Summary

Tony is in trouble after the events of the Season 11 finale 'Honor Thy Father'. Most of the team involved at some point. Spoilers for the episode.

This is a Milsom Bay story … I don't think it matters if you haven't read the earlier ones: I'll introduce the characters as we go along.
Special Jethro Gibbs was in thoughtful mood as he rode the elevator to the squad room. It was four days since Jackson Gibbs' funeral in Stillwater and he had spent those days doing the final clearance of the family home and completing the formalities of handing the shop to his father's former assistant. It had turned out that simply handing the key over had not been enough so he had had to break a number of his rules and involve a lawyer. Despite this, and despite the sadness involved in going through Jackson's stuff, the Stillwater sojourn had proved to be therapeutic. Many of the town's residents had taken the time to visit with Gibbs and tell him how much they had respected his father and also how fondly Jackson had spoken of his only son.

Gibbs was unsure whether he would ever go back to Stillwater but he felt a certain satisfaction in feeling that he had done what his Dad would have wanted and also that father and son had reconciled in recent years. As the elevator doors opened he fancied that they were opening to a new stage of life, a new beginning. He felt an unaccustomed optimism: even though he had disagreed with Vance's actions in trying to side-line him from the team's active case once the news had come from Stillwater, he thought it showed a softer and more sympathetic side to the Director and might mean a better working relationship in the future.

Tim McGee and Ellie Bishop were already at their desks. Gibbs suppressed a smirk at their worried expressions: he guessed they had been agonising over how to welcome their bereaved Boss back to work and he wondered what Abby was planning. He resolved to try not to be irritated by their attempts at sympathy but rather to focus on the fact it showed they cared; with the loss of Jackson his co-workers would take the place of family even more.

Gibbs strode to his desk and noticed that DiNozzo's desk was uncharacteristically clear and tidy with no jacket slung over the chair or backpack waiting by the desk.

"Where's DiNozzo?" he demanded, surprised that he wasn't waiting with a cup of coffee or slightly inappropriate comment.

"Um," said Ellie, looking desperately towards McGee.

"Well, Boss," said McGee nervously, "it's like this …"

NCIS

Tony DiNozzo was sitting by the window of his beach side cabin in Milsom Bay, North Carolina. The sky and the sea were both grey and therefore matched Tony's mood as he stared glumly out. After pacing his DC apartment for hours the previous evening, he had, on a whim, jumped into his car and driven through the night to Milsom Bay. Ever since he had happened on the place almost by accident the beauty of the Bay and the kindness of its inhabitants had never yet failed to lift his spirits: he wasn't sure it would weave its magic this time.

A gentle tap on the door startled him out of his reverie and he got up to open the door.

"Tony! I didn't know you were coming down," said his visitor.

Tony produced a smile. Not his best one but not a bad attempt. It was John Sutherland, a local artist, his nearest neighbour and one of his first friends in Milsom Bay.

"Last minute decision," said Tony.
"When did you get here?" asked Sutherland. "I didn't get home till midnight and I didn't see your car then."

"About 3am," said Tony, "didn't leave DC until after 10pm."

"Rough case?" asked John, knowing that Tony sometimes needed to come to the coast to forget a particularly hard investigation.

"Not really," said Tony noncommittally but then, thinking he needed to explain a certain listlessness, "Gibbs' Dad died."

"Oh," said John, wondering if perhaps Tony had been close to Gibbs senior. "How did Gibbs take it?"

Tony shrugged, "much like you'd expect. Stoic. Although he might have teared up a bit when they gave him the flag at the funeral."

John didn't quite know what to say. Tony seemed a bit down, almost shell shocked. "Was it sudden?" he asked, thinking perhaps this was the reason for the odd look on Tony's face.

"Guess so," said Tony distractedly, "although this is Gibbs we're talking about. He's not exactly into sharing so who knows? Took us by surprise anyway."

"Right," said Sutherland, unsure how to continue, "Gibbs on leave then?" He thought that perhaps the whole team was off rotation while Gibbs was on compassionate leave and that Tony had seized the chance to use up some of his accumulated vacation time.

"For a while," said Tony vaguely.

John gazed at his neighbour in perplexity: he and Tony had got on well right from the beginning and he had never struggled to know what to say to him before. He reached for normality, "Coming down to Millie's?" he asked.

"Of course," said Tony with exaggerated enthusiasm as he leapt up.

Millie Lacey ran a café a half mile or so down the coast from Tony and John's properties. She was another of the reasons Tony loved Milsom Bay: a superb cook and also possibly the kindest person he had ever met. Neither he nor John were keen on cooking and, as John had once said, what was the point of doing it themselves when the finest cook in the Carolinas was within sniffing distance?

Tony and John didn't always need to talk when they were together but Tony's silence during their walk felt uncomfortable to John and he was grateful when they reached the café.

"Tony!" said Millie delightedly when she saw the new arrival, "I didn't know you were coming!" Tony gave her his customary hug but the perceptive John noticed that he held it a little longer than usual as if he needed some comfort.

Millie also noticed the change and was about to ask if everything was all right when Ruskin realised that Tony had arrived and came barrelling in to give his own welcome. Ruskin was a dog who Tony had 'acquired' during a case but who spent his time at Millie's where he was a favourite with all her customers. Ruskin was a friendly dog who was happy to see everyone but he retained a particular fondness for Tony and was apt to go a bit crazy when he saw him.

"Hello, boy," said Tony, bending down to pick him up. He buried his face in Ruskin's fur for a moment or two and then let the dog lick his face ecstatically. Millie and John exchanged significant
looks at this behaviour: Tony was always affectionate with Ruskin but there was something different about this.

"Well, sit down," said Millie briskly, as she decided that her food would probably cure most of what ailed Tony. She knew he had a hard job and that sometimes he sought relief and solace from the pressures of DC. "Your usual?" she asked.

"Absolutely," said Tony with enthusiasm and one of his blinding smiles.

It wasn't long before Millie had provided Tony and John with bacon and scrambled eggs along with freshly brewed coffee. It also didn't take long for her to notice that, despite his professed eagerness, Tony was shuffling his food round the plate rather than eating it. Other people might have taken a circuitous route but Millie cared too much about Tony to waste time,

"What's wrong?" she asked, taking a seat opposite Tony.

"Wrong?" he replied innocently.

"You're playing with your food," she pointed out sternly.

For answer, Tony took a big forkful of bacon and eggs but, under her gaze, then struggled to swallow it. "You know, I never realised how like Gibbs you are," he complained after a moment or two.

Millie frowned. She had met Gibbs on a couple of occasions and wasn't sure if the comparison was complimentary or not.

"It's early," said Tony in an apparent attempt at an excuse.

"Never known you not hungry for Millie's food," commented John.

Tony shrugged in reply. He took another forkful, stared at it and then laid it back down uneaten. He picked up his coffee instead.

"How long you down for?" asked John, trying a different tack.

"Not sure," mumbled Tony, "couple weeks."

"Weeks?" said Millie in surprise. Apart from Tony's first visit, he had rarely stayed more than a few days.

"Yep," confirmed Tony.

"That's good …" said John with a hint of doubt.

Tony nodded distractedly. He picked up his fork again but then put it back down again with an air of finality. "Sorry," he said, "not hungry after all."

"That's all right, sweetheart," said Millie.

Tony looked up in surprise. Millie was always briskly kind but this endearment was new. She laid a hand on his, "is something wrong?" she asked.

Tony's eyes glittered with some strange emotion, "Wrong?" he said with an attempt at airiness, "what could be wrong? I've got four weeks leave … and I get to spend it here. What could be better?"
"Tony?" said Millie and John in worried unison.

"Why do you have four weeks' leave?" continued John.

"Because I've been suspended," said Tony.

"What?" said John and Millie again.

NCIS

"So, McGee," said Gibbs as Tim still struggled to say anything, "what's it like? And where's DiNozzo?"

"I don't know. We don't know," said Tim.

"What you mean 'you don't know'?" said Gibbs.

"He's not allowed to talk to us," said Ellie, "and we're not allowed to talk to him."

"What's going on?" demanded Gibbs.

"And you're not supposed to contact him either," said Tim gloomily.

"What you mean?" said Gibbs fiercely, "one of you … tell me what's happened."

"Agent DiNozzo has been suspended," said Director Vance; he had come down the staircase unobserved.

"What?" said Gibbs. "What for?" Gibbs wondered what trouble Tony could have got into in just four days.

Vance stared emotionlessly at Gibbs. "DiNozzo disobeyed a direct order," he said.

"What order?" asked Gibbs, trying to keep his anger under control.

"I specifically told DiNozzo not to contact you while you were in Stillwater attending to your father's affairs."

"So?" said Gibbs.

"And he disobeyed that order and contacted you."

"He was doing what I wanted him to do," said Gibbs with a hint of a sneer.

"He disobeyed the order of his Director," said Vance coolly, "last time I checked, I outrank you, Gibbs."

"Then suspend me," said Gibbs.

"No," said Vance maintaining his stare, "it's time your team learned what the chain of command means, Gibbs."

"How long is he out for?" said Gibbs as he struggled to keep his temper.

"Four weeks," said Vance.

"Four weeks," demanded Gibbs, "four weeks? Are you mad?"
"At the end of that period …" began Vance.

"What?" said Gibbs beginning to walk towards the Director, "what then, Leon? You think we'll all be toeing your line by then?"

"No," said Vance. "At the end of four weeks Agent DiNozzo will attend a disciplinary hearing at which I will recommend that his service with NCIS be terminated on the grounds of his misconduct." He paused, letting his gaze sweep over the faces of the MCRT, "Agent Gibbs, I suggest you start looking for a new team member. You're going to be one short."
"I've been suspended," said Tony.

"What?" said John and Millie.

Millie was shaken out of her usual placidity and John looked shocked.

"Why?" said Millie eventually.

"I'm accused of disobeying a direct order," said Tony stoically.

"You refused to do something Gibbs told you?" asked John sceptically. It wasn't so much that he thought Tony didn't have the courage to stand up to Gibbs but rather that it seemed unlikely that Gibbs would react by suspending Tony; somehow he thought the former marine would deal with insubordination differently. Probably in a way that didn't generate paperwork.

"No," said Tony, "the Director. I disobeyed the Director."

"Was it some kind of misunderstanding?" asked Millie hopefully as she looked into Tony's tired eyes.

"No," said Tony regretfully, "I can't say it was."

"What happened?" asked John, "I mean, if it's something you can talk to us about."

"It's OK. Nothing top secret," said Tony. "Remember I told you that Gibbs' Dad died?" John nodded. "Well, he went off to Stillwater, where his Dad lives … lived. And a case came up. The Director told me to take charge and not to tell Gibbs about it."

"Sounds reasonable?" said Millie cautiously.

"Yes," said Tony, "and I tried to stick to it. Although Gibbs kept calling me to find out what we were up to. I had to ignore his calls."

"But you did it?" said Millie.

"For a while," agreed Tony, "and then something came up about the case and I figured I had to tell Gibbs."

"And?" asked John.

"And Gibbs came charging back. Didn't hesitate. The Director was pissed and put him on administrative leave."

"Was Gibbs upset?" asked Millie.

"About being put on administrative leave?" asked Tony, "well, you've met Gibbs. You know he doesn't like being told what to do."

"No," said Millie, "was he upset about his Dad. You know, not capable of doing the job?"

"Gibbs?" said Tony incredulously, "he's never not capable. No, he was a bit distracted but he was OK."
"And did he go on this leave?" asked John.

"Not so you noticed," said Tony, "like I said, he charged back and took over. We got the case sorted. Locked up the bad guy. Went to Stillwater for the funeral. Gibbs stayed on for a while and the rest of us came back to DC. And the day before yesterday Vance called me into his office and told me I was going to be suspended for insubordination."

"Wow," said Millie.

"Told me to hand in my weapon and badge and he had me escorted from the building. Told me not to contact anyone from NCIS."

"For a month you said?" asked John.

"Might be less," said Tony, "depends on when he can arrange the disciplinary hearing for."

"There's going to be a hearing as well?" said Millie, "I thought the suspension was the punishment."

"Oh no," said Tony, "that's just the appetizer, the trailer if you will."

"And the main feature?" asked John.

"Our esteemed Director is bucking for me to be dismissed," said Tony, "for misconduct."

"Oh, Tony," said Millie, squeezing the hand she had not released.

"And what do you think will happen?" asked John.

"I think I'll be fired," said Tony, "I can't deny that I disobeyed an order."

"It seems a bit … harsh," said John.

Tony shrugged, "Vance doesn't like me," he said, "I'm not his type of agent. He can't wait to see the back of people like me. I guess I played into his hands."

"What will Gibbs do?" asked the practical Millie, "I can't imagine him being happy to find out what's happened."

"I'd like to think he'll blow a gasket," said Tony, "but this is Gibbs. Who knows?"

NCIS

Gibbs was momentarily speechless when the Director told him that he intended that DiNozzo would be fired and then he took an angry step towards Vance,

"Are you mad?" he demanded, "fire DiNozzo? Why? Because you don't like him? Because he doesn't fit with your image for this agency?"

