Serieux

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Summary

For anyone who bothers to look beyond the man's ever present smoke and mirrors, it's pretty clear that Tony is a highly flawed, complicated and complex individual. Sure he has secrets he won't talk about, and not just the so-called extenuating circumstances in Philadelphia either. Still, no one had a clue that he hides the mother of all secrets, one that could rip apart the fabric of society if it were ever to come to light. After almost two decades though Tony feels like his secret is fairly safe, which only goes to show that he should never let his guard down...not ever.

Notes

Over the last few years, I've written more than my fair share of 'Tony leaving the team' type stories. So when it was announced several months ago that Michael Weatherly was leaving the show I wasn't tempted to write another one... until now. The catalyst for this story was actually another one I wrote last year but have yet to upload. I was going back and tweaking it - like I do periodically with anything I haven't posted. Bad habit btw! Anyhoo - it is a tag from season 5 which raised some issues about Tony's past, and it suddenly hit me that all the questions we have about his background and have hoped that someday might be addressed, even if the explanation was lame, ain't going to happen. So I decided it was time to address the freaking huge elephant in the room.

So Serieux somehow came into being when it occurred to me how to explain a great deal of the discrepancies that have greatly annoyed me over the years but I had to resort to some rather extreme measures to do so. Perhaps that's why it was always ignored on the show...or
more likely the powers that be weren't ever aware/concerned about it.

This is tongue in cheek - parts of it anyway. It is part satire/parody, part analysis/introspection with a smidgeon of payback thrown in and is absolutely AU. I can also guarantee that this isn't how TD leaves the show. It isn't beta'ed because I wanted to post it prior to the end of season 13, so it's still somewhat rough. My apologies in advance for any boo boos. I'll also warn Gibbs fans now that this is not particularly complimentary so you might want to skip it, or read it at your own risk.

Disclaimer: I don't own any of these characters and I'm making no money off the story. This is for entertainment purposes only.
Rule # five

Tobias Fornell groaned. His mouth felt as if a canary had mistaken it for the bottom of its birdcage and decided to crap in it. Too much booze, too much red wine, too much whiskey and definitely far too much rich food last night. Now he was paying the price for their night of overindulgence. Dragging himself into the shower and dressing, he headed for the coffee pot that had been brewing since he hit the shower. He sucked down several cups of caffeine before he could even think about heading into the office.

Hearing a soft footfall, he looked up, seeing his houseguest looking bright eyed and bushytailed as she made her way to the coffee pot and helped herself to a cup of coffee and added milk. He decided right then that he hated her, since she’d overindulged just as much as he had and yet she looked none the worse for wear. He guessed it was a sign of his incipient old age. How depressing!

His feelings of resentment towards his guest weren’t improved as she smiled brightly at him, greeting him cheerily.

“Morning Toby. Want me to cook us something hot for breakfast. I’m starving!”

Fornell scowled. First off he hated being called Toby, second - he was in no shape for food, not even the thought of food. Last and definitely not least, his hangover had left him with a pounding headache.

“Hangover.” He managed to force out before gulping more coffee.

She shook her head; Tobias wasn’t sure if it was condemnation or sympathy. Skewering him with a stern gaze and a pat on the shoulder, she departed the kitchen with a, “Wait right there.”

He assumed she was going for some aspirin or something similar. A gun would be really welcome so he could shoot himself, but instead she returned with a vial of something foul looking. And green. Giving it to him, she instructed him firmly, “Drink it, Toby.”

Looking at it and then at her, his stomach gave a heave. “What the hell is it?” he managed to ground out.

“It’s a hangover remedy. It’ll either kill you or cure you,” she joked. “Drink up!”

Since death would be a welcome release at the moment, he shrugged. Holding his nose, Fornell chugged it down in one go before he could chicken out. At first he thought it was just going to come straight back up again since it was vile tasting. Valiantly resisting the urge to up-chuck, he felt like some strange alchemy was taking place. First it was in his head, then it moved down to his stomach and spread out to his fingers and toes, leaving him feel all tingly. Miraculously, he found his head clear, his mouth fresh and his stomach was settled. Unbelievably, he was suddenly famished.

“Feel better?” Smiling brown eyes scrutinized him carefully.

“Holy shit, that was incredible. Disgusting but incredible.” Tobias enthused.

Frowning, his female companion smacked his wrist lightly. “Language, Toby,” she admonished him before hustling into the kitchen and starting to cook a hot breakfast for them both.
As he watched the young woman with the glossy chestnut locks bustle around his kitchen cooking mushroom and cheese omelettes, he pondered her hangover cure. Somewhere, at the furthest reaches of his mind he remembered something about hangover cures but he couldn’t recall what it was. Maybe if he slept on it, it would come to him.

As he left the house a while later, she called after him. “Make sure you bring him home with you tonight, Toby. I have to know if it’s really him.”

“It’s him, Hon. I’d stake my pension on it but I’ll drag him home tonight if at all possible - unless we get a case.”

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Tobias sighed as he pulled up in his driveway. No cases today so they should get their answers tonight. DiNozzo would be turning up soon, no doubt extremely curious about why he’d insisted he come to dinner. Granted their professional relationship had been fairly rocky over the years, twice Fornell had been heading up murder investigations centred upon DiNozzo as the prime suspect.

Honestly, the man was a trouble magnet. Attracted shit like no one he’d ever met with the possible exception of Gibbs, except that Jethro actively went out looking for it. Tony seemed to just attract it, or perhaps it was being in such close proximity to Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

DiNozzo, although Fornell had taken pity on him at Thanksgiving and dragged him home for dinner, was not exactly a close friend and therefore been nonplussed to be invited round for dinner tonight. When pressed for information, Fornell just grinned mysteriously, saying a mutual friend was eager to catch up with him again. He noticed the speculative expression on Tony’s face before he tried to make an excuse to get out of coming over.

It was highly apparent to Tobias that the NCIS agent was feeling low, had been for a while. It was after all why he’d invited him over to spend Thanksgiving Dinner with himself and Emily, who’d come home for the holiday.

He'd found Tony alone in the NCIS bull pen at the end of their joint case, having declined to spend what was left of the holiday with the team, sans Bishop and Gibbs. Fornell, figuring that misery loved company had brought Tony back home to share what was bound to be a crappy dinner. It was Emily’s first holiday since the death of Diane and it was always going to be an extremely difficult one for his daughter and himself to get through.

Having the NCIS agent with them helped both of them, and he suspected that it also helped Tony too since he would have understood how hard it was for his daughter. He knew that DiNozzo had also lost his own mother when he was young. Being able to help each other had been mutually helpful for everyone.

And since DC was a pretty insular environment, it didn’t take much to get tongues wagging, so it wasn’t rocket science to figure out why Tony was so glum. Everyone knew that Gibbs was being an absolute prick to DiNozzo, and considering how Gibbs normally treated his team, particularly his 2IC, aka his loyal St Bernard - that was saying something. Fornell knew that even Gibbs’ friends and staunchest of supporters, Dr Donald Mallard and Dr Abby Sciuto - who were perpetually blind to Jethro’s flaws, had noticed how bad the abuse had become.

They were both trying their damnedest to put a positive spin on it. So the Spin-Twin Doctors’ slant was that Gibbs was pushing his baby bird i.e. Tony out of the nest to spread his wings. Apparently he was doing this because it was now time after 15 years for him to grow. Not seemingly 14 years ago or ten years, but 15 years being the ‘magic’ number for him to go forth and become a momma
bird to his own little baby birds.

Okay…okay that was more Sciuto’s version than Mallard’s but the gist was the same. Ducky’s narrative was more focused on tough love but the subtext remained. Gibbs was kicking him to the curb because he needed to spread his wings and fly away and absolutely nothing to do with him getting shot by Daniel Budd and nearly dying.

As theories go it was not a bad one – if you discounted a lot of facts. Salient facts. But that explanation didn’t cut it as far as Fornell was concerned – apart from the arbitrary nature of the 15 years. After all it was common knowledge amongst feds that DiNozzo should have been leading his own team years ago. He’d lead the MCRT more than adequately a decade ago back in 2006. So it took Gibbs ten years to realise and it had nothing to do with getting shot?

All that aside though, Tony wasn’t some pansy assed, delicate little rookie – he was an extremely experienced agent, who could have handled a professional evaluation from his boss. One where Jethro told him his skills and experience were exemplary and that he was being wasted as his second in charge after such a lot of years.

He would have coped with a recommendation from Gibbs to start looking at higher level positions, it would not have fazed him, nor broken him. The fact that the gunny never gave DiNozzo positive reinforcement – even when he performed superhuman feats, would guarantee that such a discussion, if it had taken place, would have been more than adequate to push him out of the nest.

If Gibbs real agenda had been to stop him wasting his talent, it would have allowed him to leave the MCRT with his head held high, thrilled because Gibbs was proud of him and believed in his ability. Instead, the man was desperately unhappy, questioning his whole life, his sense of self-worth and second guessing his skills, achievements and if he had a purpose or value.

So his low self-esteem was not helped at all by the way Gibbs had sidelined him this year and wasted his skills. It was heartbreaking to see Gibbs was definitely ignoring his own Rule 5 - Don’t waste good! When Tony finally left – and he would slink off, his tail between his legs because he knew Gibbs didn’t want or need him anymore, he would be a shadow of the brashly confident young cop Gibbs had snatched away from the Baltimore PD 15 years ago.

Talk about using him up and spitting him out when he’d reached his use by date. Fornell was less than impressed with Gibbs behaviour.

Tobias was certain Tony felt incredible guilt that Gibbs got shot and almost died, feeling he’d failed his team leader because he hadn’t prevented it. That was balderdash, complete and utter drivel. The truth was that Jethro could always be sucker punched by a pretty female or a cute/pathetic kid with a sob story and once on a mission to save them, he wasn’t going to listen to any of his team. It was a miracle this hadn’t happened before this.

So if Jethro was trying to force him to leave, and that seemed to be beyond doubt, then it seemed to Tobias that his real motivation was far less altruistic and far more selfish than worrying that Tony was wasting his talent. He strongly suspected that the former Marine actually was setting him up to fail by destroying his faith in himself, although he wasn’t sure if it was a conscious decision or subconscious.

Regardless, it went beyond the pale for him to treat a loyal partner like that, especially someone who’d had his back for 15 years. Fifteen Gibbs years which in his opinion were much longer than normal years. He demanded that his team be available and reachable 24/7, that work took precedent over any home life, that they work interminable hours and often skipped meal, that they unquestioningly observed all of his rules, while he ignored them when it suited. Tobias was fairly
sure that a fifteen-year stretch in prison probably passed quicker than the time Tony had spent working with Gibbs.

The undeniable fact was that Gibbs had returned from his life threatening shooting, angry at the whole damned world, but seemingly angriest at Tony. Tobias wasn’t sure if it was because he did blame Tony for him getting shot, not that it was his 2IC’s fault. He’d seen the security footage – Gibbs froze instead of reacting against the threat because of who it was. Still it wouldn’t be the first time that Gibbs had blamed DiNozzo when the senior field agent was blameless, or punished him unjustly, either.

For example, when he’d been explicitly ordered not to reveal the existence of what turned out to be an ‘unauthorised’ undercover mission for then NCIS director, Jenny Shepard, who was also Jethro’s former probie. Gibbs had been pissed off with him that he hadn’t disobeyed a direct order from the director of the agency, when the truth was that he wasn’t even in the country or Tony’s superior when the operation was conceived. Considering how badly he’d treated him when he decided to return after retiring and leaving DiNozzo to deal with the consequences of his massive tantrum, Gibbs petty fit of pique over The Frog was exceedingly arrogant and high handed. Even for him!

Plus, Gibbs had definitely blamed Tony for following a direct order from Director Jenny Shepard to stand down when she selfishly decided to commit ‘suicide by Russian dirtbags’ in the California desert. This was a variation of ‘suicide by cop’ but equally deadly and effective, chosen because she was dying and she’d wanted to go out in a blaze of glory.

Oh sure, Jethro told DiNozzo it wasn’t his fault but his actions belied those words. When Tony was deployed as agent afloat, he made no attempt to stay in contact with his former SFA. If it hadn’t been for Abby hassling her Silver Fox to bring him home, Tobias doubted very much that Jethro would have bothered dragging him back to DC.

Fornell felt pretty certain the real reason Jethro finally got his head out of his ass to bring DiNozzo home again was that Leon Vance didn’t want him back. So dragging him back from the Sea Hawk had been a definite slap in the face for the new Director, who’d backed down and let him stay. The pair had been engaging in typical alpha dog posturing to prove who was top dog ever since he’d taken up the directorship and it had been one nil to Gibbs.

The reason Tobias was so sure about his motivation for bring Tony home was because one sure fired way to get Gibbs to do something, even if he didn’t want to, was to order him not to do it. Worked a treat and he could attest to its effectiveness, since it worked for him every time! Want Jethro’s help on a difficult case – tell him to keep his damned mitts off and the stubborn bastard was immediately thumbing his nose at him and the FBI, knee deep in the investigation.

And as contrary as Gibbs could be (some would say childish) when told he had to do something, he could be equally unforgiving and vindictive when he felt slighted or wronged. It was pretty damned obvious that the whole Domino fubar, keeping his 2IC out of the loop was a petty tit-for-tat tactic to get even for La Grenouille and/or the debacle in the desert with the director. Personally, Tobias thought the real fiasco was when the SecNav appointed such an unsuitable candidate as Shepard for director of NCIS in the first place.

From where he was standing, Gibbs was really pissed off at Tony, maybe because he was shot, maybe because DiNozzo was a constant reminder that he let himself get shot and nearly died. Not to mention he was a witness to Jethro’s massive failure, which would surely be eating away at him. Knowing Jethro as he did, Tobias would hazard a guess he was also furious about not taking down Budd, since the man lived, ate and breathed retribution.
Tony along with the CIA and DHS, managed to thwart him in his self-appointed role in taking down the latest bad guy - who in this instance was Daniel Budd. He'd even managed to be the hero and save Luke Harris where Gibbs had failed. From Gibbs point of view, Tony had robbed him of what he probably saw as his Gibbs-given right for vengeance. Honestly though, had Jethro really expected that NCIS, DHS and the CIA should all grind to a halt, wait months for him to get back on his feet and cleared to return to the field, just so he could take Budd down?

In retrospect, the former Marine probably did feel it even if he didn’t think it, but apart from the inherent narcissism of such a desire – what about the innocent individuals at risk from this terrorist while he was recovering? The truth was that no one, not even Gibbs was indispensable and therein lay the rub, as far as Fornell could see.

DC chatter was that Tony had been a consummate professional, working the joint op with the CIA and DHS, to take down the lowlife who was courting and corrupting disenfranchised youths. He’d also taken especially good care of Joanna Teague’s six, who as a CIA agent, was on the joint task force to capture her son, Ned Dornaget’s killer. DiNotzo had been highly protective of Teague, stopping her from falling into the trap of killing Budd in white hot vengeance.

He’d made a genuine attempt to apprehend Daniel Budd, shooting to disarm so the terrorist could be interrogated and brought to trial to answer for the crimes against Ned and all the others whose lives were lost. Budd clearly had no intention of being taken alive though, and Tony had taken the kill shot, by the book, because unlike Gibbs, no matter how much he might want revenge, he believed in upholding the law more. It was another enigma that continued to puzzle Tobias when it came to DiNotzo. Unlike the rest of his team, the former cop believed in observing the law while he was enforcing it.

Still, Fornell didn’t think that blaming Tony for getting shot and being pissed off that he’d to taken down Budd sans Gibbs, was the only thing that had stuck in Jethro’s craw. He suspected his wrath was far more complex and also much more primitive than that and he decided that it wasn’t all that shocking he’d had a meltdown in the bull pen. Too much anger – too little processing.

He had a hunch that Gibbs being forced to take extended sick leave while Tony lead the team was a bitter pill for him to swallow, since Gibbs WAS the job. He had nothing else to fall back on and too much time to brood on that fact and the inevitable truth. To be perfectly blunt, Fornell felt the Marine was getting past it - as this latest fubar with Budd amply demonstrated. He should retire from field work, because it was clear, following the shooting that he was a liability.

Even if he could still pass the physical requirements, his vulnerabilities including children, widows and females, especially when they played the surrogate daughter card, made him extremely vulnerable in the field. Emotionally he was a liability – it was pure luck that no one else had been hurt when he froze out there in the field.

Which was all by the by, since no one asked for the opinion of one aging FBI agent on Jethro exceeding his use by date. However, from what Tobias had heard via the DC grapevine, Gibbs had only been permitted to come back, albeit on desk duty, purely because Tony was in Hong Kong chasing down Budd and Vance decided Bishop and McGee needed a senior agent’s supervision.

If his 2IC hadn’t been off chasing down Budd, Fornell very much doubted that Vance would have ever entertained the idea of him returning early, even in a very limited capacity. The director had restricted him to desk duty, which would undoubtedly have hurt the arrogant git’s pride and made him resent Tony even more. A definite case of the aging old lion looking at his successor and trying to figure out how to buy himself a few more years.

Of course once he had his foot in the door, Gibbs refused to follow orders to confine himself to
desk duty but hell, that was 100 percent predictable. As far as Tobias was concerned, Leon Vance was an idiot if he expected Gibbs to stay out of the field, as ordered.

Tobias suspected Jethro was experiencing feelings of grief as he realised he wasn’t as indispensable as he liked to think he was, and he probably hated that DiNotzo could stand in for him so successfully. Combine all that seething grief and resentment with the humiliating realisation he fucked up big time with the kid he’d befriended and then let down, which must be extremely galling for him. Toss in not being able to feed his Revenge Monster for all that pain by hunting down and killing Daniel Budd - his usual method of coping with emotional pain. That was a helluva lot of negative emotions for even a person who was well adjusted to deal with.

What it added up to was way too much anger – Gibbs default emotional setting and absolutely no way for it bleed off. It meant he was always going to end up taking it out on a convenient target, in this case his ever loyal personal whipping boy, Anthony DiNotzo. Unfortunately, at least in his own mind, he also had good reasons to be angry with him and for that he’d been pitiless.

As if that wasn’t enough, there was also his near death experience that he was yet to properly acknowledge, let alone deal with in a healthy manner. Fornell was no shrink but he figured it had to be complicating Gibbs attitude and recovery. Realisation that he wasn’t going to be the top dog field agent for too much longer and nothing else to fill the void, must surely be impacting. The truth was that Jethro had no family and very few friends. He’d made damned sure he pushed away everybody who cared about him, preferring to live with ghosts - Shannon, Kelly and Mike Franks.

Recently…well until the jerk cheated on his Bishop, Gibbs’ best bud had been his probie’s hubby – a NSA lawyer of all things and a relationship that in Tobias’ opinion rather questionable. Currently, his pal cum father-confessor was Dr Taft, the surgeon that dug the bullets out of his body and saved him, since he’d done such a bang up job of alienating everyone else in his life.

Included an unwaveringly loyal partner who’d had his six for longer than all four of his marriages combined. And as Fornell readily admitted, Jethro’s unpleasant personality traits meant that there wasn’t exactly a plethora of people stepping up to be his friend. On a good day, Jethro deliberately pissed off the few people who’d tolerated all his shit over the years.

Hells bells, even his enemies knew that apart from THE JOB, he had nothing and no one in his life. When Sergei Mishnev - last year’s arch nemesis was seeking a murder victim who was close to Gibbs, to make him suffer, he’d discovered that there wasn’t anyone. Which was why Mishnev had resorted to killing his ex-wife Diane. There wasn’t anyone else, except perhaps Abby. And how pathetic was that? Yeah, okay – he was still bitter that Emily had lost her mother because Diane had foolishly married a man incapable of loving her but it didn’t alter the facts

Tobias sat there in his car, contemplating the behaviour of the veteran NCIS agent, who he’d long considered a friend, for want of a better way to classify their relationship, although lord knows, he didn’t like him much at the moment. Meanwhile Tony pulled up in the driveway behind him, blocking him in. Looking at his watch, Fornell realised he’d been wool gathering for the last twenty or so minutes.

Climbing stiffly out of his agency vehicle, he cursed the fact that he wasn’t a spring chicken anymore as his knees creaked in protest. If anyone could understand Jethro’s angst about getting old and becoming irrelevant it was Tobias. Still he wasn’t going to condone him taking it out on others – that was the coward’s way.

Stretching his spine as it popped satisfyingly, he walked over to Tony’s car and opened the door as DiNotzo stepped out, giving the fibbie a weak smile. Fornell studied Tony critically, noting the dispirited air, the slumped posture that screamed defeat and self-doubt. Tobias really wanted to
head on over to Alexandria and shoot Gibbs in the ass with his Glock and then punch the bastard in the chops or maybe the nose. Hell why not both?

While he’d found DiNotzo infuriating and often extremely annoying, especially when he’d first met him, he’d gradually come to realise that it was mostly an act to hide an incredible complex personality away from prying eyes. But regardless, Tony had always exuded joie de vivre, a mercurial quality, some called it a zest for life, even if it was all just a performance. The fact that he didn’t or couldn’t be bothered faking it anymore spoke volumes about how low he must really be feeling.

As he dragged the beaten man through his front door, Tobias found himself having second thoughts. Was it right to do this to him when he was so down, so obviously depressed? Did they have the right to take advantage of him when he couldn’t fight back?

And yet there really was no going back, not since the night he’d taken pity and dragged the poor sap home with him for a pathetic Thanksgiving Dinner with himself and Emily. The dye had been cast and Tobias couldn’t go back and undo the past, even if he wanted to.

That night several months ago, Tony was still reeling from the first bruising encounter with the self-confessed love of his life, Jeanne Benoit. Plus, his relationship with DEA agent and former colleague at Philly PD, Zoe Keates, was in trouble. Who’d have thought a barely edible turkey dinner, a few drinks and a teenager with a cell phone, taking a bunch of selfies and uploading them to a plethora of social media sites would have had such an earth shattering consequences.

The fibbie couldn’t help feeling that tonight was going to be a major disaster but maybe he was wrong; perhaps it would be DiNotzo’s salvation. God knows, Tobias hoped so or he’d have to shoot himself along with Gibbs for kicking a wounded dog when he was down.

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“Where’s Emily?” Tony queried casually as he wandered through Fornell’s comfy house towards the kitchen, making a beeline for the fridge, although Tobias made it there first and took out three bottles of beer.

“Back at school again. She said to say hi.” He replied, handing him the bottle he’d opened, before taking a second bottle and walking towards a second person who was stirring something on the stove.

Tony blanched, realising he’d missed the fact that there was a third person in the kitchen, a person of the assuredly female persuasion. More evidence that he was a crap investigator with no situational awareness. Of course Gibbs wanted him gone – with skills like his he’d get his team injured. Well he’d already nearly cost Gibbs his life. No wonder the man couldn’t stand to be round him anymore.

Tony looked at the slim figure with the shining chestnut locks, cascading down her back in a riot of curls and he groaned. He hoped that Fornell hadn’t decided to play matchmaker. With the end of his relationship with Zoe and the emotional fallout of meeting Jeanne again after all these years, he simply wasn’t feeling up to a blind date with someone he didn’t know. Not even someone he had a passing acquaintance with, since the FBI agent had mentioned something about a mutual friend.

But not even someone as well-meaning as Fornell – and wasn’t that a freak-out that the guy who used to try to arrest him for murder was now looking out for him, could fix up his ills with a blind date.

As the young woman turned around slowly, he noted in passing her long legs, her lithe body
dressed in a simple elegant white shirt and well-worn jeans that hugged her curves, before his eyes travelled up to her face. He wasn’t in the mood for any romantic liaisons despite what Tobias might be planning, but that didn’t stop him observing her clinically with the practised, but dispassionate eye of a connoisseur. This was a beautiful young woman who was probably in her mid-thirties.

Her beautiful brown eyes exuded warmth and intelligence as well as an unspeakable depths of pain which stared at him, hungrily. Searchingly.

Then she smiled brilliantly, showing perfectly straight white teeth before she ran towards him, arms outstretched as she seized him in a bearlike hug that took his breath away. It was fierce. It was desperate and there was no physical distance between them as she plastered her body up against him and refused to let go.

She gave a half sob, half titter before sighing deeply as she admonished him, but gently.

“It’s been a long time, Anthony DiNozzo Junior. Far too long or perhaps you’d prefer it if I call you by your real name…”
Distantly Related

Chapter Summary

So the identity of Fornell's guest is revealed and how she knows Tony. Plus his mother of all secrets is revealed. And it's a doozy!

Chapter Notes

So here we are at the parody/satire part of the story. There are two enormous elephants in the room concerning DiNozzo's back story and I've found a way to explain them both. It only required me to adopt OTT explanations using a crossover but I'm not responsible for the retconning and continuity errors that caused it – I'm just fixing it! So now I have to confession to make – I'm really, really nervous since, this isn't logical crossover like using another police procedural would be. I've never actually written a crossover fic before (borrowed a character or two) but not like this. The truth is I'm dabbling in the largest fandom and feeling very much out of my depth. I hope the fans will go easy on me.

This story isn’t beta’ed and I haven’t had the luxury of doing innumerable drafts like I would normally do before posting this unfortunately, so apologies in advance for errors. If there is something huge I’d appreciate a heads up so I can fix it. Remember – I did say parody. :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony registered her words in a haze as he felt her hug him tighter, instead of releasing him. He glanced over at Fornell who was watching the exchange with an unreadable expression on his worn face.

Gently trying to extract himself from the strangely familiar young woman, he tried to place where he knew her from. Clearly she was someone he encountered during an undercover operation since she had called him out on his identity and he’d done a lot of ops over the years. But Tony felt like this beautiful woman wasn’t military and she definitely was one of the countless working girls he’d encountered, either as a homicide detective or when working narcotics in Baltimore. Or Peoria PD or Philly PD as a humble unie either. Granted the pain he saw in her eyes, the eyes of an old soul, could be explained by her living on the streets or owned by some lowlife pimp. Yet she had an innocence, a freshness about her that made him certain she’d never been a working girl.

Perhaps she was someone he’d encountered when he spent a year undercover with the Macalusos, although she didn’t look or sound Italian. Actually she didn’t even sound American; actually she sounded very British. Searching his memory for someone he had encounter who was British and coming up empty, he decided that being able to fully expand his lungs was something he aspired to do.

Finally extracting himself from the limpet-like grip, he observed her carefully.
She watched him too, noting the lack of recognition in his eyes. “You really don’t recognise me, do you Snuffles. We thought you were dead…” She watched in horror as the man in front of her finally figured out who she was and ended up in a full blown panic attack.

Moaning as he started to hyperventilate, “But you can’t. I can’t. This cannot be happening. I’ve been so careful; I followed the rules... nooooo you weren’t supposed to find me.”

Watching Tony decompensate before their eyes, as lack of oxygen started to affect not just his emotional state but his consciousness, Tobias decided his premonition was coming true. It took a hell of a lot to scare the shit out of DiNozzo and for him to panic like that it had to be bad. Grabbing the semiconscious man between them and guiding him into the living room, they steered him towards the sofa. Lowering him down onto the cushions just in time it would seem, as he finally lost consciousness.

His house guest disappeared into the guest bedroom which she’d been using and reappeared momentarily with several vials clutched tightly in her hand, her expression puzzled and concerned. Fornell started at the vials - remedies he assumed and at Tony and then something clicked. This morning – the hangover cure.

“That’s it! The DiNozzo Defibrillator!” he exclaimed triumphantly

“The what?”

“That hangover remedy you gave me this morning. I’ve seen it before – Tony calls it the DiNozzo Defibrillator.”

“It’s magic.”

“I know. Nothing works that well.” Fornell stated emphatically.

She smiled as she attempted to get the contents of the vials past his lips. “I can’t believe after all this time that it’s him. I mean, I told myself it was him but until I set eyes on him, I wasn’t totally positive…you know? Harry will be absolutely beside himself when he finds out. She shook her head bemusedly.

As they watched Tony gradually come around, Tobias looked at his dinner guest appraisingly. I hope we won’t end up regretting this. He hardly seemed thrilled to see you.”

“How can you even think it. For almost twenty years we thought he was dead and now here he is alive and living here for all those years. It’s a miracle!”

Fornell shook his head, “Granted it sounds like it but Tony must have a have had a damned good reason to pretend to be dead all this time. Enough to cause him to pass out in a genuine old fashion faint.”

“DiNozzo’s don’t faint,” a familiar voice replied irritably.

“Perhaps… but you aren’t a DiNozzo. You’re a Black…Sirius Orion Black to be precise,” his female companion retorted, as Tony noted automatically that she was holding his hand in a fierce grip. Like she was afraid he might disappear into thin air. Which right about now sounded like a very good idea.

Sighing in defeat, he looked at her, seeing her keen intelligence and recognising that the dye was already cast. “Hermione Granger… is that really you?”
“Yes Padfoot, it’s really me…although technically it’s Hermione Wealsey now.”

Tony/Sirius eyed her with frank admiration. “You were a pretty young teenager, but Merlin’s beard, you’re a stunningly gorgeous woman, Hermione. Yet I can’t believe you didn’t marry my god-son. You two were made for each other.”

She snorted, “Why does everyone say that?” she asked aggrievedly.

“Because you two were like ying and yang, I would imagine. So why didn’t you…wait! Is he…tell me he’s not dead?” he demanded in a strangled tone, turning pale and sweaty, starting to panic all over again.

Throwing her arms around the distraught man, she gave him another bear hug. “He’s fine, Sirius although he’s going to completely freak out when he learns you’re alive.”

“So Hermione Weasley… you married Bill or Charley, I presume. Can’t imagine you marrying that prat Percy, or Fred or George for that matter.” Tony declared.

“No Sirius, I married Ron.”

“You’re joking, I trust.”

Hermione looked angry. “No I’m serious and don’t say it, Snuffles.” She warned tartly, arms folded in a don’t mess with me stance.

Holding up his hands, palms facing forward in submission, he protested. “I wasn’t planning on it. I’m Anthony DiNozzo now, Hermione. Sirius is dead,” he declared with finality.

And before she could reply he continued. “So all due respect to Ron but you were the smartest witch of your age. Ambitious, driven to succeed and Ron… well let’s just say he wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box or the most ambitious of wizards. Hell Hermione, a sloth has more ambition.

“But, more importantly, from what I observed and Harry said, you two used to fight like cat and dog. Plus Ron used to make you cry on a regular basis. Forgive me but those minor details are not the most promising indicators for relationship success.” Tony shook his head in amazement at he stared at the gorgeous woman before him.

“I’m sorry but I just never saw you two as being compatible. You were too good for him back then and you are definitely waaaay out of his league now, my dear girl. I hope he realises that!”

He noticed her flushing with embarrassment, so he filled in the silence like he usually did. “So is your lesser half here too, or is he holding down the fort at home?” he enquired curiously.

Fornell choked on his beer and Hermione just looked sad. “No, he’s dead.”

Tony/Sirius sat up, extracted his foot from his mouth and drew the younger witch into his arms. “I’m so sorry, Hermione. What happened to him.”

“A bludger hit him in the heart during a quidditch match and he went into cardiac arrest. He was the goal keeper for the Chudley Cannons, his life’s ambition. If I’d been there at the match I could have tried CPR and in all probability, saved his life.

“I’m sure you’ll agree that while the magical world might be superior in healing many illnesses and injuries, non-magical medicine is far superior is way ahead in some crucial areas and cardiac
“And you’re right, Sirius. We weren’t a good match… our marriage was as tumultuous as our friendship. I spent much of it in tears, but we were young and foolish when we got together and married. I’m not sure why, with the extended lifespan of witches and wizards that we’re encouraged to pair off and marry so early on in life.”

“To make babies because of how many squibs the purebloods produce due to their inbreeding. Plus, witches are less choosy when they are young, easier to manipulate.” Tony/Sirius retorted cynically.

If I’d been a few years older and wiser, I’d have realised that we were too different, too incompatible for a relationship to work long term. But that’s all academic now.” She sighed, her mood suddenly melancholy.

Changing the subject adroitly, Tony/Sirius patted the pensive witch on the back awkwardly. “And what brings you to the US Hermione?”

“You, Sirius. I came to find you.”


Fornell looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Ah…well that would be Emily, I’m afraid,” he apologised.

“I don’t understand.”

“Emily posted the photo’s she took at Thanksgiving when I dragged you home with me for dinner on her Facebook page and Instagram and Twitter accounts.”

“Okaaaay,” Tony/Sirius drawled. “So how did Hermione find out about it in Britain?”

Hermione laughed, “Did you forget that I’m a muggle born witch, Padfoot?”

“I prefer to use the term non-magical these days, kiddo seeing as how this is the world I live in now, and no, I didn’t forget. But since when do witches use social media, cell phones or computers?”

“Well, my kids have grown up around them, thanks to my parents. They are equally at home in both worlds, which I am eternally grateful for. I even sent them to regular school when they were little and they have trust funds for when they go to University.”

“Wow, I bet Molly had something to say about that!” the NCIS agent quipped sarcastically.

Shrugging Hermione “Let’s just say that there was some animated discussion.” She said diplomatically, describing the stoush with her mother-in-law, who was something of a dragon and used to getting her own way.

Tony looked at her admiringly. Ever since the witch had helped to save his life as a 15-year-old, he’d respected her courage, fire and intelligence. No doubt the Weasley matriarch wouldn’t have known what hit her when Hermione dug her heels in.

