose another fight. TTDs used to be every week, but now there is only one or two a month. Losing owners found it expensive to replace the fighters that were killed.”

“I can imagine.”

“Sometimes they’re long matches because both participants want to lose. They just want their miserable lives to end. After a certain amount of time, weapons will be thrown into the ring. A knife, a rope, a bat, a pipe, anything that could be fatal. Oh yeah, one more important thing. If you kill your opponent on a non-TTD match, you are forfeited to your opponent’s owner.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you kill their man, you take their man’s place. Depending on that owner, you might be beaten and tortured. You can also be sold to another owner at any time. If you’re doing well, it’s less likely you will be sold or traded unless the money or trade is right. Whatever you have in your cell belongs to your old owner, so you can take nothing with you. It’s up to your new owner to give you whatever they feel you deserve.”

“So you might have to start over with nothing.”

“Quite likely. Watch the boards. When they random draw the fights, they put them up on the screen. Eventually, you will begin to recognize the different fighters. If you’re lucky, you might know enough about them to develop a strategy to beat them. Listen to whatever your trainers tell you. They get a bonus when you win, nothing when you lose. Rumor has it, if they lose too much, they get shot and dumped.”

“Nice. Sounds like mob influence. Who are these people?”

“It started small with guards from the prison. Three owners, each with a couple fighters. The next two stables are also owned by a prison guards. They got in three or four months after the beginning. The rest of the owners have other occupations, or inherited their money, and bought their way in.”

“Who owns the purple stable?”

“Some rich guy. He was into dog fighting before this. A couple stables are owned by women.”

Several more minutes passed and Tony watched as men with different colored shorts showed up in groups.

“How many men in each stable?” he asked.
“Depends on what the owner can afford. Some have maybe ten or twelve. Others only three or four.”

“And all these men come from the prison?”

“It’s been going on for years. I’ve heard that a few of the guys were young and homeless and were just taken off the street, but most come from the prison.”

“The doctor has to be in on it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he is.”

“I was in the infirmary because the guards beat me. I told the doctor to report them. He gave me a shot instead and I woke up here.”

“Every time there is a TTD match, the owners want new blood to replace the old.”

“And they’re auctioned off, the new ones.”

“The owners pay dues and pay the trainers and guards. It takes money to run this place.”

“Any idea where we are?” Tony asked softly.

“I’ve heard that we’re on some farm that’s been in one of the guard’s family for over two hundred years. I have no idea where it is, though. We could be a few miles from the prison or hours away.”

“I wonder how many of the prison guards are in on this.”

“A lot. Some of the guards who started this began inviting people who were into underground dog or cock fighting. Some of the wealthier ones asked if they could buy in. The guards were happy to take their money. Even the guards who don’t own fighters, they still come in to watch and bet on the fights. Not all of them, but a lot of them.”

One of the boards flashed on.

“Fight list,” SP1 said.

Tony scanned through the list for his initials. “Know anything about GC1?”

“Yeah. Drawing GC1 on your first fight is bad luck.”

“Why is that?”

“He’s a huge black man who has never lost a fight.”

“Nice. Any suggestions on how to beat him?”

“Move. He’s a big guy with a heavy punch, but he doesn’t move fast. Sometimes it takes him a while to catch his opponent, but once his opponent starts tiring, he catches them and beats the snot out of them.”

Tony nodded and watched as the trainers and guards looked at the board and chatted quietly amongst themselves.

“They’re not supposed to make bets. They can’t place bets out front. The owners are afraid they may bet against themselves and force a fighter to lose.”
Tony nodded. “But it doesn’t stop them from betting between each other.”

“Exactly. They mostly bet with people from the same stable and bet on fights they’re not involved
with. If they’re caught betting on their own fights, they can still get in trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Fined by the owners or shot. And you never know. I suppose they could find themselves tossed into
a cage as a fighter themselves. The owners always want more fighters, but sometimes the guards say
it isn’t safe to pull another man out of the prison.”

“Someone has to be catching on to a high death rate in the prison.”

“Yeah. And apparently, all the inmates that wind up here are reported to have died and to have been
cremated. What are the odds so many young, healthy men die and are cremated at the same prison? It
would certainly make me suspicious that there are never any actual bodies anywhere.”

“No, I mean—”

“We aren’t allowed to bet either, but that is one bet I would never take.”

Tony watched the board as odds began flashing for each fight. He was not favored to win his match
against GC1.

“Newbies rarely win their first match. And GC1 has never lost a fight. You have to take that into
consideration.”

“And yet, someone must have bet on me.”

“You’re one hell of a long shot. If you do win, it will be a mighty good payout. Some people can’t
resist betting on a longshot.”

“I’m pretty scrappy. I think I just might win.”

The old timer chuckled. “You keep thinking like that. Some people say a good mental attitude is half
the battle.”

Tony watched as the fighters went over to the side of the room and began oiling themselves down.

“Some do it because it makes them look better in the spotlight. Others do it to make it harder for their
opponents to get a good hold on them.”

“How is the loser determined?”

“It’s really up to the ring judges in many cases. Sometimes, especially after a lot of fights, they call
them for time. The ring judges will rate how well you throw punches, how much damage you do and
also how well you avoid blows from your opponent. The audience likes to see blood, so that may be
part of the equation, too. The other fighters won’t hold back. You shouldn’t either. If there are no
pins or other eliminations, the winner is decided by the points the judges give. If you’re pinned or
don’t get up for ten seconds, you automatically lose. That’s how most fights are determined.”

“And in the TTD fight, it’s when one opponent stops breathing.”

“Pretty much. Although there are rumors if it’s taking too much time, as long as one guy is down and
not moving, he may be declared dead even if he isn’t. Then they’ll take him out of the ring and finish
him off.”
“What do they do with the bodies?”

“They probably just dig a hole and dump the bodies.”

“And we’re stuck here until we die or are killed?”

“I guess. I have heard that one fighter is now a trainer.”

“I suppose they have to dangle a carrot. If there was no out, there’s no point to winning.”

“We’re all criminals. It isn’t really much different than being in jail. We’re all just doing our time.”

“But here, you never get out.”

“I’m sure at least half the guys here are lifers. A lot of them are fighters. That’s how it really started. Inmates would fight and the guards would bet on the outcome rather than break it up.”

“Then they took it to the next level. Grabbed the fighters and brought them here specifically to fight,” Tony speculated.

“Yeah. Then more people got involved and the demand grew.”

Tony shook his head. “They must come out on the weekends for fights. They probably tell friends and family that they’re staying at some quaint little inn.”

“Probably. We don’t always fight every week. The owners vote on a schedule.”

Tony pondered all the information he’d been told. The trainers and guards were across the room talking to their counterparts from other stables. Tony counted himself lucky to have the chance to talk to someone when the trainer wasn’t paying any attention to them.

Tony continued observing the fighters oiling themselves. While one screen showed a list of upcoming matches, another screen showed the live fight from the ring. While a fight was on, most of the fighters and all of the trainers were watching the matches with rapt interest.

“Are fighters ever raped?” Tony asked softly.

“Depends on the stable,” SP1 noted. “There are always rumors. I have heard that some few fighters are forced to have sex. Some owners like good looking fighters for sex or like to watch. Not in our stable. We’re all kept in our own cells, alone, except for training or fighting.”

“Has anyone ever attempted to break out of here?”

“This place? It was built by prison guards. There are multiple locked doors, all solid metal. I’ve never heard of any one even trying to get out.”

“So we’re stuck inside forever?”

“Like I said, it doesn’t make much of a difference for lifers.”

“There’s no sunlight. Hardly any contact with others. How do you stay sane down here?”

“Focus. This is our life now. We’re like ancient gladiators. We train. We fight. Some win, some lose and some die,” SP1 said.

Tony mulled over the thought that he was like a gladiator of ancient Rome. He was certain they
actually saw daylight. They fought under the sun in the coliseums. Scanning the room, he watched the other fighters. Many were up and moving about; stretching or exercising.

