A Handful of Dust

by Marzipan77

Summary

AU tag to Chained. The shadows are not imaginary - Tony remembers how they descended on him in Lane Danielson's cabin. How they held him down, weighed his limbs with chains, stopped up his mouth after drinking that whiskey. He can't wash it off. Can't stop seeing the glint of the knife out of the corner of his eye. All he wants is to get back to normal. Get back to the head slaps and Kate's snark and Abby's loud music. But nothing is right and he's getting it all wrong.

Notes

No graphic violence or descriptions of assault, but, sometimes, the faint, hazy memories of what might have happened can be worse. Tony is struggling with the aftermath of his undercover assignment.
Chapter 1

A Handful of Dust
“There is shadow under this red rock // (Come in under the shadow of this red rock) // And I will show you something different from either // Your shadow at morning striding behind you // Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you // I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”
— T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

"Take a seat, Agent DiNozzo."

Tony shot the cuffs of his bright white Dolce shirt until they peeked out the perfect quarter inch from his charcoal grey sleeve. He unbuttoned his jacket, slid into a conference room chair, and brushed one hand through his hair. His gaze flicked from place to place, counting shadows, identifying points of entry. Cataloguing dangers. The sky outside the conference room window was gray-shot, clouds showing their dark underbellies, threatening. The atmosphere had seeped inside, shadows curdling in corners, roiling at the edge of his vision.

He shifted his chair away from the table - back and to the left - camouflaging the move by pretending to stretch out his legs. Good. Now, if he glanced to the right, he could see the edge of the door frame and the hinges – just enough to know if someone opened the door.

There was a term for this. Tony had been an investigator for over a decade by now and was not as dumb as people liked to believe. Hyper-vigilance. "The condition of maintaining an abnormal awareness of environmental stimuli." Text-book. His mind filled in the rest of the facts even as he smiled across the table at Special Investigator Marcus Lemuel. "A person suffering from PTSD may have hypervigilance, heightened startle responses and flashbacks…"

Which was ridiculous because he didn't have PTSD. A couple of days undercover wasn't going to give a trained investigator PTSD – that was a condition for the men and women Tony had sworn to protect, the ones in real harm's way out there, facing terrorists and hostiles, IEDs, enemy ambushes, torture, and death. Not a few romps through the countryside chained to a dweeb like Jeffrey White.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

Cigarettes and whiskey.

Cold steel against his neck.

Blood exploding against the windshield.

"Just relax, Agent. You know this is routine."

The conference room sprung to life all around him, its familiar lines and curves shooting him away from the memories and back to now. Marcus Lemuel, NCIS Special Investigations, stood opposite him. Tall, and thin, Marcus' neatly trimmed beard showed gleams of gray. He'd walked into the conference room with a slight limp. Manmade 'leather' shoes were too tight – no give in those. Left-handed. Weapon secured to his left hip made his jacket pull awkwardly. Off the rack. No back-up gun. Eyesight going the way of his hairline judging by his back and forth with the file in front of him.

Of course Tony had checked him out. This morning, once he got the email about his interview. His lips twisted up to one side – he was glad he'd worn the suit. Took those extra showers. Came in early – still dark out early – but sleep wasn't an option. His stomach clenched, reminding him that food
hadn't been one, either. He wasn't going to risk tossing his cookies in front of SI. Marcus Lemuel had been SI for four years after fifteen years as a field agent. Took the promotion after his first child made it into Thomas Jefferson, one of the premiere science and tech charter schools in the area. Pricey.

Tony touched his Ferragamo tie then slowly lowered his hand, careful not to fidget. At least Marcus wasn't one of those bureaucratic drones that had red tape for blood and thought dotting I's and crossing T's was more important than doing his duty. Or that it was his duty.

Tony had been here before. Every time he fired his weapon. Every time a death or injury came from his gun. Or knife. Or fists. Deposition. First step in the process. The SRB would look everything over and call him back if they had any other questions. Which they wouldn't – couldn't – not if he had anything to say about it. He very carefully nodded and set his hands on his knees under the table where no cameras or eyes could see them shake.

Time for the show.

The other agent touched the controls of the recorder he'd placed on the table between them, taking Tony's nod for readiness.

"NCIS SI Agent Marcus Lemuel interviewing Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo concerning agent involved shooting taking place on December 16, 2004, Norfolk, Virginia."

December 16? Was that right? Tony glanced down to his watch. Today was the 18th. Seven days to Christmas. His brows flicked down and up. Didn't seem right. He didn't remember seeing any decorations. Hearing any tinny Christmas carols playing on an endless loop. Had Abby been dressed in tinsel and garland this morning? Had he seen her? He couldn't remember. He shivered. No wonder that creek had been so cold.

"Agent DiNozzo, please confirm for the record that you are taking part in this interview of your own free will as per Special Investigations directive 869 dash 14G, "Suspect Death With Special Circumstances."

He didn't wince. "Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo. I am giving testimony freely and truthfully." He smoothed back his hair again. He'd washed it four times last night, two this morning followed by a deep conditioning. Too long. He needed gel to tame it, to keep it out of his face, but he couldn't bear to use the stuff. Even clean-shaven instead of inmate-scruffy, dressed in his best suit instead of cast-offs from the NCIS costume department, the face in the mirror this morning had looked too much like a criminal. Drug smuggler. Murderer. Jeffrey White's accomplice.

Victim.

"... I really liked you, Tony."

"Take me through this assignment, Agent DiNozzo."

Background. Okay. That was easy. Before the shadows. Before the doubt. All he had to do was talk. Tony let the words flow. Iraqi antiquities. Warehouse theft. Jeffrey's arrest. Pressure from on-high – way the hell up the chain of command – while Morrow was in Europe. Pesky Secretary. The “Plan.” The prison break. Tony Curtis. Sidney Poitier. The Defiant Ones. Tony's idea. A riveting plot, a stunning leading man – it seemed simple.

"And how was it determined that you would be the agent to go undercover. To try to get the antiquities' location from Jeffrey White?"

His rhythm stalled by the agent's interruption, Tony closed his mouth, the back of his neck hot. He
let one side of his mouth quirk up. "If you ask Agent Todd I'm sure the answer would be that I most resemble a scumbag."

"Agent DiNozzo."

"Yeah, sorry." He kneaded the back of his neck, trying to do something about the stiffness there, the unrelenting thought that someone was watching, someone's eyes were there, staring. The thin white bandage Ducky had tucked over the cut, the itchy, annoying line White's knife had drawn across his skin caught against his fingernail. "Senior Special Agent Gibbs determined I was the best candidate. You'll have to ask him about his motivations – uh, reasoning." That hadn't sounded angry, had it? "I was perfectly fine with it. I have a lot of experience on undercover assignments," he hurried to add. Not Gibbs' fault Tony had screwed it up.

"All right. Your actions have been noted up until you and the suspect, White, tumbled down the hill and into the creek when the tracker embedded in your right shoe stopped transmitting."

White had done it on purpose. Even then, Tony had suspected it. Even thinking White was the submissive in the relationship – the puppy, the skinny geek Lane Danielson had dragged along in his criminal wake. Something in Tony's gut had squirmed, unconvinced by White's act. His cowardly patter.

He should have known. Should have figured it out. Should have –

"Can you tell me what happened next?"

Tony brushed his hair back from his face. "I managed to herd White in the direction of the trailer the team had set up for us to 'find.' After searching it for some tool to cut off the cuffs – which I knew we wouldn't find so that White wouldn't have a choice but to drag me along with him – we changed clothes and took the truck."

"Which, your report notes, White purposely crashed leaving Agents Todd and Gibbs to try to puzzle out your subsequent movements."

Nice. Tony admired Marcus' wording. Like he could have stopped White from jerking the wheel. Or maybe he could have. Should have seen it coming. Maybe Tony had been too entrenched in the role he'd assumed, in the scenario they'd worked out. Smart guy leading helpless geek around by the nose, gaining White's confidence with a few lines about Tony Curtis and some back-slapping. Too sure it was Tony who was in control.

White's eyes were cold. Dead. A shark, not a squirrel. Not the frightened mask he slipped on at a moment's notice. His smile finished the story his eyes began – sharp, dangerous. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

He cleared his throat. "Once we had stolen the bike – motorcycle – I headed towards a side road I'd remembered as having a gas station and very little traffic."

"You remembered." Marcus looked up from his notes. "From what?"

Tony frowned. "From the map. The map we'd used to plan the op – operation." Did Marcus think he was a complete idiot?

The other agent nodded, sliding the map from the file and unfolding it on the table between them. "Can you point out the location for me?"

Breath caught up in his chest, Tony flicked his eyes once towards the edge of the door off to his right
and then stood to lean over the offered map. Exposed. His back burned, anticipating the blow. The knife. The bullet. The shadows beneath the window darkened, the sky outside mirroring his unease. "There." One finger followed the road from the trailer where he'd picked up the truck, to the accident site, to the lonely gas station.

"Huh." Marcus made a face. "Good catch." He looked up at Tony. "And you knew that Agent Gibbs would look there?"

Tony sat back in the chair, pushing it out a couple more inches to increase his range of vision. "Well, I knew he was going to need gas at some point. And White was still acting skittish, so I didn't want to risk going to a more crowded place on the highway." He shrugged. "The pay phone was actually a bonus. I finally talked White into contacting his partner to get me in on the deal. He wouldn't let me know what number he was calling or where his partner was hiding out, but I managed to leave the keys to the truck in the coin return slot when we were maneuvering out of there."

Marcus paged through a file to his right. "Yes. Agent Gibbs' report notes that he found them there."

Too little, too late. Tony should have left a better clue, a 'trail of bread crumbs,' Kate had called it. But White was cagey, smart, too smart to be the innocent geek he'd been playing. Tony's gut had churned every time he looked at the guy's wide, frightened eyes. Arranging another stop, another accident or coincidence wasn't going to work any better than the tracker or the truck. He'd hoped the luds on the pay phone would give Gibbs the hide-out's location. Hoped. All he really knew was that he was on his own.

"Yeah, sorry." Tony frowned down at his hands, tapping against his knees, twisting in the fabric. He kept losing track, kept finding himself back there on a tiny motorcycle with a serial killer draped around him like a wet cloak. He brushed his hair back and raised bright eyes to the other agent.

"We got to the cabin pretty late. Lane Danielson, White's partner, wasn't too pleased with my presence. Even less so by White's insistence on my inclusion in their plans to leave the country."

Tony swallowed, his throat dry. The standard water pitcher and glasses sat to one side of the table, but he wouldn't reach for them. Too much of a tell. Tony's eyes narrowed. And who knew who had touched the stuff.

"Danielson raised the bottle, staring Tony down. He'd had to drink. Had to. No fugitive, no one who'd been in prison for months would turn down a free drink. The liquor burned, seared a path down his throat. Tasted wrong. Like citrus. Sharp as knives."

"And the cabin, where was it located?"

The other agent was still standing, bent over the map. Tony's mouth twisted in a grimace. Damn it. "This is all in my report," he managed through clenched teeth.

Marcus blinked at him, eyebrows rising. "It helps me put everything together to see it on the map. Please."

Tony rose again, knowing he was getting this wrong. This should be easy. Routine. His attitude should be boredom, not barely concealed irritation. Lemuel was almost apologetic. Friendly. Kind. What the hell was up with that?

He felt the unguarded door behind him like a black maw waiting to either swallow him or spew out dangers he wouldn't be quick enough to fight. Pins and needles against his skin. Pins and needles. Just like in the cabin. Prickly then warm then numb. Cold reflections glinting at the edge of his vision. He wanted to jerk away – to clear the room, gun in hand, just as he was taught.
Tony made his movements slow and deliberate, straightening to his full height instead of crouching, curling in on himself. He smiled. "Trailer." He pointed. "Gas station." He let his finger drift along the switch-back trails White had led him along. "Cabin." While he was there, he showed Lemuel the route they'd taken the next day to the highway. "Then down to Norfolk."

"I see. Thanks." Marcus returned to his chair and gestured Tony to his. "But there was no mention of the antiquities or their location when you got to Danielson?"

Tony settled on the edge of his chair this time, half-turned towards the exit. He needed to end this. To get past this next part as quickly as possible and get out of there. "No. Danielson didn't trust me. He had a lot of questions, a lot of suspicion." White had scurried out from behind Tony, almost simpering before Danielson' obvious anger. The vibe had been weird – the tension between the two, the unspoken questions and answers that flew silently between them had raised every red flag and waved them frantically in Tony's mind's eye. "But, eventually, White got him to let me inside, to get the cuffs off." He absent-mindedly curled his left hand around his right wrist, feeling the heaviness of the manacle that wasn't there.

"Danielson eventually came around?" Marcus dropped the question into Tony's gaping silence, the words echoing, bouncing from the plain, flat surfaces of the conference room. Clean. Familiar. Nothing like a rundown cabin in the midst of silent trees, the flat smell of mold, the taste of dirt and lies. Ripples in the air from that one question – one simple question - opened out, spreading.

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it. Danielson. White. Danielson let him in – or White demanded it. Assumptions about those two, their roles, and who was leading who – who called the shots and took the chances – had spun NCIS' obvious anger. The vibe had been weird – the tension between the two, the unspoken questions and answers that flew silently between them had raised every red flag and waved them frantically in Tony's mind's eye. "But, eventually, White got him to let me inside, to get the cuffs off." He absent-mindedly curled his left hand around his right wrist, feeling the heaviness of the manacle that wasn't there.

What he hadn't guessed, hadn't been able to figure out, was that, instead, it was White calling all the shots. Danielson, jealous and insecure, needed White, not vice versa. Danielson was afraid that this new strong, confident guy would steal White away from him. And the man didn't even know it. Dark, cruel eyes had focused on Tony and warned him off, saying, of all things, that White was 'easily manipulated,' while White stood in the shadows and smiled, Tony and Danielson both dancing on his strings. He remembered White hanging over Danielson's shoulders – just like he had Tony's on the motorcycle – and whispering in his ear.

For a second – one flickering moment in time – catching White's eye over Danielson's shoulder - Tony knew he was going to die.

And then the scared little dweeb was back, assuring his partner that Tony was a good guy. Someone they needed. And the shadows pulled back to hide against the walls.

"You remained in the cabin overnight. With the two criminals."

"Yes." Tony bit off the word, slammed back the lid on the memories. The whispers at the edge of the blackness that had crept back after drinking Danielson' liquor.

"All night."

"Yes. All night." Tony combed his fingers through his hair. It was irritating, falling into his face all the time. Stupid. Should have cut it this morning. He'd had the scissors in his hand, watched himself
in the mirror blinking water out of his eyes as the gleaming blades came closer. Light shivered along the long, sharp surfaces, glinting, bright enough to sear his eyes. The light was too bright, the table cold steel beneath his fingers. Then he realized his hands were shaking, the light from the bathroom fixture reflecting, jerking around the room like a crazy lightning bug. The scissors had made a heavy clank against the porcelain when he dropped them.

"You think you're gonna replace me, pretty boy? Think you're gonna be happy with him? Doing what he wants you to do?" The laughter was cruel, cynical, cutting. "Hope you're not too traditional. Or the squeamish type."

"Now, Lane, you know he couldn't replace you."

"I'd kill him first."

"He's been really useful. And nice. He likes me."

"Bastard. Maybe I'll cut him up a little, make him ugly. Scarred. You'd drop him if he wasn't so pretty."

Just a dream. A nightmare. It wasn't surprising that Tony had nightmares – not when he was trapped in a cabin, alone, with a serial killer and his partner. The shiver of light along a blade – warm breath against his neck – calluses against his skin –

Lemuel cleared his throat and Tony put his shoulders back, chin high, staring at the other agent across the table. Daring him to say something. He'd learned how to glare from the best – from Gibbs – surely he could get the SI agent to stick to the facts, to move this along. "Shouldn't we be focusing on the shooting? On White's death?"

"We'll get there, Agent DiNozzo. Just a few more questions." Lemuel folded his hands on the table. "During that night at the cabin, you couldn't find a way to get out? To take a phone from one of them? To contact your team?"

"No," Tony growled. "If I had a chance to do either of those things, you would have known it because I would have done it." He leaned forward, laying one arm on the table, finger pointing at the other man's chest. "Have you ever had to step into a situation like that? To let yourself-" Tony took a deep breath, "- undercover, out of touch with your team? It's not like the movies, Marcus," he sneered. "You do what you have to do."

Leave it. Move along. Tony made a sweeping gesture before hiding his hand under the table again, urging the other agent away from that night. Before Danielson came in to his room with his damned bottle. The two had argued, low and menacing, leaving Tony alone to search for anything – anything – he could use as a weapon and coming up empty. Trying the tiny window and finding it had been painted shut – layers and layers of different colors sealing the warped wood into a solid mass. Trapped. No way out.

"What did you 'have to do,' Tony?" Marcus asked, his voice steady, cajoling. Coaxing.

Tony turned his head away, looking towards the door. Anxious for a glimpse of bright orange walls, for Kate's sharp elbows, for a smack on the back of the head. For normalcy. He tried to stare through the barriers, to breach the thick walls of the conference room to find Gibbs. Kate. Abby. He imagined Gibbs looking up from his desk, his stare compelling. Cold. Impatient to get this done and get his agent back to work. Just like in Norfolk. Abrupt. He could almost hear his voice. 'Get the hell over it, DiNozzo. You're supposed to be a professional. Suck it up.'
Kate – Kate would be frowning, as always. Assessing. Compassionate, though. Abby, too. In her own way. Down in autopsy, Ducky bent over a dead body. White's body. Murmuring about gunshot wounds and the human body. Would he cut open White's brain? Point out the damage – the dead, black areas that had made him a killer? Bile burned a track up Tony's throat.

Ducky, watching him from a safe distance. The skinny kid – Palmer – crawling backwards on the tiled floor.

He swallowed. Took a deep breath. Get through. Get past. Get over it. "There was one door in and out," he tried, flashing a smile that cut and bled. "And since they hadn't given up the location of the goods yet, I had to play nice."

"In your briefing, before you went undercover, your team had determined that Lane Danielson was the more dangerous of the two. And that this pair had killed before." Lemuel's voice was controlled, even. Not the typical judgmental IA drone. Nothing about this interview was typical. "What happened, Tony?"

Nothing. Nothing happened. He tried to say it. To laugh. To chatter on about 'being flexible' and 'staying in character.' Meaningless terms. The lump in Tony's throat threatened the neat piles the SI had made on the table. "Was I 'concerned' for my 'well-being?'" he shot back at the other man. "Yes. But only as far as Tony the fugitive would have been concerned. He didn't know these guys were killers. He thought little Jeffrey had been roped into this robbery by big bad Danielson and might be open to a new partner. And might need some protection." Bass-ackwards intel as usual. Danielson had been a fool. An idiot. A cold, dead idiot.


"Just help me, Lane. He could be wired." Tugging at his buttons. His fly. Danielson' dark chucking. "Just lie back, boy. We'll see how much you like him now."

He shook his head. Just a nightmare. He hadn't been hurt. Hadn't been – nothing had happened. None of the promised scars or anything else was visible on his skin in the morning. Danielson had disappeared and taken his threats with him. But, now, beneath Tony's silk shorts, his designer suit, his skin crawled, fighting to get away, to slough off his body and back to the shower.

"Anyway," Tony continued as if that empty pause hadn't happened, "I had a job to do and it wasn't finished."

Lemuel watched him for a moment. A minute. Maybe more. Tony didn't fidget; he offered a bland, unconcerned face with a small smattering of impatience around the edges. But his left hand clenched against his thigh, knuckles whitening.

"Your report notes that, sometime during the night, Lane Danielson left the cabin and did not return."

His left knee bounced up and down. "Yes."

"What time during the night did he leave?"

Tony looked up from his lap into Lemuel's eyes. "What?"

One finger tapped the papers in front of him. "What time?"

"Well, I wasn't wearing a watch," Tony sneered.

The SI wasn't fazed. "Approximately, then. At approximately what time did Lane Danielson leave?"
"I don't know."

"Soon after you arrived? An hour? Two? Or closer to morning?"

Tony smoothed his hair back, leaning back in the chair, gathering his usual air of ease and effortlessness around him. It took a lot more work than it usually did. The blackness, the dead emptiness of that night stole it. Stole his calm. His masks. His confidence. He didn't know. The shadows had held him senseless all night long. But he couldn't say that. Couldn't tell. "I'd estimate between two and five AM."

Lemuel went back to the papers, paging through Tony's report slowly until he found the passage he was looking for. Tony glanced at the door and then back. Almost done. Almost through.

"You note that you and Jeffrey White left the cabin at approximately seven in the morning."

"That's what White said." He remembered the skinny guy pulling back the sleeve of his shirt - too big, the shirt was too big, the sleeve so long it flopped over his hand, unbuttoned – to look at his watch. Big, black sports watch. Tony frowned. Danielson' watch.

"So, Danielson had gone long before that. How did Jeffrey White explain his departure?"

His mind skittered back to the memory. The lack of memory. The feeling of falling. Of paralysis. It hadn't taken long. One swig from Danielson' bottle. Just one. And then the morning. White sitting beside him on the bed, one hand on Tony's chest.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

He had not fallen asleep. He would not fall asleep undercover. Gibbs would kill him. Even though he'd been exhausted, adrenaline alone would have kept him awake through the night. Adrenaline and suspicion. He might have dozed, half-awake, listening for every sound, every movement from the room next door. He might not be Gibbs with his super-powers, super-hearing, super-sniper skills, but he had been undercover before. Sleep was not an option. Not when you're surrounded by enemies, 'bad people with naughty thoughts' as Jeffrey had said. People who would slit your throat without any provocation. Tony couldn't help tracing the edge of the bandage on his neck. Close. So close.

It's what they all expected to hear. Gibbs. Morrow. Lemuel. How Tony had listened for clues, heard arguments, doors opening and closing. How he'd committed it all to memory, sorted out the facts, and used it to choose his own words and actions to get White to play ball. He couldn't tell them, couldn't admit what really happened. He wouldn't. Wouldn't think about it. Tony closed his eyes, teeth clenched, muscles rigid. No. It didn't happen. Nothing. Happened.

"As I noted in my report, White and I discussed the fact that Danielson might be on his way to the stash, looking to cut us out of the deal. I was in a hurry to get out of there, to get to the antiquities." To end this. End it – escape – get away. Away from the touching. Hands on Tony's back, his arm. The wide-open eyes turned up at him, that trace of a smirk beneath White's facade of helplessness. White was in no hurry. Had wanted to linger. Tony couldn't – he had to move. "I managed to drop the phone and gun in the duffel when he turned away for a moment."

Even then, White had been playing him. Tony saw the scene on repeat, had gone over it second by second during the sleepless nights since, laying on his bed in the dark. Whispers. Sounds. How his body felt, thick and clumsy, in the morning. His clothes, not quite sitting right on his frame. The flannel shirt hanging neatly on one bed pole where he didn't remember tossing it.

White stood too close. Sat too close in the car. Tony's lips tightened against his clenched teeth.
"Agent DiNozzo? Tony?"

He couldn't stop thinking about it. About the blackness. The empty night. The whispers. That morning he'd blamed Danielson, remembered it was his hand that held the bottle, his voice that murmured threats. White had gotten rid of him — somehow — and a little part of Tony had felt grateful. Protective.

It wasn't until later, washing and scrubbing in the shower, facing himself in the misted mirror over the sink, remembering Abby's evidence of what White had done. Danielson's slit throat. Remembering White's touch on his shoulder, his breath on the back of his neck from the backseat.

Tony raised half-closed eyes to the SI agent. Behind Marcus' silhouette, backlit by the sky, fat wet flakes peppered the window. Stuck and melted and ran down the glass. Like tears. Rain. Blood on a windshield. He was done. Tired. Out of time, out of words, out of excuses. "White drove. When he got tired I drove and he got into the backseat. I called Gibbs time after time on that cell phone. Dialed and hung up. Driving one handed towards I didn't know what."

"Tony. Stop."

God, why wouldn't they leave him alone? He let his chin fall towards his chest, his fingers plucking at the perfect seam of his trousers. "I didn't know if Gibbs got the message. Didn't know if they were following me. If they were even looking for me." On his own. At the end of his rope. His gut knew he was out of time. Out of options. The borrowed clothes were too loose, too tight. Or maybe it was his skin.

"Agent DiNozzo." A woman's voice came from behind him. Beside the door. It sounded like Kate but not Kate. Weird.

"When we got to the container, Danielson wasn't there." Both hands in his too long hair, Tony grabbed tight. Squeezed. He couldn't think, couldn't stop. Focus, he demanded, focus, you idiot. What kind of agent can't give a simple statement? Gibbs is going to kill you. White's voice in his memory wasn't frightened any more. Just certain. Sure. He'd been suspicious the entire time. "White tried to slit my throat. I shot him."

"Hey, DiNozzo."

He blinked, rubbing at his eyes. When had Gibbs arrived? "Are we done? Do you need something else?" Tony's arms and legs were heavy. Numb. He couldn't move. Couldn't stand. The adrenaline that had fueled him for so long — since the op had first started, since he'd shuffled to that prison bus with Jeffrey White. Since Gibbs had sent him off with a clip on the back of the head and a warning. Since Abby had hugged him, asking one more time if she could put the tracking device under his skin. Since a pale, frightened McGee had rushed in to wield the tech and handle the Undersecretary.

"Yeah, Tony. We're good."

Marcus came around the table, handing off his file to the woman who stepped from the shadows. Tony frowned. The door beside him was open, Gibbs crouching by his side, one hand on Tony's shoulder to keep him seated. "Boss? What's going on?"

Familiar blue eyes weren't cold or distant, now. The perpetual frown was still angry, still the mark of Gibbs' second B, but different. Less impatient, more vengeful. "What happened yesterday, Tony?"

"Yesterday?" It was Tony's turn to frown. Report writing. He'd been late because … the hot water in his apartment had run out. Scissors gleamed from the bright white of the sink. "Just a regular day,
Boss. Why? What happened?"

Gibbs looked over Tony's head towards the woman and then back to him. "I had Ducky take a look at you. Remember?"

The itch beneath Tony's skin was getting worse. He rubbed at his arm, pressing hard, getting his nails up under his sleeve until Gibbs' hand stopped him. "Um. Yeah. I went to see Ducky." The morgue was cold – always a little bit creepy. Ducky had been ready for him, a tray full of instruments and empty vials. Gerald's replacement puttering around behind him. Tony had hopped up on the table, unbuttoned his shirt, and then … then …

A whisper of sound behind him. The glitter of light on a cold steel blade. "Just lie still…"


Tony could breathe again. "Good. Good. I'm gonna run down there and apologize. Poor guy. Must have thought I was going nuts." His smile felt off. Strained. Gibbs must be mad. Furious. Ducky was one of his oldest friends. "I'd never hurt Ducky, you know that, Gibbs."

"I know. He knows, too. But I think you freaked Palmer out more than a little bit."

Palmer. That was the skinny guy's name. Crawling like a crab on his back on the floor. Metal gleaming from his right hand. A thermometer. Not a knife.

Tony looked back at the window. Lightning flashed in the distance. 'Thunder-snow,' they called it here. Gibbs' hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him attached to the here and now. Somehow – of course – his boss knew that and tightened his grip.

Maybe it was contagious. Rubbed off on him from Jeffrey White. From the blood that had splashed against his face. Tony let his hands fall into his lap and closed his eyes.

"I think I'm going crazy, Boss."
Chapter 2

II

"I think we are in rats' alley// Where the dead men lost their bones.// 'What is that noise?'// The wind under the door.// 'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?' //Nothing again nothing."

— T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

24 Hours Previously

Gibbs didn't like it.

He sat in his regular booth, staring out at the cold, red winter sky, coffee cooling in his hand, his mind churning out of tempo with his gut. Yeah, the dirt-bags were dead, the antiquities recovered, and his agent was back where he should be. This should be the calm after the storm, the release of aching tension giving way to deep breaths, a round of drinks, and some restful sleep. The end of an Op like this should have had his team whooping it up in the bullpen, Abby insisting on group hugs all around, and DiNozzo smarting off about his unparalleled prowess to everyone within earshot.

He sipped, grimaced, and managed a smile up at Maggie as she set a fresh cup in front of him.

"Looks like one of those 'weight of the world' days, Jethro."

"Yeah, well, with that sky out there, what do you expect?" He gestured. "'Red sky at morning, sailor's take warning.' Or are you too young to know that saying?"

"Oh," Maggie let the syllable trail out. "So you're just super worried that it's going to snow. Right." She raised a rueful brow. "Worrying about getting the last loaf of bread and roll of toilet paper from the grocery store, that's the kind of guy you are."

Gibbs lowered his head, wrapping both hands around the cup. There was a storm coming, all right. But it had nothing to do with snow. "You got me."

The bell over the door interrupted whatever the waitress was about to say. She lifted the coffee pot from the table as a man slid into the seat opposite.

"Coffee, sir?"

"Thank you, yes. Cream and sugar."

As Maggie hurried off for another cup and the trimmings, Gibbs squared his shoulders and lifted his gaze to the older man's narrowed eyes. He looked tired. The trench coat he folded on the seat next to him was wrinkled, the top button of his crisp white shirt unbuttoned and tie askew. Gibbs could probably count on the fingers of one hand the times he'd seen Tom Morrow looking anything less than perfectly buttoned up.

Morrow folded his hands on the cheap Formica table-top. "I've read through the notes. Talked with the Undersecretary." He tilted his head. "She's withdrawn the formal complaint she had lodged against Probationary Agent McGee, by the way. You may want to think twice before you leave your youngest, least experienced agent in the cross-hairs of someone with that much power again."

"McGee did fine," Gibbs growled. "I took responsibility for what he told her." It wasn't McGee he was worried about. He grimaced. Not that way. The Probie had handled the interfering witch just like Gibbs told him to. The kid didn't know how to do anything different. At this rate, McGee would
never worry him the way DiNozzo did. Too scared to piss Gibbs off.

Especially now.

Coffee – in a real ceramic mug – was set down in front of the NCIS director, along with a metal caddy carrying sugar packets and little pots of creamer. His smile up at the waitress was real. Kind. Grateful. The simple ‘thank-you’ somehow sounded like an entire soliloquy and made Maggie blush.

"We're not serving the lunch menu yet, but I could get some egg sandwiches together if you're interested," she offered.

"That would be wonderful. About a dozen, if you wouldn't mind. A variety." Morrow glanced over at Gibbs. "What do you think, Jethro?"

"Better make one with egg whites and spinach on some kind of wrap thing for Todd," Gibbs murmured around his cup. Tofu veggie crap. No wonder she was so prickly all the time. Probably hungry.

Once Maggie had hurried off to do what the hell ever Morrow wanted her to do, apparently, the director pointed his determined stare back across the table.

"Danielson and White are both dead. Miss Sciuto has filed her evidence reports, and it's clear that White killed Danielson and Agent DiNozzo managed to take White out before he became another victim. Good shooting. The SRB shouldn't have any trouble. You caught the buyer in Norfolk and the antiquities are in the care of the State Department." He doctored his cup and lifted it to his lips for a long drink. "Sounds like some commendations are in order." The bland stare became heated, the man focusing his regard down to a pinpoint centered all on Gibbs. "So, fill in the blanks for me, Agent Gibbs. Why do I get the feeling that my insistence on taking the red-eye back from Europe three days early still seems like I arrived too late."

'Agent Gibbs.' Gibbs swallowed the liquid caffeine and tried to pull his thoughts together. Tried to grab onto some words, shuffle them into order. Explain to his boss why the end of the operation was only the beginning of trouble. Teeth clenched, he shook his head.

"Wish I could explain it, Tom."

"Ah." Morrow sat back against the fake leather cushion. "So it's Tom and Jethro, two old friends having a cup of coffee together. Catching up." He nodded. "I'm listening."

Gibbs pushed a thumb and forefinger into his eyes, rubbing hard. "Nothing I can define. And nothing I will put on paper or in a report. Wouldn't be right," he added, trying to blink away the dryness.

"Your gut acting up?"

"And then some."

Morrow pursed his lips. "Let's start when you and Agent … when you and Kate found Tony in Norfolk."

Gibbs turned away for a moment, his gaze on the distance while his mind fled back to that parking lot. It figured Morrow would focus on that moment. Gibbs’ gut-clenching first look at DiNozzo in days, head hanging down, haloed by a bright spray of blood.

"I screwed up."
"Not for the first time," Morrow replied, his voice quiet, intense. "Get on with it," he demanded.

"DiNozzo was out of contact. Had been for close to 36 hours when I finally realized the hang-ups on my phone were coming from him." Idiot. He'd let the calls about the VW for sale screw with his own rule. Rule number three – never be unreachable. Tony had been telling him, over and over again for hours where he was and where he was going. A smarter man would have figured it out.

"By the time we got to Norfolk, DiNozzo was sitting in the driver's seat of the car, head down, blood all over. I thought-" he swallowed, almost snarling to try to keep the damned emotion out of his voice – out of his head, his gut, just out – "thought I was too late. Thought he was dead."

"And since Jethro Gibbs doesn't do 'feelings' very well, I'm sure you were the first person to welcome your agent – your friend – back into the folds of his family with a hearty backslap and some sincere words of relief and compassion."

Gibbs' eyes narrowed at the desert dryness of Morrow's delivery. "Not exactly."

"You said something cruel and DiNozzo reacted badly, is that what this is all about? Because …"

"I wouldn't have called if it was that simple."


Lips a thin line, Gibbs did. "I didn't see it. Missed it. All I could see was that DiNozzo had done me proud, that he'd taken out the scumbag and come out of it whole and healthy." He nodded. "I didn't look any deeper."

The director glanced down at his watch and then picked up his coat. "Where is DiNozzo now? Bethesda? Georgetown? Who's with him?"

Gibbs held out one hand. "No. No hospitals. It's not that kind of … problem." Not for Tony, anyway. "DiNozzo is in the bullpen, working on his report. Kate's keeping an eye on him."

"All right, Jethro. Maybe it's the jetlag. Or the dismal weather that greeted me at Reagan after the bright Italian sun. Spell it out for me before I get impatient."

"It's messed him up, Tom. Something happened out there. Something he didn't expect and wasn't prepared for. And he won't talk. But, underneath?" Gibbs shook his head slowly back and forth. "He's wrapped up like rusty barbed wire. Bleeding out." He pushed one hand through his hair, the acid in his gut fraying his nerves like they hadn't been in years.

"And since you were your typical compassionate, caring self when you found him, he's not willing to talk to you about it." Morrow's features were sharp with disapproval. "What about Doctor Mallard?"

One shoulder shrugging, Gibbs held the cup up against his lips. "He's refusing to see him."

Morrow frowned. "Doctor Mallard is –"

"No, dammit." Coffee spurted out of the hole on the lid of the cup as it met the table with too much force. "DiNozzo won't see Ducky. Says it isn't necessary. No wounds, except a shallow little cut on his neck –" that he keeps touching, Gibbs reminded himself. "I watched him undress, took his clothes for evidence once we were back to the Navy Yard last night. He's right. A couple of bruises from rolling down that hill and the prison manacles. And he knows we don't need pictures or blood
Tony had practically torn the clothes from his body, flinging them to the floor like a teenager in his bedroom. Gibbs had growled, the snapping of his gloves echoing from the cement block of the emergency shower stalls. DiNozzo had made a beeline for the showers almost as soon as the car door had opened, going on and on about cheap flannel and sleeping in his pants, and the way the gel felt like cement in his hair. Gibbs hadn't been listening. Or watching. Or he would have noticed. Noticed the way Tony's hands shook. How his movements were too abrupt, too clumsy. The way he never turned his back on Gibbs, even naked beneath the shower's spray.

"It's not like DiNozzo to refuse a direct order from you, Jethro, even when you're at your worst."

And he had been. Standing over Tony like an avenging angel, chips on both shoulders. DiNozzo had been at his desk even before Gibbs got in this morning. Hell, he probably hadn't even gone home the night before. He narrowed his eyes, trying to remember what DiNozzo had been wearing. Not sweats. Not clothes from the gym. But the plaid shirt had been wrinkled, like he'd taken it from his go-bag. He laid his forehead in one hand and closed his eyes.

One minute Tony had been smiling, grinning, changing the subject to how well that shampoo of Ducky's cut out the stench of overripe special agent. The next, Gibbs would look over and see the shadows gathering, Tony's jaw clenching, his hands gripping the keyboard like a lifeline. And whenever Gibbs looked up to remind him about seeing the medical examiner, he'd been gone. On his way to see Abby. Making copies. Going for water – coffee – talking to HR about an expense report from three months ago.

"He keeps wrong-footing me," Gibbs admitted. Damn it. The kid was good. "Keeping me at a distance."

Morrow tilted his head. "Why are you so sure this is a major problem? It sounds as if Tony is simply putting himself back together after a particularly difficult – and, since we're talking about it, I'll say it now – mismanaged undercover assignment. But," he held up a finger, "that is a discussion for another day. Now." He tapped on the table. "Tell me why this has gotten your famous gut in a twist."

Gibbs stared into Morrow's eyes. "You don't remember."

"Remember what?"

"You don't remember what happened to Tony the last time his undercover assignment turned to crap. You don't remember what happened in Philadelphia. How long it took to get Tony back. To get him back from the brink."

Tom Morrow paled, his expression blank as his mind raced. "God damn it," he whispered. "We cannot lose DiNozzo because of an overzealous Undersecretary and our own short-sightedness, Gibbs." Morrow leaned in and shoved one finger into Gibbs' chest. "I will not stand for it. Now," he straightened his shoulders, eyes sharp and bright like a bird of prey, "how are we going to fix this?"

- - - - -

Kate typed, never more grateful for the touch-typing classes her mother made her take in high school. Keeping her eyes on the screen instead of her keyboard made it much easier to keep a close eye on her partner. Gibbs had stepped out, his hissed warning to her by the elevators making her heart race. She'd known. She'd known there was something wrong with Tony. Heck, she'd known before Gibbs did.
It started last night, in Norfolk. No, she reminded herself, it started long before that, when the team was setting up this ridiculous operation on a bad combination of scanty information and hurried planning. Tony had seemed thrilled for the opportunity, but, looking back, Kate saw the tension, the shadows hovering behind his eyes. Gibbs' usual snappish instructions, laced with his own trademarked mix of anger and worry, had done nothing to soothe his nerves, or Kate's conscience.

Sending a partner off with limited back-up was not Kate's idea of good investigative work. She'd tried to tell Gibbs that, to infuse a little reasoning into the discussion down in Abby's lab. That's what she had been trying to say to Gibbs out in the car after Tony's tracker disappeared and Gibbs was unwilling to even acknowledge that this operation had gone to the dogs. No one in this organization seemed to be able to think beyond knee-jerk reactions, cowboy actions, and testosterone.

Tony could have been dead. It could have happened oh so easily. When they found the body at the cabin, she couldn't breathe, her heart beating so fast and hard that her chest felt bruised. As Gibbs brushed back the leaves, she'd been sure that it would be Tony's dead green eyes staring up at her. Kate took a hasty sip of her tea, hoping the herbal blend would settle her stomach.

Then, against all odds, they'd found Tony in Norfolk. Alive. Unharmed. If there was a more obvious sign that Tony could take care of himself they found it in the bloody backseat of that car. In the knife lying on the floor, one thin trace of blood on the edge. In Jeffrey White's dead body, bullet hole front and center. Kate had taken the buyer into custody, planted him in the backseat of the car, and then hurried over to greet her partner with a grin and a comment about calling her a dog.

The banter had died in her throat.

Leaning back against White's car, hands hanging numbly at his sides, the man with the slick-backed hair wearing cheap flannel splashed with blood didn't look like her partner at all.

She glanced across the aisle. He still didn't.

Tony was hurting. Too pale. His eyes too bright. Even close-shaved, his hair clean and seemingly comfortable in his own clothes, Kate could still see the dark shadows in Tony's eyes and the stiffness of his shoulders. Her usually exuberant partner was too quiet, his humor too dark, and his smile a lie he couldn't quite pull off today.

And no one was helping him. No one was being gentle. Or supportive. No one suggested time off, or a therapist, or even some heavy drinking. Apparently, at NCIS, you - what was the cliché? Walked it off? Shook it off? Got back on the horse?

Bullshit.

Working for the Secret Service had been wonderful, a dream come true for a woman in law enforcement. Caitlyn Todd had been hand-picked from the FBI Academy, pushed through the specialized training, and motivated to finish her graduate work on Religion, Psychology, and the Criminal Mind. It had been a humbling, terrifying joyride straight to the top, but, until Kate met Tony DiNozzo, she'd never realized how much she'd missed along the way.

No police academy. No uniform patrols. No learning the ropes, the ins and outs, shortcuts and codes that came from the usual partnerships and teams law enforcement was all about. It was an apprenticeship system, really, in the ancient tradition. Doing the work alongside the older veterans and learning as you go. It was a road that Kate had bypassed, but Tony had walked it, inch by inch and mile by mile.

After working just one case with the odd team of Gibbs/DiNozzo, Kate had done her homework.
She sighed, stealing another pointed look at her oblivious partner. Tony would laugh. Good Catholic schoolgirls would always do their homework. But, after her mistakes at the Secret Service, Kate wasn't about to make another one so quickly by taking Gibbs – and NCIS – at face value.

Gibbs was a story all by himself. His record with the Marine Corps, with NIS and then NCIS, spoke for itself. But Tony – Tony had piled up both commendations and reprimands in every police force from Peoria to Baltimore. It took all of her resources, a few favors, and more than a few late nights poring over reports and records she wasn't supposed to have, and she still wasn't sure she understood her partner.

One thing was clear: Tony DiNozzo was gifted at undercover work. He lived it day in and day out. Distract. Disarm. Overwhelm your listener with details so that they turn away. Insist on attention on your own terms so that no one thinks to look behind the curtain. She'd found the record of his mother's death. His father's money. Of his childhood injuries. One Hawaii PD's report to Children's Services about an abandoned youth. Boarding School. Military Academy. Ohio State.