"Because Agent DiNozzo was insubordinate, Special Agent Gibbs," said Vance coolly, "and no, agents who can't follow direct orders have no place in NCIS."

"You can't do this," shouted Gibbs.

"Watch me," said Vance, staring at Gibbs.

Gibbs' phone rang, preventing him arguing further. "Gibbs," he said curtly, not taking his eyes off
the Director, "OK. Understood." He ended the call, "Gear up. Dead sailor in Falls Church." Ellie and McGee collected their backpacks and began to walk hesitantly towards the elevator. "This isn't over," hissed Gibbs at Vance, "not over!"

"Terms of the suspension, Gibbs," Vance called after him, "no contact with DiNozzo pending the hearing."

Gibbs turned back and glared at him.

"And this is one order you will obey," continued Vance.

NCIS

Gibbs and his team met up with Ducky and Palmer at the scene.

"Ah, Jethro," said Ducky, as they walked towards the dead sailor, "I would say 'welcome back' but I fear that this was not the homecoming you were anticipating."

"Could say that, Duck," said Gibbs tersely, "what we got here?"

"At first, and second, glance I would say that we have a simple road traffic accident," said Ducky, "the injuries are consistent with the petty officer's car impacting at speed with this tree. I do not believe that there is anything mysterious about the cause of death although there may, of course, be something more sinister about the reason for the crash."

"Looks as if this tyre has blown," said McGee as he snapped photographs.

"And the others look pretty worn," observed Ellie.

"As I suggested," said Ducky, "the injuries seem to have happened during a high speed impact."

"Makes sense," said McGee, "driving too fast. Came round this bend and the worn tyres couldn't cope. Went into a skid. Bam!"

"OK," said Gibbs, "collect the evidence for Abby. Get the car back to NCIS. We'll make sure. Run a check on this guy. See if there's any reason he was skimping on buying new tyres."

"On it, Boss," said Tim.

"Duck, you spoken to DiNozzo?" asked Gibbs as McGee and Bishop moved off to arrange moving the car.

"No," sighed Ducky, "Director Vance's orders were most clear and it didn't seem advisable for us to disobey them. Have you spoken to the boy?"

"Nope," said Gibbs, "didn't know anything about it until I got in this morning."

"Is the Director serious about this, Jethro?"

Gibbs just stared at the ME.

"I see," said Ducky with another sigh, "no, I fear you are right. But, Jethro, is it possible to view Anthony's actions as misconduct?"

"Don't know, Duck. I'm going to talk to HR. Delores Bromstead'll be on DiNozzo's side. That will help."
Ducky coughed. "What's up?" asked Gibbs.

"Delores is on her two week vacation. You may not be able to enlist her help until she returns."

"Damn," said Gibbs as he turned to walk to the van.

"Jethro," Ducky called after him, "Jethro, I fear that many people are nervous about going up against the Director in his current mood. Delores may be among them." Gibbs raised a hand in acknowledgement and continued walking. "And you will also need to calm Abigail down," called Ducky. Gibbs grimaced at that but didn't make any signal this time.

Abby's lab was uncharacteristically silent when Gibbs visited for an update on the traffic accident.

"Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs!" she shouted when she saw him standing at the door, "I'm so glad you're back. You'll fix things! You can't let the Director do this."

"Calm down, Abs," said Gibbs, "I've only just got back. Still working it out."

"Right," said Abby, "calming down, calming down."

"What can you tell me about the crash?" asked Gibbs.

"The crash?" said Abby, "what about Tony? We've got to fix it."

"Case first, Abs," said Gibbs firmly, "there's a family waiting for news."

Abby swallowed, "Right," she said, "case first. Well, Gibbs, the Duckman was right about the car colliding with the tree at high speed."

"OK," said Gibbs, "what else?"

"And the tyres were in really poor shape," said Abby, "an accident waiting to happen. It's just that it waited to happen until the guy was driving too fast and in the direction of a really solid tree."

"Petty Officer James Nielson," said McGee as he walked into the lab followed by Bishop. Abby put the petty officer's picture up on her screen.

"Posted at Norfolk," said Bishop, "has a house there but …"

"But he was facing foreclosure," said McGee.

"Lots of debts," said Bishop, "no obvious reason. Just bad at managing his money."

"So?" prompted Gibbs.

"So, no money for essential maintenance of his car," said McGee.

"OK," said Gibbs, "write it up. I'll let his CO know."

"He looks a bit like Tony," said Abby mournfully.

"He does?" asked Bishop.

"Something in his eyes," affirmed Abby.

The others gazed at the photo but were unable to see any likeness.
"I'll look at the tyres again. Just in case there's something hinky," said Abby, "but if I don't find anything, the case is closed?"

"Yep," confirmed Gibbs.

"Then what are we going to do about Tony?" she asked.

"What you done so far?" asked Gibbs.

"Nothing," said McGee.

"We thought about it," said Abby earnestly.

"But Director Vance was very specific about us not contacting him," said Bishop.

"And we thought it'd be best to do what he said," said McGee.

"For who?" said Gibbs.

"Everyone," said Bishop honestly, "we didn't want to risk getting Tony in trouble if he answered any calls from us."

"And we didn't want Vance suspending us," said Tim, "Boss, we felt really bad about it."

"We don't like to think of Tony being all on his own," said Abby sadly.

"You did the right thing," said Gibbs, "all of you. Need to do this by the book."

"I don't understand," said Abby, "I mean, I thought the Director was warming up to us. That he was family."

"Abs …" began Gibbs.

"And he was trying to be nice to you, I thought," continued Abby, "trying to take the strain away from you. Letting you be free to grieve your Dad. That was nice of him, wasn't it?"

"I fear it may have brought back bad memories for him," said Ducky as he walked into the lab with Jimmy by his side.

"Jackson's death reminded him of Jackie's murder," said Ducky, "and he remembered how he struggled to cope."

"He was off work for weeks," observed Jimmy.

"Precisely, Mr Palmer," said Ducky, "so he assumed that Jethro would be in the same distressed state."

"But the Boss said he didn't need the time off," remembered Tim.

"You are correct, Timothy," said Ducky, "and I would surmise that the Director may be thinking that he is being criticized in some way for taking a leave of absence after his wife's death."

"Not the same thing, Duck," said Gibbs, "I wasn't trying to undermine him."

"I am sure not, Jethro," said Ducky reassuringly, "but I'm afraid that we are not always rational in
our feelings or reactions. And the Director is somewhat sensitive in matters like this."

"But why suspend Tony, if it's Gibbs he's mad with? Gibbs carried on working even though the Director had put him on administrative leave. That could be insubordination too." said Bishop.

"You're the analyst," said Gibbs, "figure it out."

"Oh," said Ellie, "I see. Gibbs is just back from burying his father."

"Yes, my dear," said Ducky, "it would hardly be politic to suspend someone so recently bereaved and especially a someone who is so highly regarded."

"And Tony …" asked McGee

"Vance doesn't like DiNozzo," said Gibbs, "that's reason enough."

"But you'll fix it, won't you?" said Jimmy. He then seemed flustered by this boldness but bravely continued, "I mean, you will, won't you?"

"Working on it, Palmer," said Gibbs with as much confidence as he could muster.

NCIS

"I need some fresh air," said Tony after he had finished telling his story to Millie and John. "Sorry," he said, as he gestured towards his still full plate.

"I'll come with you," said John.

For a moment or two, it looked as if Tony would turn down this offer but then he simply nodded.

"Thanks, Millie," said Tony, "I'll try to do better next time."

"No problem," said Millie with a concerned frown on her face.

"Can I take Ruskin?" said Tony.

"Sure," said Millie.

"He hasn't got any social engagements today?" asked Tony with an attempt at a smile, "don't want to put a crimp in his plans."

"Not till this afternoon," said Millie, "and it's nothing for you to worry about."

"Come on, Ruskin," said Tony, "Let's go for a walk."

The two men and the dog walked for a couple of miles until they reached Leeley's Stretch, one of Tony's favourite spots to sit and think. Ruskin flopped down with an exaggerated sigh of exhaustion and the other two sat down to watch the waves.

"Why you do it?" asked Sutherland.

"What?" asked Tony.

"Why did you call Gibbs when you'd been told not to?"

"We had a break in the case. Meant that it was connected to Gibbs more. Meant that he might have the edge to crack the case."
"Better than you?"

"Boss is always better than me, John. Well, not always. Although his movie knowledge is surprisingly extensive. Not as good as mine, of course. And dress sense. I suppose the Boss has a certain homespun charm but not to compare to my sense of style …"

"Tony," John interrupted him gently but firmly, "you're rambling."

"Something else I'm better at than Gibbs," offered Tony, "I decided that Gibbs needed to know about the new information. The whole case just became more sinister and dangerous."

"Too much for you to handle?" probed John.

Tony stared at him levelly, "No. Not too much for me to handle but the case comes first. Needed to solve it and I knew that Gibbs would …"

"Have the edge," said John. "But why didn't you refer to the Director? Let him make the call?"

"Have to go with the gut," said Tony, "back your judgement. I knew it would be quicker."

"Can you make that as an argument?" asked John, "you know, that you made a judgement call on the need to call Gibbs?"

"Possibly. But if they pressed me I'd have to admit that I thought that if I ran it past Vance he'd say 'no'. I guess I was following Gibbs' rule 18 'It's better to seek forgiveness than ask permission'. It's just that the forgiveness part is proving a bit difficult."

"I see," said John.

"And I guess I understood how Gibbs would be feeling," continued Tony. "The job is Gibbs' life. Not working a case would be like another bereavement for him. I knew he needed to be working."

"Is that how you feel?" asked John.

"Guess so," said Tony, "sad, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"I'm sitting on a beach and I just wish I was back in DC doing my job. Looking out for my Probies. Doesn't feel right that I'm not on their six, not on Gibbs' six."

"It's not sad," said John, "it's about caring about what you do."

"I am good at my job," said Tony, "I know people think I swagger and boast. And I do. It's part of the DiNozzo charm. If you ever met my Dad, you'd know where I get it from. But underneath, I do care and I do my work well."

"Have you told your Dad about all this?" asked John as he pondered a potential source of comfort.

Tony gave a sort of laugh, "No. He'd turn it round to himself somehow. Sometimes I feel as I'm the father and he's the prodigal son. No. Best to keep it to myself."

"Have you spoken to anyone about this?" asked John.

"Feels like I'm talking to you," said Tony mildly.
"Someone professional," said John, "You know, with knowledge about stuff like this."

"Yes," said Tony, "spoke to one of my fraternity brothers."

"What did he say?"

"It's not good. He suggests that I try to negotiate a resignation."

"Why?"

"Like I said, I'm good at my job."

"So?"

"I'd like to carry on in law enforcement."

"That's good."

"If I'm dismissed for misconduct do you think anyone's going to hire me as an agent?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted John.

"But if I resign with the investigation hanging over me, that'll be known too."

"And?"

"They'll think I quit because I was guilty."

"Ah," said John.

"So Fred says I need to get the investigation expunged and then resign."

"Or be exonerated by the enquiry," suggested John.

"That would be good," agreed Tony, "but it feels a bit unlikely at the moment. Depends on the enquiry thinking I was justified in disobeying Vance."

"I see," said Sutherland. He found himself sharing Tony's doubts. He was sure that Tony had acted out of the best of motives but he was also struggling to understand why Tony hadn't spoken to Vance first. He guessed it had something to do with the special bond between Gibbs and Tony.

"And then there's my age," said Tony gloomily.

"Yes, Methuselah?" asked John. He was about two decades older than Tony and so regarded him as a youngster.

"Getting on for law enforcement," said Tony practically, "and if I get fired I may lose my pension. Another reason for not telling Dad. That's what he'd focus on – losing the pension."

John gazed out to sea as he tried to think of something positive to say that might raise Tony's spirits. A sigh escaped his lips and Tony attempted a laugh in response,

"Sucks, doesn't it?" he said.

John turned to look at him and had to admit, "Yes, it does."

Tony saw the sympathy in John's face and managed a cheerful smile, "Not to worry," he said
energetically, "Gibbs'll be on the case. I'll swan back to DC in a few days after a rest at the seaside. McGoo and Probish will be green with envy!"

"Does anyone know where you are?" asked John.

"Well, you do," said Tony answering the question literally.

"I meant from your team," said John patiently.

"I informed HR. As required by the terms of the suspension but I'm not allowed to contact anyone else so, no, they don't know. Don't worry, John. I'll be all right. A DiNozzo is never defeated!" He jumped to his feet, "Come on, Ruskin, let's practise that ball throwing."

Ruskin got to his feet obligingly and prepared for a game of fetch although, unless something had changed since his last visit, Tony knew that it would be him who did most of the fetching. John realised that Tony felt he had bared his soul enough for the time being and wanted to be on his own so he made his way back to the café. He thought he needed to discuss the next move with Millie. As he walked away he looked back and saw Tony running madly with Ruskin. John didn't consider himself to be fanciful but he couldn't help but think that Tony looked as if he was running to try and escape something.

Later that day, after Tony had failed to show for two meals, Millie and John decided it was time to call for help. A phone rang at NCIS.
Chapter 3

"Donald Mallard. How may I help you?"