SP1 noted, “Some fighters like to warm up before their bout. Others are getting rid of nervous energy. If your opponent is oiled up or sweaty, remember the floor out there is dirt. Drop your hands in that dirt and it will help. The owners don’t like wrestling as much as boxing style fights. They rather see good solid punches that draw blood.”

“But almost anything goes?”

“Almost. Just don’t wrap your fingers around anything.”

“Got it.”

Tony was already working out his fight strategy in his head. At first, he planned to dance around the ring and observe his opponent’s moves. If this GC1 had been around awhile, it was probably no use to try to tire him. It was likely he had plenty of stamina.

As the night progressed and his match grew close, Tony went over to the oil and rubbed some into his skin. During the bout before his, the trainer motioned for Tony to get up and follow him.

After going through a door, Tony was seated in a small contained area. It reminded him of a hockey penalty box. The master trainer stood at the door and focused on the current fight as they waited.

Tony watched as the previous match wrapped up and one fighter was deemed the winner. Some in the crowd cheered, while others moaned over the defeat.

The master trainer opened the door to Tony’s cage and motioned him out. Tony followed his trainer down to the edge of the ring. A voice boomed over a speaker system, first announcing GC1, who entered the ring to cheers. A moment later, he announced AJ2. The master trainer nodded toward the ring. Tony stepped into the fighting area and faced his opponent. There was more murmuring from the crowd than cheering.

As soon as their match started, Tony began moving around the ring. It was larger than a standard boxing ring. There were a few openings. Each led to an aisle, which Tony assumed led to another holding room. Railings separated the fighters from the audience.

As he dodged out of his opponent’s grasp, Tony heard a few boos directed at him. Apparently the crowd wanted to see action, fighting and blood, not one man keeping away from the other.

Tony stuck to his plan. He observed GC1. The man was built like a professional football player. He was large, heavy and muscular. He definitely had a weight advantage over Tony.

Remaining light on his feet, Tony kept a little distance between himself and GC1. Occasionally, the larger man would lunge at him, but Tony was easily able to dodge out of the way.

The grumbling from the audience grew louder.

Tony’s trainer yelled at him, “Get in there and fight, damn it. You can’t stay apart forever.”

Tony saw the ring judges leaning toward each other and talking. He figured he must be losing points for not engaging his opponent. GC1 appeared to be getting frustrated with him, too.

The words the old fighter had said to him replayed through his mind. GC1 indeed appeared slow on his feet. Considering his opponent’s bulging biceps, Tony was sure that once the man landed a solid
hit, it would only be a matter of time before Tony lost the fight.

Knowing he couldn’t stay away forever, Tony darted behind the man and punched him as hard as he could in the lower back. It felt like punching a brick wall.

“Damn,” Tony exclaimed.

Dropping low, he swept GC1’s legs out from underneath him, causing the large man to fall into the dirt. It only seemed to enrage him further. Before he could get up, Tony jumped into the air and slammed his full weight down onto the other fighter. At least his opponent made a slight ‘Oomph’ sound when Tony landed.

When GC1 finally got his hands on Tony, he lifted him up, then slammed him to the ground. As he approached, Tony sprung to his feet and landed a solid kick to the other man’s groin.

As GC1 grimaced and covered his cock with his hands, Tony moved around him and kicked the back of his knees, sending him to the ground again. With the other man down, Tony climbed onto his back, wrenching the man’s arms behind him and holding them.

The referee counted down the ten seconds. GC1 made a couple unsuccessful attempts to dislodge Tony, but failed. Turning to the judges, Tony watched as they chatted amongst themselves. The entire crown seemed to hold their breath.

Tony ran over the fight again in his mind. He was sure he had never grabbed anything that would disqualify him from winning the match. He couldn’t understand why the judges were taking so long to reach a decision. Hadn’t the older fighter told him you lost if you were pinned? Surely, he couldn’t lose by points if he took this giant down and pinned him.

After what seemed to be an eternity, the announcement was made. “The winner of the match is AJ2!”

Tony looked startled and wasn’t sure what to do until he caught sight of his trainer waving him to the side of the ring. He was surprised by the amount of cheering. Considering how high his odds were, it was obvious that not many people had actually bet on him.

As he returned to the waiting area, his stablemates were all smiles. The trainer pointed him back to his seat beside SP1.

“You did good, rookie,” the old fighter said. “I can’t believe a newbie took down a man who had never been beaten.”

“I told you, I’m scrappy.”

“Your style is a little unconventional.”

“But it worked.”

“This time. Congratulations, kid. Life is better here for winners.”

Not everyone in his stable won their fights. The bouts continued for hours. Those who had finished their fights were given something to eat. Those with matches toward the end of the schedule looked longingly at the food.

Tony turned back to the older fighter as he ate his sandwich. “How do they determine the fight order?”
“It’s all totally random. I’ve heard that someone developed a computer program. It just randomly spits out two names at a time until everyone is matched up. If you’re really lucky, you might draw a fighter that is scratched by their owner. This happens if they’re injured. Sometimes the owner just doesn’t think his fighter can win the match. They still have to pay the fight fee when they scratch a fighter, but they don’t take a loss. Our owner will fight you no matter what. If there happens to be an odd number of fighters or sometimes all the fighters left are in the same holding room, you just get the day off. The owners don’t pay a fee if their fighters aren’t called for a match."

“How can you tell if you drew the TTD match?”

“It’s usually the last fight of the day and is noted as TTD. Check that last bout on the board. Most fighters like to get an earlier match. Less time to be nervous and once you’re done, you’re done for the day.”

Tony watched as the other fighters left the area one at a time, then returned later on, often bloodied and bruised. The master trainer walked most of his fighters out to the arena. The guard was the one who tended to the wounds.

“Anyone ever get hurt bad, like a broken arm or leg?”

“It happens, but not often. Rumor is one fighter died of a fractured skull. Most owners frown on you seriously hurting an opponent. They want all the fighters healthy enough to fight every week. You can’t make them any money if you’re too hurt to fight.”

“But you get time off?”

“Maybe, maybe not. The owner can still make you fight, even with broken limbs. You still have to come to the holding cell. And for every week you don’t fight, they consider it a loss. You’ll lose everything in your cell.”

“I’m hoping this win will get my blankets back. It’s too damn cold in those cells without something to keep you warm.”

SP1 laughed lightly. “I’m sure you will get your blankets back and probably even a bed, too. This was a special win; taking down an unbeaten opponent, especially on your first outing."

Tony watched most of the fights on the screen, but didn’t want to watch the TTD match. Other than knowing they were captives here, and the lack of alcohol, they could have been a group of guys at a bar cheering at fights on television.

Tony wondered if he could manage a spot sitting next to SP1 in the future. He could use tips on other fighters. Although he had watched most of the fights, he couldn’t remember each one in any great detail.

His stable had done well. Four of the six had won their matches. None of them had drawn the TTD match. Tony wondered why they still had to wait around. It had been a long, tiring day of sitting and waiting.

After the final match was called, the master trainer tugged on Tony’s arm and led him back toward the ring. Tony turned his neck, his eyes pleading with the older fighter who simply waved him on.

He’d learned better than to ask the master trainer anything. Within a minute he found himself in the ring with two other fighters. His body trembled slightly. He hadn’t expected to have to fight again so soon. And against two opponents?
Standing beside his master trainer, he waited and listened to the murmuring of the crowd. He could tell it had thinned out a bit, but there were still plenty of spectators left.

The announcer’s voice boomed through the speaker. “And here are tonight’s champions. NT1 from the green stable, QM1 from the brown stable and AJ2 from the purple stable. Congratulations to tonight’s winners.”

“And may the odds be forever in your favor,” Tony muttered softly, unnoticed amidst the din of the crowd.

As he was returned to the holding room, Tony scrambled to get behind the old fighter as they lined up. “What was that about?” he whispered.

“The crowd gets to vote on their favorite fighters of the night. I think they only pick two because the TTD winner is always included. There is a chunk of prize money set aside and it is split between the three champions. Our owner will be very pleased with you.”