That daily practice had served him well in law enforcement – getting Detective DiNozzo a gold shield at a ridiculously young age. Earning him some heart-breaking assignments he'd rushed into where angels feared to tread. And, at least once, during the Macaluso Operation in Philadelphia, those skills had cracked a huge case and earned Tony not only a trip to the hospital, but a six week mandatory disability leave.

A psychological disability leave.

The IM window on Kate's computer screen began to blink.

"Sorry I missed your call. What's up?"

Frowning, Kate clicked into the box. "How would you feel about a consult?"

"?? Are you 'asking for a friend'?"

Kate huffed a laugh and then looked up to find Tony watching her. The stare wasn't the playful, over-the-top curious look she'd expect on any other day. Hooded eyes, hunched shoulders, it was as if the tiny dings from her computer were gunshots, open threats, and Tony was scouting for an escape route.

She straightened, tilting her head in challenge. Be normal, she urged him silently. Say something cocky about me talking to my boyfriend on company time. Come hang over my shoulder and make lewd comments. When Tony stayed quiet, his mouth a thin, white line, she had to try.

"It's nice when Gibbs is out of the office, isn't it?" She typed a frowny-face response in IM while she talked. "I can chat with a friend, you can play Tetris. And I think the temperature definitely warms up a couple of degrees when 'Mister Cold Shoulder,' goes for coffee."

"He's not cold. He's just Gibbs," Tony snapped back. "You wouldn't like him nice."

Kate's eyebrows rose. "I wouldn't? I think I might like to give it a try." She smiled. "And how would you know, anyway?"

Tony's scowl was frightening. "Gibbs is nice to children. Victims. Wouldn't be right –" he cut himself off and took a deep breath. "You and I are neither, Katey-Kate."

God, Kate changed her mind. Tony's attempts at normalcy made her want to cry. "Hey, how about getting McGee and Abby to stop at McCrory's for a drink after work? I think we could all use it, and,
who knows? Maybe Not-Nice Gibbs will come with us and pretend to be human for ten minutes?"

She jerked backwards when Tony shot to his feet, fists clenched and a dangerous gleam in his eye. Breathing shallowly, hardly letting her chest rise and fall, Kate intentionally relaxed against the back of her chair. She wasn't afraid of Tony. At least, she wasn't afraid of Tony, her partner, frat-boy, jock, good guy. And there was no way in hell she would show fear to this version of Tony, no matter how he was acting.

"I don't want a drink," Tony growled, standing rigidly beside the file cabinet, his back pressed to the black steel. "I just want to write my report, make my statement, and do my job. I don't want to see Ducky, or talk, or get my hand held. I just want to work in peace, is that too much to ask?"

"No, Tony," Kate stated, calm and even, "and I'm not asking anything of you. I just want to help." She swallowed, leaning forward. "My partner is hurt, and I'm worried about him."

"Save your worry for the victims, Agent Todd." Tony latched onto the back of his chair, knuckles white. "I'm fine."

The unnatural silence of the bullpen suddenly registered, and Kate watched as Tony slipped on another mask. The flash of a grin, one hand brushing back his hair, the other adjusting his collar, and the frat-boy was back. "Besides, I've got a hot date. And, hopefully, she won't be holding my hand, if you catch my drift."

"Disgusting." The word jumped from her throat before she engaged her mind. Of course. Tony would smack at the Catholic girl with the most disturbing image he could manage, hoping she'd turn away. Okay, Kate nodded. For now. She turned back to her computer.

"What if NCIS called you in?"

"Victim counseling? Not really my strength but I could refer you to a colleague."

"No," Kate typed, "Agent. Trauma. PTSD maybe."

The blinking light winked at her, on and off, on and off. She took another sip of the cooling tea, flicking a glance at her partner. He was still standing, his gaze darting around the squad room. As she watched, he raised his right hand to touch the healing cut along his neck. To pick at it. She froze, the cup against her lips as Tony's eyes went glassy – distant – and he barely seemed to breathe. The pulse in his carotid jumped, raced, visible even across the aisle.

The quiet 'ding' of her computer jerked him from his fugue and he looked down at the drop of blood on his finger.

"Tony," Kate began, rising from her chair.

"Gotta hit the head," he threw over his shoulder, all but running away from her down the hallway. Kate sighed and sat back down.

"Doesn't sound like your boss. Tony? Are you okay?"

Kate found herself channeling her partner. "I'm fine."

"Okaaaaay. Your director has my number."

"He does?"
"Long story." Another pause. "I'm clearing my calendar. Call me later."

A knot untwisted from Kate's gut. She watched down the hallway, hoping to see Tony making his way back to his desk, mask or no mask. No such luck.

At least she was doing something. Something that might help. "I will," she whispered as she typed.
Chapter 3

Thank you for your kind comments. I know it is a different kind of story and I hope you'll stay with me for Tony's journey.

III

"Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song, // Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. // But at my back in a cold blast I hear // The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear." T.S.Eliot ~The Waste Land

Tony flicked the elevator switch, pacing the car in a tight circle, one hand on the back of his neck.

"What the hell, DiNozzo," he barked at himself. "Are you trying to get benched?"

Kate was being Kate. Wrapped a little too tight? Yes. Superior, nose-in-the-air tendencies? You betcha. Concerned and caring beneath a thin veneer of snark? All the damned time. If she wasn't treating Tony like her idiot – slightly depraved – little brother who couldn't be trusted to wipe his own ass, that would be something to worry about.

He stopped, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and then sank down to the floor, his back snugged up tight against the steel wall. His heartbeat slowed its frantic thumping, muscles relaxing from the fight or flight mode they'd been stuck on since he'd come back. He drew in his knees and laid his head down on his folded arms.

Peace. Safe. He blinked at the metal wall just a dozen or so inches from his side. The tiny box reflected only Tony – nothing else – no one else. Not behind him. Beside him. His blinking slowed, eyelids heavy.

No wonder his boss liked to hang out here. No nosy partners. Doctors with too much time on their hands. Eyes watching, cataloguing, assessing every twitch, every smile, every reaction. The way Gibbs used the elevator as his personal office and think-tank, no one would notice if Tony hung out here for a minute. Just a minute or so. Away from Kate. The bullpen. Every one.

He'd tried. He'd tried last night after Gibbs left. The darkened bullpen had been almost good enough. The last few teams had packed up and headed out after a joke or a handshake, welcoming him home. Home. They'd all gone home eventually. Tony frowned. He hadn't been able to think about it. About home. A dusty cabin, a sagging mattress – No. Maybe tonight. Yeah. Tonight. After he got it all out, typed it all into the system. Curved and sliced the words so that they made sense, dry and definite.

"Just the facts, ma'am," he murmured to himself.

Maybe he could rest once the words had set up their boundaries, defined the limits of what had happened with Jeffrey White. Lane Danielson. And let everything else – everything that didn't happen – fall away into that dark hole that held all of his might-have-beens.

Last night, the words got away. Ran away. They wouldn't sit there on the screen in nice, neat lines, staying in their boxes on all the appropriate forms. Letters were jumbled, sentences cut and pasted
into nonsense. He'd been too itchy. Too wired. He wanted to go attack the punching bag, but the gym would be dark, memories lurking in the shadows. He'd plunked in his quarters and got a chocolate bar from the vending machine, but the label at one edge was torn. Couldn't eat that.

Nothing worked. The windows in the bullpen were too wide, the cleaning staff too quiet, appearing suddenly at the edge of his vision without any warning. And Tony kept feeling those eyes on the back of his neck. Watching. He found himself spinning around in his chair to look up at the stairs, the balcony, the door to MTAC.

Finally, Tony'd tried one more thing. Abby's lab. Her office. Tucked behind closed doors against the wall. He'd unfolded the cushion from her futon and slid it to the far wall. Sat down. Took off his shoes. But he couldn't quite make himself lie down or close his eyes.

Dead eyes stared past the whiskey bottle. Daring him. Taunting. Go ahead. Drink it. The serpent in the garden. The evil witch and the apple. Just a taste. One swallow won't hurt you. Won't kill you. Won't –

Tony jerked his head up, banging it against the elevator wall. Okay. Right. Sleep was out. For now. Maybe later. He'd go home. Shower. Sleep in his own bed.

He looked at his watch. Nearly noon. People would be going to lunch. Looking for the elevator. He should get out now. Go back to his desk, a story about getting a mid-morning snack and a date with the cute waitress at the donut shop ready to deflect any invitations. Because eating – yeah – no thanks. Soon, though. He'd be okay soon. A-okay. Right as rain. As soon as he finished that report.

His phone buzzed on his hip and he grabbed at it. Could be a case. Dead petty officer in Rock Creek Park. Drug stash found on a Navy ship. Terrorism. Bomb threat. Call him cold and callous, but Tony would take anything right now. Even if he couldn't be in the field until the SRB cleared him, even if watching Gibbs and Kate take McGee with them as their third instead of him would poke holes in his confidence, he'd have something to do. A focus. Maybe Gibbs would even give him a head-slap if the Boss got involved in a case and forgot to be so damned nice.

Tony stared at the display, the name and number fuzzy, unclear. He felt the phone's vibrations through his hand, through his skin, along his nerves. He watched the number flash again and again, his throat dry, mind numb.

Couldn't check the rearview mirror again. White could be awake. Watching. He'd be suspicious. More suspicious. Driving with his left hand on the wheel, right hand resting casually on the duffel beside him, Tony reached for the phone again. Glanced down fast to make sure his thumb was on the right number. Dialed. One ring. Disconnect. Again. Tony tried to pull air in through clenched teeth. Waited. What was wrong? Why didn't Gibbs get the message? Call him back? Tell him he was following? Come on, Boss. He'd set the phone on vibrate. White wouldn't know. Tony could say something stupid. Get Gibbs' attention. Get them to follow. He was running out of time.

Rule 3. Never be unreachable. He'd loved that stupid rule. Coming from Baltimore, from … before … he'd clutched at that rule like a lifeline. That's what it was. A line. A rope. A connection. A promise. Someone would always be there on the other side of the line. Someone would always answer. Gibbs. Gibbs would answer. Two-way promise, right? If Gibbs insisted that Tony never be unreachable, if he got pissed off when Tony didn't answer the phone for ten minutes because he was in the shower, or his battery died, or he had to fumble for it in the dark chaos of his pile of dirty clothes in the middle of the night, then that meant – that meant –

He shook his head, his hand wrapped so tight around the slim piece of technology that the metal and
glass squeaked. But it didn't. It wasn't. It turned out to be an outgoing rule only. Never be unreachable to Gibbs. But, Gibbs himself – Tony closed his eyes and pressed the fist holding his phone against his forehead – Gibbs himself could do what he chose. Break his phone against the wall. Drown it in a cup of bourbon. Forget it under his boat, sawdust muffling the sound. Look at the number flashing on the screen and smile and turn it off.

It wasn't a lifeline. The phone wasn't a life saver thrown from a ship. Nothing Tony could hang onto when he was – when he needed it. Not a promise. A whisper that Tony was not alone. It was just a thing. Just another broken pledge. A handful of dust.

There would be an explanation. A reason. Something he could read in Gibbs' own report. Gibbs would never condescend to tell him. To spell it out. "Hey, DiNozzo. I know I left you high and dry for hours when I didn't respond. Must have had you worried, huh? Yeah, well that's because ..." Not Gibbs' way. He'd found Tony eventually. Followed the stupid trail to stupid Norfolk.


"Okay. Phones. Not a big deal. Not a scary monster." His lips pulled back, he knew the grin on his face was feral. Felt it in the tightness of his cheeks, the way the cords in his neck throbbed. "Answer the phone. Write the report. Do the job. Man up, DiNozzo. Normal. Back to normal." Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. Didn't pass out. Didn't throw up. Didn't need a damned lifeline to find his way back home.

Yeah. He stopped. Smoothed his hair again. Adjusted his collar and his sleeves. Just another day at the office.

The phone rang again. Same number. Same insistent demand.

Ducky. Medical examiner and NCIS pet grandfather. Especially for Gibbs' team. Nobody got out of a trip to the cold metal tables beneath the brighter than bright lights after an op like this one. "Go see Ducky." Gibbs had said it more than once.

He turned to the front of the car. Flipped the on switch. Pressed the button for the lowest floor.

If Tony wanted normal, he had to walk the steps. Check the items off of the list. Not the rules list, this was a different one. Tony's list. He'd made it years ago, a lifetime ago in Philly. Tony's Guaranteed To Send the Nightmares Away List. It had another name. A darker one. He wouldn't think about that. He was better now. Smarter. Sharper. Honed to a gleaming edge by Agent Second B himself.

Turn in gun. Check. Flirt with the gals when he turned in his clothes. Shower ASAP – don't take 'you should wait' for an answer. Check himself for any injuries – any injuries that he couldn't see to himself. Let someone you trust get a good look at you. Short list, but Gibbs was there. Let them see you – and take a good long look at them. Remind yourself about trust. Chain of command. Red tape – it could choke you or wrap you up in a nice comforting squeeze. Normal, familiar irritation. Write that report. Get over it.

He'd added a couple more since he'd come to NCIS. Good ones. Hug Abby. See Ducky.
The other part of the list would have to wait. Until he could get home. Until he could stand to be in a car, driving, his back exposed. In his apartment. In his bedroom.

He'd checked them off, one by one, and Ducky was next. Time to go. Get in line. Get back in shape. Tony lifted his chin and stared at the numbers lighting up one by one above the doors. Counting down. Three. Two. One.

Blast-off.

Ducky didn't bother leaving a message. He placed the phone back into its cradle on his desk, his shoulders hunched in defeat. His hands were tied. For now.

The young man was stubborn, almost as stubborn as Gibbs.

He had not liked the look of young Anthony when the three returned yesterday afternoon. Tony had smiled, greeted him, given Abby her hug and her time to fawn over him. Puffed out his chest in pride at the greetings of his colleagues. But it was clearly an act. A deception. Behind those green eyes, darkness lurked.

It was a familiar facade but a shallow one. Not shallow in the sense that it simply covered a thin layer of distress, mere scratches or scrapes along one's psyche. That was certainly not the case here. In fact, Ducky was fairly certain that Anthony's mask covered something deeper and darker than a casual scrutiny would discover. Not shallow – brittle. Perhaps that was a better description.

The young man was an enigma on a good day, Ducky thought to himself, rising from his chair to pace around his rather cold and austere workplace. He smiled. It was as if Anthony DiNozzo was the ME's exact opposite. Anthony decorated his surroundings with many reminders of his past, his interests, and his pursuit of happiness. From his Mighty Mouse stapler to his OSU pennant to his Magnum PI coffee mug. Even the man's high end bespoke suits were in direct contrast to Ducky's clean desk, his comfortable if old-fashioned and frumpy clothes, and his lack of even so much as a Scottish flag to denote his origins.

Anthony's impatience and sometimes irritating overabundance of energy could be explained away by the contrast of youth over age, his vainglorious exploits with the female persuasion a difference of upbringing and generation. However, it seemed to the older man that Anthony and he – in fact, Anthony and everyone else on Gibbs' team – were foundationally dissimilar based primarily on their upbringing.

Family. Both nature and nurture had left Anthony with an oozing, stormy morass rather than a firm foundation on which to build his future.

Ducky huffed a loud sigh, needlessly rearranging the gleaming tools on his instrument tray. He refused as a matter of principle to get into a useless argument as to degrees of abuse or neglect of children. He'd heard it too many times to count. Sad eyes and broken spirits had filled his examination rooms – and autopsy tables - far too often in the past. Over his shoulder he imagined the few fools who spoke before they engaged whatever brain cells they possessed. "At least he wasn't beaten." "Well, beating would be better than enduring endless insults and put-downs." "He wasn't sexually abused, that would be much worse."

He asked quietly to himself. As if there could be a winner or loser among those who suffered any kind of parental or familial abuse. For heaven's sake, what was the prize to be for the worse scenario? Should a child 'simply' neglected, not turned bloody or sporting broken bones then
consider himself lucky? Ridiculous.

Anthony was an independent adult dedicated to protecting others. He was kind, intelligent, and helpful. His quirks, his unimportant shortcomings, did not in any way detract from his inherent honor. However, his unfortunate upbringing had left the young man woefully ill-equipped to handle some particularly difficult instances.


And, more importantly, when Anthony was truly hurt, fundamentally injured or wounded, he had few personal resources to draw upon to overcome it.

Ducky stood for a moment beside the empty autopsy table, his hands holding tightly to its curved edge. There was only one thing to do. One way forward. He could not, in good conscience, relax his attempts to help the wounded young man, even if his insistence caused some friction between them. Ducky had taken his vows to do no harm long ago, and leaving Anthony DiNozzo to suffer behind the mask of a clown would do nothing but.

He would make one more attempt. He hurried back to his desk, dialing the young agent's cell phone once again. "Answer the phone, Anthony," he muttered under his breath. "Do not make me go over your head. Please."

He was just pressing the disconnect button, ready to dial Jethro when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Is Agent DiNozzo still avoiding you, Doctor Mallard?"

"Indeed, Mister Palmer." Ducky eyed the thin, spectacled lad suspiciously. The lab assistant had the odd habit of disappearing and then appearing again out of nowhere. And he knew far more than one would suspect. Ducky sat back in his chair, hands folded in his lap. "Tell me, why do you assume that Special Agent DiNozzo is avoiding me?"

Palmer stripped off his gloves and discarded them in the appropriate receptacle. "Well, it's not really my place to say," he began. "I haven't known any of Agent Gibbs' team for very long."

Ducky pressed his lips together, considering. "Perhaps that makes you better able to make an unbiased assessment."

"Of Agent DiNozzo?" Palmer's eyes were wide behind his glasses.

"You have interacted with the man, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, of course. In passing." The young man shifted from foot to foot.

"And what are your thoughts? Come on, now," Ducky slapped his knees lightly. "First thing that comes into your head."

"Well –"

"The first thing. No equivocating!" Ducky cocked his finger and pointed towards his latest assistant. "There's a gun to your head and you must answer or bang! You're dead!"

"Okay!" Palmer shouted. "Okay. But, please, no violence. I like this job and I really don't want to leave it the way your last assistant did, if you know what I mean." He snuffled a laugh, the grin slipping and sliding off his face.

Ducky stared.
"Okay. Well, I guess I would say that Agent DiNozzo reminds me of my cousin, Danny."


"So, when we were growing up, our families used to go on vacations together every summer. Uncle Jerry and Aunt Margaret and their three kids, Ellen, Willy, and Danny, and my parents and my sister, Beth, and me. We'd go camping or rent one of the cabins in the state park. Fish and swim and go canoeing. I remember one time," Palmer stepped forward, another grin dimpling his cheeks.

"The point, Mister Palmer."

"Oh. Sorry. Well, Cousin Danny was the oldest, three years older than me. So I sorta had some hero worship going on there." Palmer's cheeks pinking.

"Ah. The boy was everything you wanted to be, was he?"

"Yeah, I guess. Funny and good looking. He was better at every sport – I mean, every one. Frisbee and badminton and kickball, and he was smart. Clever. Danny would sneak out at night and pull pranks and never get caught. And, even when he did, he just took his punishment and shrugged and smiled."

Ducky raised his eyebrows. "That does sound quite a bit like our Anthony, doesn't it?" The story was compelling if a bit pedestrian, but something told the older man that he was not going to like the ending.

Palmer's happy memories seemed to drain away, leaving the young man pensive. He put his hands on his hips. "That's the thing, Doctor Mallard. Danny was great. But, as we got older, my dad got a new job and we moved away. We spent less and less time with Uncle Jerry and the family. Lost touch." Palmer hesitated, turning away. "And then, when I was in ninth grade, we found out that Danny had drowned."

The Medical Examiner stilled, his heart beating quite fast. His 'gut,' as Jethro would say, telling him that this story might be hitting a bit too close to home.

"Danny was fully dressed when they found him. Beaten up by the rocks. The, uh, critters. No one ever found out what happened. If he slipped into the river by accident, or if he was trying to help someone else – or a dog or a cat. No one would have been surprised to find out he'd lost his life trying to save someone's pet. But, Beth and I always wondered."

"There was a darkness in Danny. Something hiding behind his smiles and jokes. I didn't notice so much when I was a kid, as I grew up … well. The young man's voice was barely a whisper. "I guess maybe that's what I see when I look at Agent DiNozzo. Especially now."

The two men avoided each other's eyes, each retreating silently into his thoughts. Ducky was sorry he had asked his new assistant the question he had, insisting that the younger man share a deeply personal story. He was equally unhappy that Mister Palmer's insight into Anthony's character seemed to be uncomfortably spot on. There was indeed a darkness within the special agent. One that Ducky would do all he could to draw out as he would a poison.

Before he could reach for the phone to try to reach the young agent again, the autopsy doors swished open on a nervous, disheveled figure.

Tony looked back and forth between the two silent men. "Geez, guys, who died?"
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

My sincere apologies for the delay in posting. In all honesty, the finale episode of NCIS this year, the final good-bye to Tony DiNozzo, screwed up my process completely. It was such a poor send-off to this beloved character that it pushed me away from thinking about this fic (and all other NCIS fics) for a good long time. Thankfully, another fan and fanfic writer posted a lovely manip of Tony that struck me and set my muse chattering again.

Again, thank you for your patience.

IV

"That corpse you planted last year in your garden // Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? // Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? // Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men, // Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!" ~ T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land

Gibbs knuckles were white where he gripped the steering wheel. Morrow was in no mood to put up with his usual disregard for speed limits and red lights and other rules of the road. Trying to balance his need to get back to the Navy Yard, to get eyes on DiNozzo, to stand between his agent and whatever nightmare images this assignment had dug up and staying on Morrow's good side was pissing him off.

As soon as Morrow buckled his seatbelt, the director had been on the phone. First to Ducky, getting the man's insight into DiNozzo's probable mindset and leaving the ME with instructions to "do what he could." Then with his secretary to clear his schedule for the next few hours at least, the next two days if possible.

"Just pretend I'm still out of the country, Miranda. Out of contact." He paused, his planner spread across his knees. "Rumors of my return early should be brushed aside. The Undersecretary doesn't have much of a reputation left after this debacle - for either accuracy or poise – so I wouldn't worry about her. Yes. Good. I'll see you shortly."

Closing his phone, Morrow flipped back to his address book, settling deeper into the car's upholstery so he could watch Gibbs. One finger to hold his place, he sighed.

Gibbs drew a sniper's calm readiness across his natural impatience and irritation. "You don't think I'm going to like what you're going to say."

"Frankly, Jethro, I don't care. If your assessment of the situation is correct, we don't have time to waste. The sooner we get Agent DiNozzo the help he needs, the less damage this case will cause. To him, personally, as well as to the rest of the team and NCIS in general." Morrow's voice brooked no argument. "I'm going to call in a specialist. One we've worked with before."

Gibbs' lips tightened into a line. "You're talking about Kate's sister."
"I am."

Gibbs knew Doctor Cranston. She'd been used by NCIS before, long before he'd hired Kate. It had made Kate's background check go that much faster, her security investigation pretty much a lock. Rachel Cranston was highly regarded in the small circle of military law enforcement agencies and had been under contract with the Navy and Marines for years. Smart. Funny. She knew how to deal with the particular traits of men and women who risked their lives for a living. She was good. Good at getting to the root of problems, bypassing the walls tough-minded men and women built around their pain. Her competence wasn't what Gibbs was worried about. "DiNozzo will balk."

"She's the best one for this situation – she'll know how to deal with his past as well as this latest problem. In fact, we probably should have called her in for his yearly evals as soon as he signed on." Morrow rubbed one hand across his eyes. "A prior relationship with her would have made this much easier."

"Twenty-twenty hindsight," Gibbs grunted, making a right turn on the last dim shine of a yellow light. "Can't go back in time."

"No. Not even long enough to put some better back-up in place before sending DiNozzo out chained to a serial killer."

Gibbs didn't bother to respond. Morrow was angry. Partly about DiNozzo, that he'd been hurt, could have been killed. But also about the fall-out. The way this might blow back in their faces. Open the doors of NCIS to investigation on a lot of levels. The kind of crap Gibbs couldn't care less about. He wanted DiNozzo healthy, his mind clear and focused. Not forced back into a past full of darkness, pain, and self-doubt.

"It's not the fact that she's a shrink he's going to put up a fuss about. DiNozzo knows the protocols. He knows he has to pass psych after either a shooting or an undercover assignment, let alone both. It's that fact that she's Todd's sister. Trust me," Gibbs barked a laugh, "that will not go over well."

"Well then we'll just have to keep that fact from Agent DiNozzo, won't we?"

Gibbs sighed.

"What?" Morrow demanded.

"Tony is an investigator. Just because he's hurting doesn't mean he's not going to see more than you want him to."

He felt Morrow's stare boring into him, demanding more.

"DiNozzo and Todd – she's got a chip on her shoulder the size of an aircraft carrier. He's worried I've started filling up the team with specialists like her and McGee, and a generalist, an investigator like him, is going to get pushed to the side."

"Is that what you're doing, Gibbs?"

Frowning, Gibbs jerked the wheel to the left and stomped on the accelerator to pass a lumbering SUV. "You know me better than that."

"I know that you're filling out the team as I suggested. You and DiNozzo were headed straight to burn-out as a two-man team." Gibbs caught movement in the corner of his eye – Morrow, holding up one hand to keep him quiet. "Yes, yes, your closure rate was still far above excellent. But you two were an accident waiting to happen and I won't have an agent's death on my hands because I was too
intimidated by your death-glare to insist your team get enough rest and eat semi-regularly." He huffed impatiently.

"Then why did you ask me?" Gibbs let the sarcasm drag out the question.

"Because I also know you. And you would not be above letting Agent DiNozzo believe you were considering pushing him out just to get a rise out of him. Thinking you'd somehow inspire him to work harder or longer for your approval."

Gibbs narrowed his eyes but kept his mouth shut.

"I'm guessing that, if that's the case, most of the animosity between Todd and DiNozzo can be laid at your feet. Gunny."

The title was a reminder. A slap upside the head. Morrow didn't like the way Gibbs ran his team – he never had. And he'd been becoming more and more insistent that Gibbs start to conform to his notion of professionalism rather than the leadership style – if you could call it that - that Gibbs had learned from his mentor, Mike Franks. They’d had this discussion before. Lately, more frequently. Gibbs was a dinosaur; he knew it. Hell, everybody knew it.

Gibbs knew his limitations. "That's why I work better with a two man team, Tom."

Morrow's dry laugh didn't sound amused. "Pull the other one. You were able to work effectively with a much bigger team in the Corps. Each one doing his best for a common cause, with a strong chain of command. You've been assigned to infiltration teams with NCIS and done some damned good work for your country. But you seem to have forgotten all that." Morrow tapped his fingers on his planner. "For some reason, it's almost as if you've begun to believe all that press you're getting."

"I don't give a damn about –"

"Shut up and listen to me, Gibbs."

He clenched his teeth as a barrier against the angry denial that was bursting to get out.

"Something happened when Burley put in for a transfer. When Blackadder self-destructed." Morrow tilted his head. "Since Ari Haswari put a bullet in your shoulder, your focus has been … limited. You pulled back. Put up your guard. Decided playing the cranky bastard card every once in a while wasn't enough. A good gunny doesn't continue to grind down his recruits the way you have. Hoard every ounce of information for himself. Put everything – and everyone – on the line the moment a case seems to be taking too long. A sniper is supposed to have patience, Gibbs, not run around like his tail's on fire every time a dirt-bag eludes him for more than forty minutes." Morrow cut off abruptly, tapped his fingers again. "But this is a discussion for another day. One we have had before and will again, of that you can be certain. And, next time, Gibbs, next time we will be going over the procedures concerning back-up and proper preparation for undercover assignments in detail. Nowhere does it state that a 'quick and dirty' plan cobbled together by you and DiNozzo and Sciuto in ten minutes will fly. Do you understand me?"

Morrow leaned in, the fake leather squeaking beneath him. "This issue with Agent DiNozzo is all a part of this new philosophy of yours, where you treat members of your team – of my agency – as tools. And not your lovingly handled woodworking tools. As blunt instruments of your impatience and blind obsession to put every case to bed within your personal time frame."

"It's my job to put these guy away! To get justice for the military and their families! You'd think that doing that faster would be considered a good idea." Gibbs let the anger raise his voice, jerking the
steering wheel in rhythm with his denials.

"I'd advise you not to try to piss me off any further, Agent Gibbs. Not right now."

It was the evenness of Morrow's tone that stabbed through Gibbs' haze of frustration. He knew what Cranston would say. That he was only this mad because he knew that Morrow was partially right. More than partially. Somewhere inside, Gibbs had equated more team manpower with faster solve rates. If he and Tony had worked seamlessly as a two-man team, keeping the highest solve rate in the agency through sweat and sleeplessness and damned stubbornness, then a 3 or 4-man team should work at lightning speed.

They should have found Haswari sooner. Identified him. Taken him out. If the bullet the bastard had put in Gibbs' shoulder wasn't enough of a reminder of his – of their – failure, it was the memory of Ari's victorious grin as he lay bleeding on Gibbs' basement floor. Gibbs' gut churned. They weren't finished, the two of them. He knew it. And that knowledge made him treat every other case as a distraction, important, yes, but something that had to be solved immediately so that they could keep their desks clear for that moment when the bastard reared his head again.

And he rode his team mercilessly until they solved each case, T's crossed, I's dotted, paperwork filed. Failure was not an option. DiNozzo, senior to the others, who'd been a real partner to Gibbs during that year between Blackadder and Kate, felt the change. He knew Gibbs' was strung up tight, had even called him on his Captain Ahab-like obsession. But he didn't know why. Didn't know how Todd and McGee figured in the equation.

Because Gibbs hadn't told him.

Morrow was right, the tension between Kate and Tony had nothing to do with Kate's prickly superiority or Tony's self-doubt.

It had everything to do with Gibbs.

He blew out a breath and turned into the line of cars headed into the Navy Yard. Pulling in too close to the minivan in front of him, he stomped on the brakes and twisted to meet Morrow's eyes. "Can we get back to DiNozzo? You can tear me a new one when we get him taken care of."

The director caught his heated gaze and shot it back to him. "You're right. Agent DiNozzo should be our first priority. I apologize for getting off track."

Gibbs felt the muscles in his jaws bunch. Another reminder. Morrow would not hesitate to apologize about something like this. Even more so knowing that Gibbs never would.

"You don't believe that opening up to Agent Todd's sister is something DiNozzo is going to allow himself to do."

Gibbs didn't bother answering. He'd already said so.

"That, Jethro, is Doctor Cranston's problem. She's the expert. She'll just have to win over Agent DiNozzo. Convince him of her professionalism."

Gibbs swept a quick glance over at the man beside him. At the raised brows, eyes glinting darkly beneath them.

Morrow continued. "I can think of one way to convince Agent DiNozzo. Convince him that Doctor Cranston is someone he can trust. Rely on. A way that will do quite a bit to repair any damage you've caused to your relationship with your young protégé. What about you, Jethro?"
Damn it. He could say no. He should say no. It was nobody's business but his. Morrow was pushing him hard. Pushing to put himself out there, to make some kind of gesture to convince DiNozzo that he deserved better from Gibbs' hands. But Gibbs didn't like to be pushed. He loosened his fingers from the wheel and then gripped it even tighter. He faced forward, drawing the car up to the guard post, busying himself with showing his ID, signing the clipboard.

He heard Morrow turn away. Heard the rustling of his coat as he straightened, buried himself in his damned planner book, giving Gibbs' a semblance of privacy within the car.

"It's up to you of course. Maybe Agent DiNozzo is not as affected by this assignment as you believe. Perhaps it will all blow over after a few good nights' sleep." The director grunted. "We're simply overreacting. Any NCIS staff psychologist should be good enough."

The scene back in Norfolk came back to Gibbs; the focus sharp and deadly. DiNozzo stumbling out of the car, blood spatter drying against his skin and hair, the gun held loosely in one hand. His usual chattering voice speaking too softly, green eyes shifting away from meeting Gibbs' gaze. The man revealed in the NCIS showers as he discarded layer after layer of clothes, nearly tearing away chunks of skin in his haste, had been hurt. Damaged. Shock and reaction could only account for a little of what Gibbs had seen. No, this had been deeper. Soul deep. The kind of injury only another soldier could understand.

"Call Cranston," Gibbs stated.

Morrow paused, the phone still in his hand. "You're sure?"

Gibbs nodded, looking straight ahead.

Morrow dialed. "Doctor Cranston, Tom Morrow from NCI - ." Cut off, Morrow listened. "You were. You can. Very well, I'll see you in my office in fifteen minutes."

~ ~ ~

"Anthony! I am happy to see you."

Tony ducked his head and then instantly regretted it. He stood straight, hands shoved deep into his pockets, drawing a sloppy grin across his face. "Yeah, I got the impression you wanted to see me after your sixth or seventh call, Ducky."

The ME chuckled and met Tony across the bright silver autopsy table nearest the door – and farthest from the sealed drawers housing the doctor's latest patients. Tony's gaze lingered. Jeffrey White was in there. Somewhere. Thick black sutures holding him together.

"Anthony?"

Ducky's eyes told Tony that he'd missed something. "Sorry, Ducky." He forced a laugh. "Autopsy. It takes a minute to, you know." He trailed off, not quite sure where he was going with that little nugget.

"Ah, yes, the ambiance does leave much to be desired."

Leave it to Ducky to fill in the blanks of any conversation. Tony crossed his arms and tapped one finger on his chin. "I don't know, a little paint, some curtains, a few seascapes hung between the x-ray light box and the stainless steel shelves and a handful of out-of-date magazines and you've got yourself a nice little doctor's office vibe going on."
"I am afraid it would not do my usual patients a bit of good, dear boy. And, of course, Director Morrow might balk at the added expense of a proper decorator."

"Considering those bright orange walls in the bullpen, I'm not sure Director Morrow isn't color blind."

Tony wheeled to the left, unprepared for the sudden, loud voice. His hands scrabbled against the smooth table for a moment, trying to find purchase, a weapon, a shield between his body and this new – this unexpected –

"It's all right, Anthony. It's just Mister Palmer and his somewhat questionable sense of humor. There's nothing to worry about."

Stupid. Just Palmer. Tall, skinny Palmer with his big round glasses. Tony tried to turn his reaction into something else, something normal, knocking against the table with his knuckles to make a loud ring. "Right! Good one, Palmer!" He hopped up onto the table, fingers drumming in an uneven rhythm. "Although he's always well dressed, you know? Do you think Mrs. Director hangs little tags on his clothes to tell him what goes together so that the guy doesn't wear the wrong power tie with the wrong shade of grey?"

His back to the blank faces of the drawers filled with the dead, Tony felt a prickle against the back of his neck. Eyes, watching him. Always watching.

Wake up, sleepyhead.

He glanced towards the clear sliding doors leading to the hallway. Over his left shoulder he knew the mirrored door to the stock room stood half open, glaring back his reflection. Too many doors. Too many entrances. Places to hide. Tony held himself still, sitting straight, both hands on the table so he could push himself off in any direction, wherever the threat came from.

Ducky's shoes squeaked against the tiled floor, telegraphing his movements. Giving the metal table a wide berth, he appeared in Tony's peripheral vision, empty hands held away from his body, his face pale and concerned. "While I agree with my assistant's lack of enthusiasm for the color orange, I can assure you that our director is not color blind."

The tentative smile on his face was meant to soothe, Tony knew that. He tried to let it happen. Let himself relax under Ducky's steady, gentle hands. He could handle this. He would handle this. Just another step on his way back to normal. He shifted his glance towards Palmer. To the goofy grin on his face. The rigid posture of his body. Okay. Just another awkward geek standing there in blue scrubs, no idea how to handle a body that wasn't two days dead, leaking fluids, eyes clouded. Still. Unmoving.

He tried to stretch. To move. His back ached. His legs had fallen open, weightless and heavy at the same time. The edges of his vision were peppered with black flecks, the wings of crows, flying toward the center. Dying might be like this. This fading. Falling. Voices murmuring just out of his hearing. "Help me, Lane. He might be wired."

"Yes, as I was saying, you can remain sitting. We'll do the basics – heart, lungs, blood pressure, temperature. Nothing invasive today. Just open your shirt for me. Anthony. Tony. You've done this before. I will not do anything you don't agree to. Just the basics, my boy. You trust me, of course. You always have."

Ducky's voice droned on and on, repeating the same phrases over and over. Tony found himself nodding when they registered. Good. Right. He could do this. Ducky said so – and he should know. After working at NCIS for almost four years, Ducky had treated Tony for everything from a bullet graze to road rash. Tony did trust him. He looked down, his hands fiddling with the buttons on his shirt.
"Good. That's right. Now, Mister Palmer, if you'd bring me the requisite items from my bag. You know what they are."

Tony let the doctor's Scottish burr rumble across his skin like the vibrations of a purring cat. He should have come down here sooner. Even when Ducky was going on and on about some ridiculous situation about a little-known tribe in southern India or the practices of a particular witch doctor he encountered in Madagascar, the ME's presence was always comforting. Reassuring. He knew Ducky. He trusted him. Tony glanced up to smile at the older man who was still keeping his distance a few paces to his left. He stiffened.

Ducky reached out, abrupt, his eyes clouded with worry. He wasn't looking at Tony. Someone else was there, to Tony's right.

"No! Don't –"


"Tony – wait –"

He had to go. Run. Get away.

"Mister Palmer, do not move."

Frightened eyes peered up at him. Wide. Unblinking. Rage leaped up Tony's spine, searing white hot. No. Not this time. This time Jeffrey White wouldn't fool him. This time Tony wouldn't believe in the innocence behind those glasses. The act. Frightened little milquetoast act of a vicious killer. He leaned over, looming over him. He should kill him. Twist his skinny neck until it snapped. Now. Before – before he could –

"Special Agent DiNozzo! Stand down!"

He spun. Who? What?

"Ducky?"

What was Ducky doing here?

"You are at NCIS, Agent DiNozzo. You are in autopsy."

Tony frowned, glancing around. Tile. Metal tables. Steel drawers hiding the dead. Ducky, rigid with fear but still commanding.

What the hell had he done? Images slapped against his mind's eye, folded and bent, bright and coarse, layered over one another until he couldn't tell what was real and what was memory. Fantasy. Nightmare. He blinked down at the figure sprawled across the floor.

"It's all right, Anthony. Everything is all right."

No. Everything was not all right.

"Uh, Ducky. Sorry. I've – I've got to go. A thousand things to do. You know how it is." He flung the words out, not really caring if they made any sense. His gut clenched – empty. Sick. "I'll – tell Gibbs I'm –" He strode through the doors, moving fast, faster, barely able to hold still long enough to
access the stairway door's scanner. His keys were in his pocket. He'd – he'd go. Go home. Lock the door. Alone. He had to be alone. It was safest. For him. For all of them.

"Anthony! Please!"

Ducky's voice didn't follow him far. He ran through the parking garage. Flung himself into his car. Raised his eyes to the rearview mirror, certain he'd see pale blue eyes there. Glasses. He ripped the mirror from the windshield and threw it into the passenger seat, shoved the car into gear and sped away.
Chapter 5

"Under the brown fog of a winter dawn // A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many. // Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled. // And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." ~ T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land

The elevator's ding woke Kate from her mindless stare at Tony's empty desk. Well, not exactly mindless. Her mind was too full of thoughts. Worries. Scenarios and what ifs concerning her partner. Partners. She glanced at the empty desk to her left. Gibbs had been missing for over an hour, leaving her to sit at her desk and wait. And wait. And worry.

"Caitlyn, have you seen Jethro?"

Ducky. Kate could have hugged him. She could always count on the aging ME as the voice of wisdom. Of reason. Of 'have a cup of tea and settle in' to talk out the problem. She smiled, feeling the tension drain from her shoulders – until she saw the near panic on Ducky's face.

She rose quickly from her chair, rounding her desk to approach the older man. "Ducky? What's wrong?" 'What now' is what she'd rather ask.

The ME turned back and forth from the elevator to Gibbs' desk to the balcony outside of MTAC as if he was afraid Gibbs was going to slip passed him if he wasn't watching. "I'm afraid time is slipping away from us, my dear, and our window of opportunity is rapidly closing."

Kate slumped back against her desk. "It's Tony, isn't it?"

Ducky nodded, still distracted. "Who else?"

"He finally came to see you?" But that was a good sign, wasn't it? If Tony had finally responded to Gibbs' order then he was acting more like himself and less like this tense, hair-trigger stranger that had been sitting across from her. Especially if he was willing to sit down for more than five minutes and let someone close enough to touch him. When Kate had dared to suggest something as nonthreatening and normal like drinks after work she thought he might actually take a swing at her. "Did he say anything?"

"Unfortunately, Anthony was not in the mood to say much. In fact," Ducky lowered his head and rubbed his hand across his forehead, eyes closed, "let's just say that our meeting did not go well."

"Are you all right?" Kate stepped closer, her gaze flicking across the older man's flushed face, his trembling hands and the line of sweat across his upper lip.

Finally settling enough to observe Kate's concern, the ME huffed and took out a white handkerchief from his back pocket and drew it across his mouth. Snatching his self-control from some other deep pocket, Ducky smiled. "Forgive me, Caitlyn, I assure you I am fine. I realized quite quickly that Anthony was suffering much more acutely than I had first assumed." A twinkle sparked in his eyes. "My assistant was caught a bit off-balance, however."

"Tony attacked him?" Visions of the tall, geeky young man sporting purpling bruises and a broken nose swam through her mind. Frowning, she turned, reaching for her desk phone.
She stopped suddenly at Ducky's touch on her shoulder.

"Mister Palmer is fine. And has learned a good lesson on approaching a trained agent with less than the correct procedure. Unfortunately, Anthony did not remain long enough to assure himself that he did nothing wrong."

"He ran?"

Ducky sighed. "He ran."

Kate turned back to the phone. "I should alert –"

"Who, my dear?" The older man asked gently. "The gate guards? Internal security?" Ducky's blue eyes were kind. "Do you think sending armed agents after Anthony would do him any good whatsoever?"

"He's out of control, Doctor. If he has you this upset we don't know what he's going to do – he's a – a –"

"A danger? To himself or others?"