"Dr Mallard. It's Millie Lacey here. From Milsom Bay. I don't whether you remember me or not?"

"Mrs Lacey," said Ducky with great cordiality, "what a pleasure! How could I forget you? I have very fond memories of your wonderful Dundee cake … and, of course, of your good self. And how are you?"

"I'm very well, Doctor," said Millie, "I have John Sutherland with me. Do you mind if I put you on speaker so we can both speak to you."

"Of course, it will a delight to speak to both of you. Mr Sutherland, are you working on a particular painting at the moment? I must say that I greatly admire your seascapes. They put me in mind of some of the early works of Joseph Mallord William Turner. Perhaps you are familiar with his work?"

"Well …" began John.

"I have occasionally wondered if there is some familial connection between the Mallards and the Mallord in Turner's name," mused Ducky, "but I have been unable to establish one. Perhaps, at some point in the future when I have retired, it is one of the research areas to which I may devote some time. I fear, however, that I have many such areas awaiting my attention. And it is certain that, blood ties or not, I have not inherited any artistic ability although I did used to be rather proficient in anatomical drawings when I was a student at the Edinburgh Medical School. But I didn't allow you to answer my question."

There was a stunned silence at the other end of the phone before Millie ventured,

"What question was that, Dr Mallard?"

"Whether Mr Sutherland is familiar with the works of Turner?" said Ducky with the air of someone who was used to such distraction from his listeners.

"Yes," said John, "I'm a great admirer of all his work. In fact I am planning a visit to the United Kingdom next year and intend to see as many of his paintings as I can."

"Splendid," said Ducky, "if you would care for me to recommend places to stay while you there, please let me know. In fact, if you give me your itinerary, I can probably request friends to show you around. I know people in many parts of the old country."

"Thank you," said John, "that would be wonderful. If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," said Ducky, "I have always found that being guided by a 'native', so to speak, immeasurably enhances the experience of a visit to a foreign country. Why I remember …"

Millie coughed politely before saying, "Dr Mallard, that wasn't why we called you."

"I do beg your pardon, dear lady," apologised Ducky, "I fear I was somewhat carried away by the thought of a perambulation through the art galleries of Great Britain. How may I help you?"

"It's Tony," said Millie.

"Ah," said Ducky heavily.
"We're worried about him," said John.

"Am I understand that he has been in contact with you?" asked Ducky.

"More than that," said John, "he turned up early this morning."

"He looked exhausted," said Millie.

"And he didn't eat his breakfast," said John. "And that's unusual for Tony."

"Indeed," said Ducky.

"And he hasn't come for any meals since then," said Millie.

"I see," said Ducky.

"He … er … he told us that there was some problem at work," said John tactfully.

"Yes," said Ducky, "I was not aware that he had left DC. You know, I presume, that he is … um … not required to be at work at the moment?"

"He said he had been suspended," said Millie.

"Pending possible dismissal," added John.

"I know that we don't know what he's like at work," said Millie, "but it seems most unlikely that Tony would do anything that deserved dismissal. Would a character reference from us help, do you think?"

"I fear not, Mrs Lacey," said Ducky, "and if one were needed, you can be sure that there are many people here at NCIS who would be willing to provide one. Anthony is undoubtedly an unusual character but most people here are aware of his value to NCIS."

"Tony said that he's not allowed to contact anyone at NCIS," said John.

"That is true," said Ducky.

"That seems rather harsh," said Millie, "cutting him off from his co-workers and friends."

"That's probably why he came down here," said John.

"He's trying to be cheerful and optimistic," said Millie, "but I can tell that he's worried. What can we do to help?"

"What you are already doing, Mrs Lacey," said Ducky, "providing friendship and comfort as far as Anthony will allow you to."

"Um …" said John, "and is there anything that you and Agent Gibbs can do?"

"Jethro was extremely angry when he returned to work this morning and discovered that Anthony had been suspended," said Ducky, "and I am sure that he will be actively working to get Anthony reinstated but …"

"But?" asked Millie.

"But I fear he may need to be tactful in the way that he approaches the situation."
"Oh," said Millie in a tone which suggested that she wasn't sure that 'tact' was one of Gibbs' talents.

"Yes," said Ducky, "it is important not to inflame the situation and so make things worse. But, don't fear, Jethro has a habit of surprising people. He seems to have a knack of persuading people to his point of view."

"He's not going to shoot anyone, is he?" asked Millie worriedly. Ducky wondered what stories Tony had told his Milsom Bay friends.

"I am sure not," said Ducky, crossing his fingers, "but he will find a way."

"So we just have to wait and see?" said John disappointedly.

"I fear so," said Ducky, "but you may, if you wish, tell Anthony that Jethro is on the case and that his co-workers are all most concerned for him."

"That would mean us telling him that we called you," John pointed out.

"I will leave that to your judgement," said Ducky, "but I would think that he would be grateful for your concern. And it might be helpful for him to know that we are working on his behalf."

"Thank you, Dr Mallard," said Millie.

"And do call again if you are at all concerned," said Ducky.

"We will," said Millie, "I will make you a Dundee cake. Tony can bring it with him when he returns to DC."

"That would be most kind of you," said Ducky as he put the phone down. "And I think it is time I did something about this as well.

NCIS

Secretary of the Navy, Sarah Porter, was not entirely surprised when she returned to her office and found Agent Gibbs waiting outside.

"Agent Gibbs," she said warily.

"Ma'am," he returned, "I need to speak to you."

SecNav's PA tried to intervene,

"Secretary Porter has a full afternoon of meetings …"

Sarah looked at Gibbs' face and decided that a delay would not go down well, "it's all right, Janice. I'll see Agent Gibbs now. Let people know I may be running a little late."

Janice looked a little mutinous at the thought of the schedule being disrupted but she was feeling a little intimidated from having Gibbs glare at her for half an hour while they waited for SecNav to return and so she gave way.

Sarah led the way to her office and gestured to Gibbs to sit. For a moment it looked as if he would prefer to stand but then he seemed to decide to delay any confrontation and he sat down in a manner that suggested he was at attention.

"How can I help you, Agent Gibbs?" asked Sarah.
Gibbs stared at her as he considered telling her that was a stupid question but, once again, tact won out, "Special Agent DiNozzo," he said.

"Ah," said Porter, "I'm guessing you don't agree with Director Vance's actions?"

Gibbs took a deep calming breath, "No, I don't. DiNozzo is my best agent."

Sarah considered her reply, "and one who disobeyed a direct order from Director Vance."

"A bad order," said Gibbs, "an unnecessary one."

"And was it Agent DiNozzo's job to make that determination?"

"You want agents to follow blindly?" asked Gibbs.

"No," agreed Sarah, "blind obedience is not a good thing."

"So you'll tell the Director to reinstate DiNozzo?" stated Gibbs.

Under Gibbs' icy stare, Sarah found herself wanting to obey but she was made of firm stuff. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why not? You agreed that you don't want blind obedience."

"I'm not convinced that Agent DiNozzo's judgement was correct when he disobeyed Leon's directive."

"Why not? I've told you that it was."

"Agent Gibbs, I respect your judgement but I also have to respect the judgement of the Director of NCIS."

"DiNozzo is a good agent," said Gibbs.

"I'm sure he is although you have to admit that he is not always conventional."

"He gets results," said Gibbs.

"Modern day investigations are not judged solely by results," said Porter, "results have to be sustainable and not subject to challenge in the courts. In my experience, conventionality has the best record of success in that regard."

"My team's work is not usually challenged," countered Gibbs, "the results speak for themselves."

"Perhaps," said Porter.

Gibbs tried a different tack, "Leon doesn't like DiNozzo. He thinks agents should be more like McGee."

"You don't approve of Agent McGee?" asked Porter.

"McGee is an excellent agent," said Gibbs, "as is Bishop. But teams need a variety of skills and, in my view, DiNozzo supplies a lot of the skills that are needed."

"You think Leon is pursuing some sort of vendetta against Agent DiNozzo?" asked Sarah.

"I think that DiNozzo is not the real target," admitted Gibbs.
"And who is the real target?"

"Me."

"And why is that?" asked Sarah.

"He finds me difficult."

"I find that hard to believe," said Sarah with a smile. "He speaks highly of you, you know. I think you may be mistaken. I understand that Leon placed you on administrative leave following your bereavement?"

"Yes."

"But you continued to work the case anyway?"

"Yes."

"Surely if Leon wanted to target you, he could have taken disciplinary action against you for that?"

"Possibly," said Gibbs.

"But he didn't. No, Special Agent Gibbs, I don't believe you are the real target here." The Secretary stood up to indicate that the interview was over, "Agent Gibbs, I appreciate your concern. I will pay close attention to the findings of the misconduct hearing and will ensure that it is conducted fairly and impartially. You will have the opportunity to support Agent DiNozzo if he wishes you to. And I am sure that your views, as his supervisor, will be taken into account at the hearing."

Gibbs found himself baffled for the moment. "This isn't over," he said, "my team needs DiNozzo."

"Good day, Agent Gibbs," said Sarah, "thank you for your input."

Gibbs suppressed a growl and strode to the door.

"Oh, Agent Gibbs," Sarah called after him, "I am sorry for your loss."

Gibbs turned round with a challenging look on his face.

"Of your father," said Sarah, seeing that Gibbs thought she was implying that DiNozzo's dismissal was a foregone conclusion.

Gibbs grunted and left the room, just managing to restrain himself from slamming the door. He wasn't done yet!

NCIS

Ducky braced himself and knocked on the Director's door. He didn't follow Gibbs' example but rather waited for the invitation to enter.

"Dr Mallard," said Vance, "what do you need?"

"To work in an atmosphere where I feel respected and valued," replied Ducky.

Vance steepled his fingers and looked over them, "as do I, Doctor, as do I."

"I fear," said Ducky, "that I am no longer sure that such an atmosphere exists here."
"I see."

"I realise that I may be going beyond my purview here," said Ducky.

"Go on," said Vance drily, "I'll stop you if I think you're exceeding your purview."

"Thank you," said Ducky, "it's about Agent DiNozzo."

"Somehow I thought it might be," acknowledged Vance.

"You cannot fail to see how his suspension has affected people," said Ducky.

"Indeed," said Vance who had paid a visit to Abby's lab and seen the Tony 'shrine'.

"People are concerned that they are under scrutiny," said Ducky.

"As they should be," said Leon, "NCIS agents should be held to the highest standard."

"Of course," agreed Ducky, "but …"

"But what?"

"Don't you feel that you are being unduly harsh in this case?"

"DiNozzo admits that he disobeyed my direct and unequivocal instruction," said Vance blandly.

"Indeed," agreed Ducky. "But there were special circumstances."

"Such as?"

"I am sure you are aware of the special bond between Jethro and Anthony. It was very difficult for Anthony to keep Jethro out of the loop especially when he found that the case so directly pertained to Jethro."

"So our agents are only required to obey easy orders?" said Vance.

"Of course not," said Ducky, trying to keep his temper, "but the MCRT has always operated in a particular way."

"Past performance does not mean things can't change," said Vance.

"There is a wise saying, 'don't fix what isn't broken,'" said Ducky.

"I'm not convinced it's not broken," said the Director. "I consider that chain of command is crucial to the way this agency works. I haven't seen much evidence of it working in the MCRT."

"Director?"

"Agent DiNozzo is nominally the senior field agent but Agent Gibbs doesn't seem to pay that much heed in the way that he assigns duties."

"Jethro allocates tasks according to the person best qualified to perform them," said Ducky, "and sometimes that doesn't equate with seniority."

"If you say so, Doctor. And that may be how Gibbs chooses to run his team."

"So you understand, Director?"
"No. It may be the way that Gibbs chooses to run his team but it's not how I choose to run my agency."

Ducky tried another tack, "Anthony's suspension has caused a great deal of distress and stress to his co-workers."

"Stress is part of their work," said Vance unsympathetically.

"And I understand that it is causing Anthony a measure of pain."

"You've been in contact with Agent DiNozzo?" said Leon sharply. "Against my directions?"

"Indeed not, Director," said Ducky stiffly, "two of Anthony's friends called me. They were worried about him. It was from them that I obtained my information."

The Director peered at Ducky trying to determine his truthfulness. He drew some papers towards him as a signal that Ducky's time was up. "Agent DiNozzo's hearing will be conducted impartially by the Inspector General's Office. I have nothing else to say on this matter. Thank you for your input, Dr Mallard."

"So you won't reconsider your decision, Director?"

"I see no reason to."

"Then I fear that I can no longer work for this agency," said Ducky sadly.

"What?"

"You will have noticed that I am somewhat past the normal retirement age," said Ducky, "and I am fortunate that financially I have no need of employment."

"Are you threatening me?" said the Director.

"By no means," said Ducky, "I have continued with my work here because I found it mentally stimulating and worthwhile. And I have enjoyed a good working relationship with the agents and with your predecessors. I fear, however, that the events of the last few days, have shaken my faith in the leadership of NCIS. So, unless I am mistaken in surmising that you do not intend to reconsider your decision about Special Agent DiNozzo …"

"You are not," said Leon grimly.