As they marched back to their cells, Tony noticed the two who had lost their fights were in the back. Instead of returning to their cells, they were taken up to the training area. Tony was certain they were going to be punished for losing. After all, losing had its consequences.

A short time after returning to his cell, Tony was visited by the guard who returned his blankets. The guard also gave him an air mattress, a thick comforter, a DVD player and a handful of DVDs.

When he was alone again, Tony shook his head when he discovered half of the DVDs were work out programs. He also had three movies, along with a season of M*A*S*H and one of Magnum PI. “Mag Pi!” he exclaimed happily. “At least you guys will help with the boredom, I hope.”
As the weeks passed by, Tim settled into working his shifts with ease. He found himself with a bruised face one day after dealing with an uncooperative inmate. The other guards were close at hand and the three of them easily took the inmate to the floor and put him in cuffs and chains before he was allowed to rise.

He heard the prisoner was put into segregation for fighting. A few days later, he wandered up to the isolation cells.

“How’s that guy Robinson doing?” he asked the guard on duty.

“Robinson?”

Tim pointed toward the bruises on his face. “I got this breaking up that fight.”

“Oh yeah. Found him dead in his cell. Hanged himself with his bedsheets. Some guys just can’t handle the isolation,” the guard replied with a shrug.

“Oh. That’s a shame. He was so young. Too young to die.”

“It happens.”

That night, Tim called Gibbs. “I sent you a report about the fight and the story that Robinson had hanged himself in solitary. Did you get it?”

As he sat at his desk, reading the file, Gibbs was fuming. “Yeah. I’ll bet they’ll say he was cremated, too.”

Tim waited another week before he brought up the possibility of a poker game again. Damon agreed
to spread the word.

“I can host the first game,” Tim offered.

“BYOB and food supplied, right?” asked Damon.

“Yeah. We can start around seven or eight until we get tired of playing. There’s usually some sport or another on television, too. If we get tired of playing cards, we can bet on whatever game is on TV.”

“You’re really into this betting shit, aren’t you?” questioned Damon.

“I guess. I started in college and have always been pretty good at it.”

“You’re either smart or lucky.”

“Probably a bit of both. I study the players in poker games. Everyone has a tell. If you’re observant, you can figure out how confident they are in their hands. As far as professional and college sports, I study them, too. I read about them and keep spreadsheets. I study their patterns and predict which team will win.”

“That almost sounds like a full time job.”

“Not quite. I’ve always enjoyed sports and numbers. Betting just makes things a little more interesting and I’m always looking for a little extra cash.”

On Saturday night, Damon and four other guards showed up at the house. Three of the guards brought beer and two brought scotch. Ashley pulled frosted mugs from the freezer for the beer drinkers and regular glasses for the scotch drinkers. Tim opted for orange juice mixed with vodka, but had pre-made the pitcher with very little vodka. There was no way anyone could tell how weak it was from looking at it.

Ashley brought over a plate of sandwiches, along with a vegetable platter, two bowls of chips and four different dips. “If anyone needs anything else, just let me know,” she offered.

Tim had two new packs of cards set on the table, one red, one blue.

“Do you always use new cards?” Damon asked.

“Not always. But this week, it’s a new game so it seemed appropriate. I always have new decks of cards around. It’s a custom that if any player wants the decks changed, we change the decks. I have a lot of different cards, too, not just blue and red.”

“Any playboy decks?” asked Carlos.
Ashley stepped over and rubbed Tim’s shoulders. “No playboy decks, but he does have some great Star Trek, Star Wars, Lord Of The Rings and national parks decks around.”

Tim patted her hand. “Thanks, sweetie.”

Ashley planted a quick kiss on Tim’s cheek. “You boys enjoy your game.”

Jethro barked at the patio door. Ashley let him in and he immediately ran to the table to sniff the guests. “Come on, Jethro!” Ashley called as she started down the hallway. “I’ll keep him in the den with me while I watch television. Just holler if you guys need anything.”

In truth, she had the computer set up in the other room where she could monitor and record the card players. The computer screen was facing away from the door so if any of the guests managed to get that far down the hallway, they wouldn’t see anything. If they got too close, Ashley could turn off the monitor immediately if anyone meandered into the room by mistake.

Tim had played some poker in college and was counting on his intellect, and the booze the others were drinking, to work to his advantage.

“He dealer picks the game and the house deals first. We alternate between the blue and red decks. If anyone wants a fresh deck, say the word,” Tim began as he broke open a new deck and shuffled it.

“Do we get to choose between the star wars and national parks decks?” teased Todd.

The other guards joined in the laughter.

“I have a really nice Budweiser Clydesdale deck, too,” Tim noted as he began passing out the cards. “Five card draw, aces are high, nothing is wild. A quarter gets you in the game. Minimum bet is a quarter, maximum bet is five dollars.”

The players nodded and checked their cards.

At the end of the night, Tim and Ashley said good night to their guests and cleaned up.

“See anything hinky?” Tim asked.

“Not really. I didn’t detect any cheating either. You did pretty well.”

“Yeah, I think I made two hundred bucks.”

“How do you declare that on your expense report?”

“It’s only an expense if I lose. Winnings would go on my wage and earnings. I guess. Just to keep things from getting complicated, if I wind up ahead at the end of the case, I’ll just donate it all.”
The following week, the news of the poker game spread through the ranks of the guards. Damon offered to host the next week’s game. Tim was happy to see there were more guys wanting to play.

“I guess we could invite extra guys,” he suggested to Damon. “They could be alternates, take over a seat if someone gets tired of playing. If enough guys show up, we could set up a card table for a smaller second game.”

Damon nodded. “I do have a folding card table and some folding chairs to go with it. It fits in my car so I could bring it to other guys’ places if someone doesn’t have an extra table and chairs.”

“Sounds good. If someone has a table large enough for ten or twelve people, we can actually play two games at once. A game at each end.”

“I doubt any of the guards has a house big enough for a table like that. It really was a fun time,” Damon said. “I enjoyed getting to unwind.”

“As long as no one gets too drunk or mad about losing, it’s a nice way to spend off time with your co-workers. It’s a nice way for me to get to know everyone a little bit better.”

Tim always won more than he lost. He hinted at betting on other sports events during the poker games, but didn’t want to push too hard. He was hoping that this would lead him to whomever was involved in the illegal activities at the prison. Showing that he was a risk taker and open to gambling could be the way to get his foot inside the door.

After the other guards left, he made notes about them. He wondered if there was a good way to find out if any of them were actually dealing drugs at the prison. He didn’t want to come off as doing drugs himself, and decided to stick with the story that he was open to any ventures that would put extra cash in his pocket.

Tony found winning was definitely better than losing. We watched as the defeated fighters were beaten more and tortured by being left tied, chained and hanging in the training area for hours.

Over the past few weeks, Tony had won his first three matches and enjoyed the extra comforts it earned him. The next things he picked were a camp toilet and a radio, which came with a set of headphones. He was warned that playing his radio or DVD player too loud might be grounds for losing them. He also found that he was allowed to trade his DVDs in for others.

With all the time he had alone in his cell, he really didn’t mind having the work out DVDs. Before he was just moving around, exercising on his own. With the DVDs, he could follow along a set routine. When he was tired, he’d watch a movie or an old television program on DVD. When his eyes started burning, he would close them and listen to his radio.

He lost his fourth match and took a heavy beating. The guard patched up his wounds after the fight,
but he still had to wait until the final bout ended. When they were marched back to their stable, he
and three others were taken upstairs to the training area and beaten.

“What are you giving up?” he was asked.

“Radio?” he said weakly. A moment later, he regretted his choice and hoped he could win it back
soon.

Losing was painful and hard on his system. After taking the beating in the ring, he took another one
upstairs, and then spent the night chained and hanging from his wrists. When they let him down the
following morning, he was exhausted.

He did poorly during their training session and lost his fight with his stablemate. They hadn’t fed him
since he’d lost his last match and he could tell his strength was greatly diminished.

“How can I win if you don’t feed me?” he pleaded from his knees.