Kate clamped her mouth shut on an immediate response. She met Ducky's eyes, unrepentant. She had a duty as clearly as he did. To her co-workers. To any civilians in the building. To the community. And to Tony – her partner. Her friend.

"Tony is not going to thank me for letting him get away with hurting anyone. For backing off until he comes to his senses. He nearly went for my throat this morning for even suggesting that Gibbs should be nice to him. What if he really hurt someone? Someone he cared about? Like Abby?" She patted Ducky's hand and then lifted the receiver. "I'm certainly not going to let him walk away without trying to help him."

"I understand. However, a friendly face is what is needed here, not a symbol of authority or one who threatens him in any way." Ducky shook his head. "In Anthony's current state, the smallest gesture could be interpreted as a threat – just as a reflection from Mister Palmer's thermometer resulted in a kneejerk reaction of self-protection. Imagine what the sight of a raised hand or, heaven forbid, a gun would look like to our friend's hypervigilant mind."

Kate's stomach clenched, acid clawing its way up her throat. Ignoring the voice on the other end of the phone, she turned back to Ducky. They wouldn't hurt Tony, would they? Everybody in the building seemed to know him – know him and like him. He knew the gate guards by name, played basketball in their league. They'd understand, wouldn't they? But what if Tony reacted badly? What if he was so far inside his own head that he didn't know friend from foe?

Angry, Kate shook her head. "Ducky –" She began to answer, to insist, when she caught Ducky's half-smile and followed his line of sight to the open elevator.

"Perhaps we should call in some reinforcements until Jethro returns."

"Perfect." She put the receiver down and hurried forward. "McGee, put those files down and come with me."

Tim McGee, mouth opening and closing like a fish, clutched the file box that much closer to his chest and looked back and forth between Kate and Ducky and the otherwise empty bullpen. "What? Where?"
Ducky snatched the box out of the young man's hands. "No worries, Timothy. Go along now and listen to Caitlyn."

"Um. Okay. Just – Gibbs asked me to correlate the antiquities' inventory with any –"

"Tim." Kate set herself directly in front of the babbling agent, gripping his shoulders in both hands. "Gibbs isn't here. And when he does get back, he's going to be concerned with something much more important than some dusty old tablets and cracked cups."

"You mean Tony, don’t you?" McGee straightened, his forehead crinkling with worry. "What can I do?"

Placing the box down on Gibbs' desk, Ducky headed towards the elevators, stopping beside the young agent. "Good man, Timothy. Now," he crooked his finger at the other two, "follow me. Based on Anthony's trajectory when leaving autopsy, there's not a moment to lose."

~ ~ ~

DiNozzo's phone was going to voice mail. Again. Gibbs closed his with careful precision and then rubbed the device against his pant leg, not so much to remove his own indented fingerprints from its case as trying to invoke a genie out the thing that would render up three wishes so he could go back in time and prevent this crap from happening in the first place. He met Morrow's eyes across the elevator and shook his head. Yeah, no luck, no wishes, and no head-slaps were going to miraculously turn this situation back to normalcy like in one of DiNozzo's movies.

When the phone rang he nearly dropped it.

"Yeah, Gibbs."

"Honestly, Jethro, how you can expect us all to be reachable at any time of the day or night and then secrete yourself away for hours on end during a crisis is more than I can understand-"

The elevator doors slid open on the disgruntled features of the Medical Examiner, phone pressed to his ear. Gibbs stood there for a second, Ducky's mirror image, and then snorted, pocketing his phone and raising his eyebrows as Ducky did the same.

"What now," Gibbs growled as he moved past his old friend and into the bullpen. The empty bullpen. DiNozzo's desk was empty, his computer still on, chair shoved back against the credenza, cold cup of coffee half-drunk. Todd's was just about the same – a half-eaten bran muffin, tea, and a pile of witness statements. Not even a hint of McGee – although that box sitting half-on and half-off of Gibbs' desk might be the files the Probie was supposed to be researching.

Exasperated, Gibbs raised both arms in the obvious question.

Ducky harrumphed, unimpressed. His face might have been bland, but Gibbs saw the concern in the pale blue eyes and the nervous movement of his hands. "Anthony has run. There was an – incident – in autopsy when he finally managed to drag himself there and he reacted badly."

"Just how badly?" Morrow stepped up, his coat hanging over one arm.

Ducky lifted his chin. "I would be happy to discuss it with you, Director Morrow. In private."

Gibbs heard the squeak as his teeth ground together. No. Not now. No more meetings. It was time for action. He turned, in his mind already halfway to DiNozzo's apartment –
- and found a slight Scotsman directly in his path.

"Caitlyn and Timothy have it in hand."

Not their job. Gibbs narrowly avoided shouting it in the crowded bullpen. He wrestled his anger into submission and let his glare do the speaking for him.

~ ~ ~

"Agent DiNozzo?"

Tony's grip on the steering wheel didn't tighten. It couldn't. There wasn't any room between his skin and the leather to squeeze any harder. He'd flashed his ID, the gate guard had done the little head-bob to see it and noted his exit on his clipboard. Staring straight forward, Tony willed the gate to rise, his right leg shaking with effort as he crushed down the brake pedal. He didn't need words or talking or friendship. He just needed out.

"Sorry, Agent DiNozzo, but there's a call for you."

I'm not going back. Tony froze that expression on his face as he turned slowly towards the hovering guard. I don't care what Gibbs barks, I won't go back. Not now. Not until -

"Sir?" The phone's curly cord is stretched out straight, barely reaching Tony in the passenger seat. "It's Agent Todd."

Even better. Tony clenched his teeth. Baby-sitter, know-it-all Kate was likely up in arms that he dared leave the bullpen without her say-so. That chip on her shoulder was taking on some serious weight; the woman was going to end up looking like a hunchback if she didn't lose some of her attitude.

Tony stared, unmoving, but the gate remained down. Blocking his path. He ground the brake pedal further towards the floor boards and reached for the phone.

"What?" he snapped.

"Hey, Tony, glad I caught you. McGee's on his way to you. I'm sorry to hold you up but his car wouldn't start and he needs to get back to his apartment for some, well, frankly I wasn't really listening but he kept making these puppy-dog eyes at me and since I knew you were on your way out and I've still got to finish that background on Doctor Yeung, the stolen Iraqi antiquities' buyer, I thought you wouldn't mind giving him a ride. Thanks, I'll make it up to you. No, scratch that, have McGee make it up to you. God knows I don't want that hanging over my head."

She disconnected. Before Tony could even get his teeth unstuck, Kate hung up. Taking lessons from Gibbs. But the rambling was new.

The passenger side door opened before he could make up his mind to turn around, to wait, or to insist the guard open the damned gate and let him out.

"Whew! Glad I caught you. I thought Gibbs was going to have my hide for sure, although he still might just because I left that file on my laptop instead of remembering to bring it to the Yard this morning. He does not do patience at all, does he, Tony?"

Tony didn't turn. He didn't acknowledge the chattering annoyance sitting next to him with a glance let alone speak to him. As the gate guard tossed him a casual, two fingered salute before heading back into his guardhouse, Tony swallowed down the anger, staring straight ahead at that thin white
piece of fiberglass and wood that trapped him here. When it finally started to move, all Tony could think was thank God Tim wasn't sitting in the backseat.

"Hey, what happened to your rearview mirror?"

~ ~ ~

By the time Gibbs and Morrow had spoken with Todd and headed upstairs, Doctor Rachel Cranston was already waiting in Morrow's anteroom. Just like every other time he met with her, Gibbs was struck by the woman's tiny frame, her narrow shoulders and thin wrists peeking out from the sleeves of her tailored grey suit. Compared to her sister, Kate Todd was built like an NFL linebacker. Even in heels, Rachel barely came up to Gibbs' shoulder.

"Agent Gibbs. Director Morrow. How can I help NCIS today?"

Cranston's gentle voice, the slight smile, her nonthreatening posture standing beside the secretary's desk – all of it belied the woman's fierce intelligence and the depth of her devotion for her clients. She'd been on the Marine Commandant's civilian staff for years and had liaised with NCIS during some of the worst cases Gibbs had ever seen. Gibbs had known her to go 52 hours with no sleep to talk a suffering soldier off of a very real ledge. He'd seen her stand up confidently before the most belittling, condescending military types and never sweat. And he'd sat across a darkened room from her, wrestling with his own demons of guilt and grief and rage, and she'd never run – and never failed to welcome him back with open arms when it was Gibbs who did the running.

"Hello, Rachel."

Her smile was more of a lightening of the eye, a lifting of the chin than a grin. "Jethro."

Maybe this wasn't going to be such a mess after all.

Sitting at Morrow's conference table, a cup of coffee at her elbow, Rachel looked up from her notes. She had let the Director fill her in on DiNozzo, his history, and the particulars of the Jeffrey White op, details reluctantly added from Gibbs a time or two, before she spoke. Gibbs watched her hands, the glint of light reflecting from the slim silver pen as it moved across the page, the dull gleam of filigreed gold on the ring finger of her right hand. The movement of her pen was smooth and flowing, as if she was drawing, not writing. Sketching in the outline of an agent. A cop. A man with enough demons of his own to keep her busy for years.

She closed her notebook and laid it on the table, her pen across it like a sword. "I'd very much like to help Agent DiNozzo. But, based on personal information I've received very informally," her eyes flicked to Gibbs, "I doubt if he'd welcome my help. I have a bit of experience with reluctant clients and it doesn't sound like your agent has a lot of time for building rapport and establishing trust."

Morrow huffed. "Yes, that's exactly what Agent Gibbs told me."

Rachel tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "You obviously have reason to believe Agent DiNozzo will be likely to accept what he would undoubtedly describe as my interference."

Gibbs could almost see the wheels turn as the psychologist pursed her lips and then switched her attention back in his direction. He nodded. Her eyebrows shot up.

"Oh. Yes, that might work," she murmured. She tapped one finger against her lips. "Was Agent DiNozzo able to complete his report of this operation?"

"Not yet," Gibbs stated. "Verbal report is sketchy." Very sketchy. DiNozzo hadn't said more than a
handful of words on the way back from Norfolk. And everything that had come out of his mouth since then had been either a distraction or a half-truth.

She nodded. "And is there paperwork from this previous operation in Philadelphia? If he was placed on mandatory leave, there must be something in the system."

Morrow stood and moved to his desk, leaning over to flip the intercom switch. "Renee, do you have the file I asked for?"

"Yes, sir. I'll bring it right in."

The door opened and closed and then Morrow was back with a large inter-office memo envelope. He unwound the strings and slid the heavy black folder from inside – it landed on the conference table with a dull slap as if the words on those pages carried a supernatural weight. Morrow laid his hand on the file and met the psychologist's eyes.

"As Director of NCIS, I have the right and responsibility to see to the mental and physical health of my agents. Since Agent DiNozzo was involved in both an undercover operation and an officer involved shooting, he is required to attend and pass both a physical and a psychological review as well as the standard SRB. Revealing his complete medical history to a licensed professional psychologist with the proper clearance is my choice." He took a deep breath. "Nothing is secret in a Federal Agency. No agent who expects to maintain any kind of clearance level can keep his superiors in the dark about past concerns. However, there is a line of trust that must be maintained if he is to work effectively with authority. The agent must trust his superiors to be extremely careful with his secrets and to weigh the necessity for truth very carefully."

Rachel sat through Morrow's speech without a twitch of the lips or a fidget. She kept eye contact, but did not glare – a skill Gibbs would kill to have. Or not. He forced himself to sit back against the chair, empty coffee cup twisting in his hands while he watched her. Her steady look seemed to make promises of her own about how careful and diligent she would be with DiNozzo's secrets. And how she heard the concern and distress in Morrow's unnecessary verbiage.

Gibbs didn't need her promises. He'd already trusted her with the best of himself – gone now, buried in the ground by Hernandez' bullets. The familiar needles struck out from his gut at the thought, like a frag grenade, piercing bone and heart and soul. Shannon. Kelly. Faces grey, eyes clouded, stiff and cold. No warmth, no life, no future where his little girl grew up and he walked her down the aisle, Shannon watching tearfully from the front row. They'd been the good in him, the best, and now all he had left was the worst. He looked up from the crushed and mangled cup in his hands to Rachel's smooth features, her steady hands, and her straight back.

He'd trusted Rachel with his soul. He could trust her with DiNozzo's pain.

"Director. Gibbs. I hope you know how seriously I take my oaths. I'll do my best for your agent," she assured them, the quiet tone of her voice reinforcing her sincerity.

"This file will not leave NCIS," Morrow insisted, hand still pressing the folder against the table.

Rachel nodded. "Agreed." She stood, eyebrows rising. "If you could point me in the direction of an empty office, I'll get started."

The two men rose automatically with her. Old school, both of them. Gibbs saw the slight twitch of the woman's lips as she held out her hand. Morrow hesitated one more second before handing off the record of the Macaluso job. The unedited reports. The tedious, overwhelming notations of DiNozzo's injuries – the visible ones and the others. The ones that cut deeper than skin and bone. There were
CDs in there of depositions, every nasty, biting detail spat out by Macaluso's sons. Uncensored. The words themselves, staring up from a black and white page, were not half as devastating as the venomous mouthings of those snakes. Teeth clenched against the rush of bile churned up by the vivid memories of his own first time going through that file, Gibbs dropped the remains of his cup into the trash and turned towards the door.

"Conference Room Three," Morrow stated to his back. "Please make sure Doctor Cranston has everything else she might need."

Gibbs hauled the door open without looking back. He stalked to the edge and peered over the railing, knuckles white. Kate stared up at them, alone in the bullpen, fidgeting her cell phone from hand to hand, clearly waiting. He felt the faint brush of Rachel's sleeve against his. Kate's smile at her sister was quick and just as quickly gone.

"If there is any way to get Agent DiNozzo's report of this … situation, Jethro –"

"You'll get it."

"Jethro."

He sighed and turned towards her.

Her eyes were gentle. "This is a great sacrifice on your part. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Gibbs snorted. "'Want' has nothing to do with it. No, I don't want to tell him, to tell anybody." His throat threatened to close up just thinking about it. But DiNozzo needed it. He needed someone to tell, to talk to. Someone nonthreatening. Safe. No one could have known that Jeffrey White was a monster when the manacles were fastened around their wrists. Gibbs had done that. Put him in the position to be hurt again. And only Gibbs could give him a way out.

"But you will."

Rachel had finished his thought. He nodded.

She cradled the file against her chest. "I'd better get started then."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience! I'm working on this story steadily and hope to post much more frequently. And thanks so much for all of your comments and kudos. You guys rock!

VI

"I sat upon the shore // Fishing, with the arid plain behind me. // Shall I at least set my lands in order? // London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down." ~ T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land

This day had not gone the way Tony wanted. It had started out badly: nightmares – daymares - insomnia driving him from Abby's lab on a quest for caffeine and sugar and diversion from the thoughts and memories that circled round and round behind bloodshot eyes. He'd fetched drinks for the team, flirted with the barista, traded lewd jokes with the cleaning staff and then found himself back at his desk, exhausted, by 7 AM, the blank white case report staring back at him from his computer screen.

Kate. Gibbs. Ducky. They'd all been there throughout the morning, their eyes a little too kind, their words a little too pointed as Tony tried – and failed – to hold himself together. His usual masks hadn't fit. His frantic energy had deserted him. Even his verbal stabs and strikes that were sure to keep people at arms' length wouldn't land.

Tony sat on the edge of his bed, eyes closed, his head heavy in his hands, full of a jumble of images: simple words, subtle threats, and the painful thrust of memory. His stomach growled and lurched, the few bites of pizza he'd managed turned to sharp stones digging at his gut. He was finally alone. Finally back in his apartment, within the familiar walls and scents and textures. Door locked, phone silenced, Tony was free to put himself back together the only way he knew how.

They'd let him go this time. He knew that. Knew that he'd been trapped between their glares and glances and expectations when he'd tried to escape earlier. Sitting at the gate of the Navy Yard, he'd felt the bungee cord of his team's concern yank him back. He'd slipped through the cracks of his team's scrutiny for a moment until Tim had slid into the seat beside him and started talking. And talking.

They still wasn't sure exactly what happened after that. First he was driving McGee to his apartment, then, after promising to wait while the kid retrieved something - he couldn't remember what – Tony'd found himself upstairs in the high tech nerd sanctuary while Tim rewired this and formatted that and generally kept up the geek-speak a mile a minute.

What Tony did know was that the strange interlude with McGee had been the most peaceful part of his day. The flashbacks had calmed, the flickering images at the corners of his eyes had stilled, and the voices full of pain and fear and promises of the worst sort were silenced. It was as if Tim's apartment with its state of the art equipment and clean and sterile surfaces dispelled every though of musty cabins and mold and flannel. As if the two could not exist in the same space and time. For the first time since Gibbs had locked the manacles around Tony's wrist, he'd felt – safe.
Tim’s running commentary had helped. Gigabytes and GUI, cables and ports, firewalls, RADCAB, and Fast-ATA. He’d kept giving Tony things to hold, told him keys to press, had him searching through connectors to find the right ones. The unfamiliar terminology coupled with the way the young agent appeared to require absolutely no speech or interaction from Tony had given him a chance to be quiet. To drop all of his desperate acts, the ill-fitting disguises, and the usual repertoire of movie quotes and frat-boy patter and just be.

Whatever had happened, Tim had then somehow convinced him to drive back to the Yard, stopping for lunch for the team on the way back. It wasn’t until he was walking into the bullpen carrying three large pizzas and a drinks carrier that Tony’s mind clicked back on and his hands started to shake.

Even that didn’t faze McGee – he just put down his bag and took the things from Tony’s hands and suggested he go get some paper towels from the men’s room since they’d forgotten to grab napkins. Which gave Tony time to splash water on his face and stare himself back under control.

Gibbs had been chewing on a slice of pepperoni and mushroom when he got back. Sitting behind his desk, sipping scalding black coffee as if everything was completely normal. He didn’t even look up. Kate wasn’t that good an actress. Her words were right, yammering on about unhealthy choices and grease and clogged arteries while she picked the sausage off of her slice and set each little chunk down in a row in the box lid. McGee’s words seemed to have run out. Standing there in the middle of the bullpen, the younger man was pale, sweat on his forehead; his eyes were too wide and his breathing too quick.

The simmering cauldron of Tony’s nerves had boiled up again, his head stuffed full of blood and whiskey and death. He’d looked down at his hands, expecting to see blood, but they were clean. Dry. Filled with crumpled brown towels Tim had ordered him to bring. He took a deep breath and smoothed them, handing a few off to Kate, to Tim, and then set a couple on Gibbs’ desk.


Tony had nodded, turning back to his desk.

"And eat something."

Okay. Tony had glanced up to see Kate carefully not looking his direction, Tim reaching out to lift the lid of the untouched box, swiveling it so that Tony could take the first slice. Maybe. Maybe he could. Lunch at the office. Gibbs growling for reports. Tim cautious and Kate mothering. Just another day at NCIS.

He’d touched a key, bringing his monitor back to life, the empty spaces of the familiar report still waiting for him. With the smell of tomato sauce and garlic and cheese, the bright orange walls, and the faint back-and-forth of McGee and Kate steadying him, Tony had managed to fill in those blanks. Set it down in black and white. No shades of grey here. No might-have-beens, or maybes, or could-have-happeneds. This wasn’t a movie scene. No Defiant Ones. No Tony Curtis. No subtext.

He’d typed out the words one by one, 'just the facts, ma’am,' he reminded himself. The voices were there, just over his shoulder, a low buzzing that the simple, professional bullet points pushed to the background. The darkness grew there, at his back, waiting until he finished.

When he’d finished and was standing at the printer, the tension locked down around him again like a suit of armor. This armor wasn’t fastened around him, but it slid in behind his skin, invisible and icy. He didn’t know how long he stood there, the three standard copies of his report lying in the printer's tray before Gibbs had noticed. His boss had taken the pages, stapled the copies, and then silently herded Tony down the hall towards the conference rooms. Morrow was waiting for him there. He took
Tony's report with a bland, all business air, and started shooting Tony phrases like 'just take a moment,' and 'assist with inquiries' and a bunch of other meaningless nonsense that Tony had parroted to witnesses and victims time after time.

Victims. Tony'd taken a step away before he even realized he was moving. No.

Gibbs hadn't touched him. He didn't grab his elbow or lay a heavy hand on his shoulder to stop him. He'd moved, angling his body to form a barrier between Tony and escape. The hairs on the back of Tony's neck lifted and the slender cut under his chin throbbed with every heartbeat.

It had been hours ago, the shadows that pillowed in the corners of Tony's bedroom told him that. Tony's hands slid up and his fingers clenched, tightening in his hair, his too long hair, pulling hard enough to stop the flipping images and bring him back to now. He didn't remember how he got away. Why they finally let him go. All he remembered was the woman standing beside the conference room table. Thin. Petite. The jacket of her suit tossed over an empty chair. He'd met her clear grey eyes and noted her careful mannerisms. Composed. Professional. Tony had let her introduce herself, shook her hand, and then excused himself. She didn't matter. What mattered was the black folder sitting on the table like a bloated black slug.

Tony's muscles bunched and shivered, the tension he'd stored up in them for days taking its toll. A wave of cold swept him from top to bottom. He knew this feeling. Understood the physiology. The burning and nausea, how he couldn't seem to catch his breath. Football camp in the Ohio summer. An O2 mask over his mouth and nose on the sidelines. Working his body hard, straining, struggling to be good enough. And then doing everything it took to stay there, at the top. Those were good memories – some of the best of his life. He tried to hang onto them, to put himself back there, smiling at his teammates, feeling the camaraderie in the locker room when all Tony DiNozzo had to worry about was making the play, hanging onto the ball, and covering his man.

The sunny skies and the sweet green turf of his alma mater faded, replaced by the squeak of a rusty screen door, fetid breath against his neck, and the flat, bitter reek of sweat and fear. Running, lifting weights, wind sprints, lunges, working out in full gear – that made his body stronger, the gain well worth the pain. This was different. This constant tension, muscles tight, mind spinning, no sleep, no food, no rest – this could break him down. Tear up his body. His body and his mind.

Tony made himself open his hands, finger by finger, and lowered his arms to rest his elbows on his knees. His body couldn't take much more. This time he didn't have the team trainer standing by with oxygen or someone he trusted sitting in the sunshine of a Pennsylvania afternoon, his voice dispelling the panic. Tony was smarter than this, tougher than this, than this thing that reared up from his past to slam into him like a Michigan linebacker. He was no teen jock or green rookie. He was a federal agent, God damn it, and he'd see to himself before the cramps and the vomiting sent him to the hospital. To the steel and sterile rooms where strangers had the right to walk in and out, to read the secrets you tried to hide beneath your skin, and to poke and prod at the wounds that only you could see.


He opened his eyes to take in the familiar shapes of his room. The closet doors were still open from his frantic search for a clean shirt the day before – three days ago? Four? The day before he met little, unassuming Jeffrey White. His gaze slid across the top of his dresser, the shelves in the corner, and the stands on either side of the bed. Kate would probably be surprised that his bedroom wasn't either the total mess of a lazy slob or a satin-sheeted, mirrored-ceiling sex pit. Just a room. Average. Unremarkable. Nothing about it would raise the slightest suspicion or curiosity.

Rising from the bed with his legs stiff and his head pounding, Tony moved to the rack of CDs and
movies set beneath his stereo. His fingers slid along the CD cases, some standard plastic, some simple cardboard or paper sleeves. A few mixes had been gifts from girlfriends. One was a copy of the only concert his high school band had managed to record, feedback and shrieking microphones and all. He picked up the one he wanted, wedged between Ole Blue Eyes and Ella. The paper sleeve was pristine, immaculate. Nothing was written on the lines, no dates or names to tell him what he'd find when he slipped it into the CD player.

Tony stroked the sleek lines of the Bose, wondering when the technology would take another leap forward, making the disc an anachronism like 8-tracks or cassettes. Wondered if he'd have the foresight to transfer the contents to another type of file before he needed it again. A thumb drive. A wav file. Whatever replaced this. Finger in the center hole, Tony looked at his reflection in the surface, seeing a much younger man, bruised and bloody, lips cracked and bleeding, the shadows behind his eyes turning green to black.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

"How do you feel now, Fed?"

He closed his eyes and breathed. In and out. Any child could do it. In and out. The doors were locked. Chain and deadbolt set. No one was here. No one could touch him. No one would see. He picked up the remote and stood back from the stereo, pushing the 'play' button.

"Tell me, Doc," Tony's voice rang out from the perfectly modulated speakers, loud and pissed and broken, "tell me how this is going to work. How – how I'm supposed to –" the pause was filled with hoarse breaths, "how can I be –"

"Tony. You've made enormous strides. You've beat back demons most people can't imagine. It's time to remind yourself of that. Of who you are, right at the very foundation. Of what you've accomplished."

Silence.

"I know you're not afraid of going back out there, of going back to work. Putting yourself in harm's way if that's your duty."

Another pause. Tony listened, his body tipped towards the voices, the therapist's office coming back to life in his memories. Wide plate window. Light wooden furniture. Doctor Camber in his usual fawn leather chair while Tony either paced or sprawled on the couch. It had taken weeks for him to share anything truthful with the psychologist. To get beyond the pain in his body and the searing ache in his soul. To remember that he was Tony DiNozzo, not Antonio DeMarco, trusted mediator between factions of the Macaluso families. People who weren't there only remembered the convictions, the simultaneous raids that broke up the mafia family's drug, prostitution, and smuggling monopoly on the East Coast. The 'big picture' as his Commander used to tell him.

They had no idea what it took to get there. Very few had access to the courtroom. To the testimony. To the hospital reports and SRBs and internal investigations. And only Tony had seen every moment from the inside. Only Tony and his handler had all the facts. His handler. Bryce Forman. The keeper of the recordings Tony had smuggled out. The one Tony trusted to hold onto his conscience, to his soul, while he became a criminal. The one who was supposed to hit the panic button and get Tony out when the shit hit the fan. Hot molten rage swept through Tony, rocked him on his feet. He choked it back. A harsh, gutteral laugh blew out of Tony's throat. No wonder he had trust issues.

He hadn't saved any of the other recordings of his sessions with Ray Camber, the clinic's psychologist. None of them mattered. None of the detailed descriptions of his pain. The verbal
diarrhea of blame and anger and self-flagellation. The timeline of his life, sketched out in that quiet clinic in the Poconos for Camber to pick apart. None of that mattered. This one – this one he'd keep forever. To remind himself that he could do it. That Tony DiNozzo would never be a victim again.

"No," the Tony on the disc finally answered. "I passed the review board. My range scores are as good as they've ever been. I can do it."

"But you're hesitant. Do you doubt yourself?"

No Tony of any era was going to answer that question. At least not honestly. Doubt himself? Hell, yes. He'd doubted everything. His body had healed, his muscles re-built, his mind quieted. He was as 'at peace' as he was going to get with it, with himself. Trusting anyone else? That was another story.

"I see. You don't know how they'll see you. How your fellow officers will look at you now that they've seen you wounded. Hospitalized. You've read the transcripts, you know what the Macaluso family claimed. What they're going to bring up in open court. Facing the pity in your colleagues eyes, the mistrust, the questions about what happened, what the Macalusos did to you and what you did as a part of their organization, these are the thoughts that are eating at you."

"Yes," Tony hissed the word along with his younger self. He had to go back there. To work the process he'd come up with at the little clinic in Pennsylvania. To get the voices – the memories – to stop, to leave him alone, to slot the persona he'd taken on into the past, to cleanse himself of the doubts, and forget the blame. Get over it. Camber had pointed the way – whether he knew it or not. It was time to remind himself of who he was.

"So, I'll repeat what you already know. You cannot control their reactions, Tony. No matter what you thought you learned as a child. No matter how you managed to survive, you know you can't manipulate others into acting – and feeling – the way you want them to. It doesn't work. Even the best actor, the best undercover operative, can't control others, he can only control himself. You. You can decide how to act and react to whatever they say and do."

Idiot. Of course you couldn't completely control others. But you sure as hell could deflect and distract and pretend that nothing they did or said or thought could possibly bother you.

"Tony, are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm listening." Tony heard the resentment and condescension in that voice from his past. His control had not been good enough back then. But that Tony had never worked with Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Grand Poobah of control, of stoicism. Of never letting the enemy see your cards.

Camber had taken the words at face value. "And why can you do that?"

"Because I'm strong." Tony growled along with his former self, his voice stronger, leaner, more deadly than it had been back then.

"Yes. Go on," Camber said.

"I've survived. I'm healthy. I'm alive. I survived. All of it."

Tony said the words in perfect tempo and tone with the recording.

"Um-hm."

"I'm strong. Smart. Not a victim."
"No, you're not a victim."

"Not helpless. I have a gun and a badge and –"

"Don't focus on the externals," the doctor reminded him.

In his bedroom, years removed from this encounter, Tony nodded. "I have courage and loyalty. I'm capable of love. Capable of putting this crap behind me. Of moving forward. It won't defeat me."

"Yes. You won't forget it, any of it, but you can put it into its proper perspective."

"Admit it happened." The Tony on the CD was gritting his teeth. Forcing the words out. He remembered how much he'd hated Camber sometimes. A lot of the times. He'd wanted to forget. To deny. To slip back into devil-may-care Tony DiNozzo and lock the torture away with all of his other griefs. Camber wouldn't let him. That much the doctor was right about. Never forget. Never forget where you came from. What molded you into the strong, capable person you became. Into a survivor.

His former self hurried on.

"Remind myself I survived. And that's all that matters."

Tony hit the 'stop' button. "That's all that matters."

Doc Camber had been a big help – up to a point. He may have wanted to linger a little too long on the crappiest parts of Tony's life, pretending that 'bringing them into the light' would turn them into rainbows or sunshine or something, but he'd done one thing right.

He'd reminded Tony that Anthony D. DiNozzo was a survivor. Not a victim. Not someone to be pitied or coddled or defeated. And when Tony had walked out of that clinic with his clean bill of health, his gold shield, and all the shiny new commendations that came with it, he had gained something else. A system. A plan. A way to cope.

Camber didn't want him to forget. Fine. Tony turned to the shelves on the other side of the room, waiting in the shadows. He wouldn't forget, but he'd remember in his own way. For his own purposes. He glanced over the mundane items he'd placed there over the years. Things that would mean nothing to others, but that would remind him of every time he'd had to put himself back together. A thick glass tumbler. A silver backed brush. A Hawaiian lei. An OSU coffee mug. A child's scapular. A first edition of Peter Pan. A model car.

Reminders. Mementoes. Souvenirs of his scars, of every time he'd hit bottom and clawed his way back up. Every betrayal. Every blow. Every touch that violated, and every boot that had been set against his neck – literally and figuratively. Jeffrey White and Lane Danielson were just the most recent. He'd choose their token later, lay it there on the bottom shelf. Let it grow meaningless under a layer of dust.

Tony swallowed, the cut under his chin stabbing. "Let's do this," he said, eyes narrowed.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

VII

"Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel, // And here is the one-eyed merchant, // and this card, Which is blank, is something he carries on his back, //Which I am forbidden to see." ~ T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

The plane slid smoothly over the plank's surface, curls of wood twisting up from the blade. Gibbs lifted the tool and set it back against the end of the board, his rhythm seamless, the pressure firm and even. The same motions over and over again soothed the doubts that ate at him, forced the anger and worry deeper under the surface with every pass. When the wood was ready, even and silky, his thoughts were in order, too.

Gibbs set the tool on its shelf and took up the jar where a thin layer of bourbon still coated the bottom. He breathed in the scent of oak, of age-mellowed sweetness, before finishing it off. It was late and tomorrow – tomorrow he would need all of his wits about him. He huffed. What few wits he had left, anyway.

The jar clattered to the work bench. Gibbs stretched, both hands fisted in his lower back. He glanced towards the pile of shavings under the ribs of the boat. No. Not tonight. Tonight he needed something softer than a cement floor. He dragged his weary body up the stairs, taking one look back at the bones of his project before he turned off the lights and closed the door.

Washing his hands free of sawdust and dirt at the kitchen sink, Gibbs' mind circled the problem of Tony DiNozzo like the water in the drain. McGee had done a good job. He'd held it together long enough to give DiNozzo some breathing room. When the two had come back with lunch, Tony had looked better, calmer, more like himself. He'd managed a few bites of pizza and finished his report after a mild order from Gibbs. He'd watched the younger agent from across the aisle. And as soon as he saw the tension return to those shoulders, the quick flick of his head to scope out all corners of the office, Gibbs had been at his side.

He turned off the water and tore off a paper towel to dry his hands. It had been too soon. Too soon to introduce him to Cranston. But Morrow's instructions had been clear. Once Tony's report was finished, once the agent had wrapped his head around the facts, Morrow saw no reason to delay. And nothing Gibbs had said could change his Director's mind. If he'd had a chance to read DiNozzo's report first, Gibbs was sure Morrow would have begun to understand. As it was, Gibbs only just managed to keep his boss from sending out a team to haul DiNozzo back when he bolted.

Gibbs' body went through the motions of filling his coffee maker. Pouring the water. Spooning in the grind. The light over the sink cast thick shadows behind him, as if this one point of light drew every bit of warmth in from the entire house. His house might be older, a little dusty, a little drab, but it was filled with memories. Love and laughter, Shannon's brightness and Kelly's smiles. He wondered what ghosts Tony's apartment had stirred up around him tonight. Would he find peace there, locked behind his walls, liked Gibbs did? He shook his head. Doubted it. That place held memories all right, but none of them were good ones.
He rested his hands against the counter, head hanging between his shoulders. People liked to tell him how much he and DiNozzo were alike. Ducky. Abby. How they both lived the job, had a natural inclination to take charge, to throw themselves into the fire to save innocents or teammates. How they sank their teeth into a case or a mystery like a bulldog and couldn't be shaken off. Gibbs didn't think he'd ever had the enthusiasm Tony did for undercover work. It wasn't in his nature to show his feelings. To let the job get under his skin the way it did Tony's, like an itch that needed scratching. Even if half of DiNozzo's inane chattering and wild energy was an act, some of it was real. And that portion told Gibbs a lot about the younger man.

Gibbs had been the enigma of a military man – a sniper. He'd been a part of a team, a troop, a command, every moment of his Marine years. But, when he'd become a sniper, he'd been alone. At his heart, he was built to be a sniper. His central quietness, his balance, the weighted foundation of his life let him sit out in his nest and let the world go by. Unaffected. Indifferent. Gibbs was at peace as long as he had his target in his sights. Alone on a hill, on a high perch, in an abandoned building, Gibbs trusted the rest of his team to do their jobs and leave him alone to do his. And, when the job was done, he walked away.

DiNozzo did his best work alone; that much was the same. But Tony came back to the office in the wee hours, took files home, and slipped happily into undercover assignments for far different reasons from Gibbs'. He didn't have a quiet soul, a depth of balance he could draw from. Tony liked working alone because he didn't trust anyone else. He didn't trust them to see his process, to follow his leaps of intuition, or to appreciate the smarts he could bring to bear on a case. DiNozzo trusted Gibbs and Kate and even their probie to have his back in a firefight, to cover his ass in any physical struggle. But to appreciate – to respect – his intelligence? His particular ways of getting answers? His insight and perception? No.

'And why's that?' Gibbs asked himself. Maybe it was because Morrow was right. Because DiNozzo had been left out to dry in Philadelphia. Because his partner in Baltimore had betrayed Tony along with his oaths. And because, here, at NCIS, Gibbs had started to focus too much on his distant targets and let his team fall apart around him.

As a two man team, he and DiNozzo had done well. They'd shared insights and theories, followed up leads and leap-frogged each other's discoveries. Gibbs didn't have time to drift off to a high hill and cut himself off from his team. He and Tony were the team and it was all hands on deck. Now, with Todd and McGee in place, Gibbs was turning away. Isolating himself. A one man army, more interested in the shadows in his memories and that distant focus than in his team. He'd been leaving them to fight over his scraps, Tony, his number two, plowed under by Todd's arrogance and McGee's inexperience.

Tony would never consider exposing himself, his process, the way his mind worked, to either one of them. As for weaknesses? Gibbs grunted, stepping away from the counter, from the spotlight of warmth. No. Tony was not about to reveal his underbelly to those two. Or to Gibbs these days. Whatever weakness Tony saw in himself – real or imagined – he'd guard with sharp teeth and claws and every dirty trick he'd learned in his years of law enforcement. That's what he'd told Morrow earlier. How he'd gotten the director to back off and let Tony come back to them in the morning.

It was all there in black and white in Tony's report. The careful wording. The sparse facts. The gaps. Reading Tony's report made Gibbs' gut churn, not because of what it said, but because of what it precisely and effectively did not say. How it turned the eye away from the black hole of Tony's pain. It echoed that damned black file from Philadelphia. The one Rachel had left on the conference room table so that Tony wouldn't be blindsided when Morrow opened the door.

Gibbs turned, setting his hip against the counter. He crossed his arms, staring into the darkness of his
"You could turn on a light you know."

The rustle of clothes. Stockinged feet sliding on the wood floor. The lamp at the end of his couch flicked on revealing a slim arm, brown hair, and quiet grey eyes.

"I don't mind the dark, Jethro." Rachel settled back on the end of the couch, tucking her feet underneath her again. "I thought I would wait until you were finished downstairs. I knew you wouldn't mind."

Gibbs shrugged. "Leave the door unlocked for a reason."

Rachel cocked her head to one side. "There's a practice in the hills of western Carolina. When there's been a death, the loved ones come to the house and open all the windows, just in case the spirit is trapped there and can't find its way to the afterlife. I've always wondered if this habit of yours of leaving the door unlocked is one way of dealing with your loss. As if you can't quite open the windows, you can't bear to usher them out, but you don't want to hold them back if they need to go. So, you leave the door unlocked. Leave it up to them."

He lowered his chin, faint images of Shannon – of Kelly – smiling at him from the darkness. He shook his head. "I grew up in central Pennsylvania, not the Appalachian mountains."

"But you've heard the stories."

Gibbs pushed off from the counter and moved into the doorway. "Heard a lot of stories. Seen a lot of death. People have come up with different ways to deal with their grief."

"Yes. And the way one man deals with his losses could be wildly different from the way another does."

He raised his eyes to hers. She'd propped one elbow on the arm of the sofa and leaned over to rest her head against it.

"You here to psychoanalyze me? I thought we were dealing with DiNozzo."

"We are. Just an observation. It's been quite a while since we've spoken." She let the silence lay between them untouched, watching him. Gibbs was good at silences. But he knew from experience that she could wait even him out. "Been busy."

"I heard a little something about that, too."

"Kate or Morrow?" Gibbs sighed. It was bad enough having a shrink with a high level security clearance looking over his shoulder, couple it with a nosy sister and an interfering director and –

"Kate doesn't talk about your cases. She does vent to her sister, sometimes, about her crotchety boss and his short fuse and his obsession about a particular case. And about long hours and stress and the way it's threatening to crack the foundations of her team." All of it was said in the same languid air, as if he and Rachel were an old married couple trading insights about their day.

An icy blade shivered up Gibbs' spine. He crossed his arms over his chest, denying the urge to shout. To bark at her. To demand she get to the damn point. Aggression didn't work with her. Gibbs' usual weapons – a glare, a cutting remark, a bitter rant – all fell on the psychologist's calm demeanor not
like a storm, but a cool refreshing breeze. "I know I've screwed the pooch. Tugged the rug out from under DiNozzo's feet." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Never should have thrown this sorry excuse for a mission together. Not with Tony in the middle of it."

Rachel tilted her head, the light giving her features a warm glow. "There will be time to reflect on that later, I think."

Gibbs couldn't help a bitter laugh. "'Reflect.' Yeah, Morrow will be 'reflecting' at me when we've got DiNozzo taken care of."

Her eyes crinkled. "Well, if you need any help reflecting, let me know."

He didn't bother agreeing. "Morrow was wrong," he stated, getting back to the point. The reason for her visit.

Rachel nodded against her hand. "He realizes that. We spoke over dinner. His determination to help Agent DiNozzo has him acting precipitously. That was not the time to introduce us."

"So you left the file out so he'd see it and bolt?"

She tilted her head back and forth. "So that he was forewarned. So that Agent DiNozzo could make his own schedule for our time together. Rushing him to talk about something he clearly was doing every he could to hide wasn't going to work."

"Morrow should have listened to me," Gibbs growled. "Or read the damned report. I know my agent."

Rachel smiled. "I believe Director Morrow is a lot like you, actually. He'd much rather set a plan in motion even if he hasn't quite thought it all out properly."

His grunt sounded loud, harsh, in the quiet room. "Has the balls to read me the riot act for doing the same."

"He explained the undercover operation." She lifted both hands as if in apology. "It seemed quite an elaborate, dramatic plan. Staging a prison break, faking the murder of the guard. I know I'm not an expert, but it sounded like you and your team see too many movies."

Gibbs did not roll his eyes. "DiNozzo. His idea. Something about Tony Curtis. Abby jumped on the bandwagon. You should see the two of them when they get started."

"So it was their fault for rushing you." Not a question. Not a statement. The quiet words said simply in the silent, shadow-heavy house should have been light as feathers, not sharp enough to cut right to the bone.

"No," Gibbs answered. "My head wasn't in the game. I," he rubbed calloused fingers across his forehead and fell into the chair across from her, "I let it all happen. Agreed to anything and everything just to get the damned secretary off my back. To get this case over with."

"Why?"

"To get Danielson. We thought – we assumed," God he hated to admit that, "assumed he was a three-time murderer. Figured White would lead us right to him."

"And the antiquities."
Yeah, sure. He glanced across at Rachel and saw the clear understanding on her face.

"Your complete focus was on getting the murderer behind bars. That sounds like the right kind of focus to have, Jethro. Exactly the right goal for you and your team."

"Maybe." He didn't want to talk about this. About his rush to throw DiNozzo headlong into prison. How he didn't wait for all of the evidence against Danielson and White. How long was it until Abby had the video? A day? Eighteen hours? How long would it have taken before she saw the killer's mistake? Saw him take off his gloves and leave the fingerprints that identified White as the guy who liked to use a knife? To charm his victims with his scrawny appearance and claims of abuse and innocence until they turned their backs and he could slice their throats open?