"Then I ask you to accept this letter of resignation," Ducky took an envelope out of his pocket.

"Are you serious?" asked Vance.

"Completely," said Ducky earnestly.

"You'd resign because of DiNozzo?"

"No."

"Good," said Vance.

"Not because of Anthony. Because of you, Director. Now, I am, of course, willing to work out whatever period of notice you consider appropriate. I have too high a regard for the work of this Agency to leave you at a disadvantage. I am sure you will arrange for me to be notified of any
further documentation which I need to complete."

Ducky walked from the room leaving a stunned Director still in his seat. Ducky could still feel the adrenalin rush from his confrontation but he feared that it would be soon be replaced by a feeling of unbearable sadness at his resignation.

"So, there you are, Jethro," said Ducky as he gingerly sipped at a drink of bourbon in Gibbs' basement, "you see before you an ex-medical examiner."

"You didn't have to do it, Duck," said Gibbs.

"Yes, I did, Jethro," said Ducky, "I would not have been able to live with myself if I had not challenged the Director. And it would be unfair to expect my younger co-workers to speak up so robustly. It was easier for me to do it. I am, after all, approaching my twilight years and have no financial need to work. I was the obvious candidate."

"Doesn't make it easy," said Gibbs morosely.

"No," agreed Ducky, "I will admit to a certain sense of melancholy at the prospect of having so much extra time on my hands."

"Can't see you being idle for long," said Gibbs.

"Indeed," said Ducky, "and in fact I was discussing a potential project earlier today with Mrs Lacey."

"Place won't be the same without you, Duck."

"I don't intend to be a stranger to you all, Jethro," said Ducky.

"Good."

"I confess that I harboured a faint hope that the prospect of my resignation would trigger some change of heart from Leon," said Ducky. "But I fear I am of less importance than I thought."

"Leon would probably let you change your mind," said Gibbs.

"Possibly," conceded Ducky, "but I don't intend to ask him. In some ways, Jethro, I feel a measure of relief."

"You do?"

"Yes, although I still feel young at heart I have become increasingly aware when I look in my mirror each day that my heart is somewhat deluded. And my bones would be grateful to remain in bed a bit longer each morning and not be subject to call outs at unearthly hours. So, there is no need to be concerned for me, Jethro."

"Hmm," said Gibbs.

"But I am concerned," said Ducky, "that I may have made the situation worse."

"How so?"

"I fear that I may have driven Leon into a corner and that he may feel even less able to retreat from
his position."

"Don't worry, Duck."

"Why not?"

"I don't see Vance backing down any time soon. He's chosen his position carefully."

"And how are your efforts proceeding, Jethro?"

"Not good, Duck. Vance had got to Porter before me. She's backing him."

"Take heart, Jethro," said Ducky hearteningly, "you must know where some relevant bodies are buried."

Gibbs laughed, "Not this time, Duck."

"You will think of something, Jethro. And preferably before Abigail resolves to test her theory of being one of the few people able to kill someone without leaving any forensic evidence."

"I might help her bury the body," said Gibbs bitterly.

"And on the bright side," said Ducky, "now that I am on my way out of NCIS I feel no compulsion to obey Leon's orders about not contacting Anthony. I am going to pay a visit to Milsom Bay tomorrow."

"Tell DiNozzo we're on his six," said Gibbs.

"I will," promised Ducky. "I am hoping that I shall find him in better spirits. I spoke to Mrs Lacey and Sutherland of my proposed visit. They advised me that Anthony had just returned exhausted from walking all day. Ruskin looked decidedly disgruntled and had to be carried by Anthony. Mrs Lacey has resolved to keep Anthony under her wing tomorrow. Apparently Ruskin missed an appointment at the Milsom Bay Retirement Home today due to his peregrinations with Anthony and Mrs Lacey is determined that he and Anthony will keep it tomorrow."

"DiNozzo in a retirement home?" said Gibbs, "and she thinks that will cheer him up?"
Chapter 4

Tony slept well after his exhausting day of walking along the coast at Milsom Bay and he woke up feeling better than he had since his suspension. Ruskin eyed him warily from his position at the foot of the bed but relaxed when Tony didn't seem to have any immediate intention of going for a marathon stroll again.

"Go to see Millie?" queried Tony, wondering at what point he had begun talking to animals.

Ruskin answered by jumping off the bed and going to stand at the door with tail wagging. Tony suspected John of watching out for him as he soon caught up with the pair as they walked down to the café.

"How are you today?" John asked.

"Better," said Tony, "sorry for being a gloomy Gus yesterday. Things just got on top of me."

"Understandable," said John, "you've got a lot on your mind."

"Could say that," said Tony, "but a good night's sleep helped. And I've got Leroy Jethro Gibbs on my six; no need to worry."

John nodded. He suspected that Tony wasn't quite as optimistic as he was pretending but he decided not to prick his bubble.

"Dr Mallard said he might be coming down today," he said.

"Ducky?" said Tony in surprise, "I hope the Director doesn't find out. Don't want to create any more targets."

"He didn't seem to be worried," temporised John. He didn't want to be the one to tell Tony that the doctor had resigned on Tony's behalf: he would leave that to the tactful ME.

Millie greeted them with a smile and a stern warning to Tony,

"Make sure you eat properly today," she said, as she pointed them towards their usual table.

"No worries," asserted Tony, "I'm so hungry I'd eat Ruskin if you didn't have breakfast ready."

Ruskin looked up when he heard his name but didn't pick up on any sinister intent so contentedly followed Millie into the kitchen where he knew tasty morsels would be waiting. Millie soon returned with two steaming plates of food. Like a good strategist, she waited till Tony had nearly finished eating before announcing her plans for the day.

"Ruskin missed an appointment yesterday," she said.

"Uh, sorry about that," said Tony a little sheepishly.

"No worries. I'll take him today."

"Where's he going? Not the vet's?" asked Tony.

"The Retirement Home," said Millie. "I take him in a couple of times a week."
"Why?"

"The old folk like him. They can't have pets of their own there so they like having visitors. And he's good with them. They stroke him and cuddle him and he laps it all up. He's a natural."

"There were some people there who'd hardly spoken to anyone since they started living there," said John, "but Ruskin brought him out of their shell and they're a lot more social since he started going there."

"That's good," said Tony a little absently.

"So I thought you could come with us," said Millie.

"Excuse me?" said Tony.

"Come with us," said Millie.

"Me? Visit a retirement home?" asked Tony.

"Yes," said Millie.

"That doesn't sound the sort of thing I'd do," said Tony cautiously.

"Have you got anything else planned?" said Millie.

"N-o-o-h," admitted Tony as he feverishly tried to think of another engagement.

"Well then," said Millie as if that was decided. She looked at Tony's doubtful face, "you might enjoy it."

Tony wasn't renowned for his tact but there was something about Millie which made him decide to guard his tongue and not express what he really thought about the 'treat' in store for him.

"We'll go after lunch," announced Millie, "before they settle down for an afternoon nap."

"Great," said Tony unenthusiastically.

Millie laughed and clapped him on the shoulder as she walked back to the kitchen.

NCIS

"Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs," said Abby as she ran into the squad room.

"Abs?" asked Gibbs, "Where's the fire?"

"Fire? What fire?" said Abby, "I didn't know there was a fire. Although I suppose there must be one somewhere. And it seems a bit selfish to be pleased that it's not here. Because we could probably cope with one better than some people. But then there must be people who could manage even better than us. I mean if there was a fire at fire department headquarters they'd be really good. Much better than us. Because they train for it and it's their job," she paused, "why are we talking about fires?"

"We're not," said Gibbs, "you are."

"Oh," she said, "but I think you started it. The talk. Not the fire. Because I don't think there is one."

"Abs," said Gibbs, "what do you want?"
“Apart from world peace, Tony to be reinstated and CafPow to come in bigger cups?” she asked.

Gibbs nodded.

“James Nielson,” she said.

“Who?” asked McGee.

“The Petty Officer who was killed in the traffic accident,” said Gibbs. “What about him, Abs? I thought we closed that case.”

“We did,” agreed Abby, “but I said I’d look at it a bit more. You know, because I thought he looked like Tony.” She sighed but the others didn’t react.

“And?” prompted Gibbs.

“And I found something icky,” she said.

“Hinky?” asked Bishop.

“No, icky,” corrected Abby, “Although it's hinky too.”

“Hinky ickiness?” asked McGee.

Abby considered this, "No," she said, "more like icky hinkiness."

Gibbs opened his mouth to ask what the difference was but decided to ignore Abby's linguistic niceties. "Today, Abs," he prompted.

"I found something icky on the tyre that blew," she said.

“What?” asked Gibbs.

"Something icky and sticky. Some sort of residue on the tyre. Something rubbery."

"It's a tyre," commented Gibbs, "isn't there meant to be something rubbery on it?"

"Good point, Gibbs," praised Abby, "and I might have ignored it but Bishop found something hinky."

"I did?" said Ellie.

"Yes, you did. In the Petty Officer's wallet."

"What was it?" asked Ellie.

"A receipt for a new tyre," said Abby.

"That's sad," said McGee, "he'd bought a new tyre and not had time to fit it."

"Au contraire," said Abby, "that's where the icky hinkiness comes in. I thought it was strange that he hadn't fitted it so I looked again at the wheel."

"And?" asked Gibbs.

"And I could tell that the tyre had been changed very recently."
"But it wasn't a new tyre," objected McGee.

"No. And yes," said Abby. "I tested the rubbery stuff. The icky stuff. And I think it was a coating applied to a tyre to make it look new. The receipt in Nielson's wallet was for a cheap tyre. A very cheap tyre. So I think …"

"Someone was reconditioning old tyres to make them look good!" said McGee excitedly.

Abby directed a cool look at him for interrupting her but then carried on, "and they'd last for a while. I mean, someone who drives like McGee would get away with them for longer than someone who drives like Gibbs."

"And I guess Petty Officer Nielson was more like Gibbs than McGee," mused Ellie.

"And," said Abby with a little jump of excitement, "and it looks as if there have been a few other accidents with faulty tyres. Although our Petty Officer is the first really bad crash."

"Good work, Abs," said Gibbs. "McGee, Bishop, pull the other accident reports. See if there's any pattern about where they bought their tyres."


"Abs?" said Gibbs.

"I've already done that," she said, "I … I … well, I didn't go home last night. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep for worrying about Tony. Although I feel a bit better for knowing that he's in Milsom Bay."

"How do you know that?" demanded Gibbs.

Abby fiddled with a pigtail, "Ducky told me?" she suggested, "or it might have been the Director's secretary … or someone in HR?"

Gibbs gave her a hard stare but decided to let her off the hook in favour of pursuing the case. "What you find?" he asked.

"I think the tyres were sold by Goldsboro Gizmos. It's not a shop or garage. It's mostly internet sales."

Gibbs grunted in disapproval at the word internet but refrained from commenting.

"That's why nobody's picked up on it yet. Although a lot of sale have been made to sailors."

McGee had been tapping away at his keyboard, "Goldsboro Gizmos," he announced, "run by Hal Smith out of Goldsboro, North Carolina." He brought a driver's licence photo up on the plasma.

"He looks familiar," said Gibbs, peering at the picture.

McGee looked again, "you're right, Boss. I've seen him somewhere before." A few more taps of the keyboard produced a result. "Former Petty Officer Hal Smith. We interviewed him last year when we were investigating that series of thefts from Norfolk Navy Base."

"Former Petty Officer?" asked Gibbs, "we didn't link him to the thefts, did we?"

"No, Boss," confirmed McGee, "we suspected he had at least looked the other way but we couldn't pin anything on him. Tony interviewed him for hours and used every movie reference he could think
of but Smith didn't crack. In the end we decided he was just small fry. And he was on his way out of the Navy for poor performance so we let it go."

"He served with Petty Officer Nielson," said Bishop, who had been doing her own research.

"He sold his friend the tyre that killed him," said Abby sadly, "that's gotta hurt."

"Not as much as it hurt Nielson," said Gibbs. "Gear up. We're going to pay former Petty Officer Smith a visit."


"What?" said Gibbs, "I said 'good job'."

"I know," said Abby, "that wasn't a 'good job Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs'."

"What was it then?" asked Gibbs.

"It was a 'Goldsboro is real close to Milsom Bay Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs'."

"Abs?"

"Perhaps the satnav might go wrong. You know, and you might end up in Milsom Bay – by mistake. And you might bump into Tony – by mistake," said Abby earnestly.

"Abs," said Gibbs in a dampening tone.

"Please, please, please," implored Abby, "… please?"

Gibbs rolled his eyes but saw that McGee and Bishop were looking hopeful too. "We'll see," he said, "McGee. Get a search warrant authorised while we're driving there."

"It's a long way," said Abby hopefully, "you may need to spend the night. Tony's got a spare room!"

Gibbs chuckled and kissed her on the cheek. "See you, Abs."

NCIS NCIS

Millie smiled as she looked round the sunny lounge that faced on to the sea. Ruskin was basking in the attention of the elderly residents who all looked delighted to see him. This was nothing new, and Millie always enjoyed her visits. What was new was that her other companion was going down a storm.