“I still don’t understand why you would see photos posted by Emily Fornell.” He stared at Tobias, horrified by a sudden thought. “Please don’t tell me you’re a wizard, Tobias.”
Fornell gave a bark of laughter. “No DiNotzo, I’m not, however Emily is a witch. Diane, contrary to popular opinion, Jethro’s included, wasn’t a witch…but her mother was. And she was also from Britain and related to the Weasleys somehow…”

DiNozzo cursed his terrible misfortune, whilst connecting the red hair and realising that Emily bore more than a passing resemblance to little Ginerva Weasley, now that he thought about it.

“So we,” Tobias indicated himself and Hermione, “Are distantly related by marriage, and our kids are friends on Facebook.”

“Damn it, I can’t believe my bad luck,” Tony groaned dejectedly.

Hermione punched his arm, palpably hurt by his attitude. “Why wouldn’t you want us to know that you aren’t dead? It just about destroyed Harry when you died at the Ministry that terrible night. How could you put us through that, Sirius?” She demanded, her fiery temperament manifesting itself as her eyes flashed dangerously.

Tobias held up his hands. “Let’s get something to eat before we get into it. I didn’t eat anything today and I’d be surprised if DiNotzo had time to eat either. Don’t want him passing out again.”

“DiNozzo’s don’t pass out, Fornell.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. What evva, as Emily would say.” The FBI agent rolled his eyes theatrically in a half decent imitation of a teenage girl.

Hermione shrugged, whipped out her wand and voila, there was a delicious looking meal of veal marsala and a green salad on the dining table. Pointing at Tony/Sirius she growled, “Sit. Eat. Spill it!”

As they sat down and Tobias poured red wine, Tony regarded his plate, before beginning. “Hermione, I’m sorry for what happened that night at the ministry. I let my crazy-assed cousin get to me. Truth to tell, I was going bat-shit crazy being cooped up inside that hell hole that was the Black ancestral home. Someone should have taken a wrecking ball to that place a long time ago… or better yet, lit a stack of dynamite under it.

“You know what a dive that place was but you have no idea how unhappy I was growing up there as a kid, and then suddenly I had to stay hidden there 24/7. I’d escaped one horrific prison only to be locked up in another and I was climbing the walls. I wasn’t kidding either…being there was sending me insane… well more than I already was after escaping from Azkaban.”

Hermione nodded. “Yeah, I know. You never really had a chance to recover from 12 years of false imprisonment and exposed to shocking privation. Your brain chemistry was most likely all out of whack and you probably had PTSD.”

“Probably,” he conceded. “And Bellatrix might have been mad as a hatter but we grew up together and she knew every one of my weak spots better than most. I let her get to me. When she pushed me through the veil of death, I really did die and a part of me was just so damned relieved. Because if I was dead then Dumbledore couldn’t force me to go back to that house I hated with every fibre of my being.

“I thought I’d finally find peace and much as I felt guilty about leaving my god-son alone, Merlin help me, I was euphoric to finally be free. Then Destiny met me and stopped me going on and told me that I wasn’t dead yet…well I was dead. Technically, but I wasn’t meant to be dead – it wasn’t my time and I still had things to do.”
Hermione was listening raptly, her attention focused on his face, her dinner forgotten as she watched him speak.

“They told me I could make a real difference. They explained that there was a Tony DiNozzo – a distant relative of mine on my grandmother Potter’s side of the family – who was related to an important muggle family called the Paddingtons, who’d died. Seems a dirty cop had sold him out while he was undercover in Philadelphia. Anthony DiNozzo wasn’t supposed to die either – he was predestined to save a lot of lives. Destiny explained that as a non-magical human, even though he wasn’t supposed to die, TPTB would not permit him to return.

Fornell looked outraged and Tony nodded imperceptibly. He got it – it was a cop thing. When a cop was killed on the job it struck at the heart of everyone in law enforcement, when it was murder, it was all hands on deck to try to bring the killer to justice. A dirty cop though – was the most complete and utter betrayal. There was nothing worse in most cops’ minds and their reaction was visceral and ruthless.

“Normally I wouldn’t be permitted to return either after passing through the veil, but because of my twelve years of hell in Azkaban without trial, and plus I was trying to save you kids from Tommy-boy and his murderous minions, an exception was being made. That and the fact that DiNozzo was betrayed too and the impact that his death would have had on many hundreds, perhaps thousands of individual lives he was supposed to save was significant. So Destiny had a proposition for me.”

“What was the proposition,” Hermione asked him, ever curious.

“That I could come back and take up Anthony DiNozzo’s life and mission, since we’d both worked in law enforcement and I could finish what he was supposed to achieve. His body hadn’t been found yet, so there was only a couple of people who knew he’d died. The catch was that he was a non-magical and I had to agree to live in the non-magical world too. I was still a wizard but obviously had to maintain secrecy when it came to magic. The other deal breaker was that I was expressly forbidden to make contact with anyone from my former life – that I couldn’t interfere in any way, not even sending a message.” His expression was bleak.

“On pain of death!”

Fornell realised the cause of his panic before. “You didn’t make contact, Tony. You got found out through no fault of your own. I’m sure that TPTB that made the deal with you won’t hold our meddling against you.” The fibbie figured that he was worried about the people DiNotzo was supposed to save, not his own death per say.

“Don’t know, Tobe. Guess we’ll soon find out if that is the case.”

Hermione was frowning, the multiple crinkles in her forehead and her chewing of her bottom lip was so familiar to Tony/Sirius, even if it had been almost two decades since he’d seen her. “Did Destiny tell you why you weren’t allowed to make contact with us?”

“Yeah, she said that if witches and wizards ever thought that there was a way to cheat death after passing through the Veil it would threaten the fabric of society. As you know, there isn’t a lot that magical folk fear, apart from the finality of death.”

“Okay, that makes a certain amount of sense, especially when you think of Tommy-boy and what he did. Few people knew the truth because of the threat that the knowledge posed for the next mass murdering megalomaniac to come along. I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion about you earlier, Sirius.”
“I’m sorry too, Hermione. It wasn’t that I wanted you all to suffer when I fell through the Veil. It killed me over the years not being able to contact Harry. I immersed myself in popular culture and learnt about technology, pretty much cut myself off from magic, avoided the magical world completely…or so I thought,” he looked at Tobias wryly.

“Never knowing what happened to any of you…it killed me. Sometimes I’d wish I’d never agreed to come back again. I’ve missed you guys so much, so if I’m going to land in the shit with Destiny, you might as well tell me what’s been happening in the last 18 years. Is the war still ongoing? How is Remus – did he get the girl in the end?”

Hermione, who’d been furious with him before she’d listened to his explanation, had become plaintive as his story unfolded. When he asked about the outcome of the war it reinforced how cut off, how alone he had been since being given a second chance at life. Now she needed to tell him about the terrible toll that had been paid for victory against Tom Riddle aka Voldemort - the deluded megalomaniac that twice brought magical Britain to the brink of destruction.

Most of the so called pure blood families had been effectively destroyed by death, incarceration and good old fashioned inbreeding. Glancing at his untouched meal gone cold as he recounted his story and the dark shadows under his incredibly expressive eyes, she cast a spell to replace his meal with a fresh one.

“Why don’t we save that discussion until after you eat, Sirius? Eat,” she scolded him maternally, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

“Tony,” he corrected gently.

“Eat, Tony,” Hermione acknowledged.

Sighing, Tony did as he was told. Remembering that she was incredibly overbearing when her mind was set on a particular goal, he knew that there would be no arguing with her. Indeed, the quickest way to find out what had happened to his friends and loved ones was to eat. Taking the first bite, he realised that the food was delicious and he was starving.

Tony couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten a proper meal. Still it was almost impossible to quell his irrepressible curiosity. Deciding that deflection might help, he paused between bites.

“So I get that you saw photos of me from Thanksgiving – knew I should have spent it alone when Zoe ditched me to go back home for the holiday. But it’s almost two decades since you saw me, and I’ve changed my appearance, lightened my hair colour obviously.

“My eyes are more green-grey than grey now since I had to look like Anthony DiNozzo – although there were similarities to start with. As far as you knew, I was dead so why would you think that an American federal agent was me and not someone who looked like me?”

Fornell and the witch exchanged guilty glances before silently coming to an agreement. Hermione looked at him compassionately. “That’s all true as far as it goes. But there were three things that convinced me. Yes, it was a long time ago, and you have done a good job of subtly changing your appearance. Nothing too drastic, just enough that under normal circumstances I’d probably have believed the doppelganger excuse.

“But when I looked into your eyes, I saw so much pain and suffering. I’ll never forget those incredible expressive eyes of yours, Padfoot. Poets claim that the eyes are the windows to our souls and I’ll never forget yours that night when we escaped from the Dementors on Buckbeak.”
Tony nodded, relieved in one sense that he hadn’t made it too easy to be found, yet uncomfortable that she could see into his soul so easily. He’d spent a lifetime trying to hide his flawed personality – well two lifetimes really. For Hermione to have been able to see beyond the smoke and mirrors he projected, it made him feel naked and vulnerable.

“And the second thing,” Tony/Sirius prompted, eager to not dwell on such an uncomfortable topic. What was it with women who always fixated on his eyes, going on about how wounded and vulnerable he was? As far as he could see, they were just eyes – admittedly DiNozzo had excellent eyesight but they were still just eyes. Now Hermione was saying she was able to recognise him because of them. It was more than he could handle at the moment.

Fornell looked guilty and apologetic. “Um that was me, DiNotzo. Hermione emailed me to ask me about you. I realised that you were an enigma and I recalled how there was that discrepancy between your real age…um DiNotzo’s age and the one that NCIS thinks you… um DiNotzo is.” He burbled confusedly.

“DiNotzo was born in 1973, went straight to the Police Academy after graduating from college and spent two years as an officer with the Peoria Police Department, 18 months spent in Philadelphia PD and almost two years at Baltimore PD making you 27. When I investigated you for murder the first time, your DOB was 1973 but now it’s in your jacket as 1968 being your DOB.”

Tony looked pained. That was such a fuckup…sorry Hermione. Tony’s father turned up on a case out of the blue. Drunken bastard ignored his son for years after summarily disowning him when he was twelve, after abusing him mentally and physically. Threw me for a loop when he appeared uninvited and unexpected but luckily the man is a drunk and he, unlike Hermione never realised the substitution.

“The pathetic piece of shit muddled up Tony’s birthday – told everyone he was born in 68, waxed lyrical about a bottle of wine bottled the year his son was born that he purchased to commemorate his birth. The alcoholic tool confused Tony with the first son that was born with a congenital heart defect who died five days after his birth.

Tony/Sirius shrugged, slightly remorseful. “Since he told everyone I was five years older than Tony and that was closer to my own biological, age I decided to let it lie and altered my records on the sly. I didn’t think anyone would notice.”

“Probably wouldn’t have either, if not for Hermione wanting me to investigate you plus the fact I had done so in the past. And one more anomaly that was the real clincher.” Fornell revealed reluctantly.

“Which was?” Tony/Sirius interrogated the FBI agent sharply.

“Well, I mentioned that in your jacket you were supposed to have worked at Baltimore for almost two years before leaving to join NCIS when Gibbs recruited you.”

“Yeah…so?”

“So when I put together some of the snippets you shared with colleagues over the years, it just didn’t add up. The two years you told Ziva David you worked in the Transit Authority in Baltimore when you were investigating the gypsy cab murder, which was true. And you also told Metro Detective Sparr that you spent two years working Narcotics in Baltimore. Again when I checked with the department, that was true too.

“But you also spent a year undercover bringing down the Macaluso family. Plus, you worked as a
beat cop AND a homicide detective. That adds up to a lot more than six years of working for Baltimore in various jobs, yet chronologically, you only worked from 1999 to 2001 as a Baltimore cop. Plus, Gibbs was under the impression you’d never worked Narcotics which contradicts the facts since you did spend two years there.”

Fornell threw his hands up in the air. “What am I saying? The whole damned thing is contradictory…totally crazy. None of it makes any sense whatsoever.

Hermione leaned close to him, looking directly into his eyes. “Where did you get the Time-Turner, Sirius?”

Tony/Sirius chuckled nervously. “Not absolutely sure, Kiddo. When I was sent back again I had it on my person. I think it must have ended up inside my clothes somehow during the battle at the Ministry. I don’t consciously recall taking it though. So I think it was an accident.

“I also had my wand as well as the Time-Turner. I know it was stupid but I figured why not use the Time-Turner? I wasn’t forbidden to practise magic, just as long as I didn’t reveal myself to non-magical people and I doctored my official file. No one ever cottoned on or if they did they thought it was a clerical error.” He looked chagrined.

Fornell chuckled apologetically. “I went back to the source, talked to people who had actually worked with you. Otherwise it probably wouldn’t have come to light – would have put it down to a clerical error too. But along with the business about your DOB and the fact that no one seemed to have a clue, I figured you did some sort of spell thingy and it was pretty suspicious.”

Hermione grabbed his hand and squeezed it comfortingly. “Why use the Time-Turner like that, Sirius um Tony?”

Tony/Sirius pushed his plate, only half eaten away. His eyes telegraphing his feelings of conflict and emotional pain. “I couldn’t sleep when I was sent back. When I wasn’t suffering from insomnia, I was having terrible nightmares. Not just my own stuff, which was bad enough but for some reason I was given Anthony DiNozzo’s memories too.” He shrugged.

“I guess so I could fit into his life – recognise people in his life from before. Like Zoe Keates, Tony’s partner when he was in Philadelphia,” he observed wistfully. He missed her and wondered if they might have still been able to fix things if he hadn’t run into Jeanne again.

“He didn’t spend 12 years in Azkaban but he had a really shitty life too, for all that people saw him as a spoilt entitled rich kid. Plus, seeing all the crap that cops see, so combined, it was pretty bad. And I was going crazy, worrying about what I’d left behind in Britain.” He was silent for a while, staring broodingly into the middle distance.

“DiNozzo and me…we have a lot of similarities. He feels guilty about everything. Things he couldn’t control, people that got hurt that weren’t his fault and I feel guilty about rushing off to try to get revenge when Lily and James died. It’s my fault that Harry grew up in an abusive home instead of with me like he was supposed to – and with DiNozzo’s memories of just how bad it was to grow up being abused and neglected…well it made me crazy, knowing it was all my fault.

“If I’d been more mature and hadn’t let my desire for revenge against Bellatrix goad me into acting like a fool, this would never have happened. I was a trained Auror, once upon a time. I let her psych me out and got myself killed, just when I was finally able to begin to be a godfather for Harry. I finally had an opportunity to make amends to him for all the damage I’d caused and I blew it.”

Tobias looked like he’d just figured something out. “That’s why you refuse to let revenge dictate
your actions, isn’t it?”

“The price is always too high Tobias and innocent people end up getting hurt. It cost me 12 years of my life for something I didn’t do, and it prevented me doing what I should have done. Harry paid the price for it - an enormous amount of damage that I can never undo or fix, all caused because I wanted revenge. So when I returned, I vowed not to let my heart rule my head.”

They were all silent, lost in their own thoughts until finally Tony/Sirius continued.

“Um anyway… I decided to keep busy, that way I wouldn’t be tempted to try to make contact with anyone from my old life. And trust me, the temptation was horrendous. Decided to take a leaf out of DiNozzo book. He was a born cop, who lived to make a difference. To serve others.

“It was the way he dealt with all his own demons and I figured that since I had the Time-Turner, it was a sign that I was meant to put it to good use. I guess I did go a little nuts with it but those first couple of months after I woke up as Anthony DiNozzo with his memories as well as my own, I was out of control. I wasn’t exactly in a good place, mentally, even before I fell through the Veil.”

He looked at Fornell. “PTSD from that hell hole, plus a mountain load of guilt doesn’t add up to mental health.” He fell silent, staring into space.

Fornell stood up finally, clearing the table. “How about we take the rest of this discussion into the living room where we can be more comfortable. I’ll get the coffee brewing and DiNotzo, you get the booze.”

Tony nodded, “Gotcha, but no bourbon, Tobias. I’m not drinking that rotgut tonight.”

“Agreed. I’ve got a good single malt or if you prefer it, a fine cognac. I only keep that cheap bourbon crap for when Gibbs is here, not that I’ve seen him since Diane was murdered. He has no palate to speak of, so I absolutely refuse to drink whiskey, port or cognac with such a philistine.”

They were finally settled in the living room with glasses of whiskey, Tobias in one of the leather wingback armchairs that Diane had purchased not long before her death. Cattycorner to them were Tony/Sirius and Hermione on the matching chesterfield lounge. Rather to Tobias’s surprise and DiNozzo’s obvious discomfiture, despite there being plenty of room, the gorgeous brunette had chosen to curl up close to the NCIS agent.

Fornell wondered if it was just that she was elated at finding an old friend was still alive or if her feelings ran deeper. He rather suspected the latter alternative was the more likely. She had been a teenager when he’d died – could she have had a crush on her friend’s godfather. A wizard, falsely imprisoned for 12 years could have seemed a highly romantic figure to an impressionable and idealistic teenager.

Hermione squeezed his hand, her eyes filled with tears. It must have been a terrible time for you.” She remembered how in her third year of Hogwarts she’d been allowed to use a Time-Turner to allow her to attend classes that conflicted with her already bursting timetable because she was such a driven, Type A personality. Plus, as a muggle, she had constantly felt like she had to prove herself, thought she had to be twice as smart as everyone else, just to fit in.

He screwed up his face and it was obvious to both of them he was trying not to break down.

“Things settled down a bit by the time I got to NCIS. Finally, thanks to me learning occlumency growing up, I was able to organise Tony’s memories into a semblance of order and keep them relatively separate from mine.
“Yet I’m not always able to maintain that degree of control, especially when I’m sleeping, exhausted or get injured. When I had the plague it was all so confusing, it was lucky I couldn’t speak, since I might have spilled my guts and ended being committed to a mental health facility for Multiple Personality Disorder.”

“It must have been difficult, keeping such a huge secret for all those years; not having anyone to confide in.” Fornell observed sympathetically. Sure DiNotzo excelled at undercover gigs but it was one thing to go undercover, even deep undercover for several years but there was also someone, a handler at the least who knew the score.

“It was. I don’t think I’d have made it without Padfoot. He kept me sane when I was sure I’d go crazy.”

Fornell looked puzzled at the smirk that the wizard and the witch shared.

“I thought you were Padfoot. Hermione calls you Padfoot.”

“I am.” He laughed uncomfortably and looked at Hermione. “I guess there’s no harm introducing him to Snuffles.”

She chuckled. “Yep. Kitty is well and truly out of the bag now,’ she teased playfully.

Fornell scowled, knowing that he was out of the loop and not appreciating it. So he nearly face-planted out of his chair as before his eyes DiNotzo transformed into the most ginormous, fierce looking black canid. He wasn’t sure if it was a dog or a wolf but it looked lethal, whatever the hell it was. On second thoughts, it looked like something that crawled out of the maws of Hell. And then the brunette witch gave a squeal like a fangirl, as Emily would say, and wrapped herself around the ferocious looking beast. She was wrestling with it in a hug that would have put Abby Sciuto to shame in its bone-crushing intensity.

DiNotzo rematerialized, looking rather flustered as he managed to extricate himself from the embrace of the beautiful witch since she’d ended up with her hands in some fairly intimate places. And while Tony looked highly disconcerted, Hermione looked perfectly cool, calm and collected.

Fornell was concerned. He was increasingly convinced that Hermione had feelings for DiNotzo um Black, even though there was a considerable age difference. Of course she wasn’t a starry eyed teenager any more. The young woman was a widow, a mother with two children at Hogwarts and a challenging and important job in charge of education in their ministry of magic. Plus, she was about to accept an important promotion within weeks.

She was a beautiful young woman and clearly could have found another man to marry, yet had so far decided to remain single. She definitely seemed to be putting the moves on DiNotzo/Black and not, he suspected for his bloodline. Was it his bloodline…it was all way too confusing for a simple cop to figure out?

Most men would give their eye teeth to have her attention and affection but DiNotzo was in a bad place right now. Breaking up with Zoe, running into Jeanne Benoit again…twice and Gibbs with all his bastardry had left him in a very precarious state emotionally. He was going to have a long talk with Hermione to make sure she wasn’t toying with him, looking for a brief affair, to scratch an itch or fulfil some girlish fantasy. He had no doubt that in his current condition she could easily break him if she wanted to, because she was as good as family to the man who had lost everything and everyone.

As the silence mounted with Tony looking increasing ill at ease, Tobias asked what should have
been his immediate question if he hadn’t been deep in thought.

“Ah excuse me but what the CRAP was that?”

“That was Padfoot.” Hermione responded, her smile equal parts amusement and pride. Sirius is an animagus; able to transform into a Grim like dog at will. Which is a difficult feat and only a small percentage of witches or wizards are ever able to achieve.”

“I guess that might have come in handy once or twice on the job,” the FBI agent observed drolly.

Tony/Sirius shrugged. “So, Hermione…tell me about magical Britain and what happened to everyone. How is Remus?”

By the time she was finished her account of everything that had occurred since he fell through the Veil, the NCIS agent was utterly devastated by the loss of life it had cost to win the war. When he learnt that Remus and his cousin Tonks had left their son Teddy an orphan, he stood, told them he needed to be alone and disappeared out the front door. Fornell was expecting him to drive off home but his car remained in the drive.

The British witch, guessing his thoughts, observed quietly. “He’ll probably find somewhere dark so he can transform into Padfoot and go for a run.”

Fornell snorted. “I pity anyone that see’s that monster. He’s as big as a bear. He’s not like a werewolf is he – likely to attack someone?”

Glaring at him in exasperation, “Did you honestly think I’d hug a werewolf, Toby?”

Tobias recalled her enthusiastic welcome for Padfoot’s emergence with some embarrassment. “I guess not,” he admitted with a weak chuckle, although he realised that it also gave him the perfect opening to discuss her intentions regarding DiNotzo. Who’d have ever thought that he’d be trying to protect Tony from a gorgeous young woman, but even without his revelations tonight, Tobias had been concerned for the NCIS agent’s welfare.

Chapter End Notes

End Notes:
So I bet you didn’t see that one coming? Next chapter there will be more exploration of the two characters’ commonalities. I admit initially, it was the aspect of the Time-Turner that occurred to me when I was trying to figure out how to explain away the comedy of errors that have been made of Tony’s time in Baltimore, on the show over the years.
In case you are interested:
- In Designated Target 5.08 Tony tells Ziva he spent 2 years in Baltimore at the Transit Authority.
- In Stakeout 5.12 he told Detective Sparr from Metro PD that he worked in Baltimore Narcotics for 2 years.
- In Baltimore 8.22 DiNozzo was a homicide detective (the elite of detectives) and his behaviour certainly didn’t suggest that he was a newbie or junior to Danny Price, his partner, so make of that what you will.
- In Framed 3.09 Tony and Gibbs reveal that he was a year undercover to bring Mike Macaluso, Mafia boss down at – yep you guessed it - at Baltimore.
- In Once a Crook 11.05 DiNozzo is a beat cop working on a case 15 years ago.
- In The Good Wives Club 3.02 there is somewhat contradictory evidence. They find a hydroponic drug crop and Tony estimates that the PO’s claim that the dope is for personal use is highly suspect but that his estimate that the crop is 3 months is correct. When Todd questions his opinion he mentions the Baltimore PD’s Drug Task Force. Gibbs replies that he was never on the task force and he replies that he had friends on it.

So there is clearly a huge continuity faux pas, especially in season five where in the space of four episodes they have him working 2/yrs in TA and then 2/yrs in Narcotics - it seems like pretty sloppy writing imho. Now you could argue, that Tony was lying in both cases but Gibbs seems to defer to his knowledge right from when they arrive at the crime scene in Designated Target which is uncharacteristic for Gibbs. That’s highly suggestive that Tony has specialised knowledge from working TA and he continues to demonstrate that knowledge throughout the case. Then there is the 2/yrs with Narcotics, although the evidence is less clear. Tony does seem to have knowledge of the drug trade. While in The Good Wives Club, Gibbs deliberately asks for his opinion about the amount of drugs found in the raid, implying he had specialised knowledge on the subject. Plus, in High Seas 1.06 DiNozzo is testing the evidence for methamphetamines and seems to be the resident drug expert for the team.

Neither of which is conclusive but it is suggestive and so it leaves more questions than answers.

Then there’s the second elephant in the room – Tony DiNozzo’s age. So what do we know? He went to OSU on a sports scholarship because his father disowned him age 12. We know he has a Phys. Ed degree and his opportunity to pursue a professional career in basketball/football fell through when he broke his leg. After graduating at 21 or 22 y/o he attended police academy – between 3 – 6 months so let’s go with six months. He was with Peoria PD for 2 yrs, Philadelphia PD for 18 months and Baltimore almost two yrs. That adds up to six years max. There’s never been any suggestion in 13 years of canon that he did anything between graduation and attending the police academy, so fair assumption that he was either 21 or 22 when he attended the academy.

That would make him 27 or 28 of age when hired by NCIS…so 29 or 30 y/o in season 1 but. Cate says in season one that he is 32. Based on this timeline that’s out by 2 or 3 years. Let’s ignore my timeline for a moment, say he was 32 y/o in 2003, then at most that would make TD 45 y/o now, yet according to retconning he is 48 (i.e. born in 1968). So between 3 - 6 years went where exactly, depending on my timeline or theirs? That’s a significant amount of time to just ignore.
Chapter Summary

Fornell and Hermione have a long talk about their favorite special agent when he takes off after receiving bad news.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to people who have left feedback. Like all writers I thrive on comments. This story isn't beta'ed and I haven't had time to do my dozen rewrites so hopefully there aren't too many boo boos.
So glad that people got my irony about fixing the timeline that TPTB have created for Tony needing magic to explain it away. lol I also want to explain that there won't be any ships in this story, despite what takes place in this chapter. IMHO Tony is far to fragile to pair up with anyone without it inevitably falling apart. First thing is for him to get himself out of a toxic environment so he can begin to heal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony didn’t come back that night. They sat up ‘til the wee small hours waiting to see if he’d return but he never did. So Tobias decided to use the time to begin interrogating Hermione about her rather obvious attraction to DiNotzo, which she didn’t deny.

She admitted that her opinion of him as a teenager had been complicated. She’d been terrified of him at first when he escaped from Azkaban, the notorious magical prison that Tobias had learnt, made the toughest Super-max prison or the worst jails in third world countries look like a five-star hotels by comparison. That was when she still thought he’d betrayed her best friend’s parents to Voldemort and was a mass murderer who’d killed a bunch of muggles and his school friend, Peter Pettigrew.

Then they’d discovered the truth, that he’d somehow managed the impossible feat of escaping completely unaided to try to protect Harry from a murderer, aka Peter Pettigrew who was responsible for Lily and James Potter’s murder. Obviously at this point, her feelings about him and for him had begun to transform. Then when he’d offered to let Harry live with him instead of his abusive relatives she’d been so happy for her friend which had clearly made her revise her feelings for the wild looking escapee even more.

The next significant factor in the evolution of her attitudinal change occurred on the same day after Sirius had saved Harry, herself and Ron from his best friend (a werewolf) by transforming into his animagus form to stop the werewolf attacking the teenagers on the full moon. Hermione explained that he’d been wounded in the process of defending the three friends, which had made him vulnerable and was a contributory factor in him being recaptured.

Not surprisingly, after such a terrifying experience and Sirius’ heroics she’d admitted that she’d
been very grateful and her feelings had morphed into more than a little hero-worship. Tobias knowing teenage girls, surmised that it was also more than likely, where her teenage crush on the wizard developed.

Meanwhile they’d managed to save him from being put to death with literally moments to spare, thanks to her Time-Turner and her familiarity all year in manipulating time so she could attend extra classes. Sirius had been grateful and more than happy to protect Buckbeak, a hippogriff who’d helped him escape. She and Harry used the Time-Turner to save the hippogriff from an unjustified execution for supposedly attacking a student.

So then Sirius had lavishly praised her before disappearing into the night with the fugitive magical creature. Fornell could well imagine how all that adrenaline and high excitement of riding on the back of the huge beast would impact on the hormones of a teenage girl. Hermione had already shared with him that she’d been a highly studious type. Not the sort to have a lot of experience with matters of the heart. Throw in a lifetime of being looked down on by magicals and muggles alike, it must have been a heady experience for the impressionable and unworldly teenager girl to have Black notice her and acknowledge attributes.

“I practically melted into a pile of goo when he told me I was really was the brightest witch of my age. Plus, I was all tingly from where his body had been in contact with mine as we flew through the night,” she admitted somewhat bashfully.

“He was such a heroically tragic figure…like something out of a romance novel or a Victor Hugo novel. Plus, he was wounded; both in body and spirit. I wanted to take away all his pain and make him whole again.” She flushed, embarrassed as she revealed her emotions from that night so many years ago.

Fornell grimaced at the patently colourful teenage prose, thinking this could very well be his own daughter speaking. God he hoped that she never saw Jethro that way because he would have to kill him. Although he wondered if DiNozzo wasn’t a more likely candidate for Emily to crush on. He had an aura of despair around him lately, that even he’d picked up on. He was why he’d felt compelled to drag him home for the holiday and he was a hetero as they came.

He shook his head as he contemplated his relationship with his daughter. Teenagers were sent to break their parents’ hearts; of that he was certain. Especially teenage girls on the cusp of dating for the very first time. Emily needed her mother now more than ever, hell he needed Diane now more than ever. He wondered if he’d survive her teenage years without committing murder when she started dating for real.

Mind, if any of this sort of crap ever happened at the Maryland Academy for Magical Studies where Emily attended, he’d raze the whole fucking place to the ground. Then he’d round up the staff and rip out all their entrails and force them, at the point of his trusty Glock, to eat them. Thank goodness that sort of shit had no place in the US – not the blood snobbery or using outmoded stuff such as quills and parchment designed to keep the population all backward looking.

Nor the idea that it was perfectly acceptable for teenagers to mess with time, or forced to slay deadly snakes, roughly the same dimensions of King Kong because the adults who were supposed to be educating them were too damned useless to protect them. Hell if he found out that his daughter had been attacked and spent months petrified AND even worse, was never informed about it, suffice to say they would never find the bodies. The whole situation was just WRONG!

From what Diane had told him, the magical Brits were all rather backward thinking, like a bunch of sheep, biddable and under the thumb of a few power mongers. They were trapped by the past and in the past; unable to move with the times – unable to make critical decisions or adapt to change. It
sounded like some third world country ruled by corrupt despotic dictators.

By contrast, in the US, most magical teenagers chose to go off to regular colleges when they graduated from high school, like non-magical kids, then pursued careers, not married off the moment they finished high school. They were encouraged to think for themselves and not accept what they were told and if Emily ever started acting like a sheep he’d have her out of there so damned fast her head would spin like in the Exorcist. Not that there was much chance of that happening. Emily was her mother’s daughter; you couldn’t tell her anything.

He sighed, refocusing his attention back onto the young witch who was talking about her road to Damascus. “It was a painful realisation that the people I looked up to the most in this new world I’d found myself thrust into, had stood by and knowingly let an innocent man rot in jail for 12 years without a trial. So yes, Sirius became a highly romantic figure initially – one that had held me in his strong arms as we raced through the night.” She sighed and it didn’t take a federal agent to figure out she was reliving that night through rose coloured romantic glasses.

Then her dreamy expression changed, became closed off. “As I spent more time with him at No 12 Grimmauld Place, the Black Ancestral home, I suddenly started seeing all his flaws. That he was juvenile and impulsive – he had an explosive temper. I thought he was trying to relive his youth through Harry, Ron and I. Plus, I hated the way he treated his house elf, Kreature.

“And then Sirius was dead, coming to our rescue, again. So of course I felt horribly guilty about all the faults I’d picked with him. I was so judgemental as a teenager,” She admitted sorrowfully. “Rigid in my thinking, quick to judge what I knew nothing about and too damned smart when it came to book learning for my own good. Plus, I was totally lacking in real life experience since I spent my life with my head in a book and was so incredibly stubborn. I thought I knew better than everyone else, just because I had a high IQ.”

Her expression was woebegone and Fornell recalled how self-righteous Emily could be. Once his daughter made up her mind there was no changing it and her temper if you tried – watch out! It was definitely a case of like mother like daughter in terms of her disposition and temper – or maybe it was the redhead thing. But regardless, she sounded a lot like how Hermione had just described her teenage self.

How quick she was to rush to judgement, the infuriating belief that she was right and everyone else was wrong. How no matter how inexperienced or ill-informed she was, Emily still had opinions, unshakeable ones, on just about every topic under the sun. He’d been assured that it was normal teenage behaviour and that she’d grow out of it, given time.

He smiled gently at Hermione, observing the miserable body language as she hugged her torso, her long legs drawn up underneath her. “That sounds just like Emily. Sounds like you were a typical teenager.”

“Yeah…maybe Toby. But I was also such a goody-two shoes. I believed absolutely in authority figures – believed that they were infallible. And magical Britain is so insular, so backward thinking. It is so easy to pull the wool over people’s eyes – even me – especially me.

“Honestly, half of the wizards and witches are barely educated, unable to think for themselves and ready to believe everything they’re told, despite evidence to the contrary. There is a complete absence of critical thinking and analysis with the magicals. It’s why I accepted the position to reform the education system when Rose and Lily started at Hogwarts.” She confessed, referring to her daughters attending the magical boarding school.

“So what changed, Hermione? Because clearly you have a vastly different opinion of Sirius now,”
he observed sardonically. “Is it misplaced guilt because he died and you felt like you owed him?” Fornell probed, his inner interrogator firmly entrenched and determined to find out what was motivating her actions towards Tony.