Gibbs looked across at Rachel, met her eyes. "No. I rushed it. And because of that, it's a damned miracle that the body we found at that cabin wasn't Tony's. That the blood-spray in that car wasn't from his open throat."

Rachel gave up her casual pose. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, her hands clasped. "And?"

The darkness around them wasn't as comforting anymore. "And whatever else happened in that cabin, however Tony ended up scared, wounded, running for cover, that was my fault, too."

Gibbs' words were swallowed up by the night, by the silence that grew around them, by Rachel's unflinching stare.

"Do you think that's what I'm here to do, Jethro? To assign blame?"

His mouth lifted on one side. "Not your job." He'd heard her say it often enough before.

"But," she prompted him.

Gibbs blew out a breath. "But it's easier to blame yourself than to move on."

She nodded. "Are you ready to move on, now? Ready to swallow that guilt you chew on down in your basement and move forward for Agent DiNozzo?" She pointed both index fingers at him from her folded hands. "It's up to you. Telling him your story will be a huge step in not just your agent's recovery, but in yours as well."

"You tell me. Is it going to help? Are you gonna be able to get DiNozzo out of his past, out of his head, and back onto my team?" His stare was cold, his words blunt. "Because if this isn't going to work —"

"I don't make promises like that and you know it." She threw his attitude right back to him. "But, in my professional opinion, Agent DiNozzo has been coping with loss and pain for a long time by himself. This time, he just needs a little help. Help I can give him."

"Then I'm ready." Gibbs didn't give a shit what talking to Tony about his girls would do for him. He'd made his choices 20 years ago and he'd live or die by them. But it wasn't too late for DiNozzo. Gibbs didn't want to imagine Tony in his apartment, alone, the darkness weighing him down, tearing away at a good man's heart while he did whatever he did to 'cope.' It was time for Gibbs to come down from his high hill. To stop licking at his festering wounds to keep them open and aching. Time to start caring about the people here, right around him, for a change. If he could give DiNozzo a hand, steer him towards the help that was waiting for him, that was a start.

Rachel took his statement for fact and leaned back against his couch cushions. "Then I have an idea
about how to proceed."

"And leaving Tony alone tonight is part of that?" Gibbs' gut knew it was the right thing to do. Didn't mean he liked it.

"That file you gave me was powerful, Jethro. Not just the facts of the case in Philadelphia, but the working notes of a Doctor Camber. It told me a lot about your agent. About his strengths and weaknesses, about how he deals with betrayal and loss, and, maybe more importantly, how good he is at manipulating the therapeutic process." Her smile was honest, almost proud. "He's a master at saying what doctors expect to hear. And, while talking a mile a minute, apparently, saying nothing at all."

Gibbs felt his own grin match hers. "Yeah."

"So," Rachel sat up, reaching for her shoes with stockinged feet, "Agent DiNozzo should be allowed a chance to deal with this latest trauma in the way that's worked for him in the past." She held up one hand to stop Gibbs' comment. "No. I don't think it will work. Not this time. But if we don't let him try, he will never admit he cannot handle this on his own." She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "He's been alone too much already." She looked up. "Let's show him there's another way."

He watched her get ready to leave, his gut churning. She was right. How long had Gibbs told himself to handle his grief – his guilt – himself? How long had he closed his eyes to the pain that he dealt out to others even as he claimed that it was all his, his pain to keep, to have and to hold, forever. Gibbs let out his breath, fetid and musty like a cabin locked up for too long. Time to invite Tony in. Show him the wreckage. If he'd come.

"So, tomorrow, DiNozzo's just going to walk in and ask for help?"

Standing, Rachel slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "Not exactly. But you might be surprised. Director Morrow has scheduled Agent DiNozzo's interview with Special Investigations for tomorrow morning. With an Agent Lemuel."

For a minute, Gibbs was lost. How the hell was that going to help? Rehashing the facts of his report – answering annoying questions that only a paper-pusher would ask – Huh. Wait. "Marcus Lemuel?"

"Yes."

Lemuel. He had the experience. And he was smart. A fellow Marine. He'd understand. Gibbs caught Rachel's warm gaze and nodded. "He's a good man."

"So are you, Jethro." She smiled. "And a good friend. Let's make sure Agent DiNozzo remembers that he has one."

Chapter End Notes

I'm back from the Land of No Wifi with some more chapters under my belt! Many thanks for your continued patience and your great comments! I really appreciate all of your kudos and the fact that you're still with me! Next chapter brings us back to day one. Finally!
Chapter 8

VIII

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?" // 'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street with my hair down, so.' // 'What shall we do tomorrow? // 'What shall we ever do?" ~ T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

Sleep had come in fits and starts, exhaustion laying him out like a punch-drunk fighter only to have him come up swinging when the nightmares began. Each time, Tony climbed out of his bed and straight to the shower to wash off the stink of sweat and fear. Then it was back to his shelves to make the journey one more time, to touch the silver-backed brush, the thick, cut-glass tumbler, and the other reminders of his survival. Once he calmed, his skin fitting back around him like it would hold him together for a couple more hours, his eyelids would slip down and he'd sleep again.

A little after four, after he'd made it all the way from the top shelf clear down to the bottom, Tony found himself sitting on the floor, a slim, leather-bound volume in his lap. Shaking fingers traced the letters embossed on the cover. E. A. Poe. He'd only opened it once, searching for a story he remembered from his school days. A verse about darkness and betrayal. He remembered finding the book in a gift shop on one of his trips up and down 95 in his earliest days at NCIS. He'd picked it up without a thought, set it down at the counter beside his bottle of soda and Snickers bars, and then stuffed it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

He'd left it there for weeks. It was just heavy enough to lay against his chest like a heavy hand over his heart. Every time Tony got caught up in an NCIS case, every time he felt himself relax into the weird orange bullpen with his new partner, its presence pulled him up short and reminded him. Reminded him of Danny. Of false friendship and lies, of the meaninglessness of oaths, and the shock of a knife in the back. A blow only a friend could get close enough to land.

A sense of calm had finally settled around him. It was thin, a little stretched like an over-full balloon, but as long as Tony was careful he thought he could make it last. He set Poe's book back on the shelf and stood, heading back to the shower one more time. The water was cold by the time he'd finished, two empty bottles of shampoo and body wash rattling around his feet as the water drained away.

Tony's mind was still as he dried himself. Shaved. Got out the hair dryer and finger-combed his hair into shape. He stepped out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist, to turn on his computer and put the water on to boil. His stomach was empty – hollow – but it felt right. Like he'd finally been cleansed of whatever Danielson had given him. He got a mug down from the cabinet, opened a new box of tea bags and, with a silent apology to Ducky, set a tiny bag of Earl Grey tea-dust in his cup. He might not drink the tea, but making it, going through the motions, pouring the boiling water, spooning up the sugar, was something Tony DiNozzo would do. So he did it.

He headed back to the small desk in the living room to check his email. One from his cousin Pete – the usual Christmas card sent digitally, of course, because Hallmark and envelopes and handwritten messages were too old-fashioned. Eddie, Tony's OSU teammate and frat brother, had sent an internet joke that Tony had seen about twelve times already. Poor Eddie, always late to the party. Brooks Brothers and Joseph A. Banks missed him. Had plenty of sales and coupon codes for his use if he wasn't finished his Christmas shopping. Not to mention the DVD department at Amazon.

Christmas. One of his favorite times of the year. No one did Christmas like Tony DiNozzo. One
shelf in his hall closet was stacked with the gifts he'd picked up over the past year. He liked to buy gifts. Loved to see the surprise on people's faces when they saw it was just what they wanted. He liked to joke about bottles of bourbon and honey dust, talk it down, make it about off-hand gestures and the typical male race to find anything at the mall at midnight on Christmas Eve. It's what they expected. American Jock mentality. They'd all laugh if they knew how much joy Tony got out of all the bells and lights, singing along with the Grinch, or sitting in calm silence as Linus took the stage and reminded them what it was all about.

The ache in his chest told him this year would be different. That this was another starting point. Another Year One. If Tony didn't want his traditions tainted with blood and bile and fear, he should put them aside. He closed his eyes, letting the echoing emptiness swallow up the sorrow and despair. Maybe his act should be reality. There was always next year.

He stared back at his screen. Nothing from Morrow. No demand for his head for leaving early. No good-intentioned prodding from Kate or McGee. He hesitated before opening the email from Abby, but the only thing he found there was a set of emojis that probably meant something in lab-goth-speak, but that Tony couldn't quite figure out. He felt his shoulders relax, his breath coming easier as the invisible clamps around his rib cage eased open. He could do this.

The email from Special Investigations wasn't exactly a surprise. Short and to the point. Report to Conference Room B at 10 AM for your deposition. Signed by Agent Marcus Lemuel. Good. More normalcy. One more hurdle, one more test of Tony's control. Time to put this behind him.

Tea forgotten, Tony headed back to the bathroom to face himself in the mirror. Washed. Clean-shaven. Green eyes too bright within the heavy shadows and colorless clay of his skin. He still looked like a criminal.

Tony combed his fingers through his hair. It was irritating, falling into his face all the time. He should cut it. No time to go to his barber. Deposition was this morning. He should look professional, not like a refugee from a mop-top boys' band. His lips grew tight against his teeth. Or a homeless shelter. Even dressed up in his best suit, Tony was going to look like a guy who'd gone out to get drunk and was stumbling to work in the morning in a haze of alcohol and regret. He opened the medicine cabinet and took out the scissors – long, slender blades as sharp as razors. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes as he closed the door. When he stared back into the mirror, all he could see was the light shivering along the sharp metal, glinting, bright enough to sear his eyes.

"You think you're gonna replace me, pretty boy? Think you're gonna be happy with him? Doing what he wants you to do?" The laughter was cruel, cynical, cutting. "Hope you're not too traditional. Or the squeamish type."

"Now, Lane, you know he couldn't replace you."

"I'd kill him first."

"He's been really useful. And nice. He likes me."

"Bastard. Maybe I'll cut him up a little, make him ugly. Scarred. You'd drop him if he wasn't so pretty."

His hands were shaking, the light from the bathroom fixture reflecting from the blades, jerking around the room like a crazy lightning bug. Voices and smells, alcohol, dust, and sweat, desperation and cruelty scratched across his mind, rippled beneath his skin. The scissors made a heavy clank against the porcelain when he dropped them.
The bass line grabbed Gibbs as he stepped out of the elevator, thumping up through the soles of his feet to beat inside his chest. The music itself was muted even though the door to the lab stood wide open. He hesitated in the doorway for a moment, shoring up his nerve to face Abby with calm confidence. She needed to see him steady, rock-solid, convinced that Tony would get through this.

"Abby."

She didn't turn. Didn't bounce up to him on platform boots, repeating his name over and over and demanding he 'fix this' or 'make it better.'

"Good morning, Gibbs." She tapped away at her workstation, images of Marines and sailors flashing across the monitor too quickly for the naked eye. Facial recognition. "Not your case," she stated, answering the question Gibbs hadn't asked.

He slid the huge plastic cup across the metal table. "Important?"

"Aren't they all?" she murmured.

He let her be for a moment, let her work her way around to talking, to getting out the words – the fears and worries that must be swirling around in her mind. After two or three minutes, she still hadn't.

"You're quiet today," he prodded, not quite smiling.

She glanced at him and nodded. "I am. Today, I'm Quiet Abby. I'm calm and quiet and safe, no flailing arms or yelling or stomping. There's a time and a place, Gibbs."

"And I'm guessing this is neither."

"That's right." Her pigtails bounced up and down. "Excited Abby can be hard to handle. She's all over the place. Hugging too tight and holding on too long and spinning around in circles. Energetic Abby can put that battery-powered bunny to shame. And Disappointed Abby is a strain. Even for me. She's an emotional mastermind and can make you feel smaller than the smallest microbe has any right to feel." She took a breath, purposefully relaxing her shoulders and returning her hands to the keyboard. "So, today I'm Quiet Abby. Safe Abby. The one who you can come to if you need someplace to hide."

Gibbs sipped his coffee. She wasn't done yet. There was more she needed to say. His gaze drifted around the lab, noting the subdued lighting, the clean metal tables cleared of evidence, and the unused monitors set to display winter scenes straight out of Currier and Ives. The outside wall had been hung with twinkle lights and, even these, were set to a steady gleam of blue.

"Did you know he tried to sleep here? That first night?" Abby pointed towards the glass doors of her inner office. "I came in yesterday and found the pad for my futon all scrunched up in the ballistic lab, like he'd tried to make a nest or something. A place he could feel safe. Where he could just be Tony again, here, with us, not out there shackled to a serial killer. Not on guard every single second because little pasty-faced Jeffrey White liked to use a knife." She turned to him, her eyes wide. "And he didn't, Gibbs. I could tell. Tony didn't find it. Even behind three locked doors he still didn't feel safe."

He slung a hip against the metal work table and watched her. Abby was brilliant. Unique. Eccentric. She was light and excitement in a world full of cruelty and pain. But, at the core of her, she was a smart, sweet woman who loved her friends with her whole heart – and she could dial off the crazy.
whenever they needed her.

Today her eyes were haunted, her usually pale skin waxy. This wasn't Caff-Pow induced exhaustion or the signs of a late night dancing to Brain Matter. Gibbs had only seen Abby like this a few times in memory. And those were times none of them wanted to remember.

"You can't rush him, Abby. None of us can."

"I know that, Gibbs," she answered, no sign of impatience or pouting on her face. "But I can be ready for him when he is. I can – I can fluff up the futon and turn down the music and I can be Quiet Abby and Safe Abby until he's ready. Because I want to help, Gibbs. I have to help."

"You will. You do." He took her elbow to draw her close, to kiss her temple, but Abby wrapped her hands around Gibbs' wrists and held him there, close but still where she could look into his eyes.

"I have to help Tony. If I'd been faster – or smarter with that stupid tracker – he might not be as, as broken as he is now." Her grip was tight, insistent. Not quite panicked, but close enough.

"He's not broken, Abs." Gibbs cocked his head to the side and slid a grin across his face. "Maybe a little bent. Needs a little bit of repair. But we'll get him there."

She stared, probing for a weakness in Gibbs' certainty, a single doubt that would bring down his sure façade. She breathed out, releasing some of the desperate tension she was keeping under wraps. "We will. We will, Gibbs. All of us. I mean even Kate was down here complaining about how weird he's being, and I could hear what she was saying underneath, how she's worried about him. And I'm so proud of Timmy for what he did. For getting Tony out of his head for a while with his best geek-speak. Wasn't that great?"

"It was great," Gibbs echoed, happy to see her a little more animated. A little less subdued. "But what Tony needs now is Normal Abby. He wouldn't want you to change. You know that. He's trying to put himself back together. Do you want him worrying about you?"

Abby deflated, her mouth scrunched up in defeat. "No," she admitted.

Gibbs leaned in. "He's gonna figure it out, Abs," he whispered.

"He will." She gave herself a little shake and turned back to her computer. "Tony's smart. Much smarter than he wants people to see. But I'm not going to fail him. Not this time."

"Hey. You've never failed him." He hoped she couldn't hear his own admission of guilt in those few words. Yeah, he'd failed DiNozzo – he'd failed all of his team when he ran the MCRT like some kind of afterthought. Close the case. Close the case, fast. It repeated and repeated, shouting at him with every lost trail, every worthless clue, every time his phone rang with more demands. As if these men and women, these victims, were interruptions in Gibbs' grand scheme. Haswari and Gibbs weren't done – he was like a bomb counting down to zero and Gibbs couldn't find the fuse. Guilt locked the muscles in his jaw, tensed his fingers around the frail paper cup, and slid a rod of iron up his back. He wouldn't let Abby see. This wasn't on her. And he wouldn't have his people piling themselves with blame that rightfully belonged to him.

Abby wouldn't face him. Her voice was quiet again, controlled as her fingers flew over the keys. "He knew, Gibbs. Sometime during that first awful day when the tracker went dead and the truck crashed, Tony knew. He'd figured it out. That it wasn't Lane Danielson who had killed those men. That we'd chained him to a monster and then lost him."

"Not your fault."
Her shoulders rose in a half-shrug. "Maybe not entirely. But I didn't try too hard to get that tracker placed more securely. And I should have used two – every piece of technology should have a back-up, a redundancy, especially when lives are at stake. I should have put a back-up in the trailer."

"And I should have answered my damn phone," Gibbs growled.

She frowned, looking up at him from beneath her black bangs. "Your phone?"

Gibbs didn't answer. His lips thinned, eyes narrowing. When he'd realized – when he finally - finally - put it together and looked at the damned caller ID, at the call log, and realized it was DiNozzo …

Abby's hand rested against his chest. "Gibbs?"

He covered her hand with his and raised his eyes to meet hers.

"The calls. About the VW. You thought –"

Gibbs nodded.

"Oh, Gibbs."

"No, Abby. Stop." None of that. He wouldn't take her pity. Or her absolution. He knew it was coming. It was what Abby did. She always forgave him. Always. Made excuses. She couldn't see Gibbs as anything less than her hero, her stalwart, strong tower that would always protect her, protect her team, her family. He couldn't be seen as imperfect. As a man. A guy with as many weaknesses as he had strengths. A short-sighted, functional mute with holes in his awareness big enough to sail a ship through.

If he was – if Gibbs could screw up then the foundation Abby had built on him would be shaken. Damn it. He stepped back and rubbed one hand across his face. That pedestal she had him on was a crumbling, teetering joke, shored up by Abby's wishful thinking and faith. He'd stay on it – for her sake – but it was time to cut it down to size.

"You're right, Abs. Tony is smart. He did figure it out. He's got a first-class investigator's mind."

Her brows quirked, trying to figure out how all this fit into her particular view of Gibbs, of Tony, of all of them. "You were right to drag him here from Baltimore. They didn't appreciate him. Didn't take care of him like you do."

Gibbs grunted. "But I don't. I should have put the brakes on. I should have slowed down and taken the time to get this right. You don't send in an undercover operative until you have all the facts – until you've provided for every possible contingency." He kept talking to keep her silent. "That's on me. And I will deal with DiNozzo."

Somehow, Abby got the point. Heard his promise. She slid her hand out from beneath his and nodded. A moment later, she was facing her workstation again, still subdued, still quiet.

"I had a dream, Gibbs. A dream about Tony. I don't know where he was, or what he was doing, but the sun was bright and the sky was blue, just a few clouds in the sky."

On any other day, Abby would be painting a picture, her fingers spread wide, hands dancing in the air. Not today. Gibbs' gut clenched.

"It felt like he was high up, but that could have been metaphor. All I know was, it was just Tony. Alone." She crossed her arms over her chest and stared into the distance, unseeing. Or, maybe,
"Then what, Abby?"

She took a deep breath. "And then a spray of blood splashed across his face. And his eyes, Gibbs. His eyes. They were empty."

~ ~ ~

It wasn't quite on his way to work, but Tony was early so he made the detour. He nodded at the young man at the desk, shifting the two stuffed shopping bags to his right hand so he could hold out his left. The Marine reached out, his gesture not quite automatic yet. Ignoring the way the pinned right sleeve of the man's plain blue shirt twitched, Tony met the man's eyes with a steady gaze.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Unlike others, Tony didn't mind the honorific. Even if he'd never earn an officer's rank, would never serve others the way this young – this painfully young – veteran had, he wouldn't begrudge the kid's respect. "I'd like to drop off some gifts. Not for the kids," he added quickly as the man's eyes flicked towards the 'Toys For Tots' display. "I've marked them so you guys can make the right choices. Give them to someone who can use them." His grin was fleeting, but honest. " Might brighten someone's day. I hope so, anyway."

The wounded veteran stood. "That's very generous, sir. Thank you for thinking about us."

Tony wanted to hold up a hand to stop him. To tell him that he hadn't been thinking about them. Hadn't stopped for a second in his preparations for the holidays to consider the needs of those who'd given so much to keep him safe. Not the time. Not the place. "Just –" he set the bags on the counter, "just be careful. There are a couple of computer games in here. Not quite sure if they're too violent or noisy. I'd hate to," he rubbed at the back of his neck. Hate to what? Hate to screw this up, too? To bring these hurting men and women any more pain? "You understand," he murmured.

"I do, sir," the kid assured him, back straight, automatically coming to attention. "We're very cautious."

"Good. Good." Someone should be. "Well, okay." He tried another smile but this one didn't quite work. "Guess I'd better get to work."

"Sir?"

The kid's voice called Tony back from the door. Back to the check-in desk of the Wounded Warrior facility. To face this young man whose bravery and loyalty had left him with one arm and a lot more damage that Tony couldn't see. This young man with compassion in his eyes who was still serving his brothers and sisters.

"Merry Christmas, sir."

"Same to you," Tony answered.

The veteran held Tony's gaze, blue eyes clear and welcoming. "If you ever feel like coming down, hanging out with some of us. Talking. Watching the game. Well, you'd be welcome."

Tony's head was shaking before the kid could finish. "No. I mean thanks, but, I don't belong here. Although I know a Marine who –"
"Everyone's welcome, sir. I mean it."

He held out his left hand again and Tony couldn't refuse to take it. He dropped his gaze to the man's empty sleeve and drew the thin shell of calm across his aching chest. "Semper Fi," he murmured, turning, long strides putting distance between him and this kid's too insightful eyes.

Tony pulled out of his illegal parking spot too fast, engine racing, bent on putting this behind him. Time to get on with things. With life. He brushed his hair out of his eyes, ignoring the honking horns, and sped off towards the Navy Yard. Towards his SI interview. Towards Marcus Lemuel, ex-Marine. Towards normal.
IX

"If there were water we should stop and drink // Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think // Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand // If there were only water amongst the rock." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

Current day, 10:25 AM, Conference Room B, NCIS

Continued from Chapter One

"… and Jeffrey White left the cabin at approximately seven in the morning."

"That's what White said." Tony remembered the skinny guy pulling back the sleeve of his shirt - too big, the shirt was too big, the sleeve so long it flopped over his hand, unbuttoned – to look at his watch. Big, black sports watch. He frowned. Danielson's watch.

"So, Danielson had gone long before that. How did Jeffrey White explain his departure?"

Tony's mind skittered back to the memory. The lack of memory. The feeling of falling. Of paralysis. It hadn't taken long. One swig from Danielson's bottle. Just one. And then the morning. White sitting beside him on the bed, one hand on Tony's chest.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

He had not fallen asleep. He would not fall asleep undercover. Gibbs would kill him. Even though he'd been exhausted, adrenaline alone would have kept him awake through the night. Adrenaline and suspicion. He might have dozed, half-awake, listening for every sound, every movement from the room next door. He might not be Gibbs with his super-powers, super-hearing, super-sniper skills, but he had been undercover before. Sleep was not an option. Not when you're surrounded by enemies, 'bad people with naughty thoughts' as Jeffrey had said. People who would slit your throat without any provocation. Tony couldn't help tracing the edge of the bandage on his neck. Close. So close.

It's what they all expected to hear. Gibbs. Morrow. Lemuel. How Tony had listened for clues, heard arguments, doors opening and closing. How he'd committed it all to memory, sorted out the facts, and used it to choose his own words and actions to get White to play ball. He couldn't tell them, couldn't admit what really happened. He wouldn't. Wouldn't think about it. Tony closed his eyes, teeth clenched, muscles rigid. No. It didn't happen. Nothing. Happened.

"As I noted in my report, White and I discussed the fact that Danielson might be on his way to the stash, looking to cut us out of the deal. I was in a hurry to get out of there, to get to the antiquities." To end this. End it – escape – get away. Away from the touching. Hands on Tony's back, his arm. The wide-open eyes turned up at him, that trace of a smirk beneath White's facade of helplessness. White was in no hurry. Had wanted to linger. Tony couldn't – he had to move. "I managed to drop the phone and gun in the duffel when he turned away for a moment."

Even then, White had been playing him. Tony saw the scene on repeat, had gone over it second by second during the sleepless nights since, lying on his bed in the dark. Whispers. Sounds. How his body felt, thick and clumsy, in the morning. His clothes, not quite sitting right on his frame. The
flannel shirt hanging neatly on one bed pole where he didn't remember tossing it.

White stood too close. Sat too close in the car. Tony's lips tightened against his clenched teeth.

"Agent DiNozzo? Tony?"

He couldn't stop thinking about it. About the blackness. The empty night. The whispers. That morning he'd blamed Danielson, remembered it was his hand that held the bottle, his voice that murmured threats. White had gotten rid of him – somehow – and a little part of Tony had felt grateful. Protective.

It wasn't until later, washing and scrubbing in the shower, facing himself in the misted mirror over the sink, remembering Abby's evidence of what White had done. Danielson's slit throat. Remembering White's touch on his shoulder, his breath on the back of his neck from the backseat.

Tony raised half-closed eyes to the SI agent. Behind Marcus' silhouette, backlit by the sky, fat wet flakes peppered the window. Stuck and melted and ran down the glass. Like tears. Rain. Blood on a windshield. He was done. Tired. Out of time, out of words, out of excuses. "White drove. When he got tired I drove and he got into the backseat. I called Gibbs time after time on that cell phone. Dialed and hung up. Driving one handed towards I didn't know what."

"Tony. Stop."

God, why wouldn't they leave him alone? He let his chin fall towards his chest, his fingers plucking at the perfect seam of his trousers. "I didn't know if Gibbs got the message. Didn't know if they were following me. If they were even looking for me." On his own. At the end of his rope. His gut knew he was out of time. Out of options. The borrowed clothes were too loose, too tight. Or maybe it was his skin.

"Agent DiNozzo." A woman's voice came from behind him. Beside the door. It sounded like Kate but not Kate. Weird.

"When we got to the container, Danielson wasn't there." Both hands in his too long hair, Tony grabbed tight. Squeezed. He couldn't think, couldn't stop. Focus, he demanded, focus, you idiot. What kind of agent can't give a simple statement? Gibbs is going to kill you. White's voice in his memory wasn't frightened any more. Just certain. Sure. He'd been suspicious the entire time. "White tried to slit my throat. I shot him."

"Hey, DiNozzo."

He blinked, rubbing at his eyes. When had Gibbs arrived? "Are we done? Do you need something else?" Tony's arms and legs were heavy. Numb. He couldn't move. Couldn't stand. The adrenaline that had fueled him for so long – since the op had first started, since he'd shuffled to that prison bus with Jeffrey White. Since Gibbs had sent him off with a clip on the back of the head and a warning. Since Abby had hugged him, asking one more time if she could put the tracking device under his skin. Since a pale, frightened McGee had rushed in to wield the tech and handle the Undersecretary.

"Yeah, Tony. We're good."

Marcus came around the table, handing off his file to the woman who stepped from the shadows. Tony frowned. The door beside him was open, Gibbs crouching by his chair, one hand on Tony's shoulder to keep him seated. "Boss? What's going on?"

Familiar blue eyes weren't cold or distant, now. The perpetual frown was still angry, still the mark of Gibbs' second B, but different. Less impatient, more vengeful. "What happened yesterday, Tony?"
"Yesterday?" It was Tony's turn to frown. Report writing. He'd been late because ... the hot water in his apartment had run out. Or was that today? Scissors gleamed from the bright white of the sink. "Just a regular day, Boss. Why? What happened?"

Gibbs looked over Tony's head towards the woman and then back to him. "I had Ducky take a look at you. Remember?"

The itch beneath Tony's skin was getting worse. He rubbed at his arm, pressing hard, getting his nails up under his sleeve until Gibbs' hand stopped him. "Um. Yeah. I went to see Ducky." The morgue was cold – always a little bit creepy. Ducky had been ready for him, a tray full of instruments and empty vials. Gerald's replacement puttering around. Tony had hopped up on the table, unbuttoned his shirt, and then ... then ... A whisper of sound behind him. The glitter of light on a cold steel blade. "Just lie still..."


"Hey – DiNozzo, stop. Ducky is fine. You hear me?" Solid. Honest. No-nonsense. Tony could breathe again. "Good. Good. I'm gonna run down there and apologize. Poor guy. Must have thought I was going nuts." His smile felt off. Strained. Gibbs must be mad. Furious. Ducky was one of his oldest friends. "I'd never hurt Ducky, you know that, Gibbs."

"I know. He knows, too. But I think you freaked Palmer out more than a little bit."

Palmer. That was the skinny guy's name. Crawling like a crab on his back on the floor. Metal gleaming from his right hand. A thermometer. Not a knife.

Tony looked back at the window. Lightning flashed in the distance. 'Thunder-snow,' they called it here. Gibbs' hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him attached to the here and now. Somehow – of course – his boss knew that and tightened his grip.

Maybe it was contagious. Rubbed off on him from Jeffrey White. From the blood that had splashed against his face. Tony let his hands fall into his lap and closed his eyes. "I think I'm going crazy, Boss."

He felt a gentle tap to the side of his head and opened his eyes.

Gibbs' head was tipped to the side, mouth crooking up on one side, but his eyes were gentle. "You're not crazy, DiNozzo. No crazier than ever."

"Huh. Funny, Boss." Hot and cold chased themselves across Tony's skin, sweat breaking out on his back, at his hairline. "You're okay. Just need a little help."

"Help?" Orders and demands and growling dismissal from this man surged through Tony's memory. "Sign of weakness?"

Gibbs sighed. "Not this time, Tony." He rose to his feet, knees cracking, one hand on Tony's shoulder to steady himself – and to keep Tony from standing up beside him. "It's been a bad couple of days. You just need a chance to get your feet back under you."
"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

Anger flowed out from Tony's center to each fingertip. "'A bad couple of days'?' He surged from the chair, standing toe-to-toe with his boss, hands in fists at his sides, ready to strike, to jab, to knock the damned man on his ass. "What the hell would you know about 'a bad couple of days,' sitting in your car with Todd, laughing at me. Making jokes." Tony could practically see them, hear the two of them trading jibes at Tony's expense while he was — while White and Danielson — Tony shook his head. "Fucking not answering your God damned phone! Who the hell does that? Who does that, Gibbs?" He raised his hands to grab at Gibbs' shoulders, to push him — shake him — knock that smirk off his face.

Gibbs backed away so fast that Tony hands gripped empty air. He swayed, stumbling forward, off balance. And, just as quickly, Gibbs was back, keeping him from falling flat on his face.

"Easy. I've got you."

For a second, Tony closed his eyes and let it happen. He let his boss take him by the shoulders and anchor him. Gibbs' foundation was always rock-steady, Tony could lean against it for a minute, right? He could rest here.

No. He tore himself from the Marine's grip, hurling himself backwards, knocking over the chair he'd been sitting in. The conference table brought him up short and he froze there, breathing hard, perched on the edge, gripping it with both hands. No. This had to stop. He had to stop this.

"Agent Gibbs. Please."

The woman moved forward. Not far enough to come between them — smart lady, Tony thought. She was tiny. Slender and fragile-looking. Big eyes in a heart-shaped face. He'd seen her before. Yesterday.

Tony's eyes narrowed. Morrow wanted him to meet her. Doctor something. And she'd had his file.

"Oh, hell no." Tony stood. Reached for the badge attached to his belt. "This is not freaking happening." He flipped the badge to the floor and left it lying there, face up, between him and his boss. "I'm gone."

"Hey —" Gibbs barked.

The woman held up one hand and Gibbs stilled. Tony's eyebrows lifted high.

"Agent DiNozzo, I'd very much appreciate it if you'd allow me to speak with you for a few minutes. With or without Agent Gibbs' presence. We can stay here or leave NCIS and go to my office, or a nearby coffee shop if you'd rather."

She didn't smile but there was a lightness about her eyes, an easiness to her posture. As if she really had no preference. Wasn't trying to force Tony into anything. Right. He stared at her, trying to figure out why she seemed familiar — beyond almost meeting her yesterday. The shape of her eyes. The tilt of her chin. He couldn't place her.

"You're a shrink."

"Yes. We met yesterday. Doctor Rachel Cranston."

She kept her distance. Didn't offer her hand. She stood there as if she had all the time in the world.
"You've read my file." Tony's gaze flicked towards Gibbs and away again. "Morrow gave it to you."

The doctor folded her hands in front of her. "He hoped I could be of some help to you."

Tony's back straightened. "I don't –" Teeth clenched, he remembered the interview with SI. The way he kept flipping back to that night at the cabin. His thoughts were jumbled, mixed up, filled with gaps and jumps and muddy, foggy might-have-beens. He was all over the place. He jerked his neck, settling his collar and brushed one hand down over his tie. "I don't want your help. Anyone's help." He did not look at Gibbs when he said it.

The woman nodded. "I notice you said that you 'don't want' my help. Not that you didn't need my help. Do you hear the distinction, Agent DiNozzo?"

He heard Gibbs' snort, watched the man almost roll his eyes. It didn't sound like the usual derision Gibbs had for anyone in the head-shrinker business. It sounded almost friendly.

"You know each other?" Tony asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "You cook up this 'scene' between you? Was Lemuel on board? Because you know, Boss," Tony inserted all of the sarcasm he was capable of into that word, "I may not be the perfect agent like yourself, but, on a good day, I can smell a snow job and a set-up a mile away."

"Not a snow job, DiNozzo."

Tony's smile felt like a knife-slash across his face. "So, just a set-up? Well," he started a slow clap, loud in the quiet conference room and loaded with disdain, "great, great job. You got me to break there for a minute, didn't you? You gonna play back the video with Kate and Abby later and have some laughs?"

Kate. Tony's narrowed gaze landed back on the doctor. Examined her body language, her bone structure. "Rachel. Cranston. Kate's sister." He felt the realization like a pointy elbow to the ribs. "Isn't this just the last the nail in my coffin." He sketched a short bow to the woman. "Thank you for your concern, Doctor Cranston, but I don't think I'll be lying on your couch and spilling my guts to you anytime in the near future. Or the far future. Or ever."

Tony took a step forward and toed his badge with one Italian loafer. "It's been fun, Gibbs. And, at the same time, it's been hell. Have a nice life."

He brushed past the man's raised hands and flung the conference room door open. Outside, he expected the hallway to be filled with more anxious faces. Ducky, at least. Todd, anxious to put her head together with her sister and share the good stuff. Morrow, all-business, professional, giving Tony his ultimatum about getting help to get his badge back. Maybe McGee trying another geekfest on him.

Just one person stood there. One person.

"Hey."


"Tony – wait –"

_He had to go. Run. Get away._
"Mister Palmer, do not move."

Frightened eyes peered up at him. Wide. Unblinking. Rage leaped up Tony's spine, searing white hot. No. Not this time. This time Jeffrey White wouldn't fool him. This time Tony wouldn't believe in the innocence behind those glasses. The act. Frightened little milquetoast act of a vicious killer. He leaned over, looming over him. He should kill him. Twist his skinny neck until it snapped. Now. Before – before he could –

Palmer. Ducky's assistant. The guy Tony attacked yesterday.

Throat clenching against the bile rushing up from his gut, Tony fought off the panic. The urge to vomit. To scream. To cry. He looked the young man up and down, focusing on his neat suit, tie knotted perfectly against his neck, on the straight back, shoulders broader than he expected. The kid was tall, too. Nearly as tall as Tony, his eyes behind the round glasses revealing his nervousness.

Yesterday, Tony had mistaken Palmer for Jeffrey White. A thermometer for a knife. And he'd almost – he'd almost –

The fury drained from Tony in a wave that took his breath away. He brushed the hair out of his face and shook his head. Took a step. Another. Waited for Palmer to flinch away. To withdraw from him in horror. Instead, the kid stepped forward. Towards Tony. Towards the guy who could have killed him. Might still.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Before Tony could retreat, Palmer was standing right there in front of him. Quiet. Calm. Hand outstretched.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Agent DiNozzo, but I'm glad I ran into you. I just wanted to say how sorry I am for yesterday. I should have handled that better." His smile was a little watery, a little crooked, but the hand that shook Tony's was firm. "So, no hard feelings?"

"No hard –" Tony dropped the kid's hand and twisted away, his back against the hallway's wall. "I almost – I could have –" What was this guy saying? Why was he apologizing to Tony? Didn't he get it? "Palmer, I don't think you understand what happened," Tony ground out through clenched teeth.

The younger man was nodding. "No, no, I understand. When I was younger I worked in a Veterinarian's office. We saw a lot of animals – dogs, mostly – that had been treated badly. We had to learn how to move and how to speak around them, how to approach them without setting them off." He laughed, smiling widely, "I guess my years of working with dead people," he leaned in, "who seldom react no matter what you do to them, made me forget." He shrugged.

Tony felt like his eyebrows were going to rise up off his face and hang in the air. "Did you – did you just compare me with a dog?"

"Well, yes, I mean, a big dog. A police dog or a military dog, maybe. Not one of those little yappy dogs that ladies keep in their purses. That's just silly, right? I mean what self-respecting dog would –"

Tony grabbed the kid's wrist and gave it a little shake. Just to stop him. Not to hurt him. He swallowed thickly and dropped his hand. "Sorry. I just –" he brushed the hair out of his face and blew out a breath. "Palmer. Jimmy, right?"

"Yes."
"Why the hell are you apologizing to me? I hit you." Tony's gaze lingered on the man's chest, frowning. He couldn't see bruises through wool and cotton, but the kid wasn't holding himself awkwardly, like he was in pain. "Did I hurt you? Did you see a doctor?"

"No, no, you didn't hurt me. Well, I have a bruise on my butt from falling on the floor, but I think I'll live." Palmer waved away Tony's concern.

"No, seriously. At least get Ducky to look at you. And then, then," Tony's mind was spinning again, out of control, the 'what ifs' piling high and deep, twisting his tongue and making his hands tremble, "then you should report it. Write it up. Tell the Director. I shouldn't - no one should get away with that. With hitting you. Anybody." Oh God. This couldn't. Tony shoved his hands through his hair again, holding on tight. "What if it had been Ducky? What if he'd broken a hip or something? Or Abby? I shouldn't -" he looked around the dimly lighted hallway, the open conference room door just a few steps away, Gibbs and the doctor watching from the doorway. The other end was empty – a clear path to freedom.

He should go – should run – far away. Away from anyone he could hurt. From everyone.

"Hey, Tony."

A light hand fell on his shoulder and Tony turned back to face Palmer. Jimmy. Ducky's assistant.

"You're right. That would have been bad if you'd knocked Ducky down. Or if you'd hurt someone. But you didn't." His hand tightened. "You didn't."

Tony slumped back against the wall, his head bowed. He lifted his hands, watching them shake and tremble. His stomach ached. His head hurt. "I could. I could hurt someone."

The light hand was replaced with a stronger one. The faint scent of bleach and autopsy's cleansers giving way to the aroma of coffee and the comfort of someone else's strength.

"Yeah, you could. And that's why you should take the help, Tony. If you won't accept it for yourself, how about for the rest of us?"

"Gibbs." He barely whispered the name, like a mantra. A wish. A yearning for something long lost.

"I'm right here, DiNozzo."

Tony swallowed the tears, angry again. Angry that he couldn't be stronger. He couldn't be a man. Suck it up. Get over it. Gibbs would never - "I'm not weak," he muttered.

He felt the other man's shrug through the hand that cupped the back of his neck. "No. You gonna call me weak?"

"What? No –" Tony's head came up fast, his eyes seeking Gibbs'. "Wait. You'd never go to a shrink."

The smile was half apology, half grimace. Gibbs jerked his head back towards the conference room. "My doctor. Been seeing her for years."

The floor might have tilted. The building rattle. Not thunder-snow this time. This time it was Tony's entire worldview shaking. An earthquake. A tsunami. "Boss?"

"Not weak to take the hand somebody holds out for you."
The hand was right there. Strong. Callused. Knuckles decorated with scars. Tony looked at it and
back up into Gibbs' eyes. He saw Palmer, still there, a few paces away, hands in his pockets. He
turned to watch Kate's sister in the doorway of the conference room. Patient. Calm. Waiting.

"I don't want to hurt anyone, Boss."

Gibbs spread his fingers, still waiting. "You won't. Not if you get some help." He squeezed Tony's
neck, shifting closer. "Don't want you hurting yourself either. I taught you better." When Tony
frowned, Gibbs tilted his head, the smile small but kind. "Nobody hurts my people. That includes
you."

Tony felt his Boss's grip on his hand before he realized he'd reached out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for all of your comments and kudos!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

X

"In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing // Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel. // There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home. // It has no windows, and the door swings, // dry bones can harm no one." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

He was early. A lot early. Tony wandered the small office, stepping slowly around the two short couches. A couple of chairs. An oversized coffee table of worn wood that set off the seating plainly into 'your side' and 'my side'. Great for marriage counseling, he guessed. His mind was flicking around, he knew that, it had been running full tilt since his meltdown yesterday after the interview. He couldn't rest, couldn't seem to settle, to concentrate on any one thing for more than a few seconds.


Tony shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and hunched his shoulders up around his ears. What the hell was he doing here? Getting therapy. Seeing a counselor. "Getting some help," that's what Gibbs kept telling him. "If you're sick you go do a doctor, DiNozzo. This isn't any different." Maybe not, but DiNozzos didn't go to the doctor. Any doctor. Hospitals were for wimps and sissies. Or for real illnesses, like his mom's cancer. He blew out a breath and rubbed his hand across his forehead. Cancer. Yeah, maybe cancer would be easier. Stomach roiling, he clenched his teeth against the bile. "Stop it," he growled to himself. "Asshole." Yeah, sure. Cancer was super easy. He swallowed, lips pressed tight. "Focus," he murmured. "Focus." He was Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. He could handle this.

He took another turn around the office, dropping into investigative mode. Examining. Finding clues. That's what he did. What he was good at - great at, even. It was normal. God, how he wanted a little bit of normal right now.

The fireplace was gas, the mantle rich red brick displaying a muted watercolor, faint greens and greys and blues – relaxing. A pewter lamp flanked it on one side, old and worn. On the other, a pair of wooden candlesticks with thick beeswax candles. He touched a finger to the base of the smaller candlestick, wide and squat, carved with lines of marching elephants. African, maybe. These weren't haphazard finds placed by some psychiatrists' decorating service. These were mementos, precious things. Chosen by Rachel Cranston, the woman, not precisely placed by the buttoned up counselor.