The master trainer wasn’t impressed and kicked him hard in his chest, knocking him to the ground.
Tony didn’t move.

Once he had been returned to his cell, Tony collapsed onto his air mattress and thought of Gibbs.
“Where are you?” he asked, his eyes closed. “How long do I have to hold on?”

Gibbs scowled as he entered Abby’s lab.

Abby immediately hugged him. “We’re going to find Tony soon. I know it.”

Gibbs handed her a piece of paper.

“Who’s Gary Robinson?”

“He is the latest inmate to supposedly die at the prison. Tim said Robinson was in a fight. Tim got a
black eye when he helped break it up. He said he asked about Robinson a couple days later and was
told he was put into segregation and hanged himself overnight.”

“Some people really can’t handle isolation.”

“Abby, I want you to find this guy’s family, get his remains and test them.”

“I will get right on it. Gibbs?”

“Yeah?”

“Even if I prove the remains are faked like the others, how is that going to help us find Tony?”
“From what Tim reported, it seems that one inmate mysteriously dies and is supposedly created every at least other week. That’s a lot of men, Abby. They have to be somewhere.”

“We’ll find them. We are going to find Tony,” Abby said reassuringly.

Back in the bullpen, Gibbs looked over at Ziva. “Start searching land deeds. I want to know if anyone who works at that prison has some acreage somewhere nearby.”

“How far out would you like me to search?” asked Ziva.

“It’s going to be within driving distance of the prison. The warden said no one had any significant absences.”

“They would not. That would only draw attention to them. If they are using their job at the prison to take men, they would not risk losing their job.”

Gibbs nodded. “But what the hell are they doing with them?”

“Human trafficking?”

“They’re not always younger guys. Get a list of deaths in the prison over the past six months.”

Ziva said, “I will get right on that.”

Rising from her chair, she went down to Abby’s lab. “Gibbs wants a list of prisoner deaths for the past six months. This requires hacking, correct?”

“Yes. And Gibbs thinks they’re losing about one inmate every other week. That is a lot. Give me a few minutes and I will see what I can find.”

“I will wait here. Gibbs is acting like a surely bear.”

“Maybe a surly bear?” asked Abby.

“What is the difference?” Ziva wondered.

“One is definitely a bear and the other is a grouchy bear,” Abby replied.

“I think both may apply at this moment.”

“While I’m doing this, can you see if you can track down Gary Robinson’s family? He’s the last inmate who supposedly died. Gibbs wants me to get his remains from his family so I can test them.”

When Abby and Ziva had their information, they returned to the bullpen, standing before Gibbs’ desk.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Gary Robinson’s closest relative is his sister Helen in Florida. She did not even know Gary was dead. His remains must still be at the prison.”

“Get her on the phone,” barked Gibbs. “Have legal to send a document to her giving us permission to pick up his remains.”

From Tim’s desk, Abby loaded information into the computer and displayed it on the big screen for Gibbs.
“You were right, Gibbs. It’s been almost one inmate every other week that has died in that prison. I pulled their files and almost everyone who died was punished for fighting. Their deaths run the gambit. Everything from head wounds from a previous fight like Tony, to a few overdoses and heart attacks, too. Others supposedly committed suicide.”

“Do you have pictures of those men?”

“Sure,” said Abby as she began clicking through images, all mugshots from the prison files.

Gibbs studied the faces. “Some are young, but some must be in their thirties.”

Abby sorted through the files quickly. “The youngest is nineteen and the oldest is forty-two.”

“A lot of them are rough.”

“Rough?” Abby asked.

“Not handsome. They look like hardened criminals.”

“They are criminals.”

“And they all have records of fighting?” Gibbs inquired.

“Every one of them has at least one notation in their files regarding fighting.”

“What are they in prison for?”

Abby scanned through the files again. “A lot of murders, assaults, armed robbery. It’s all violent stuff, Gibbs.”

“They’re all fighters. Tony’s alias was in for stabbing a man to death. They said Tony was involved in a fight. He went missing from solitary.”

“Most of them did,” added Abby. “They get into fights, then are sent into isolation and disappear.”

“With no witnesses,” Gibbs said softly.

Ziva studied the images. “How are they getting them out of the prison? All vehicles are searched coming and going.”

Gibbs thought for a moment. “Abby, get their surveillance tapes. I want to see the footage of the entrance gates within twenty-four hours after Tony and Robinson supposedly died. And any of the rest of them you can pinpoint, too.”

Abby nodded, rocking on her heels. “I will get right on it. You already know don’t you?”

“Know what?”

“You know how they got the men out,” Abby said confidently.

“I have a theory.”

“One you care to share? It will be easier for me to spot it on the surveillance footage if I know what I am looking for.”

“They need to get men out who are supposedly dead,” explained Gibbs. “See if you can find any
vehicles large enough to transport a man out of there.”

“Like a delivery truck?”

“I’m thinking more like a hearse or ambulance. The men are supposedly dead. It’s on record. Wouldn’t it be more suspicious if men were dying, but no bodies ever left? They don’t have a crematorium at the prison, do they?”

Abby’s eyes sparkled. “No! No, they do not. They have to get the guys out. They could have drugged them and put them in some sort of casket while they went through the security gates. The next day, they get an urn delivered back with fake remains.”

“I want to know what vehicles they are using, who is driving them and where they are going,” demanded Gibbs.

Ziva followed Abby back to the lab. “I will help you look through the footage. If we can identify the vehicle, we can search for it on traffic cameras and find out where they are going.”

Abby watched as Ziva sat down and began typing on the keyboard of one of her computers. “Are you going to help me hack into their surveillance feed?”

“Gibbs thinks one of the prison workers has acreage in the area,” Ziva explained. “With all the men they have taken, they must have a lot of space and privacy.”

“That makes sense. It may be owned by a prison worker, or a family member. You may have to search records for siblings or parents.”

Ziva nodded as she stared at the monitor before her.

“We’re going to find Tony,” insisted Abby.

“I know we will,” Ziva agreed.

Two days later, Gibbs returned to the prison as his alias and handed Deputy Warden Hackett a signed document. Abby had doctored it up, changing the authorization from NCIS to Gibbs’ attorney alias.

“I’m here to pick up Gary Robinson’s remains.”

“You’re what?”

“I spoke to his sister, Helen. She had not yet been notified of her brother’s death.”

“I don’t believe that poor boy had any family contacts listed in his file.”
“We had a nice chat. When I mentioned that my client had recently suffered the same fate, she asked if I could pick up her brother’s remains and have them sent down to her in Florida.”

“We would be happy to take care of that. There’s no reason you need to go to the trouble.”

Gibbs smirked and stood up. “Oh, it’s no bother. In fact, I feel a bit obligated considering that signed legal document I just handed to you. Whether it’s a casket or an urn, I’m ready to pick it up.”

“You have a vehicle ready to transport a casket?”

“If you have a casket, I’ll call the ambulance. However, I have a feeling that Gary Robinson was cremated just like Anthony Jackson was.”

“I will have to make a call,” said Hackett.

Gibbs nodded. “You do that.”

“How did you know he had died?”

“I know someone in the public records office. They mentioned it. In fact, she said she thought it was hinky that Jackson and Robinson both died here at your prison within a couple months of each other. Then she mentioned that there were several other death certificates coming from the prison. Two or three a month she said.”

“That many? That can’t be right.”

“You guys do keep records on that sort of thing, don’t you?”

“Of course we do.”

“I’m getting a list of names. I hope you’re ready for an in-depth investigation, Deputy Warden.”

A few minutes later, Gibbs had another urn in his hands.

When he dropped it off to Abby, he said, “I want to know as soon as you know.”

The poker games became a truly social night for many of the prison staff. With a couple of card tables and enough chairs available, they often had two or three tables running on poker nights. More than one of the guards would slap Tim on the back and thank him for putting the games together.

During their next game, Tim was sitting next to a guard named Wade Hawkins. The man smoked cigars and won several pots.

“You’re not bad, McCallahan.”
“You do pretty well yourself,” Tim responded.