She smirked at him. “Not at first, Toby. After Harry told me he’d found out that his father, James Potter and Sirius had teased and bullied Snape during their time at Hogwarts, I really despised him for a while. Combined with his casual cruelty to his family’s house elf it confirmed my previous opinion that he was a childish, selfish um…”

“Dickhead? Deadshit?” Fornell proffered helpfully.

Frowning slightly, she sighed. “Yeah I guess that’s one way to put it.” Her expression suggested it was a piss poor one.

Fornell smirked, having previously noting her aversion to cussing. Stretching out his lean form in the chair and crossing his legs, he sipped on his drink, the smooth cognac caressing his palate as it delicately danced across his tastebuds. He smiled at his guest, “Okay so what made you change your mind? Because clearly you have.”

“A lot of stuff…a lot of years growing up. When I finally located my parents in Australian and brought them back home again, they encouraged me to continue my formal education in the muggle world. Sure I was a mother but that didn’t mean I was destined to turn into my mother-in-law.

“Frankly, the idea of popping out babies, year after year and becoming an interfering know-it-all, spoiling my kids rotten and interfering in their lives was anathema to me. I wanted to make a real difference in their lives…in every child’s life. That’s when I became enamoured by psychology and the more I learnt about the subject, the more I started to understand Sirius’ behaviour.”

“How so?” Fornell queried.

“Well for a start, I came to see how his background impacted upon him. He came from a horrendous family background with no positive role models to emulate. Apart from one cousin and her daughter, his immediate family were all Death Eaters and Pure Blood Supremacist who would fit right in in the Ku Klux Klan. Yet as a young child he had the strength of character to resist their example of savagery, hatred and bigotry. Sure he might have been cocky and arrogant, done wrong…bullied Snape and treated Kreacher badly, but no one is perfect.

Tobias nodded. “Sadly, I have to agree with that statement.”

Hermione looked glum. “As I pointed out, I was a real pain in the neck, know-it-all. I had a pretty idyllic childhood, had wonderful parents as role models and grandparents who told me I was wonderful, smart... could be anything I wanted. Sure I might have been picked on and bullied at school but I can’t begin to imagine how it would have been not to have had the love and support of my family. And even with my family’s love and support and being victimised by other kids in both worlds, while I never bullied her, I was still an unkind b…”

“A bitch?” Tobias supplied helpfully.

Pulling a face, she groaned. “Yeah…that to Luna Lovegood – a girl at Hogwarts - just because she was different from me. She used to irritate me since she was totally illogical and yet she didn’t do anything to deserve my contempt. She was a brave and a stalwart supporter when we needed her in the war and since then, she’s become my best friend.” She paused, looking guilty and took a sip of her Irish coffee.
“And,” she resumed her musing. “By the time I’d earned a Masters in Educational Psychology, I started examining my old girlish assumptions. I mean really truly, examining them, which was painful but necessary.

“I saw the figures I’d looked up to…the people in authority who made choices and sacrificed principles of common decency and innocent people for the greater good or in reality, for their own agendas. It is easy to tell yourself it is for the greater good but truthfully, they were afraid that they lose their job, respect or power.

She yawned and looked at her watch, before stretching like a cat. She was lithe and possessed a sensuality that made him fear for what this witch could do to DiNotzo’s very fragile heart. Tobias figured the vulnerability crap that Hermione had already mentioned about Tony or was it Sirius, was getting to him, since he now felt weirdly protective of the NCIS agent. Weird since most of the time DiNotzo bugged the holy crap out of him but lately, even before he knew about their shared magical link, he’d started experiencing almost familial stirrings for the guy.

Unaware of the concern she had provoked in the FBI agent, Hermione continued to speak about her feelings toward their wayward wizard. “I continued to compare and contrast the people I knew and how they dealt with traumatic situations. For example, Severus Snape might have had a terrible childhood and been bullied by Sirius and James but he chose to deal with that by making choices that hurt many others who were innocent. As a mature adult, he continued to make choices that affected so many innocents, influenced them and their families in life changing ways.”

Tobias was curious. “How do you mean Hermione?”

“He chose to teach and I use that term advisedly, since there was nothing didactic or altruistic in his approach to his job. He used his position to scare little children, to belittle students and ruin the hopes and aspirations of untold number of individuals who were prevented from pursuing valuable careers. Individuals who would have benefited our society as healers or aurors, but failed to get the grades that they needed because Severus never bothered to teach them.

Scowling, she took a deep breath. This was obviously a sore topic for her as an educationalist.

“Dumbledore justified letting him teach because he was a spy for the light side and had to maintain an act. It was supposed to be for the greater good that we and hundreds like us suffered from his terrible teaching and abusive attitudes over the years. But what gave either of them the right to decide what constituted the greater good? I mean, who’s not to say that one of the many witches or wizards that he effectively prevented from becoming healer might not have gone on to find a way to overcome the unforgivable curses and saved untold lives?

“What if someone was destined to become a gifted mind healer and could have found a cure to heal Tom Riddle’s insanity or the parts of himself he split off to make him immortal. Who knows what is truly possible? Maybe the war wasn’t necessary at all if Hogwarts students had received the education they were paying for…the education they were entitled to. What gave Dumbledore and Snape the right to take away that possibility?”

Hermione had jumped up and started to pace as she began to rant about a topic most dear to her heart – education. She’d clearly been giving it a lot of thought over the years. Not that surprising, since her job was to oversee the education of all witches and wizards in the UK – it was also her excuse to come the States. She was supposedly checking out magical educational facilities including Emily’s school that was considered somewhat experimental and cutting edge.

Fornell couldn’t help but think that she was not only very eloquent in her argument but also made a very convincing case. Finally, she seemed to realise she was pacing and using her hands as she held
forth and she looked somewhat bashful. Blushing, the witch sat down on the chesterfield again, one leg under her butt as she continued to speak.

“Severus Snape knew that Sirius was innocent, that he’d been unjustly imprisoned yet did nothing to free him. Then when Sirius escaped from Azkaban he gave him up, knowing full well that he would be killed by the ministry. He’d committed heinous, abhorrent crimes as a Death Eater, Toby, and been given a second chance by Dumbledore yet he had absolutely no qualms about sending an innocent man to his death. One who’d already served over a decade in the worst prison possible for something he didn’t do, all because of his hatred of him when they were schoolboys.

“Dumbledore thought Death Eaters like Snape should be given a second chance yet an innocent man, an auror – a magical cop, didn’t even get the right to defend himself against a charge he was innocent of. How was that right?”

Fornell fumed. He doubted very much that magical cops were any better paid than their non-magical counterparts. To not even get the opportunity to defend himself was an unforgivable situation for any reasonable person, let alone a cop to accept. He couldn’t imagine how he would have dealt with what had happened to Black. He suspected at the very least he’d be filled with hate and want retribution.

His houseguest had ducked out to the kitchen and poured herself another coffee while he was brooding. She’d returned with a second cup in case he wanted to switch from liquor to caffeine. He decided to take a break from alcohol and took the cup with a grateful nod.

Hermione smiled as she settled herself back down again and sipped her coffee to keep herself awake. “Severus was so filled with hate, yet Harry Potter had an absolutely horrendous childhood, more than likely as bad, if not worse than Severus and he didn’t go to the dark-side, unlike Snape. Yes, okay, James Potter and Sirius played a stupid teenage prank on Severus that went wrong…badly wrong and he could have died. Sure they teased him during his school years, yet he had no problem inflicting terrible mental abuse on James’ totally innocent son when he was supposed to be preparing him for his showdown with Voldemort. And yet, Harry hasn’t turned into a bitter, vicious monster who takes out his pain on innocent children.”

“Perhaps he’d been perverted because of the trauma of being called Severus by his parents. Seriously, who would do that to a kid…especially when your last name was Snape?” Tobias quipped facetiously.

Smirking she acknowledged the joke before becoming grave again. “Harry was also bullied unmercifully at school by Draco Malfoy and his minions, as well as Snape, who wasn’t a teenager I might add – he was an adult, a teacher and knew better…he just didn’t care. All he cared about was himself and his grudge. Harry was betrayed by friends and school mates and more than once. Yet Harry didn’t become a cold blooded murderer like Severus did when he decided to become a Death Eater.

“Even the headmaster betrayed Harry for the so-called greater good, time and again, and still he didn’t turn dark. He chose to serve and protect others, even when they didn’t deserve his sacrifice. Harry was still prepared to die for them because Dumbledore told him it was for the greater good.

“They’d turned their backs on him and accused him of despicable things, being the Heir of Slytherin or a lying murderer when Cedric Diggory died. For most of our fourth year prior to Cedric’s death and Harry being tortured by Riddle, the whole school thought he was a liar and a cheat – interested in self-aggrandizement. I was the only one to publicly support and believe in him. I believe that his treatment in school and home trumped Severus hands down, but he never became obsessed with wanting revenge, unlike Snape.”
“Turn the other cheek.” Fornell commented sotto voce.

“Exactly!” she nodded emphatically. “He isn’t bitter or twisted…Harry Potter is the most forgiving person I know. So finally I’ve realised that no one is perfect including Sirius but it didn’t necessarily make them a bad person. And by the same token, no matter how terrible a life you’ve had, at some point you have to stop holding grudges and draw a line in the sand.”

Fornell thought her friend, the so-called saviour of the magical world, Harry Potter sounded a lot like DiNozzo. The NCIS agent was pathologically incapable of bearing a grudge, he forgave everyone - except himself. Personally he thought it wasn’t always such a good quality to possess since people always took advantage of it.

“Shades of grey, Hermione. No one is all black or all white but some individuals are much closer to black-grey than the other extreme.” Fornell mused, thinking of his earlier contemplations of Tony and Jethro and how they chose to do their job.

Gibbs was definitely a ‘the end justifies the means’ kinda guy and probably would believe in the ‘greater good’ philosophy too – well as long as he was the one who got to make decisions regarding what constituted the greater good. While Tony had long been the moral compass of the team and given his stubborn determination to observe the law, it was a miracle that he’d managed to last on Gibbs team as long as he had. He was definitely much closer to the grey-white end of the continuum than others in his so-called family.

“And studying psychology,” Hermione was saying. “I learned how traumatic events could arrest development and cause post traumatic injuries. Twelve years of unspeakable horror with no hope of being released, it must have had a profound effect on Sirius - on top of his family upbringing. It’s a miracle he survived without becoming incurably insane or malevolently evil.

“Emotional immaturity, impulsivity, lack of anger control – they seem like a pretty minor trade-off for all the terrible stuff he’d been forced to endure. He was also generous to a fault, courageous, willing to stand up for what he believed was right. Despite the personal cost, he was loyal friend and a dedicated auror. I guess I finally realised that a few flaws were, in the scheme of things, pretty minor. Like I said, no one’s perfect but all things considered, Sirius could so easily have been turned into a serial killer or mass murderer by his experiences and yet he’s chosen to spend his life serving others.”

It occurred to Fornell that everyone referred to DiNotzo as Gibbs’ loyal Saint Bernard, which was actually pretty damned funny, knowing what he knew now about Messrs Black and Padfoot. Of course, he’d never thought that a massive, ponderous Saint Bernard fit the image of the mercurial, athletic senior field agent particularly well. He thought perhaps a golden retriever with its goofiness, endless enthusiasm and in-your-face personality was more apt. Or perhaps an elegant and athletic Irish Setter with its stunning good looks, flightiness and boundless energy for work or play.

Even a Maremma Sheepdog fit him better, since they were fiercely protective of the flock, just as he was extremely protective of people he regarded as his flock - team mates, partners, family. Although of late, Tobias conceded that Tony’s mien was more like a lugubrious blood hound or a doleful blood hound. Mind you, he was a blood hound when he caught the slightest sniff of a clue, refusing to give up until he’d tracked it down or the trail was finally frozen solid.

Once he had his quarry in his sights, no matter how fleeting, he reminded Tobias of an annoying terrier running it down and once he’d caught it, wouldn’t let it go. The case of Michael Rivkin and the dead ICE agent sprang to mind as one such example. Even after Vance had ordered that the case be closed, no doubt hoping to avoid embarrassing Director David with revelations that his
Mossad assassin killed a US federal agent, DiNotzo refused to let it go with a terrier-like tenacity.

In fact, Tony often joked that his hand-to-hand combat wasn’t necessarily very scientific or technical; he described his style as scrappy. Having seen a bunch of terriers scuffling together over a bone or how one fought to drag its prey out of a burrow when he was a boy, scrappy was the adjective that came to mind. Plus, DiNotzo’s constant chatter was somewhat reminiscent of those damned yippy yapping terriers, too.

He chuckled. All those canine qualities made a lot of sense now that Fornell knew about Tony’s MOAS which included his animagus persona, Padfoot. Even his blind, dog-like loyalty to team mates who abused him horrendously over the years, in little and not so little ways made more sense than they did before.

Oh, what wouldn’t he give for Gibbs et al to see Tony’s alter-ego, but Tobias knew that would never be. Still he would use that fantasy about him transforming into Padfoot in the bull pen to help him make it through interminably boring meetings or stakeouts. Sighing philosophically, he tuned back into Hermione’s musings and realised she fallen silent. He guessed it was his turn to respond.

“Okay, so with education and insight you’ve been able to realised that everyone has flaws, that no one is perfect.” He told the brunette lounging tiredly on his couch. “I can see that you’ve grown up, matured emotionally and mentally, Hermione. Which is to be expected, of course. You understand that no one is without sin or flaw. Thankfully, most people have at least some good qualities if your prepared to look hard enough, but where does that leave Sirius. You seem to be very friendly towards him.”

She shot him an amused look before she stretched out her kinks again from all the sitting around. Her yawn soon had him yawning too as the hour was late and there was still no sign that Tony would return tonight…or actually it was now the early hours of the morning. Giggling tiredly the witch was surprisingly forthright with him about her intentions.

“If you’re concerned that he’s twenty odd years my senior, I’ll point out that such an age gap is not considered to be all that large in the magical world where our lifespan is much extended. Besides I’m a mother of two; not like I’m an ingénue, so if you’re asking if I’m interested in him, attracted to him… then yes, Toby, I am. Is it a crush? No I’m not a silly teenager – I’ve dated since Ron’s death, so you don’t have to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

Fornell grinned. “I know all that Hermione. Actually, it isn’t you I’m concerned about. I have a feeling that you can be a handful, that people cross you at their peril.” Seeing her smirk, he quailed momentarily, remembering who she was…what she was… before he refocused on the subject at hand.

“No, it’s actually DiNotzo that I’m concerned about. He hasn’t had good luck in the romance department. His fiancée dumped him just before their wedding. Then he fell in love with someone he wasn’t supposed to, while he was under cover and he never really got over her. He ran into her recently and it was traumatic for him, opened up a lot of old wounds that had never healed. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he also split up with his girlfriend a couple of months ago.”

“Did he get together with his old flame?” Hermione wanted to know.

“She’s married and Tony has a strict moral code about breaking up marriages.” Fornell explain, sadly. “So anyway he’s been through the ringer emotionally and he’s quite vulnerable at the moment.” He snorted rather loudly at his ability to state the bleeding obvious.
Seeing her expression of confusion her elaborated. “What you need to understand is that law enforcement has a high burn out rate, Hermione. Enforcing the law and protecting others is a bit like having an unforgiving and selfish mistress. She uses you and when you have nothing left to give her, she’ll spit you out, broken and defeated,” he explained to his guest, cynically.

“But you can work past the burnout - if you have support from your colleagues and family. Partners watch each other’s back and are there for each other through thick and thin. But Tony’s boss, his mentor and partner, the man he depends on has essentially told him to take a hike, after 15 years together. So he’s feeling lost and adrift. He’s fragile and very much alone.”

“Okay, Toby…I get the not so subtle shovel hint. I won’t break him. I won’t take advantage of him and if I do pursue him, I’ll go slow. Satisfied?” When he nodded, she smirked. “Now tell me about Sirius’ partner who is causing him all that pain. Tell me everything about him.”

Fornell looked worried. “Why? What do you want to know for?” Seeing a protectively maternal expression on her face, he groaned, experiencing a sense of foreboding. “I thought it was against the rules of international magical law to use any non-sanctioned magic against non-magical people?” He asked, nervously.

“That’s true, Toby,” she replied coyly. “And someone in my position can’t afford to get caught flaunting that edict in particular…”

Fornell heaved a sigh of relief…until the beautiful, sexy witch laughed cynically.

“Although, there is also a certain amount of wiggle room for someone with my connections, if you catch my drift. Especially if you don’t get caught,” she chuckled evilly.

“Besides, that doesn’t mean I can’t make him wish he’d never been born for hurting someone that I care about. I’m also a very intelligent muggle-born female and there’s absolutely nothing to say I can’t teach him a lesson…sans magic.”

It was unfortunate that he chose that moment to take a swig of his smooth single malt which he’d unfortunately switched to drinking instead of coffee, which went down the wrong way and left him choking for several minutes. Staring intently at Hermione, he had a feeling that even without magic this sassy, smart woman could and would cause absolute mayhem.

“So, spill!” she ordered authoritatively with the merest glimmer of a grin on her lips and tiny little crinkles between her eyebrows that suggested deep concentration.

Tobias almost felt sorry for Gibbs…almost! But he brought it all on himself, the miserable, tyrannical curmudgeon. Clearly he’d decided a long time ago, if Jethro Gibbs wasn’t happy then no one else close to him deserved to be either.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so clearly Hermione has her sights set on Tony/Sirius but like I said, there won’t be any ships. It was necessary to the story so I could examine the parallels between these two characters. It occurred to me in the process of writing what is supposed to be a parody, that these two share a lot in common. Including that they are both incredibly complex, very flawed characters who have still managed to retain their essential goodness in spite of what has been thrown at them. What I find fascinating and
frustrating is that the author/writers seem to actively despise them and trash them every chance they get. They seem to prefer characters who are less complex, with a chip the size of the Titanic on their shoulders and not exactly moral, viewing them as heroes.
Very Special Competent Agent DiNozzo

Chapter Summary

Tony has made a decision about his professional future. It's time to hand in his resignation.

Chapter Notes

I'd hoped to have the last two chapters of the story up before the airing of the finale of season 13 but I've made significant additions to this chapter, so therefore I'm unlikely to meet that schedule for the Epilogue. Still it is all in a good cause since it was so I could make an in-depth examination of the impact that 'Competent Tony' had over the course of his time at NCIS.

This chapter ended up being a fair bit longer than the first draft which I wrote initially. This is because of the video clip that EW.com posted, in anticipation of this week’s season finale airing in the US, which will see Tony DiNozzo bowing out after 13 seasons plus appearing in the pilot episodes in JAG, NCIS LA and NOLA had me grinding my teeth. The ten things, which FYI were 'supposedly' celebrating what made Tony such a great agent/memorable character, IMHO trivialises his contribution to the team quite dramatically. The spin is already on, even before he leaves to downplay Anthony DiNozzo's importance, presumably to convince people to stay loyal.

The second thing that got me steamed was the conversation between Tony and McGee in Charade 13.20 - basically it-parrots the party line. So I guess that leaves it up to Tony fans to provide a more in-depth analysis of the effect that ‘Competent Tony’ has had over his 15 years’ tenure on the MCRT. I hope you enjoy it, although I’m sure I’ve left out important stuff. Let me know what you would include.

BTW if you're curious about the list of ten things I've listed them in end notes.

So this isn't beta'ed and its much rougher than I'm usually comfortable in posting but I want to post it before the finale. If you find anything major, I'd appreciate head's up. Hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tobias glance over at his companion beside him in his car, his expression pensive. Frowning he asked, "Not having second thoughts are ya, DiNotzo?"

"No… there's no place for me here. Gibbs made sure of that. He's benched me, or sidelined me from investigations and made it plain he doesn't want or need me anymore. McGee is SFA in all but name only, as far as Gibbs is concerned. I knew leaving was inevitable. I just didn't see 'this' coming."

"What did you see happening. You know you could have come over to the Bureau, don't you?"
"Yeah, I guess."

"But?"

"Well it would have been a bit weird – the Bureau did try to arrest me twice on murder charges. Slacks still gives me shit over it."

"Fair 'nuff but you're always welcome, never forget that! But where were you planning on going?"

"Well the CIA has been throwing out feelers, especially Officer Teague but since they tried to blow me up years ago and they murdered my beautiful mustang, it would be really weird. The DHS has also been making offers again, especially since Hong Kong. S'pose there has to be some compensation for the whole Daniel Budd fubar, since it seems to have cost me my job on the MCRT."

"So what's with the Mandarin?"

"I was thinking about applying for a NCIS job in the Asia Pacific region. The only way I could possibly stay with the agency is to be well out of Leroy Jethro Gibbs sphere of influence. I've tried to apologise to Gibbs for getting shot but he won't forgive me."

"For what it's worth, I don't think that's what is really stuck up his butt, DiNotzo. Well apart from his head."

Tony snorted. "Nice image, Tobe! Doesn't matter anymore. Any friendship, any partnership that may have existed in the past has died. I don't fit in anymore… maybe I read too much into what existed between us in the first place. Gibbs seems more than happy to spend time with that flimflam guy, Anthony DiNozzo Senior but not me." He noted sadly. "I just wasn't good enough."

"It was never about you, Tony. It's Gibbs problem…really."

"Yeah if that was true how come I'm the only one he's pissed off at? McGee does his job, puts a kill shot into a suspect who threatened them while they were trying to get intel out of him about the death of Gibbs' family and the NCIS agent protecting him. The dead agent's son, a DEA agent goes postal – and what Gibbs and Mitchell were doing investigating this case in the first place is by the by, but the pertinent point here is that Gibbs defends Tim's action to his vengeance seeking crony. Not only does he staunchly defend him for doing what he's supposed to, but he tells Tim and everyone else what a good job he did. He's never once thanked me for saving his butt – ever in fifteen years.

"He spends the Thanksgiving holiday acting all supportive with Ellie and her family when she found out about Jake cheating on her, and I certainly don't begrudge her because it was a lousy thing to happen. Yet I run into Jeanne and then he tells me to suck it up and go back and use her to get info on a frigging case when he knew how I feel about her. Plus, I break up with Zoe and he doesn't even blink – not even an acknowledgement. So if he can be there for the others but not me… please…tell me… how in hell can it not be about me?"

Fornell sighed. "Okay…point taken. It is about you but not in the way you think. It isn't that you aren't good enough. Believe me."

"If that's so, what the hell is his problem?" Tony demanded heatedly.

"He's packing it. He's finally realised that he's getting past it. He screwed up badly with Daniel Bud and those kids. So now in his twisted thought processes, he needs a scapegoat so he doesn't have to face the truth – you are the scapegoat my friend! A diversion."
"But…"

"But nothing. If Jethro had responded appropriately with Luke Harris, even just disarmed him by winging him, it's highly likely you all could have taken down Budd, then and there. But by freezing as he did, and failing to do his job as he was trained to, allowing Harris to shoot him multiple times, he gave Budd the diversion he planned. The diversion he needed to escape, since as soon as Gibbs was down, all of your energy and resources went on getting medical aid for Gibbs and stopping him bleeding out.

"All the resources that were required to save his life…all the man hours and then valuable resources, not to mention the length of time that it took to hunt Budd down the second time and take him down. How much damage, how many more teenagers did he corrupt in the months after he escaped while he was free? Damn it, he had months to focus on his plan to plunge us into a war with North Korea – it was pure luck that we managed to avert that crisis, Fornell opined angrily.

Fornell looked across at his impassive companion. "Gibbs fucked up big time, Tony. He can't handle that!"

They both were silent as Tony reviewed Fornell's analysis. It was such an emotive subject and with all his guilt over letting Gibbs get shot, he'd been completely unable to look at it rationally. Even now, with the veteran FBI agent who was Gibbs' friend giving him his expert analysis of the situation, especially since he could be much more objective than Tony ever could, it seemed almost blasphemous to blame or criticise Gibbs.

Then again, the Marine had gone feral on McGee's ass when he'd frozen in the field and failed to shoot the dirty detective when he was just a rookie. He'd accidentally shot and killed the Metro detective's partner, thinking the unarmed Dee was firing at him. So when his corrupt partner pulled a gun and was going to shoot him, the probie froze. In Tim's defence, it was the first time the probie had killed anyone, yet that hadn't stopped Gibbs tearing the probie a new one.

Gibbs, unlike McGee certainly didn't have the excuse of inexperience and had it been anyone else on their team who had frozen in the field, he would have shoved his boot so far up their butt it would have caused indigestion. Still, for some reason it felt all sorts of wrong to blame Gibbs since he'd nearly died… felt like he was victim blaming.

Then again, Toby was correct about one thing. Gibbs had the opportunity to disarm Luke and made the choice not to because he was feeling guilty for not protecting Harris from Budd. Still a shot to the shoulder, much like he'd done with Ari Haswari, would have been enough to put a kid like Luke that out of the game pretty damned quick. It was highly unlikely he'd be able to fight through the pain of a bullet. But Gibbs didn't fire a shot and had, by letting Luke shoot him, in Tony's opinion, selfishly sentenced that poor kid to a whole world of hurt. Way more suffering than if he'd manned up, shot for the shoulder, since physical pain healed with time.

Shooting another human, especially for the first time was something that you never forgot. When a cop or a fed shot someone for the first time and/or killed them, they were adults and had been extensively trained for that eventuality and prepared for it as much as that was possible. Plus, there were support systems in place to help them deal with the inevitable rush of emotions that ensued, but that poor kid had nothing to prepare him and no support afterward. Sure Gibbs survived but Luke didn't know that until he and Joanna Teague caught up with him in Hong Kong. If he was Luke, Tony would hate Gibbs for just standing there and letting him shoot him when as the professional, he could have stopped it and saved him from Budd.

And as sacrilegious as it felt for Tony to admit it, Tobias was right. Because of his choice not to shoot Luke, Gibbs had jeopardised their mission and made it possible for him to escaped. Gibbs
had decided that his guilt was more important than a young vulnerable boy.

Tobias had watched as the various conflicting emotions flashed across DiNotzo's face before he continued. "As for you not being good enough...well that's just crap! It's not that you're not good enough... it's that you're too good."

"Oh come off it, Tobias!"

Reading the frank scepticism apparent in his facial features and body language, the FBI agent embarked upon a crusade to convince Tony of his worth as a cop and an agent. He was determined that Tony would hand in his resignation with his head held high and his self-worth in place.

"I'm serious! You took down Daniel Budd, the dirt bag who got the best of the Legendary Leroy Jethro Gibbs. The perp who succeeded in getting inside Jethro's head and psyching him out, and he can't deal with that. Easier to blame everything on you. So he's trying to break ya... trying to make you second guess yourself. He knows your weaknesses, just like you know his."

"You're kidding?"

"Deadly serious... no pun intended."

"So you're saying that he doesn't blame me for him nearly getting killed."

"Exactly! You were the only one to do that, DiNozzo."

And suddenly the car was silent as Tony processed Fornell's observations and he had no doubt he was pondering whatever happened to Rule #1 – Don't screw over your partner... or was it always have your partner's six? Same difference as far as Tobias could see.

"Ducky's take on it is that he is treating me like dirt because it's his idea of tough love. He reckons that Gibbs is trying to push me out of the nest because my skills are being underutilised and he wants me to move on." Tony finally shared some of his mental processes.

Tobias snorted loudly, expressing what he thought of that suggestion. "So what do you think about it?"

"I think that this is Ducky Mallard. Who is fiercely loyal to his friends. Who loves Gibbs like a son or perhaps a brother, trying his best to justify what cannot be justified. He sees the best in everyone, especially Gibbs and if he has to choose between him and me, then he's always going to side with the boss."

"And?" Tobias probed since there was much more left unsaid.

Shooting him an infuriated scowl he continued. "And I think that he's desperately scrabbling around to find a reason why Gibbs is being such an asshole. I get that... I do!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah but see, here's the problem with Ducky's theory. I'm definitely not some cute little baby bird," he stated the obvious and ignored the loud snort of derision emanating from the fibbie, "And besides, since when does Gibbs beat around the bush or worry about soft soaping what he thinks? Especially when it's about me? He never shied away from head smacks or yelling at me in public, even if I was 'supposed' to be his 2IC." He concluded sarcastically, with particular emphasis on the 'supposed' since Gibbs had always ignored the chain-of-command when it came to his
"So why the freakin hell would he suddenly start getting all cryptic with me now, Tobias? And honestly, after 15 years of loyalty, surely I deserve more than that? All he had to do was sit me down over a beer or during a performance review and tell me that he thought I should start applying for promotions. It's what any normal leader would do." He argued, getting increasingly angry.

Fornell nodded. "I agree. Why go to such extraordinary lengths when he just needed to say, 'Look, Tony, you are too good to be a SFA for a moment longer. You deserve you own team and you have a responsibility to yourself and the agency to lead a team.' Ya know, DiNotzo, most people feel that you've been wasting your talents for at least the last six years, probably more. So maybe you need to ask yourself, why now?"

Tony looked serious as he pondered what had been discussed and Fornell supposed that many people might have stayed out of it – kept their yaps shut but that isn't his way. Like Ducky, Jethro is his friend, a colleague. For some years they were brothers-in-arms, survivors in the trenches of being married to Diane…until he hooked up with her again and then she was dead.

As much as he understood Gibbs, perhaps better than most other people - even Donald Mallard, he wasn't prepared to perform mental and emotional contortions that would make an Indian yogi feel like a human pretzel. Unlike Ducky and Abby he wasn't going to avoid facing the unpalatable truths because it was uncomfortable. Which included the fact that Jethro could be an unmitigated, unprincipled bastard when he thought the ends justified means.

In fact, at times he could be a downright cold hearted, Machiavellian prick, who would always put his own needs before a guy like DiNotzo, just because Jethro's sense of entitlement, his pain… 'his past' meant he felt he'd earned it. Fornell never could figure out just how Jethro managed to get away with half the shit he did.

A loose cannon like him certainly wouldn't be tolerated at the FBI because TPTB could be pretty damned anal about not just closing cases, but also pettyfogging little details such not getting cases thrown out on technicalities, too. Perhaps if NCIS had been a little bit more concerned with observing the law and less worried about keeping Gibbs happy, he might have been less free to piss off perps and megalomaniacs. Certainly people...women who had the misfortune of being close to him might have been safer and... alive!

But Cate Todd and Diane aside, Tobias felt that this wasn't about Gibbs. His ascendance and his sphere influence in DC…in the world of spooks and spies was fast drawing to a close. Despite him fighting like a cornered rat against the laws of physics and the statutes on mandatory retirement to stay relevant, in the end age would win out. But Tobias Fornell was utterly determined that he wouldn't permit him to throw DiNotzo under the bus just so he could avoid having to deal with his own mistakes, his ghosts or gaining reprieve for a few extra years. Which was what this ultimately amounted to – a man staring down the barrel of retirement and obscurity.

This man beside him…this extraordinarily complex, flawed but essentially good guy, he deserved to walk out of NCIS with his head held high. Sound in body and spirit, free from the doubts and demons that Gibbs had knowingly or unknowingly sown in him, setting him up to second guess himself. That self-doubt was incredibly destructive for anyone...for someone like DiNotzo who was naturally prone to second guessing himself anyway, it could so easily result in a death sentence. A moment of doubt during a life and death situation and the consequences could be deadly…for him and anyone else that was with him. Fornell was not about to stand around and let that happen.
Even if he worked for the FBI and DiNozzo was NCIS and technically his mortal enemy in the fed wars, Tobias would observe Rule # 1 even if Jethro couldn't or wouldn't. After more than 20 years in law enforcement Tony deserved no less than his support.

Looking across at his silent companion Fornell cleared his throat. "You okay?"

Tony shrugged. "I'm fine. Honestly. I still don't get why you insisted on driving me into work today…why you insisted on taking the day off to dog my ass. Granted it is a damned fine ass," he joked with a semblance of his old humour.

"But I'm perfectly capable of going into the office and giving my notice. I don't need my hand held, much as I appreciate your sentiments, Toby."

"Don't call me that," the fibbie grumped at him. "And I have your back, whether you need it or not. We're family, you and me, Bucko Get used to it. Us Fornell's stick together!"

Tony chuckled. "Okay, first off…how come Hermione is allowed to call you Toby but I'm not?" he teased Fornell. "Second thing…we are not family. I am related to Harry and now Hermione is related to him through marriage. Damn it! I can't believe he married Ginerva Weasley…a silly little fangirl if ever there was one when he could have had Hermione."

"Anyhoo… that means she is now related to me… tenuously through her marriage that makes Harry he brother-in-law. Your ex-wife, wife, did you guys remarry?" he queried gently as Fornell shook his head. "Diane is somehow related to the Weasleys and so because of Emily, you're distantly related to them…very distant. Like beta max video and blue ray DVD are related – not!"

Fornell snorted, his expression amused. This metaphor was vintage DiNozzo. "And the third thing?"

Tony smirked at him. "Okay the third thing…Bucko? Seriously Special Agent Fornell. I'd never have pegged you as a Richie Cunningham fan. The Fonz… maybe but Richie freakin Cunningham? C'mon!"

Sniggering, Tobias looked at him almost fondly. "How ya gonna deal with no more movies or television, DiNozzo? You're gonna go crazy," he predicted bemusedly, referring to the plan for Tony to re-enter the magical community. He'd accepted a job offer he'd received to head up the Department of Magical Law Enforcement from the new minister of magic.

"Not planning on giving them up, Toby. I'm not just a Black – I'm part DiNozzo too and he couldn't cope with the primitiveness of British magical society. Don't think I could go back after all this time either. I'll work in the magical world but I'll maintain a separate life in the non-magical world out of business hours. Hermione's parents are going to find me a house. It's less risky. The less time I spend socialising with wizards and witches, the less risk there is of anyone figuring out my secret."