Frowning, Tony turned away to pace alongside a sideboard holding coffee and tea in silver carafes, a condensation-dotted pitcher of ice water, and mugs with the emblems of each of the Armed Forces. Homey. Welcoming. A far cry from Doc Camber's high-style Danish-modern minimalism, his floor-to-ceiling windows framing the chilly Pennsylvania autumn, and the dustless, humorless professionalism that kept Tony at such a distance he always felt cold. A shiver climbed his spine as he remembered.
Unlike Dr. Camber, Cranston was straightforward. She didn't hide her humanity behind pretension. Didn't favor turtlenecks and jackets with elbow patches to shout out her profession. Her credentials had been on display in the brownstone's foyer, just inside the door, as if to get that out of the way as soon as her clients entered and then put it behind them. This room was quiet – it didn’t shout about her qualifications, it let the client find them out on his own. Hell, it could have been a room in Ducky's house – except for the lack of yapping hounds and a sweet old lady with a knife in her bra. It told an investigator like Tony that she was open, direct, not a game player. And she would not be easily swayed by a smile and a badge.

Tony didn't have a badge. There were no credentials in his pocket. He licked his lips, remembering the way Gibbs had cradled them between his hands as if they were some fragile baby chick. He'd held Tony's gaze, nodded once the way he was apt to do, just once, up and down, his gravity giving the simple gesture all the solemnity of an oath. "I'll keep them safe for you, DiNozzo."

No, he wasn't an investigator now. He might never be again. That fear was lying just beneath the surface, thick and terrible, a sort of pasty white bubble of dread that needed only one sharp poke to spew panic all over him. His life couldn't be over - everything he'd worked for, fought for, bled and killed for could not have been broken into pieces by a nerdy serial killer and a length of blank fog in his memory.

Okay, so Tony hadn't come here to interview a witness or to analyze a suspect. That didn't mean he had to discard a lifetime of investigating. His first time, here, in her office, he couldn't help it. It calmed him. Let him pretend, for just one more minute, that he was in control. That he was an adult, a man, not some fragile kid back from his first action overseas.

Turning back to the center of the room, Tony's gaze was caught by a flicker of movement. Behind the sofa. A flash at eye level - there and gone as he turned. A glimmer, a reflection that shouldn't be there. Right hand to his hip, Tony crouched behind the armchair, his heart beating fast and loud, deafening. There was only one door, right? Damn it, he hadn't cleared the scene properly. What was wrong with him? The shadows piled up thick in the corners, behind the furniture, between the fireplace and the side wall. Gibbs was going to kill him. No gun. No back-up - he'd promised his Boss.

*Cigarettes and whiskey.*

*Cold steel against his neck.*

*Blood exploding against the windshield.*

Tony squeezed his eyes tight, trying to ignore the pounding of his heart, the rush of blood, the tingling in his fingers as he clutched the rough brocade of the overstuffed chair. He tried to take a deep breath, his lungs filling with the scent of coffee and vanilla candles. The thin hiss of the gas in the fireplace made him frown. His head jerked to the side as he caught on. No mold. No broken furniture. No stench of sweat or blood or lies.

He opened his eyes and straightened, pretending ease, cloaking himself in the attitude of a fearless federal agent, a seasoned professional - someone who would never cower in the face of a threat. He was better than this. Blowing out a breath, Tony let his muscles relax, weight centered in his hips, shaking his hands out at his sides. Braced. Ready. He found himself in the corner, standing behind a high-backed, subtly patterned chair, a soft, plaid blanket tossed neatly over the arm. He smiled. He'd put his back to the wall, between two windows, lots of furniture between him and the only door.

Fine. Now to find whoever had moved - had startled him -
Tony blinked. It was a mirror. A mirror set at eye-level between two flickering sconces. Ancient, its surface marred by pockmarks and flaking silver leaf. Tony stared at his reflection, the imperfect surface making his skin ripple, the smudged shadows around his eyes deepening to black.

Of course.

He stumbled to the sofa, both hands over his face, rubbing hard. Who was he trying to fool? His training, his experience as an investigator, his worthless insights wouldn't make today easier. Nothing would. Not the differences he saw between Cranston and Camber – not even Gibbs' advice, his insistence that Kate's sister could help or the man's painful revelations of yesterday. Tony hunched his shoulders, bent nearly double over his knees. He didn't want this. This couldn't be happening. Not to him. He had to get his act together. Tony DiNozzo would not simper in the corner, crying, falling apart in some therapist's office. He hadn't done that in Pennsylvania, even after all the blood and pain and betrayal, and he damned well wouldn't do it now.

He wasn't ready. He needed more time. More time to polish up his act, to tie down his mask and get on with life. He had to be in control, to get Cranston to spill what he needed to put this all behind him without actually letting her in. He'd done it before. Alone and aching, recovering from real injuries, not some tiny little prick on his neck, he'd done it.

Gibbs' eyes flashed in Tony's mind's eye. Pale. Filled with loss and regret and horror as he told his story. Tony's gut twisted, lungs burning with the need to breathe. Gibbs. Quietly bleeding out on the floor of a Navy Yard café. For him. For Tony.

He wasn't alone. Not now. Now he had a larger-than-life, silver-haired bastard guardian angel who was not going to let him run away. Hide. Pretend it hadn't happened.

Yesterday, after the crapfest that had been his interview with SI, Tony had given in. Given up. With Gibbs at his side, he'd let Cranston walk him to the coffee shop. He'd kept his shaking hands in his lap and his sunglasses firmly on his nose, his back straight and his expression emotionless. She'd been calm. Unfazed. Sent Gibbs off for their drinks like she'd been giving the hard-assed Gunnery Sergeant orders for years. Tony had kept his gaze riveted to his Boss' back, still trying to fit his new knowledge of the man into the jigsaw puzzle labeled Leroy Jethro Gibbs. No matter which way he turned the thing, there was no slot for 'counseling' or 'therapist.' Hell no. There wasn't even the slimmest of spaces for 'weakness' or 'needs help.'

"I've been seeing Agent Gibbs for some time, now, Agent DiNozzo. But, in the end, that is his story to tell."

Tony hadn't moved his head and she sure as hell couldn't see his eyes behind the mirrored shades. Lips a thin line, he'd transferred his inspection to the psychologist. Psychiatrist. He hadn't even asked. What was the difference, anyway? One pushed pills and the other sat you down on their couch to talk about your mother. Camber had been … Tony shook his head.

"Tony," he'd said.

She'd tilted her head. "I don't think you'll feel comfortable calling me Rachel."

No. Comfortable was nowhere near what Tony had been feeling. 'Rachel' was Kate's sister and the whole situation was feeling a little too incestuous already.

The doctor had nodded at his unspoken thoughts. "Let me be clear," Cranston had continued. "I've worked with men and women in the Navy, in the Marines. Officers and civilians. Family members. I'm happy to call you Tony if that's what you prefer. But, out of respect for you, for your position
and your experience, I may fall back on your title." She held one hand up to ask that Tony not interrupt. "Not to keep you at a certain distance as another therapist might, but in honor of your position."

He'd chewed over that claim, eyes narrowed. Out of respect. Right.

"I also recognize," she'd added, "that one of your strengths as an agent is to present others with a nonthreatening front. A friendly face and a much more amiable manner in order to balance Gibbs. Offering your first name is part of that."

"And as your patient," Tony had loaded the word with bitterness, "I'm still standing in the man's shadow." As usual, Tony was doing what Gibbs wanted. He was letting the man drag him around like a little kid. Gibbs' therapist. Kate's sister. It was as if Tony had no identity – no worth or purpose beyond the interests of his teammates. He'd rubbed at his forehead, eyes closed and teeth clenched. Anger churned, searing along his nerves, changing on the way, somehow, to sorrow. To despair. No. They were trying to help. Jimmy, Ducky, all of them. He'd sighed and dropped his hand back into his lap, raising bleary eyes towards the doctor.

Cranston had folded her hands on the table. "That is one way of looking at it. May I offer you an alternative?"

Tony leaned back, slumping into the metal chair. "Sure, Doc, offer away."

"Think of this as an introduction to one of Gibbs' military friends. I have, in many ways, served with him. I've seen a lot of the same tragedies. I've shared some of the same losses. And I've taken similar oaths of loyalty and faithfulness." Her smile had been serious, solemn. "Agent Gibbs is not the keeper of my conscience nor I his. But I believe you understand me when I say that he holds me to an extremely high standard. He trusts me. We are both hoping that is a comfort to you."

Tony had watched Gibbs at the counter while she talked. Watched the tense line of his shoulders. The set of his jaw. The way the barista tried to tease and flirt with him while Gibbs searched his wallet for the right bill. Oblivious. Impatient. Nothing new there. Tossing the money on the counter, Gibbs snatched the coffees and turned towards them.

It was then Tony had seen it. The worry. The concern that dug the creases beside Gibbs' eyes and mouth into deep cuts. The slight frown over sharp blue gaze that snapped right to Tony. To his table. Back and forth between Cranston's face and Tony's slumped posture. Cranston had been saying something else but he hadn't been listening.

Gibbs had stopped, his eyes locked with Tony's. Right in the middle of the coffee shop. Unconsciously, the patrons swerved around him, like ships avoiding a craggy rock. Upright and immovable. They didn't bother trying to move it – him - didn't complain or make a fuss. Like ship's captains, they knew it wouldn't do any good. They simply adjusted their courses and got on with it.

Swallowing in a dry throat, Tony had searched his Boss's eyes. Asked the questions that wouldn't ever come to his tongue. Questions about control. About honesty. About hope. Finally, he'd glanced away, face reddening, as his mind flipped through likely and unlikely options. Explanations. Dark and darker. Cranston was a last-ditch effort to save Gibbs' team. Gibbs would use her to get Tony grounded and back to work – that's all that mattered. This was all another elaborate joke where Tony would spill his guts and then Cranston and Kate and Gibbs would fall all over themselves laughing about it. Morrow had forced Gibbs into caring – threatening his job if he lost Tony to the nuthouse.

"Hey."
Suddenly the man had been at his side, coffee sliding onto the table in a controlled fall from the callused hands. Not a drop spilling. Tony had shaken his head, laughing. "It's not fair, Gibbs."

His boss had set one hand on Tony's shoulder. "What isn't fair?"


The hand on his shoulder had tightened. "No secret, DiNozzo. I've got good people. Always have. Gotta have good people around you. To help. To give you a swift kick in the ass. To see beyond the surface." Gibbs' had given Tony's shoulder a shake until he'd looked up at him. "You never had that. You have it now."

What – Tony frowned. Was Gibbs talking about his family? His and Tony's? Tony's eyes widened. "Gibbs, you don't have to –"

"My mom." The older man had ducked his head, smiling, as he perched on the metal chair beside him. "She was a straight shooter. Told it like it was. Kept my dad and me in line. Dad was –" Gibbs had hesitated, his eyes shadowed. "He tried. Put his big damned foot in his mouth whenever he opened it. Haven't talked to him in years."

"I thought he was dead," Tony murmured.

Gibbs had glanced sideways at Cranston, the doctor keeping still and silent in the next chair. "Treated him like he was for a long time. Not the point. Point is, I had that. Maybe not the perfect childhood like one of your movies, but good. Solid. And then –" Gibbs took a deep breath and Tony had watched another layer of control drop from his boss' face. "And then I had Shannon. My wife."

Tony had been frozen in his seat, breathing quickened, heart pounding as he'd listened. Stephanie. Diane. Rebecca. Three wives. Three divorces. Nasty, evil divorces. And not once had Gibbs spoken of any of them with that look in his eyes. That head-over-heels wonder. That soul-crushing grief.

"Married her right out of basic." Gibbs' smile turned to a grin. "That woman - she was something. Fiery on the outside but smooth and calm underneath. Saw through my stone-cold act every time. Didn't let me get away with that crap. With any crap." He'd sat back in his chair, steeling himself, devastation written in huge red letters on his skin, in his muscles, along every bone.

"No. Stop." Tony had scooted his chair backwards. "You don't have to do this - you don't -"

Gibbs hadn't even paused - kept hold of Tony with that unrelenting stare. Pinned him in place. "She and our daughter Kelly. Just like her mother. Stubborn. Loving. Sweet." His voice had broken, tears starting up in his eyes.

Gibbs had searched for words for a minute. Another. Tony'd sent a questioning glance towards Cranston but she barely reacted. A slight nod. A twitch of her lips. Tony had gotten the message to shut up. To wait. Even if his hands had been shaking even harder.

"They were murdered. Kelly was eight. Shannon had been a witness to a crime - a drug deal gone bad. The bastard killed them. I was - I was overseas. Didn't find out until I got back to camp. My girls -" Gibbs' tortured words came to a grinding halt and he'd sat there, empty, naked, loss and pain and guilt turning him into a much older man. Grey and wan.

"You didn't have to tell me that, Gibbs." Tony had felt like he couldn't breathe. Like the darkness of those memories, of Gibbs' past, were curling towards him, pressing down, tangling with his own guilt and pain. The dank basement of a Philadelphia row house. Unanswered cries for help. A dusty
cabin in the woods. Phone calls ignored. They blended and twisted together, angry words, threats, blows getting past all of his barriers, striking hard and fast and choking him -


"Try to get him to breathe with you, Jethro. To match you."

Cranston. Gibbs. Tony had felt his boss's hand against his chest, heavy and demanding. "In. Out. You know better than to disobey my orders. C'mon, I've got you." Gibbs' voice, at first strident, commanding, softened as Tony caught a little oxygen, a little more, enough to clear his vision, his right hand clenched around Gibbs' wrist, holding them together, making him stay. "That's it. You with me?"

Tony had managed to jerk his head in a nod. Still gasping like a fish, he'd let his boss pull off his sunglasses, and wipe the tears from his face. Gibbs grabbed some napkins and pressed them into Tony's hands, holding them there until he was sure Tony's shaking fingers could grasp them.

They'd sat there in silence, Gibbs and Cranston, while Tony had pulled himself together. Embarrassed, eyes locked on his own hands, Tony had managed half an apology, half a thank-you, his mouth twisting in a grimace. "Didn't mean to cry like a little girl," he'd muttered.

"You weren't," Gibbs had replied, his voice a gateway to an open wound. "A little girl's tears are easier. Louder. Quick to come and just as quick to go." Tony'd watched as the callused hand reached out to touch one of Tony's crumpled napkins. "A man's tears are different. Come up from a deeper place. Easier to deny until, well -"

"Until you can't," Tony'd whispered the only way that phrase could end.

"Until you can't," Gibbs had echoed. "No shame in it."

"No?" Tony had raised his eyes. "Coulda sworn your rules would have something to say about that. Or the Marines." He'd been aching for a fight. An argument. Anything but the overwhelming tsunami of emotion. That bloodbath of tears and pain. He'd glanced around the coffee shop, wondering how many feds had gotten his meltdown on video. How many YouTube hits it was going to be worth. Anger was easier. Safer. He could use it to push them away, make them hate him. Especially now, now that Gibbs had trusted Tony with his secret. "Those guys aren't usually real big on sobbing into each other's arms."

"They aren't?"

Tony'd examined his boss for the expected rage, that knee-jerk put-down Gibbs had always used to keep Tony in his place. No. Those eyes were still calm - a little storm-ravaged, a little cloudy, but still at ease. Tired. Determined.

"What?"

Cranston had leaned in. "Agent DiNozzo, without giving away any confidences I can tell you that the strongest of men, the most seasoned Marines, driven and trained Navy Seals do cry. They do have doubts. And, after a difficult mission, after time in enemy hands or coming back from extended duty assignments, they most certainly need their friends and families to help them find their way home."

Gritting his teeth, Tony had bitten off his reply. "Not a soldier. Not a Marine. All that happened was that I was stuck with a geeky guy with blood on his hands. You can't compare -"
"No, you can't compare. You can't compare any of it, Tony." Gibbs squinted, his mouth twisting. "You think there's some kind of scale, one to ten, to measure a man's pain? His loss?" He shook his head. "No. This? This is you."

Gibbs had moved, reaching out to put a hand on Tony's shoulder again, but Tony had backed off, hands raised, keeping him away. It hadn't stopped Gibbs' words, though.

"You can't tell me that 'nothing happened.' I know better. I saw it in the way you chose your words, the way you keep your back against the wall. I see it now, while you try to drive me away. And I sure as hell read it in the damned black file from Philadelphia. The only question now is, are you going to deny it? Hide from it? Walk away from this messed up family we've built here? Or are you going to open up, wrestle with it, drag that damned crap into the light so you can finally get over it?"

Tony lowered his hands from his face and set them on his knees. He looked around Dr. Cranston's office. Took in the warmth, the safety, the openness. Gibbs was right. As usual, he smirked. Maybe it was time to lay aside the investigator. The professional. The glib smartass who always had an answer. Maybe it was time to drag the twisted mementos of his pain out into the open. Dust them off. Let the light hit them. No shame. No embarrassment.

Time to look at it all with open eyes, standing tall, instead of out of the corner of his eye at midnight.

The door opened. Cranston walked in.

Tony took a deep breath and did not smile.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for your patience. Family vacation over, ankle and broken toe iced, let the writing continue. Much gratitude for your continued comments and kudos!
"And other withered stumps of time // Were told upon the walls; staring forms // Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed. // Footsteps shuffled on the stair." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land
mindset. It wasn't a virus or bacteria, no tumors were growing in his brain, no alcohol or drugs were messing with his chemical balance and egging him on. He hadn't witnessed a buddy blown to bits by an RPG. A child strapped with bombs holding out her arms to be held. The men and women who served stood head and shoulders above Tony - they deserved all of the resources, the help, anything, everything. Tony? Mental illness? Tony's stomach ached and he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth to try to keep the bile quiet.

Maybe his father had been right all along. Maybe he'd seen something in Tony way back then, seen the weakness, the … wrongness in his only son, his only child. Maybe that's why he hated him. Sent him away. Something behind Tony's green eyes had showed itself to his father before Tony had perfected his façade. Tony was going to end up in the gutter, wearing newspaper for shoes and living in a refrigerator box. Crazy homeless guy. DC had plenty of them. "Move over boys, there's gotta be room for one more," he yelled, head thrown back.

Dr. Cranston was learning. She was good - she picked up on every flinch, every twitch or blink. Maybe it was something in the Todd/Cranston DNA, but profiling seemed to come naturally to them. His smile flickered - Kate only wished she was half as good a profiler as her sister. Tony liked to think of himself as an unassailable wall, a master of masks and deception. Kate had fallen for it, hook, line, and frat-boy. Cranston hadn't. Her steady stares, her questions, tiny comments murmured into the silences that grew up between them - she looked through him, down all the way to the center mass of Tony's soul. It was unnerving. Disturbing. He didn't want her there, down at his core - he didn't want anyone there, down in the dirt and muck and grime of Tony DiNozzo.

Leaning forward, Tony dropped his head into his hands. He'd made his bones undercover, being someone else, living inside a scumbag's skin day after day without a minute to be himself. He was good at it. A natural. Philly had proven that. Grinding his teeth together, he forced his memories away from the Macalusos, the months of soul-eating stress and lies and tiny little deaths his psyche had died. They'd fallen for it, all of them. Welcomed him to the family. Mafiosi with criminal histories that went back decades hadn't been able to figure out one Italian/British/American cop with a talent for deception. It wasn't his act that had given him away, after all, he reminded himself, welcoming the bloom of bitterness, the taste of betrayal against the back of his throat.

On the other hand, little Jeffrey White had seen through him. Pegged him for a cop from the first. So Cranston figuring him out just added evidence to the huge honking pile that Tony DiNozzo had lost his mojo as well as his mind.

He'd been fidgety today, pacing around the doctor's office during their entire afternoon session. Morning and afternoon, Tony had been seeing Cranston every day for six days. Surely the woman was tired of him. Tired of his evasions, his denials, his moodiness. Tony had no patience for things like recovery and introspection and healing. He wanted to be gone, to lock himself up in his apartment for the holiday week, order enough pizza for a small mid-western town and zone out to Home Alone, A Christmas Story, and maybe the televised yule log for days on end. Drink a little - or a lot - bake some Stollen for the neighbors, make his famous Christmas goose with two kinds of Port wine for the sauce, sneak into the back row during Midnight Mass. DiNozzo's coping mechanisms were classics.

Let's face it, he sighed, rubbing a hand over his face, his time-tested coping methods couldn't be any worse than how he was doing in therapy.

"Don't you have Christmas stuff to do? Baking or going out of town with family or something? I mean, Kate starts talking about her grandmother's stuffing recipe around Columbus Day. Isn't that on the Cranston/Todd agenda?" He'd tried to get Cranston to loosen up, to tighten up, to react to him, annoying, frat-boy, arrogant ass DiNozzo, not Tony-the-patient. Tony the sick little agent. PTSD
Tony. Best he could do was that little smile that was more in her eyes than her face.

"I'm sure Kate's been eating nothing but tofu and vegetables since Thanksgiving," Cranston had replied. "But, this year, we're spending Christmas in our own home. Our son is six and we're all a little tired of spending the day traveling between relatives' homes. This year it's pajamas and hot chocolate and playing with his toys instead of dressing up and trying to make nice all day." She sighed, relaxing back into the high-backed chair she usually chose for their sessions. "Sounds like heaven."

"It does," Tony had replied a little wistfully. "I don't remember any Christmases like that."

Cranston's smile had deepened. "Now that sounds like one of the first honest things you've said to me."

Tony'd shrugged and turned to make another lap around the office. "Everybody's got childhood stories."

"Yes. Memories and nostalgia are big around this time of year. But making new memories instead of dwelling on the old can be a great way to spend the holidays."

A couple of heavy thumps sounded from Tony's front door. Ah, that was what had woken him up from his daze. Tony stood, the empty glass that had been resting against his thigh on the leather couch tipping over. His muscles were stiff, as if he hadn't moved in hours. He guessed he hadn't. He made his way to the door and paused, one hand flat on the solid surface just beside the deadbolt lock. Maybe he shouldn't respond. Shouldn't answer. His stockinged feet hadn't made any noise against the hardwood floor. It might be someone from the building, looking for a donation to the soup kitchen, or kids selling wrapping paper for their school fundraiser. It might be Abby. Or Ducky. Tony leaned his forehead against the door. He shouldn't risk it.

"I can hear you, DiNozzo. Open the door."

Gibbs. Gibbs and his stupid Batman hearing. Damned if the man couldn't probably see through the door, too. It was bad enough that he always seemed to know what Tony was thinking, now he had x-ray vision, too.

"Might as well open it, I'm not going anywhere."

"Of course you're not," Tony murmured, banging his forehead against the door. "Why are you here, Gibbs?"

"Well, if ya open the door you might find out."

Tony snapped off the locks, taking down the chain with a shake of his head. Might as well. Gibbs wouldn't be above putting his boot to the flimsy thing and costing Tony a healthy chunk of his security deposit. After all, the man threatened to put his boot many places - some even anatomically possible. If Tony annoyed him enough, maybe he could get Gibbs to take him back to NCIS for a little hand-to-hand practice and the man could knock him unconscious.

He could use the sleep.

Gibbs didn't shoulder his way in or stomp through the few inches between Tony and the door frame. Not this time. He stood there, a cardboard box in his arms, and waited, his expression neutral. Leaning on the open door, Tony frowned, wishing he'd never roused from his semi-coherent doze. That he'd followed his nose to the nearest bar rather than come home. That any of the thoughts and emotions that were swimming around in his gut would bother to surface and give him a clue as to
how he felt about Gibbs showing up at his door on Christmas Eve.

"Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure." He found himself backing away from the door, one arm gesturing wide to usher the other man inside. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting - I mean," Tony took a quick look around his dark apartment and then hurried after Gibbs. "Let me turn on some lights."

Gibbs had stopped in the kitchen, resting his box on Tony's island where the light from the hallway fell across the counter. He didn't ask Tony why he'd been sitting in the dark. Didn't quip about losers who drank away the night to wake up on Christmas morning in a puddle of pity and piss and booze. Tony blinked in the sudden light and positioned himself across the island, hands braced, stiffening his spine for whatever was coming.

A package of instant gravy fell onto the counter. A can of cranberry sauce. Two boxes of -

"Seriously? Stove Top Stuffing? Are you trying to kill me, Gibbs?" Tony snatched the unholy red boxes from his kitchen counter and shook them in his boss's face. "Don't tell me that this is what you eat on the holidays? Good Lord, no wonder you're always in such a bad mood!" Tony stomped on the foot pedal of his trash can and dumped the boxes. He snagged the can of red horror and threw that in after them. "Jellied cranberry sauce is nothing but sugar and flavoring and boiled cow hooves."

"Hey!" Gibbs grabbed Tony by the wrist to divert him from whatever else was in his box of tricks. "I brought supper. You could say 'thank you.'"

"Well thank you for trying to poison me. I know you want my crazy ass off your team, but you don't have to kill me to do it!"

The fingers tightened, pressing hard, Gibbs blue eyes flecked with ice.

Anger exploded from Tony's gut, taking over. Fight or flight permanently switched to one side. He ripped his arm from Gibbs' hold and shifted around the island, hip forward, slamming the older man against the fridge, left arm across his chest. Panting, Tony leaned in, pressing hard, just underneath Gibbs' throat. Finally, he thought. Finally the damned emotional roller coaster had slid to a stop, its pointer on anger. Yeah, Tony could get behind that. "Go ahead, say it. Say it, Gibbs," he urged. "Fire me. Tell me I'm a freaking basket case. Tell me to man up and then stalk off like you usually do."

Nothing. No fight. No yelling. No sarcasm. The ice was still there in his boss's eyes, but it looked glacier-deep. No movement. Gibbs was waiting. Again.

"What the hell are you waiting for? What - what -"

"Seems like you've had a whole conversation with me in your head, DiNozzo. Waiting to make sure you were done."

Tony stumbled backwards. What - what had just happened? "God damn it," he shouted, fists clenched as he spun, threw himself at the wall, pounded once, twice -

And then Gibbs was there, one hand on his shoulder, leaning hard against Tony's right side. "Stop. Stop hurting yourself. Or trying to get me to hurt you."

Head shaking in denial, Tony closed his eyes. Stopped pounding his fists against the wall. Just -stopped.
Gibbs backed off. Did something back at the counter with his box of dorm-room food. Gave Tony a minute to get himself together. Tony chuckled, wondering how long he could get away with leaning here against the wall with his back to the man before he gave up and went away.

"Not going anywhere."

"Geez, Gibbs," Tony shifted, leaning his back into the wall, "please don't tell me you're a mind reader. I really think I've had enough people sifting through my brain over the past week without that."

"You keep forgetting I've done this before. From your side. I can kinda figure what's happening in your head."

Eyes raised to the ceiling, Tony groaned. "If it's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium."

The sounds of Gibbs' movements stopped. "Something like that."

"1969. Suzanne Pleshette. Ian McShane. Pseudo-documentary about those pre-packaged European tours where they do a country a day." Tony rattled off the movie's stats. "Wacky and weird like only '60's movies can be. I can't imagine a tour of my brain would be much different."

Gibbs grunted, his usual response when he didn't really understand what Tony was talking about.

"Are you really going to make me eat jellied cows' feet and sawdust stuffing, Boss?" He let his gaze fall from its piercing fascination with his ceiling down to Gibbs' face. "'Cause that's just mean."

"You got a better idea?"

The weight of Gibbs' presence - of his offered companionship - dragged Tony's shoulders into a hunch as he hauled the refrigerator door open and slid out the pan of lasagna. "It'll take a while to heat up," he murmured into the cold white expanse, grabbing butter and a couple of beers. A head of garlic and a baguette joined his pile on the counter. He moved around Gibbs, giving him as wide a berth as he could in the small space. Turned on the oven. Set the pan of lasagna inside. Reached for his chef's knife to start knocking the garlic bread together.

Behind him, he heard his trash can open, Gibbs digging for his boxes and cans. Waste not, want not. It might not be a USMC saying, but it was Gibbs through and through. A minute later and he heard the click and swish as Gibbs opened both beer bottles, metal caps spinning on the granite. One bottle was plunked down at his left and Tony paused a moment to stare at it. He should take a drink. Down the whole thing. He was thirsty enough. He kept chopping.

Gibbs didn't go too far away. Solid and still, he leaned against the sink at the edge of Tony's peripheral vision. Quietly assessing. It's what he did.

Maybe Tony should try it.

His hands knew what they were doing. Crushing, melting, slicing. His mind filtered back over the past few days, his silence to his friends and teammates, Cranston's comments. Detachment. Separation.

When the garlic bread was ready for the oven, Tony took up the beer bottle again and matched Gibbs' falsely casual pose. "Cranston call you?"

"Nope." Gibbs took a sip of his beer.
"No? She didn't tell you to get your ass over here and make sure I wasn't slitting my wrists in the bathtub?"

"Already said no, DiNozzo. And that's not your style."

No. It really wasn't. Tony had worked his share of suicide cases, interviewed the people left behind to clean up the mess.

"Right. So what's the deal with the box of food you collected for the soup kitchen? I mean, that's what it is, right? It's a good prop, don't get me wrong, but you don't usually need an excuse to barge in here." Tony swirled the beer bottle by its neck, careful not to spill. He didn't want it, the smell was too hoppy or too dark, maybe it had gone flat in his fridge. Probably tasted stale and dusty. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the bottle.

"Not polite to show up empty handed."

"'Polite?'" Tony narrowed his eyes at his boss. "Okay, that is - weird - but let's keep to the subject. Why are you here, Gibbs?"

"Already told you." Gibbs drank, watching Tony the entire time. "I've been there. More or less. I don't need Cranston to tell me what's going on in your head right now. Figured you'd rather have me right about now than an invasion."

Tony frowned. "Invasion?"

Gibbs mouth twitched. "Abby. McGee. Kate. Ducky. They're all ready to storm the walls of Castle DiNozzo. You up for that?"

"Oh, hell no," Tony stated, setting the beer bottle on the counter behind him.

Gibbs glanced towards the untouched beer and away. He shrugged. "So."

"So," Tony echoed, drawing the word out, giving himself time to find a topic of conversation that would be safe. That wouldn't bring up some kind of demons or ghosts and leave them both bleeding. He couldn't ask about Gibbs' family, wouldn't do that to the man, especially on a day like Christmas Eve. He opened his mouth. Closed it. He didn't want to talk about White. Danielson. Cranston. How his 'recovery' was going.

"Not expecting anything, Tony." Gibbs interrupted the frantic churning of Tony's thoughts. "Share a meal. Watch one of those Christmas movies you like so much. Maybe go to church. Don't need to talk if you don't want to."

True to his word, Gibbs didn't push. Dinner was silent. A word here or there, a grunt of admiration for the food, a murmur of thanks- that was it. The movie he'd chosen - The Bishop's Wife - did all the talking required for a while, Gibbs comfortable enough in Tony's apartment to get his own drinks and find the bathroom. The silence hadn't weighed on Tony like he thought it would. Instead, he felt centered. Balanced. Whether it was Gibbs' unspoken support or something intrinsic in Christmas Eve, he didn't know and it didn't matter.

Walking back from St. Mark's in the cold and dark of the early, early morning, stars bright, wind tangling in the fringe of his scarf, Tony began to talk. He hadn't made a decision or planned it out. He hadn't had a revelation while the men and women and children sang Silent Night. He didn't weigh and measure how much it could help, or anything like that. He just opened his mouth.

"You're probably wondering why I didn't drink that beer tonight. Or offer you bourbon. Wondering
about a lot of things, I'd guess," he began, keeping his eyes focused on the stars, his footsteps slow and even. "It's one of the things Cranston has me working on. Eating and drinking." He chuckled, scrunching up his shoulders. "I know you're shocked. You've seen me stuff my face with anything I can get my hands on more than once. A lot more than once. Pizza, barbeque, breakfast burritos, not to mention the stash of candy in my desk. Ever since - since the White case -" Tony shook his head.

"Since then, I can't get much beyond bottled water. And that's only if I buy it myself. Pick it out of the back row of the convenience store fridge." Tony's heart was beating faster, his hands clammy inside his gloves. "I tried going to Murlarkey's yesterday - heck, I've been going there for years, I play basketball with Tom and his brother on the weekends. I taught Kitty how to make my grandmother's beer-battered fish and chips. But yesterday I ordered a beer and then I couldn't - I couldn't even touch it. Just sat there staring at it for ten minutes. Kitty kept asking me what was wrong, but -" he took a deep breath of the cold crisp air. "I finally pretended I got a call and took off. Came home and poured out all my open liquor bottles. Every single one of them. Even the Macallen 18 that Ducky gave me. Can't trust them."

A car drove by, slow and careful. Tony turned to watch the two blond children strapped into their car seats in the back, tucked under fleecy blankets, their heads canted to the side as they slept. Sweet. Innocent. Parents the front seat looked tired but they were holding hands. Someone was on the way to grandma's house for Christmas morning presents. He stopped for a moment, Gibbs close behind. Remembering the church service, he sent up a quick prayer that that little family would get there, safe and warm. That nothing would tear them apart - not death or sickness or the kinds of horrors that he saw in his job every day. Nothing like what had turned little Jeffrey White into a killer.

"I get that DiNozzo. I spent a lot of days with a bottle in my hand after - after my girls died. Woke up one step away from alcohol poisoning." A hand came down on Tony's shoulder. "Hell, I admire that you got rid of the stuff. Good for you."

Tony dropped his chin to his chest. "No, Boss. Don't give me any credit. I'm not - I'm not afraid I'll swim down to the bottom of the bottle and pull the cork in after me." He chuckled. "Maybe I should be." He watched the tail lights of the small sedan fade into the distance. "It's not just booze. The half-empty orange juice went the same way. I could only eat the damned lasagna because I made it myself." Sighing, Tony moved off down the sidewalk at the same deliberate pace, Gibbs just a half-step behind. "Cranston caught on pretty quick. Stopped offering me coffee. Tea. A glass of lemon water from her classy silver diffuser bottle. When I started showing up with two bottles of water tucked into my coat, she figured it out."

"It's stupid and I know that. Just like smacking poor Palmer around was stupid, or taking too many showers or trying to resign every other day. It's stupid and I'm hungry and thirsty but I can't - I just can't make myself do it." He was keeping the stifling darkness away, the smell of sweat and musk, musty old cabin air and Danielson's eyes above the whiskey bottle. The bright stars helped, the crisp cold of Christmas day, and the life and movement of the DC streets even at this hour. But, word after word, the fear, the darkness, and the dread that slipped up from behind him and was coming closer.

Gibbs grunted, catching up to walk beside him, not quite in step, hands shoved deep into his coat pockets. "Wouldn't call it stupid. Sounds like you're protecting yourself."

His own breath was like fog in Tony's face. He was tempted to hide behind it, keep his face turned away, shut his mouth now before more slipped out. But whatever had started him talking was still in force, the words gurgling up from behind his highest, thickest walls. Maybe it didn't have anything to do with the night sky, or the cold, or the lingering sound of church bells and raised voices. The sight of the happy family in their car. Maybe it had less to do with Cranston's therapy or Tony's exhaustion and hunger. Maybe it was Gibbs. His hand held out, offering nothing more than companionship. An
ear. A strong shoulder to lean on. Loss for loss, sorrow for sorrow couldn't be measured, added up and weighed until it was in balance, but Tony felt like Gibbs was pulling down all of his careful barriers, knocking holes in the dike of his memories with nothing more than a few words and a calm spirit.

Suspicion twisted hot beneath his breastbone. 'Why?' Tony asked himself. 'Why now? Why this time?' There was nothing about their relationship - about Gibbs' stiff-armed approach to leadership or Tony's out-of-step need to follow - that made any of this make sense. Yeah, Tony remembered Baltimore. A job offer. A hand against his cheek and a quote from Butch and Sundance. Rule five. But nothing since then had prepared him for this.

"Are we friends, Gibbs?" he blurted into the silence, stopping again to face the other man.

The abrupt question didn't seem to bother his boss. "Like to think so."

Tony tilted his head, slights and slurs and reluctant, grumbling offers of help drifting through his memory. "Pretty screwed up friendship, if you ask me."

Gibbs stood steady and straight, meeting Tony's piercing stare with his own. "Never been good at it."

Just when Tony figured that was all he was going to get, that Gibbs might be about to remind him for the millionth time of his handy excuse for any crappy behavior or insult - his 'second B for bastard' alibi - Gibbs bent his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "I could do better. Should do better by you, DiNozzo. Tony." Gibbs nodded. "Trying now."

"Okay." Blinking at a sudden gust against his face that raised icy tears to his eyes, Tony tucked his chin down into his scarf. "Just - doesn't mean this is any easier."

Gibbs' mouth twitched. "Nothing about you has been exactly 'easy.'"

"Oh, and you're so freaking simple and uncomplicated yourself, Mr. Kettle." Tony shivered, his whole body trembling.

"Feel like taking this inside?" Gibbs took a step towards Tony's apartment, less than half a block away. "Make some coffee." One hand came out from his pocket quickly. "Don't have to drink it."

"Okay," Tony repeated, his breath turning to ice in the tangled wool of his scarf as he imagined the aroma of dark roast, the dim light of Christmas morning, and a familiar presence at his side. "Guess it's time to fill in the blanks of that report."

"Sounds like that's where you were headed," Gibbs nodded. "I'm listening, Tony. Not judging. Not waiting for something so I can chime in with the answer to all this." Gibbs' laughter was a little harsh and a lot sardonic. "Answers are not my strong suit. But, if it helps, I think I know what's coming. And I'm not going anywhere."

The light reflecting from Danielson's whiskey bottle danced before Tony's inner eye. White's shark-smile. His lead-filled limbs, waking up on that dusty bed.

"You sure, Gibbs?" he whispered, his eyes not quite meeting his boss's any more.

"Hey. Yeah. I'm sure," Gibbs shifted, foot to foot, bringing his face back in line with Tony's. "You ready?"

Lips pressed into a thin line, Tony felt the depth and breadth of that question, let it trickle down to the
very core of him, seeping into all of the hidden places, the echoing emptiness of his memory.

"Yeah, I'm ready, Boss."

Chapter End Notes

Geez, finally! Tony was not cooperating with this chapter, but he's ready now. Thanks again for your great comments and kudos.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Warnings for description of assault and language.

XII

"Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; // Exploring hands encounter no defence; // His vanity requires no response, // and makes a welcome of indifference." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

"The double-talk, the vague areas of my report - it's not like I thought they'd get by you. Not really." Tony stood at the window, staring out into the darkest part of the night. Clouds had rippled across the bright stars as he and Gibbs made their way back to his apartment, the moon ducking behind them. The universe seemed to have drawn a soft cloak across the heavens, muffling the intensity of the night and the sounds of a busy city. Everything was closer, warmer, as if Tony, at the center looking out, was wrapped up in cotton wool, allowed to whisper his secrets into the darkness where no one else could hear.

Behind him, Gibbs sat, quiet and still, the smell of dark roast a familiar reminder of the man's presence. Just out of sight. Solid and strong. Watching Tony's six. Bracketed by Gibbs behind and the cosmos before him, how could Tony feel anything but safe?

"It wasn't until I met Danielson at the cabin, when I saw White and him together, that I really knew that our intel was wrong. I had that feeling earlier, you know the one, the crawling skin on the back of your neck, that little voice in your head that's trying to get your attention. White was too textbook, too perfectly that geeky little patsy we thought he was." Tony's breath clouded the window in small, hazy circles. Shoulder leaning against the wall, he set his left hand against the glass, the cold a welcome contrast. "For a while, I chalked it up to the hurried op, figured it was my own gut rebelling against the lack of prep, throwing up 'I told you so's' and 'this was a mistakes' just because I knew better. And I did. And so did you."

Tony didn't wait for a response. That's not what this was about. There'd be all kinds of time later for that discussion. He swallowed the arguments, the resentment. Fought back the questions, the demands to know why this time, this particular time, Gibbs had taken Tony up on one of his ridiculous suggestions. He was afraid he knew the answer to that one, anyway.

"But there was something behind White's eyes. His 'poor little me' eyes. Now and then I'd catch him watching me. Staring. Intense. Heated. I had no idea what it was about, I just knew I didn't like it. It meant trouble for me. Me, Tony DiNozzo, federal agent, but also my undercover persona." He sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know, something about him was telling me that whoever found himself tethered to Jeffrey White was in for a scary ride."

"When we got to the cabin, when Danielson opened the door and White slid in beside him -" Tony closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. White had latched onto Danielson's side, his attitude shifting back and forth between simpering and seductive. The darkness inside the small man that Tony had only had a glimpse of became an almost visible aura around him, sucking Danielson inside. After a few minutes of back-and-forth, when Danielson, grudging, angry, and suspicious, was finally going to let Tony in, White had turned and Tony had almost taken an
instinctive step backwards as the force of the man's persona had reached out for him, a victorious smile playing over White's lips. "I saw it then, behind those wide eyes. I knew I was going to die."

The silence behind him grew edges, as if something was poised on its brink, ready to spring out into the light.

"Danielson didn't trust me; that much was clear. What was even clearer was that White had a hold on the man, reins, bridle, and a bit in his teeth. White was calling the shots without seeming to say anything and Danielson was going wherever he wanted. He put up a fight about bringing me in, but it didn't sound anything like a difference between partners-in-crime, or an argument among thieves. Honestly, it sounded like Danielson was jealous. Like it was a lovers' quarrel. But, at that point, my character was already developed - man of the world type with few morals and fewer regrets, whose quick thinking and charm got him what he needed. I couldn't change it. Not without putting the whole operation at risk."

Eyes still closed, the cabin came to life around him, and - this time - Tony let it. White's innocent smirk. Danielson's scowl. They'd shown Tony to the small bedroom and disappeared into the other one, door half-open, their voices tangling, arguing, but only long enough for a desperate Tony to find the windows painted shut and his access to the only outside door right beside the other bedroom. Shoes discarded by the bed, Tony had moved as close as he dared and listened while his gaze roamed the cabin searching for something - anything - a weapon, a phone, a freaking clue.