Ruskin had bounded into the lounge and been greeted with shouts of delight. Tony had looked at his dog's reactions and muttered into Millie's ear, "and McGee calls me an attention whore!" A few moments later, however, and with the air of someone about to run into a burning building, he entered the fray. The elderly ladies responded to his charm and good looks and flirted happily. The older gentlemen admired his technique and discussed football and basketball with him. Ruskin found himself outshone for once but, in philosophical and practical mood, went in search of snacks while nobody was looking.

Millie was just beginning to think she should drag Tony away from his new friends when she became aware of some sort of disturbance at the main entrance. She looked across at Tony and saw that he was on alert too.

"I want to see my Grandma," came an insistent voice.
The response was muted but seemed not to have been satisfactory as they soon heard the voice again, "You can't stop me," he said, "I've got a right to see her."

Tony moved to sit next to Millie.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Millie peered into the lobby. "Oh dear," she said, "it's young Harry. He shows up every now and then and demands to see Donna, his grandmother."

"And that's a problem?" said Tony softly.

"I'm afraid so. He asks her for money. And she gives it to him but he never pays it back. Her daughters have told the home managers not to let him in. It's bad enough that he takes her money but he frightens her as well. He was a sweet boy but he didn't grow up well."

The sound of the raised voices increased and most of the elderly people in the room became aware that something was wrong. They began to look a little anxious. Tony went into federal agent mode although he was acutely aware that he had no weapon or badge to back him up.

"Just stay where you are, everyone," he said calmly, "I'm sure there's nothing to be worried about."

The noisy young man burst his way into the lounge with one of the Home staff protesting behind him.

"Grandma!" he shouted, "Where are you? I need to talk to you. This is the last time, I promise."

"Why don't you lower your voice," said Tony walking towards him, trying to look unthreatening, "you're frightening people."

Tony's calming approach didn't have the desired effect. Harry flushed red in anger and fear and he produced a gun, "How did you find me so quickly?" he demanded.

"What?" said Tony in bewilderment. Then he looked more closely and realised that he recognised the wielder of the gun although the name was different. "Petty Officer Smith?" he said.

"Not Petty Officer anymore! You saw to that."

"All right, Hal," said Tony reasonably, "but I didn't have anything to do with you being discharged."

"Don't lie!" shouted Harry/Hal as he waved the gun around a bit more, "you all lie!"

"I'm not lying," said Tony, "and I'm only here visiting. I'm not on duty."

"Doesn't matter," said Harry wildly.

"What have you done, Hal? Or shall I call you Harry? Is that what they call you here?"

"I don't care what you call me," wailed Harry. "How did you find me?"

"I wasn't looking for you, Harry," said Tony, "I was already here. Having tea. Do you want something to eat?"

"I don't want anything. I just want my Grandma."

"You can't see her," said Tony firmly, "what do you want from her?"
"I need to get away," cried Harry, "and you're stopping me."

"Why do you need to get away, Harry?" asked Tony.

"You know!" said Harry.

"Tell me," said Millie, "you can trust me, Harry. You've known me for years."

"Mrs Lacey?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry."

"It's all gone wrong," Harry told her.

"What's gone wrong, dear?"

"I didn't mean it to," said Harry.

"I'm sure you didn't mean it to. Can you tell me?" said Millie.

"I killed my friend," sobbed Harry, "my best friend."

A gasp swept the room as people heard this. Tony tensed a bit more as he tried to work out how he could get to Harry without getting anyone hurt.

"How did you do that?" asked Millie.

"Stop it!" shouted Harry, "I know what you're doing!"

"What's that, Harry?" asked Millie with continued patience.

"You're trying to confuse me. Everyone always tries to confuse me. Don't move!" This last order was directed at Tony who had tried to approach a bit nearer. He stopped and raised his hands placatingly and directed a warning look at Millie trying to tell her to stay still.

"If I can't get money from Grandma, I'll get it from the rest of you!" Harry decided. "Go on. Get your money out."

"Harry," said Tony, "they haven't got any money. They're just here having tea."

"They've got rings. Watches! I'll have them," said Harry wildly.

"Go on," said Tony, "everyone. Take your jewellery off. It'll be all right." He took his own watch off and laid it on a table near Harry. The elderly residents began to take off their own rings and watches but the process was agonising to Harry as many of their fingers had swollen and the rings came off slowly. Watches were difficult to undo with arthritic hands. Harry became increasingly frantic and Tony kept a close eye on him.

Finally one of the oldest women tried to undo the catch on a necklace but couldn't cope with the tiny lock. With a grunt of impatience Harry strode towards her, turning his back on Tony for a moment. Fearing that the woman was about to be hurt, Tony took his opportunity and slammed into Harry, knocking the gun out of his hand. He drew back his arm to deliver a punch and then realised that the gun was not Harry's only weapon: a knife was about to be stabbed into Tony's stomach. Tony managed to twist at the last minute but he was too late to stop the knife hitting him.
Chapter 5

Hal Smith's *Goldsboro Gizmos* was housed in a rundown warehouse on the outskirts of Goldsboro.

"Good thing he does most of his trade on-line," commented McGee as Gibbs brought the sedan to a halt.

"Or sells to his friends," suggested Bishop as she lurched slightly unsteadily getting out of the car.

Gibbs didn't comment but simply strode up to the warehouse and tried the door.


"You do that," said Gibbs grimly.

Bishop peered through a grimy window, "Lots of tyres," she said. "But of course, there would be. He sells tyres."

Gibbs rolled his eyes at this input from his techno whiz kids but didn't need to say anything as Tim came back, "It's all shut up back there as well, Boss. Guy in the place next door says Smith isn't here that much. Does most of his work from home."

"We got an address on where he lives?" asked Gibbs.

"Yellowwood Drive, Jacksonville. I'll look up directions."

"Let's go," said Gibbs.

An hour or so later they were approaching Jacksonville when Gibbs' phone rang.

"Gibbs."

"Ah, Jethro," came Ducky's voice.

"Can it wait, Duck? Kinda busy here."

"This is important, Jethro," said Ducky with uncharacteristic brevity. "I'm standing outside the Milsom Bay Retirement Home. You may remember that Mrs Lacey said she intended taking Anthony for a visit?"

"Yeah?"

"It appears that some sort of altercation is taking place inside the Home. There is a young man with a gun who seems to be making threatening gestures. Jethro: Anthony and Mrs Lacey are among those in the lounge. I have called the police," said Ducky, "but I thought you would also want to know."

"Be there soon, Duck," said Gibbs as he hit the gas.

"Really?" said Ducky, "I know your driving skills are extraordinary, Jethro but it is several hours drive from Washington to Milsom Bay."

"Not in DC," said Gibbs, "we're about half hour out from Milsom Bay."
"Oh," was all Ducky could think to say, "then I await your arrival with interest."

"Uh, Boss," said McGee, "we just missed the turn to Smith's place. But if you take the next right we can loop back."

"Not going to Smith's place," said Gibbs, "we're going to Milsom Bay. The Retirement Home. Look it up."

"Boss?" said McGee trying to puzzle out a reason for this change. Somehow he didn't think it was because Gibbs was scoping out retirement homes.

"Ducky's there," said Gibbs, "there's some sort of hold up. DiNozzo's involved."

"What's going on?" asked Bishop.

"Don't know. That's what we're going to find out," said Gibbs.

NCIS

In rather less than Gibbs' estimate of thirty minutes, he drew the sedan to a screeching halt outside the Retirement Home. Several police cars and an ambulance were parked nearby and the MCRT could see police officers dealing with questions from the concerned inhabitants of the Bay. With a practised eye Gibbs singled out the person who looked in charge and, holding his badge in front of him, marched in his direction. He was halted by a voice calling from the direction of the ambulance,

"Agent Gibbs?"

Gibbs walked towards the ambulance where he saw Millie sitting white-faced on the steps.

"Dr Mallard said you were on the way, Agent Gibbs."

"Mrs Lacey? Are you all right?" asked Gibbs.

"Yes, now that it's all over. It was … frightening."

"What happened, Mrs Lacey?" asked McGee.

"It all happened so suddenly," she said, "although it also seemed to go on for ever. I'm sorry, I'm a bit confused."

"Take your time," said Gibbs relaxing slightly now that he knew the incident was over.

"We were just having a pleasant afternoon," said Millie, "talking to the older folk when Harry Smith burst in. He wanted to see Donna. His grandmother."

"Why was that a problem?" asked Gibbs.

"He's been difficult in the past. The home said he couldn't come without an appointment: he frightens her, you see. But this time he wouldn't take no for an answer. He started shouting. The residents were getting frightened."

"What happened next?" asked Gibbs even as he looked round trying to catch sight of Tony.

"Tony stood up and tried to calm him down," said Millie, "but then it all seemed to go crazy."

"How so?" asked Gibbs.
"Harry pulled a gun out. He seemed to recognise Tony. Said that Tony had been looking for him. But I don't think he had, Tony looked really surprised. Harry said something about having to get away because he'd killed his friend."

"Boss," whispered McGee to Gibbs, "you don't think Harry is Hal, do you?"

"Hal," said Millie, "that's what Tony called him to start with. Do you know him too?"

"Yes," said Gibbs grimly, "what happened next?"

"Harry said he wanted money so he told everyone to take off their rings and watches and jewellery and hand it over to him."

"What did Tony do?" asked McGee anxiously.

"Nothing. I mean, he took his own watch off as a sort of example and then he just kept watch over Harry. And I thought it was all going to be all right but some of the older people took a long time to take their jewellery off and Harry began to get impatient. And … and …"

"What?" asked Gibbs.

"Rose couldn't get her necklace off and that seemed to finish Harry. He raised his hand to her. We all thought he was going to hit her."

"And?" asked McGee.

"It was all so fast," marvelled Millie, "one moment Tony was there and the next moment he'd knocked the gun out of Harry's hand."

Gibbs, McGee and Bishop breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"But then it turned out that Harry had a knife as well. Tony was reaching for the gun when Harry stabbed at him. It was dreadful."

"Did he hit Tony?" asked Ellie.

"Yes, dear, he did," said Millie. "But Tony still managed to grab Harry so he couldn't get to the gun. It must have been very painful but he managed to hold on and marched him towards the door. He wanted to get him out of the lounge, you see. And he would have managed it too but …"

"But what?" said McGee.

"George DaCosta didn't take too kindly to that idea."

"Who's George DaCosta?" asked Ellie.

"Fought in the Korean War," said Millie, "likes to talk about fighting spirit."

"And what did he do?" asked McGee.

"In the war?" asked Millie, "I'm afraid I don't know. But I'm sure he'd be very pleased to tell you if you asked."

"No, not in the war," said Tim, "this afternoon."

"Oh, I see. Yes, of course," said Millie, "well, he hit Harry on the head with his walking stick. Harry
went down like a sack of potatoes. Took Tony down with him."

"And how is Tony?" asked Gibbs in increasing anxiety as he heard this catalogue of accidents.

"I'm here, Boss," came a tired voice.

Gibbs looked round and saw Tony, escorted by Ducky, walking from the Retirement Home.

"What you doing here, Boss?" he asked, "and McGoo. And Probish! Does the Director know you're here? He won't be pleased."

"We had a case. Hal Smith: he's been selling defective tyres to old friends in the Navy. One of them died in a crash as a result," said Gibbs.

"Oh," said Tony, "that makes more sense that you all driving all this way to see me."

"We missed you," said Bishop earnestly.

"Yeah," said McGee, "what she said."

"Ahem," said Ducky, "I hate to interrupt this touching reunion but Dr Murray is waiting to stitch Anthony up."

"What's the damage, Duck?" asked Gibbs.

"Hey," objected Tony, "I am here, you know."

Ducky took no notice of the interruption, "Smith's knife embedded itself in Anthony's forearm. It has created a rather nasty gash which has been bleeding profusely. The temporary bandage needs to be replaced with a more permanent measure."

"Not my fault, Boss," said Tony. "I was minding my own business until Smith came bursting in. I was just trying to keep him calm but then he went for one of the old ladies. I'd been planning to let him take what he wanted and leave. Didn't want to risk taking him down with all the old folk around but when he went for her, I didn't have a choice."

"Not your fault," agreed Gibbs.

"I used that move you taught me," said Tony, "twisted at the last minute and used the momentum to take him down."

"Don't think you twisted enough, Tony," said McGee, pointing at the bandage on Tony's arm.

"You may be right, McHeartless," said Tony, "work in progress. I didn't quite manage to get out of the way but, trust me, I'd rather have the knife in my arm than in my heart where it was heading for. Meant I could keep a hold on him. I was walking him to the door when General George intervened."

"You did well, DiNozzo," praised Gibbs.

"And now," said Ducky, "Dr Murray awaits you in his clinic, Anthony."

"Hang on," said Tony, "you OK, Millie?"

Millie managed a somewhat tremulous smile, "I'm fine. Goodness, how often do you do this sort of thing, Tony? I don't know how you cope with it. Once was more than enough, I can assure you."
"You did well," said Tony, "you tried to talk him down."

"Didn't seem to work very well," said Millie.