Fornell nodded. "Do Hermione's parents know about you?" he asked curiously.

"Nuh uh. There are only three people who know. You, my godson Harry and Hermione and that's probably three too many to be safe." He countered. "Hermione's parents think, like everyone else that I'm an American wizard who has dual citizenship, since my mother was a Paddington. American wizards live far more integrated lives, unlike the insular British who are still mostly living in the Victorian era. I'll be considered an oddity but not overly suspicious for an American. Besides, since the new Minister of Magic has a foot in both camps and is on a mission to drag magical Britain kicking and screaming into the 21st century with regards to using technology – I
doubt that anyone will focus too much on my living arrangements."

Fornell considered what Tony had said. He could find no fault with his rationale. "So you'll work with magicals and play with muggles."

"Non-magicals, Tobias. Muggle is demeaning. But yeah I can't really afford to socialise with wizards and witches in case anyone starts putting two and two together. I just hope I'm doing the right thing. Maybe I should have accepted a job in the non-magical world. Am I honouring Anthony DiNozzo's mission by taking this job when there is so much turmoil and chaos in the world."

Fornell considered this statement. There was no easy answer to such a loaded and emotive question.

"You said that you were sent back because Tony was destined to save hundreds, maybe thousands of lives. From my perspective I'd say you may have already fulfilled that obligation."

Tony quirked his eyebrow in disbelief. "How do you figure that one Fornell?"

"Well without going through every single case you've ever worked, let's just consider a few prominent highlights. In Baltimore you took down Macaluso; that whole branch of the Mafia came to a grinding halt. There's no way to quantify how many lives weren't lost to drugs with that lot in prison, plus all the guns you took off the street, the runaway and abused kids who didn't end up as sex workers because of drug addiction. All the kids who didn't grow up to serve in the Macaluso family business in one capacity or another.

"What about all the lives saved when you figured out correctly that Ari would target family and friends who were at Norfolk to welcome home the five ships in the Marine Amphibious strike group from the Gulf with the drone that he and his terrorist cell stole? The MCRT managed to stop the drone attacking all those innocent people and children, even though you all paid a terrible price losing Todd. You guys took out a highly dangerous terrorist cell and literally averted a human catastrophe. So how many lives did the MCRT save that day, Tony? Many hundreds, I'd estimate."

Tony stared at him contemplatively before nodding somewhat grudgingly. "Yeah, I guess so."

"What about that terrorist cell you took out in Somalia. You were the one who drove that whole mission, taking down Saleem Ulman, even before you were given point. You found a way to track him down and persuaded TPTB to go after him even though Mossad had given up on bringing him down. So how many thousands of lives did your team and the Marine's potentially save that day by taking out the terrorist cell and Ulman? It's hard to estimate the effect your mission had then and continues to have now, DiNozzo. You can't quantify something like that but I do know its effect was a huge blow for the terrorists – all thanks to your pigheadedness."

Tony chuckled, "Gee thanks for the compliment, Fornell."

Tobias flashed him a grin. "You're welcome, Tony. And there was your stubborn insistence that the estranged wife killed her husband, Lieutenant Arnett who was out on the ledge of the ten story building, trying to commit suicide after she'd drugged him to the eyeballs. Okay, so you thought she was after his money, but if you hadn't been so bull headed, hadn't trusted your instincts and had the foresight to bag her toothbrush from Arnett's apartment, what would have happened? An Al-Qaeda spy, wanted by Interpol would have gotten away with murdering Arnett and probably fled the country."

Tony rolled his eyes. "As Ziva, Abby and McGee were quick to point out, Tobias, Abby was the
one who caught the spy. I asked her to check DNA on felony data bases. She thought to run her photo recognition on the Interpol database. She solved the case."

"Oh please, that's just crap, Tony. If you hadn't been so damned persistent about the wife being the killer, if you hadn't used your seniority to insist that Abby run the DNA and compare in on the National Felon's Database, why would she have even thought to check Interpol's database. Perhaps she would have got around to it when all the other leads that the rest of the team dreamed up didn't pan out, but by then she would have skipped the country. Dana Arnett was an Al-Qaeda mole, and would have disappeared before you had a chance to nab her.

"Abby's a lab tech who investigated the evidence that investigators – you in this case - bring to her. Her and the others denigrating your contribution to stopping a murderer and a dangerous terrorist escape was ridiculous, unprofessional and wrong. Undoubtedly it was motivated by jealousy, my friend. If Gibbs didn't pit you all against each other, ignore the chain of command and had praised all of you when you did good work, not just his favourites, then perhaps the rest of the team would be able to acknowledge the valuable contribution you make to the team. That's his bad, yet you paid the price, my friend."

Tony flashed him a grateful look for the scant praise on a case that was nearly a decade old. Which was all sorts of wrong.

"Look DiNozto, if you'd been on my team, I'd have no problem telling you when you did good work. I wouldn't have been threatened by your talent because it would have made me look good, just like you made Gibbs look good all these years. But you deserved a shit load more than demeaning head slaps. You're an awesome, intuitive investigator and I wish you'd worked for me – for both our sakes."

Tony just sat there speechless, not knowing what to say. He wasn't used to praise let alone such fulsome compliments. At least ones that didn't contain some hidden barb in them like a scorpion's sting.

And Fornell wasn't nearly done yet. "Okay, so let's discuss the fact that your joint taskforce broke up Budd's ring of child assassins, saving not only countless at-risk-youths but also thousands of innocent lives that Budd's child suicide bombers would have targeted. All because you came back and risked your life every day to serve others."

Fornell reached over and put his hand on Tony's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze in a manly show of support. "What about the fact that you've saved your team mates lives, and more than once? And while that is very important thing, clearly, by saving them, how many other lives did you indirectly affect? You saved Abby and McGee from Ari Haswari. By rights, he should have killed both of them - McGee with the car bomb and Abby by the sniper's bullet. Hell, DiNozzo! You shouldn't have even been out in the field when you saved them.

"They've gone on to do their jobs over the years and how do you put a price on that, or how many lives they've be able to impact by being alive to do their jobs. Not just all the single cases of criminals brought to justice but just think for a moment if they hadn't been there to avert that crap Budd pulled. We were on the brink of nuking North Korea because he'd manipulated the U.S.A. into thinking they were attacking us. If Abby and McGee died by Ari's hand back in 2005, their replacements might not have been able to avert that FUBAR crisis. Think how many hundreds of thousands, maybe even hundreds of millions of lives could have been lost?"

Both agents were silent, thinking about that horrific possibilities. The horrible consequences of that scenario was too hideous to envisage but yet all too real. Fornell decided to fill the void and change the subject.
"So let's look at how you saved Todd from Ari's car bomb…"

Tony interrupted. "Fat lot of good that did, Tobias. Cate got to live for one more day – big deal. He still killed her."

Yeah, okay… but if you hadn't interjected, what I was going to say was that while Ari still killed Todd, in that one day she saved Gibbs life up on the roof, tackling him out of the way of a bullet. If she was dead, there's no guarantee that Gibbs would have survived being on the roof that day – either from the terrorist or even from Ari's sniper rifle. So how many lives has Gibbs saved as a direct result of you saving her, even for one more day?

"Eh…there's no way to even geusstimate, not unless you are an actuarial analyst egghead…but I do know it would be a lot, all because of your heroic actions in taking hold of the trigger of the car-bomb, Tony. And, there are scores of examples of team mates and colleagues whose lives you saved over the years, who've gone on to save the lives of other people. It's called the butterfly effect."

Which reminds me, what about that spy you saved despite all the shit she put you through a couple of years ago in France? She was the daughter of one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. She sounds like she was one ginormous pain in the ass, yet you refused to give up on her and even when she did her damnedest to give you the slip, you had her back. You took out two Iranian moles and saved her life. No knowing how many potential lives she go on might save in the course of her career because you were the one who went to retrieve her. I'll bet most agents would have either lost her or given up when she ditched them."

Tony smiled sarcastically. He'd done good work on that assignment but he recalled that McGee was pissed off at being overlooked in favour of Tony. He'd downplayed the assignment with one of his typically dismissive barbs about Tony suitability for the mission, which he'd initially thought was about internet security. When Tim found out the true nature of the assignment, he'd told Bishop it was a suitable for Tony's level of skills as an errand boy. Fornell who'd always been something of a frenemy all these years was a helluva lot more complimentary about his contribution and its significance.

When he expressed these sentiments and revealed, "S'nice to be appreciated," Fornell snarled.

Honestly, what the hell was wrong with these people. This was no way to lead a team. One that spent so much time backbiting and trying to bring everyone down to the same level meant that it was energy that could be utilised in so much more productive ways. He couldn't help wondering just what could have been achieved if the team members had all felt validated and appreciated instead of having to compete for nonexistence reinforcement. Shrugging because it was too late to undo the damage done, he pressed on with his task, noting automatically that they were getting close to the Navy yard.

"Then there are the innocent lives you've save over the last seventeen years or impacted in some way. Take that time you saved Gibbs and his daughter's friend after they drowned in that submerged car. What was her name… Mary Taylor?"

"Maddie…Maddie Tyler."

"Right, Maddie Tyler. She was dead and you resuscitated both her and Gibbs. Putting aside the fact that you saved the old bastard's life again, for a second, who's not to say that Maddie Tyler might not discover the cure for Motor Neurone Disease or pancreatic cancer one day. Just because you saved her life? Maybe she affects the life of someone else who does find a cure?"
"Or perhaps someone who might have been a victim of serial killer Jeffery White if you haven't killed him when you were undercover, goes on to invent some green technology that will save humanity. A family member that you exonerated from a crime they'd been accused of could decide to serve others, maybe become a youth worker or a nurse and save others."

Tony thought about the nine-year-old boy, Jason King that a young Anthony DiNozzo had saved from a burning building. Unable to get his sister, four-year-old Amber to safety too had traumatic. That event had been pivotal for both DiNozzo and Jason. It was what made both of them want to become cops and while Jason never forgave Tony for his sister's death, his hate and grief propelled him into investigating arsonists. Who knows how many people Jason would save. So it was possible he supposed, that some of the people he'd saved over the years when he took up DiNozzo's life's work might also be doing great things and saving lives.

Fornell was done with him yet. "And don't forget about all the so-called bread and butter cases, DiNozto. They mattered too. That kid that everyone thought was a suicide bomber and taken his classmates hostage. Everyone wanted you to kill that kid, thought he was a perp yet you decided not to listen to 'everyone' including Shepard. You wanted to save him in spite of himself and it turned out he was a victim too. You saved him, the kids he held hostage and Gibbs that day, plus you caught the real criminals. If you'd shot the kid like everyone wanted you too, chances are the perps would never have been caught and he, Gibbs and the hostages would have been blown up by the bomb. Instead you reunited the boy and his father with his mother who was in WitSec. How do you quantify what you did that day?

"The fact is there is no way to know how many live you've affected but I'd bet my last dollar that you've made one Hell of a difference, Tony. You're one damned amazing cop and a Very Special Agent. You should be proud of all your achievements," he concluded in genuine admiration.

Tony found himself becoming uncomfortably hot although he would deny that it was because he flushed as red as a beetroot with embarrassment. He looked at Fornell gratefully. "Wow I don't know what to say. Thanks man."

It needed to be said, Tony – should have been said by Gibbs but you and I both that ain't gonna happen. I'm a poor substitute and it would mean a whole heap more had it come from your partner and mentor of 15 years but it's still better than a poke in the eye with a blunt stick.

Tony laughed at that but it sounded almost like a sob and the FBI agent studiously ignored the uncharacteristic display of emotion, since Tony would be hugely uncomfortable.

Tobias looked at him speculatively. "You could do both, ya know? Living in the real – sorry non-magical world means there's nothing stopping you contributing to it too if the need arises or you so choose."

He snuck a swift glance at Tony since they were stationary at a set of traffic light. Green-grey eyes stared back at him and he suddenly realised that he had yet another answer to the enigma that was DiNozto. His eyes, their colour seemed to change with his mood and what character he was playing at that moment. Sometimes his eyes were emerald green, sometime greyish green and sometimes they were even grey blue. Chameleon eyes. Huh…magic!

Tony looked at him curiously. "How so?"

He grinned. "You might not know this but the FBI were approached for character references and security clearances for you from MI6. Hermione might have offered you the job, and as the new Minister of Magic elect, she carries a lot of weight as you'd expect, but as an American with dual citizenship you're still subject to vetting by the spooks. I'd say that if you wanted to consult for
Scotland Yard, MI5 or particularly MI6, they'd welcome you with open arms. In fact, I know so, since they already sounded us out on what it would take to poach you from the DMLE."

Tony looked shocked but definitely interested in the idea. Fornell supposed that after almost two decades as a cop and fed he wouldn't want to simply walk away from that world completely. He couldn't fault him on that. He'd probably be the same.

Seeing the traffic was flowing better than normal, they were early. Seeing a coffee shop, he decided to stop off and grab a coffee so Tony wasn't hanging around the bull pen waiting to see the director at 8.30am. Ignoring his protests, Fornell drew him into the shop and ordered two coffees, before steering DiNotzo into a booth. He looked at the tense face and gave himself a mental pat on the back.

He thought it was funny that DiNotzo was letting him do so much of the talking. The normal garrulous man was definitely brooding on what was to come. Remembering something he'd said earlier about people knowing his secret, the FBI agent decided to address it head on.

"Oh and that reminds me of something you said earlier. You've gotta know that I'd never betray your secret, Tony. But if it makes you feel safer then I'll willing volunteer to undergo that oblivious spell thingy to make me forget it. That would just leave Hermione and Harry – can you trust him with your life? I think ya can bank on the new Minister of Magic keeping your secret – she's pretty fond of you," he observed with a smirk.

Although Fornell enjoyed teasing DiNotzo about Hermione, especially since she'd made no secret of her interest in him, Fornell knew that Tony was not interested in getting into a relationship at this stage. He was still too gun shy and with all the major changes that he was facing, Tobias figured it was pretty smart. He just hoped that Hermione would respect Tony's reticence and not push him. None-the-less, Tony rolled his eyes at the good-natured jibe.

"I trust both of them, Tobias. They've sacrificed a lot in the war and they already share a secret that could be extremely dangerous if it became common knowledge. They understand the consequences if my identity was ever to come to light, not just for me but for the 'greater good,' he pulled face at the loaded phrase. "And you, Bucko! I trust you since we're practically family," Tony joked playfully. "If ya can't trust your family, then who can you trust?"

Tobias smiled, feeling rather honoured by Tony's trust in him. "Fine but the offer stands if you ever change your mind. Just please… let me have some time to saviour the memory of Vance, Gibbs and his merry minions when you tell them that you've been headhunted to be the head honcho director of a super-secret British law enforcement organisation waaay above their security clearance. It's gonna be so awesome!" He chortled gleefully.

Tony looked at him and smiled as they made their way back to the car and eased back into the traffic stream for the final few miles to the Naval yard.

The mood was much lighter after coffee and Fornell's thoughts turned to more practical matters.

"So…by the way, have you decided what you're gonna do with your apartment yet? You gonna sell it or rent it out?"

"Well I was considering renting it to McGee and Wheels but that was before he and Probish hacked into my financial records, including my Tax records. Now I'm going to sell it I think, or lease it out for an astronomic amount."

"THEY WHAT?" Fornell shouted, glaring at him and Tony grabbed the dashboard in alarm.
"Eyes. Road." Tony spat out, panicking. "I have no desire to end up at the ER before I hand in my resignation, Toby."

Once the FBI agent was refocused on the driving he responded to his previous question. "Tim and Ellie were snooping into how I could afford my apartment, so they hacked into my financial records."

"Please, tell me you reported them?" Fornell huffed, greatly outraged. NCIS agents…well McGee and now Bishop at the behest of Gibbs, were always too quick to hack into FBI files and it pissed him off no end. Especially when they kept getting away with it. It was time to take a leaf out of Hermione's book and indulge in a little bit of payback.

"Nah. Gibbs told me to suck it up when I was stupid enough to mention it. Said I was a habitual snoop and what goes around comes around. And yeah I might have snooped in people's desks, listened to their phone calls when they were in the bull pen or searched Cate's purse when she left it lying around on her desk but…"

"If you want to have a personal phone call, don't have it in the bull pen," Tobias observed cynically. "Yeah snooping in people's desks is a bit much, Tony but it's a far cry from hacking into someone's private financial data. Gibbs would kick them to the curb if they did it to him – after he gave them a colonic irrigation – courtesy of his boot!"

"Too true, Toby. When I snitched his NCIS issued phone to figure out his movements when he was trying to protect his former CO, Colonel Ryan and you guys were trying to track Ryan down over missing money in Iraq, Gibbs told me he'd break my hand if I did it again. But short of reporting it to IA there's not a lot I can do about it."

"Leave it with me. We have a computer tech at the Bureau that is a maestro of the keyboard. She'll make them wish they'd never gone near a computer, let alone decided to hack your records," he promised gleefully. He'd heard she could be extremely creative.

"So what if Senior wants a place to stay?" He asked a bit later as they were approaching the Navy yard.

"Then his good buddy Gibbs can put him up at his house. He spends more time with him out of hours than me, especially since Hong Kong. Seems like Senior's a better conman than I gave him credit for. So much for Gibbs' infallible gut. Though, if he shags Gibbs' nympho neighbour in Shannon's marital bed it, might be a different story. He'd probably kill him after he shoots his boys off."

"Shags, DiNotzo?"

"Point, Tobes. Spending time with Hermione has me regressing. Need to keep up my guard and not let the English idioms creep back in, though. Have to remember who I am... or who I'm not."

Fornell wondered if Tony was biting off more than he could chew. Perhaps he would be better off accepting a job in the non-magical world after all. It was a big ask to return to his roots and maintain such a deep cover, even for the king of working undercover. But then again, now that the genie was out of the bottle, was there any way to stuff it back in? Probably not.

He also knew that the new Minister of Magic, aka Hermione Weasley nee Granger, had been as good as her world, and planned a spot of retribution concerning a certain Leroy Jethro Gibbs. She swore that it wasn't using magic but he quailed at the thought of what Hermione had planned even without magic. The woman's intelligence and drive made Abby Sciuto look average by
comparison. Fortunately, he'd persuaded her not to act while Tony was serving out his notice so he didn't get caught in any fallout but she steadfastly refused to tell him what she had planned.

As they drove into the NCIS carpark and exited the car, Tony flashed him a smile. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends…"

"Once more." Tobias finished the well-known Shakespearean quote, returning an encouraging smile as they made their way to through the front doors of NCIS

Tony looked sad and Fornell understood…sort of. Fifteen years…a lot of water under the bridge. Gibbs and some of the others were in for a nasty surprise. More than that if he read Hermione right.

Taking a deep breath Tony plastered on his trademark grin, as sincere as a newly converted paleo dieter at a pasta night. Adopting his brash persona and swag, he approached the security staff with a gay, "Showtime!"

Chapter End Notes

In case you're curious:

Top Ten Moments Video Clip

10. Baltimore – the Freeze Dirt Bag moment tackling Gibbs. (Yawn!)

9. SWAK – "You will not die" (Be still TIBBS shippers beating hearts *eye rolls*)

8. Internal Affairs -Tarot cards scene with Abby in evidence garage. (Oh my! Such an iconic scene - not!)

7. You Better Watch Out - Senior and the single bed conversation (Anyone say continuity boo boos - E.J. Barrett sleeping over; not to mention Zoe last season? Must have been very cosy!)

6. Requiem – Tony saves Gibbs. (No mention of him taking out two killers or saving Maddie Tyler – wouldn't want him to appear too heroic, would we? Or perhaps the rest was unimportant.)

5. Bounce – Gibbs informs Tony of Rule 38. (Well that was so the most pivotal moment in that episode – NOT)

4. Tony undercover in dreads, playing guitar while watching La Grenouille and dog howling. (This is what they want us to remember about him working undercover or the whole Frog arc? No just no!)

3. Charade. McGee's BFF moment. (See comments below.)

2. T&C and Past, Present and Future – TIVA moments (Nope, what I'm always going to remember is her attacking Tony while he was wounded in Aliyah, after she lied to them for months and committed espionage against the United States. AND her telling him she needed to shower after talking to him because he made her feel sleazy.) And the number one moment?
1. Family First – Tony hugging Gibbs, Abby and McGee goodbye. (Really? How underwhelming!)

And then there is the BFF moment between Tony and McGee that left me grinding my teeth. Okay, putting aside for the moment, the fact that I've never bought the family/sibling as team myth, especially the Tony/Tim bro/ BFFs relationship. Let's say I buy it, let's look at what McGee chose (well to be fair what the writers selected for him) to reassure DiNozzo that his life had meaning and direction when he was floundering.

1. He survived the Plague.

2. He saved Gibbs – yep again, no mention of taking out two killers and saving Maddie Tyler who Gibbs had killed. Coincidence?

3. And finally, Tony was one of McGee's best friends.

Okay so it's not a secret that I'm no fan of how McGee has treated Tony over the 12 years he's been on the team (or how all the team treat Tony to be fair) and so I'll restrain myself mightily, apart from pointing out two incidents from this last season to dispute claims by some that Tim's been nicer to Tony without Ziva's bad influence. Two typically nasty jibes this season that made me see red were when McGee told Bishop that Tony was to blaming for him getting poison ivy and his Valentine's Day remark. The truth about the poison ivy was that he was too arrogant to listen to Tony, who tried to warn him the first time about the poison ivy at the crime scene. The second time he got poison ivy, he was dumb enough to pee at a crime scene, so I fail to see how either time was Tony's fault. And no, I don't care that he put calamine lotion on Tony – it still doesn't negate lying to Bishop and blaming Tony for his own screw-up.

Plus, there was that really cruel comment when he told DiNozzo that he thought Tony enjoyed being alone, re his breakup with Zoe when Tony confided that he wasn't not looking forward to Valentine's Day. Nice! With BFF's like that who needs enemies? Okay…end of rant.

Back to the list of three things McGee mentioned in Charade. They were so obviously part of the party line that TPTB on the show want to push; they were too identical to the clips on the Best-Of video for it to be a coincidence. But I guess what really stuck in my craw about that scene was that if someone was really one of your BF's, in that situation if you'd already mention saving Gibbs' life, wouldn't you also take the opportunity to thank him for saving your life too? Especially considering the fact he'd been still recovering from the aforementioned plague when he'd taken your place holding the trigger to a car bomb and sent you to safety, effectively saving your and Cate's life? I know it would be top of my list in that situation. So that scene felt totally insincere and incomplete to me.

But of course, the spin they've put TD's departure is totally in keeping with them trashing his character over many years and their desire to downplay his influence on the show and lessen the impact of his leaving. Call me a cynic if you like – I know what I know!
A Faustian Bargain

Chapter Summary

Tony informs Director Vance of his intention to leave NCIS. Tobias has fun watching Vance squirm and Leon contemplates what DiNozzo's departure means for the agency, the MCRT and his directorship.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay between chapters. A combination of lack of time and disgruntlement over the finale contributed. I thought a chapter plus an epilogue would see this finished but the characters had other ideas. Not sure yet but at least 4 chapters and a two part epilogue. Good news it is rough drafted so hopefully no more long intervals between chapters - touch wood!

Warning: Please take this seriously (no pun intended). If you are a big Gibbs, McGee or Vance fan then you shouldn't proceed any further and if you do, then don't bother complaining about my analysis of their behaviour. Take it up with the NCIS writers or showrunner since it's based on cannon. I guess, strictly speaking I should give a spoiler alert - most especially for seasons 11-13.

Tony didn’t know whether to be peeved or amused by having Fornell follow him around like a duckling sticking to the momma duck as he entered Director Vance’s outer office. Krista Delaney was a temp from the secretarial pool and she filled in for others who were on vacation or sick leave. If Leon’s regular PA had been on deck, she definitely would have questioned Fornell’s presence. As it was, it seemed like the gods must be smiling on him, since Delaney waved them both through into Vance’s inner sanctum. The director’s eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Tobias but that was the only outward indication that he’d been caught off guard.

“Come in, Gentlemen. I must have missed the memo about you attending this meeting, Tobias.” He commented rather pointedly before shifting quickly into compassionate mode. “So how is Emily doing?”

Ever since Fornell’s ex-wife had been murdered, Leon had seemed to feel a genuine sense of brotherhood with the newly single father.”

Tobias grimaced. “She’s back at school and trying to stay busy. We’ve survived the first Thanksgiving, Halloween and Christmas… somehow. It’s actually all a bit of a blur but there’s still Diane’s and Emily birthdays to endure. Not looking forward to either of those, but I guess we’re doing okay.”

Vance nodded. “I won’t lie, that whole first year is the pits – not just the big events and holidays but all the little milestones and moments. The first time they get sick and their mom isn’t there.
The first time they get a bad grade or a good one and they want tell her about it and then realise that’s never, ever going to happen. The first fight with their best friend…well you get the drift. We should get our daughters together when Emily is home from school; they have a lot in common.”

Fornell nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Thanks Director.”

“So what can I do for you?”

Tobias looked momentarily wrong-footed, as if he’d only just realised he should have anticipated this fairly obvious question when he showed up trailing around after Tony. Except that coming up to the interview with Tony had been totally spur of the moment. Thinking on his feet, he stated the first thing that popped into his head.

“Ah yes well… I’m here on protection detail.”

Vance’s millimetric eyebrow lift was so subtle it was almost imperceptible, his gaping jaw less so. “Is there a threat to Agent DiNozzo that I haven’t been made aware of?” He asked, and the implication that if there was a threat then he absolutely should have been informed, was pretty damned clear.

Tony shot an incredulous look at Fornell, who didn’t look at all contrite; if anything he looked like he was hugely enjoying his little adventure in extemporization. “Sorry, Director, I’m afraid that information is purely need to know. I’m sure you understand.”

This time Director Vance’s tell was much more apparent; his dark brown eyes appeared to bug out of his head in anger. “I need to know. I’m the director – DiNozzo is MY agent and I HAVE security clearance. So spill it now, Agent Fornell!”

“Sorry, Sir. You may have security clearance but I’m afraid you don’t have high enough clearance for this information.” His glib reply told Tony the grizzled FBI agent was enjoying himself hugely. Still, Toby didn’t have to work with these people – but he did. For the next few weeks at any rate.

When Tony observed the rapid tic of Leon’s eyebrow, along with his eyes that seemed to bulge even more, a la Marty Feldman, he became extremely worried that Tobias would cause Vance to stroke out. Picturing his two motherless kids, Jared and Kayla Vance, Tony sent him a glare that clearly said, ‘back off now.’

The Fibbie shrugged ingenuously. “Perhaps after you’ve listened to DiNozzo, you might have a better understanding of the situation, Director.” He grinned wickedly and mimed hitting a tennis racquet, meaning ‘the ball’s in your court, now’.

Shaking his head in exasperation, Tony took over. “So I know that we’ve had a number of conversations about my future within the agency since I returned from Shanghai, Director.”

“Yes and we decided that when the next SSA position in the Asia Pacific region came up, that you’d apply for it. There’s a spot opening up in Manilla in seven months’ time with Barnes retiring but as you know, a slot could also come up before that.” What he avoided saying in so many words but all three men understood implicitly was that if someone was killed on the job, and that was a risk that they all took every day, then a job would come up much sooner.

“Yes, well I wanted to inform you that I won’t be needing that job, Director. I’ve accepted another offer. I just wanted to give you a heads up and figure how long I’m going to need here to finish up all my affairs here at NCIS. Primarily any cases I might be required to give testimony in, since I’m not going to be available to return to DC for cases after I leave. I figure if we can work with Legal
to figure it out and get this all settled, then I can hand in my official notice.”

Vance frowned. “Look Tony, I know that things have been tough for you here lately, but perhaps we can find you a position in Europe ASAP.”

Tony stared at him, realising that Vance thought he was trying to hustle him. “I know that you can’t just pull a job vacancy out of thin air, Director. That’s not what this is about – I meant what I said. I’ve accepted a job overseas that would make it difficult to return easily.”

“The CIA offered you a job?” Vance asked him.

“They did, and I turned them down.”

“Then where are you going?”

He sighed. “I’m going to England.” He proffered rather reluctantly.

“Oh, so that’s not like outer Mongolia. Why would it be difficult for you to return, should we need you back to testify in a case?”

“It’s not the geographical location. It’s the nature of my job that will make it difficult, if not impossible.”

“I don’t understand what could be so important.”

Fornell huffed in frustration. “Oh for Pete’s sake, just tell him, Tony. As the director of an ultra-classified law enforcement organisation in London, coming back for routine court cases, it would be a security nightmare to orchestrate your appearances.”

Vance who had his customary toothpick between his teeth, nearly swallowed the small, sharp sliver of wood. “Director, classified law enforcement agency. Which agency?”

“Sorry, Director. That’s classified information and you don’t have adequate clearance to be read in on that information.” Tony replied, careful to keep his tone from seeming smug, whilst trying to project contrition for not being able to tell him which organisation had offered him a job. He was after all, essentially a pragmatist after working for Gibbs for all those years. He still had to work out his notice, so why shoot himself in the foot by pissing off Vance unnecessarily?

“Then why do you two know about it? I have higher security clearance than either of you.”

Fornell smirked cheerily. He was clearly having the best time and Tony hoped that he didn’t make everything more uncomfortable than it already was. He just wanted to keep a low profile until his departure.

“The FBI have dealt with this department before, which is why I also did the probity and background security clearance checks on DiNozzo before his position was approved by the Minister.” Perhaps a slight exaggeration about the FBI but not the checks. “And DiNozzo also encountered the group at some point in his professional past.” Again the truth but not entirely.

“But the director…that’s one helluva huge leap up the pay grade from SFA and why headhunt an American? We wouldn’t appoint a Brit to such a high profile position.” Leon protested…dazed.

Tony grinned. This was a relatively easy one to answer. “I am half British, have dual citizenship. My mother’s family is a prominent one in England. And why me…they want my experience plus my ability to think outside the box to help in restructuring the organisation. They like that I’ve got
such a varied experience in law enforcement, like that I understand how a humble beat cop thinks and feels.

“They made me an offer that I couldn’t refuse. Since there was no guarantee that I would get a promotion here anytime soon and Gibbs wanted me gone months ago, I’d be a damned fool to turn it down.”

He was pensive at the end of his explanation and Fornell and Vance imagined he was probably wondering how after all his years of service to Gibbs, he’d ended up throwing it back in his face.

“But you’ve never expressed a desire to move to the management side of the job. You live for being a field agent,” Leon argued, not wanting to lose Tony.

Especially not now that he had been appointed as director of an ultra-secret agency of an ally, but also ultimately a competitor. It was a case of grossly underestimating his agent and being rudely reminded that they’d under-utilised his talents for far too long and now they’d pay the ultimate price. They would lose him permanently.

He wished that he’d been a lot more proactive in finding him a job, but he’d been complacent. It was sad but true that you didn’t appreciate someone until they were gone.

The truth was that Tony had no intention of just sitting in an office all day, though. He fully intended to help with training and lead any cases that were complex. It was one of the conditions of him accepting the job.

Fornell interposed his five cents worth before Tony could speak. “He’s already being recruited by MI6 and Scotland Yard. They’re desperate for him to act as a consultant with them on difficult cases or those that utilise his unique skillset and experience, Director. He has approval from the relevant minister to still maintain his field status, working within certain protection protocols,” he stated gleefully and earning the Leon Vance double barrelled glare.

“So this is the reason for DiNozzo’s protection detail? His new job?”

Tony glowered at Fornell. “I’m really not happy about this. I don’t accept that I’m in any danger and even if I was, the appointment has yet to be announced publicly – well as much as it will be. So I’m sure we can drop the body guarding stuff in the US, Toby.”

Fornell grinned like the Cheshire cat. “Until I can confirm that with Madame Minister, I’m not willing to let up on your protection detail, Director DiNozzo.” He replied deferentially, noting with amusement how Vance looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon at his use of the director honorific for Tony. Given his partiality for the boxing ring and his clenched fists, Fornell was willing to bet he’d be spending quality time with a punching bag some time in the near future.

After they left the office, Tony turned on the veteran FBI agent furiously. “What the hell was that? We both know I don’t need protection.”

“Yeah, but it was the best I could come up with when Leon put me on the spot, and besides, it gives me a great excuse to hang out with ya here today. That’s all I wanted… a chance to watch the upcoming fireworks. So it’s all good!”

Shaking his head in irritation, Tony capitulated, albeit reluctantly. “Fine, but just for today. I don’t need you following me around like a lost duckling; it’s embarrassing. And for the love of Mike, Tobias, stop grinning like a loon. It’s freaky and besides that, the others will smell a rat!

~000~
Leon watched DiNozzo and the FBI agent protecting him, Tobias Fornell, leave his office after dropping a freakin huge bombshell. He couldn’t believe that after fifteen years on the MCRT and with the agency, that the guy was resigning to accept a position as Director of some super-secret organisation in Britain. Obviously he should have worked much harder to find a SSA position for him when he’d first come to him requesting a transfer. He’d been really hoping that Gibbs would get his head out of his ass and sort out his problem with DiNozzo – whatever the hell his problem was with him taking down Daniel Budd and The Calling.

Since Gibbs was going to be retiring in the very near future, it had made perfect sense for DiNozzo to step up and take over the team - just as he’d done so successfully several times in the past. Leon totally didn’t want to find someone else to take over the team when Gibbs was dragged, kicking and screaming out of the bull pen for the last time. Hopefully to take up a desk job, but more realistically, to sulk away the days in his basement, getting rotten drunk on cheap bourbon.