During a break, Tim went outside for a breath of fresh air and saw Wade approaching.

“Damon mentioned you were into betting on sports.”

“Yeah, I like that adrenaline rush when you’re on the edge of your seat wondering if you’re going to win or lose.”

“Some of the other guards and I like to bet on the prisoner fights. You interested?”

Tim gingerly touched his injury. “Hell yeah. That sounds like a win-win. How do you get by with watching them fight without breaking them up?”

“There’s a special wing of the prison where we just let them go at it.”

Tim glanced around quickly, then stepped closer to Wade and lowered his voice. “Are these fights slightly illegal?”

“Technically, they’re a lot illegal. But if you’re interested, I can get you in.”

“And how do you know I won’t rat you out?” asked Tim.

“Some rats are bigger than others, right?”

“I suppose.”

“Think of this venture as a bunch of rats out at sea on a life raft. Now there are a lot of rats on this life raft. A whole lot of rats. If one rat squeaks the wrong thing, tries to sink the boat so to speak, there are a lot of rats that won’t think twice about going for his jugular. Understood?”

“Yeah, I get you.”

“So, if you want to play for some serious cash instead of a few bucks, you let me know. And I understand the low dollar part. You don’t want hard feelings at work. But I see it in your eyes that you’d like to bet more. You look at the weaker players like they’re that frail antelope lagging behind the herd and you’re that hungry lion ready to take them down. But you can’t do that to a co-worker. I get that.”

“And this thing you know about, it’s not co-workers?”

“Some. A few co-workers and a whole lot of rich people who think nothing about tossing around a few grand here and there.”

“How much does it cost to get in?”

“You’ll want to start out with at least five grand. After you win a bit, maybe you’ll be interested in investing in a couple fighters yourself.”

“As long as my wife doesn’t find out.”

“My old lady’s cool about it. Once she saw the cash flow, her eyes just sparkled and she doesn’t give a damn where it’s coming from. And really, what’s better than being a common man getting to take thousands from the rich as people who inherited more money than they know what to do with? They don’t even care if they lose. They just like that rush of watching the fight and betting on the outcome.”
Tim couldn’t wait to get back to the safe house and send a message to Gibbs:

I think I’m in. I was invited to some fights this weekend. My contact said the fighters are prisoners and the whole thing is illegal. I’m hoping this leads me to Tony. Will keep you posted.

Tony’s greatest fear was being drawn for the death match. He couldn’t imagine losing one and he didn’t want to take another life in a match. No matter what they did, he didn’t want to take the life of someone being held captive and being forced to fight.

His next fight was brutal. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing the fight, so he refused to give up. Some of the crowd cheered for him, but he ignored them. His strength came from not wanting to lose and a strong desire to ensure he would survive until Gibbs found him.

Tony was bleeding, sweating and panting heavily when he finally pinned his opponent. He nearly collapsed before he made it back to the waiting area. Instead, he landed heavily on the bench and hoped the end of the night would come quickly.

The master trainer approached him. “You did well tonight. You drew another unbeaten fighter and won.”

Tony remained silent.

The guard brought over a wet towel and began cleaning and assessing his wounds. “What do you want for winning tonight?” he asked.

“How about some beer?”

The guard chuckled and looked toward the master trainer.

“All I need is a pint a day,” said Tony.

“Get him his beer. Whatever brand he chooses. He deserves to celebrate this victory.”
Gibbs sipped his coffee as he read through Tim’s report. He sent back a simple message:

*I want these guys. All of them. Do you have an address or directions?*

Tim was quick to reply:

*Wade Hawkins is the guard who is getting me in. We will all meet at his house, then drive in a van together. I will find out what I can.*

Minutes later Gibbs was placing a cup of Caf!Pow in front of Abby. “What you got, Abs?”

“Bad news on Gary Robinson’s remains. They’re real.”

“Gary Robinson really committed suicide?” Gibbs asked.

“I can’t tell you that. Even if the remains are his, I can’t tell how he died. However, Ziva called and asked his sister for a DNA swab. As soon as it’s here, I will find out if these remains actually belong to Gary Robinson.”

“Tim might have found something. I want to know everything you can find out on a guard named Wade Hawkins. Find out if he has any property anywhere.”

Abby stepped over to her computer and tapped several keys. “He rents. Nothing substantial under his parents or siblings names, either.”

“Keep looking. And as soon as you find out whether those remains are Gary Robinson’s or not, let me know.”

“You will be the second person to know,” she promised.

“Thanks, Abs,” he said, planting a kiss at her temple.

Back in the bullpen, he checked on Ziva’s progress.

“I have found no property owned by any of the guards isolated enough to hide all these men. I am checking family property.”

“Tim said a guard named Wade Hawkins is getting him into some fights this weekend. I want you to find out everything you can about Hawkins. I want to know what shifts he works and who he hangs out with. Abby said he rents, and there isn’t any significant property owned by his family.”

“Why are we not bringing him in to interrogate?”

“He must be in deep to be allowed to bring others in. With as many men as they’ve grabbed, it’s not just him. The moment we bring him in for questioning, everyone they have taken will be in danger.”

“They will be afraid he will squeal like a swine?”

“Something like that. We’re just going to have to wait until Tim gets closer, or you find the property. Anything under the warden or deputy warden?”

“I only checked the guards.”

“It could be anyone in that prison. Check all employees: the wardens, office staff, security, everyone,” demanded Gibbs.
“I will get right on that.”

Later that night, Gibbs was in his basement working on his boat. He’d hung a picture of Tony on the wall. When he took a break from sanding, he’d sip his bourbon and look at the picture.

“We’re all searching, Tony. Hang on just a little bit longer. We’re getting close. I can feel it.” He kissed his fingers and pressed them against the photo’s lips. “I will find you. I promise you that.”

Tony sat against the wall drinking one of his beers. They gave him a tiny mini-refrigerator and each day the guard dropped off a couple bottles of beer.

“I should have asked for the beer first,” he mused out loud.

They never gave him enough to get drunk, but he enjoyed the slight buzz now and then. Since he was still in the last cell, he could hear when the guard began gathering the captives to go upstairs. He always had time to finish his beer or take a pee before his cell door was opened.

It was never a good feeling to have to fight the men from his own stable during their training sessions. Over the weeks, he figured out that they usually held a little back. They didn’t want to hurt each other, or get hurt too badly themselves. He learned to read their moods and could tell when his opponent was putting forth their full effort or not.

It still stung to lose anything. Tony was certain he had scars that would never fade.
We’re Searching Everyone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

NCIS Prison Bunny by Jacie 5625 - 5450

CHAPTER SEVEN - We’re Searching Everyone

When Saturday came around, Tim drove over to Wade’s house. He was asked to get there early, along with the other invited guards. When Tim arrived, there were already a handful of guys in the backyard drinking beer. Martin and Henry were tossing horseshoes, while the others watched and chatted.

“Are we betting on them, too?” Tim asked.

Wade handed Tim a beer. “If you can find any takers. If you like fights, you’re in for a real treat.”

“Better then television?”

“Absolutely. No gloves. There’s nothing like bare-fisted fighting. Flesh pounding on flesh.”

“Why do they fight?”

“They’re all fighters. We have the violent criminals that are in jail for assaulting or killing others. It’s in their blood.”

Tim’s heart sank when he saw the van. It was a white converted cargo van. It had no windows in the back, but there were three rows of seats.

“What happens if someone wants to come back earlier?” asked Tim.

“It’s an all-day event for us. No one leaves until it’s over.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“Unless someone runs out of money and we agree to leave. Otherwise we all stay. Even if you’re out of cash for the night, it’s still fun to watch the fights.”

Tim climbed into the van. It was dark and stuffy with so many crowded into the passenger area, but
no one else appeared to take any notice. There was a cooler stocked with beer that everyone was welcome to and a lot of conversation about the fights and about work.

It was well over an hour before the van came to a stop. After going through a gate, the van continued on a gravel road for a couple more minutes.