"You tried," said Tony, "that's the important thing."

"I suppose so," said Millie doubtfully, "what's going to happen to Harry now?"

"He's in a lot of trouble," said Gibbs, "not just for this but for other stuff as well."

"Oh dear," said Millie, "I can't help but remember what a lovely child he was. And Donna will be so upset. Oh, well."

"Can I ask? Is George really a general?" asked Bishop.

"What?" said Millie, "oh, I don't know, I think it's just a nickname. But there are several ex-navy and army people in the Home."

"Yes?" asked Gibbs in sudden interest.

"Yes," confirmed Millie, "some of them used to serve at Norfolk or Camp Lejeune. They liked the area and carried on living here when they left the forces. And some of them have family still serving at Camp Lejeune: it means that their family can keep an eye on them while they're based here."

"Anthony," said Ducky crossly, "do I have to remind you that Dr Murray is waiting for you?"

"Ducky," said Tony, "why don't you take Millie home? I think she needs a cup of your specially brewed tea."

"I'll take DiNozzo to see the doc," said Gibbs, "you take Mrs Lacey home, Duck."

Ducky opened his mouth to argue. He was looking forward to a conversation with the Milsom Bay doctor across Tony's wound but he saw the glint in Gibbs' eye which suggested he was plotting something. He gave way graciously.

"That sounds an excellent idea, Jethro. Mrs Lacey, allow me the honour of escorting you home. I am a great believer in the restorative benefits of a well brewed cup of tea and it will be my pleasure to initiate you into my methods." He drew her to her feet and led her away gallantly. As they left, Gibbs heard him say, "And I wonder, dear lady, if you happen to have baked that Dundee cake yet?"

"Boss," said Tony, "I can go to the doc's on my own, you know."

"No trouble," said Gibbs happily, "I want to make the sure he does it right. McGee, Bishop: go see the police chief. Tell him we have an interest in his prisoner."

"Take care, Tony," said Bishop as she and McGee went off to follow their instructions.

"Now," said Gibbs, "where's the doctor?" Tony looked suspiciously at Gibbs' happy face and pointed across the road. "That blue building," he said, "what are you up to, Boss?"

Gibbs shrugged innocently and then a thought seemed to strike him and he called after the junior agents, "Get a full list of residents of the Home."

"What are you up to, Boss?" asked Tony again.

"Just being thorough," said Gibbs as he shepherded Tony into the clinic.
Ducky settled Millie with John Sutherland and then hastened back to the clinic to give his advice and to discuss the various treatment options which might be available.

"Oh, my," he exclaimed when he entered Dr Murray's treatment room, "oh, my!"

"Thank God," said Tony, "tell them this is nuts!"

Dr Murray beamed when he saw Ducky. He was fond of Tony, not least because he seemed to liven the place up so much when he visited. The doctor liked Tony's friends and had a particular soft spot for Dr Mallard; Milsom Bay was a small community and he got few opportunities to talk about medicine so was always pleased to welcome Ducky. Ducky had always thought that the doctor was an extremely efficient doctor but, as he gazed at Tony, he was beginning to have doubts.

"You seem to have …" Ducky trailed off as, unusually, he found himself lost for words.

"Gone completely overboard," said Tony crossly.

Ducky didn't usually trust Tony's medical judgement but he couldn't help but think Tony had a point this time. His arm was wrapped in a huge bandage and it appeared that Ducky had interrupted the doctor from placing the injured limb in a large sling. Tony had a small scratch where he had bumped his head falling to the ground following General George's intervention. At least, Ducky remembered it as being a minor wound not really needing a six inch band aid to protect it.

Ducky was always courteous when dealing with fellow medics, "you seem to have been very … er … cautious in your treatment, Dr Murry," he said.

"Need to be thorough," said Gibbs, "don't want to take any risks."

Ducky considered this. He knew that, beneath the gruff exterior, Gibbs cared for his agents but he rarely mollycoddled them and he couldn't help but think this excessive swaddling counted as mollycoddling.

"Jethro?" he asked.

"Ah," said Gibbs, "we've got another visitor," and he waved in welcome to a young man with a camera who was standing in the doorway.

"Come in, Colin," said Doc Murray genially, "we're all ready for you."

"Boss?" said Tony uneasily.

Gibbs ignored Tony and gestured again to Colin to draw near. "There he is," said Gibbs, "the hero of the hour."

"Boss?" said Tony again.

"Great opportunity for you, Colin," said Gibbs, "taking a picture of the person who rescued a whole room of old people. Go on. Get started!"

Colin didn't know Agent Gibbs but seemed to be in awe of him already and dutifully snapped away for several minutes.

"That's great," said Gibbs cheerfully, "send me some copies, won't you?"
Colin nodded and, feeling he had been dismissed, scuttled off. As soon as he'd gone, Dr Murray went into action.

"Hmm," he said innocently, "on reflection, perhaps I did go a mite overboard with this dressing. I think I'll take some of it off. And I guess you don't need that huge Band-Aid on your head either. I remember now where I put the smaller ones. I'll use one of those instead."

In a matter of moments, Tony's bandages were reduced to a more manageable size although the doctor told him to use the sling for a few days.

"Thanks, Doc," said Gibbs, "great work."

"Always a pleasure to work with an artist, Agent Gibbs," said Dr Murray.

"Come on, DiNozzo, let's get you home," said Gibbs, "been a long day."

NCIS

Later that evening Gibbs and Tony were sitting in Tony's cabin. Ducky, Bishop and McGee were staying at Millie's café.

"You sorted out your Dad's stuff?" asked Tony.

Gibbs was momentarily surprised. The worry over Tony's suspension and then the trip to North Carolina had made him temporarily forget about Jackson.

"Yep," he said, "All done."

"Makes you think," said Tony.

"What does?" asked Gibbs.

"How quickly a life is tidied away. Few trips to Goodwill and the city dump and it's all gone."

"Some things," agreed Gibbs, "but not the important things. Things, money ... they're not a man's real legacy."

"Not a man like Jackson's," agreed Tony, "or yours, Boss. But DiNozzos? Don't tell Senior that money doesn't matter."

"You'll leave more than money," said Gibbs, "you're not like your father."

"Looks as if I will be leaving though, doesn't it, Boss?" said Tony, "I mean, not dying. But if Vance has his way I won't be at NCIS much longer. I can't see a way out of this, Boss. I realised today, in the Home, how much being an agent means to me. I can't imagine not doing it. What am I going to do?"

"Hey," said Gibbs, "leave it to me. I'm on your six."
Chapter 6

Gibbs and the team stayed long enough the next day to enjoy one of Millie's breakfasts and then set off on the journey back to DC. Ducky had decided to stay on for another day but had found time to discuss tactics with Gibbs.

"Jethro, my advice would be to tread softly with the Director."

"Duck?" said Gibbs.

"I suspect you have some scheme in mind. I would counsel, however, against backing Leon into a corner. Allow him a way out."

"What makes you think I'm plotting something, Duck?" asked Gibbs.

"Many years of friendship makes me think that, Jethro. You are not quite as inscrutable as you believe, you know. You need to continue to work with the Director in the future so I would advise that you do not 'rub his nose in it' too much. Recent events have shown that he is not to be trifled with."

"I'll take that under advisement, Duck," said Gibbs noncommittally. "McGee, Bishop, finish up. We're heading back"

McGee and Bishop hurried out of the café. By the look on Ellie's face she had probably discovered a new 'thinking' food. Millie hastened after them,

"Agent Gibbs. I made you all some sandwiches for when you stop on your way back." She handed a large package through to McGee.

"Thanks, Mrs Lacey," said Tim, "but Gibbs doesn't usually want to stop on journeys. We'll eat them on the road."

"But it's a long drive," said Millie in concern, "I hope you've all used the bathroom already."

Stricken looks dawned on the faces of McGee and Bishop; Gibbs' peremptory summons had taken them by surprise. Gibbs laughed and drove off with a screech of the tyres. Tony joined Millie as she watched them leave.

"You know," he said conversationally, "if it had been me who mentioned bathroom breaks like that I would have been accused of cruelty."

"Why?" said Millie innocently.

"Because I would have done it to put the idea of using the head into their minds," admitted Tony, "it's a good tactic. I might have to use it on them some time." He finished with a sigh.

"What's wrong?" asked Millie, "is your arm hurting you?"

"It's fine," said Tony automatically, "No. I was just thinking that I may not get a chance to tease the Probies again. Not if Vance has his way."

"I'm sure Agent Gibbs has it all in hand," said Millie comfortingy.

"Of course he has," said Tony with forced cheerfulness, "the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs is on the
"Melissa, the manager of the Retirement Home phoned," said Millie, "she hopes you'll go visit sometime today. They want to say thank you."

"You know, Millie," said Tony, "it wasn't that big of a deal. It's the sort of thing I'm trained to do and I probably should have done it better. It was a bit of a rookie mistake getting knifed like that."

"Don't be silly," said Millie firmly.

"No, really," said Tony, "it's the sort of thing I learned at the Police Academy. And you know, it was actually General George who was the hero."

"It may be run of the mill, all in a day's job to you, Tony," said Millie, "but it's a big deal for us. Let the Home say thank you."

"OK," said Tony reluctantly, "perhaps I can take Ducky with me."

"And you do know, don't you," continued Millie, "that George wasn't actually a general? I asked Melissa this morning. She says that he was a Lance Corporal. Although he's living it up today and everyone's calling him General."

Tony laughed, "at least someone's done well out of this."

NCIS

The trip back to DC took longer than it would have if Gibbs had been on his own because he relented and allowed his passengers a brief pit stop on the way back. His kindness may have been influenced by his own need for a caffeine injection. Despite the 'delay' Gibbs was back at the Navy Yard in time to catch the Director before he left for the day.

The Director was sitting in his office waiting for a Gibbs irruption. McGee had reported in to Abby about the events of the previous day and that they were on their way back and the rumour had made its way up to the Director's eyrie.

The Director straightened a little as he heard a knock on the door. In some ways a knock was an encouraging sign but it had a no-nonsense, 'I'm coming in' sort of sound which made Leon wish he had left early that day. He fiddled with a folder that was already placed perfectly symmetrically on his desk and called,

"Enter."

Gibbs strolled in, looking to the Director's jaundiced eye, as if he owned the place. Vance decided to try and take the initiative,

"Good work on catching Smith," he praised.

Gibbs shrugged, "it was mostly Abby. She didn't let go of the mysterious goo on the tyre."

"I'll remember to thank Miss Scuito," said Vance. He paused, looked down at the work on his desk and then looked up in apparent surprise, "is there something else I can do for you, Gibbs?"

"DiNozzo," said Gibbs briefly.

"His disciplinary hearing has been brought forward," said Leon, "early next week. HR have emailed him the details today."
"He apprehended our suspect yesterday," said Gibbs.

Vance pretended surprise, "he's not supposed to be working. How did that happen?"

"It happened because he's an agent," hissed Gibbs, "and a damned good one!"

"I'm not denying that he has certain … skills," acknowledged the Director, "but that isn't the point. The point is failure to follow the chain of command."

Gibbs ignored this, "DiNozzo saved a roomful of old folk yesterday," he said, "when he was unarmed and unprepared."

"I'd expect nothing less of a seasoned and experienced special agent," said Vance coolly.

"And was injured in the process," said Gibbs. He took his phone out and hit a button, "McGee. Send those photos to the Director."

"Gibbs?" asked Leon.

"Check your email, Director," drawled Gibbs.

Vance huffed a little but did as Gibbs 'requested'.

"Good God," he exclaimed when he saw the pictures, "what happened to DiNozzo?"

Gibbs suppressed a smile. "Like I said, he was hurt taking down the perp."

"Is he all right?" asked the Director.

Gibbs was mollified to hear the note of genuine concern but didn't soften. "He will be. In time. He's quite the hero down in Milsom Bay, you know. Local paper sent a photographer along; he took those photos." Gibbs stared blandly back at Vance, not revealing that it had been he who had called the Milsom Mercury and suggested they might be interested in access to the local 'hero'.

"I see," said Vance cautiously. He suspected something was coming but didn't want to anticipate it.

"Managed to hold them off from running the photo or naming DiNozzo," said Gibbs virtuously.

"Yes?" said Vance.

"Not sure how long I'll be able to do that," said Gibbs thoughtfully, "it's a big story down there. But I figured you might not want the story run, Leon."

"Why not?" said Vance, deciding to try and call Gibbs' bluff, "good story. Makes NCIS look good."

"Until they probe a bit further," said Gibbs, "and find out that the heroic agent was there because he was suspended. That the hero might be about to be dismissed for misconduct. Not sure that's the sort of publicity the Navy wants, Leon."

"Hmm," said Vance thoughtfully.

"And once they run it," said Gibbs, "the nationals'll probably pick it up. Who knows where it might end up?"

"I see," said Vance, "and you're telling me this – why?"
Once again, Gibbs didn't answer directly. "Milsom Bay has a lot of navy retirees," he mused. "Some of them live in the Retirement Home."

"Yes?" said Vance.

Gibbs smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. It was the sort of smile Vance had seen on his face when Gibbs sensed he was about to nail a suspect.