"You think you're gonna replace me with that pretty boy? Think you're gonna be happy with him? That he's going to be your pet, doing what you want?" The laughter had been cruel, cynical, cutting. "Hope he's not too traditional. Or the squeamish type."

"Now, Lane, you know he couldn't replace you."

"I'd kill him first."

"He's been really useful. And nice. He likes me."

"Bastard. Maybe I'll cut him up a little, make him ugly. Scarred. You'd drop him if he wasn't so pretty."

"That's not what this is about, Lane." White's voice had been cajoling, teasing, but Tony remembered the undercurrent of steel. "We can use him."

"Use him up, more like," Danielson had growled. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Don't be hasty, Lane. He's a pilot. And he's smart. Flexible."

One of them had moved, the old wooden floorboards squeaking and Tony had ducked back into his bedroom, cursing silently. He had to get them to talk about the antiquities. About their plan to get them out of the country. He couldn't do that while the two of them were locked away discussing how and when to kill him. When neither of them followed him, he'd squared his shoulders and did what he had to do.

Dropping one of his shoes to bang against the wooden floor, he headed back into the main room and flopped down onto the stained couch. "Hey, guys. You got anything to eat around here?" he'd shouted.

The bedroom door was yanked open, White dodging around Danielson's arm to hurry out first. "I'm hungry, too, Lane."
"There's chili. A couple of cans of stew. Crackers." Danielson had crossed his arms in the doorway, eyes narrowed at Tony's relaxed pose. "Sorry we don't do gourmet around here."

"Sounds good," Tony had shrugged, frowning at Danielson's weird comment. Did his greasy hair and scruffy, filthy face scream gourmet to this guy? He'd twisted his head to shoot a smile towards White. "A can opener and a spoon is all I need. I'm so hungry I could even eat my grandmother's dry as dust pot roast."

White had been digging around in the one cabinet that still had a door. "Sounds terrible. But I'd eat anything hot right now." He'd backed out of the cabinet with two cans, peeled back the thin metal tops and set the cans on the battered black wood stove, the only source of heat in the cabin. "Shouldn't take long, Tony." White's eyes had glittered at him before they slid back to Danielson. "Gonna need more wood for the stove, Lane. Might be cold tonight."

"Yeah, there's some logs outside. I'll get 'em later."

Tony had tried not to let his relief show. It was an opportunity he couldn't let get away from him. "I can get some." He slapped his hands on his knees, ready to push to his feet. "Might as well get it while it's still light out."

Danielson had grunted. "Good. Make yourself useful."


The two had gone back and forth, sniping and nagging at each other like a stereotypical married couple while Tony fell apart without a word. Without a sound. Without a single fear showing on his face or in his body language. After the soup, after White sat with him on the couch - too close, always too close - wedging him into the corner where he could hardly breathe, then - then -

Tony leaned back from the window, just far enough to ease the aching in his neck, his shoulders. The fog from his breath shrank down to palm-sized, to a quarter, a dime, and then gone. He was left facing his skewed reflection, patches of shadow like lichen eating away at his skin, visual proof of the darkness threatening to fill his soul.

"He wasn't going to let me go outside. Wasn't going to let me out of his sight. White made that clear." Tony's throat felt raw, as if he'd been shouting, screaming. "I tried to get them talking about the goods, about their plan, about anything, but Danielson just stood there grunting monosyllables while White twisted the words around and around until they were meaningless. I was tired. Spent. And the feeling was too familiar."

Weeks undercover in Philadelphia had soaked exhaustion into Tony's bones. He'd managed on little sleep, cup after cup of coffee, and lots of adrenaline. Until one night - until he'd pulled one all-nighter too many trying to make himself indispensable to the Macaluso. Until he'd crashed for nine hours and woke up to Carmine and his brother knocking on his door with wide smiles and the offer of 'something he was not going to believe' down at the warehouse. Yeah, that had turned out to be fists and knives and metal shackles that left deep grooves in Tony's wrists and ankles and backup that never came.

"Danielson followed me into the bedroom after a few minutes. Brought a bottle of whiskey. Peace offering, he claimed." Tony swallowed, his voice raw and raspy. "I couldn't say no. What guy who'd been stuck in prison would turn down a free drink - or a dozen? But I saw it in his eyes, I saw the hate, the triumph when I took the bottle. He watched me the whole time, never blinking. Yeah, he knew that I knew it wasn't just whiskey. But I didn't have any choice and so I swallowed down a
Tony rubbed his hand across his mouth, tasting the bitterness, the acid. His hand was shaking. His skin cold. Behind him, Gibbs shifted, the leather couch groaning. Tony didn't turn around. He couldn't - couldn't do this if he was looking at the man. If he could see the pity or disgust in his eyes.

"After that - after that I don't remember. I think I laid down on the bed. Figured I'd wait until they were asleep and then see what happened." He closed his eyes and then opened them, stumbling forward at the reeling images, his hand on the window steadying him. Dark clouds. Harsh laughter. Bits and pieces of conversations. Hands. Rough hands pulling at his clothes.

The darkness whispered. It smelled of booze. Sweat. Cigarettes.

"Just help me, Lane. He could be wired." Tugging at his buttons. His fly. Danielson' dark chucking. "Just lie back, boy. We'll see how much you like him now."

What was real? What was a nightmare? Did he really want to know?

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

"In the morning, when White leaned over me to wake me up -" Tony sucked in a breath and tightened his lips, his jaw working, teeth grinding over the words. "Something happened after I passed out. My clothes were - my shirt was on the bedpost - don't remember doing that. My belt was too loose, briefs twisted. I think -" He grimaced, muttering curses. "I don't know what the hell happened, Gibbs. I don't know if anything happened. But it feels - it felt -" Damn it.

The window was wet under his hand. Condensation. Sweat. The cold had seeped into his skin, up his arm, and twisted inside his chest, an icy hand around his heart. "I wasn't hurt. No blood. No - no pain." No rips. No tears. "There - there was a smell, though. And - my skin was - felt -" Tony's control ground to a halt. Danielson was gone, throat cut, buried beneath fallen leaves by the wood pile. "Abby told me Danielson was killed sometime during the night. I guess after - after whatever they did. I guess they had a fight. Over me." He laughed. It was hot and vile and tasted like vomit. "Thought I'd want people fighting over me. Turns out," he swallowed, "turns out, not as much fun as you'd think."

The cocoon of warmth, of dim light and silence rippled. Movement behind him. For the first time since, since that night, it didn't make Tony run, or fight, raise his fists or fling himself against the wall to face it. This time he knew it was Gibbs. His boss. His friend. Still facing the window, Tony thought back to the prison bus, to the scared, shaking, delicate form of Jeffrey White. To the fall down the hill. The truck. The motorcycle.

"I screwed up. Underestimated the little jerk. Oh, he had me fooled, had me feeling sorry for him, wondering how someone like him could get mixed up with a stone cold killer like Danielson." He could hear his voice getting louder, felt his hands shaking as anger - full blown rage - tore through him, eating up the fear and hurt. "He - the bastard drugged me. Touched me. Fucking assaulted me, Gibbs. But I was a good little agent. I let him - let him get close. The next day, I still had to do my fucking job so I let him put his hand on me. Look at me. The guy couldn't quite hide how pleased with himself he was. How much he felt like he owned me. But, hey, Tony DiNozzo never quit on an assignment, even when he'd been worked over by the best in the business."

He ignored the wetness on his cheeks, the way his voice quivered, catching and breaking, hurrying on to cover his pain. His shame. His shabby attempt to explain - to get past it - to purge himself from the fear and horror. Gibbs stood right behind him, silver hair reflected in the window, but he didn't touch, didn't lay a hand on Tony's shoulder, curl it around his neck. It wouldn't take much to break
him now. To open the floodgates. To leave him a crumpled mess.

"So I palmed the cell phone. Stuffed it in my pocket. Got in the car. I managed to dial your number, once. Let it ring. Hang up. I knew I only had to hit redial to connect again. Figured - figured you were looking for me. Waiting for my call. That you'd grab onto the lifeline and haul me back in. But - that didn't happen. No cavalry coming over the hill. No sound of helicopters in the distance. And, honestly, Gibbs, I didn't know what that meant. If you had stopped looking. If you had better things to do. If Ari had popped up on your radar and you'd forgotten all about me. Or if you were smiling and shaking your head and figuring I could handle one simple little geek like White and what was the rush." His gut churned like it had that day. All day. Biting back bile. Wanting to run. To slam the car into a tree. To reach for the gun White had stuffed in the bag. To end it - just end it. "But I did my job. I did my job." Tony always did his job. Just like in Philly.

He let the pain pour out. "After hours of nothing, no contact, I felt like I was back in that basement in Philadelphia. I remembered trying to keep up the act, to hold onto my scumbag persona while they were beating me. Burning me. Touching me. Breaking me. I got through it. I survived. Even though my backup never came, I survived. And, God damn it, I'd survive Jeffrey Fucking White." Tony spun, head high, his weight balanced, even. "I survived, Gibbs. I found the antiquities. I did my damned job. And I shot Jeffrey White in the head just before he slit my throat. I did my job." The whispered words were bullets aimed straight and true for Gibbs' heart. "I saved myself, just like in Philly."

But what had he saved? What was left? Tony DiNozzo, federal agent was gone. Broken. They could find him in pieces strewn between all over the back roads of the Virginia countryside. Whether Cranston could put him together again, clean the blood off of the pieces and shove them back together with spackle and spit, well, that remained to be seen. And nobody was taking any bets.

"I don't know how long I sat there in that car with the smell of blood and death and the taste of whiskey and betrayal before you decided to show up. Before you opened the door and cracked a joke." Tony's grin felt like a knife across his face. "Breezed in and took over, clean and well fed and over-caffeinated, just another day for the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Expected me to smile. I'm not," Tony snarled. "I'm not smiling, Gibbs."

Strong hands reached out before Tony could topple. Led him to the couch. Put a lukewarm bottle of water in his hand. Tony leaned over, head in his hands. Trembling. Anger and bitterness turned to grief, to sorrow, as tears burned down his cheeks. Darkness folded around him, left him drifting, torn from every lifeline, all of his ties to the world around him, to his very self, gone, cut loose.

All but one.

Gibbs pressed close, one hand on the back of Tony's neck, holding him hard against his chest. Holding on. "I've got you. I've got you."
"After the torchlight red on sweaty faces // After the frosty silence in the gardens // After the agony in stony places // The shouting and the crying // Prison and palace and reverberation // of thunder of spring over distant mountains. // He who was living is now dead // We who were living are now dying." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land.

The scenery outside the window wasn't exactly inspiring. The backs of row homes. Industrial sites. Narrow tunnels between brick walls, the sky a pale grey far up above him. Tony had always heard that journeys by train were serene, picturesque, a way to relax and dream and explore the beauties of the country without worrying about traffic or tolls or the need to find a gas station. Maybe that was true if you rode through the Midwest, or across the Canadian Rockies, but the route from DC to Philly was a lot less … scenic. And it left far too much time for his mind to wander. To dwell. To pick apart the past six weeks and imagine every way he should have acted differently.

Head pressed against the cool window, Tony breathed out a long, brittle sigh. If he had it all to do over again, what would he change? What could he change? The undercover op? Signing on with NCIS? Getting into law enforcement in the first place? Hell, maybe he'd start with Christmas Eve - early Christmas morning, really. How he spewed his darkness like vomit and collapsed in his Boss's arms like a sobbing two-year-old. The memory made him cringe.

He'd managed to pull himself together, finally. After he'd figured Gibbs had heard enough, seen enough, more than enough of his supposed experienced and worldly SFA reduced to a piddling pile of tears by the big bad meanies who had hurt him.

"It's okay to be hurt, Tony. To be human. I wish you'd stop minimizing your pain, beating yourself up for having a normal emotional reaction to your assault."

Cranston's voice had started to pop up at awkward moments in Tony's subconscious like an annoying kind of Jiminy Cricket since the day after Christmas. Since he and Gibbs showed up at her office and Tony told her. Since Gibbs had dragged him to Cranston's office and stood over him until he finally admitted the assault. Said it out loud. Gibbs. Bastard. Friend. Tony shrugged, smiling to himself. Depended on the day which label Leroy Jethro Gibbs would be wearing.

Tony was better. A lot better. Some days. Some days he wasn't. He'd learned a different terminology to measure his health. 'Self-care.' 'Triggers.' 'Body awareness.' 'Self-talk.' Training his body came naturally to Tony, but retraining his mind, shifting away from bitterness, from demeaning himself and dwelling on the darkness, to a healthier way of thinking, of processing - yeah, that was the hard part. Tony had read the literature. The books she'd given him. Talked. Listened. And, finally, somewhere along the way, he'd heard what Cranston was saying, what Gibbs meant by his brusque remarks.

Being assaulted. Touched. Groped by a couple of killers after they'd drugged him into submission was not his fault. Was not a sign of weakness or stupidity. It didn't happen because Tony hadn't been careful enough, or wise enough, or because he deserved it. It had nothing at all to do with him, with Tony, Anthony DiNozzo. And no matter what those voices from his past said, no matter how all the evidence added up in the court of his memories, the betrayals of friends, of family, and of partners didn't sum up a life predestined for violence. It wasn't inevitable that Tony should be hurt. Eyes closed, Tony repeated that to himself. Again.
"Recovery is a process, Tony."

Sure, sometimes he still threw things. Denied it all. Pretended he'd put on his big boy pants and brushed it all off as the price of his job. His specialty. Worse things happened every day to men and women - to children - who had fewer resources to cope than he had. And then Cranston would step in.

"Process refers to a course of action, an activity practiced over time," she'd remind him. "Just like you trained your body for college sports, your hands and mind for marksmanship. You're making good progress, Tony. Don't worry if you have to retrace your steps sometimes. Go back and re-experience your anger and denial. As an agent, when you're tracking a suspect, don't you have to sometimes go back and check, just to make sure you're still on the right track?"

God, she had all the answers. Sometimes, that was good. Great even. But sometimes, yeah, sometimes, Tony saw just a little glimmer of know-it-all-Kate behind the doctor's eyes and he wanted more than anything else to startle her, to prick and poke at her like he did his partner until she responded with a well-placed elbow or a sarcastic curse.

Unfortunately, Dr. Cranston had much better control than her little sister.

Tony settled deeper into his seat, one foot up on the empty one opposite him. He watched the icy rain hit the train window leaving long lashes against the glass. Six weeks. Six weeks of therapy, of desk work, of his emotions playing him like he was a hormone-driven pre-teen yelling at his parents one minute and demanding their comfort the next. Of patience and warmth from McGee, bitten back comments from Kate, and quiet Abby making sure her lab was some kind of 'safe space' for her broken teammate.

It was mid-February already. Well into a new year. Looking back, it seemed like the weeks stretched out behind him, defining his life and his character like his job once had. These six weeks were more than an interruption, a bump on his life's road. They were a black wall in his memory, shutting off his access to the past. To love and laughter. Good times. Times he was proud of himself and his accomplishments. College. The police academy. Being part of the thin blue line of law enforcement, a member of the team. To competence and the loyalty and trust of his co-workers. Of his boss. Himself.

He sipped his drink. Today was a good day. Today he could eat and drink whatever was set down before him. He watched the icy rain hit the train window leaving long lashes against the glass. Six weeks. Six weeks of therapy, of desk work, of his emotions playing him like he was a hormone-driven pre-teen yelling at his parents one minute and demanding their comfort the next. Of patience and warmth from McGee, bitten back comments from Kate, and quiet Abby making sure her lab was some kind of 'safe space' for her broken teammate.

It was later, at home, that the fears came back. Familiar shadows gathered. Voices from his past whispered accusations and slurs. Suspicions and abuse. He took another deliberate swallow. Those were the mornings he'd show up in the bullpen before the cleaning staff had left. When the dark purple shadows under his eyes shouted out that he hadn't slept and his shaking hands had to be imprisoned in his lap. After a few of *those* days, Gibbs would show up with pizza. Chinese food. Or he'd drive Tony to his small, comfortable house to fix cowboy steaks and offer his couch for the night.

Gibbs' house was a sanctuary. Tony chuckled into his cup. How the hell had that happened? His first year at NCIS, Tony only saw the living room. Two steps inside the front door. Whether it was intimidation or respect for the man's privacy, it had all turned into Tony's unwillingness to cross that
Boss/Agent line. To keep himself back from any possible offers of friendship or camaraderie. After Danny Price - not to mention Wendy - he'd been more gun-shy than usual. Smiling too big gave him aching muscles by the end of every day, but it kept him sane. Mostly sane. Protected. And Gibbs' third divorce had been a pretty big distraction for his boss at the time - dodging baseball bats and golf clubs took a lot of concentration.

At the end of their first year together, after Viv had nearly gotten them killed and then herself transferred the hell out, things started to change. Gibbs lost some of his ass-clenched, uptight silence. He talked more. Actually explained his thinking once or twice. With the benefit of hindsight, Tony realized Cranston probably had something to do with that. After a two-week 24-hour-a-day investigation into the deaths of three recruits at Parris Island, when Tony and Gibbs had dragged themselves back from South Carolina at oh-dark-whatever, spirits broken, and bodies in not much better shape, it had changed. Tony had opened his apartment door to the stench of spoiled food and the wash of musty heat that meant his electricity had been off for days. He'd shown up at Gibbs' house with a duffel bag and a six-pack and had been offered the couch.

It hadn't ended well. And Tony hadn't darkened Gibbs' door for a long time after. Until six weeks ago, that unlocked door might as well have been a castle drawbridge, chained and barred. Now, Gibbs not only offered Tony a change of scene, a respite from the darkness that oozed from his apartment's walls, he actually expected him. Hooked up a 1970s style television in the living room. Added a warm plaid blanket to the back of the couch. Stocked hazelnut creamer in the fridge. It was nice. And weird. Weird and nice. Story of Tony's life.

Tony curled his hands around the paper cup, closing his eyes to inhale the scent. Chocolate. Marshmallow. There was something about certain smells that invoked memory. Lilacs. Spicy red sauce. Leaf mold of autumn. Sawdust and coffee at Gibbs' house. Hot chocolate called up his mother's arms, the comfort of a soft wool blanket in front of the fire. Childhood. Or, at least a sliver of childhood - a peek between the curtains - a good one - caught in amber in his memories. He settled there for a moment, back before little Tony knew what kinds of ugliness were waiting for him out in the world. It was a good place to rest.

Lying on the bed, his legs and arms lead weights, Tony could barely open his eyes. Something was wrong. There was something on his chest, something heavy. Hands on his skin. Dank breath against his cheek. Someone was tugging on his waistband. Fastening up his jeans. His skin cold, breath shallow, Tony tried to get his eyes open, to look around, get up and get those hands the hell off of him. Break the fingers. He couldn't breathe, couldn't focus -

'Rise and shine, sleepyhead.'

Tony lurched, banging his head on the metal casement around the window. Huh. He hadn't had one of those dreams in a few days. Guess he was due. He glanced around the car, half-full of couples chatting, businessmen with open laptops, well-dressed women holding their cell phones to their ears and mumbling quietly. His breathing slowing, Tony nodded to himself. At least he didn't scream anymore. Or jump up, trying to escape those hands. Those memories. Not usually.

The doctor called it recovery. Finding a new baseline. Tony called it a win.

"There might always be nightmares. Upsetting memories that pounce on you when you don't expect it. We're not here to dissolve them, to make them go away. We're here to show you strategies to handle them so that you can go on with your life."

He remembered being not quite happy with her when she said that. Reminded him that PTSD was a
condition that would follow him into the future. But, she was right. As usual. And if Tony wanted to get to work - to his real work, to investigating, chasing down the dirt bags, interviewing suspects, carrying a gun, he would damn well do whatever it took. And Gibbs would make sure of it.

Tony huffed a breath and shook his head, taking a sip of the cooling chocolate. At least he hadn't spilled it. Who knew that Gibbs, the surly bastard, would be the guy who listened to Tony's ranting? Who dragged him out of his pity-party and set him back on his feet, again and again? He'd traded Tony's ramblings for stories of his own, stories about his wife and daughter. His grief. Mike Franks and an NIS file. The darkest days of his life which Gibbs still couldn't quite remember.

Teeth locked together, his jaw aching, Tony swallowed down the resentment that seemed to go hand in hand with his gratitude. Gibbs. He wasn't an easy guy to be friends with. Owing Gibbs his life? Yeah, that was a no-brainer. On the job, he'd put his life into those Marine sniper's hands any day of the week. But his fears? His memories? The darkness that Tony hid behind frat-boy smiles and tall tales of blondes and brunettes? Not so much.

It had been Cranston's suggestion. Of course. Tony had been talking more. Had cracked open the solid shell he kept around his past. Showed her a few peeks through the opening. One bright, sunny late-January day Tony had brought a particular book of poetry and set it on her coffee table. Poe's book. The book that reminded him of Baltimore and his ex-partner, Danny Price. He'd told her how he used it to center himself when things got too bad. How he had learned how to keep the ghosts quiet after Philadelphia, after the Macaluso boys had worked him over, broken his bones, broken his spirit. How Doc Camber had preened and preached and left Tony with bad and worse suggestions for putting himself back together. And how he'd gathered up his shelf of ornaments from second-hand stores and gas stations to fuel his survival.

For the next few hours, Tony had sat, head bowed, picking at the seam of his jeans, while that bright blue sky had been swarmed by grey clouds, and sleet and freezing rain had turned a brilliant day ugly. Cranston's remarks had slipped past him, brushed aside by the clouds in Tony's own mind. Self-doubt. Anger. He'd picked over his words, his admissions, wondering how he could have forgotten - again - that opening his mouth never ended well. He called himself all kinds of a fool. Exhausted his inner voices. When he surfaced again, Cranston had been silent for a long time.

Cranston had watched. Or she'd paged back through her notes. Settled down with a cup of tea in front of the fire. She made her waiting, her patience, seem normal. Standard. A typical, natural response to Tony's brooding silence. As if she'd had a lot to think about.

So did Tony. A lot to think about. And regret. He'd said too much. Wanted to go back in time and take it all back. To joke and laugh and tell her he'd picked up the book on his way to her office that morning. To lie through his teeth about his pain. His grief. His brokenness.

He hadn't.

"It's not easy," she'd murmured finally, more to herself than to him. "All your life you kept quiet. Kept your true self hidden behind the quips and jokes, the overconfidence. Your good looks definitely helped. And your quick tongue. Helped people misjudge you. Place you into a particular slot labeled 'arrogant smart-ass.' 'Playboy.' 'Light-weight.'"

Tony'd listened. Lifting his eyes to her still, calm form, he'd listened.

"Some of us run from our labels. We purposefully act in a way that contradicts them. Take Kate for instance. She's a small woman. Beautiful. Even as a child she was a beauty - all that dark hair and fair skin. She hated it. Hated it when the relatives pinched her cheeks or told her how she'd break all the boys' hearts someday. Prickly was a nice way to describe my sister." Cranston's gaze was on the
fire, her mind in the distant past. "Kate took up martial arts when she was eight. Joined the Rifle Team in high school. She hated it when someone commented on her looks - she wanted them to notice anything else about her- anything. Her intelligence. Her anger. Positive or negative, she didn't care. Anything."

"But you took your labels and ran with them. I don't know when you first noticed, when you decided that you were going to be the person people expected at first sight. That you were going to live up - or live down - to that first impression. And I don't blame you - not at all. We all have coping mechanisms to make it through this world. To deal with our pain and loss. Our grief. The ways people we love hurt us, whether they mean to or not." The doctor had taken a sip of her tea, tucking a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. "I think your means of coping were pretty painless, considering. You didn't drink too much. Didn't take refuge in drugs. You made choices in your life that kept those options closed off. College sports. Law enforcement."

"Some people hurt themselves in other ways," she continued. "More conscious ways. They cut. Start fights. Allow themselves to be used roughly by their partners. They let others punish them for their past sins and slights. In a way, you fall into that category, Tony."

His head had come up quick at that whispered insight. "What? I don't -"

"You seek out dangerous assignments. Volunteer for them. You suggest undercover roles that put you in great danger. Alone. With any possible back-up far away. It's clever. And I'm not in any way diminishing your skill or your professionalism - or the responsibility your superiors have in making sure you're safe. But I'd like you to think about it in a different way. How much do you use pain - physical or emotional - to keep yourself stable? To keep from thinking about the things in your past that you would classify as 'dark' or 'ugly.' To remind yourself that you've survived worse? Or, perhaps, to punish yourself for not being perfect?"

He'd gone home that day and stood in front of the shelf in his bedroom. Picked up each item, each memory-heavy thing and felt the familiar stab of pain. And he'd known that she was right. And that it was time to change it.

The bristles of the silver-backed brush were soft, the slim lines elegant. Too delicate for a man – for a man who had any doubts about his masculinity, anyway. No one would think twice that a man who loved the finer things, like Tony, would own a brush like this. Just like his mother's.

She'd been a complicated soul. British upper crust mixed with a stubborn streak a mile wide. She'd needed it to cope with his father, not to mention an over-active little boy who'd objected to Louis XIV furniture and fancy outfits. Who was likely to turn up to her garden parties with a frog in each pocket and mud stain on his bottom. He remembered her exasperation, how her words seemed to cut him like a knife, straight through to his soul. But her hugs were legendary. And, when her painful disease stole her vigor, her sweetness, and, one morning in May, stole her from their home while he slept, Tony was bereft. Devastated. Left to wandering the rooms and halls of their house looking for her.

He never saw her again. Never got to say good-bye, or that he loved her. Never got that one last hug.

On those nights after Baltimore, after Danielson and White, when the nightmares woke him in sweat and terror, Tony would take that brush in his hands and remind himself that a lot of kids lost their mothers. That it was sad, sure, but it didn't make him weak. A victim. He'd survived. A little angrier, a little lost, yes, but he'd survived. He'd stopped looking for her, eventually. They got rid of the over-stuffed, over-decorated furniture and the stupid suits and Tony didn't miss them at all. He'd moved on. Little kids did that. 'Resilient,' that's what everybody called them. At every crime scene or witness interview, he'd heard the cops, the agents, talking among themselves about the children left
behind. About how they'd forget. How they'd get over it faster than any adult.

They'd survive. Just like Tony had.

This time he sat on his bed, the brush in his lap, and let himself remember her. The scent of her hair. Curling up beside her on the couch to watch movies. He'd let the smile linger on his face and didn't mind the tears that followed.

A few days later, Tony had been ready. He'd stood at the door to Gibbs' house, a cardboard box in his hands and his heart in his throat. One more step, he'd told himself, one of the new mantras of his life. 'One more step.' 'One more day.' He shifted the box to one arm and opened the door, surprising Gibbs at the sink, washing up his single plate and fork and knife from dinner. A single place-setting was out of joint with the coziness of the house, four seats around the table, dishwasher in the corner. Blue eyes met Tony's across the distance between them and Tony felt the weight of Gibbs' losses once again. His boss had shared his pain. His memories. Talked about Shannon's attempts at cooking. Kelly's piano lessons. Trusted Tony to understand.

It was his turn.

He set the box on a kitchen chair without explanation, taking out each item, each memento, and placing them carefully on the table. The heavy crystal glass sat next to a half-empty bottle of scotch. A bottle that had been half-empty for close to ten years. The pink and blue and purple lei he'd picked up at a novelty shop on the Ocean City boardwalk doing Spring Break with his old frat buddies. An OSU coffee mug followed, the handle cracked. He let the child's scapular dangle from his fingers, smoothing the black ribbons flat. The first edition of Peter Pan. Poe's poetry. A model car, painted almost the exact color of his pride and joy. The last thing felt slick under his hands, the glass body nearly slipping from between his fingers. Gibbs lurched forward to help catch it, and Tony pulled his hand away, letting his boss frown down at the black glass horse, front legs raised to strike, lips pulled back from bared teeth. Gibbs didn't say a word, just set the ugly thing down among the others and then leaned back against the counter, ready to listen.

Tony lifted the cut-glass tumbler. "This glass is an exact duplicate of the ones my father kept on his credenza. The ones little Anthony had to fill exactly right during his daily 'reports.' The ones that were broken, one by one, against walls or floors or a little boy's skin as his father's grief and anger raged." Tony's mind sent him back to his Long Island home, his mother's empty chair at the dinner table, and his father's alcoholism. "My hatred of hospitals began back there. Too many strange hands, too many questions, too much pain and confusion for one little boy."

Tony let his memories linger on the broken bones. The bruises. The cuts. The pitying looks of the nurses and the cold, indifferent words of the doctors. He catalogued each one. Remembered. Then he dropped the glass into Gibbs' trash, the cheap bottle of scotch following.

"The last time it happened I was in the hospital for over a week. Came home to see my packed bags being loaded into the limo that would take me to my first boarding school. I remember meeting my father's eyes across the foyer, reading the panic and sorrow there. I turned around and never looked back." Well, not for a while. Not until his first Christmas vacation. But his father was better by then. Better. And Tony had learned to accept what he could get.

Tony blew out a breath and reached for the next item. He fingered the bright paper flowers of the lei and remembered the freedom and fear of being a ten-year-old on his own in Hawaiian hotel. Waking up to silence in the room that adjoined his father's. His father's empty room – empty of suitcases, clothes, and toiletries. Of any sign that his father was coming back.

"Dad had a meeting to go to in Hawaii the summer I turned ten. He told me it would be a celebration
- for both of us. He'd close a deal and I'd be double digits." Tony wrapped the cheap thing around one hand. "I never did find out what happened. Why the deal fell through. What made him so distracted that he forgot I was sleeping in the next room." He remembered getting dressed, packing up his own bag, while his mind picked up and discarded scenarios he'd seen in movies and on TV. He'd sat on the bed, legs kicking, belly rumbling until the housekeeper showed up, surprised by the child's presence and his replies to her laments in perfect Spanish.

Tony shook his head and concentrated, smoothing out the paper petals he'd unconsciously crushed. "I was a pretty smart kid, Gibbs. I figured it out. Bided my time, waiting and watching, and finally sneaked down to the front desk to use the phone and get my father's secretary to send a return ticket and a car to pick me up. I didn't see dad again for days. Weeks, maybe, I don't quite remember. But I was okay. No tortured tales of abuse or other kinds of shenanigans."

"Shenanigans," Gibbs repeated through clenched teeth. "You could have been -"

"Yes." Tony stopped him with a word. "Yes. Terrible things could have happened. Might have happened." He stared at the stupid lei, the reminder of how much his father loved him and cared for him. Cherished his only child. "It was wrong. And not the last time I stupidly trusted my father. But if we go down every 'what if' trail all of these things could lead us to we'll be here forever." He let out a breath and licked his dry lips. "Just - just let me get this out. Okay?"

Gibbs held out his hand, nodding. Tony let the lei fall into his boss's hands, and watched him tear the flimsy thing to pieces with a surge of relief. He smiled and turned back to the table.
Chapter XIV is a three-part chapter, dealing with Tony's memories of abuse, torture, and loss. Be warned, although nothing is depicted, it is discussed, so take care if this language is difficult for you. I've decided to wait until all three parts were ready so that I could post them all at once. Thank you all for your patience.

XIV Part I

"April is the cruelest month, // breeding lilacs out of the dead land, // mixing memory and desire, // stirring dull roots with spring rain." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

Gibbs sat down across from his SFA, careful not to touch him, to startle him from his thoughts. The gentle rocking of the train didn't seem to disturb him, or the hum of voices. No, Tony was miles away, his eyes on the streaks of cold rain lashing at the windows, his mind set squarely on his past. Or the near future. Neither of which would be doing him any good. "Hey."

Tony blinked, drawing away from whatever memory had captured him. He reached for the steaming cup Gibbs held out. "Thanks, Boss."

"Figured yours would be cold by now." Gibbs' own extra-large coffee was already half-empty.

Tony set the new cup inside the empty one he'd been clutching. "I still can't believe you're coming with me."

Gibbs grunted. "You kidding? Getting the chance to stand eye to eye with him? Wouldn't miss it."

Tony chuckled around a mouthful of whipped chocolate and marshmallow. "As long as you remember not to break his jaw as soon as he opens the door."

Gibbs knew his eyes above his cup were icy. "No promises."

"Gibbs."

Leaning forward, Gibbs propped his elbows on his knees and stared at his teammate. His friend. Even now, since the changes that had leaped out of the dark at them, since their working friendship had turned into something deeper, Tony didn't understand. Didn't understand the level of trust and confidence Gibbs had placed in the young man. Or what he might be willing to do for him.

An inner voice growled at him. 'Yeah? You think?' Gibbs wasn't big on talking about his feelings. Giving the verbal cues that other people seemed to understand from birth. Small talk. Affirmations - his mouth twitched into a smile at the memory of one of Rachel Cranston's experiments with 'self-affirmations.' He was pretty sure that one never made it beyond a couple of raised eyebrows and a squint.

Gibbs had shared his most precious possessions with Tony. Shannon. Kelly. His wife's smiles. His daughter's tears. Memories he'd guarded, locked down tight without a chink of light showing through his armor, for years. Decades. Those were the words he'd given to Tony, handed to him like a life
preserver on a sturdy rope, hoping to anchor the both of them.

Still Tony didn't seem to understand what that meant.

"I know you think of me as some kind of stoic, DiNozzo, like one of those monks who never feels the cold and sleeps on beds of nails. But, by this time, you should get it."

Tony snorted, jaw locking up for a moment while he peered into the cup of hot chocolate, watching the steam curl around the edges. "I get it." He murmured.

"Don't think you do," Gibbs replied firmly. "And that's not on you. You think you're the only one with a lot to regret in this life?" He huffed what might have been a laugh. "I wish - well, I could wish for a lot of things -" His girls. It would always be his girls back with him. Safe. Happy. Tony's silent nod told Gibbs he understood. "Anyway, one thing I'd wish for was that I'd acted differently. That night at my house."

Tony didn't look up. Kept staring into the damn cup. Gibbs knew the man was still struggling, dealing with all the crap dredged up by White, by whatever had happened in that cabin and the fact that he would never know. By Cranston's insistence on tearing away a lot of the scar tissue Tony had managed to build up over the years so that some real healing could occur. A few nights back, lugging that damned cardboard box, Tony had taken to tearing open the scars himself in Gibbs' own kitchen. And Gibbs had screwed it up.

Gibbs' gut churned. He hadn't been able to eat much since then. Since Tony had laid out the curated reminders of his personal hell. Gibbs had never felt more helpless and less like the competent, confident leader he imagined himself to be. Tony's box of memories had stolen his breath, torn away any of that careful distance he was still holding onto. The Tony DiNozzo that had stood in his kitchen was poised at the brink of darkness, one foot inching into the light while the past loomed up behind him like a living thing, black and ugly and eager to swallow him. Gibbs would never forget that look in Tony's eyes - the glimmer of hope. Of faith. Of fear. Looking at Gibbs like he was some kind of savior. The weight of that responsibility had nearly sent Gibbs to his knees.

He'd listened while Tony talked about his mom, the silver-backed brush like something out of one of his black and white movies. The light from Gibbs' single bulb over the sink danced along the design, glimmering. This kind of heartache Gibbs understood. A little boy would miss his mom, Jethro sure did. But he'd had mostly good memories of his mother. Tony's were all tangled up with despair and shock and the denial of a child's grief at her passing.

And then it got worse. The scotch bottle. The glass. Gibbs could see the heavy crystal break against vulnerable skin. Smell the blood. See the boy inside the man in front of him, bruised and frightened and betrayed. At the vivid reminders of the senior DiNozzo's cruelty and violence and neglect Gibbs thought he'd upchuck his dinner all over the floor. He'd managed to stay quiet, muscles tensed to rein in his anger, his feral rage at what that man had done to his own son. At least until Tony put his usual DiNozzo spin on that trip to Hawaii. Made a joke out of his abandonment. His fear. Gibbs couldn't keep it in. Had to say something.

Trust DiNozzo to put him in his place. The emotions, the black rage and hurt and empathy for this
young man in front of him - those were Gibbs' problems. Cranston had warned him. Warned him not to make Tony's recovery about him, about his reactions or expectations. Not to measure Tony by Gibbs' ideas about loss. About grief. About payback and vengeance and righteous retribution. Gibbs had tracked Hernandez to a desert road in Mexico and put a bullet in his head. But Tony - Tony was not like him. He was no killer. No bastard who thought his pain justified his actions. Tony never sought to make others pay; he bled himself dry instead. And if he needed to share the ugly wounds of his past, to talk about each and every horror from his life in order to cauterize those deep, oozing gashes, then Gibbs would by God stand there and take it.

He'd tightened down his surging gut, spread a bland expression across his face, and clenched his teeth, determined to listen. To let Tony do this in his own timing and at his own pace.

And then the very next item nearly broke him.

Gibbs' parents hadn't really gone to church, not in any kind of faithful, intentional way. Easter. Christmas. Someone's christening. A wedding or a funeral. They'd always believed in God. A higher power, he guessed they might call it. Someone who was watching, ready to step in and put you in your place if you got too big for your britches. Except - that never seemed to happen. Not like Jethro thought it should. So he took to stepping in himself.

Shannon was raised Catholic, with all the little rites and rituals. She never doubted. Never. In life, in death, when she was faced with a friend's suffering or her own father's lingering death, she'd touch the crucifix she wore around her neck and bow her head. Gibbs swallowed another mouthful of Amtrak's idea of coffee with his sorrow. Kate was a little like that. Less compassionate, more insistent, but Gibbs saw the same kind of faith behind Kate's eyes. It was familiar.

So was the scapular Tony had lifted up from Gibbs' table. The flat black ribbon would lay over a boy's shoulders, connecting front and back to the small, rectangular images that were meant to guard his heart. Tony's was small and simple, not the ornate silk of a rich kid's, the images hand-painted or intricately embroidered. This was the plain scapular given to a poor man's son. Fraying at the edges. The images of Jesus and Mary, one on either end, were stamped on canvas edged with uneven stitches. Good Catholic boys wore these under their clothes. Under their cotton t-shirts, against their tender skin. Good Catholic boys who were altar boys. Gibbs chest had tightened, squeezing, his heart thumping out of rhythm. No. He remembered thinking only that. One word. No.

Tony had seen it. Seen the images seared into Gibbs' inner eye. "No." He'd echoed Gibbs' inner cry. "It's not what you think. I never met a priest who was anything like that. Like the stereotype." He shook his head, angry. "I was an altar boy. I changed clothes in the rectory. And no one even looked at me twice let alone touched me." Tony's jaw was clenched. "They were just men. Men who'd made a commitment to God. That didn't mean they were all good or all perfect, just like men who don't wear the cloth. But they weren't perverts."

When he could breathe again, Gibbs had nodded, listening.

"This belonged to my best friend, Patrick. When I was eleven I went to St. Benedict's School for Boys - the first of many boarding schools dear old dad tried out. And, I've gotta admit, I loved it there, Gibbs," Tony had continued with a smile. He'd made friends - of course. DiNozzo couldn't help making friends wherever he went. Living with other boys his age was probably like giving a plant water after a long drought.

"Patrick was a scholarship kid. His parents didn't have the money for private school, but the Diocese coughed up a couple of kids' tuitions every year and Patrick was one of them. He was my age, slept in the lower bunk in my dorm. We got to be friends. Especially over the holidays when we didn't get hustled off home like a lot of the other boys. We spent the first winter break playing football and
Tony's eyes had darkened. "It was right before that first summer when I learned about Patrick's family. After a lot of the other kids had cleared out, he came to me. Sat on his bunk and watched me pack. He had this in his hand." Tony's fingers had smoothed down the fraying ribbons. "He asked me if I really believed in God. Told me he wasn't sure. That God, if He was good, would have done something. Kept him safe. I didn't understand. Joked about it." Tony's hand closed gently over the image of Jesus.

"His father beat him. Hurt him. Hurt his mom and his sister. I remembered the bruises I'd seen those first few days of school in the fall. The pink skin across Patrick's lower back. I was shocked. Speechless. I remember stammering out something about my dad sending me to the hospital for stitches. Patrick lurched up and hugged me, crying. He knew I'd understand."

"But I was just a kid, Gibbs. I didn't know what to do."

As an adult, Gibbs had heard a lot of stories. Seen a lot of case files. He'd seen the wounds on children's backs, the marks of hands that should be loving on their arms, their faces. He'd pursued the abusers as far as he could - farther than the law would allow sometimes. A trained agent, a professional, he knew exactly what to do when a child was in danger. He couldn't imagine being confronted with it as a boy.

"So I took Patrick to the Headmaster. He was a layman. A little more approachable than the priests. He taught math and he was our pee-wee football coach. I trusted him." The bleak bitterness in Tony's voice had filled in the blanks. "He listened to Patrick's stutters, sat down and dried his tears. I was so sure he was going to do something, to fix it all. And," Tony's laugh was like fingernails on a chalkboard, "I suppose he did, in a way."

"It turns out, when you're a scholarship kid, any kind of 'scandal' is too much. The Headmaster sent us down to the cafeteria with a note so we could get some ice cream. I remember how quiet Patrick was - but it was a better kind of quiet. Like something horrible had happened but it was over now, and now he could rest. Smile a little. Goof around with me." Tony's forehead crumpled, confusion wiping away the easy smile. "And then, about an hour later, the Headmaster walked in and I felt Patrick stiffen beside me. There was a man with the Headmaster. Patrick's father. He'd called Patrick's father."

The green eyes had been full of pain as they looked back at Gibbs. "He'd called the father, Gibbs. Not Children's Services. Not the cops. And even though I knew - I knew - that man had told some kind of tale of woe and repentance, how his son was clumsy or disobedient or maybe even that someone else had hurt him," Tony's hands were fists around the slight cords of the religious medal, "I saw the cold rage behind those eyes. And I knew Patrick was going to be punished."

"And so did Patrick."

In that moment, Tony realized what he was doing to the scapular. He'd unclenched his hands, smoothed the ribbons straight, and touched one finger to the image of Jesus and then of Mary. "He just handed this to me. Stared into my eyes. 'I don't think I want this anymore,' that's what he said. And I never saw him again."