Tim took a chance. “So where is this place? It’s further out than I thought.”

“It’s a ways out. No other houses in sight.”

Tim looked around when he got out of the van. They had pulled directly into a large building. Several cars were already parked there.

“If it goes too late, some people just stay out here overnight,” Wade explained.

Tim gulped unintentionally. He didn’t want to be stuck out here any longer than he had to be. All he wanted to do was to gather some information and report back to Gibbs.

“Who owns this place?” he asked.

“It’s been in Martin’s family for over two hundred years. It’s still in his mother’s name, but she’s in a nursing home now. Martin and his brother grew up hunting out here. It’s so secluded; it seemed like the perfect place to put the fights on. There’s a lot more built out than it used to be.”

“How long has this been running?”

“It’s been a few years. It started with Martin and his brother Michael, Maurice and me,” said Wade. “We only had three fighters in the beginning. Martin and Michael co-own their stable. Then Ted joined in so we could have more than one match each time. A few weeks after he joined, we had a couple fighters each and it grew from there.”

“And you all paid for this?” asked Tim.

“That’s the best part. We wanted to make it bigger and better. We pulled some rich people in from dog and cock fighting circles. Some of them wanted to buy in and have their own fighters. They paid to build the cottages so they could stay out here. One of them owns a construction company. He was a huge help in getting everything built out the way we wanted. We all used some of our own winnings to build part of it. We have several people who come out to drink and bet, but they don’t own any fighters.”

“But anyone can own a fighter?”

“It would cost you. If you wanted to buy your own fighter, you would either have to buy into a stable or find someone who would house and train your boy.”

“Train?”

“Yeah. It’s a big operation now. There are twelve stables, some with multiple owners. We pay people to stay out here and take care of the stock and train them. It’s big money, Tim. If you bet well, you can make a fortune.”

“That would sure make Ashley happy.”

“If you choose to tell her,” Wade said with a wink.

The group waited as Wade unlatched a door and flipped on lights. Once in the passageway, they
descended a staircase. Another locked door stood at the bottom of the stairs. Tim took note of the
doors and that they were each solid, heavy, and locked after everyone in the group had passed
through.

“Underground?” Tim asked.

“Yeah. In case anyone happens to fly over with heat seeking gear. The heat signatures don’t register
down here. There are well over a hundred people here when the fights are on. Someone might get
curious.”

“That’s why the cars are parked inside?”

“Exactly!”

The group walked down another hallway to another locked door. Wade opened the door and once
again, it was locked after everyone was through.

“Not much on fire safety, I guess,” Tim muttered.

“We’re more concerned with the wrong people getting in and the fighters getting out. We have never
had an escape.”

“Impressive.”

“One wrong word and this whole thing could blow up.”

“That’s why we can’t drive out here on our own?” asked Tim.

“Yeah. That’s just one of several security measures in place. Like I said, there are several owners.
They can’t get us all. There are too many. If you’re the one who says the wrong thing to the wrong
person, and we get raided, someone will put out a hit on you and your family. And Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“These people are quite fond of torture.”

“Understood.”

“This is the betting window. Once the fights are listed, you get the fight number and your fighter’s
initials from the board and place your bets. The fights are all random draw.”

“You said the fighter’s initials?”

“Yeah. We just use initials here for everyone. The guards all know each other’s names, but to
everyone else just give your initials.”

“More security?”

“People can’t rat you out when they don’t know your name. You can use any initials you want, just
remember them. Your bank is under your initials.”

“And if I give the cashiers someone else’s initials, they won’t mix up the accounts and give me
someone else’s cash?”

“Those guys are paid to remember your face and make sure only you have access. They also have a
security photo of you when you’re at the window. There’s a new picture taken each time you’re here
and destroyed at the end of the night. That way they not only have your face, but whatever you’re wearing that night."

“As long as they don’t give my winnings to someone else, I’ll be good.”

“They won’t. When you put your first cash payment in for the night, they give you a scannable card. You use that any time you bet, buy food or drinks and when you cash out at the end of the night. They’ve never made a mistake, yet.”

“Good to know.”

“You give them cash when you get here and they hold that in a bank all night. If you want to bet more than you have in the bank, you have to give them more cash. At the end of the night, you take home the balance.”

“If there is one.”

“That’s true. If you’re winning, someone else is losing, it’s all good. That counter over there is where you can order food. There are two bars, where you can get drinks. You can use your bank for that if you want, or pay cash.”

“How do they know what your balance is?”

“They all have computers that are networked together. You get tickets for your bets and receipts for any food or drink if you want to keep track. Every order has an ID number and you have to scan your card for anyone to take a payment from your bank. And you can always check your balance yourself.”

“And you said some people are here for the entertainment and don’t even care if they lose money.”

“For some, it’s more about bragging rights. It’s the rush you get when the fighter they own or bet on wins. Some of them have so much money, they don’t really care about losing a few grand.”

“Must be nice.”

“If you make smart bets, you can make a nice chunk of change here.”

“Who pays the salaries of the people working?”

“The stable owners all pay dues and entrance fees. Everyone else pays to get in. Tonight you’re my guest. I paid your way in. After tonight, you’ll have to pay twenty five bucks to open your betting account. They take it off the top and that’s how these people and the bills all get paid. Plus every time we get a new fighter, there’s an auction. That money goes to paying the doc and upkeep of the place.”

“Are there any record sheets?”

“For the fighters?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to bet without knowing anything about them.”

Wade chuckled. “I like you, you’re smart. A lot of people bet on certain stables or whoever looks stronger or in better shape. Some people bet on who they think is handsomer.”

“Who bets on fights based on which guy is better looking?”
“Some of the ladies. Probably some of the guys. I can get you the fight records though, if you want. How far back?”

“How about four months?”

“I can do that. You will have to turn them in before you leave.”

“I can’t take them home and study up to make more informed bets?”

“Nothing from here leaves. If stuff starts walking out the door, it’s only a matter of time before it falls into the wrong hands. It’s warm out now, but even in winter when everyone wears coats, those are left in the vehicles.”

“What if someone is cold down here?”

“We have blankets and jackets for loan down here.”

“But they have to be left down here?”

“Yeah.”

Wade handed the record sheets over to Tim and watched as he studied through them.

“A lot of guys don’t bet their first time here. They want to see what goes on.”

“So betting isn’t mandatory?”

“Not officially. But of course, you look better if you make at least one bet. Not everyone bets on every fight.”

“But some do?”

“If they can afford it. Some of them bring a ton of cash in. For others, as long as they’re on a winning streak, they keep betting. Once they run out of money, they call it a night. They still watch the fights, but just eat drink and socialize after that.”

Tim followed Wade to a section of seating and sat down between Wade and Damon. A few minutes later, he followed Damon to the betting window and got his betting account opened and a couple bets laid down.

“Pace yourself on the drinking,” Damon warned. “Some of the fights end quickly, others drag on until the judges call it.”

“When do they call a fight?”

“They call it if someone is disqualified or pinned for ten seconds. After about twenty minutes, a fight can be called for time. The judges score the fighters on their techniques, number of hits and damage they do. If a fighter leaves the ring during a match, or grabs hold of another fighter’s hair or shorts, he loses by disqualification.”

“Wade said we’ll be here ten to twelve hours. Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s about right. The fights start at noon and run at least until ten, sometimes until one in the morning. The bathrooms are against that wall and there’s also a smoking lounge in that far corner. It’s not advertised, but there are a couple quiet rooms with couches if someone gets tired and wants a nap. Those are off the bathrooms and are labeled for men or women.”
“Sounds like they’ve thought of everything.”

“Pretty much. If you watch the other people, some of them start drinking from the time they get here. It’s only a matter of time until they’re falling down drunk. It’s not unusual for someone to have to be taken into one of the side rooms because they’re passed out drunk.”

“At least there’s a couch to crash on.” Tim ordered a Coke to drink and returned to the seating area in time for the first fight to begin.

“They do sell a lot of Red Bull and 5-Hour Energy drinks here.”

Tim nodded as he held his Coke.