"Yes," said Gibbs. McGee and Bishop had been busy on the return journey and had cross-referenced the names of the residents with serving members of the Navy. "Yes. Deputy Commander and the Chief of Staff at Lejeune both have elderly relatives in the Milsom Bay Home." Leon's poker face didn't waver but Gibbs thought he could spot a tell. "They were real pleased to hear that DiNozzo had saved their folks," said Gibbs, "they said they'd be contacting you to express their thanks and recommend a commendation for DiNozzo."

Gibbs finished speaking and gazed at the Director. Gibbs knew he could expand on the scenarios he had already sketched but, although that would be satisfying, he remembered Ducky's words about not overplaying his hand and not pushing Leon into a corner from which he would come out fighting.

Leon was a good poker player and he knew when it was time to fold.

"What you want, Gibbs?" he said.

Gibbs narrowed his eyes as he considered whether he had done enough.

"DiNozzo reinstated," he said.

"Very well," agreed Vance.

"With no written reprimand on his file," said Gibbs.

Vance twitched at this but Gibbs pressed his advantage, "I guess SecNav will want to hear about what DiNozzo did. How much it was appreciated by senior commanders."

"Very well," agreed Vance, "no written reprimand on his file."

"Good," said Gibbs, getting ready to leave.

"But," said Vance, stopping him in his tracks, "but I will interview him on his return and issue a verbal warning about future behaviour."

Vance and Gibbs stared at each other in something like a standoff. Finally, Gibbs shrugged. He had got what he wanted and Gibbs had never taken much notice of verbal warnings. This way he was letting Vance get something out of the whole situation.

"OK," Gibbs agreed. "But I'll have to wait."

"Why?" asked Vance.

"DiNozzo can't drive at the moment. Not with his injury. I'll go down at the weekend and pick him up. Have him here on Monday morning."

Vance gritted his teeth, "Fine," he conceded. "And now, Gibbs, I think you have work to complete on the Smith case. Don't let me keep you."
"Never," said Gibbs somewhat ambiguously, "good to talk, Leon."

Gibbs left the room with his customary confident stride but made the concession of closing the door quietly behind him. He might have been surprised to see a smile of relief cross the Director's face.

Vance had been feeling uneasy about DiNozzo almost since the day he issued the suspension notice. He was still sure that he was technically in the right but he wasn't sure he had acted from the right motives. Vance had been enraged when DiNozzo had defied his order about not contacting Gibbs although, on reflection, he had realised that the agent had been caught between a rock and a hard place. Gibbs would have been furious if DiNozzo hadn't kept him in the loop and Vance was fair enough to acknowledge that DiNozzo had made an astute call in pacifying his direct boss rather a more removed one.

These were all realisations that Vance had come to after taking time to think but he soon saw that the emotions of the events surrounding Jackson Gibbs' death had swayed him in ways he hadn't noticed. Jackson's was the first funeral Leon had attended since his wife's and it had brought back many memories for him. He had heard that in many ways attending any funeral always brought back memories of other such ceremonies and that had certainly been the case for the Director.

The newly stirred emotions had reminded Leon of the depth and pain of bereavement and he had been convinced once more that he had been right to try to bench Gibbs in the immediate aftermath of his father's death. And it wasn't just sadness that had overwhelmed him again; he had also re-experienced the anger following Jackie's death and in that wave of fury he had wanted to lash out. DiNozzo had been the obvious target: he had disobeyed Vance's direct order and had the misfortune to be the sort of agent the Director most disapproved of.

Vance understood ability and hard work but he was suspicious of flair and panache: that was why he distrusted DiNozzo. He knew that the agent did good work and got good results but it all seemed haphazard and unreliable to a Director who wanted to be able to predict performance rather than being constantly surprised by it. This unease about DiNozzo, combined with his own tempestuous emotions, had made the Director behave slightly irrationally but he hadn't been able to figure a way out of the predicament without looking weak.

That was the reason for the relieved smile when Gibbs had gone. Gibbs had provided him with a way out albeit one which still made him look a bit wrong-footed. Vance decided it was a price he was willing to pay. The whole agency was used to Gibbs manipulating people to get his own way; this would be just another example and Leon had the satisfaction of knowing that he hadn't actually backed down from his belief that DiNozzo had broken the chain of command. Moreover, he would have the opportunity of delivering the verbal warning and making clear his position to the agent. All in all it was as good a result as he could have expected.

NCIS

Ducky obligingly accompanied Tony and Ruskin to the Retirement Home but, to Tony's surprise, Ducky grimaced as they stood outside the main door.

"Ducky?" said Tony in concern. "Something up?"

"I fear it brings back memories of visiting Mother in her latter years," said Ducky a little morosely.

"I'd forgotten about that," said Tony.

"And I fear it also reminds me of my own advanced years," confessed Ducky, "and the thought that I may be soon seeking such a residence on my own behalf."
"Never," said Tony robustly, "you'll outlive us all, Ducky."

"You are very kind, my boy," said Ducky, "but also a liar. And apparently not versed in human physiology."

"Ducky?"

"In the nature of things I will predecease you, Anthony."

"Oh," said Tony.

"Although," said Ducky more cheerfully, "you do have a very dangerous job so perhaps I won't!"

"If Director Vance has his way I won't have a dangerous job much longer," Tony pointed out.

"Don't worry. I suspect Jethro has a plan," said Ducky.

"I hope so," said Tony, "I don't want to be unemployed. I've got goldfish to maintain."

"I am sure that is the paramount reason for you wishing to remain in work," said Ducky gravely. "It has nothing to do with you enjoying your job and being very good at it?"

"May be," conceded Tony.

"Nil desperandum," said Ducky.

"Ducky?"

"Don't despair," translated Ducky, "remember you have Leroy Jethro Gibbs on your side. Or, as he would say, on your six."

"Thanks, Ducky."

Ducky coughed, "There is something I should tell you, however."

"Ducky?"

"My own stratagem with the Director did not work in the way I had hoped."

"Ducky?" said Tony suspiciously, "what did you do?"

"I tried to prevail on the Director to reconsider his actions," said Ducky.

"And? I'm guessing that didn't go well?" asked Tony.

"The Director was very courteous," said Ducky, "but implacable, I fear."

"He didn't suspend you as well, did he?" asked Tony.

"No," said Ducky.

"Good," Tony breathed in relief.

"No. I tendered my resignation," said Ducky.

"You did what?" demanded Tony.
"I informed him that he was creating an unhealthy atmosphere of suspicion in the Agency and that it was not one in which I was prepared to work."

"What happened?" asked Tony.

"I resigned," said Ducky simply.

"And he accepted it?" said Tony.

"He did. I fear I made the mistake that I have urged Jethro to avoid," said Ducky.

"What?"

"I gave him an ultimatum that he could not back down from."

"But you can take it back, can't you?" said Tony, "Say you did it in the heat of the moment?"

"I daresay I could," agreed Ducky, "but I shall not do so."

"Why not? You love NCIS?"

"Yes, I do but some things are more important. Respect for one's leaders being one of them. I find I no longer want to work where there is a possibility of such things happening. But, never fear, dear boy, I am sure that Gibbs will be more successful than I was and you will be restored to your rightful position."

"Ducky … I don't know what to say," said a stunned Tony, "I can't believe you did that for me."

"Neither can I," admitted Ducky, "I took the letter into my interview with Leon but never really expected that I would need to present it."

"Then take it back," urged Tony, "don't leave for my sake. What will the autopsy gremlin do without you?"

"Anthony, I have no intention of asking to rescind my notice. You were indeed the catalyst for this happening but there is a principle at stake here which is more important. I will indeed miss Mr Palmer and all my co-workers but Mallards have been renowned throughout history for adherence to principles. I will not betray my ancestry. I am a Mallard and proud of it."

"Ducky," began Tony, still clearly unhappy.

"And besides," continued Ducky, "I find I am beginning to relish the prospect of more time available to pursue my many interests. I may travel more. I will be able to improve my golf handicap and I have been invited to become Secretary of my local Real Tennis club. I suspect that I will soon wonder how I ever had the time to come to work."

"Are you sure, Ducky?" asked Tony.

"Completely, Anthony, do not give it another thought."

"Thank you, Ducky. For trying, I mean. It means a lot to me."

"Not at all," said Ducky briskly, "and now, I believe some sort of celebration awaits us. Onwards and upwards!"

Despite his misgivings Ducky enjoyed his afternoon immensely. He found satisfaction in sharing
common childhood experiences with the residents who were his contemporaries and, it must be admitted, also took pleasure in knowing that he was so much fitter than they were and, not as yet, in need of assisted accommodation.

Tony was cooed over by many of the female residents but found that he was somewhat overshadowed by the decisive actions of General George who had overnight become the leading light of the small community. It turned out that Rose, the lady who Smith had been about to attack, was the great aunt of the Deputy Commander from Camp Lejeune and he made a special trip to the Home to check on her and thank Tony. Ruskin took up his favourite position on Tony's feet as if to proclaim his ownership of this popular human and, all in all, Tony couldn't remember a better afternoon.

Tony and Ducky were in the middle of a protracted leave taking when Tony's phone rang.

"DiNozzo."

"Gibbs. Director wants to see you on Monday."

"Monday?" asked Tony.

"Told him that was the first day you were available," said Gibbs.

"Boss?" said Tony doubting that this was a good tactic.

"Don't worry, DiNozzo, it's all in hand. I'll be down on Saturday. Make sure you have beer waiting."

Gibbs ended the call without waiting for a reply.

"Is all well, Anthony?" asked Ducky as he looked at Tony's puzzled face.

"I don't know," said Tony honestly, "I don't know."
Ducky left Milsom Bay the next day leaving behind a Tony who was still concerned and stunned by the news of his resignation and apprehensive about the upcoming interview with the Director.

"I am sure all will be well, Anthony," said Ducky as he sat at the wheel of his Morgan, "Jethro may have the social skills of a grizzly bear but he has the best interests of his team at heart."

"And he hates to be told what to do," said Tony, wondering which was Gibbs' driving motive in this case.

"There is that," conceded Ducky, "but I think in this case that the two motivations combine to work in your favour."

"I hope so," said Tony, "and look, here comes Milly to see you off as well."

"Dr Mallard, I thought you might enjoy some of my shortbread; freshly made last night."

Ducky accepted the tin with a smile, "You are too kind, Mrs Lacey. You have already made me that delicious Dundee cake."

"Any friend of Tony's is a friend of mine," said Millie firmly.

"Then I thank you most sincerely. I can't quite understand how Anthony ever manages to tear himself away from this charming place."

"I hear there may be a vacancy at the Retirement Home," said Tony cheekily, "if you're looking for a place to live here?"

"Thank you, Anthony. I am pleased to say that I do not intend to be joining the residents of the Home for some time to come, delightful though they are. Take care of that arm. Goodbye all." He raised his hat courteously and drove off.

"What a gentleman," sighed Millie as she watched him go.

"Millie?" said Tony speculatively.

"Not like that," she replied, "I just meant that he is a very kind and polite man."

"If you say so," said Tony, "but you may have a chance. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach and you're certainly on your way there with all this cake and shortbread."

"You've got too much time on your hands," said Millie with mock severity, "it's sending your imagination into overdrive."

"You may be right," acknowledged Tony. "I think I'll go and see John. See if I can annoy him as well."

"You're not annoying me, Tony," said Millie, "but you're overthinking things, you know."

"Don't say that to my team," said Tony, "thinking isn't something they accuse me of."

Millie didn't reply but let Tony go. She was troubled about Tony. She knew that Gibbs had arranged something with the Director and that Tony was trying to trust in that but she suspected that there was
something else on his mind: he was uncharacteristically seesawing between abstraction and forced cheerfulness.

Tony found John sketching on the beach.

"New picture?" he asked.

"Don't know," said John, "possibly. I just like to come and draw sometimes. Doesn't have to be for a purpose although it's surprising how often it gives me an idea."

"Like McHemingway and his 'free writing'," said Tony absently.

"What's the matter, Tony?" asked John, deciding not to pursue the free writing comment. "I thought everything was sorted out with work."

"Probably is," said Tony, "Gibbs didn't go into much detail but he's usually trustworthy. And in this case he's got the added incentive of getting one over on the Director."

"Then what's wrong?" said John, not looking at Tony but gazing out to sea.

"Ducky," said Tony finding it easier to talk to John once he wasn't looking at him directly, "He went in to bat for me with the Director and ended up unemployed."

"I thought he resigned," said John, "he went voluntarily."

"He didn't think he had a choice," said Tony, "it was a matter of principle."

"There's always a choice," said John, "and at this stage in his career I'm guessing Dr Mallard has different choices to yours."

"Guess so," said Tony, "but it's quite a responsibility."

"What is?"

"Knowing that someone risked their job for you. And then there's Gibbs. He went in to bat for me too. Semper Fi."

"What?" asked John.

"Gibbs' motto. For him it involves never leaving a man behind."

"Good motto," said John, "Dr Mallard and Agent Gibbs are both good men. In their different ways."

"And you are very tactful," laughed Tony, "and very right!" Then in a more serious tone of voice, he added, "it's a lot to live up to."