Technically, he was pretty sure that Gibbs should have been banished from field work quite a while ago, even if according to his jacket now it gave him a couple more years before mandatory retirement kicked in. The main problem being that Leon had doubts about the accuracy of the gunny’s personnel file, but then again, he didn’t want to look too closely. Leon preferred to have plausible deniability. As Director he absolutely needed plausible deniability.

Somewhere along the way, he and Gibbs had started a quid pro quo relationship. What it meant was when Gibbs screwed the pooch, he couldn’t afford to respond appropriately as Director of NCIS, due to Gibbs possessing information about him which was equally damning. It had started with the case of his best friend’s murder and Gibbs figuring out their foolish identity fraud. Leon wasn’t sure what had tipped him off – the enemies he had in the CIA or one of the enemies from within NIS – take your pick. It could even have been courtesy of those damned dirt files that the vile old dinosaur, Mike Franks gifted to his probie when he’d retired.

At the end of the day, who had tipped the former Marine the wink didn’t really matter. What did matter was that Gibbs knew Leon’s MOAS and right then, their relationship, their whole dynamic shifted irrevocably. And at least from where he stood, not in a good way. No doubt Gibbs saw it differently.

Leon had looked the other way when Jethro’s ex-mother-in-law, Joanne Fielding killed an Admiral who’d been involved in her daughter and grandchild’s deaths. Gibbs had deliberately stuffed up the investigation by not advising her of her Miranda Rights when getting her confession to prevent her being convicted. Vance pretended it was an accidental slip up, even though Leon knew damned well Gibbs had messed up on purpose.

He’d also deep sixed Dr Sciuto’s forensic report proving that Gibbs had killed Pedro Hernandez – the person believed to have fired the shot that killed the NIS Agent Mitchell, who was protecting Gibbs family. Mitchell’s death caused the car accident that resulted in Gibbs wife and daughter’s deaths when Gibbs was serving as a Marine, and on deployment in Iraq.

In return, Gibbs had also turned a blind eye, not reporting him or charging him for his interference in several cases which were highly personal where he foolishly became involved (despite protocol) and abused his position. He’d browbeaten a confession out of Nick Perkins, intimidating the kid with an axe, determine to prove he’d killed his father who’d been a good friend of his at Annapolis. And then his spectacularly naïve and stupid insistence that his brother-in-law had nothing to do with a murder victim – that it was just a case of wrong time, wrong place. He’d wilfully and deliberately obstructed the MCRT’s investigation. Without Gibbs’ protection, at the very least he’d have faced charges of obstructing justice and interfering in a federal investigation.
Then, Gibbs had developed a very opportune case of acute myopia after Eli David was killed and Jackie was tragically caught in the cross fire. His bad eyesight allowed him to stand by as Ziva David and Leon plunged deeply into a black abyss of hatred, intent on avenging their loved ones. The director owed Jethro big time for looking the other way. If he’d ended up in prison for conspiracy to murder, or accessory to murder the deputy director of Mossad, Ilan Bodnar, his life would have effectively been ruined. His children would have been swallowed up by the foster care system.

Which was why, last year when DHS and the CIA demanded an inquiry into Gibbs actions (or lack of actions) that allowed The Calling’s Daniel Budd to escape capture in Iran, Leon had called in markers to derail the review before it could get off the ground. Furthermore, he’d also turned a blind eye to Gibbs lack of mandatory psychological counselling after almost dying, fudging the requisite clearances that enabled him to resume his duties.

Of course, on that score he didn’t really have a choice, since the pig-headed ex-Marine flat out refused to attend counselling and because of his Faustian bargain, there really wasn’t anything Vance could do to force him to accept psychological help. Not if he wished to keep his own job, and also stay out of prison. When it came to enforcing NCIS rules and regulations, Gibbs effectively had him by the short and curleys.

Leon had figured out some months ago that the mistake he’d made, which landed him in this current mess and ultimately led to DiNozzo resigning from the agency, was asking Gibbs to come back early to babysit Bishop and McGee. That was a big mistake! With the benefit of hindsight, what he should have done was to farm out Agents Bishop and McGee to another team. That or brought in a TAD to lead them while Tony was in Shanghai.

He should never have had Gibbs come in to supervise them via desk duty, because once Gibbs had his foot in the door, he just forced himself all the way back in. The problem was Leroy Jethro Gibbs never listened to anyone else’s rules but his own, so he’d ignored the desk duty restriction accordingly.

Jethro was so utterly convinced of his own indispensability to the agency that he couldn’t grasp the concept that NCIS was capable of functioning just fine without him, including taking down Daniel Budd and The Calling. Of course, that whole crap with Parsons from the DoD several years ago, including how everyone had bent over and presented themselves, willing to be screwed over to save Jethro’s ass had probably contributed greatly to his delusions of grandeur.

And wasn’t it just too ironic that the agent that he’d happily have jettisoned almost eight years ago, when he’d taken over the big chair from Shepard, was now the one that he’d do almost anything to keep. Over the last several years, Leon had been gradually changing his mind - and not just about DiNozzo, who he’d previously seen as an anachronistic dinosaur and irrelevant for the ‘golden age’ of NCIS he’d planned when he’d taken over the directorship. He was also in the process of revising his previous opinion of McGee, who he’d seen as the ideal prototype for future NCIS agents under his watch. The last several years had been something of a revelation for Vance as he’d watched these two agents side by side. The results were definitely not what he would have predicted, even five years ago.

It had kicked off when he’d grudgingly been forced to respect DiNozzo for resigning in solidarity with his junior team mates to protect Gibbs’ ass. He’d resigned even though he had been the only one who Richard Parson’s hadn’t accused of betraying his oath as a law enforcement professional. He had to admire his loyalty to his team, though he wished he possessed more personal ambition

Leon was also impressed by the way, when his apartment had been shot up, DiNozzo had taken it
upon himself to make sure his former teammates were warned of the danger they were all in.

Something Gibbs had seemed surprisingly unconcerned about, even after discovering they were targets - so much for Gibbs’ Marine Corps mantra of ‘leave no man behind.’ There was no doubt in Leon’s mind that McGee owed his life to DiNozzo’s quick thinking and action that day, since the last thing the former junior agent would have been expecting was a drive by shooter targeting him.

Sure DiNozzo had gotten his job back again but he had no way of knowing that would occur when he’d sacrificed a blameless eighteen-year law enforcement career to save his mentor’s less than squeaky-clean ass. Even before Parsons had turned up with Gibbs in his sights, most people were well aware of the skid marks. Ziva David, facing charges of premeditated murder and Timothy McGee of illegal hacking of federal and classified data bases and conspiracy to murder, also had far less to lose than DiNozzo when they’d handed in their badges.

Indeed, certain cynical types might argue that their resignations were as much about them saving their own butts and staying out of jail, as it was altruism to protect Gibbs. Especially since Parsons hadn’t followed through and prosecuted either one.

Vance still couldn’t reconcile himself to the fact that Gibbs had seemed to be curiously unmoved by his team’s self-sacrifice in resigning to protect him - taking it as his due. Not only had he forbidden them from defending themselves or him, but he’d seemed surprisingly unconcerned with their safety either, following their resignation and it was still very much a bone of contention for the director. After all, he didn’t have a head injury at that time that he could use as an excuse for his callous disregard of David, McGee and DiNozzo’s lives.

Learning that his former agents were targets, even while he was still in Iran on his super-secret classified mission and not bothering to inform them or NCIS was just plain negligent. If it had been anyone other than Gibbs, Vance probably would have investigated the feasibility of charging him with withhold evidence and endangering lives. Their quid pro quo relationship made that impossible, unfortunately and so he’d skated again.

Candidly, after seeing the crime scene photos of DiNozzo’s apartment, Leon decided it was sheer dumb luck that he hadn’t been killed. Certainly no thanks to Gibbs, who should have, at the very least, given him a heads up when he came home, if not before. The director wouldn’t have blamed Tony one bit if he’d throttled Gibbs for his lie of omission - yet he’d been way more forgiving of him than Vance would have been if he’d been in his shoes.

And with regard to his growing respect for DiNozzo, he’d been suitably impressed, not to say incredibly relieved at his resourcefulness and grace under fire when he’d saved Admiral Kendall’s daughter from her own impetuousness. Not to mention saving her from several moles working for Iranian Intelligence, who’d been hell-bent on her demise. The SFA’s stubbornness, creative problem solving abilities, plus his undercover skills had allowed him to see beyond the party girl façade of Amanda Kendall and saved the spy’s life where others (including himself) probably would have given her up as a self-absorbed spoilt brat. He’d well and truly proved his worth again on that mission.

Leon had also been pleasantly surprised and impressed by the mentoring relationship he’d formed with the probationary agent, Eleanor Bishop after she joined the team. Watching the pair over the last few years, it became very apparent that it was DiNozzo who was responsible for training the team, not Gibbs, who was far too impatient, intolerant and cranky to be an effective teacher. A fact that made DiNozzo’s departure even more of a blow for the MCRT and NCIS – effective trainers were worth their weight in gold. Combine that skill with his leadership abilities and he was a resource that Leon would long lament losing to someone with more vision.
There was also the outstanding job he’d done in coordinating the hunt for Daniel Budd after Gibbs had been shot and the monster evaded their net. He’d earned glowing endorsements from Joanna Teague, Ned Dorneget’s mother. She was a highly experienced CIA operative, not easily impressed and DiNozzo had been commended by other agents on the joint taskforce which also included the Department of Homeland Security.

They’d all worked together as a well-oiled team to bring down Budd. Actually, it had made for quite a pleasant change for Vance not to have to field complaints about Gibbs’ attitude and inability to play nicely with others, a quality that DiNozzo seemed to have in spades. And he’d let him get away!

In contrast, these last few years he’d begun to question McGee’s competencies and his ability to step up to the role of a senior field agent. Something he’d always taken for granted until a couple of years ago. He’d just assumed that anyone on Gibbs team wouldn’t be there for over a decade and not be a highly capable field agent. Guess what they said about assumptions wasn’t such a wives’ tale after all.

Oh sure, Special Agent Timothy McGee was a highly competent individual when it came to the technical side of the job. Stick him in front of a computer and he was an impressive individual – a very valuable asset for the agency, without a shadow of a doubt. However, the director had begun to notice certain details about his field competencies and instincts which were concerning, to say the least.

The junior agent was the one who Gibbs planned to promote to SFA, if his recent actions were any guide to his intentions. They’d included: benching his obscenely experienced SFA after his return from Shanghai, ignoring, even actively encouraging McGee’s bypassing the chain-of-command or giving Tim point on a routine investigation, despite DiNozzo, his direct superior, being willing and able to handle the case.

Plus, he along with the rest of the bullpen, had taken note of Gibbs effusive plaudits of McGee simply because McGee had done his job on a case following Gibbs return from four months injury. Tim had taken down a suspect who was threatening himself, Gibbs and a DEA agent with a gun. Competent work without a doubt, but only what every agent was expected to do in similar circumstances. It was hardly earthshattering or worthy of one of Gibbs’ rare as hens’ teeth acknowledgements yet he’d got one anyway.

It certainly seemed overly excessive if you contrasted it with Jethro’s failure to even acknowledge DiNozzo’s superhuman effort to save him and a civilian female from a submerged car years ago - a civilian Jethro had managed to drown. Not only had Tony hauled them out of the submerged and flooded car to safety after he dived into filthy water with crap lungs, but he’d also resuscitated Gibbs and the girl too. And for good measure, managed to dispatched two really bad guys.

But DiNozzo’s superhuman efforts was apparently ‘just doing his job’ and didn’t merit Gibbs’ acknowledgement, let alone gratitude. Yet for McGee firing his weapon and neutralising a threat, it had? It sure seemed like a massive double standard to Leon and further evidence of how much of a bastard he was acting to his 2IC, then and now.

Not that an air-headed titian director back in the day, hadn’t added insult to injury. What could possibly justify her recommending and presenting Gibbs with the Navy’s Meritorious Civilian Service Award weeks after he screwed the pooch and drowned Ms Tyler – a civilian. Either said former director was trying very hard to get back in her former lover’s pants or her brain tumour had affected her thinking at that point, since for that escapade alone, Gibbs should have received a suspension. Well suspension and/or a loss of rank, certainly not a damned freakin medal!
Still, all that aside, McGee was Gibbs’ newest golden boy, and DiNozzo’s likely successor. Yet there remained a number of valid reasons why the director hadn’t felt comfortable with him filling in for DiNozzo while he was in Shanghai chasing down Budd. And nothing had really changed in the months since he’d made that judgement call for Leon to revise that view either, especially now that he knew DiNozzo was shipping out for good.

There’d been a number of incidents in the last couple of years that had Leon questioning his initial impressions of McGee being his prototypical agent. Perhaps first and foremost was the major stuff-up last year when MCRT were working a murder that ended up intersecting with the DoD. They’d discovered McGee’s girlfriend was posing as the disaffected social media bait for a terrorist who was recruiting disenfranchised individuals and radicalising them. Leon couldn’t begin to describe how negligent it was, in his humble opinion, to have Fielding, a paraplegic, doing undercover work since obviously she couldn’t pass quals.

Meanwhile, the heir apparent to DiNozzo’s job, had gone running off to inform his girlfriend, Delilah Fielding that in the course of the investigation, they’d discovered that the terrorist appeared to have developed an unhealthy obsession with her. While seemingly gallant to run to her rescue, McGee had unknowingly let their terrorist trail him straight to his girlfriend’s safe-house, placing Delilah in very grave danger in light of her physical situation. For an agent with his decade of experience, there was NO excuse for McGee allowing himself to be followed.

Hardly surprisingly, the Department of Defence to wanted his head served up on a platter for blowing their undercover Op with a tail that any rookie should have shaken. As if that screw-up hadn’t been enough, he’d compounded that error not once but twice more. Upon arriving at the safe-house, McGee had proceeded to argue with Fielding because of his jealousy over her male boss staying in the same apartment. So when their terrorist - the target of the whole sting - knocked on the door, he failed to check who was outside and simply opened the door and let him in, assuming it was one of the good guys. Tim also failed to draw his firearm, per protocol when he opened the door. He simply let him in, placing his life, Delilah’s and a highly complex and costly undercover operation in extreme jeopardy.

Which all added up to three highly rookie type, massively stupid errors from a supposedly highly trained and seasoned MCRT agent. So it hadn’t come as a great surprise when after the debrief and wash-up, Fielding’s boss plus the Department of Defence had wanted McGee’s balls. Personally, Vance couldn’t blame them, any one of the mistakes would have been unforgivable lapses – combine all three and they were totally inexcusable. Frankly, it was an embarrassment for the agency.

Yet somewhere along the way, Tim had become Gibbs’ golden-haired agent and he’d called in favours to save his butt on that case, just like he’d done when the dumbass lost his creds. Good God… using social media to track that plane wasn’t exactly an amazing innovation worthy of White House lionizing, after all it was merely a modern variation on a BOLO or public appeal on the six o’clock news. Yet for someone of McGee’s experience to lose his creds at a concert was unbelievable. Damn it… did he need someone to put a chain through them and attach it to his buttonhole, like Jackie used to do with Kayla and Jarrod’s school bus passes when they were small, so they couldn't lose them?

The truth was that Vance had been dragging his heels when it came to finding DiNozzo a new team to lead. He’d been desperately hoping that Gibb would extract his head from his ass because even IF his jacket was correct, he only had a couple more years before he had to retire and it was clear to him that DiNozzo would make an excellent leader of the MCRT.

He’d procrastinated, thinking that having to bring the SFA back from overseas in a couple of years
to take over the team had seemed like a waste. He also had concerns that with DiNozzo gone, McGee wouldn’t be able to keep control of Gibbs the way Tony could. Even with their relationship in the toilet, he was still able to keep the team somewhat on an even keel. Frankly, he’d been concerned about the welfare of the whole damn team if Tony wasn’t around, based on performances he’d seen recently.

But it wasn’t just that McGee led a terrorist to the residence of undercover agent or essentially invited him inside, which worried him. The fact was that McGee was far too easily intimidated by Gibbs or people like Ziva David and Abby Sciuto, who could make him cave in to pressure in a nanosecond. He knew about the illegal use of MTAC for one of Abby’s friends at Christmas and obviously he knew that Ziva had convinced Tim to misappropriate highly valuable government equipment to help her track down Ilan Bodnar.

Vance was totally aware how hypocritical it was to blame McGee for that hacking exploit because he’d tacitly approved of them tracking Bodnar down and killing him. Well Leon Vance - husband, lover and father of Jackie’s children had definitely approved of it and been very grateful. Yet he was also the director of ‘NCIS the agency’ and as such, with the benefit of a little distance and time, ‘Director Vance’ could not condone their behaviour, nor could he afford to countenance McGee being so damned laissez-faire about ‘borrowing’ hundreds of thousands of dollars of advanced computer hardware and software from the agency.

Unfortunately, it didn’t stop there either. There were more examples of ineptitude he couldn’t overlook, like a couple of years ago, McGee entered a hotel room with an extremely inexperienced Bishop in tow. As the senior agent – the one with experience and training he was supposed to be watching her six. Yet, after discovering the murder victim, not only did he failed to draw his weapon, he’d also failed to clear the crime scene to ensure that the killer wasn’t still on the premises. That failure had endangered himself and the still very much rookie, Ellie Bishop and could so easily have gone pear shaped. He’d actually stood around joking instead of following standard operational procedure when discovering a murder scene.

McGee’s response demonstrated he couldn’t follow protocol, that he had poor situational awareness and failed to understand the serious repercussions of not having his partner’s six. It was also a scarily similar circumstance in many ways, to what occurred with Delilah Fielding a year later, indicating that hadn’t been a one off lapse. So for the good of the team, the question need to be asked. How the hell was he supposed to trust that McGee was capable of looking after himself… not to mention his teammates or set an example for junior agents?

And he had to admit Tim’s childish pouting regarding that 40-year-old cold case of the Colombian airport bombing last year had not impressed Leon overly much. He’d had a mini tantrum after learning that Gibbs, DiNozzo and David had already been read in on the situation back in 2013 following them catching a break in the case. Since it was a need-to-know situation involving multiple command structures, Vance hadn’t been permitted to read McGee in, prior to the case becoming active once again last year. Tim had been sulky, angry that DiNozzo knew and he didn’t. He seriously believed that Tony should have ignored orders that it was classified and revealed data about the case to him.

That viewpoint was greatly concerning to Vance. After all, McGee had been placed in a very similar situation to DiNozzo during the Domino investigation and had kept his mouth firmly shut as ordered. He would have sacked him if he hadn’t, so Vance was very disappointed with the agent’s immature attitude now. It was a bit rich for him to turn around and throw a tantrum because he felt left out. Leon had heard Tony venting to Dr Palmer about Tim’s whining that because he shared all of his illegal hacking activities with him, Tony was supposed to reciprocate with classified intel because he owed it to him.
Evidently DiNozzo was supposed to ignore direct orders from his superiors and share classified data with a junior team mate, just so his feelings weren’t hurt. McGee had expediently ignored the fact he’d lied and concealed the whole unauthorised hunt for Bodnar from Tony. Frankly, his rationale sounded like it had come out of the mouth of a puerile teen, not an experienced federal agent aspiring to a supervisory role.

Such a childishly self-important attitude meant it was only natural for Vance to question his suitability for promotion. Particularly since the role of the second in charge frequently required for that person to subjugate personal opinions, desires and ambitions and put the welfare of the rest of the team before themselves. And as Gibbs was so fond of saying, actions speak louder than words.

Although Tim’s attitude went some way to explain why, when Gibbs attended to a family matter several years ago, McGee had felt entitled to be openly insubordinate and ignore DiNozzo’s orders. He’d objected to the task the SFA had assigned him – wanting to do what he wanted. He’d then compounded his actions by going over his superior’s head, complaining to Gibbs’ about DiNozzo ‘bossing’ him around.

And inexplicably, instead of tearing him a new one for his insubordination, Gibbs had rewarded McGee’s disregard of protocol and ignoring his superior’s orders. In truth, Jethro had acted more like an inept parent who’d been hoodwinked into settling a tiff between siblings, than a supervisory agent enforcing proper procedure. He’d not only rewarded actionable behaviour, he’d compounded the insult to his second in command - to the rank he held - by giving Tim point on the investigation. Leon had difficulty understanding how a Marine, a gunnery sergeant no less, could be such a shithouse agent and supervisor. Unfortunately, though, Gibbs also had him over a barrel.

It was obvious by his actions that Tim considered himself DiNozzo’s equal, if not his superior as an agent. The director, in hindsight hoped that he hadn’t contributed to that misconception – although he feared he had. McGee clearly felt he had license to ignore any regulations and protocols that inconvenienced him and equally clear to Leon that Gibbs would ‘officially’ promote the junior agent to SFA. He had after all, pretty much been performing the role in Gibbs mind for quite a while now.

Vance had real concerns that Gibbs was not firing on all cylinders after the shooting, and not merely from the physical consequences. That meltdown in the bullpen when they were heading off to Togu in South Sudan was surely not a coincidence. It was an overseas mission, his first since the shooting which sparked his collapse and more evidence that he wasn’t fit for the field.

Having an ineffectual and conceited agent as Gibbs’ 2IC, plus having responsibility for two junior agents and Gibbs who was arrogant and ignored the law when it suited literally scared the shit out of Vance. Particularly since he couldn’t veto Jethro’s decisions, as much as he wanted to. And he did want to! Sadly, Gibbs was an unstoppable force – realistically, the only thing that could stop him at this point was retirement. Leon’s or his!

Perhaps he should just bite the bullet and shoot Gibbs himself, then get down on bended knee and beg DiNozzo to stay. Although, SSA of the MCRT really couldn’t compete with a promotion to director of an ultra-secret law enforcement agency.

Feeling a wave of despair wash over him, Vance opened his top desk drawer and took out the bottle of whiskey, totally ignoring the shot glass, swigging the liquor direct from the bottle before swiping his hand across his mouth. Looking at the clock, he grimaced before taking another very healthy swig of the alcohol regardless. It was still morning and things were bad enough for him to be drinking and not giving a shit. He was so screwed!

He should probably get out while he still could – take a job in the private sector. SecNav Porter
had already foreshadowed his job was on thin ice when she almost forced him to resign last year over the fallout from the reappearance of former NCIS Agent Kip Klugman. So why had he ignored just how badly FUBAR Gibbs and his team had become? Oh yeah…that’s right! His Faustian bargain with L. J. Gibbs.

Crossing the floor to lock the door of his office, - which he probably should have done before he started drinking on the job - he informed Delany he was not to be disturbed until further notice. Rummaging around in his bottom desk drawer, he finally found what he was looking for. He pulled out a calico doll… um a calico-representation-of-a-person that he’d bought at a market a few months ago when he was spending some quality time with his daughter. It was a novelty item from a stall that specialised in jokes, collectibles and tension relieving crap like novelty stress balls that looked like heads of celebrities or iconic characters.

The doll…uh cloth-representation-of-a-person was fairly unpretentious. Its four appendages were detachable, supposed to be cathartic to be able to dismember the calico representation-of-a-person. The face was deliberately blank so you could draw your own specific features on it, and his figure’s face had steely-blue eyes and grey hair. Leon was a bit embarrassed to admit he derived childish satisfaction in taking out his intense feelings of frustration and powerlessness onto a piece of cloth and stuffing.

Sighing, because as a highly intelligent, well-educated and he liked to think of himself as highly evolved person, he really should be above such childish behaviour but damn, it felt so good! Grabbing his stress doll, he held it down on the desk and pictured a certain thorn in his side while restraining it. Taking the right arm firmly, he ripped it off the body, the hook and loop Velcro fastening separating and it made a most satisfying ripping sound that soothed his troubled spirit. Taking hold of its right arm firmly, he proceeded to use the detached appendage to beat the crap out of the cloth-representation-of-a-person, feeling his anger and frustration bleeding off him.

Finally, feeling like he was ready to face the world without the need to drink himself into a stupor for surrendering his power to Gibbs, he took a deep breath. He’d definitely gotten the worst of their bargain – probably because he had a lot more to lose if he ever decided to call Gibbs’ bluff. Scowling as he contemplated how impotent he was as director, he suddenly thought about the X-rated version of the doll um cloth-representation-of-a-person he’d seen on the market stall. Obviously, he couldn’t very well buy it with his fifteen- year old daughter there but sometimes he really wished he had one so he could emasculate it like he felt Gibbs had castrated him.

He’d had such high hopes when he’d first taken over from Director Shepard, now his whole tenure was tainted and DiNozzo’s departure did not bode well for the immediate future.
Home Truths

Chapter Summary

Tony informs Gibbs he's leaving and decides to share a few home truths with his team mates. They do not appreciate his insights and Fornell has fun dropping the bombshell and watching the fallout.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter sees a confrontation between Tony/Sirius and Gibbs for those people who have been hanging out for something a bit meatier than the basement hug we got on the show. It is also dedicated to Arress who is under the weather at the moment and assured me that a leaving scene where Tony decks Jethro would help her feel better. Unfortunately I don't have one of those scenes just sitting around on my laptop but hopefully this will be almost as good. Hope you enjoy it.

Warning: As stated previously, fans of Gibbs, McGee or Vance should skip this chapter.

Fornell watched Jethro, Bishop and McGee observing their progress as they made their way to the stairs from the mezzanine level following their awesomely fun tête-à-tête with Director Vance. Ellie Bishop was openly curious, smiling at Tony, while McGee pretended to be focused on his computer screen. Every so often he would shoot what he probably thought were covert glances at Tony as the two agents made their way down to the bull pen. Fornell decided his furtiveness was more obvious than if he'd casual watched them and pretended to talk on the phone.

Gibbs was seemingly impassive but the fibbie knew him and his tells well enough to discern the thinning of his lips and the steeliness of his glare. Jethro was curious and pissed off that Tony had been up in the director's office and he had been left out of the loop. Tobias knew if there was one thing that Leroy Jethro Gibbs hated more than anything, it was feel like an afterthought.

As they descended the stairs, Fornell was already metaphorically rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the showdown to come. Director Vance had been the appetiser – Jethro and his minions were the main course. This was going to be the best fun he'd had in years! Almost made up for having the thankless task of being the FBI's unofficial liaison with Gibbs for the last couple of decades.

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Tony smirked as Gibbs growled at him. "You're late, DiNozzo."

Gibbs, even when he was being an ass-hat was nothing if not predictable in his responses, however, DiNozzo was pretty immune to bastard Gibbs by this stage of the game. If months of this uber bastard act after Shanghai hadn't toughened his skin to dimensions equivalent to dragon hide, then Toby's pep talk today had well and truly rectified the situation.
Grinning widely, just because he knew it would piss off the boss, he replied irreverently, "Nope, I was up chewing the fat with the Director, Gibbs. I was here early, actually."

Jethro glared at him as he sank down into his chair. When Tobias found himself a spare office chair and wheeled it over to park his butt at the end of Tony's desk, Gibbs started fuming. "Why are you here, Fornell and what's with ya playing footsie with my agent?"

Tony hid a grin. Gibbs thought they were colluding on a case with Vance. "We had urgent business to discuss with the director. Confidential business."

"You're on my team, so you don't get to keep secrets from me. I should have been in the meeting!" Gibbs asserted forcefully. Tony recognised that he was losing face with his junior agents and was no doubt incensed. Actually, since Gibbs was chronically angry, especially with him, this insight hardly made him psychic.

You know that's a steaming pile of horse hockey," DiNozzo retorted mildly, ignoring the snort of amusement from their favourite fibbie. "I don't have to tell you what we discussed in confidence… since it was classified."

"Yes. You. Do! My team…my rules."

Tony exchanged a look with Fornell, seeing that goofy grin on his face again. He was having way too much fun today, messing with NCIS personnel.

"Doesn't work that way, Gibbs. You don't have the clearance to know what we were discussing." Tony stated calmly, before looking at Fornell and shrugging. "You can throw him a bone if you want to," he declared offhandedly.

He knew he was fanning the flames – a giveaway was how Gibbs eyes started to bug out in fury and McGee had that petulant, stop-shitting-on-me look. The truth was that somewhere between Vance's office and the bullpen Tony discovered that he really didn't care anymore. In the meantime, Probish looked like she wanted to crawl under her desk, which probably wasn't such a stupid idea. Things might be about to get ugly!

"If you're sure, DiNotzo."

Tobias saw his nod of assent out of the corner of his eye as he glared at his long-time friend, shaking his head sorrowfully. His world was about to get blown apart. "I'm afraid that all I'm permitted to tell you is that I'm here on protection detail, Jethro."

"Why does Tony need protecting?" McGee demanded, managing to sound to Tony's ears, simultaneously disbelieving and querulously, shooting nervous looks between DiNozzo and his boss.

"Need-to-know, and I'm afraid the MCRT doesn't," Tobias informed them, pretending to regret not being able to divulge more details.

"What did you do this time, DiNozzo? Who did you piss off now?" his good friend joked peevishly. Apparently he had about as much patience as Gibbs about being kept in the dark – and people had the hide to call him nosy or in Tim's case DiNozy.

Tony felt himself getting mildly pissed off by them – he was fairly sure he'd have been absolutely ropeable if he wasn't just toying with the team. The boss and Tim seemed more concerned that they were out of the loop than they did that his life might be in danger. The fact this was all a stunt by the FBI agent, didn't prevent him feeling mildly irritated at how incredibly obtuse his colleagues
Tony stared McGee right in the eyes before asking him mildly, "Which part of classified and need to know are you not capable of understanding, Tim?"

"C'mon Tony. I thought we'd agreed last year that it wasn't a nice thing to do… being left out of the loop. I always share all my off-the-books hacking missions with you, so you agreed to share the classified stuff with me."

"No Tim. We did agree that it didn't feel great not being read in on classified intel, but this isn't grade school or a popularity contest. I certainly did not agree to ignore direct orders to withhold classified intel from you and any other unauthorised personnel. It doesn't work like that. People who reveal classified intel without authorisation end up going to prison."

He looked over and noticed Toby has pricked up his ears about hacking. "What are you, Tim… a 5-year-old? I'll show you mine if you show me yours?"

McGee pouted, ready to make a snarky response as Tony looked over at Ellie, who was giggling.

"Can you please knock sense into McDoofus? After you and Jake stopped working together but were still married, did he tell you classified NSA secrets because you were together."

"You know he didn't, Tony."

"Of course I do, but I wish you'd tell Boy-genius here."

"Shut up, Elf Lord!" Gibbs growled at him. "Don't be a dumbass. So McGee might not have security clearance, but I sure as Hell do."

"Not for this, Jethro." Fornell assured him.

"Bullshit, Tobias. I was a Marine Scout sniper doing black ops and then I did black ops for NCIS. I have a higher security clearance than your and DiNozzo's clearance combined, Tobias." Gibbs bragged, displaying his infamously inflated sense of grandiloquence.

Fornell glared at him. "In your dreams, Navy Re-tread-Cop!" He taunted, using a long forgotten insult. "But in this case, you will never have the security clearance required to know this."

Tony looked askance at his little duckling who was rapidly morphing into a cranky Rottweiler. Fornell seemed to be doing his level best to stir up the team's curiosity, which, since the magical world tried to keep a low profile with non-magicals, wasn't real smart. He also wasn't picking up on Tony's signals to stop.

At this rate, McGee was going to spend every spare moment he had, hacking into NCIS to try to find the classified data. Too bad there wasn't anything to find, not even in Vance's computer – well not any more than he was about to share.

Seemed like that re-tread taunt had definitely pissed off Gibbs. His next salvo was entirely predictable and typically cutting. "Thought you learnt your lesson with The Frog, DiNozzo."

Tony cringed, not because of La Grenouille but because of Jeanne and the last thing she'd said to him. Seeing the cringe, Gibbs continued the assault, knowing he'd hit a nerve.

"Ya don't get to keep secrets on MY team. It's my way or the highway," he threatened, impatiently.
Tony grinned wryly – the more things changed the more they stayed the same. If he hadn't run into Jeanne twice recently he might not have felt so touchy about the subject.

"You're absolutely right, Gibbs. So I guess it's the highway. Once I settle up the cases that Legal need me to testify on, I'll be out of your hair. It is what you wanted for quite some time, after all."

He looked at Fornell who had a smirk on his face, then realised that not only had Bishop, McGee and Gibbs stopped in their tracks to stare at him, but so had every other person in the squad room.

"That's not funny, Tony," McGee whined, darting alarmed looks between Gibbs who was fuming, and Tony who looked determined and Fornell who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. "You know we don't joke about that sort of thing with Gibbs." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully…code for don't poke the bear cuz we'll all suffer if you do.

"I do know that, Tim. Guess that's why I'm not joking."

"You were already going to resign, weren't you, Tony?" Bishop realised suddenly.

"Very good, Probish. One day, you'll make a very fine investigator, but if I can give you a piece of advice? Think of it as a parting gift."

She nodded, shocked. "Of course, but why are you leaving? I thought you were supposed to take over the team when Gibbs retired."

"Ah well, that's a complicated question, my little Probette. Long story short – yes that was the plan, which was why I gave 15 years of loyal senior field agent service to the team instead of taking over my own team nine years ago. But that's before Gibbs spent this past year freezing me out after he let Luke Harris shoot and almost kill him."