Tony hadn't said anything for a while. Had made one aborted move towards the trash can and then stopped. Finally, Gibbs had stepped forward and folded the scapular into his friend's hands. "I think..."
you need to keep this one. Don't you? Someone should remember."

Tears shimmered in Tony's eyes. His throat worked. A nod. One single nod told Gibbs he'd maybe
said the right thing for once.

The scapular disappeared into Tony's pocket, the move designed to hide his face for a minute until he
could pull himself together. Gibbs stayed close, knowing there would be more to the story.

"Yeah, the Headmaster - God, I don't even remember his name - I made him regret it. You think I
can annoy Probie in the bullpen? You've never seen Tony DiNozzo with a bug up his ass
determined to make someone's every moment a living hell. I told everyone - all the other boys, the
priests, other kids' parents, kept yapping about it until they threw me out."

Gibbs had reached up to tap the back of Tony's head, pride in that little boy quieting his gut.
"Attaboy, DiNozzo." He let his hand linger for a second before he'd pulled away. "That was why
you became a cop?" Gibbs had prompted, wanting to tear Tony away from his friend's pain, from his
own helplessness, and from the remembered betrayal of that Headmaster so many years ago.

Tony'd shrugged, his smile wistful. "Maybe it sowed a seed. But I was still a little boy, Gibbs. I
wanted to play football. To be an astronaut or a race car driver." He'd picked up the model car. "You
recognize this?"

Relieved for the distraction, Gibbs had taken a closer look at the plastic model. Corvette. Sleek.
Looked a lot like - "Is that your car?"

"Yeah," Tony had smiled. "1991 ZR1. No matter what you say, Boss," he'd stuck up one finger,
"even with the fiberglass body, it's a classic."

Something about Tony's easy smile sent a chill up Gibbs' back. His agent still had the car. Talked
about it like it was a woman. Babied it, made sure to park it in the NCIS garage when they were
going to be out of town, bought a high-end car cover for it to protect it from the elements, and waxed
it nearly every weekend. Gibbs had heard more than enough about the car on road trips and
stakeouts over the years. What could make Tony set a model of that with the rest of these ugly
memories?

Tony held the plastic model up to the light. "Bet you didn't know that I stole a car once."
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Second part of Chapter XIV - the same warnings apply.
This chapter deals with some of Tony's past revealed in the episodes "Cadence" and "Rekindled."

XIV Part II

"April is the cruelest month, // breeding lilacs out of the dead land, // mixing memory and desire, // stirring dull roots with spring rain." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

"Bet you didn't know that I stole a car once."

Gibbs' eyebrows had lifted high. "Nope. Didn't know that." It wasn't in Tony's record - not even an expunged juvenile offense had shown up in Gibbs' background check.

"It wasn't exactly a Corvette. A 1972 Citroen. Ugly, cranky thing. Funny, nobody ever made a model of that hulk. Okay, I guess I should say I tried to steal it. I was not, as you might imagine, an experienced delinquent, no matter what my father might say. And hot-wiring a car is not as easy as Magnum always made it look on television."

He'd held the sports car lightly, twisting it back and forth. "Remington Military Academy. It was the boarding school of last resort. Sixth one in four years."

Gibbs had winced.

His voice light and easy, Tony went on. "I was a very angry boy, Gibbs. Prickly. I spoke my mind to whoever was listening. Because, after Patrick, after all of this," his cool manner dissolved into brittle resentment as he waved his hand over the leftovers of his past, "after everything that had happened it never took me long to decide the current administration of whatever school I'd been carted off to didn't deserve my respect or my obedience. So, RMA became my new home."

Gibbs had tucked away that truth, measuring it with Tony's work history and his time at NCIS. A flicker of dread caught him by surprise. This could be part of Tony's good-bye. He'd cleared his throat, ready to step in, to say something, but Tony had already been talking.

"Remington had a reputation, apparently. I always thought of it as the Statue of Liberty of prep schools: 'Give us your tired, your poor, your juvies, your problem children with chips on their shoulders, and we'll teach them to be grateful. Or else.'"

"Not the kind of place I imagined your dad would ever choose." Gibbs had always wondered how a kid like DiNozzo had ended up at a military school. Why a father like DiNozzo Senior would ship his son off there rather than a place that turned out upper crust, arrogant, old boys' network useless types like himself.

"Like I said, last resort." Tony had sighed. "I'm sure he figured that, after a couple of weeks of getting up before dawn, forced march hikes, and spit and polish, I'd do anything if he'd get me out of there. Even follow him into the business. That first night, he nearly got his wish." His smile had
flickered, turning on and off like a car's high-beams in the rearview mirror. "And I didn't know the half of it."

Tony'd pulled up a kitchen chair and perched on the edge of it. Gibbs hadn't known if it was because it was going to be a long story or if the younger man just didn't have any more energy left to spare for standing. The stories - the memories - might have lanced some deep well of pain, let the festering pus of regret and bitterness out so Tony could heal, but they also seemed to drain away his will. His resolve. Head hanging, he'd spoken to the little car in his hands rather than to Gibbs.

"Coach caught me. Shook his head all disappointed. I'd only met the guy that day, but already I didn't want that, didn't want to disappoint him." Tony had chuckled. "And then he flipped down the visor and told me he always left the keys in the car and, if I really wanted to run, to please not screw up the electrical system - it was buggy enough."

That had surprised a laugh out of Gibbs. "Sounds like a good man."

"Yeah, a good man," Tony echoed, eyes hooded. "He protected me. Protected a little shit that did nothing but snarl and growl and make his life miserable."

Gibbs pulled another chair around to straddle, his hands tightening across the back. "Protected you from what?"

"Honor Corps. A bunch of upper class bullies who ruled that school from behind the scenes. Who took it upon themselves to 'discipline' students who were out of line. And, believe me, Gibbs, I was out of line almost all the damned time for the first few months."

Gibbs had rubbed his hand across his mouth and wished for that bourbon again.

"Coach Tanner walked in on them the first time. I was practicing in the gym after hours. It was five on one, and I was looking at a fairly substantial beat-down when he strolled in. Sent them on their way. Told me he was dismantling that group of assholes. Of course, he couldn't be everywhere and the Honor Corps didn't like having their noses rubbed in their crap. So they bided their time. Waited. All the time their righteous indignation growing into near murderous rage. After all, they couldn't have a black coach and a newbie smart-ass destroy their generations-long secret club, could they?"

"I never told Coach about the … let's just call it hazing. I was throwing myself headlong into sports, into physical conditioning. Bruises and sprains and headaches that made you need to vomit were easy to overlook. What was a black eye or a split lip or boot marks on my back?" He made a rude sound, blowing it off. "And I knew Coach was working on it. I saw that other kids were starting to come out of their shells, felt more confident. Let the jerks concentrate on me, I figured. I could take it."

Before Gibbs could bark out the obvious, that Tony shouldn't have to take it, his SFA was looking up at him. Grinning. "And, you're going to be surprised, Gibbs, but I actually started to like it there. Me. In a military school. Crazy, huh?"

That grin hadn't hidden the undertone of self-mocking. "Not surprised," Gibbs had replied.

"Right, well, it's not exactly like boot camp. Or being a Marine."

"Hey," Gibbs had stopped him. He knew all about pride. The straight-backed, well-earned arrogance of Marines. They were the best and held everyone around them to an unreachable standard. At least Gibbs always had. Semper Fi wasn't only about being faithful to the men and women serving with you, it was also about holding the line and making it damned near impossible for those outside the
Corps to measure up. And that kind of pride often came with the same look-down-your-nose superiority Tony'd found at RMA. "You've made a fine Marine, DiNozzo."

That one statement, one simple sentence had Tony dropping his jaw and staring in confusion. So Gibbs had leaned in and made sure his friend heard him. "You would have made a good Marine. I'd have been proud to serve with you. Hell, what do you think this is? Working together at NCIS?"

Tony had shaken his head, frowning. "It's not the same. I know that."

"You look after your team. And, hearing this," Gibbs shoved one hand towards the model car, "I know you always have. You stand up to people, put yourself in the line of fire." Gibbs remembered another story, one that Tony didn't seem to have a little plastic token for. "You run into the fire, Tony. That's what a Marine does. That's why I've always trusted you to have my six."

The color had drained from Tony's face, his eyes wide. "But I didn't - I - I failed, Gibbs. Every time. Every time I tried to do the right thing, I failed. I mean, look at this -" he surged to his feet, tossing the car onto the table. "Look at all this! It's stupid to hang on to this stuff. To store up all this pain, a little kid's grief for his mom, or a couple of bruises. That's not what men do! What Marines do! Men move on, they hold it together. They don't need therapy just because they had a rough life. Just because they couldn't count on -" Tony's eyes were wild, one hand scraping through his hair. "Just because a couple of dirtbags - just because Jeffrey Fucking White -" his jaw snapped shut.

"Just because you were assaulted? Because a murderer drugged you and then put his hands on you?" Gibbs stood opposite his friend, his voice hardening to steel. "Real men should just get over it? Is that what you tell assault victims, DiNozzo? Suck it up? Move on?" Gibbs pressed closer, chest to chest and eye to eye. "That what a rape victim should do? A little boy used by his father as a punching bag? Should Patrick have just gotten over it?"

"No! I couldn't save Patrick! He, he was just a kid, Gibbs!"

Gibbs grabbed Tony's shoulders, fingers digging, holding him hard against the tremors that were shaking his body. "And so were you," he whispered. "So were you."

"Not always. I wasn't a kid at RMA. Or at OSU."

Gibbs wanted to argue. To yell. To insist that, yes, yes he was. A sixteen-year-old was a kid. So was a twenty-year-old. Even in the Marines. From Gibbs' distance, Tony was still a damned kid at thirty-two. But, then again, maybe he'd stopped being a kid right around the time his mother died. Or his dad laid his hands on him for the first time. Or when he realized that he couldn't trust anyone, any adult, not to betray him.

"You want to tell me about OSU?" That was safe. Gibbs knew that story. The story of a young man's bright future, a career that had nothing to do with his father's money or expectations and everything to do with his own talents and hard-won skills. Gibbs had known Tony's record at OSU before the young man came to work for him. He'd done his homework, checked out the kid who'd moved from Peoria to Philadelphia to Baltimore, tucking a gold shield and far too much experience for his age under his belt. That cracked mug represented how Tony thought of himself, polished and perfect until the championship game, an awkward tackle, and a broken leg dissolved all of his hopes.

Tony still had that feral gleam in his eye. "It's not about football," he snarled as if he could read Gibbs' mind. "Poor little Tony broke his leg and ruined his pro-ball career. No, Gibbs. Not even someone as shallow as I am is going to put that on the same level as child abuse. As my mother dying."
Frowning, Gibbs backed off. It might not be about a broken leg, but having your hopes shattered like that couldn't have been easy - for anyone. Tony was about as shallow as the Pacific Ocean, but Gibbs recognized that the man was too deep inside his own head right now to listen to any arguments. "You want to tell me what it is about?"

"Well, it's not a secret, is it? Not to you." He snatched the coffee mug from the table and shuffled it from hand to hand. "That background check you did on me back in Baltimore must have been pretty good. I was never identified in the news. I'd ask you how you found out about the fire, but I know you like to keep your cards close to the vest. Just another example of the superhuman Agent Gibbs. He knows all and sees all."

Gibbs had shifted back a few steps, too concerned to sit, too worried about Tony's hair-trigger to get any closer. The bitterness coming out of his friend's mouth was a front, a smokescreen. He'd been wrong. Tony did have a memento that reminded him of the Baltimore fire. The college student taking a walk before the big game. The apartment building going up in flames, and a brother and sister along with it.

His SFA was clever. A master of illusion. No wonder he was so talented at undercover work. No one, no single person looking over the items he'd spread across the table would have imagined that OSU mug represented not the ruin of a promising sports career in Ohio, but one night's tragedy hundreds of miles away. "You saved that boy, DiNozzo. You ran into that fire and you saved a child who would have died."

Tony put a hand across his eyes as if pushing tears back inside where no one would see them. "I left his sister to die."

Holy hell. Gibbs had bit down on a growl and linked his hands behind his neck to keep from shaking the man. "You did what no one else did. You got the boy out. Even a trained firefighter couldn't have done better."

"Jason. His name is Jason." The words trickled out while Tony hid his eyes behind his hand. "He blamed me. Still does."

"You've talked to him?"

Tony had shrugged again.

Of course he did. Trust DiNozzo to go looking for the lemon juice and salt to rub into his own wounds. Gibbs had pressed his lips together, breathing in and out, controlling the anger. He hadn't been mad at Tony. Not really. Mad at the world, maybe. Fate. For putting a college kid in that situation. Mad at the boy who Tony had risked his life to save.

"Who thinks he's superhuman now?" Gibbs asked. "Give yourself a damned break, DiNozzo."

That had dragged the hand from Tony's face. "What?"

"You couldn't save everyone, so you should be damned for saving one? Sounds like pride talking. Egotism, like Ducky calls it." Gibbs had been done listening to his teammate tear himself down. Maybe Cranston thought all this was a good idea - Gibbs had his doubts.

Long fingers had caressed the clay mug. Traced the crack in the handle. "Maybe you're right. Sometimes I think I even believe it."

"Good," Gibbs had replied. Tired. Frustrated. "Now. Throw that damned mug away. Stop punishing yourself for not being able to save that little girl."
Tony's eyes had softened when he looked back at Gibbs. His words like an apology. "Sure, Boss. As soon as you stop punishing yourself for not being able to save Shannon and Kelly."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This is the third part of Chapter XIV, dealing with the same difficult issues.

XIV Part III

"April is the cruelest month, // breeding lilacs out of the dead land, // mixing memory and desire, // stirring dull roots with spring rain." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

The train slowed, lurching around a bend, and Gibbs stiffened his muscles, bracing himself. He frowned up as a man's voice made thin and exotic by the speaker system announced the Baltimore station. Across from him, Tony didn't react, still staring into his cup. He let his body ride out the train's abrupt movements, swaying gently back and forth, absorbing the changes. Gibbs narrowed his eyes, watching.

He and DiNozzo were similar in many ways. Ducky had mentioned it more than once. So did Morrow. Even Fornell. Driven. Intuitive. Born to the job and dedicated to it beyond reason. They were both stubborn, bent a little towards obsession when a particular case got out of control. But, down deep, at their centers, they were very different. Gibbs pressed himself - his needs, his requirements - on the world around him and expected it to change. He demanded it. And if it pushed back, well it had better have a damned good reason. Tony's first reaction to stress, to pressure, was to adapt. To change himself rather than expect the world to change. If only for a moment. Like a costume he put on for a particular conversation, or an attitude he adopted to get a witness to talk. If Gibbs was a tank, barreling through life, then Tony was quicksilver, filling in the gaps and letting the space around him define his shape.

Their similarities made Gibbs accept DiNozzo for a partner, allowed the Marine a grudging respect for the cop's abilities. But it was their differences that made the MCRT work. That closed cases. That built the team.


Tony didn't move.

Gibbs tapped one closed fist on Tony's knee, trying to draw his eyes from that cold cup of hot chocolate. "Did you hear me, DiNozzo?"

Tony's shoulders were hunched up around his ears. "You're a bastard. Yeah, I heard you, Boss."

It was an automatic response honed to appease the senior agent when he was at his worst. Repeat Gibbs' words. Acknowledge them. That's not what Gibbs was hoping for today. "It means I react. Come out swinging. Even when I'm hurting friends by doing it." He shrugged and shook his head. "Not an excuse. An apology."

That made Tony look up. An apology from Leroy Jethro Gibbs? Hell, it was a wonder the earth didn't slip off its axis. Gibbs leaned closer.

"When I said that I wished I'd acted differently that night at my house, I meant it. I screwed up."
Screwed it all up. Shattered the moment. Slammed Tony back behind his barriers so that no chink, no gap was visible. Tony'd done a lot of work on himself, let Gibbs in, let Cranston help. He'd shared what happened in that cabin with White and Danielson. Brought out his box of pain and let Gibbs rummage through it. But let Tony bring up Gibbs' past, speak his wife or daughter's names, approach the guilt that twisted in Gibbs' gut and Gibbs turned on him. "I'm sorry, Tony."

That night in the kitchen, Gibbs' fist had come down hard on the wooden table before he'd realized what he was doing. The impact had sent the rest of Tony's mementos flying. The model car skittered to the edge, one tire hanging over. The book leaped up, pages ruffling, and came back down, flat, smacking against the wood with a loud bang. The black glass horse rushed towards the wall head first, cracking down its length before smashing into pieces on the floor.

Whatever kind of healing had been taking place in Gibbs' small kitchen had burst, just like Tony's keepsake. The air had taken on the feel of a coming storm - compressed, muffling sound and constricting Gibbs' chest like iron bands were wrapped around it. He'd wanted to shout. To throw a punch. To make Tony eat his damned words. He'd even stepped towards Tony, muscles clenched, knuckles white.

It had been the acceptance in DiNozzo's eyes that had drained away Gibbs' rage. Tony had been poised on the balls of his feet, hands limp at his sides. Ready. Waiting for someone else he'd respected, admired, someone in authority over him to turn on him. To betray him. To hurt him.

Gibbs had backed off. Stepped away. But Tony hadn't moved. Closed-off, wary, he'd tracked Gibbs' movements. Watched him get the broom and dustpan through emotionless green eyes. He might not have withdrawn entirely, but they'd taken a few leaps backwards in their friendship that night. Maybe no one had been to blame, not when you considered the hurt they each lived with, harbored and protected deep inside. Then again, maybe the blame was pretty damned easy to place.

"It was my fault. Nobody asked me to share them with you. Not you, that's for sure."

"Gibbs."

Gibbs snorted. "See? You're still trying to keep me from talking about them. Just like that day at the coffee shop with Cranston." He sat back against the hard-cushioned train seat. "I wanted to. Needed to. It was good to tell someone else about them. To say their names. Shannon. And Kelly." He hadn't spoken their names out loud for a long time. 'My girls,' he said to Cranston. 'My wife.' 'My daughter.' As if they had no existence apart from him. From his grief.

Tony stared at him, his eyes wide and wet, sorrow for Gibbs, for his losses, for his pain painted across his features, oozing out of his skin.

Overwhelmed, Gibbs bent his neck, breathing slowly, letting their silence wrap around him. Even with the other travelers speaking quietly right across the aisle, people moving, carrying luggage, and the sounds of the station coming in through the window, he and Tony were alone. Connected. This silence was warm, accepting. A shared grief. Not like that night in his kitchen. Never like that again, Gibbs hoped.

After Gibbs' outburst, they'd cleaned up, communicating in aborted movements and sideways glances. Gibbs had been careful with the glass fragments, lifting the biggest pieces from the floor to the table, sifting out what others could be salvaged from the powdery mess on his floor. As angry as Gibbs had been - at himself, at Tony for turning the tables on him - he'd known that ugly black horse had represented a terrible memory. Something Tony had been saving for last. He'd felt it when Tony had almost dropped it, hauling it out of the box, as if the younger man's fingers burned just to touch it. Tony had avoided looking at the pile of shards. He'd taken the books, the car, plopped them back
into the box. Slid it across the floor with his foot to lodge behind Gibbs' table. And then, without a word, he'd gone home, their confrontation swirling around him like a black cloud. Gibbs had grabbed his bourbon and gotten half shit-faced in his basement. More than half.

When Gibbs dragged himself up from the basement the next morning, grateful for the pre-set automatic coffee maker Fornell had given him for Christmas, the presence of that box had sent up a flicker of hope behind his pain. Tony'd left it there. Right there. If his teammate had taken the box, swept the broken glass into it and hauled it back home it would have been an obvious rejection. A way of erasing himself - and his memories - from Gibbs' life. This felt like the younger man had left the door open. Just a crack. An invitation. Gibbs had stuck his head under the water faucet in his kitchen sink, chugged his first cup of coffee, and resolved to step through that crack. Apologize. Get Tony to tell him the rest of his story.

And then his phone had rung and the Cooper case had him twisting in knots to find a suicidal young petty officer before it was too late.

A scant hour later, Gibbs had stalked out of the elevator to find DiNozzo already at his desk, his waxy skin and the deep purple shadows under his eyes sure signs of his own restless night. Gibbs had caught himself before he turned the corner into his team's work area, shoving down his immediate reaction, the resentment that tried to crawl up from his gut. Resentment for this distraction from the case, for the bad blood lingering between them, for the PTSD that kept his best investigator out of the field. Teeth clenched against his innate stupidity, Gibbs had swallowed down any barking challenges that wanted out and made himself come to a gentle halt in front of Tony's desk.

"Don't know if I can fix it," he'd begun.

Tony's mask was fixed on 'pleasant' and 'ignorant.' "Fix what, Boss?"

"The horse. I'm good with wood. Crap at everything else." Gibbs had been hoping that Tony would hear the underlying admission in those few words.

The insincere smile had come and gone on his SFA's face. "It was pretty ugly to begin with. Don't think it could get much worse."

Gibbs had taken that for an olive branch, another crack in DiNozzo's door. "Doesn't mean I won't try. Still one story I haven't heard."

His teammate's gaze had sharpened, searching Gibbs'. "Yeah?" The word had been barely audible, more a puff of air, a wary invitation.

"Yeah." Gibbs had nodded. "I don't like to leave things half-done. Do you?"

Something swam behind Tony's eyes, something dark. "Guess not."

That had been it. It hadn't fixed everything. Or anything. Just kept that door from slamming in Gibbs' face. They'd been busy for the next 16 hours, tracking down the sole, guilt-wracked survivor of his unit's fatal action. McGee had been the hero, tracing the man's movements through his electronics. His 'digital footprints,' Abby had explained. They'd gotten to him in time. In time to get him to the hospital, get the drugs out of his system before they killed him. The look on the man's mother's face had been all the thanks Gibbs would ever need.

He'd sent the team home for a well-earned rest. Finished his reports. Was just about to turn off his desk lamp when Morrow had appeared in the small pool of light.

"Agent DiNozzo has asked for the next three days off."
Gibbs had been thrown back to that black thing lurking behind DiNozzo's professional mask. The unspoken story he'd never had a chance to hear. He'd stood, facing the director across his desk. He couldn't let Tony run. Hide. Not now. "Better put me in for the same then."

Morrow had nodded. "Already have."

He'd only stopped by his house to change. Take a shower. Grab some food. He'd wanted to get to DiNozzo before the guy took off. Skipped town to face whatever that darkness had churned up in his soul. Whatever 'half-done' thing that wouldn't keep. Gibbs only made it back as far as that pile of glass on his kitchen table. It had a friend. An envelope. Stark. White. It wasn't his name that had been scrawled across the front - just the words, "If you really want to know."

Gibbs hadn't bothered to take off his coat. He'd just fallen into a chair, ripped open the envelope and started to read.

"Ever see a movie called "The 300 Spartans?" Ralph Richardson, Richard Egan, 1962. Diane Baker played Elias, the love interest, of course. Had to have a love interest. It was about the Battle of Thermopylae. You know the story. Three hundred stalwart Spartans hold the only pass through the mountains against thousands of Persian invaders. But, what they don't know, is that a greedy little goatherd, Ephialtes, knows another route. A twisty, turny path over the mountains. And, since he's been rejected by both the Spartans and the beautiful Elias, he decides to betray his people and lead the Persians in through that path so they can ambush the valiant warriors. It wasn't a bad film. And Kieron Moore was a great bad guy in Ephialtes. I liked to play pretend that battle when I was little kid. Pretend to be King Leonides, determined to save his people. Get the better of that little shit Ephialtes."

"Anyway, the Greek people never forgave him. They got the last laugh, though. They turned the traitor's name into a word that meant 'nightmare.' Nightmare. That's what that undercover job in Philadelphia ended up as, a nightmare. So I put the two together and came up with that ugly black glass horse, that 'nightmare' to remember it by. Not that I could ever forget."

"But I'm getting ahead of myself."

"I put my heart and soul into that Macaluso job. Turned myself inside out. Became Antonio DeMarco, Diplomat to the Family. I covered myself with filth and slime and slid right into the biggest, dirtiest smuggling operation in the east; became one of the family. A paisano. I drank. I fucked around. I took shots of coke and speed. I even slapped a girl once. Watched the brothers pass her around. And then afterwards I threw up until my throat bled."

"Bryce Forman. He was my handler. Experienced cop. Made his bones undercover back in the day, just like me, so he knew the pitfalls. The dangers. Talked me through the worst of it, got me to go back in when I wanted so badly to be done, to be out. He'd taken a bullet in the hip six months before, was looking at a few more months of rehab before he got his shield back. Got to go out into the field again. I could see he was still in a lot of pain sometimes. Of course, stupid me, I felt sorry for the guy."

"Story of my life. I wanted to make him proud. Make him see that I was good. That Tony DiNozzo could take it, could get the job done. And every little 'attaboy,' every single time he sat me down and talked me through the shakes, or he reminded me of how important the job was, how these people needed to be taken down, put away for good, well, I fell deeper. Believed a little easier that he was always going to be there for me. That, for once, relying on someone wasn't going to leave me twisting in the wind."

"We all know how that ended, don't we?"
“The brothers came for me that night, that last night. All smiles and back-slaps and laughter. But they knew. They already knew. And after - after they'd taken me to that basement. Stripped me. Chained me up to the pipe and started in on me - after, they finally told me how they knew.”

“It had been Bryce. Turned out that pain in his hip had turned him into an addict. Pain meds. Narcotics. And when he'd run out of prescriptions and his doctor wouldn't give him any more, he turned to the streets. Not to the Macalusos, no, of course not. But, hey, all the families know each other's business. They gossip like middle-school girls. And once a cop was in their pocket, owing them money, well, they bragged. And once Bryce was out of money, he started selling favors.”

“The last one he sold was me. And the Macalusos wanted to make sure he got his money's worth.”

“They set me up over a drain in the floor, a cold water pipe over my head. Let that run for a couple of hours. To soften me up, they said. They'd take turns with beatings. Used a soft cotton sack filled with something, I never knew what, at first. So they could make it last without breaking any of my ribs. Cigarettes were next. And a thin blade, so sharp that it burned. The whole time they'd fondle me. Squeeze my balls. Tell me that, before they were done, they'd make sure to cut them off slow. Let me see them. Maybe feed them to me. Freddy, he liked to burn me there. Thought it was funny. Hilarious.”

Gibbs' hands were shaking too hard to hold the paper still. Or maybe it was the water in his eyes that blurred the words to nonsense. But he couldn't stop - he wouldn't stop reading. Listening. He could hear Tony's voice in his ear, as if his SFA was standing just behind his right shoulder, where he should be. He held the pages with both hands, forced himself to hold on, to blink away the hot, furious tears. To go on.

“It lasted about 23 hours. I learned that later, in the hospital. Felt like about three weeks to me at the time. It never stopped. They tag-teamed. One of the brothers would rest when he got tired, got tired of punching me. Prodding me. Touching me. Broke my jaw. Ribs. Collar bone. Freddy was more inventive. He liked to slide things under my nails. Tear off my toenails. Went to town on my knee with a tiny little ballpeen hammer. Towards the end he was practically foaming at the mouth, and even his brother tried to talk him down. Talk him out of - you know. Shoving things up my ass.”

“I guess they'd given Bryce some good shit. Something that kept him in Lala Land for that long. I'll give him this, as soon as he crawled down from his high, he sent in the cavalry. Told them my cover was blown. Turned over every rock to find me. And they did. And I was still alive and, you'll like this Gibbs, I was so grateful to see a friendly face, any face that didn't belong to one of the brothers, that I didn't say a word.”

"I never said a word."

“So that's the story of that ugly glass horse. My nightmare. Bryce Forman resigned while I was still recovering, getting patched up in the hospital and then in ole Doc Camber's place in the mountains. The Macalusos' testimony was restricted. The Courtroom was closed. For my benefit, of course. So no one would find out what they did to me. So I could keep some dignity, keep my job. Keep my face out of the press and get on with my life. And get on I did. I learned something from Camber. I learned to cope. To recognize that I was a survivor. I'd survived the Macalusos. I'd even survived Bryce Forman. My parents. School. I gathered up my mementos and, whenever it got too bad, whenever I thought I was losing it, I'd relive those days. And I'd remember that I was a survivor.”

“Doctor Cranston doesn't like them. She thinks I'm like a cutter, that I open old wounds, let myself bleed over old hurts so the new ones don't feel as bad. I'm starting to like her, Boss. Starting to think she knows what she's talking about. She said that facing my past shouldn't always be about dwelling on the pain. That I could have good memories, too. But only if I stop. Get rid of the things like that
"But there's something I need to do first. Before I can let you throw these pitiful glass shards away. Someone I need to talk to. So I'm taking some time off. Heading up north to get some answers. Have I ever told you how much I hate to fly? So, I'm taking a train. I love trains. They remind me of old Hollywood. "Murder on the Orient Express". "Strangers on a Train". Sorry, what I mean is, it'll take a couple of days. And then, maybe, we can burn that box together. If you want."

Tony hadn't signed it. Hadn't put his name to the nightmare. But he'd trusted Gibbs with the worst moments of his life. This trust was a gift Gibbs would carry beneath his heart, tucked away safely with his girls, with his mother. Looking down at the pages in his hands, Gibbs had known exactly what to do with them. He'd moved to the stove, waited through the tick-tick-tick for the gas burner to light. With his own hands he set an edge of the paper to the flame and watched until Tony's words turned to ash.

It's not as if he would ever forget any of them.

The train seemed to shrug, moving again, slow and steady, out of the Baltimore station. Gibbs looked up to see that now Tony was watching him. Focused. Measuring Gibbs' reactions. Wondering, again, why his Boss had decided to invite himself along.

"'The Lady Vanishes'," Gibbs muttered.

"Huh?"


"Well, yeah, I know that Gibbs, I'm just surprised that you do." Tony's smile seemed real. Honest.

Gibbs shook his head. "You're no lady, DiNozzo, but I'm not about to let you vanish. And I won't let you confront Forman on your own, either. No reason you should." Gibbs swallowed the last of the ice-cold, bitter coffee and set the cup on his knee. "That's what I meant before. What I told you you didn't get about me." He stared across at his SFA. His teammate. His friend. "Even when I'm a bastard, even when I need to get my head out of my ass, to wise up, I'm never going to let one of my own, let you, go on hurting when I can do something about it. I failed you with White. Don't intend to do it again."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

XV

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night." ~T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

The street was cramped, cars parked on both sides, potholes filled with dirty slush that camouflaged their depth. West Philly. Old neighborhoods, row houses, and Italian markets. They'd left the taxi at the corner. A habit. Don't show your hand. Don't let them trace you to an address. Don't let the bastards see you coming. Tony and Gibbs hadn't hesitated, hadn't needed to check on each other's opinion. This is how they did things.

His shoulders hunched against the cold, Tony let his gaze swing back and forth from one side of the street to another. Two skinny kids in threadbare coats were chasing each other around and around in their small front yard, laughing, smiles wide and eyes bright. These kids didn't get the latest and greatest video game or high-tech toy for Christmas. These kids made do with a bat, a glove, a football, an older brother's bike handed down. They made their own fun. The curtain in the front room twitched aside and Tony met the eyes of the old man watching - grandfather, maybe - he sized up the two men on the sidewalk, eyes narrowed, and then nodded, recognizing something in Tony and Gibbs. Something safe. No need to call in the boys. Not now. Tony returned his nod solemnly.

A few doors down, a woman swept the water from a dip in her sidewalk with an old, battered broom. In short, sharp movements she sent spray after spray into the yard where it glazed the tips of the few brown blades of grass poking up from the old snow. As the two men passed, she paused, lips pursed, and then stooped down to grab a handful of rock salt from her bucket to throw along the concrete path. It drifted through the air, sparkling in the lowering sun of a late winter afternoon, and then fell like rice at a church wedding.

"Ma'am." Gibbs lowered his head as they passed.

"You officers need anything?" She leaned on her broom, relaxed but watchful.

"No ma'am," Tony answered. "Thank you. Just visiting an old friend."

She smiled up into Tony's eyes, plucking a strand of hair from her face and tucking it back under her hat. "That's good. Wouldn't want to think you were after Jesse and Anne's boy again. We were hoping he'd cleaned up his act." She tilted her head. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

Gibbs stepped forward. "Born and raised in Stillwater, west of here."

"Stillwater? Now that's a town that time forgot, isn't it?"

Tony's eyebrows lifted when he heard Gibbs chuckle. "You could say that."

"Well, I won't keep you. God bless." With one last smile, she turned away to throw one last handful of salt onto the narrow walkway, shuffling back towards the steps up to her front door.
"'Stillwater', huh?" Tony commented. "Is that for real?"

Gibbs grunted.

"I mean, it's kind of on the nose, isn't it? 'Still waters run deep.' That could be printed on your business cards, Boss."

"I don't have business cards, DiNozzo."

"I know that, Boss, I'm just saying …"

Gibbs shrugged. "Didn't name the town. Had nothing to do with moving there. Before I was born."

Tony knew he was rambling, talking too much about stupid things. It was either that or shut down entirely. Brood. Keep playing in his head how this meeting was going to go, marking out scenarios. What Forman would look like. How he would slam the door in Tony's face or go for his gun or laugh or cry. He shook his head, hoping that would keep the images toward the background. "Your father still live there?"

"Yep. Owns a dry goods store. Don't call them that anymore, I guess."

"Not since 'Little House on the Prairie'," Tony muttered. "Visit much?"

Tony turned his head just fast enough to see the faint frown, the tightening of Gibbs' lips. Something dark hovered behind the older man's eyes. "No."

Uh oh. No wonder the only time Tony remembered Gibbs talking about his father was to tell a dirt bag that he was dead. Dead to Gibbs, anyway. Every time the two talked Tony was finding more he had in common with his hard-headed, taciturn boss. Hands fisted in his pockets, Tony thought about the past few months, Gibbs' presence, his encouragement. How he'd turned out the darkest, deepest pockets of his own soul so that Tony would know he wasn't alone.

"You ever feel like going back there - paying a visit - saying something that needs to be said." He swallowed hard. "I wouldn't mind a trip to small town America."

Gibbs stopped walking, his head coming up sharply. Tony, a half-step beyond him, turned. He kept his face bland, all emotion muffled behind a screen of disinterest. He wondered if Gibbs could see how fast his heart was beating.

"Might take you up on that."

"Okay."

And that was that. All the words Tony had scraped together to convince the man that this friendship - this support thing - could go both ways, fluttered back down his throat. This must be how grownups did friendship, he thought. What a novel concept.

The two stepped off down the sidewalk, scanning curbs and front doors for street numbers. When they reached the right one, Tony stood a moment, frowning, wondering what he'd been expecting. A castle guarded by a fierce dragon? Philly's old guard police standing shoulder to shoulder to keep him out? Or maybe a run-down, ghost-ridden wreck, with broken windows and cobwebs, creaking boards and frigid winds blowing down the back of his neck.

It was just a house. The trim needed paint. The cast iron railing on the steps was a little loose. The winter-dead plants along the house seemed sad, haphazard, as if the person who set them there was
trying too hard. Trying to fit in with the neighbors. Putting on a façade of friendship, of normalcy, like the beige paint and plain wood could hide the monster inside.

Or maybe that was all in Tony's head. What did he know about front yards? About home maintenance? About living anywhere but in an apartment that he treated like a hotel room rather than a home? If Bryce Forman had lived in a mansion on Long Island with topiary hedges and a lawn groomed to within an inch of its life, would it be any better? Any different? Would he have been able to slot Forman into place then? Label him? 'Evil mastermind.' 'Corrupt cop.' There probably wasn't a real estate listing appropriate to that life choice.

"You ready?"

Gibbs stood too close, his shoulder pressed against Tony's. But Tony didn't move away. He didn't smile or joke, create distance with a smirk or a movie reference. He didn't do much of that at all anymore. That Tony DiNozzo seemed to have been lost somewhere between Lane Danielson's cabin and Rachel Cranston's office. Maybe, once he was done here, he'd be able to find that guy again. Or maybe not.

"Yeah." He trotted up the four concrete steps and rapped his knuckles on the aluminum storm door.

He was old. Old and bent, gnarled fingers of his left hand gripping a plain metal cane. A working cane, not trying to look cool or edgy, one with a platform at the bottom that meant the man using it really needed it. His back was bent, his once straight spine stiffened into an uncomfortable hunch. He wore faded denim, pants and jacket, with a heavy flannel shirt, along with the narrow-eyed expression of a cop - suspicious, wary. But the once bright eyes were cloudy now, the same color as his faded denim.

For a full minute all Tony could see was the old man. A thick shock of white hair. Someone he should try to help, to reach out and steady. But, beneath his black pea coat and the warm scarf Abby had knitted him for Christmas, Tony's heart was trying to beat out of his chest. Something in Tony recognized the man. A voice from the back of his brain was shouting, urging him to lash out, to yell, to accuse. Tony shivered with the need to keep control. To think. To find the words he came here to say.

Finally, his jaw unlocked and his the muscles of his chest relaxed enough so he could draw in a long breath. He faced this man from his past. This once solid, loyal, seasoned detective with the Philadelphia PD.

"Bryce Forman."


Tony followed. He didn't have a choice. Once he'd decided, once he'd put one foot on this path, this ending was inevitable. Finding Forman, confronting the man who had betrayed him, who had been the reason for his torture, for his pain that never healed, never diminished, even after his body had been well again - whatever came out of this, it was time for answers.

Forman's living room was right out of an Archie Bunker sitcom. An old console piano was pushed up against the wall, cluttered with old newspapers, books, and a coffee mug fashioned by small, enthusiastic hands and painted with "World's Best Grandpa." A green nubby couch lay beneath the
picture window, a ginger cat curled up on the center cushion, and the latest National Geographic open on one arm. Forman lowered himself into a wide recliner, overstuffed and faded, that faced the old-model television. On the table beside him, a plate held the remnants of lunch - or dinner - or last night's snack, half a sandwich, an apple core, a plain white napkin crumbled on top. In pride of place, where the old man in the recliner could easily see it, stood a framed picture of two small boys, fresh-faced and blond-haired, sitting on Santa's lap with Grandpa looking on with a smile.

One step into the living room, Tony hesitated. He wasn't nervous. He wasn't edgy, didn't have a racing pulse and sweaty palms he expected to have. In every dream - or nightmare - when he sought this man out, when he confronted him, there'd been violence. He'd stormed up to Forman, grabbed him by the collar and pinned him to the wall. In some of his worst dreams Forman would laugh, spit flying into Tony's face as he told Tony over and over how little he cared, or how Tony had deserved what he'd gotten. Those particular dreams always ended the same way, with Tony killing Forman with his bare hands.

This wasn't the Bryce Forman of Tony's dreams. Or of his memories. This wasn't the tall man he remembered, sandy brown hair barely showing a trace of grey. His fingers were gnarled, bent, thick at the knuckles, not strong and nimble, cleaning his weapon, checking Tony's wire, slapping him on the ass to get him moving. This was an old man, a grandfather, someone who took pictures with Santa, who ate bologna sandwiches and read National Geographic. Tony's bitterness, his resentment and anger, couldn't find the man he'd hated all these years in the hunched figure before him.

When had Forman gotten so old? So stooped and grey-haired? Six years didn't turn a tall, strong veteran police detective into this crumpled, crippled … grandfather.

He moved to stand in front of Forman's chair. Gibbs stayed in the doorway, quiet, arms folded across his chest. Waiting. Ready. A source of strength and resolve in case Tony couldn't find any of his own.

"What happened to you?"

It wasn't the first question Tony'd thought he would ask. Nothing like it. He'd thought he'd go with something like, "Just how much Oxy equals one man's life?" Or, "I notice you never visited me in the hospital - couldn't bear to look at the scars, huh? Want to see them now?" But now, looking at the man who'd ruled his nightmares for years, he couldn't think of anything else.

Watery blue eyes met his. "Car accident."

"Huh. DUI?"

Tony's assumption didn't make Forman flinch. Tony narrowed his eyes. "A car accident turned you into a doddering old man? Doesn't sound like the Bryce Forman I knew."

Forman grunted, leaning forward, both hands on the top of his cane. "That's the problem, kid. You didn't know me. Hell, that pedestal you had me on was so high I doubt you could even see me."

The heat of the man's words rocked Tony back on his heels. "What -" Scenes of the past swept through his mind like an old fashioned zoetrope, the slits in the wheel giving him just a glance of the picture as it spun. Forman, smoking cigarette after cigarette, eyes squinted against the smoke, talking. Rubbing at his aching hip. Shaking his head over Tony's rookie questions. Patting him on the shoulder, telling him to get the hell back in there. Brushing off Tony's concerns. Handing him a glass of rot-gut whiskey after he threw up.

"God damn it -" Tony lurched forward, rage burning away the doubts that one sentence from Forman had twisted up from the past.

Gibbs was there. Standing between them. Just standing, hands at his sides. A wall. A rampart. Tony's very own silver-haired guardian angel. He didn't say a word.

Tony heard him just the same. Calm down. This is not what you came for. Why are you letting this guy get to you? And, finally: I trained you better than this.

He sucked in a breath and stepped back, hands falling to his sides. Bryce Forman wasn't a boogeyman. He wasn't a monster snatching at a little boy's legs from under the bed. No matter what Tony had built him up to in his memories, Forman was just a man. A suspect. A criminal. And Tony knew how to deal with criminals.

He nodded at Gibbs. "Got it, Boss."

That's all it took. Gibbs moved out of the way, back to his position by the door.

Forman watched it all through half-closed eyes, measuring, weighing, some of the old craftiness bringing life to his colorless, doughy cheeks. He raised his head, a crooked smile pasted across his face. "Your buttons were always too easy to press, kid," he laughed.

Tony settled on the edge of Forman's couch, his hands folded in front of him, and flattened out his expression, pulling his investigator's persona out of his pocket to hide the queasiness of his stomach, the trembling of his fingers. "They were. And, to a veteran like you, I must have seemed like some kind of eager puppy, ready to do just about anything for you." He didn't look towards Gibbs, but it took some effort. Not the time. Not the place. "It's a failing of mine. Even after all these years. Once I decide to trust someone, once I figure he deserves it, I tend to follow him over a cliff like a lemming."