"Always good to have role models," said John somehow not sure he was getting to the bottom of what was troubling Tony.

"Sure," agreed Tony, "I'm going to go and collect Ruskin. I've got to see Doc Murray later and he'll enjoy the walk."

John watched him go, unaware that he was wearing the same concerned expression as Millie had earlier in the day.

NCISNCIS
Tony had only been back in the cabin for a few minutes when there was a knock at the door. He opened the door to find an unexpected visitor,

"Director Vance! What are you doing here? I mean, can I help you?"

"Agent DiNozzo," said the Director, "I was at a meeting at Norfolk and thought I'd take the opportunity of coming to see you. May I come in?"

"Of course. You don't mind dogs, do you?"

Tony nurtured a hope that Ruskin might growl at the newcomer or perhaps turn his back on him but the ever friendly Ruskin simply bounced with delight at being introduced to another human being.

"How are you, Agent DiNozzo?" asked the Director, "I was concerned when I saw the extent of your injuries. Although they seem to have improved somewhat," he added drily.

"Ah," said Tony in embarrassment, "I think the doc and Gibbs might have overreacted a tad. It's not as bad as it looked in those pictures."

"I see," said the Director gravely as he began to see something of Gibbs' plotting. "You did well, DiNozzo. I've had a number of calls from grateful relatives of the Home's residents. SecNav is pleased."

"I didn't have a choice," said Tony, "once I was there I couldn't let Smith hurt any of them."

"I haven't come to criticise your actions," said Vance mildly, "you don't have to be an agent to work to defend people."

"And sometimes you have to make a judgement call," said Tony, "do what you think is right."

"Yes," said Vance, his eyes narrowing slightly at this possible dig about the needing to do what was right rather than what was authorised. He coughed, "I believe Agent Gibbs has told you that I would be interviewing you on Monday when you return to the Navy Yard?"

"Yes, Director."

"We could, if you are willing, have that conversation here and now. On a less formal basis."

"Excuse me?"

"It would still meet HR's requirements," Vance reassured him, "I thought you might prefer to get it out of the way."

"Without Gibbs being around?" queried Tony.

"Only if you are comfortable with this," said Vance a little stiffly.

Tony shrugged, "I don't need Gibbs to hold my hand," he said. Part of Tony wanted to get this over with and also to do it without the feeling that it had been stage managed by Gibbs. "So long as this has the same effect as if the interview took place in your office."

"It will," promised Vance, "and if you are not happy with the way it is conducted we will start over on Monday. I have brought a voice recorder with me so we can record the proceedings."

"Fire away," said Tony.
"Very well." The Director drew out a folder from his brief case and set up the recorder. After stating the date and details of the venue, he began, "Special Agent DiNozzo, as you know you were suspended from duty due to my concerns that you had disobeyed a direct order from me, your Director."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"I have examined the circumstances surrounding the incident and I believe that it is clear that you disobeyed my directions."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"I do not consider that such conduct is conducive to the efficient running of NCIS."

"No, Sir."

"I believe that I need to know that, if I give an order, it is carried out. That I can trust the people under me."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"And I therefore believe that such conduct warrants investigation."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"And in certain instances should be regarded as misconduct with the possible sanction of dismissal."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

Vance felt slightly disconcerted by Tony's acquiescence but managed to conceal this. "I have, however, re-examined the circumstances surrounding your behaviour."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"And I have decided that, in this exceptional case, your conduct should not be regarded as misconduct and that therefore the possible sanction of dismissal will not apply."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

Vance swallowed his irritation, "furthermore, no written reprimand will be placed on your file."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"I wish you to accept this as a verbal warning about future behaviour."

"Yes, Sir," said Tony.

"Is that all you have to say?" demanded Vance. In some ways he was pleased to have a compliant DiNozzo but there was something lacking.

"No, Sir, it isn't. How will this period of suspension be recorded on my file?"

"What?"

"Anyone looking at my file might wonder why I had been absent from duty for some days. If I may make a suggestion?" Vance nodded. "I have comp time on the books. Why not use some of that time
“to cover the period of the suspension?”

"Very well,” said Vance pleased to think he might have made a dent in the mountain of the MCRT comp time.

"And there will be no black mark on my record over this incident?” asked Tony.

"Correct,” said Vance.

"Then I agree," said Tony.

Vance blinked. He wasn't sure that he'd given DiNozzo a choice about anything. "Be aware, Agent DiNozzo, that you may not be so lucky another time."

"I understand," said Tony.

"You don't seem very grateful," said Vance, irritated that DiNozzo seemed to be taking all this in his stride.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't realise I was required to be grateful."

Vance stood up briskly, straightened his jacket, "I will notify HR of our discussion and I will see you back at the Navy Yard when you are fit for duty once more. Good day, Agent DiNozzo." 

"Sir," said Tony politely. He showed the Director to the door and when he was sure he was gone, he walked into the kitchen, picked up a mug and smashed it to the ground.

NCIS

Gibbs arrived on Saturday as promised with Abby along for the ride. She had never visited Milsom Bay and was agog to see the site of Tony's recent heroics and to meet Ruskin.

"Tony, Tony, Tony!” she screeched as soon as she got out of the car, "I missed you!"

"Missed you too, Abs," said Tony, "watch the arm. Ouch! Too late!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Abby contritely as she shifted in Tony's arms, "it's just that I was so pleased to see you. I haven't hurt you, have I?"

"Should've kept that big bandage on, DiNozzo," said Gibbs drily.

"I would have if I'd known you were bringing the Abby battering ram with you," said Tony ruefully.

"I want to see everything, hear everything," said Abby earnestly, "and where's Ruskin?"

Tony looked round in surprise. Ruskin usually ran to meet everyone but it turned out that Abby was a bit too much for him and he was standing hesitantly on the door step trying to analyse this strange new phenomenon. Abby realised her mistake and went up to him quietly and gently and soon, literally, had him eating out of her hand.

"Not too many snacks, Abs," warned Tony, "he gets fed by everyone in Milsom Bay as it is."

Abby and Ruskin turned twin looks of reproach on Tony who realised that Abby had been added to Ruskin's long list of friends. Abby went to explore Tony's cabin leaving Gibbs and Tony alone.

"Vance came by during the week," said Tony.
"What?" demanded Gibbs.

"He said he thought we could get it over with quicker."

"What happened?"

"He lifted the suspension. Gave me a rap on the knuckles, warned me about future behaviour. Oh, and we agreed to use some of my comp time to cover the suspension period."

"And you OK with that?"

"The comp time was my idea. Don't want a black mark on my file."

"Not just the comp time. All of it?"

Tony shrugged, "Guess so. Not sure the Director was very happy."

"Why not?"

"I think he expected me to be more grateful."

"Dammit, DiNozzo! What did you say?"

"Nothing much more than 'yes, sir,' 'no sir.' I stopped short of 'three bags full, sir.'"

"DiNozzo, I went to a lot of trouble to fix this. Did you screw it up by mouthing off to the Director?"

"No, Boss. I was completely respectful. I just wasn't grateful for him changing his mind. I didn't think I had to go that far."

"OK," said Gibbs calming down a bit. "I was going to tell you this weekend. Pass on Ducky's advice."

"What was that?"

"Don't antagonise the Director unnecessarily."

"I didn't," said Tony, "I was a good little agent. Answered his questions and didn't argue. I just couldn't pretend to be happy about it all."

"OK," said Gibbs, "sounds all right."

"Yes," agreed Tony, "but once Delores is back I'm going to make sure Vance has followed through on his promise. Nothing about this on my record. And, Boss?"

"What?"

"Thank you for doing whatever it is that you did to sort this out. I'm guessing it had something to do with Doc Murray wrapping me up like an Egyptian mummy?"

Gibbs grinned, "And it turns out that your Retirement Home is awash with great aunts of high up navy officers."

"That explains what Vance was talking about," said Tony, "well, I'm grateful, Boss."

"Vance would never have pulled it off," said Gibbs confidently, "we just headed him off at the pass."
"Well, anyway, thanks, Boss. And Ducky too."

"Ah," said Gibbs heavily.

"He really going to go?" asked Tony.

"Looks like it," said Gibbs, "I think he's even beginning to look forward to it. Although Palmer is in shock!"

"It won't seem like NCIS without Ducky chatting to corpses," said Tony thoughtfully.

"Well, I did happen to talk to the Director …" said Gibbs.

"About what, oh cunning silver fox, as Abby would say?"

"About perhaps offering Ducky the chance to come and consult on difficult and unusual cases."

"Nice one, Boss. What's the betting that nearly every case turns out to be difficult?"

Abby burst back in before Gibbs could reply and that was the last time they were able to talk alone that weekend.
Delores Bromstead returned from her vacation a week later and, after being consulted by Tony, confirmed that his record was clear of reprimand or record of suspension.

A day or two later, the Director stalked into the squad room and stood sternly in front of Tony's desk.

"Is this some sort of joke?" he demanded, waving a piece of paper dramatically.

"I think you know what it is," said Tony calmly.

"Are you serious about this? Come up to my office. We'll talk about it."

"What do you want with my agent, Leon?" asked Gibbs, fearful that Tony had somehow appeared on Vance’s radar again.

"Your agent?" said Vance.

"Yes, my agent," said Gibbs beginning to square up to the Director, "you want to take a member of my team off their work, I need to know."

"Director," said Tony, "you can say what you want to say in front of everyone else."

"Very well. Is this the way you repay me? Repay Gibbs and Dr Mallard?"

"What do I have to repay you for, Sir?" asked Tony politely, "you deciding not to sack me?"

"Yes," said Vance.

"Well," said Tony judiciously, "I am grateful. You made me realise how much I want to work in law enforcement."

"Then why this?" asked Vance waving the piece of paper again.

"What is 'this'?" asked Gibbs in frustration.

"It's my resignation, Boss," said Tony. "Like I said, I want to work in law enforcement but I don't trust what's going on here in NCIS. I don't trust that something like this won't happen again. If I get sacked I'll never get another job in policing."

"Tony, I'd make sure that never happened, you won't get fired," said Gibbs.

"Boss, with all respect, you can't promise that. You won't be here for ever. When you go, what d'you think the odds are that the Director won't decide my face doesn't fit? That he won't decide I'm disrespectful or disobedient? I'm sorry but I won't risk that."

"Agent DiNozzo, don't say anything you may regret, think …" began Vance attempting to be reasonable. He couldn't imagine how angry Gibbs would be if DiNozzo walked and he wasn't sure he wanted to face that fury. It had been bad enough when DiNozzo had been posted as Agent Afloat but at least Vance had always had the option of recalling him and thus taming the beast. He was also aware that, through the incident at Milsom Bay, DiNozzo had come to the attention of several high
ranking officers who were taking an interest in his career and who might not be pleased if they became aware of the contents of DiNozzo's resignation letter.

"Director Vance," said Tony, "you lectured me on the need to follow your orders. You said you needed to be able to trust the people working under you."

"And I stand by that," said Vance.

"It works both ways, Sir. I need to be able to trust the people above me. That they know I'm a good agent; that they'll back me and not throw me to the wolves. I regret that I don't feel that way about you, Sir. I no longer trust you and so I cannot continue to work under you as Director."

"And you think another agency will take you?" asked Vance.

"My personnel file shows no disciplinary action," said Tony, "there is no reason for this agency not to supply a clean reference. If a reference shows anything adverse I will not hesitate to take legal action against NCIS."

"You're threatening me?" said Vance.

"No, Sir. It's not a threat."

"Do you expect me to apologise or something?" asked Vance.

"No, Sir. I no longer expect anything from you. As I wrote in my resignation letter when I explained why I no longer felt able to work for you as Director."

"Then what do you want me to do?" said Vance.

"I think saying 'thank you for your service' is customary," suggested Tony without much hope of hearing those words.

"Gibbs," said Vance swirling round to face him, "I give up. See if you can talk sense into him." He strode back up to his office aware of the deathly silence which had fallen throughout the office. A lot of people had just heard DiNozzo say he no longer trusted the Director of NCIS.

Gibbs glared after him and then walked over to Tony's desk,

"Don't try and persuade me, Gibbs," said Tony a little shaky after his confrontation.

"Wasn't going to," said Gibbs.

"Because I've thought about this a lot. I really want … what? You mean you're not going to try and dissuade me?"

"I figure you made up your mind. I'm going to respect that," said Gibbs.

"I tried to persuade myself to stay on, Boss," said Tony unhappily, "but there's no scenario I can see working. Vance backed off this time but I might not be so lucky another time. And I can't promise I wouldn't do the same again if it came to a choice about following what I thought was a bad order."

"You sure about this, Tony?" asked Gibbs gently.

"Yes, Boss."

"You want me to put a word in with Fornell?"
"No need, Boss. I've got offers from the FBI, Philly PD and Pittsburgh PD and some others. Just got to choose one."

Gibbs' face twisted as he faced his DiNozzoless future, "Then, 'thank you for your service, Agent DiNozzo'."

"Thanks, Boss. It's been one hell of a ride."

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't see how Tony could ever trust Vance after this and so the inevitable 'consequence' was that he would have to leave.

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