"After that, everything changed, including my place on the team. The boss made it clear I wasn't welcome anymore – maybe because Daniel Budd escaped on his watch and then I was on the joint taskforce that helped to catch him. I broke Rule 45 – his mess up, he cleans it up. Or…maybe because I saw the infallible Leroy Jethro Gibbs freeze when Harris drew a gun on him. Which was it, Gibbs?"

"My office, now DiNozzo. Alone," he yelled, glaring at Fornell.

"Oh so now you want to talk, Gibbs?" Tony ignored the purple tinge to Gibbs features that resembled a threatening storm of epic proportions. "In private? Thought you didn't like secrets on your team. Or is it a case of do as I say, not as I do? Wait, don't bother answering that"

Fornell decided to turn the bull loose in the china shop. "I don't recommend that you enter the elevator unless I'm there too, DiNotzo."

Tony chuckled at the furious look that the boss sent them and tried somewhat successfully to turn it into a fit of coughing.

McGee was evidently intent on placating Gibbs or perhaps him so he wouldn't antagonise him further. Maybe Tim didn't even know who he was trying to mollify as long as he wasn't embroiled in a direct confrontation, since McGee preferred a more passive aggressive form of conflict that out and out confrontation. Tim was a maestro of delivering a poisoned comment before exiting, stage left or uttering an innocent denial, like he was joking if anyone called him on his shit.

"Gibbs didn't LET Budd get away, he got shot and nearly killed." Tim defended, his voice filled with tension.
Tony fresh from the discussion with Fornell that morning, plus Gibbs’ taunt about La Grenouille still smarting, shook his head before deciding it was time he slaughtered a couple of sacred cows; secrecy and DiNozzo-like loyalty wasn't go to keep the juniors safe after he left them.

Shaking his head sadly, he disagreed. "Sorry Tim, but that's exactly what he did. Remember, when that dirty detective, Sergeant Archer pulled a gun on you and you froze and couldn't fire - did our esteemed and sensitive leader give you milk and cookies? Pat you on the head and tell you it would be okay?" He ignored half a dozen snorts of derision from bystanders in the squad room.

"Did he tell you not to worry about it?" Tony continued to question McGee, who looked like a deer caught in a headlight, not sure how to extricate himself. "Hell no! He told you if you ever froze and second guessed yourself again, he'd take your badge. And let me remind everyone, you were just a probie."

"Yeah…but that was a cop, Tony. But Luke Harris' was just a kid." Tim protested, flashing a panicked glance at Gibbs.

"A kid with a gun, McGee. Who put two slugs in another human being with intent to kill. It sucks sometimes being a cop but when someone has a gun in their hands and pulls the trigger, it's our job to stop them, whether they're a kid or a little old lady." He looked around at the crowd in the bullpen, most who were nodding in agreement.

"But you're right about one thing, Tim. Luke is a kid. And kids have a low threshold of pain. A slug…put in just the right place in the shoulder, would in all likelihood have disarmed him of his weapon pretty damned quick. And who better qualified to deliver such a non-lethal shot than a highly trained Marine Scout sniper who was also a twenty-year plus veteran federal agent?" He demanded rhetorically, while studiously ignoring Gibbs.

"Budd knew damned well that Gibbs wouldn't fire on Luke. That's why he sent Luke into the square to kill him, knowing in the ensuing melee he could slip away and out of the country. Luke was his exit strategy and his sacrificial lamb, because although he profiled Gibbs and knew he wouldn't be able to shoot Luke – that it was his Achilles heel. Budd also knew that one of the other feds would take him down – it is SOP after all. It was sheer dumb luck that Harris escaped with Budd; he was always expendable.

"I guarantee if Luke had killed Gibbs, like he was supposed to, as Luke believed he had, then Harris would have been riddled with bullets. But his incompetence still created enough of a diversion for Budd, as everyone hustled to stop Gibbs from bleeding out."

Most people were speechless at what was occurring in the bullpen. Ellie meanwhile tried the Walt Disney gambit, looking extremely uncomfortable with their level of acrimony. "Well at least Luke and Gibbs are both alive and Budd is dead. So… ah… all's well that ends well."

"Yep, you're right, Probish. Luke is alive…at least for now." Tony conceded gravely. "Not sure that he'll make old bones though. I think that misplaced guilt is the hardest emotion for anyone to deal with," he stated, staring intently at Gibbs who glared right back.

"What do you mean?" Bishop asked, the furrowed lines in her forehead indicating she was trying to put the pieces together but coming up empty.

"A screwed up, guilt riddled teenager? I've seen it often enough to know how it plays out," Tony declared pessimistically. "Turning to drugs or drink to blot out the guilt and or engaging in extreme risk taking behaviour." He stared steely-eyed at Gibbs who was trying to remain impassive.
"C'mon Ellie, you remember how hard it was the first time you shot someone, but you're a federal agent and it's your job. You had training, plus you have the cognitive maturity to deal with it – hopefully."

"Ellie considered what he'd said before she grimaced. "Yeah…fair point. I'd rather be shot I think. Bullet holes heal… emotions are a lot trickier to mend."

McGee scowled across the bullpen. "Why are you making a scene, Tony? You know this won't end well. We don't piss Gibbs off…especially now." His baby-faced features were a study in petulant sulking, although he did have a point.

Tony stared at Gibbs who seemed to have been sandbagged by the topic - although he guaranteed that state of affairs wouldn't last forever. "Because I finally figured it out myself… with a bit of help." He glanced at Fornell and flashed him a tight smile.

"I was blaming myself for Gibbs getting shot but the truth is he made that decision himself or more accurately, he forced Luke into making it for him when he froze and refused to do his job."

Tim keened plaintively as he watched Gibbs' fury. "Stop. Just because he tossed you off the team, no need to ruin it for Bishop and me."

Tony stared at the guy who told him he was one of his best friends. So much for solidarity. "Not this time, McFearless… I've taken all his crap for 15 years, respected the man and the rank but enough is enough. Gibbs refused to attend mandatory counselling after Iraq where he nearly died… again.

"Just like he failed to attend mandatory counselling when he got blown up, lost his memory and ran off to Mexico for 4 months of boozing in the sun. He somehow also managed to skip mandatory counselling when he drove that car off the docks and drowned himself and a civilian; and look how that avoiding mandatory counselling turned out. Someone needs to have the guts to speak some home truths to him."

"Gibbs wouldn't drown a civilian," Ellie objected staunchly, looking like a kid who'd been told that Santa Claus couldn't stand kids.

"Not intentionally, Bish. But he still drowned her and himself…because of his stupid damned misplaced guilt. He deliberately went off half-cocked without backup or telling anyone where he was going and ended up dead in the bottom of the Potomac, along with his daughter's best friend.

Tony was silent as he remembered staring into their dead eyes and the desperate attempt to resuscitate them, his lungs screaming in protest before he even started CPR.

Out of the blue Gibbs charged him – his expression feral as Fornell stepped in front of Gibbs to shield him and Balboa stepped up to assist in restraining him. "Shut the fuck up, DiNozzo. You've no right to talk about them."

"That's right – I forgot! We all have to tip-toe around and never mention your wife and daughter but dirt bags know all about your Achilles' heel and use it to manipulate you, and your team constantly get caught up in the crossfire. If it's not dodging bullets then we're dodging you and your outrageous temper, your head slaps or your verbal abuse.

"And I'm not going to be there anymore to pull your ass out of the fire, so you, Bish and Tim need to know that Gibbs has feet of clay when it comes to red-heads, surrogate daughters or just kids in general."
Tony saw Ellie's disbelief and felt sad. She and Gibbs had gotten extremely close this year after her divorce. Still he needed to warn her, even if she refused to listen.

"Whether you want to believe me or not, you need to realise that his Achilles heel could get you killed. It's not like other people don't know where to attack - what his weakness are. Haswari knew; ask Cate – oh wait – you can't! Haswari killed her! Eli David knew and used it to manipulate him to spy on us with his daughter and Budd did too, so you need to be forewarned.

"Hell seems like someone took out a classified ad in the Dirtbags Daily to inform the entire criminal and terrorist population what his soft underbelly is. But shame on me for daring to mention it in the bullpen with the good guys in the hope it might save his life, or someone who works under him – my bad."

Tony watched as Gibbs shot him a lethal glare before shaking off Fornell and Balboa, suddenly taking off up the stairs at express speed, trying to escape the unpleasant truths he refused to face. He was probably headed for the director's office to find out about the classified info he'd been denied access to. Well he wished him good-luck, since Vance didn't have a clue about his job offer either, although he'd probably been working his contacts as soon as they left the room.

Bishop looked crushed but he supposed there'd been a lot of confrontation; probably felt a bit like mom and dad fighting in front of the kids. Changing the subject, she asked Tony. "Was that what you wanted to tell me before?"

Replying to Bishop question, albeit distractedly, while watching the boss stalk along the mezzanine walkway, he shook his head. "No, that was more under the category of general housekeeping issues. I wanted to offer you some advice – in private."

"What about McGee?"

"What about him?" he asked her, puzzled.

"Haven't you got some words of wisdom for him too?"

Tony shook his head. "Nope!"

"C'mon Tony, I thought he was your friend. I'm sure Tim would appreciate any advice you choose to share, too."

"Then you'd be wrong, my naïve little Probette. Tim is my friend but he has never needed nor wanted my advice." He grinned and shot a look of nostalgic at McGee.

"Even when he was a raw little probie with only a few months of field work under his belt, he was never interested in anything I had to say. Hey McGee, remember the time I tried to warn you about poison ivy at a crime scene when you were a rookie?" He chuckled. "He was outraged, and he told me in no uncertain terms he'd graduated top of his FLETC class and didn't need my advice. Trust me, he prefers to learn things the hard way, Probette."

Ellie strode up to McGee and stood in front of him, hands on hips, glowering. "You told me that it was Tony's fault that you got poison ivy…twice."

Tony stared hard at Tim, feeling crushed. "You blamed me for that? Thanks a lot McGee."

Ignoring McGee who was spluttering nervously under the weight of Bishop's ire, he felt cold inside. What else did his 'friend' say about him behind his back? Of course it didn't really matter anymore – he was leaving it all behind. He just needed to get through the next few weeks.
Tony decided now would be a good time to head down to Legal and discuss his departure with them.

"Hey Tobias, I'm going down to Legal for a chat. How about you hang about in the bull pen 'til I get back."

Fornell got a wicked gleam in his eyes, although the rest of him remained poker-faced. "I'm sorry, Director DiNozzo but I can't permit you to go down there unaccompanied. It would be ill-advised."

The activity in the bull pen stopped and you could hear a pin drop as everyone stared at an uncomfortable DiNozzo. Bishop whirled around – her ripping Tim a new one glare momentarily forgotten while McGee was left with his jaw wide open

"Tony, why is Agent Fornell referring to you as Director?" Bishop blurted out, inquisitively.

He remained silent, ignoring the probie, preferring to glare at Tobias who stared back at him, trying hard to look innocent - even though they both knew he'd deliberately let slip that snippet of info.

"It would be ill-advised? You sound like that stoic alien – Teal'c in SG1. What's with you and the pop culture references today? First it was Happy Days, now it's a sci-fi show?" Tony grouched. He wasn't in any way in danger at NCIS except from Gibbs. Or perhaps getting stuck in the elevator as a result of all the emergency stops Gibbs had instigated over the decades he'd worked in the building. Other than that, he might suffer a paper cut down in legal, he supposed. Or get a paper cut while stuck in the elevator, with Gibbs - that might be ill-advised.

As he engaged in a battle of wills with the shit-stirring FBI agent, he was peripherally aware that Tim was responding disparagingly, bringing back memories of countless other times when McGee ridiculed him or minimised his contributions to the team and investigations.

"Please, Ellie. He's pulling your leg. Tony as Director. Much as we all love him, you have to know that's just plain ridiculous."

"Why is it so ridiculous, Tim?" Bishop challenged him passionately.

"Well okay, he's a good agent but he's not even team leader. Plus, he doesn't have the background to be a director. Why would anyone want to appoint him as a director, Ellie?"

"When are you going to stopunderestimating people because of their education, Tim? Tony will make an awesome director and he has been team leader on several occasions. I think he'll make a great director – he's a great people person." She declared loyally, which warmed Tony's heart just a little.

"It's probably an undercover gig. Like the time he was supposed to be an internet security expert... as if."

"Well if that's the case, explain, why he needs a protection detail?" Ellie asked him reasonably. "Fornell's pretty high powered protection for a UC op."

Striding over to Tony with a devilish grin on his face, Supervisory Special Agent Eric Balboa extended his right hand to shake hands, thus breaking up the staring contest between him and the FBI agent.

"So it would seem that congratulations are in order, Director. You've finally accepted one of the offers you get constantly?"
Tony flushed. "Ah… actually Rocky, this one came out of the blue, but it was the right time, ya know?"

"Yeah, I do man. I honestly don't know how you've stuck it out with Gibbs for so long. Such a damn waste. You still going to be based in DC?"

Aware that everyone on the floor was listening to their conversation he shook his head. "No… London."

"Right, you've got dual citizenship, haven't you?" Balboa asked and Tony nodded assent.

"When do you finish up here, Tony?"

"Um not sure…hence my need to go down to Legal and confer," Tony explained, rolling his eyes.

"Well we have to go out and do some serious celebrating before you go." Balboa promised, clapping him on the shoulder.

Bishop apparently tired of glowering at McGee, bounced over to Fornell, grinning cutely. "Can Tony go down to the Legal Department if I go with him as back-up? Please, pretty please, Agent Fornell."

Tobias tried to scowl at her but she gave him the wide-eyed innocent look while clasping her hands in supplication and Tony could tell he was on the cusp of smiling, despite his best intentions.

"Fine, but take your Sigs," He growled at them in much the same way a parent might grumpily admonish their rambunctious teens to wear clean underwear or make sure they had protection, as Probish mock-curtseied playfully, making Tony smile.

She'd been really down in the dumps after her divorce and it was good to see her smiling, for a change. He cared about her, felt protective of her… well provided she wasn't trying to turn into a Ziva-like clone or hacking into his tax returns. Truth to tell, he'd always felt protective of Ellie. In lots of ways she reminded him of his favourite cousin, Nymphadora Tonks. According to Hermione she'd died in the final battle with Voldermort, along with her husband and his best friend Remus Lupin, leaving behind their infant son, Teddy.

Ellie's physical resemblance to Tonks – who'd hated her first name with a passion, was negligent. It was her kind disposition and happy nature that reminded him of his cousin. Plus, they both had a goofiness and neither young woman was ashamed of their eccentricities. Well not until recently, when Bishop had stopped working on the floor when she was trying to figure something out.

Frankly he thought it was a cute and endearing quirk - but that aside, Ellie, like Tonks had been able to see straight into his soul. She saw his strengths and forgave his flaws; thankfully she'd never felt the need to enter into the gleeful publicly humiliation of his faults the way the rest of the team did. Ellie was a glass half full kinda girl and she'd extended that philosophy to Tony. She didn't shy away from acknowledging his good qualities, which made for a breath of fresh air.

Tonks was like that too. She'd fervently believed in his innocence right from the start and had tried to calm his bouts of mania when he'd been shut up in the Black ancestral home. A fate as far as he was concerned which had been only a marginal improvement to being imprisoned in Azkaban. She managed to see beyond his depression and bouts of irrational anger and make him laugh, a no mean feat during that time frame. He realised ow that he'd been a walking textbook of PTSD symptoms.

He still couldn't believe the pretty young auror, his favourite cousin had been dead for almost two
decades – it was such a terrible waste. He was glad that she and Remus had found a little happiness together, though he would have teased them so much if he had still been with them.

Sighing at Bishop's pleading puppy-dog eyes, Tony capitulated. "Fine, let me get my gun." She raced to her desk and drew out her own Sig before grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the elevator.

She called to Fornell. "Don't worry, I'll take excellent care of Director DiNozzo."

Tony decided to burst her bubble. "Not shouting out my new job title across the squad room would be a start, Probie. By the way, don't think I don't know that you were hoping to milk me for information, Probish. Not gonna happen!"
Chapter Summary

Tobias has fun torturing Bishop and Gibbs tortures Vance. Leon escapes to find new forms of stress management and why do those figurines look so damned familiar?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who commented and left kudos - honestly, it has been the only thing between me and writer insanity.

Sorry for the delay with this chapter but it fought me every step of the way. I'm a chronic re-drafter and this time I redrafted the chapter so much that it was a huge mess. After three weeks of messing with it, I finally managed to sort it out and then I realised the chapter was too long. So more procrastinating while I tried to figure out what to do - divide it into two short chapters, break it up and put part of it into the next chapter and potential mess up the flow of that one too. Then I thought- why am I torturing myself like this for? Then I read the epilogue again - which btw I really, really like and I figured that I should just post the chapter as is.

If you are wondering about my author's note - well it's partly explanatory and partly that I figure that you should have to suffer along with me. This venting seemed pretty mild by comparison to what I've put myself through through to produce this chapter, so I think in listening to me whine you're getting off pretty lightly. To say that I'm still not completely happy with it would be fair call but I'm also done. No really...I'm posting this right now before I can tweek it again! It isn't beta'ed so if you find any massive faux pas - I don't want to know.

Tobias Fornell had been really looking forward to Tony dropping his bombshell on the team and it had definitely lived up to his expectations. Not that Tobias considered himself an overly vindictive guy – not like Gibbs. He wouldn't mind betting that Jethro had a little black ledger book filled with people who'd done him wrong over the years.

Gibbs had more than lived up to his second B for bastard reputation since the shooting, actually he'd well and truly exceeded it (bastard always was an overachiever). Any kind offers he received from his team or peers while he was in hospital or recuperating were met with churlish anger and sarcasm. So when Jethro turned up at work before his sick leave expired, complete with his fashion makeover and Tobias had to wonder who the hell he was trying to fool. After all, his personality and attitude was what really needed transforming.

If your book was filled with ugly imagery and hate-filled prose or dangerous ideology you could slap a brand new dust jacket onto the existing book, full of butterflies, flowers and stunning vistas. Yet the new dust jacket didn't invalidate what was contained within the book's pages. To achieve
that feat would require a major overhaul of the contents – an editor to take a red pen to it, a skilled writer to rewrite it, taking the edits into account and a publisher to do a reprint.

Still, Jethro's cosmetic makeover seemed to divert many of the peanut gallery at NCIS as they commented on his 'new look'. And wasn't that a sad commentary of the times they lived in, where reality shows had created alternate realities where superficiality and shallowness was revered and worshipped. As the daughter of a young teen he was, unfortunately, an expert on the scourge that reality television had become to a younger generation. But the point was that Jethro had done little to change his inner Gibbs, if anything, he was more unreasonable as his behaviour towards Tony since the shooting had demonstrated.

So if that made the fibbie a bad person for relishing Tony getting a few licks in before he left NCIS, then so be it. Fornell could live with it but even hoping to see some fireworks, he'd been a little surprised that DiNotzo said as much as he did – the normally mouthy agent was stoic when it came to revealing anything substantive about himself to others. Even more when revealing vulnerabilities. Keeping in mind all the crap he'd endured over the years from Gibbs, he'd still been restrained – a helluva lot more reasonable than Tobias would have been in his shoes.

He knew though, that DiNotzo was far too forgiving to ever seriously put the boot into his team mates or cause them real harm. While he might drive his colleagues’ crazy with his sometimes juvenile sense of humour, he never intended to hurt any one of his colleagues and revenge was not a word in his vocabulary. Unless it was within the context of a pranking war and then all bets were off – not that he was the only one to go there, if it came to it.

Which was where Hermione Weasley and Big Badass FBI Agent Tobias Fornell came into the equation. They didn't mind causing a few tears or hurt feelings as payback for years upon years of abusive treatment.

He honestly wasn't sure what the new Minister of Magic had in store for Gibbs – he knew she had something good planned by the fire in her eyes. Okay that and maybe the determined way she'd made copious quantities of lists, created scenarios and contingencies, colour coded everything in her file and disappeared on a mysterious trip for a week.

He'd even tried sneaking a peek at her file after she came back to DC. Her file had started out an inch thick before her departure and had expanded to almost three inches thick after she came back. Since she refused to divulge her plan he'd decided to snoop, offering to carry it for her since it looked so heavy. She'd laughed and explained it wasn't necessary, although he was very chivalrous, since she'd placed a feather-light charm on the file so it weighed hardly anything. Damn! He was planning on dropping the file – accidently on purpose- and getting a quick look at the information when he picked it up.

He'd finally managed to get access to the file when Hermione had taken a shower and forgotten to lock it away. At least he thought she'd forgotten to secure the file, though when he opened it he hadn't got very far. When he tried to read it the pages were blank – every last one of them, even though he'd seen her reading them and there had been flow charts, text, bullet points (lots of bullet points), numerical lists, pie charts and colour coding when he'd tried looking over her shoulder. Figuring she'd charmed the file to be invisible, he sighed and had given up, frustrated at being outmanoeuvred.

It wasn't 'til later, when Hermione was sniggering every time she looked at him he decided that perhaps he had a piece of spinach caught between his teeth and headed to the bathroom to check. That's when he discovered that he was sporting a bright red word – SNOOP – in block letters across his forehead. He was chagrined and a bit pissed off that he'd been caught out spying, he
thought he'd been far more discreet than that. *Obviously not!*

So he was going to have to wait to see what she had up her sleeve, because he'd extracted a promise from her when she'd first mooted the idea of payback that she would wait until Tony had departed so he wasn't caught in the fallout. Although that said, the anticipation was slowly killing him. It was even worse than hearing the news that a remake of the cult hit show MacGyver, or a courtroom procedural drama from the guy who'd made that show House were coming to television next fall and have to wait three long months to watch it.

Still, after his abortive attempts to discover what Hermione had planned, he had little choice. He was aware that she'd been described as the smartest witch of her age, and he had a feeling that once roused to defend her family, she could be a really formidable enemy. Now he'd seen her in action, he almost felt sorry for Jethro – he wouldn't want to be on her bad side.

Yet he also knew damned well that over the years, it hadn't just been Gibbs who'd been an absolute asshole to DiNotzo - they'd all taken a leaf out of Jethro's playbook. McGee and the probie breaking into the IRS to find out about Tony's finances was just the latest in a long line of team assaults and insults against him over the last fifteen years. And it went all the way back to Caitlyn Todd, their profiler with what some people seemed to think was harmless sibling-like banter. For the love of Mike though, the woman had a tongue so sharp it should have been registered as a lethal weapon.

He remembered eavesdropping on a conversation between Hermione and DiNotzo where they'd been talking about profiling and law enforcement procedures and its applicability for the DMLE. That had led to a discussion about the profiling and hostage negotiation training he'd done at Quantico and inevitably Caitlyn Todd’s name had come up in the conversation. He'd commented that her tongue was so sharp that she could easily pierce basilisk hide with it.

*Sidebar – Emily had informed him that it was supposed to be ten times tougher than armadillo scales. So okay that was pretty damned tough.*

Hermione had asked if Cate might secretly have fancied him. Seeing his sceptical bemusement, she'd explained that perhaps Todd was so sharp due to the whole woman scorned thing. Tony had laughed violently, admitting that it had never entered his head and he was pretty sure not hers either.

"Honestly Kiddo, the way she used to harangue me and order me around like a prim schoolmarm with a stick stuck up her … yes well and lecture me continually. To be honest she often reminded me of Professor McGonagall after the Marauders had been caught out after curfew.

"Anyway, most of the time I was too busy being pissed off by Cate or yanking her chain to think about her like that – even if we hadn't worked on the same team. Besides, if she had the hots for anyone, it was Gibbs – she got really jealous when he flirted with a redhead.

"Of course, Minnie, contrary to appearances did possess a sense of humour for the ridiculous," he mused, his head cocked to the left as he recalled happier times. "Even while she was punishing the Marauders for one of our endless pranks there was a twinkle in her eye. Her humour might have been rather dry but Cate was pure sarcasm – which probably explained her attraction to Gibbs. Pity her profiling skills weren't anywhere near as sharp as her tongue – she'd have been really damned scary."

Tobias couldn't help snorting at that observation, because Tony describing her as a profiler really was him being incredibly kind. Not to mention it was an insult to the fine profession of psychological profiling, as she'd been woeful at it. Honestly, she had to be the only profiler to meet
her future killer and conclude that he had 'kind eyes'. It would have been comical if it wasn't so damned tragic, since her kind-eyed assassin had shot her down in cold blood.

Still, it was many years since she'd died and Ziva David had replaced her on the team. And wasn't that a truly bizarre and twisted situation – that it was her dossiers she'd personally prepared, containing info on the MCRT personnel, including Caitlyn Todd for her half-brother, Ari, that enabled him to manipulate Gibbs and his team. That manipulation included killing Todd and the attempted murder of several others. Honestly, whoever thought that letting her killer's half-sister fill her place on the team was a good idea, was one really sick puppy!

Of course, it wasn't an excuse for her outrageous behaviour as a liaison for Mossad (how did a spy and assassin end up as liaison anyway) and then later on an NCIS agent when she gained US citizenship.

Sidebar - how the hell did a spy who'd committed acts of espionage against the US get naturalised anyway? Hello people, this was post 9/11, and there was a little thing called The Patriot Act, so how the hell did that happen?

Still… for all the shit she'd done to DiNotzo over the years and pain she'd caused – and she'd done a lot, the good news was she'd been gone for several years now. All Fornell could say about her departure was 'good riddance to bad rubbish'. The whole David clan was nothing but trouble and he fervently hoped that was the last they had to do with them, although even dead, he had a feeling that Eli’s crap could always come back to bite them on the ass.

He was no fan of Ms David and thought NCIS were better off without the former member of Mossad. Still, Tobias admitted he was puzzled by Gibbs attitude towards Ziva ever since her resignation and subsequent return to Israel and he wasn't the only one. He remembered eavesdropping on a conversation between the veteran agent, Ric Balboa and another SSA, Jay Churchill in the NCIS cafeteria on one of his numerous visits to NCIS to handle the FBI's biggest pain in the butt i.e. L.J. Gibbs on a case.

It was after the team reformed and his butt had finally healed.

Flashback:

"It was like he was pissed off with her... and for that matter he'd been totally pissed off with Tony too after he went after Ziva to make sure she was safe." Balboa was saying, and Fornell's ears pricked up instantly.

"Yeah... let's face it, Jethro's usually the one to ride off into the sunset like a white knight on his magnificent steed, to save the fair maidens and young ones when they're in danger. And yet, he showed no desire to go to David's aid," Jay observed, sipping a coffee moodily.

"I know, considering she'd been like a surrogate daughter to him - he certainly protected her from facing criminal charges on more than one occasion." Balboa declared, his voice revealing his confusion. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say he was totally disinterested, cold even, about yon fair maiden, Ziva David when he returned from his Black Ops mission."

"Definitely arctic, despite knowing she was being targeted. Can't help wondering what caused him to have such a dramatic change of attitude towards her." Churchill mused, staring at his cheese danish instead of eating it.

"True, but even if he's pissed with her, she was still part of his team for eight years – give or take a few months." Balboa argued. "What could she have done that was so heinous? After all, neither
passing on classified intel to Mossad without authorisation or conspiring to conceal the killer of a
federal agent, hadn't been a deal breaker."

Jay nodded. "True, and it wasn't like he was exactly knocking himself out to warn Tim or Tony
either. I mean, this is the same guy who held a gun to the head of an innocent scientist because
Tony had been exposed to his bio-jigged Y- pestis crap. So what's with the total apathetic, you-
can- all- go-and-get- fucked attitude? I'm telling you Rocky, it doesn't make sense."

It didn't make any sense to the veteran FBI agent either.

Not unless Gibbs' interest in Ziva was not so much paternalistic but merely a trophy in his alpha
male pissing competition with Eli David. He knew Jethro blamed Eli for his son invading NCIS
(his territory) and hurting NCIS personnel (his people) and managing to escape and make him
look foolish (to his people) before finally killing Todd.

So had Ziva just been a means to an end? A way to stick it to Eli that he had more influence over
Eli's assassin daughter than her own flesh and blood father (and boss) or her own country did?

Was it merely a coincidence that once Eli David was dead and Ziva had avenged the
assassinations of her father (and more importantly in Gibbs's eyes), Jackie Vance, he seemed to
lose all interest in her welfare? He didn't know - but he did know what Gibbs thought about
coincidences.

End of flashback:

Thinking about that conversation he'd overheard several years earlier, Tobias was still no closer to
figuring out why Ziva was suddenly persona non grata with Gibbs - even Tony had complained
that it was as if she had ceased to exist. One thing Fornell did know, though, was that Tony would
have picked up on his boss' indifference about his former favourite agent's safety. No doubt why
he'd taken it upon himself to hunt her down and warn her that her she was in danger, when he
realised Gibbs wouldn't.

Whatever had caused the Gunny's attitudinal change with David, it was obvious that Tony's gross
act of rebellion (from Jethro's perspective) further strained his relationship with Jethro, since Gibbs
always expected DiNotzo to follow his lead without question. He'd expediently ignored the fact
that his 2IC had always had a strong moral compass and expected him to ignore Rule # 1 just
because Gibbs told him to. Instead of treating him as the competent, loyal 2IC who looked after his
team mates, he chose to treat him as a naughty, wilful child who'd gone wandering off on his own
and needed to be taught a lesson.

Looking at his watch, Tobias debated whether he had time to visit the coffee cart in the naval yard
to get a caffeine fix and he noted Leon Vance exiting his office. The tall and always impeccably
turned out director was sans his jacket, looking uncharacteristically harried as he stormed across
the mezzanine walkway toward the elevator before entering it. Even from down here, Tobias could
hear him punching buttons frantically.

Sidebar – someone seemed like he was in an awful hurry to get out of there.

Tobias briefly wondered how DiNotzo was getting on in Legal and decided it might be fun to rattle
Bishop's cage. Noting that Tony had left his phone behind, which suggested he was more
distraught abouth the scene in the bull pen with Gibbs than he'd let on, Fornell picked up the
phone. He scrolled through the SFA's contacts before locating Bishop's cell phone number and
using his phone, sent a text to the current MCRT probie.
Smiling evilly when his phone rang almost immediately, he picked it up and listened as the newest member of Team Gibbs proceeded to give him a status update, delivered at a mile a minute. What it consisted of was that Tony was still meeting with the head of Legal and there had been no sign of unfriendlies. Advising her to keep her eyes skinned for trouble, he hung up, smirking.

Perhaps he was being a bit of a bastard for giving Gibbs' current probie a hard time but he wasn't feeling penitent about it. Until recently, he'd always thought that Ellie Bishop was a vast improvement on her predecessor - actually a vast improvement on both predecessors.

This year though, the former NSA analyst had shown some distressingly familiar tendencies to run off and behave like Dirty Harriet or infamous law unto Himself - Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Tobias didn't know if she was attempting to channel Jethro or even Ziva-Ninja-David. What he did know was the newbie would, even last year, have analysed the shit outta her regular plan to drive to the mall before executing a grocery shop. So her recent impulsivity in the field was absolutely out of character and therefore, damned scary.

It was the equivalent of McGee suddenly eschewing all thing computer related as the work of the devil, or Gibbs suddenly becoming garrulous, sympathetic and new-age touchy feely. Sciuto going cold turkey from Caf-Pow, heavy metal music and tatts or...well in other words, completely pod person.

Clearly, the young rookie had elected to rent out her brain and all its synapses to a tenant, deciding it was superfluous to her needs as an NCIS agent working under Gibbs. After all, Bishop, pre 2015 would have never dreamed of conspiring to hack into a supervisor's (not to mention a team mate's) tax information merely for some idle curiosity. Apparently she'd been spending way too much time hanging out with Gibbs and McGee if her GI Jane and Gary McKinnon-esque behaviour was anything to go by. And gullible people had thought McGeek was the one being corrupted and taken advantage of by 'Evil Ziva' since she had to be a bad influence on the boy-next-door because he was highly impressionable, but essentially a good boy!

Tobias got frustrated at people who thought McGee and Tony were best friends. Hell even Tony seemed to think they were best buds too - but then again, the ex-cop always let everyone on his team walk all over him. Talk about a door mat! His name should be entered into popular vernacular as in: *make sure to wipe your feet on the DiNozzo at the front door before you come inside.*

Doormat um DiNozzo overlooked McGee and David turning off his comms when he was undercover, plus other transgressions that would have seen them lose their jobs, or end up getting up close and personal with penitentiary hospitality if he'd reported them. He couldn't believe how much shit he'd confessed to Hermione about what they said or done over the years. That's the problem with Gibbs creating his own personal doormat – the rest of the team felt comfortable wiping their feet on him too.

Fornell was aware of scuttlebutt in the law enforcement community that argued that Timothy Farragut (no wonder he couldn't pass that lie detector test) McGee had grown up and cleaned up his act ever since Ms David had gone back to Israel. Ergo, Evil-Ziva-David was to blame for all of his insubordinate and passive aggressive behaviour in the past. However, anyone who'd studied philosophy 101 should know that inference was based on flawed logic – to wit - a post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy, which, if Tobias remembered his Latin correctly meant 'after this, therefore because of this'.
He'd always found understanding this type of fallacy of logic to be a highly useful tool in investigation. He'd observed inexperienced agents fall into this trap, time and time again, especially when they tried to examine complex intel. Essentially, the fallacy argued that since event Y (in this case McGee's supposed maturation of which he was yet to be convinced had occurred) followed event X (David returning to live in Israel) event Y must have been caused by event X. So challenging the fallacy challenged the presumption of causality, requiring that other factors be considered as well.

In this case, just because David's absence occurred at the same time that McGee's change in behaviour seemed to occur, this was not in itself causal proof she was the origin of his previous behaviour – or even if she was, that she was the only factor responsible. For example, there were other a number of things which had also changed or occurred around the time of her departure or because of it, which could equally have impacted him.