"'All these years.' You say it as if you're some kind of old war horse. What, you're thirty now? Thirty-one?"

"Thirty-two."

"Still a kid," Forman huffed.

Tony leaned in. "Some of those years - some of those days felt like decades," he said, his tone low and even. A warning. "Like they'd gone on forever and would never end. I think you know which ones I mean."

He watched Forman's throat move, the sagging skin contract and release. "Yeah," he murmured.

Calm, restrained, Tony let the evidence fall into place. Let his mind tick over Forman's words, his attitude, and the scene before him. He imagined the notes he'd write to himself about this criminal, this suspect, the way he'd approach him to learn everything he could. For a moment he remembered Jeffrey White's innocent blue eyes and a spark of doubt leaped up his throat. Doubt about himself, his intuition, his ability to see beyond a person's mask. Closing his eyes for a second, Tony let the image drain away, piling other Ops, other cases on top of White's deceptive, murderous face. Cases that Tony had closed successfully. When he'd outwitted the criminals, saved the victims - did his job. Linton and Evans in Peoria. Sevaro and Nickels in Baltimore. Bill Atlas and Laura Rowens at NCIS. And the entire Macaluso crime family in Philadelphia. He opened his eyes, catching Gibbs' steady gaze. Yeah. He could do this.

"I'm curious, Bryce. Did you think I'd hit you? Break your jaw? Put a bullet in your knee? Put you in
the hospital? Is that why you said what you did? Pushing my buttons, taking control?" Tony's smile was grim, his voice low and even. "It looks to me like you're anxious for some punishment. Like you think you deserve it. How does it look to you?"

The deep creases carved alongside Forman's mouth told Tony that the frown was habitual. The old man didn't answer, didn't shrug Tony off or come out with another verbal barb. He just sat there. Waiting.

Cocking his head in curiosity, Tony sat back, legs stretched out in front of him. Beside him, the cat stirred, raised its head, blinking. Tony reached out one finger for her to sniff and then let her rub her cheeks against it. The orange of her fur was dulled, whitened around her mouth and eyes. This wasn't a youngster, brimming with life and energy. This was an elder cat, regal and relaxed, lying in the shallow pool of warmth the winter sun offered her. Petting down her back, Tony felt the bones of her spine, imagining they mirrored the knuckles on Forman's hands.

"This one's a treasure. What's her name?" he asked, smiling down at the cat's attempts to get Tony to scratch her in just the right places.

"What's the point of naming a cat, DiNozzo? It's not like they're going to come when you call them." Forman's words were impatient, frustrated.

"Ah, that isn't very nice, is it?" He clucked his tongue and scritched her under the chin. "You look like royalty to me. But not a 'Princess.' That's a little too easy, a little too soft." He touched the ragged edge of one ear, the long-healed scar on her right shoulder. "Looks like you've fought your battles. I'd call you Brunhild. Or, based on your coloring, maybe Morrigan would be better."

"She's just some stray that wandered in here a while ago." Forman huffed, hands tight around the handle of his cane. "Is this what you came here to talk about, DiNozzo? Some cat? I guess what I've heard about you is true. You've lost it."

Tony let the man bluster. Let him stew. This was something he was good at. Great at. Go ahead, he urged silently, never taking his eyes off the cat, go ahead and underestimate me. You've done it before. Everyone does it. Especially now. **DiNozzo is nuts. He's gone. He's never been too stable, never been much to him at all, has there? For God's sake, he's in therapy of all things. Good looks are skin deep and underneath that? Yeah, nothing.**

Go ahead, Tony thought. Think of me as a light-weight. A frat-boy who rides on stronger men's coattails. A lot of people have said it, some even to Tony's face. Useless. Foolish. Immature. He'd heard it since he was a child. From his father. His headmaster. Wendy. Kate. He kept his hand soft on the cat's fur, his head bent so that he couldn't see his boss. Tony didn't mind when people underestimated him, but Gibbs did. Well, this was Tony's show. Tony's interview. And he was going to do it his way.

Once upon a time, Forman had thought Tony was too damaged, too broken to come after him. A mess, physically and psychologically. Too weak to run Forman down, to find him and demand answers, demand payback for what he'd done. How Forman had betrayed him. If he still thought that way, well, Tony smiled, so much the better.

"She's more interesting than anything you're saying, Bryce," he cooed down at the pet, now kneading her claws against his pant-leg. "And I like cats. They are amazingly honest, don't you think? Some people call them self-involved, haughty, caring only about what they can get out of people." One hand cradling the cat's head, Tony met Forman's gaze across the room. "People have called me all those same things, you know."
He shifted, the cat moving along with him, showing him her belly, head cocked against the cushions
to stare at him. "Funny thing about cats," he murmured, smiling, "they're smart. Under all the fluff
and nonsense, they're great hunters." He leaned down, one finger on the little pink nose. "Don't think
I don't know you're trying to lull me into a false sense of security, and, one extra tummy rub and the
claws will come out!" Tony glanced across at Forman. "People don't get that about cats. They're
always surprised when, after a few seconds of petting, she goes in for the kill." His smile at his
former mentor was sharp and deadly. "People don't get that about me, either."

"So, tell me, Bryce." He enunciated the man's name precisely. "How does this all weigh out?
Between us, I mean." He waved one hand back and forth. "You retire. You keep your pension, your
benefits, this lovely home. No one knows what you did. No one asks any questions or demands any
answers. Your family, your friends, they don't know about me. They all get to believe that you were
a good, upstanding, hard-working man who just couldn't take it anymore. You join the Kiwanis, or
the Moose, maybe handle some Police Benevolent Society gigs, hold your head high and take the
accolades, the honors that people want to give men and women who've sacrificed to help others.
And, when you look into their eyes as you're taking your grandkids to the mall, or when they're
opening gifts on Christmas morning, you get to believe that about yourself, too."

"But, me?" Tony lifted the cat gently, setting it on his lap where it made itself at home. "What do I
get? I got hours of torture. I got broken bones. Split skin. I got my privates twisted and groped and
three of my toenails torn out." Forman paled, his teeth grinding, his throat working to keep the bile
down. "Shall I go on? Because, I have a feeling that, since you didn't visit me, that you never saw
the doctors' reports. And there's more. A lot more. I'll be happy to describe each and every thing that
Freddy and Marco did to me. In detail. Because, Bryce?" He let the fake smile disappear, the false
levity of two old friends chewing the fat drain away. "I remember. I remember everything."

For the first time in a long time, Tony let Anthony DiNozzo out, every piece of him, bared and
aching. Every hurt, every betrayal, and every doubt swarmed to the surface, kicking and screaming,
until it was hard to catch his breath. He remembered the soul-rending horror of his torture, and the
days in the hospital wishing he could die. The memories didn't control him now. They didn't come
out of nowhere and leave him a shaking, sweating mess. Now he was in control and he was ready.
Ready to show Forman just what his betrayal had done. What his selfish, thoughtless acts had
accomplished. Tony's gaze moved to Gibbs, waiting in the shadows, his shoulders always square, his
chin always up. Maybe it was time to share his true face with Gibbs, too. To share truth with the man
who had once taken pleasure in Tony's pain.

But not right now. Now it was time for Bryce Forman. Long past time. Time to speak, to tell Bryce
Forman what happened to him in that basement in Philadelphia. To look into his eyes and make him
understand.

Tony began, the words calm and focused, his anger gone. He described the physical blows. He
talked about how he felt, the pain, the fear, and, finally, his wish that they'd kill him. He described
the smells and sounds, the laughter, the smack of flesh against flesh, the snap of bones breaking, the
feel of his own screams in his throat. He told Forman how it felt when Freddy told him about his
betrayal, the initial disbelief, denial. The moment when he realized they were telling the truth. That
he hadn't given away his cover, that it wasn't Tony's fault, his mistake, that earned him this kind of
punishment. It was his junkie of a mentor.

When Tony's mouth got dry he found a glass of water in his hand. When he felt tears on his face, he
didn't bother wiping them away. When his voice trembled and shook, the weight of the purring cat
on his lap helped him through it until the pain and the memories fell away.

He didn't know how long it took, how many minutes, or hours, they'd sat here in Forman's dusty
living room. But the sky was dark out the window, the room lit only by the street lamps and the overhead light from the kitchen where Gibbs had gone rummaging. Tony had finished. He'd said everything he had to say and now he was empty. Empty of hate, of anger, of fear. The cat hadn't abandoned him. It had curled up against his belly, paws tucked under, the constant vibration of its purring like a soothing chant.

Across the room, Forman hadn't moved. He hadn't tried to get up, to get away. He hadn't tried to stop Tony’s speech, to ask questions, or to offer any kind of explanations or excuses. The hands on top of his cane were knotted together, dry skin rasping against dry skin. His pale eyes stayed with Tony's, as if they were swallowing Tony's pain and hurt along with the words. It had been silent for a few minutes, now, three men breathing, and one cat half snoring in the quiet house.

The funny things was, Tony wasn't waiting for anything. He was done. He didn't need anything from Bryce Forman. He didn't need clumsy apologies or grudging answers. He didn't need a list of what Forman had done - or would do - to atone. Tony nodded to himself, leaning down to place the glass on the floor without jostling the cat. He lingered for a moment, both hands brushing through the cat's fur, smoothing it, before he lifted her back to her spot on the center cushion of the couch.

He met Gibbs by the door, met his eyes, and there was an understanding between them. They turned away, leaving Forman in the darkness, the silence, and headed out.

There was no anxious shout asking them to stay.

But there was a woman sitting on the steps outside.

She was young. Early thirties, Tony guessed. Probably the mother of those two little boys in the picture. She wore a ski jacket, half-zipped, a colorful scarf around her neck, and a crazy knitted hat decorated with white reindeer and a bright red bobble. Two plastic grocery bags were set at her feet. Below her in the snowy yard, a small pile of cigarette butts had grown like last year's weeds. She put another one to her mouth, sucked in a lungful of nicotine and death, and let it fall with the others.

She didn't look up.

"So, you're the one."

Tony, already at the bottom of the steps, turned. The woman's words weren't angry. She didn't rise up to confront him, to shout at him for being mean to her father. She crouched to grab the grocery bags with one hand and wipe off the seat of her pants with the other. When she straightened, looking at him for the first time, Tony saw the Bryce Forman he'd once known in her eyes.

"I- I don't -" Tony started.

After another wipe against her jacket, she held out her right hand. "Grace Forman. Grace Forman Young, actually. You're Tony, right?"

He shook hands with her on autopilot. "Tony DiNozzo, yes. I'm sorry," he shook his head. "We've never met, right?"

"No. And, don't worry, it's not like dad talks about you. He never talked about you. Or why he really retired, took disability all of a sudden, just at the end of the biggest case of his career."

Tony felt Gibbs shift behind him, moving closer, as if to try to absorb the impact of this woman's words. After what had happened inside Forman's house, after Tony's speech, the eruption of words and pain, Gibbs probably thought Tony had had enough. That he was ready to fall apart, barely able to stand. Somehow, that wasn't the case.
Tony had not felt this strong in a long time. Light. Free. He'd be happy to talk to this woman. To hear whatever she had to say to him. She'd waited out here, through a half-dozen cigarettes, while Tony had talked. She must have heard nearly everything.

Cradling the grocery bags to her chest, Grace Forman didn't look like she was about to confront a demon from her father's past. Or that she was anxious to stand between her father and an avenging angel. She looked - normal. Calm. A daughter bringing her disabled father his groceries. A mother anxious to get back to her own children. Someone Tony could meet on the street and share a smile with. A word. He found himself relaxing even more as she stood there, looking him up and down. This wasn't an enemy's assessment or a woman's hungry appraisal, but a daughter's curiosity.

"Five years ago, dad was still on Oxy. We weren't close. Hadn't been for years. I don't think I knew him very well, and, I'll admit, I kept Kevin and the boys as far away from him as possible. And then he was in a car accident. He'd fallen asleep at the wheel - passed out, more like it - and was t-boned by a SEPTA bus."

Tony couldn't help his flinch. God, it's a wonder Forman had survived.

A quick smile danced across Grace's face. "Thank God, no one else was hurt. Turns out one of those huge buses can take a lot of damage. But dad was in the hospital for a long time. The head injury was the worst. They didn't know if he was going to wake up."

Inside, Tony felt cold. He looked back towards the small home's picture window, trying to part the darkness so he could see the man he'd left there, sitting alone.

"No," Grace stated, taking a step forward. "No. He remembers. He's not - he's not some kind of amnesiac who you should feel sorry for. Obviously, he woke up. Got better. But, while he was in and out of consciousness, he talked a lot. Mumbled. Shouted. Sometimes he even cried. And while I sat at his bedside, I only heard him say one name. Not my mom's. Not mine. Not my brother's. Just one name. Yours. Tony DiNozzo."

Suddenly Tony was grateful for Gibbs' closeness, for the heavy hand on his shoulder grounding him. For the strength and friendship of his boss, even if it had come out of nowhere. For a man as wounded and aching and empty as himself standing right beside him.

And for the light touch of Grace Forman's hand on his shaking arm. "I didn't tell you that so you would feel bad, Detective. I just wanted to let you know that I know, we all know. We know what dad did. How he betrayed his duty, his responsibilities, how he betrayed you. He never told us, never admitted it." She shook her head, the blond curls peeking out from beneath her cap bouncing. "He never worked the steps or tried to make amends, or said one word about it when he recovered. But, it was too late. We'd all heard him - everyone in our family had been beside that bed at one point during his ravings."

Tony couldn't stop shivering. He couldn't stop the emotions creeping back into his emptiness. The grief. The loneliness of that basement in Philly, that hospital room, Doc Camber's office in the Poconos. Alone in the darkness beyond midnight crouched in his bedroom in DC fumbling with an ugly glass horse and fighting to put himself back together. He knew what was coming, what Grace was going to say. Shaking his head back and forth, he tried to step backwards, to escape, to get away before she could finish - before she could say the words - but Gibbs was there, hands holding his shoulders. Keeping him still.

"I just wanted to tell you that we know. People know. Even though, for some reason, you never said anything, you never accused him, never reported him. Even though the cops never came for him, no subpoenas summoned him to court, nobody touched his pension or his reputation, we know. We
know your name, Tony. We know what our father did to you. To you, Tony DiNozzo. It's not a secret anymore. You were never a dirty secret that should be hidden in the dark. We know the truth. And the truth is that you're a hero, not my father. Never my father. We know."

When Tony came back to himself, he was sitting on the ice-cold bumper of a beat-up truck parked along the street and Grace was gone. Warm hands were on his shoulders and a figure stood before him, shielding him from the cold February wind. One callused hand rested against Tony's cheek and tilted his head up.

Gibbs' silver hair shone in the starlight, but his eyes were dark, foreboding. Promising death and destruction for anyone who dared come near them, who dared look at them sideways. As he noticed Tony's awareness, those eyes softened, relief sparking in their depths, the hardened muscles in his shoulders loosening.

Gibbs blew out a breath. "You back with me, DiNozzo?"

"I - I hear you, Gibbs," Tony whispered. The moisture around his eyes felt like ice. "Gibbs?"

"Right here, DiNozzo," He crouched down, knees creaking.

"Can we go home now, Gibbs?"

Gibbs dropped his head, his laughter ringing like bells on the cold, dark Philadelphia street. "Hell, yes, Tony. Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue left now. Thanks you all for your amazing support and wonderful comments.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XVI

"For last year's words belong to last year's language // And next year's words await another voice. // And to make an end is to make a beginning." ~T.S. Eliot

They'd finished dinner. Sat down in Tony's living room with a beer for Gibbs, the last half-glass of wine for Tony, and, of all things, a single malt Scotch for Rachel. "I will not be billing this hour," she quipped, her almost-smile directed towards the room in general. Tony let his assessment of Kate's sister whirl, finding a new track before it clicked into place. The woman had more layers than an onion - and was a lot more pleasant.

The mood tonight was subdued, but not dark. It had been a week since Tony's confrontation with Bryce Forman, since his midnight call to Cranston and his last 'emergency' visit to her office. He swirled the purplish-red Virginia Cab Franc in his glass. Funny how it hadn't been Forman who had sent Tony's psyche tumbling, but just a few words from his daughter. Words about knowing his name, his sacrifice. Words like 'hero.' Tony swallowed, still struggling with that one. He hadn't felt much like a hero after Philadelphia, no matter the commendations, the kudos and honors his Captain had offered beside his hospital bed. Those weren't what Grace Forman had been talking about, after all. She considered Tony a hero for not outing her father. For allowing their family - such as it was - to survive when Tony's world had crumbled.

It had taken Rachel to point that out. To take the few words Forman's daughter had given Tony, unwrap them, and let the woman's gift out into the light, shining and spotless. Because of Grace, because of Rachel and Gibbs and Tom Morrow, Tony had - eventually - been able to see his actions - and his inactions - after Philadelphia not as weaknesses, but as strengths. As gifts themselves. Not things to hide away in the darkness, to cut himself with over and over again, but as attempts to balance the evil with good. Maybe it had been a breakthrough. Tony shook his head. He didn't know. What he did know was that, since then, since he'd come back from Forman's house, he'd been able to step into the light, to take his eyes off of the careful accounting he'd always made of his past, of his mistakes and hurts, and look to the future.

He lifted his head and sent a softened gaze towards Rachel. He was working on it. Working on looking at himself and not seeing a shell, a mask, a costume he'd taken out of the box labeled 'detective,' 'agent,' 'normal guy.' At not focusing on the demons from his past lingering just over his shoulder. Sometimes Tony could almost see a man who could, possibly, someday, be a hero to someone. It was slow going, but, amazingly, it was in fact going. Rachel lifted her glass, knowing - always knowing - exactly what he was thinking.

Beside him, at the other end of the couch, Gibbs was quiet. The man had always been quiet, but, now the quiet seemed less lonely. Less like a wary animal, hiding, licking its wounds and hoping no one would notice its vulnerability. He sat back against the arm of Tony's leather sofa, his eyes more alive, more open, than Tony had ever seen them. Not for the first time Tony wondered how Rachel had accomplished that. How she'd taken Gibbs' pain and grief and frustrated rage and dived down through all that ugliness to access the memories at the heart of him. The good memories. Tony swept a furtive glance towards the box on the coffee table, second - and third, and fourth - guessing himself.
about the gift he had for the other man. He hoped Rachel was right one last time.

"Tomorrow is a big day," she announced into the silence. "Any last minute hesitation, Tony?"

"Hell yeah," he chuckled. "Although if I spend one more day sitting on my ass while Gibbs and the team head out to a crime scene, I'm gonna turn into a couch potato, stuffing and all. Honestly," he grinned, "I feel like the little woman. Have you got your coat, dear? Stocked the truck? Charged your cell phone and actually turned the ringer on? Did you remember to pack more gloves, Probie? Next I'm going to be asking Kate if she wouldn't mind picking up dinner as I've got a paper cut from all the damned paper work!"

"And you don't want Kate picking up dinner, believe me," Rachel warned, her eyes dramatically wide. "Tofu. It isn't natural." She slid one hand across her tummy. "Have I told you that I've never had chicken that tasted like that, Tony? And those potatoes!" She scrunched further down into the yielding arm chair. "I may never move."

It was funny how people knowing how well Tony could cook still embarrassed him. "If you tell Kate that I got the recipe from The Barefoot Contessa cookbook, I will kill you, you know." He straightened. "And, since I'm allowed to carry a gun again, it'll be that much easier."

"And you've got Abby to help you dispose of the body …"

"… and leave no forensic evidence." Tony completed the quote when Gibbs trailed off.

Rachel held up her hand - either in surrender or to stop the dueling witticisms, "Duly noted." She watched the two of them for a moment before leaning forward and putting her glass on the table. Folding her hands on her knee, she seemed to settle back into her 'Doctor Cranston' persona. "As a doctor, I'm happy with the progress you've made in such a short time, Tony. And I have no doubts about signing off on you returning to work. Your recovery is astounding, and, if I hadn't been involved, if I was simply reading your file, I'd tend to doubt it was a lasting change. However, since I've walked this road alongside you and Jethro, and I've seen how ruthlessly you've disposed of things that have been holding you back, I can only be optimistic about your future."

Yeah. He'd done that. He and Gibbs. Last weekend, they'd lit that fire together in the rusted grill in Gibbs' backyard, the hacked-up shelves of his bedroom as kindling. Toasting each item with rotgut bourbon, they'd fed the flames with his blackest memories, the broken pieces of that glass horse melting into slag right before their eyes. He'd felt a little bit silly when they'd started, but, under the watchful, patient eyes of his boss and friend, Tony had done as Rachel suggested. And, as the last stinking cloud of smoke rose into the winter sky, he'd felt … good.

"What makes me even surer of your recovery is that you will have someone beside you who understands. Who understands the pressures of your work, and the difficulties of your past. I should say," she pointed at Gibbs and Tony, "you have each other. Two men who will be able to identify changes in attitudes and potentially charged situations and help each other through them."

Yeah. It was weirdly, wonderfully true. Gibbs raised an eyebrow in Tony's direction and he couldn't help shaking his head. Gibbs was still Gibbs, hard-assed Marine who expected superhuman results from his team on a daily basis. But he was also letting the other side of his personality out more. The widower. The grieving father. The man. The friend Tony could only have wished for.

"It's not bad having Morrow on our side, either," Gibbs said.

"Not bad at all," Tony agreed. That meeting had been a revelation. Upstairs in the director's office, Morrow had shaken Tony's hand and apologized. Apologized. To him. Tony still couldn't quite
wrap his mind around it. "I still don't believe he said he was sorry. Like it all was his fault somehow."

Gibbs tilted his head. "Morrow's a 'buck stops here,' kind of guy. Something else I admire about him." He took a sip of his beer, the bitter taste reflected on his face. "He's not the only one who owes you an apology."

"Gibbs-"

"I know what you're going to say, DiNozzo. You're going to repeat some asinine rule I've quoted to you more than once." He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Got that one from a troop commander. He told me that enlisted men like us didn't owe our officers apologies. And that they didn't want them. Best thing to say when you'd screwed up was, 'no excuse, sir.' That was good enough - everyone knew what it meant."

"And he got it from The Duke." Tony laughed. "Couldn't even be original."

Gibbs met Tony's eyes. "Shannon nearly decked me when I said it to her the first time. 'That's crap,' she said. 'Maybe it's okay for thickheaded Marines, but, between friends apologies are necessary. They remind both people that they're not perfect, and that the friendship is more important than being right all the time.'"

Tony held his boss's gaze. "The more I hear about Shannon the more I think she was quite a lady."

He watched Gibbs' throat work as he swallowed. "Oh yeah," was his answer.

Tony cradled the fragile wine glass with both hands. "I had a coach back at Remington. I've told you about him. He used to say, 'The first to apologize is the bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. And the first to forget is the happiest.' I don't know who said it originally, but it makes sense. Seems like the truth."

"It does," Rachel agreed. "And I'm happy to say that Gibbs has been 'working on it,' as he'd say."

The older man's grin flipped on and off. "Morrow doesn't have that problem. He sees his mistakes, eventually. Owns up to them. He was right when he told you he should have been a better director, even though he's the best I've ever had. You know why?" Gibbs nodded grimly. "Because he should have pulled back on my reins a long time ago. Believe me when I say that he and I, we've been talking."

Tony could hear the friendly exasperation in Gibbs' voice. "You just love that, don't you?"

"Doesn't matter if I love it. I needed it. Tom Morrow's version of the wood-shed is long lunches in his office with no booze and lots of detailed reports to explain how stupid I've been and how I shouldn't let it happen again. With charts. And 'cost benefit analysis' of human lives."

"Oh to have been a fly on that wall," Rachel sighed.

"That sounds - horrible." Tony shivered. "I've never understood how a life can be added up in columns or rows. Put down on paper like that."

Gibbs shrugged. "I might not understand all the accounting, Tony, but, after talking it over with Tom, and after our discussions these past few months, I know I've set the cost of your life much too low. When I've thought about it all. And that's what I'm sorry for."

Tony was speechless. He watched as the façade of Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Marine, hard-as-nails leader
of the MCRT, hard-ass, take-no-prisoners Captain Ahab fell away. There, on Tony's couch, sat a
grey-haired man, still strong, still tough, backbone straight and hair cut high and tight, but a friend, a
man, not a monument.

"Sometimes I can only see the people around me as tools. Good ones. Expensive ones that are
shaped to my hand. They're there to get the job done, to help me get the job done," he explained.
"Once Shannon and Kelly were killed, I kept everyone away. Kept myself from seeing them as
people. That way, when they left, when I lost them it didn't feel all that bad." He snorted. "Except for
the occasional nine iron to the head." Gibbs' tone managed to lighten the heavy mood of the room.
His piercing gaze returned to Tony's. "I saw you once, on that street in Baltimore. When you looked
at your partner at the end. I wasn't kidding about Rule Five. You were good. You are good. But,
you're a whole hell of a lot more than a tool."

"I'm working on it. On not taking you for granted. You. Kate. McGee. Ducky. Even Abby. Hell, the
six of you are more of a family to me than I've had in a long time. So, I'm making some new rules.
Throwing out some of the old ones." He sat up, slapping one hand against his knee. "First change.
New Rule Six. I like what your coach said."

Tony smiled. "We'll work on shortening it."

"Huh. Good. Let me ask you, Tony. What do you think of Rule Fifteen?"

"Fifteen," Tony said, "Always work as a team." He took his time, finishing the last swallow of wine,
setting the glass on the table, wiping his suddenly sweaty palms against his jeans. "It's not -" He
remembered sitting in an elevator in the Navy Yard, clutching his cell phone, ash and blood in his
mouth. "It's a 'do as I say, not as I do' rule, Gibbs. Like Rule Three."

Gibbs set his beer bottle down and folded his hands together as if in prayer. "You've been on teams
your whole life, DiNozzo. Out of all of us, all the people I just named, you probably understand
playing as a team the best. You know what it means. You get that you and your teammates have
strengths and weaknesses, and you're always ready to step in, to put yourself in front of the bullet or
in the face of your SOB of a team leader to keep the team alive. I know that. Grace Forman saw it.
Your coach at Remington saw it. And I saw it in you when you didn't rat out Danny Price. I knew I
needed you, needed that for my team. Because none of the rest of us knows a damned thing about
being a team player. And Rule Fifteen?" Gibbs' laugh was bitter. "That is the biggest hypocritical
pile of shit I've ever pretended to believe in."

His boss wasn't wrong. McGee might hook up with cyber-buddies to take on fake trolls and dragons
in an on-line world, but his brains and his insecurities kept him locked up behind his apartment walls
while he did it. Kate was the original, 'I can do it myself and don't need anyone's help' woman. Abby
loved her mass spec and her computers and her clubbing, but, for a sweet lady, she was remarkably
alone. And Ducky, well, except for his elderly mother and his steel tables full of a definitely captive
audience, he didn't have too many people to share his stories with. "So I'm definitely the punch line
of this joke," Tony remarked.

"No. You're the only who understands how much this rule is a joke, DiNozzo. And you're the one
I'm going to need if I'm going to change that. If we're going to be a real team."

Tony sat back against the couch cushions. "You mean that."

Gibbs nodded. "I mean that."

"Sounds like some changes are coming."
"And on that note." Rachel got to her feet, drawing Tony and Gibbs away from one of the most intense conversations Tony remembered having. "I'll leave you to it."

Tony stepped towards her. Towards his therapist. Kate's sister. He took her hand. "How do you thank someone for saving your life?" he asked. "I think I'm going to need more than some good scotch and a chicken dinner for this one."

"Tony." She laid her other hand on top of his. "This isn't good-bye. Just, see you next week. I think I can trust you in Gibbs' hands - and he in yours - in the meantime." She held on another long moment. "If you need some help with these changes, you know how to reach me. And," she added quickly, "don't give Kate too much trouble for the next few weeks, okay? We've got a girls' weekend coming up and I don't want to have to listen to her ranting about her sexist teammate the whole time."

"Will do." Nope. That was not enough. Tony pulled the petite woman into his arms, holding her close so that she could feel the emotions vibrating through him. "Is this okay?" he whispered, trying to smother his tears. His gratitude.

She held on tight. "This is perfect."

After Rachel left, Tony headed back into the living room, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Not embarrassed. Definitely not. "Changes, huh, Boss?"

Gibbs was standing by the window, his face half in shadow. "I've seen a lot of changes since I started doing this. Started right before Tailhook - right before the shit hit the fan and the higher ups tore the lid off the Navy's old boys' network. Franks had come up through that, it was a part of him. Never really escaped it. NIS became NCIS, and, only a year later, we had our first civilian director and a whole new mandate. The world was changing and we had to change along with it."

Tony knew the history. Those ten years between 1991 and 2001 had rattled the entire earth. As a probie police officer in Peoria, Illinois, even Tony had been shaken. The bombing in Beirut. The USS Cole. And then 9/11. It seemed as things swirled more and more out of control, Tony had been drawn closer and closer to the nation's capital, ending up in federal law enforcement at NCIS in 2002. He might have seen a lot in those years, working on the street, but he couldn't imagine the darkness Gibbs had waded through, hip-deep.

"NCIS has been a lot of things. Trained agents for ship duty. Led anti-terrorism operations. Caught major embezzling schemes. Protected Navy and Marines all over the world. But it's still learning how to investigate crime. It's still the little brother, trying to stand up alongside the big boys. Sometimes we get too caught up in that to see we've still got a lot to learn. About investigations. Forensics. Technology. And, most important, how to take care of our own." Gibbs turned away from the window, arms crossed over his chest. "Change doesn't scare me," he continued. "Even if it takes me a while to catch up. What Morrow's doing here - it feels right."

Perching one hip on the edge of his couch, Tony frowned. "What are we talking about? He's not breaking up the team, is he? Because -"

"No. It was Morrow who told me to fill out the team in the first place. He was worried about us burning out. Wanted to expand our skill-base, too."

Three months ago, Tony would have been relieved. A heavy weight of self-doubt lifting off his shoulders at Gibbs' admission. Now something that felt like resentment chewed at his gut. "Huh. You never told me that."
"No. I assumed you'd figure it out." The older man's lips twitched.

"And another rule bites the dust," Tony snorted. Something about never assuming, or always double checking.

"Yeah. One of the changes Morrow and I discussed. Chain of command has to include a chain of communication." Gibbs pointed at Tony's chest and then waved that finger between them. "Morrow and I already have regular meetings scheduled. It's time we did the same."

Tony's eyebrows rose to new heights.

"You and me. Regular meetings. Once a week."

"So being SFA is actually going to mean something other than a desk-full of monthly paperwork?" When Gibbs said changes, it looked like he actually meant it. Who knew?

Gibbs nodded. "Didn't matter as much when there were only two of us. Or three. But, with Kate and McGee on the team permanently, we need more structure. And you need me to stop undermining you."

Before Tony could react - with either disbelieving laughter or relieved tears - Gibbs kept on talking. "Morrow has some thoughts about easing the others into this. I think I'll leave it up to you."

"Oh, nice," Tony chuckled. "My first day back and you want me to, what, wear a suit? Bark out orders?" Tony tilted his head, considering. "You know, that's not a half-bad idea. Get it all out there in the open while they're still patting me on the back for my clean bill of health." He caught the spark in Gibbs' eye. "That's some nifty underhanded thinking there, Boss. I like it."

"Good. Because you're not going to like this next part."

He jerked his chin in Gibbs' direction. "Lay it out for me."

"The director's already added a note to your file, limiting your undercover operations to advisory only."

A cold blade of fear traced down Tony's spine. "For now, right? Until I get some distance? Some perspective?" Tony mirrored Gibbs' pose, arms across his chest. "I mean, who knows? Maybe I'll -"

"No."

Gibbs was firm. Unmoving.

"Aw, come on," Tony huffed, "as soon as 'national security' or 'possible terrorism' comes into play, everyone's preferences go out the window. Everyone in law enforcement understands -"

Tony's words trailed off as the older man stared him to silence. Gibbs was the first to break the impasse.

"You can do more. You are more than a blank slate, a chameleon, changing to fit in with whatever the higher ups want from you. And I'm not going to stand there and watch you get hurt again when I could stop it. Neither is Morrow." Gibbs' eyes narrowed. "You put enough of yourself out there to protect your team and our military and the people who want to hurt them. You've been shot, stabbed, hit, damn it." Gibbs stood, emotion pouring off of him as he took a few steps in Tony's direction. "Listen to me, Tony. You do not have to give up your soul to do your job."
Tony pushed himself to his feet to face Gibbs. He searched the older man's eyes, looked deeper than before, pursuing his boss's - his friend's - feelings, his motivation all the way down. "After everything you've seen. Everything you've done - you believe that."

"Yes. I believe it. Maybe this is another example of what a damned hypocrite I've been, but I don't want to have to do this again, Tony. To pull you back from some brink, the edge of darkness. I don't want to lose you - as teammate or friend."

Gibbs' intensity, the power of his regret and sorrow sank into Tony's soul. "You've been with me in this since the beginning, Gibbs." Tony heard his voice shaking but he couldn't do anything about that. He pressed on. "You've told me things, shared your losses, your family," he shook his head, "I'll always be grateful for that. And a little amazed, to tell you the truth. I'd like to do the same for you, if you'll let me."

Gibbs' eyebrows dipped, his hands open at his sides. "Of course."

"I don't mean sharing," Tony laughed once, as if clearing the way for more words. Words he needed to say - and he needed Gibbs to hear. "Hell, I've done enough of that lately to last a lifetime. I mean looking out for you." When he realized Gibbs still didn't understand, Tony explained. "Does Morrow have a notation in your file? That you shouldn't be expected to perform sniper duties? To become an NCIS hitman?"

Gibbs' flinch went all the way down. Tony made himself watch, to really look at the wounds exposed in his Boss' psyche. He took a breath, steeling himself to get it out, to say what had to be said. "They've done it to you before. I know that. Sent you to Colombia. Russia. France. The Czech Republic. Gave you a gun, a profile, and an order and didn't care that, every time you looked through that scope you saw Pedro Hernandez in the crosshairs."

Gibbs turned away, moving in fits and starts around the perimeter of the room. He ran a hand along Tony's shelves of DVDs, adjusted the tilt a picture frame, and then laid one hand down on the keys of Tony's piano, almost reverently. "Kelly was learning to play."

Tony closed his eyes.

"She made me tapes. Old cassette tapes. Sent them to me overseas. I still have a couple." The notes of a familiar chord barely sounded.

"You should get McGee or Abby to transfer them to something that will last. To a computer file or iPod." Tony made himself open his eyes to face Gibbs' pain.

His boss was facing him, a half-smile on his lips. "That would mean telling them."

"Yeah. About that." Tony stood, grabbing the package from the coffee table. The brown paper wrapping was plain, like camouflage. He carried it over to Gibbs as gingerly as if it was an unexploded bomb. And maybe it was. "I hope you don't mind. I thought you might put this on your desk. That, maybe, it was time give them some light."

It was as if Gibbs already knew what was inside. He held the square package close, brushing the surface with callused hands as if it was made of velvet or silk, something infinitely precious, not daring to raise his eyes to Tony's. "I don't know."

Tony put his hand on Gibbs' shoulder. "Your choice. This isn't a competition, or a tit-for-tat thing. I tell you mine so you tell me yours. But, if you're ready, it might be a place to start."

Almost unwilling, the paper came away from the picture frame and fell to the floor. The frame was
plain, flat and light, cherry-stained pine. The photograph was one Gibbs had shared with Tony weeks ago. A candid shot, Gibbs and Shannon flanking a sweet, freckled, red-headed girl wearing a Holly Hobby t-shirt. She had her mother's eyes and her father's smile. Tony had never seen Gibbs smile like that.

"What do you say, Gibbs?" he asked, letting his boss choose which question he wanted to answer.

"I say that a lot of changes are coming." He raised his head, looking into Tony's eyes. "And I can't think of a better place to start."

~ ~ ~

*Three Weeks Later*

The Secretary of the Navy closed the file with a sigh, and then set his glasses down on top of it. "You're sure about this, Tom?"

"Never been surer, sir." Morrow leaned back in his desk chair. "Besides, my wife likes it here. In DC. And she's looking forward to doing something about those orange walls downstairs when our new budget comes in next year."

"You're essentially laying your career on the line here. Telling us that these two agents' wishes are more important than you advancing up the ladder. You know that?"

"I'm fully aware that my recommendations for Gibbs and DiNozzo may rub some people the wrong way. People who don't have the foresight to see where NCIS could go with these two at the helm of a stable, independent MCRT, free of the kinds of demands that would have either - or both - compromised in any way." Morrow rose to refill his visitor's glass and then top off his own. He perched on the edge of his desk, arms crossed, facing the man who could undo everything he and Gibbs and DiNozzo had worked for for the past few months. "It's not that much to ask," he shrugged. "No undercover ops for DiNozzo. No black ops for Gibbs. Keep them working together, leading the team, until and unless they prove ineffectual."

"You're tying yourself to their tails, Tom. No other agency is going to want to move you up with this kind of baggage weighing you down."

"Baggage?" Morrow smiled. "I don't think of Gibbs and DiNozzo as baggage." He held up a hand to ask for the Sec Nav's patience. "Yes, the redacted parts of their files look bad, but that's why I'm asking for those portions to be permanently sealed. Deleted. Honestly, it's the best thing for them and for NCIS."

"But if this comes back to bite us …"

"That's why I'm withdrawing my name from the resume pool. If I stay here, as director of NCIS, there's no reason for any investigation into my file, or theirs. Consider it a way to cover all the bases while keeping the winning team on the field."

The Sec Nav drank the last of his scotch and pushed to his feet. "Consider the selected portions of their files deleted." He pointed towards Morrow. "And your ass permanently welded to that chair. There's no going back from here, Tom."

Morrow shook his hand. "I've been advised that it's healthier to look forward rather than back. And that's advice I intend to take."

The bullpen was quiet - the kind of quiet that came with the wrap-up of a frustrating case. Morrow
leaned on the railing, watching, listening. DiNozzo and Todd had returned last night from Paraguay, the dangerous Tri-Border Area. The case of Guyman Purcell, double-agent and pedophile. And murderer. The intelligence community had cleaned up its own mess this time. After Gibbs' team had forced their hand.

"Seriously, a set of disembodied blue eyes isn't the strangest thing you've ever seen go through the mail?" McGee asked.

"Nope," Tony replied shortly. "Not even close."

"Kate?"

"Sorry, Tim. Gross, yes, but not the weirdest."

"Okay, so what was it?" the young agent insisted.

Kate and DiNozzo met each other's eyes across the bullpen before rising to meet in front of their Probie's desk.

"When I was in the Secret Service, we got a shipment on dry ice delivered to the White House. The president was very excited, had it brought into the Oval Office. He thought it was the steaks he'd ordered from a ranch in Texas."

"What was it?" Morrow could see McGee's throat working all the way upstairs.

"Rocky Mountain Oysters," she said with a smirk. She leaned in. "Bull testicles, McGee. Ten pounds of bull testicles."

"They're considered a delicacy," DiNozzo added.

"Yuck," McGee turned a light green. "Okay, what about you, Tony? Can you beat that?"

DiNozzo glanced across the aisle towards Gibbs, sitting calmly at his desk, sipping from an extra-large coffee. "Well, I didn't exactly open it."

"I knew it! You've got nothing," Kate crowed, poking her teammate in the chest.

"I opened it," Gibbs added, loud and clear, interrupting Todd's celebration. "But DiNozzo got the first whiff. Threw up on my shoes."

"Aw, c'mon, Boss, you didn't have to throw that in."

"What was in the package?" McGee asked, his voice hesitant.

"Look up NCIS Case Number 965-DF-88441. There are pictures." Gibbs stood, turning his computer off with the flick of a finger. "See for yourself." He lingered behind his desk for a moment, brushing one hand along the picture frame that took pride of place beside his monitor. "Pack it up, people. DiNozzo and I are meeting at 0800 tomorrow, so grab some cold cases in the morning. We'll be in by 1100." He swept around his desk, pausing beside his team, waiting for the moment McGee's fast fingers found what he was looking for, and …

"Oh! That is - no, that is gross!"

"How did that even make it through our package security?" Todd asked, turning away from the grisly picture.
Tony had shared a grin with Gibbs before moving back towards his desk. "Times change, Katie. Now we have all kinds of safeguards in place to make sure nothing gets through to the bullpen that isn't vetted. X-rayed. Checked for bomb or infectious disease residue. Or, you know, human body parts."

"Yeah, I heard someone tried to send some cocaine through the mail. Morrow's new protocols caught it before the entire mailroom got high." He'd grabbed his weapon and his coat and turned off his desk lamp. "Cowboy steaks, Gibbs? I'm buying."

"See you at seven, Tony."

"Probie. Kate." Tony followed Gibbs towards the stairs.

Morrow was about to turn away when he realized Todd and McGee were still talking.

"You know, Kate. I wasn't sure - I mean, I'm glad it all worked out, but, I was worried about Tony going to Paraguay. So soon after - you know."

"Me, too, Tim. But, I'll tell you, he was pretty amazing. Calm. Confident." She shook her head. "He put me in my place. And, I deserved it."

"Really?"

"Really." She looked after her team lead and SFA. "I hate to say this, but maybe therapy isn't such a bad idea. If it can help Tony and Gibbs…"

"…two of the most pig-headed and stubborn men on the planet…"

She laughed. "Agreed. Well, things are better, don't you think?"

McGee rose. "I do. Dinner?"

"Sorry, I'm meeting my sister. It's been a while."

"Well, tell her thank-you for me."

Todd tilted her head, watching her teammate head out. "For me, too," she murmured.

Morrow smiled and turned back to his office. "Miranda - order two dozen roses to be sent to Doctor Rachel Cranston."

His secretary reached for the phone. "On the card, sir?"

"Thank you. And Semper Fi."

Chapter End Notes

A million thank-yous for all those reading, leaving kudos, bookmarking, and sending me such rich, great comments. It's finally finished, and, as hard as that last chapter was to write, I hope it sends the team on its way with hope for a brighter future than what we saw on the screen. Please take a moment to tell me what you thought.

Spoilers for Season 2 episode An Eye for An Eye.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!