“What are the numbers?” Tim asked as he studied the boards listing the fights.

“Like everyone else, we only use the fighter’s initials. To avoid confusion in case two or three fighters have the same initials, they’re also given a number. Fighters are two letters and a number, owners are two letters and betters are three letters.”

“The fighters are all listed by their real initials?” asked Tim.

“As far as I know,” Damon replied.

Tim’s heartbeat pounded wildly as he quickly scanned through the board, looking for anyone with the initials AJ or TJ. He found one TJ and two AJs. Flipping through the fighting records Wade had given to him, he saw that AJ1 and TJ1 had both been listed on every sheet. AJ2 had appeared in what coincided with Tony’s disappearance from the prison.

Leaning over to Damon, he whispered, “Is there a place where I can call my wife?”

“Not down here. I’m not sure if they’re intentionally jamming signals or if it’s because we’re underground in concrete bunkers, but there is no getting a signal out of here. We all usually tell our wives we’ll be out with the boys until one or two in the morning.”

“We can’t go upstairs to make a call?”

“No way. Only certain people have codes. Everyone here is an owner, a member or an invited guest. Guests can’t leave until the person they’re with is ready to go and escorts them out.”

“What do you tell your wives you’re doing all this time?”

“Hanging out with the guys. Most guys say we’re out at a bar watching sports until they close. Some guys tell their wives the truth. Most don’t.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure my wife would be cool about this if I gave her any details.”

Damon smiled. “Then my advice is to tell her you’re just out with the guys, drinking and watching sports all day. No need to complicate things. Some of the guys only come out once or twice a month. Most of the wives don’t care as long as you bring home some extra cash. In fact, I think some guys tell their wives, they’re working an extra shift!”

Tim nodded and tapped his foot nervously.
In the fighter’s waiting area, Tony checked the board, relieved that he hadn’t drawn the TTD fight. He’d gotten in the habit of trying to grab the seat next to SP1 so they could talk.

“What do you know about BU1?” Tony asked.

“Young guy. Disorganized. He may try anything. He loses most of his matches and is desperate to win. You can see it in his eyes. But he’s scared. You can see the fear, too. Stare him down, let him exhaust himself and he’ll be an easy pin.”

That was good news for Tony. He wasn’t up to another hard beating.

Tim was wide awake and alert when Tony was led to the on-deck area for one of the later bouts. It was dark, but Tim was certain the fighter known as AJ2 was actually Tony.

Tim had gone back and laid down a bet on the match. According to the fight records and the odds were listed on the boards, AJ2 looked like a good bet.

“These rich people, some are lazy and just place bets depending on the odds,” explained Wade. “Some take the sure things and don’t make much, but can gloat that they’ve won. Others like the long shots. They don’t pay off all the time, but when you hit one, you can take home tens of thousands.”

“Really?” asked Tim.

“It takes all kinds. Some bring hired help to review fight records. Most have their favorites they bet on every week.”

“Does everyone stay until the final match?”

“We stay. A few people leave early. There are cottages and the main house where people can crash if they don’t want to drive home afterward. A lot of them make a weekend of it. But if someone did leave early, the money is kept in a safe. Some people keep their bank open here all the time. Others
Tim was focused as Tony entered the ring.

The announcer called them out before the fight began. “Fight twenty-four on the card is about to begin. In this match, we have BU1 in orange and AJ2 in purple. Bets for this match are now closed.”

Once the bell rang, Tim watched as Tony danced around the arena. Some patrons cheered, while others booed.

Wade leaned over. “AJ2 has become a fan favorite. He’s light on his feet and has a lot of stamina. He bides his time. It’s like he’s studying his opponent’s moves before deciding the best way to fight him.”

“Smart.”

“He seems to be. Some people don’t like it. They just want to see the guys get in there and start pounding on each other.”

As Tony moved around the area, he never took his eyes off of his opponent. When he struck blows, they were quick and heavy. In less than ten minutes, he had BU1 pinned to the ground.

“The winner of fight twenty-four is AJ2,” boomed the announcer.

“He has a good record,” Tim mentioned.

“He’s known for beating fighters who have never lost a fight before. He does win more often than he loses.”

Tim wanted to run to the arena, grab Tony’s arm and take him out of there. But he knew he couldn’t. There was no way out unless you knew the touchpad codes. Maybe he could stand close to Wade next time they went through a door and catch the code he entered.

It had been a long day, but as soon as everyone was back at Wade’s, Tim quickly said his good-byes and drove off. His knuckles were white because he was gripping the steering wheel so tightly. It occurred to him, he could get pulled over for speeding and he didn’t have his badge, but he had to get this information to Gibbs as soon as he could.

When he returned to the safe house, he raced down to the basement and found Ashley busy at work.

“What?” she asked.

“I saw Tony.”
“Oh my God, you found him? Is he okay?”

“It was dark. He looked okay. I have to let Gibbs know.”

Although it was late, he knew this couldn’t wait until Monday morning. This warranted a call on their encrypted phone.

“Gibbs? I’m sorry for waking you,” Tim began.

Gibbs blinked his eyes open. He had fallen asleep in the basement again. “I’m up. What is it, McGee?”

“I saw Tony.”

The news shook Gibbs into complete wakefulness. “Is he okay?”

“Yes, I think so. It’s all about a fight club. It was started by a few guards. They take fighters who don’t have many visitors and they don’t think will be missed. The doctor has to be in on it. He’s declaring the inmates dead. After they’re taken, the prisoners are kept on a farm a couple hours away and all these people come in on the weekends for the fights and bet on them. They treat these guys like livestock, Boss. They’re housed, trained, bought, sold and forced to fight each other.”

“We need to get him. Where exactly are they?”

“I don’t know. We all met at Wade’s house and they drove us out in a van with no windows in the back. It was dark when we returned.”

“Can you describe the property?”

“We drove into some huge metal building. There were several other cars in there, at least fifteen. I was told that there is a main farmhouse and several cottages where people can stay overnight. Wade also told me that the property belongs to a guard named Martin Hopwood and his brother Michael.”

“Ziva didn’t find any acreage owned by any of the guards.”

“It’s in their mother’s name, but she’s been in a nursing home for about five years. She probably has no idea what they’re doing out there.”

“We’re going to find it. As soon as I get a warrant, we’ll get them.”

“Boss?”

“Yeah, McGee?”

“It’s high security. It’s all underground in concrete bunkers. All the passageways have multiple locked doors. Wade said it was to keep the wrong people out and the fighters in. And there are over a hundred people involved in the ring.”

“I want Tony rescued. I can’t risk him getting hurt.”

“He’s safe for now. They value their fighters. They’re the money makers and Tony has a good record. They call him AJ2. There’s only one thing, Boss.”

“What’s that?”

“Most matches are until a fighter is pinned. But the last match of the night is often to the death.”
“Do you know how the matches are set up?”

“Wade said they’re random draw.”

“When’s the next fight?”

“They start at noon on most Saturdays. Tony will be safe until then.”

The moment he hung up from McGee, Gibbs dialed Abby. “I need you to come in, Abs.”

“Now? What happened?”

“Yes, now. Tim saw Tony. He knows who owns the property.”

“Is Tony okay?”

“As far as Tim could tell, he’s fine, but being held captive.”

“I’m on my way.”

Abby met Gibbs in the office and booted up McGee’s computer. “I stopped by my lab, Gibbs. Those remains do not belong to Gary Robinson. Not unless he is not actually related to his sister.”

“The DNA didn’t match?”

“It did not. They are human remains, but definitely not related. It could be anybody’s.”

“People do die in prison. The deputy warden told me they keep cremated remains for one year, then bury them if they’re not picked up.”

“Someone must have known you were getting suspicious and decided to give you some real remains this time in case you had them tested.”

“There’s a guard at the prison named Martin Hopwood. Tim says the property is under that guy’s mother’s name. We need to find that property.”

“Okay, so let’s see who his parents are,” Abby said as she opened up a website and began her search. “Martin Leonard Hopwood was born to Michael Senior and Virginia Hopwood.”