First and foremost, Tony, Ziva and McGee all resigned from NCIS at the same time as Gibbs went off on his secret mission. Tim, Ziva and Gibbs came under close scrutiny for some extremely serious offences, which must have shaken McGee up - although maybe not – he still thought it was perfectly acceptable to hack into the IRS for his own idle curiosity. Nor had it impacted on Gibbs' behaviour either.

Tobias did wonder if it was what had prompted Ziva to head back to Israel though. Having someone finally call her on her behaviour might have scared the crap out of her – made her realise just how vulnerable she was. Perhaps she assumed that Mossad would shield her from prosecution for the Bodnar assassination? For all he knew, she might well be right.

Another factor that must have bearing on the individuals was the dissolution of the team, who had gone their separate way for months. During that time – there was the chance for them to engage in personal growth, for new skills and interests to emerge and develop. Not to mention for terrorists dirtbags to make attempts on their lives when each was vulnerable and without backup. A situation that Fornell was guessing would have had the biggest impact of all on McGee since he wasn't accustomed to being a target, unlike his former team mates.

Then obviously, there was Gibbs and his behaviour that had a huge effect upon the team and its members after its reformation. When he came back, Jethro was different, uncaring of his former agents' welfare which was odd, since he regarded them as his personal property – and never mind *sempre fi*. Hell, his so-called friend had blithely shot him in the ass to achieve his objective, post Black Ops mission – and he was pretty sure that Gibbs never lost a moment of sleep over injuring him either, more than likely he was still laughing his head off. So definitely something very off about his behaviour.

Tobias’ bullet riddled ass aside though, Gibbs had also not been impressed when Tony ignored him and embarked on a needle in a haystack hunt for Ziva after Gibbs suddenly decided to ignore his most fundamental rule – don't screw over your partner. Tony had compounded that sin by staying in Israel instead of returning home when ordered by Gibbs and earning his ire.

McGee was now Jethro's new golden haired child, replacing Ziva as his favourite. He rewarded him for returning meekly to the MCRT and following his lead. Fornell suspected his ultimate prize for remaining faithfully by Gibbs side was being handed point on a murder case DiNotzo should have led in Gibbs absence. But his reward wasn't just being given point, it was getting to watch DiNotzo be grossly humiliated as punishment for his rebelliousness since he always greatly relished Tony's punishments. Then to really rub his SFA's nose in it, as if disrespecting his rank and professionalism by delegating him to taking orders from a junior agent wasn't enough, Gibbs had sought help from everyone else on the team except Tony, regarding his difficulties with his father,
which had wounded his IC deeply.

Fornell had a fair idea that Gibbs had known it did too and it had been his intention from the beginning. After all, he had to know how much being excluded hurt his SFA after working with him for so long. Gibbs was many things, but he wasn't stupid – he also had an unerring knack of sussing out an opponent's weak spots.

The point was that Gibbs' treatment of DiNozzo and McGee after the MCRT reformed was likely to have effected not just team dynamics, but also each individual. A factor which should not be overlooked in the big picture.

Sidebar - the FBI agent also wondered if part of the reason why Jethro had been hell bent on punishing DiNotzo following his time in Israel was not just because Tony had defied him by going, but that he'd also failed to bring David back to DC. Let's face it, Gibbs really didn't appreciate people leaving his team – control freak that he was. He always had to be the one to show people the door. Stan Burley was a prime example. The man had been a part of his team, his SFA for five years but after he had the balls to put in for a transfer, Gibbs had treated him like one of his ex-wives.

The truth was that once the former gunny found agents that he managed to housebreak to his excessively exacting and unreasonable standards of being on call 24/7 and ignoring his abusive behaviour, Jethro hung onto them for grim death, long after they should be moving onwards and upwards. Being together too long meant that the lines became blurred between his agents being members of a team and something more, due to Gibbs' refusal to encourage agents to move on when they should.

Abby Sciuto would whine that they were all one big happy family but children developed skills, grow independent, rebel against their parents before finally leaving the nest to spread their wings. Gibbs team were more like indentured slaves – and like the song says, 'You can check-out any time you like but you can never leave.' Unless, of course, Gibbs decides after 15 years of devoted service he doesn't want you anymore.

Another factor that likely made a difference to McGee's demeanour was a certain green little probie who'd been hired to take Ziva's place on the team. One who was far more like McGee than she was like the two previous female agents whose place she filled. While Todd and David had no investigative experience either, they were essentially the brawns, the brute force kind of agents – the kickass, act now, think later types and Ellie Bishop had most definitely been the brains. Her analytical abilities and observational skills should make for a thoughtful, intelligent investigator further down the track - when she'd gained more experience (if she didn't keep going off half-cocked and get killed).

The point was that she was someone who didn't make McGee feel inferior when they were together in the field, unlike Cate or Ziva had, with their ability to bust a guy's balls, one literally and the other one, literally and figuratively. Especially someone like McGee who was so easily intimidated by domineering women.

Bishop, with her unassuming nature, humility and eagerness to learn was happy to take advice from the perennial junior agent, which Fornell had to think would be a big boost to his ego. Not only would he feel a kinship with her for her computer abilities but he probably felt like he could mentor her in the field. Although to be honest Tobias cringed at the thought of what he might teach her, in light of McGee's screwing the pooch with that joint undercover investigation involving his girlfriend.

Ellie was a much more collaborative personality which inevitably created a much less competitive
Then there was the *Delilah Factor* – which arguably had to be a most powerful influence on McGee and his behaviour. When they resigned and Ziva returned to Israel, McGee met Delilah Fielding and started his first significant romantic relationship since becoming an agent. Obviously Fornell wasn't counting the affair between Abby Sciuto and McGee as a real relationship, it was more of a fling or series of one-night stands since as soon as the Goth thought he was getting serious about her, she had dumped him. She'd left him the victim of a fiercely unrequited love for her that had continued unabated for years… until he'd met Delilah and commenced going out with her.

Somehow, Fornell thought that much of McGee's behavioural change and maturation he'd exhibited recently was likely to be because he was having a relationship with an adult female who was normal, not intent on dominating him. Delilah was definitely a good thing for McGee – he needed to grow up and get rid of the massive chip on his shoulder and start accepting responsibility for his actions.

Bottom line though, heaping all the blame on Ziva for his actions was a cop-out. He was a highly intelligent adult, who'd attended FLETC and graduated top of the class, so he couldn't claim ignorance. Besides, if he was so easily lead by a liaison/probie agent, then what did that say about how simple it would be for perps or terrorists to turn him too? He couldn't have his cake and eat it too, he was either unable to stand up for what he knew was right and that made him a security risk. If he wasn't a security risk, then he needed to accept responsibility for his failure to follow the chain-of-command and agency protocols and start behaving professionally.

Fornell wasn't convinced that his so-called maturation and change of attitude had occurred so much as Tim had just gotten smarter (sneakier) about how he expressed those feelings. The situation with the poison ivy this morning pretty much demonstrated he was still the same old McGee – even with no evil Ziva David whispering in his ear. As for the IRS caper, she sure wasn't there holding a deadly paper clip to his head, threatening him to get details of his work mate's tax info.

Honestly, if McGee truly was DiNozzo's best friend as he claimed, Fornell felt Tony was probably better off friendless. The fact was Tim seemed to positively glow at Tony's misfortunes, like when Gibbs was angry with Tony, which seemed to happen a lot since getting shot. What his 'best friend' seemed to be blind to was just how frequently Tony drew Gibbs ire to protect the juniors tender hide, and having Tim smirking gleefully when he took their punishments hurt him a lot more than Gibbs head slaps and vitriol.

Fornell still vividly recalled his smugness when visiting DiNozzo in the FBI lockup years ago, when he was being held for murder. After being framed for murder, a show of solidarity definitely wouldn't have gone astray. It was not a time for point scoring, as Fornell knew from personal experience. Unfortunately, getting locked up in jail for a murder when you were an innocent federal agent was when you found out who your real friends were. And taunting someone when they were down wasn't the actions of a friend.

*Sidebar to self - no wonder Tony had freaked out so badly when he was facing imprisonment for a murder he hadn't committed. It must have evoked many terrifying memories from Sirius' life in that infamous hell-hole, Azkaban and have seemed like a bad case of deja vu. And wasn't hindsight a marvellous institution.*
As for the notion of a 'best friend' using their hacking skills to break into the IRS because they were curious about how their friend was able to afford an apartment? In his opinion that was no act of a friend – let alone a good one. It was also an incredibly stupid, arrogant thing to do, since every man and his dog knew that you don't mess with the IRS - even Al Capone learnt that the hard way.

Hacking the IRS database to catch a terrorist when there wasn't time to wait for a subpoena, that was one thing and Fornell could turn a blind eye to it – maybe. BUT prying into a teammate's private business, purely out of curiosity - that was indefensible, not to mention illegal.

Which brought him to his own stated intentions to teach McGee and Bishop that just because they were feds, it didn't give them carte blanche to hack into other agents' personal and financial data. He also knew that Tony wouldn't want the Geek Hackers to get into real trouble – if he had, he could have gone to IA and reported their petty little foray into the IRS database. So bearing that in mind, Tobias decided to give them one chance before he visited the Fires of Hell upon their heads.

The Fibbie intended to bait his trap while he was on 'Protection Detail' today and if they decided to hack into the FBI…well that was all on them and he'd throw the book at them. However, if they kept their noses out of what didn't concern them, then he'd ignore the intel about the IRS and let someone else worry about NCIS agents treating classified government databases as their personal playground.

Personally, he had little confidence that they'd resist the lure of classified intel about DiNozzo supposedly hidden in the bowels of the FBI's computer but the truth was that their fate was in their own hands. That way, should they be stupid enough to break into the FBI's computers he could look into DiNotzo's soulful, puppy-dog eyes and tell him, with hand-on-the-heart honesty that any bad consequence brought down on their heads, were of their own making entirely.

Deciding to make a call to his contact at the bureau, he chose to head outside where he could find some privacy. As he headed towards the stairs, he observed Gibbs finally stomping out of the director's office and he recalled Vance had left some time ago. Fornell wondered briefly what he'd been doing up there on his own in the director's inner sanctum, although knowing Gibbs, he'd probably taken the opportunity to drink Leon's coffee pot dry.

Looking at his watch he decided that after he called his 'secret weapon' he would text Bishop – demand another sit rep on her protection duty. This was the best fun he'd had at NCIS since…well he'd never had this much fun. Best pack as much into it as possible - perhaps he should find Gibbs and have a little chat.

~000~

Leon informed his temporary PA that he was going to be out of the office for a meeting as he stalked past, leaving Gibbs still in mid rant in his office. Gibbs had burst in earlier, demanding to know who had offered DiNozzo a job. He'd been furious when he informed him that the information was above his pay grade and then when he offered the news that he'd been offered a directorship of a secret agency Jethro went ballistic. He wouldn't have been shocked if Gibbs had had another panic attack/melt down like he'd had earlier in the year, although frankly, he didn't understand what was stuck in his craw.

The director had heard the various scuttlebutt going around the office about why Gibbs was treating his loyal senior field agent like a piece of three-day old dog crap that he'd stepped in, and
was still trying to get it off his boots. There were a number of theories - mostly divided into two camps. There was the pro-Gibbs camp that seemed to think the only conceivable reason why Gibbs could be such an asshole to DiNozzo was because he was delivering some much needed tough love. According to this particular scenario, the tough love was to persuade him to move onwards and upwards at the agency, because Gibbs was so gosh darn proud of his protégé's achievement in apprehending Daniel Budd.

Obviously Dr Mallard and Dr Sciuto were firmly of this camp, and surprisingly, so too was Dr Palmer. It seems in the years since that since he'd become a father, Gibbs had become a close confidant of the young ME. He'd also become sympathetic to the plight of Anthony DiNozzo Senior – excusing his less than stellar behaviour as a parent because now he was one too, it gave him insight into just how hard it was to be a father. Frankly, Leon didn't give a shit how hard it was to be a father, a real man didn't abandon his child, and kids didn't get a choice - they didn't ask to be brought into the world by alcoholic conmen.

He'd personally checked out Senior when he'd assisted the agency a couple of times, and of course the time when he'd been charged with murder, his background had been run. What Leon learnt about the man was far from flattering. He was also disappointed that people supposed to be top notch investigators were so easily sucked into the man's bullshit. It did however make the director more empathetic towards DiNozzo for what he'd had to have overcome in his less than optimal upbringing.

Then there was the more jaundiced point of view by some of the veterans that held that Gibbs was treating DiNozzo like shit after the debacle in Iran because he felt insecure about his leadership and he was pissed off about being shot. Several of the SSAs and more jaded and experienced SFAs opined that he'd been perfectly happy to use DiNozzo's talents and skills, as long as he stayed two steps to the rear and that Gibbs' got all the accolades – which obviously hadn't happened for the takedown of The Calling. As far as the cynics were concerned, Jethro's abrupt change of attitude occurred immediately after Tony killed Budd, and him not treating anyone else like dirt was ample proof of their theory.

The only thing they couldn't agree on was why he didn't just kick his 2IC off the team – after all, there was a time before DiNozzo came along, when Gibbs regularly fired agents. He had been notorious about getting rid of people, so they didn't understand why he would change his MO so dramatically. Vance was aware that according to NCIS lore, Jethro's record was firing an agent two hours after he'd been assigned to Gibbs when the probie blundered, letting a process server up into the bullpen to serve Gibbs with divorce papers from his third ex-wife, Stephanie.

Leon was aware of several other viewpoints – one an offshoot of the pro-Gibbs camp. This group insisted that Jethro, after a tragic near death experience, had been unable to deny his romantic love for DiNozzo a moment longer. Since he couldn't cope with the unrequited love – and totally unaware that DiNozzo was hopeless in love with him too - he decided to drive him away by being cruel and cold to DiNozzo.

While this theory sounded crazy, it was perpetuated by a bunch of employees who apparently liked reading erotic romance novels. According to his PA, they were diehard shippers of the slasher persuasion and no, apparently that didn't mean slashers of the 'psycho with a knife' variety. Instead they used a pen, and wrote about ships (no not boats - relationships) male on male or very occasionally, female on female sexual liaisons. And mostly they picked heterosexuals and paired them together because... well he didn't really know.

Then she showed him some of the Deep Six slash stories that had been posted on line – wondering how many were authored by people in the building who they worked with. He'd nearly choked on
his toothpick when he discovered Director Neo Lance had been paired with Agent McGregor, Tor Kent, Pinny Jalmer, Fobias Cornell and perhaps the most disturbing, Goosy in different stories – sometimes Lance was in threesomes. Reading the smut – half of which left him clueless and the rest panicking that Jared or Kayla might ever see it or worse, might have seen it, he'd felt furious.

He had felt an overwhelming desire to shoot McGee for writing those stupid damned books. Not to mention he wanted to dig up Jenny Shepard and beat the shit out of her for not putting a stop to it as she should have, instead of her using her office and position to hunt down her father's alleged killer.

And while he was at it, he'd also throttle her for the dumbass move promoting a rank probie without the requisite investigatory experience or skill to the role of SFA when Gibbs stormed off in a snit to Mexico. Dumbass because it would be the equivalent of him appointing Bishop as SFA – since she'd been a field agent for almost three years to the two McGee had under his belt when Shepard gave him the promotion.

Anyway, Jen Shepard's incompetence aside, the slasher types had decided that Gibbs was being a total bastard because he loved his senior field agent with a love so pure he couldn't bear it anymore. Honestly, even if that schlock was true – Gibbs was the most abusive, toxic individual imaginable, based on how he related to people on the job. There were times when the director seriously pondered the state of his marriage with his Shannon – with his soulmate. Had it been all rainbows and unicorns or was it toxic too, because a leopard didn't usually change its spots. Plus, there was the minor matter of the untimely death of Pedro Reynosa and Gibbs' hand in it. There was no way that the very moral former cop could have a 'healthy' relationship with a cold blooded murderer who felt zero remorse for what he'd done. DiNozzo was too principled to be able to look the other way over something so fundamentally opposed to everything he stood for, not without it destroying him.

Truthfully, if he thought there was a hope in hell that Tony might have been involved with Gibbs or have feelings for him, then Leon would rather lose DiNozzo to the Brits than see that happen. Hell, he would personally drive him to the airport, shove him on the damned plane and cancel his US passport. He shook his head, disgusted.

And then there were the other shippers, mostly from the secretarial pool, aka The Mills and Boon or the Harlequin brigade. These people were equally deluded into believing that DiNozzo and Ziva David were star crossed lovers. Basically they saw them as NCIS' answer to Romeo and Juliet, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Isolde and Tristan or Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler. According to their hypothesis (conspiracy theory) Ziva had asked Gibbs to persuade Tony he couldn't live without her, so he'd go back to Israel, sweep her off her feet and marry her.

A variation of that theory was that she was pregnant with his love child and Gibbs was furious that DiNozzo left Ziva pregnant and unmarried, so he was treating him like shit. There were countless Lisa/Tommy stories based on that premise, that or she came back to introduce him to said love child. Seriously, Kayla could come up with more plausible scenarios.

Vance thought these people needed to get a life, take off their rose coloured glasses and stop imagining fantasy love affairs between members and or former members of the MCRT. Just like Gibbs, Ziva David would be nothing short of toxic to DiNozzo should she ever get her hooks into him. Leon had seen footage of her assaulting him when they'd been in Tel Aviv after DiNozzo shot Rivkin.

The 'so called' star crossed lover knocked him down, an injured DiNozzo, and come within a hairsbreadth of killing him without a flicker of regret. Watching it on playback, it had been such a close thing, it had made Vance's skin crawl. He didn't need his brilliantly wise, late wife Jackie, to
tell him that hurting someone was never a sign of love or a healthy relationship. It was an out and out sign of an domestic abuse.

As he drove across town, heading to the markets where he'd bought his cloth Gibbs doll...uh...cloth-representation-of-a-person, he pondered the question of why Gibbs was acting so incensed by Tony's departure. He should be crowing since he'd won and Tony was leaving. Instead the man had thrown a massive tantrum, shouting about his precious security clearance and demanding to know where DiNozzo was going.

Leon wasn't sure if he'd been read in on the agency that had snapped DiNozzo up, if he would have shared the details with Gibbs. He was acting so crazy that he wouldn't put it past Jethro to try to make trouble for DiNozzo in his new job, before he'd even started it. The fact of the matter was, that despite the conjecture about why he'd acted like such a prick, and really there was no other descriptor for his behaviour, Leon Vance had a pretty good idea why Gibbs wouldn't, why he couldn't throw Tony off the team when he came back from Shanghai. He might not understand why he was being such a prick - although he leaned more towards the Tony-made-him-look-bad theory or even 'my mess, I clean it up' rule. What Vance was pretty sure of was why Gibbs chose to freeze him out, rather than transfer him off the MCRT.

It was a variation of another those wretched rules of his - Rule # 6 to be precise. Never apologise - it's a sign of weakness. Leon suspected that particular rule existed primarily because Gibbs couldn't ever admit to being wrong. DiNozzo had worked 15 years on Gibbs team after he personally handpicked him, not to mention telling people, including himself that DiNozzo was the best young agent he'd ever worked with. Gibbs was also fond of telling everyone that he didn't tolerate second best and therein now lay his conundrum. DiNozzo was so good he'd upstaged the Master, but if Gibbs tried to fire him for incompetence, apart from looking vindictive and foolish, he'd essentially be admitting that he'd tolerated someone on his team who was incompetent.

Gibbs was such extreme alpha male; he couldn't bear to lose face or admit he was wrong. Firing his SFA now would be tantamount to saying he had been wrong for the last 15 years and he couldn't bear the thought. Leon was pretty certain that was the real reason why he'd tried his damnedest to make DiNozzo resign off his own bat. And it had worked.

Finding a car space to park his SUV, he smiled since it was just a short stroll to the markets. Part of him felt ashamed that he had played hooky from work to buy a cloth-representation-of-a-person, so he could rip it's balls off just to relieve his stress. Another part recalled his internist warning him about his hypertension and entreating him to adopt less stressful habits.

As he made his way to the market stall, he pondered Gibbs behaviour this morning that had left him reaching for the bottle of booze in his desk drawer for a second time and it hadn't even been lunchtime. In the end he'd walked out in the middle of Gibbs rant, deciding that a trip the market might be childish but essentially less destructive that alcohol. In fact, he could actually be said to be following doctor's orders – filling a prescription, even.

He just didn't understand why after making DiNozzo feel like a fifth wheel on the team and basically freezing him out of investigations, Gibbs would be so furious to have gotten what he wanted. DiNozzo was leaving the team.

As he bought his X-rated cloth-representation-of-a-person and decided to get a couple of spares, he spied a boxed set of some collectible figurines in the bargain basement section. It was from a defunct hospital drama series set in his old home and he was struck by how much some of the characters looked familiar. *Huh – he and Jackie must have watched it back in the day when the kids were little and he could snuggle up with her on the sofa.*
There was a busty red head, a guy that was spookily like his current stomach ulcer - Leroy Jethro Gibbs and a figurine who could be his own doppelganger, except it looked a heap younger - and a whole heap less stressed. Making a split second decision, he purchased the set in addition to his cloth-representation-of-a-person…um stress reduction equipment.

Deciding to grab a latte at a café he thought about his impulse buy of the figurines – he resolved he use the red-headed figurine as a substitute for his predecessor. Maybe he could stick pins in her or rip her head off and flush it down the toilet – somehow he was feeling calmer already.
Soul Searching

Chapter Summary

As the senior field agent, Tony feels a responsibility to leave Probish with important information to ensure her safety. Meanwhile, Grace deals with a ranting Gibbs.

Chapter Notes

Warning/spoiler: A story about Tony leaving would not be complete, imho without dealing with the freakin huge elephant in the room, wearing a pink and purple polka-dot onesie who refused to go away. Said large pachyderm is the deal breaker which caused a lot of people to stop watching the show because it was just so egregious, and yet treated as a huge joke by the writers. It is the episode that Tim and Ziva fans insist is a beat-up by people like me and it is also one of the most popular story tags for fanfics to tackle since it evokes a lot of outrage. If you haven't figured out what I'm referring to yet – what planet are you on? Seriously, if you don't like the Military at Home - Dead Air episode because you think it was a storm in a teacup, then do us both a favour and stop reading.

One more thing guys - if you've derived enjoyment from the Anthony DiNozzo character over the last 13 seasons, either by watching the show, writing fan fics or reading them, think about showing your appreciation by voting for Michael Weatherly who received a nomination for best actor in the EW Poppy awards. Sure it aint an Emmy but it is some consolation for the crap farewell he was given, and it might make TPTB sit up and think about how they treated the actor, the character and his fans after 13 loyal years. And to be honest, after making a silk purse out of the sow's ear of the character that MW was given, he's more than earned it. Go to - http://www.ew.com/gallery/2016-poppy-awards-drama-nominees/2716078_mobile-users-click-here-vote-best-actor-dramanominees and vote. Thanks!

Dr Grace Confalone sat watching as her client, Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs paced around her office like a feral tiger on the prowl for prey, intermittently ranting. He’d contacted her earlier, sounding like he was in dire straits, so she’d cleared her next several appointments to see him. If he didn’t calm down, he was in danger of having another of his stress-induced collapses.

And therein lay the difficulty of this case. Dr Cyril Taft had referred Jethro to her after he’d experienced an attack at work that had landed him back in a hospital bed. After exhaustive tests to find a physical aetiology for his excruciating chest pain, Taft had finally found a minute area on a scan that he’d diagnosed as scar tissue. While it was possible that this had caused Gibbs collapse at NCIS, she thought it was not probable.

Grace suspected that Gibbs ‘attack’ was psychogenic in nature, and even if the scar tissue was a factor, there was likely to be large psychological aspect to the attack. She had a feeling that Cyril was of like mind, even if he’d suggested otherwise to Gibbs as a sop to his very fragile male ego,
but she wasn’t certain since discussing this particular case with him hadn’t been easy. And therein lay the awkward nature of Gibbs’ referral because although he was Taft’s surgical/trauma patient, he’d somewhat manipulatively forced Taft into being his ‘therapist’ via various mechanisms including emotional blackmail and medical noncompliance.

Rightly recognising he was out of his depth pretty much immediately, Cyril had referred him to Grace, except that Taft was also her client, as well in this case as her colleague. *Yeah, can we all just say awkies?*

So she had somewhat limited information about Gibbs, apart from the medical file on him from his multiple GSW and sparse details about possible PTSD, his attack at work and some grief issues left over from his wife and daughter. Apparently it was this familial loss which had drawn the two men together in a classic misery loves company move. Plus, she was aware that in addition to being a special agent for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service he was a former Marine, but that was pretty much the extent of her knowledge.

Watching him pace and rant about his security clearance and his right to know where his 2IC was going after accepting a new job, Dr Confalone stared at her client in dismay. Something told her that Gibbs’ issues ran a whole lot deeper than the mere repercussions of getting shot on the job or losing a spouse and child. Gibbs’ rage did not seem to be proportional to what had caused him to *lose his gourd*. It made Grace speculate about what the hell was going on with the clearly angry man.

The dismayed therapist wondered just how she could acquire his NCIS jacket, including his mandatory psych. evals, most specifically, the most recent one after he’d been shot before he returned to work. Grace mentally ran through who she knew at NCIS or who she knew who knew someone who worked there since it probably would be difficult to obtain. Feeling a measure of concern when watching Gibbs ‘emote’ she felt it was absolutely imperative she try to get a handle on what was really going on inside her client’s head.

For now, she was concerned about his blood pressure due to his over the top fury and against her better instincts she handed him a strong cup of Marine coffee. Knowing that caffeine could theoretically elevate his blood pressure, she also knew when it came to Gibbs, coffee was like breast milk to a fractious infant. Standard means of trying to calm him were counterproductive. She knew – she’d already tried deep breathing, relaxation exercises and meditation. That’d just made him angrier – which just left coffee which she’d surreptitiously slipped a very mild muscle relaxer into. Just in case!

Forcing him to sit and savour the aroma of his coffee, focusing in on the smell, she noticed a vein pulsing over his eye and she wondered what the heck she’d got herself into. Visions of him stroking out in her office made her wonder what that would do to her malpractice insurance premiums.

~o0o~

Grace tapped her fingers on her cherry wood desk, as she waited for the NCIS psychologist, Dr Wendell Jacobsen to respond to her request. She had to say that she wasn’t exactly sanguine about her chances but still, she had to try.

“Grace, I’d like to help but you know I can’t release Special Agent Gibbs file to you unless you have a signed authorisation from him giving us his permission to release it to you. Which you’ve already indicated you don’t have,” and even over the phone she could hear genuine regret in his rich tenor.
Confalone sighed; honestly she’d expected as much. Still it didn’t hurt to ask cuz you just never knew. However, she was really hoping that she could find out more about Jethro’s collapse several months ago and his psychological evaluation, post shooting before he was cleared to return to field work.

“Fine Jake – I get it. But I’m concerned and I’m also groping in the dark, here.” She confessed into the phone, deprecatingly. “What can you tell me about his attack in the bull pen or his evaluation after the shooting – just in general terms? Not asking you to betray your professional ethics or anything.” Well she had been but now she knew Wendell wouldn’t play ball she was changing her approach – not yet willing to give up.

She and Jacobsen had sat on a few panels together on PTSD in the military and she was hoping that it might give her some sway with him.

“Look, all I know about his collapsing in the bull pen is scuttlebutt so I’m not bound by any professional ethics not to share what I’ve heard with you… considering your role. We’re just shooting the breeze and frankly, you have my sympathy for having to work with Special Agent Gibbs. It’s the least I can do.”

“But you won’t share anything from the psych eval he had after the shooting?”

“Can’t, Grace.”

“Okay…but maybe we could speak hypothetically, so you’re not betraying any confidences,” Grace suggested carefully.

“I think you misunderstand me. I can’t share anything with you because there’s nothing to impart, since it never took place.” Wendell clarified his meaning.

Confalone stared at the phone in her hand, shocked. “How is that possible?”

The NCIS psychologist shrugged – well obviously she didn’t see it, but it was apparent in his voice. “It’s Gibbs, Grace. Basically, the guy does whatever the hell he wants... and The Powers That Be don’t have the stones to stand up and tell him no! He simply refused to submit to a psychological evaluation after getting shot.”

“Then who the hell cleared him to returned to work?” She demanded, incredulously. This was not the way it worked…not ever. The system was in place, not only for the agent’s welfare but for the safety of their colleagues, the agency and most importantly, for the protection of the public.

“He wasn’t cleared, obviously. He came back after getting shot and refused to submit for a psychological evaluation and like I said before… no one called him on it. And before you ask; the rumour mill reckons he knows where all the bodies are buried which is the only way he could get away with half of what he does. People joke that he could probably get away with murder.”

The psychologist no longer felt conflicted over her questionable ethics in contacting Jacobsen. Her intuition had been pinging today as Gibbs ranted about what seemed a minor occurrence – a team member leaving to take up a promotion and him not being able to be read in on the agency he was heading up.

As the NCIS psychologist read her in on the basic scuttlebutt surrounding her client, it was beginning to become crystal clear that this was so much more than a case of trauma following the shooting in Iraq and Gibbs’ unresolved grief. Jake warned her that the man was not only a Marine sniper – he was also Black Ops and her visceral reaction to him in her office today had been to
wonder if he might be a danger to himself or someone else.

She wasn’t exactly comforted by what she’d managed to uncover, although it sounded like the object of today’s tantrum might be wise to watch his back. She wasn’t entirely sure that Jethro was, to use a highly technical term – playing with a full deck.

~o0o~

Tony had finished up at Legal after almost an hour long consult. Leon had already notified them about his impending departure and they had already begun figuring which cases he could be deposed for and which ones needed him to appear in person to testify in. The consensus was that five weeks would take care of all the outstanding cases.

Tony had decided to detour on the way back to the bull pen. He wanted to have a private chat with Ellie and he figured the staff cafeteria was the best place to do that. It should be fairly deserted at this time of the morning. After finding a quiet spot where they could talk and not have anyone sneak up on them unawares, he grabbed a fruit juice before trying to decide how to get started when Bishop’s cell phone chirruped an incoming text message.

He didn’t know whether to laugh or throttle Fornell, who seemed to be having a whale of a time today at the expense of Tony’s workmates. He’d sent Bishop at least four texts so far, demanding a sit. rep. on her totally non-existent protection detail which had the Probie on tenterhooks and her head on permanent swivel. Tony was getting seasick trying to follow Ellie’s eyes which were bouncing around like a Pong ball between two bats as she tried to watch for imaginary threats.

“Bishop…Ellie,” he groaned in frustration after she received what was her fifth text. “Give me your phone,” he ordered her, holding out his outstretched palm, forestalling any objections.

Calling Fornell on Bishop’s phone he barked, “Knock it off, Toby. We’re trying to have a sensible conversation here. Go piss off someone else.” Terminating the call, he returned the phone to its owner and smirked at Ellie.

She smiled tentatively, no doubt wondering if Fornell would rip her a new one when they returned to the bullpen. “So is this about the advice you wanted to give me, Tony?”

“Yeah, Bish. What?” he asked her, seeing she had questions too.

“Did Tim really refuse to listen to you when you warned him about the poison ivy?”

Tony sighed, resignedly. “We were looking for a baseball bat - the murder weapon and I tried to tell that he needed to watch out for poison ivy – leaves of three, let them be… but he interrupted me. He told me he knew how to conduct a search of a wooded area and he wasn’t an idiot and I should stop treating him as such.

“I tried to tell him I didn’t think he was an idiot - that I was just trying to impart a little wisdom. As a cop I didn’t encounter poison ivy in Peoria, Philly or Baltimore, so I learnt the hard way when I was in Shenandoah Park on a double murder, my first year as an agent. But before I had a chance to share my experience - because I did have nine years to his six months of field experience – he proceeded to tell me that he graduated top his class at FLETC. That he was sure he could handle it.

“So I decided to leave him to it… to respected his wishes and we all know the result. Honestly,
Probish, you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink. Tim was so sure he knew more than I did, so I thought if he learnt the hard way he might be more willing to take advice the next time.”

“Did it work?”

“Not really. Apparently someone as dumb as me couldn’t possible teach him anything of value.

She nodded. “I’m sorry, Tony… and the second time he got poison ivy in the field?”

“Gee, I don’t know. I guess he took a piss at our crime scene – the Army Navy Golf Course where a JED exploded. A Marine Colonel died and I was interviewing his young son who’d just been accepted into Princeton. McGee must have brushed against the poison ivy and then touched his ah…junk. It wasn’t anything to do with me... the first I knew about it was after we were back in the lab and he started itching.”

“Oh.” She looked contrite. “I’m sorry I believed him without investigating further and I wish I’d offered to help you apply calamine lotion. I thought Tim was being really noble offering to help you when you’d been such a jerk. I told him I wouldn’t be so forgiving and he should have let you suffer.”

Tony looked sad and didn’t mention to her that Tim hadn’t exactly offered to help – he’d strong-armed him into doing it. “Don’t worry about it, Bish, I’m used to it.” It was true too, although it didn’t make it hurt less even if he should be used to it by now.

She looked nervous. “So what was it that you wanted to tell me?”

He looked at her searchingly. She might not appreciate what he had to say but perhaps one day she’d look back and be grateful. So he took a deep breath and forged ahead.