“He has a brother named Michael. What does he do?”

“He works for a transportation firm. Here, Gibbs! I found the property listing.”

“Get me that address. I’m going to get Fornell involved.”
“Really?”

“The kidnapping of a federal agent falls under his jurisdiction. And McGee says there are over a hundred people involved. We could use the manpower.”

The following Saturday morning, Gibbs and Ziva staked out Wade Hawkins’ house and planted a GPS locator on his van. It was risky, but they had teams from NCIS, the FBI and the local police on standby. Remaining several yards behind the van, Gibbs let Abby guide them in.

They parked down the road and waited for the backup teams to arrive. Fornell pulled up beside them.

“We have helicopters and the SWAT team on the way.”

“Let them know we have undercover agents inside,” Gibbs reminded him.

Fornell nodded. “I know.”

The worst part was the waiting. Gibbs stomach churned knowing both Tim and Tony were inside and might be hurt or killed before they could be reached.

“Tim said cell phones don’t work inside. It’s all underground and is basically a maze of concrete walls and steel doors with keypad locks.”

“We have teams trained for this, Gibbs. Light explosives should open the doors. Not silently, but not very loud either. The distance should muffle the sound.”

“Tim said the fights start at noon sharp. Once they start, he said it gets pretty loud inside.”

“We’ll all be on the radio, tac one. It should work underground as long as we’re close,” Fornell said.

“Unless they’re jamming all signals down there.”

“We have a plan. Tim’s report on the layout is invaluable, even if it is incomplete.”

“He couldn’t ask for a guided tour with a map to take home.”

“I know that, Gibbs. At twelve fifteen, we get inside and find the van Tim came in. Then the teams go in, break through the doors. We’re going to flood that place with manpower and firepower. If it’s as dark and loud down there as Tim said, there will be confusion and that will work to our advantage. We’ll be all over the place before they even know it.”

Gibbs nodded. His stomach was still churning.
A few minutes after noon, the teams moved forward. The SWAT team rammed the entrance gate, pushing it out of the way for others to follow.

They moved in quickly and found the building where the white van was parked. The main door was unlocked. The first team in scanned the building and quickly located a room built along a wall. After breaking into the room, they found it was an entrance with stairs leading downward.

One by one, the team members filed down the stairs and into the passageway, each man pausing and covering his ears as the explosion experts blasted the doors open.

It wasn’t difficult to follow the route leading to the arena. Each door opened to a long hallway, which led to another locked door and another hallway. Within minutes, the teams mostly dressed in black or dark clothing pushed further into the complex.

The final door they blew led directly into the arena and seating area. The closest people turned at the noise and the smoke. The lead man rushed in and started yelling for everyone to get down.

“Police! Get down, get down, get down! Faces down! Hands out to your sides! No sudden moves!”

Armed teams moved around the perimeters to block off the escape routes for the patrons. Some of the crowd managed to get out a different exit, but the teams were told not to chase them. They were to control the crowd underground. The teams that remained above ground were watching the vehicles and would stop anyone trying to leave.

Back in the waiting areas, the fighters and captors all stared at the screens wondering what was going on. All they could see was that the fight had stopped suddenly and the participants had both dropped to the ground.

Tony’s heart began beating faster. “It’s a rescue,” he whispered to SP1.

“How can that be? How could anyone find us? Who cares about a bunch of prisoners?”

“People care about right and wrong. This is wrong.”

“I’ll bet there are a lot of people who would think we’re getting what we deserve.”

“That doesn’t make this right. They can’t keep on grabbing so many men and thinking that no one would ever get suspicious about it and start an investigation.”

It was only a few more minutes before armed men made their way into the waiting room where Tony was.

“Police! Everybody, lay on the ground, with your hands out to the side. Now!”

Tony closed his eyes and followed the directions. He released a deep breath, realizing he’d been saved.

It was brighter in the waiting areas than the arenas. When Tony opened his eyes, he saw his rescuers. They were military and police. It was obvious. He didn’t recognize any of them. There was one who appeared to be in charge. Tony tried to get his attention, but didn’t want to move in case anyone was trigger happy.

One by one, everyone’s hands were pulled behind them and slipped into plastic cuffs. Afterward, they were sent marching down the corridor toward the arena. As Tony stepped through the passageway, there was an armed man there pointing toward a door. Other armed men kept watch.
Tony marched in line with the others.

After continuing single file through all the corridors, Tony found himself climbing a stairway, then stepping out into a large garage area where several more armed officers were waiting for them.

One officer was stopping each person coming upstairs and asking them questions.

“Name?”

“Anthony DiNozzo.”

“Prisoner?”

“Undercover NCIS agent.”

The man put his hand on Tony’s chest and called to another man. “Spencer, take this one out to Agent Fornell. He says he’s the undercover NCIS agent.”

Spencer grabbed Tony’s arm and escorted him, still handcuffed out of the building. The sunshine on his face felt like heaven.

“Fornell, this one says he an NCIS agent.”

“DiNutso. We’ve been looking for you. I’ll take him, Spencer.” Fornell made a quick call on the radio. “Agent Gibbs, we have both of your agents. They’re safe.”

Tony looked around. Dozens of people were sitting on the ground in plastic handcuffs while armed men kept watch over them. Everyone in handcuffs was searched for their ID. The fighters, dressed only in their shorts, were seated in one area, while everyone else was placed in another group a few yards away.

Tony shook his head. He couldn’t believe how many people were involved.

Fornell nodded to another agent to release Tony’s handcuffs. The first thing he did was rub his wrists.

“Sorry about that,” said Fornell.

“Thanks.” He smiled when he saw Gibbs running toward him. His boss hugged him right in front of everybody.

Placing his hands on Tony’s shoulders, Gibbs asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Boss. I’m fine.”

Gibbs looked him over. Tony was thinner and more muscular than before. His body bore fresh scars and cuts. “You look tired,” Gibbs said gently as he cupped the back of Tony’s head.

“Glad we got you out,” said Tim.

“Me, too,” Tony replied. “I don’t know how much longer I could have taken things in there.”

“Tobias,” Gibbs said, “I’m taking my guys to get checked out by Ducky.”

“If I need you, I’ll find you. Looks like we’ll be busy out here for quite a while.”
Back at NCIS headquarters, Gibbs brought in some of Tony’s extra clothes from his house. “Thought you might be more comfortable in these.”

Tony smiled as he accepted the sweatshirt and jeans. “Thanks, Boss.”

“How are they, Duck?”

“Tim is one hundred percent fine. Tony has a few scrapes and bruises, but nothing serious.”

“Can I take him home?”

“They can both go home.”

Gibbs smiled, “I’m only taking one home at a time. Tim, are you okay to drive?”

“Yeah, my keys are in my desk. I have to go pick up Jethro anyway.”

The moment they were inside the door at the house, Gibbs placed his hands on either side of Tony’s face and kissed him deeply. “I was so fucking worried about you. The day I showed up and they told me you were dead, I almost lost it.”

“I’m fine. Really. Maybe a little sore. I could use a shower and some rest.”

Gibbs nodded toward the staircase.

He allowed Tony to shower alone, while he waited for him in bed.

“If you’re up to it tomorrow, we should go in and get your report filed.”

“Can’t it wait until Monday?” Tony pleaded.

“You’re lucky I don’t make you do it today.”
“What I went through is something I won’t forget anytime soon.”

“Did they rape you?”

“No. I was concerned, but no.”

Gibbs placed a hand against Tony’s cheek. “I can’t believe you’re actually back home.”

“Tomorrow when I get up, can you do that lawyer thing with the glasses for breakfast?”

Gibbs laughed out loud. “I’ve been working night and day to find you and you want a date with my fake lawyer alias?”

“I told you, those glasses are hella sexy.”

Rolling over, Gibbs grabbed a pair of glasses from the night stand and put them on. “Then why wait until tomorrow?”

“Why indeed?” Tony asked as he settled into Gibbs’ arms.

~END~

2 August 2015

Chapter End Notes

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