“Probie, I want you to know that you have the potential to be a really good field agent and investigator but this last year you’ve taken some dangerous decisions. I’m really concerned about where your head is. Your strengths are your analytical skills and your goofy off the wall memory.

Eleanor, you don’t need to be some kickass Xenia Warrior Princess type fed. It’s not who you are.” When he saw her starting to object, he shook his head and waved his finger at her.

“No, no…it’s not a bad thing. You’re Gabrielle – the bard and the moral compass to keep the team from straying to the dark side, which is way more important in the scheme of things. Plus, she was pretty hot, too.” He smiled at the blonde pocket rocket.

“Go with your strengths. You’re super smart, you’re kind, caring and trust me… you don’t need to live up to Ziva David or Caitlyn Todd, who were ball busters, sure. But you are already so much more than that, plus, you’re observant, and really good with people and that’s priceless in an investigator, pinky swear.”

Hooking their pinkies together playfully he admonished her, “To thine own self be true. Stop trying to be someone else.”

He squeezed her hand encouragingly. “I get that you’ve had your whole world ripped apart and your heart crushed, but your ex did not cheat on you and destroy your marriage because you aren’t good enough, Ellie. Jake cheated on you because he’s an idiot and a jerk. Stop trying to reinvent Ellie Bishop, she’s already one of my favourite people. But you’ve scared me lately, running around like some brainless ninja, and I’m not going to be around to watch your six anymore.”
He noticed that she’d gotten teary when he started talking about her divorce and he understood that it had shaken her. He’d had a similar experience with Wendy Miller when he’d first started out with the agency. It had messed him up but good and he’d thrown himself into his job and a meaningless merry-go-round of casual dating to make sure his heart didn’t get broken again.

“Please Ellie, I’ve lost too many people I care about, I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you because you think you need to be some cyborg super-agent. Promise me you’ll stop these stupid badass stunts, especially without backup. Special Agent Eleanor Bishop is way good enough just the way she is.”

By this stage she was sobbing and ended up crying on his shoulder and leaving him with a large wet patch on his shirt, but he didn’t feel guilty about making her cry. He felt like she needed a wake-up call. Maybe if someone had been there to support him emotionally after Wendy, he mightn’t have embarked upon empty relationships to avoid getting hurt. He might have avoided subjugated romantic fulfilment for the ultimately futile path of trying to earn the legendary Leroy Jethro Gibbs’ professional approval. It had finally dawned, 15 years too late that it was never going to happen.

When she finally stopped crying so hard and was sniffling with the occasional hiccup, he handed her a pristine monogramed handkerchief and she smiled at his thoughtfulness. “I’m sorry for breaking down, Tony.”

“Don’t apologise for feeling emotions, Probish. It’s part of what makes us human.”

“Gibbs doesn’t bawl like a baby.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow. “Gibbs is hardly the poster child for emotional maturity, Ellie. Don’t pattern yourself upon him or me for that matter, especially in regard to your social and emotional life, kid-let.” He took a sip of his juice, looking at her sadly.

“You’ll end up bitter, angry, lonely and alone. No one deserves that, especially not you, Probish. You deserve to be happy…you hear me, Special Agent Bishop?”

Once Ellie collected herself and promised that she was going to go with her strengths and look before she leapt in future, she smirked tentatively at him. “Thanks Tony. Was that all?”

He bit his lip, not sure how to say what he felt compelled to share with her, even though he felt like he was being intensely disloyal. Seeing him so obviously conflicted, she hugged him gently, trying to cheer him up. It had been a pretty tumultuous morning after all and tempers were definitely frayed.

“It’s okay, you can tell me anything.” She smiled encouragingly, before biting into her gigantic choc-caramel brownie and moaning in pleasure. “They say that a burden shared is a burden halved and I have really, really high security clearance – maybe higher than Gibbs or even Vance.”

She smiled at him winsomely and he wondered if that was true – the bit about her security clearance. The burden bit was probably true but it was also potentially a really selfish act, especially when it was something horrific. Although in his case, there was no question of his sharing what she was hinting he should share.

“I’ll even give you some of my brownie,” she wiggled it invitingly under his nose.

Tony chuckled as he stretched his long legs out under the chair. “No you evil, evil wench, I cannot tell you who I’m working for. If I did, I’d have to kill you.” He joked. *Or wipe your memory,* he
“Okay, now you are starting to freak me out, Tony.”

“Yeah I know. So there is no easy way to say this,” he paused and he seemed to be wrestling with himself before he huffed and seemed to collapse in on himself. “If you ever do undercover work, make sure that you have Gibbs or another agent you really trust, monitoring you on comms in ADDITION to McGee. Don’t depend on him (or Abby for that matter) without backup. Chances are he probably wouldn’t do it to you but then I also didn’t believe he’d do it to me either.”

Seeing her confused expression, he sighed as his expression took on a faraway expression and he started to explain. “It was the Military at Home case, years before your time, but I’m sure you’ll look it up.”

Tony either ignored her determined nod of assent or he was too deeply immersed in his memory. He continued tonelessly, his normally bright eyes focus on the table, avoiding eye contact.

“It was a domestic terrorism murder and we had voiceprints of the killer, who’d shot three people at a local radio station while they were on air. So I was undercover, wandering around a snooty gated community recording voice prints so we could compare them to the radio transcript.

“McGee and Ziva David were nearby in a vehicle – they were my backup, listening in over comms, so if I ran into the killer and he got suspicious or if I encountered unforeseen trouble like – oh I don’t know a mass murderer hiding out in the burbs for a decade, then they were supposed to come running. Just remember Probie, when you’re undercover, that it is often the unexpected that will come back to bite you on the butt.”

“Yeah I’m sure that’s true, but I don’t think that little gem is what you’ve been tying yourself in knots over telling me, is it?” she pressed him, perceptively.

He shook his head slowly. “No it isn’t. See you are becoming an excellent field agent and highly insightful, which is much more important than any kickass skills. Don’t ever sacrifice that quality.”

When she just stared at him, he sighed and capitulated.

“Fine… I finished collecting voiceprints from everyone who was available – obviously there were some people not home. So anyway… I returned to the car, got in the back seat. I found Ziva and Tim reading and they acted surprised to see me – but how could they be, because when I finished collecting the last voiceprint I told them I was on my way back to the car and they were supposed to be backing me up. When I called them on it they claimed they’d gotten fed up listening to my voice, so they’d turned down the radio so they didn’t have to pay attention to me.”

“Why on earth would you cover for them after they did that?” Ellie demanded furiously, because even as green as she was, she realised just how egregious was their lapse in procedure.

“It’s complicated.” He sighed, trying to explain to Ellie something he truly didn’t understand himself – even after all these years of trying to make sense of it.

“So break it down for me, Tony. Why?”
Groaning, his shoulders slumped, his expression was downcast as he tried to explain the inexplicable. “Because initially I was in denial, I think. They were my teammates and I would never do that to them – to anyone.” Tony was silent as he considered this statement, and thankfully she didn’t hassle him to carry on speaking.

Finally, he continued, “So anyway, I guess I convinced myself it was a joke… a really, really bad one. Then later on, long after the case was closed, I realised that it didn’t matter if it was a joke or not. You don’t joke about something that critical to undercover work where trust is often the only safety net you have. Trust that there is someone out there that will come to your aid when the shit hits the fan.”
If Tony thought he’d got off easy and he could put the whole matter to bed now, he was sadly mistaken. Meanwhile, Tony's favourite Salvatore Ferragamo Oxford Black suede and calfskin boots have an unfortunate accident.

Previous chapter warning about Dead Air should be considered to still be in force. Tony might be done talking about the Royal Woods incident but Bishop's just getting started.

Thanks to everyone who left kudos and comments.
moulded orange seats typically found in government buildings, Tony grimaced in anticipatory dislike of the rehashing that he was sure was about to ensue.

“So why didn’t you report them?” Ellie demanded of him, her fresh-faced idealism on a par with her officious regard for rules and regulations which was so typical of a rookie agent.

He sighed in defeat and was silent as he tried to think about how to explain to her when he couldn’t explain why to himself.

“It happened not long after Ziva had attacked me because I killed her boyfriend – in self-defence I hasten to add - but she’d accused me of murdering him because I was jealous. So I was very conscious of how tenuous our working relationship had become – how little if any trust she had in me.” He knew it sounded totally lame but if you hadn’t lived through it, it was hard to comprehend how it was back then.

He picked up the juice bottle he’d purchased at the cafeteria and began peeling back the label, feeling a compulsion to destroy something. Tony was recalling the whole Rivkin fiasco: Ziva’s deceit, her accusations, Vance’s alacrity to throw him to the wolves, Eli David’s torture – the total farce of the deputy director of mossad and Ziva’s father trying to force a false confession out of him. And Gibbs…Gibbs standing by and letting it all happen to him despite him ordering his 2IC to stay on Ziva’s tail over her dealings with Rivkin and her lying. He just let him wear all the shit.

Tony also thought about learning that Ziva had been passing classified data and how after they rescued her butt from Somalia she had the balls to assume she could waltz back into NCIS as if nothing happened. Then again that was pretty much what had happened though and probably why the mess with the Royal Woods case came to pass.

He thought about how Gibbs had welcomed her back with open arms, in spite of her lies and spying. Such a very different tale from the treatment dished out to Tony by Gibbs this past year when he returned from taking care of ‘The Calling’, but then, there had always been one rule for everyone else on the team and another for him.

Perhaps he should have tried passing classified intel to a foreign ally and then maybe Gibbs would have welcomed him back from Shanghai with open arms too. Remembering how he’d been publicly lambasted by Gibbs in the bull pen a few weeks ago about his identity being stolen by a professional identity operation versus the four or was it five times Tim endured ID theft or loss of his creds and there’d been no Gibbs blowback, he guessed not. Gibbs definitely seemed to have one set of standards for everyone else on the team – Jethro included – and a much higher set of expectations for him.

It only took him 15 years to understand no matter what he did, Gibbs would just keep raising the bar so he never reached it. Never accuse him of being the sharpest knife in the block.

Looking at Bishop sitting with a sceptical expression on her youthful features…waiting, she looked far from convinced by his reasoning. He didn’t blame her – he still didn’t understand it himself after years of sleepless nights. He sighed as he tried to explain that whole Rivkin debacle to someone who wasn’t there – who didn’t live through the whole situation.

“Ziva ended up as a prisoner in a terrorist camp in Somalia for several months because I killed her Mossad boyfriend, so she was his replacement on the assignment. Long story short, we thought she was dead and I felt guilty, even though she lied to us and concealed several murders and other crimes her boyfriend committed while she was secretly handling him.

“Turned out she wasn’t dead after all, so we saved her ass and she’d only just re-joined the team
when the Military at Home case occurred. Anyway, Gibbs regarded her as a surrogate daughter. He was teaching her to play baseball.”

Not entirely sure what that non-sequitur had to do with the price of fish, he remembered her fake move, falling on top of him when the bomb went off. It was a move she had used before – what was it standard seduction 101 in Mossad Officer Training? He was also convinced that she had pulled it because Gibbs was present and that its purpose wasn’t just to convince her father-figure that she was the dutiful daughter.

Subtly, she was also sending a message to Gibbs and the rest of the world saying that he was a damsel in distress who needed saving - that he was useless and unprofessional, deadwood as opposed to a competent agent who, if told to drop, was trained to respond instantly. She meant it as a slur on his abilities and training and he’d taken it as such. He knew it was a snapshot, along with her switching off his comms of how she really felt about him after Rivkin – that she’d still blamed him for the whole mess.

“I guess… I didn’t want to be responsible for breaking up the team a second time… so I kept quiet.” Tony explained to his team mate, reluctantly.

Ellie stared at him, her eyes narrowing as she considered what little she’d been told, looking as if she was going to comment further before pursing her lips. After several moments of contemplation, she responded. “So what was Tim’s excuse?”

“Eh…what?” Tony replied, caught off balance by Bishop’s question.

“So, say just for the sake of argument that I accept that really crappy excuse for Ziva switching off the radio when she was supposed to be watching your back or even if she was just joking about it. What possible excuse did McGee have for doing it?

Seeing his shell shocked look, she clarified her meaning. “Did you kill his girlfriend? Did he spend time in a Somali terrorist training camp, too? Was he also Gibbs surrogate daughter?”

She noticed his deer in the headlights mien and harrumphed irritably.

“C’mon, Tony, what possible reason was there for him to earn a free pass for not doing his job? I know I’m still a probie, but even I know that there is no excuse for what he did…what they BOTH did.”

Staring at Tony who was looking shattered she pressed him, since he remained mute.

“If Gibbs assigned you two agents as backup, then it must have been because his risk-analysis of the task meant that if it went bad, then you’d need both of them to help you deal with the threat. When McGee went undercover with the homeless people in DC, he only sent you to watch Tim’s six, not two agents, so obviously the risk analysis was that the homeless undercover operation wasn’t considered as dangerous.”

Bishop noted he was ashen-faced. She could see this breach of protocol, the betrayal of trust had him all tied up in knots and even after all this time he wasn’t able to be rational about it.

“But you already know all that because you’ve been team lead before, Tony.” She stated neutrally. “So why did you give him a free pass for breaking Gibbs’ Rule # 1, not to mention agency and law enforcement procedure. What would possess you to do it?”

Tony sighed deeply. “McGee thinks I picked on him - that I’m threatened by him because he’s a genius and I’m just a dumb jock. Plus, he thinks I told people he was gay because I was threatened
that him, and he never really got over being demoted as SFA when Gibbs came back from retirement.”

He pulled a face, remembering how Gibbs return had thrown their fledgling team dynamic, as shaky as it had been, into total chaos. He should have accepted that promotion to Rota that Shepard offered him – he’d have never ended up breaking Jeanne’s heart for one thing.

“He also resents me because he thinks I had everything handed to me on a silver platter. He might be my friend but he also begrudges me for all that stuff and more. Probably thinks I used my wealth to buy a degree and a career, including the SFA job.”

“Okay, so did you tell people he’s gay?”

“Thank-you for actually bothering to ask first, Bish - everyone just assumes. Of course I didn’t. First off, there’s nothing wrong with being gay. Have you seen me give gay or lesbian agents like Ned a hard time because of their sexual orientation?

“More importantly, a decade ago in law enforcement, that was something you didn’t tell people about your partner, especially a green probie like Tim. Even if an agent was gay, it would have been a really dangerous thing to do, possibly even handing them a death warrant. Back then, homophobia was, and still is to some extent, alive and well in PDs and federal agencies.”

“So why would Tim believe you did it?” Bishop asked.

“Because another agent on our team, Cate Todd told him that I did, and he believed her.”

“Why would she do that? That’s a horrible thing to do!”

Tony looked genuinely mystified and shook his head. “Honestly Ellie, I’m not sure why. She was a Catholic profiler with a thing about what she’d call aberrant sexuality. Disapproved strongly of it, but seemed to be obsessed with it at the same time – ya know? Once on a case, I kissed a suspect to put her off the track after she caught me snooping in her mailbox. We were watching her after we lost an agent in a horrific killing and found a photo of her on his camera.”

Tony still felt ill remembering how they’d found Chris Pacci in the lift, eviscerated. Seeing the gentle man like that was all kinds of wrong. Shaking off the gruesome image, he continued with his account.

“Turned out the woman in the photo – the one I kissed, killed our agent, who, by the by, was a friend of mine. What we didn’t know, aside from her being the killer, was that she was undergoing transgender reassignment.”

I’m sorry for your loss,” Ellie commiserated softly.

Tony nodded. “Chris was a nice guy. So Cate wouldn’t stop taunting me about kissing a guy - thought it was hilarious. Never stopped to think I felt sick to my stomach for kissing (even if it was for show) the person who murdered Chris.

“Then there was another time she and Abby photo-shopped a picture of two leather clad gays guys, with my head into the picture. If that fake picture had gotten into the wrong hands, my career would have been over.”

“I don’t understand. Why would Tim take her word over yours, knowing what she was like?”

Tony stared at Ellie benevolently. “Cate was our partner. Why did you believe that I was
responsible for Tim’s poison ivy, Ellie?”

“Touché. I’m sorry. I believed him without asking questions or getting proof and I’m supposed to be an investigator. Okay… what’s with the whole lap of luxury thing…so what?”

“I think he really believes money made my life cushy, that Senior bought my way into college and I didn’t earn my position – that it should have gone to him. Maybe he encountered rich entitled jerks at college who bought their way into a degree or he thought I had a charmed childhood.” Tony frowned contemplatively before flashing her a wounded look.

“You guys see Senior as this delightful, urbane, older guy but the truth is I grew up with a drunk who disowned his son when he was twelve years old. A man who took his 12-year-old son to Hawaii and went home without him. The bill for room service I racked up was what tipped him off he’d forgotten me.

“I put myself through college and the police academy, plus, I earned every job on the force and NCIS on my own merits. Honestly…my mother abused alcohol too and I had a pretty shitty childhood, despite growing up in the lap of luxury.”

Okay so it was Tony DiNozzo’s shitty childhood he was talking about, but all true - he was even minimising a lot of crap. And Sirius Orion Black was raised by psychopaths, rich pureblood psychopaths, but psychopaths nevertheless who’d ensured he’d had a crappy childhood, too.

Allowing his vulnerability to surface momentarily, he shared a deeply private yearning. “I’d gladly have swapped with him, even with Tim having to move around to different Navy bases as a Navy brat on a regular basis, and with a father who was cold and critical. He still had a mother, a sister and a grandmother who loved and told him so and assured him he mattered – that he wasn’t a mistake or an aberration.”

He smiled cynically. “It sounds trite but money can’t buy happiness, love or security.”

And wasn’t that the bitter truth for Tony DiNozzo and Sirius Black. He’d have killed to have been part of a loving family like the McGee’s. Admiral McGee made Senior and his own father, Orion Black look like Father Knows Best by comparison. By his own admission, Tim admitted his father had bought him a fancy car when he turned sixteen and he’d paid to put him through two degrees at top of the line colleges. His own father wanted him to take the dark mark as he approached his majority, a car even from a domineering and cold paternal figure sounded pretty awesome by comparison. And DiNozzo had been forced to face the fact that he had no one to be there for him when he was still a kid.

Ellie obviously realised he was done talking about the subject so she decided to move on in her trawling for information.

“Oo-kay…so let’s talk about picking on him because you felt threatened that he’s so much smarter than you? What did that entail?”

Shrugging resignedly, he replied. “Well there’s the McNicknames, snooping on his online games, pranks like supergluing his keyboard or hiding his self-help CDs, making him do the crap probie work, nicking his food a few times, teasing him about his dates, giving him orders…”

‘So essentially he’s angry with you for chiefly doing what everyone in law enforcement does, what he does to me or to a lesser degree what I do to him too? Not like he doesn’t play pranks on you either or that Gibbs is above playing the odd practical joke if he’s in the mood. Does he think that Gibbs makes jokes because he’s threatened by Tim being a genius – give me a break!'
Bishop frowned, folding her arms as she tried to inflict a steely eyed stare but failing miserably. “He used a trick coin on me to make sure I had to get into the septic tank to search it, instead of him. He admitted you’d pulled the same trick on him – so what, it wrong for you to do it to him but it’s perfectly fine for him to pull the same prank on me?”

“Yeah but you’re both smart – so it doesn’t count.”

Scowling at him severely, she smacked his hand, but only lightly. Clearly she hadn’t been taking cues from Abby or Gibbs because neither held back.

“Don’t do that. I don’t need to snoop in your personnel file to know you have above average intelligence, Tony. I suspect you probably have an IQ analogous to, or close to Tim, Abby or me too.” She folded her arms and pursed her lips as she regarded him contemplatively.

“As for the snooping – Tim’s not exactly without sin on that score. He stuck his foot in it with Jake when he answered my phone and then opened his big mouth, telling him about my surprise anniversary trip. Plus, he stuck his nose in your business when he decided to tell Senior that you thought he was a con artist…”

“Yeah and that sucked, but to be fair though, I answered his call to his naked girlfriend.” Tony replied, still much chagrined over the incident.

“Oh please! What did he expect? He’s dumb enough to leave his phone lying out in plain sight when he’s expecting her to call him for a booty call in the buff - while he’s at work. He’s only got himself to blame if someone answers it accidentally,” she bristled and Tony decided that nude phone calls were a touchy subject with the newly divorced agent. “And anyway, what ever happened to no personal calls at work?”

Actually, it was a bit of a touchy subject for him too after his break up with Zoe and his two encounters with Jeanne. She might be married but even after all these years and the garbage surrounding their affair – the electricity was still there and he still loved her. Not that he’d ever tell her that – she was married now and he hoped she’d have a happy life.

Ellie interrupted his train of thought. “Besides, you didn’t do any harm. Delilah reckons you did her a favour, that you made her feel sexy again because you responded to her - the woman and not the chair. And Tim was jealous, so as far as she was concerned, it was win-win.”

Tony gaped at her, again with the deer in the headlight expression. He was having trouble following her logic but then women frequently left him scratching his head. He’d thought Wheels had been furious with him but apparently not. Go figure!

“Besides, Tim can be a real old gossip and a busybody – can anyone say Deep Six? And he was really shitty about you not telling him that Zoe and you were having trouble, plus remember how he whined like baby when he found out you knew about that cold case and he didn’t,” Bishop continued. “Not to mention he pries into my personal life if he can and teases me about my memory and food but that’s different I suppose? We snooped into how you came to own your apartment which was hacking into a federal database, so isn’t that a bit hypocritical to complain about your snooping on him?

Tony just raised his eyebrows.

“And what you’ve just described…pretty much SOP at the NSA, too. I had my fair share of hazing when I started out there. Pretty sure you encountered similar stuff at police departments too from what I’ve heard about cops? And you can’t tell me you didn’t get hazed when you joined NCIS?”
Tony tacitly acknowledged the truth of what she said.

“So why did he take a job where hazing, jokes and pranks are an entrenched part of the work culture, if he wasn’t prepared to suck it up? Gallows humour and pranking is SOP in jobs that call on people to deal with depravity and evil on a daily basis.” Ellie asked, puzzled and irritated.

Tony nodded; it was true. Cops, firefighters, forensic workers, emergency techs, doctors and nurses, medical examiners, even crime scene cleaners saw some horrific sights in the course of their work and also tended to possess puerile, sophomoric senses of humour and pranked each other relentlessly.

It was a common defence mechanism that helped them to not top themselves or burn out. It was also a fact of life that all of these groups also had easy access to the means to carry out a suicide attempt, so it wasn’t that shocking that they had a much higher risk of dying at their own hand. Most people understood this truism but obviously not everyone. Some people didn’t understand the hazing and practical jokes served a practical and very needed role as a relief valve – people like Tim who took it personally or assumed it was because he was a genius and should be excused.

“McGee joined NCIS to try to make his father proud because he suffered from seasickness and refused to join the navy. Plus, he was picked on at school and I think I came to embody all the bullies he’d encountered.” Tony explained, shrugging.

“If he’d worked on a few different teams, like most normal agents do during their career, he would have realised, as you say, it’s a rite of passage and everyone goes through it. He’d have learnt that hazing isn’t personal and pranks help to relieve stress. But since he’s only served on the one field team and was the probie for the majority of that time, with me as his immediate superior, he resents me.”

“Point taken, I guess. But it still doesn’t explain why he doesn’t mind hazing me. Hypocritical much?” Ellie argued.

Feeling like he was already being far too disloyal to his partner, he refrained from acknowledging Bishop’s line of reasoning or pointing out Tim had done his fair share of hazing Michelle Lee and also making Ziva do the crappy probie stuff when she was probationary. When he didn’t comment, Ellie changed the subject again.

“But I don’t understand - why take issue with you giving him orders? You were SFA back then weren’t you? Of course you’re going to be giving him orders as his immediate superior. He grew up on a military base as the son of an Admiral – how could he not understand about the chain of command?”

Tony stared at her for long seconds, his expressive eyes very carefully blank before finally responding in a monotone to hide his feelings. “Gibbs was a Marine gunnery sergeant, Bishop, and Ziva served her compulsory stint in the IDF before joining Mossad. They of all people understood the chain of command better than most, and yet all of them chose to ignore CoC when it came to following my orders. Obviously they deemed me unworthy of being Tim and Ziva’s superior, which is probably why in retrospect, I chose not to report McGee. I think that I knew that he’d never switch off the radio on any other agent.”

“Then they’re idiots, if that’s truly the case because you are a fine leader, Tony. And you’ll make an outstanding director, even if I can’t know which agency you will head up.” She mock pouted at him momentarily, and then shot him a grin to let him know she was kidding, before she continued.

“Furthermore, I’m not convinced that you didn’t report McGee and Ziva David because you truly
believe that they’d never switch off the radio on another agent. If that was true, then you wouldn’t have felt compelled to warn me before you left and more to the point there’d be no need to tie yourself up in knots, before telling me your deep dark secret.”

She stared into the face of the man that she had learnt so much from in the first two years working on the team. Her immediate superior who’d brought her a BOLO cupcake, complete with lit candle to blow out after she’d issued her first be-on-the-lookout advisement. Such a sweet goof.

And then this past year, despite everything, Tony was still so kind to her. Notwithstanding how badly Gibbs had treated him and how she’d ignored him – partly because of follow-the-leader mentality and partly because Gibbs had taken her under his wing and he was a damned charismatic SOB. She remembered how DiNozzo looked out for her on Valentine’s Day, which had been a really sucky day for her following her divorce and he’d made it bearable.

Both of them were silent – locked away inside their private thoughts. Finally, Ellie pulled herself out of her apathy.

“Tony, was the scuttlebutt true?” Ellie had always brushed off a particular piece of gossip, figuring like most watercooler chatter that it was ninety-nine point nine percent false, but now, after their heart-to-heart she wasn’t so sure any longer…about anything. “I heard a rumour that not long before I joined the team. McGee complained about you bullying him to Gibbs during a case when he was absent and Gibbs made him the lead on the investigation.”

She’d told herself when she first heard some of the other agents discussing it that it was patently ridiculous because Gibbs was a Marine and wouldn’t ignore the chain-of-command. Aside from which, Tim was a seasoned agent so she didn’t want to believe it was true - because he was her team mate. She looked up to him and Gibbs – along with Tony, they were her role models and she didn’t want to think that they would do something so fundamentally outrageous.

Tony looked crushed and she felt a stab of pain. “Yeah,” he said shortly.

“Why…what was his problem?”

“I told him to check out the Metro PD records of the three armed robberies that had occurred that month to see if we could find a connection to the armed robbery murder we were investigating and he objected to me giving him orders. Said that there was only two of us so I shouldn’t be giving orders.”

“So when Gibbs offered him point he turned it down because it was just the two of you, so there was no need to have someone in charge?” the former information analyst delved relentlessly. Tony just glared at her, wordlessly.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. So did he give you orders?” Ellie pursued him unremittingly, determined to parse out any shred of two-facedness with a feral enthusiasm as only someone who’d done it for a living could harness.

Tony felt like a bug under a microscope. It hit him suddenly that Ellie’s unrelenting pursuit of information was reminiscent of Hermione on a tear for data. They both got off on information and he decided that it would be a nightmare if the pair were ever to buddy up to get to the truth.

“I guess so,” he conceded reluctantly, feeling intensely disloyal.

“So his objection wasn’t with having someone in charge; it was that he didn’t want to follow orders. He had no objection though when it was him ordering you around. Pretty hypocritical of
him.

She tapped her foot absentmindedly as she stared moodily at the remnants of her brownie before renewing her interrogation. “Why did Gibbs give Tim the lead?”

“Gee, why don’t you ask me something simple, like what is the meaning of life, Eleanor!” He rolled his eyes in frustration. “I don’t know why… maybe I did something to piss him off and he wanted to slap me down for some reason. Maybe he genuinely thought Tim’s idea was a good one.” Tony huffed, obviously irritated reliving the situation. “Maybe he was chronically constipated and needed an enema.”

“So he thought your idea wasn’t a good one?” she pressed him relentlessly.

“I really couldn’t comment on that, Probish. Tim complained that I was throwing my weight around and not doing my job. The boss never bothered asking me for my side, just told us that McGee was going to take point. Irony was that McGee’s assumption that the robbery was connected to previous ones and the algorithm he wanted to create to prove it, which Gibbs told him was great work, was actually a waste of time. The cases weren’t connected at all – there was no armed robbery and Dawson was killed by the owner of the store who turned out to be a heroin dealer.”

She looked crushed, a bit like someone had dared to kick her puppy. He knew the feeling. Again he was reminded of a young Hermione who had had her faith in magical authority figures shattered and now he’d destroyed Bishop’s faith in her team too.

They were silent for several minutes and Tony hoped that they were done with this whole painful and unpleasant subject. He hoped he’d told her about the Military at Home incident for all the right reasons; because she needed to know about it to protect herself in the future, and not because of some burning desire to get revenge.

True he’d finally made up his mind this morning after learning that his best friend had blamed him for coming in contact with poison ivy back when he was the probie, but he’d been agonising about telling her and losing sleep for more than a week now. But he also knew just how insidious vengeance could be – how it could seduce and confound.

Just as he thought they’d talked the situation to death and it was time to be returning to the bull pen again, Bishop delivered a knock-out blow that left him reeling. He definitely hadn’t anticipated this analysis of their little talk.

“Tony, you know what I think? I think that ultimately you decided not to report Tim and Ziva not because you didn’t want to break up the team after Ziva accusations and time in captivity. I don’t think you did it because you decided that McGee would never have done that to any other agent. I think that you didn’t report it to Gibbs because you didn’t believe he would listen to your side of the story.”

“You expected him to side with Ziva and McGee and blame you, and you couldn’t have coped if that had happened. It was easier to blame yourself than have him blame you, so you convinced yourself that you didn’t need to report it. That was preferable to finding out you were right and Gibbs wouldn’t support you – his senior field agent.”

She grimaced, looking as if she was being forced to swallow poison. “Based on what you’ve told me today though; I think you might have been right. Despite it being against every protocol and procedure, Gibbs probably would have blamed you for what they did.
“Either because you were their direct supervisor, so you could, in theory, carry the can for their actions or you could on a normal team where the chain-of-command hadn’t been hamstrung like it was here. Then again, based on how he’s acted towards you this year, he’d probably have told you they never would have done it if they respected you. Ergo you weren’t worthy of their respect or their protection, and so therefore the fault lay with you, not them.”

Looking at his hangdog look, she added sotto voce, “Or him.”

~o0o~

A little while later as he returned to the bull pen, Tony decided that women weren’t from Venus – they were from somewhere much further away from Mars than that. At the very least, they hailed from Neptune or Pluto – if not from another universe entirely. He felt completely eviscerated, like he was a trout that had been gutted, filleted and grilled over an open flame. He hoped that Ellie was finally finished dissecting the situation because he felt absolutely drained.

If she’d been a guy, they’d had dealt with the situation with one tenth of the wordage that Bishop had insisted on, in wanting to know what had occurred. Probably over a beer, a few hands of poker and a slice of pizza

Hopefully, he could finally put the whole miserable business behind him now and focus on his future. He watched bemused as Fornell cross-examined Bishop on her ‘protection detail.’ The FBI agent demanded to know if she’d taste-tested everything which Tony had eaten or drunk in the cafeteria and it’d thrown her into a mild case of panic when she was forced to admit she hadn’t.

Shaking his head at Tobias’ Machiavellian streak, he never noticed Abby’s stealthy approach until she slapped his cheek with a force that wouldn’t shame has-been prize fighter desperate to finish his last fight on a high. The energy behind it literally left him with a loud ringing in his ears as the rest of the bull pen was initially shocked into silence.

Stomping her booted foot down hard on his well shod foot, clad in his Salvatore Ferragamo Black Oxfords in suede and calfskin leather, she shrieked at Tony, “How could you do that to my Silver Fox after everything he’s done for you, you…you ingrate, you. I can’t believe you’d stab him in the back like that Mister!”
Leon was hoping that the rest of the day was going to be quieter than the highly stressful morning had been, but clearly, he must have stepped on some cracks in the pavement or walked under a mirror. Perhaps he'd unknowingly broken a mirror because it was not to be. Meanwhile, Abby gets a nasty surprise.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for everyone who took the time to leave kudos and comments - they are much appreciated.

Based on reviews, I know that many of you want Abby to face consequences for her actions and while she definitely will, it might take a little bit longer than most people would like. Readers who know my work will know I don't like to be too predictable, but have patience - there'll be a HEA and payback. :D

Just a reminder this isn't beta'ed so let me know if you see any major errors - hope you enjoy!

Leon was hoping that the rest of the day was going to be quieter than the highly stressful morning had been, but clearly, he must have stepped on some cracks in the pavement or walked under a mirror. Perhaps he'd unknowingly broken a mirror because it was not to be.

He arrived back at the office after his urgent excursion to acquire medical equipment for his stress reduction program, only to find utter chaos ensuing in the MCRT bull pen. Dr Sciuto, the forensic scientist extraordinaire and perpetually in touch with her inner child, who was shrieking at the top of her lungs like the fabled banshee. She'd been placed in handcuffs and was being forcibly restrained by FBI agent Fornell and NCIS Senior Supervisor Agent Balboa. In fact, he doubted he would ever be able to forget the sight that greeted him of two burly agents, one each side of the willowy scientist, suspending her in mid-air as her legs flailed around, trying in vain to kick out at Anthony DiNozzo. Fornell was also in the middle of reading Sciuto her Miranda rights as Tony argued with the fibbie that he didn't want her arrested.

Meanwhile, Ducky and Palmer were trying to restore order while Bishop was trying to talk down McGee who was hurling verbal abuse at Tony, blaming him for the fracas. The rest of the staff were standing around, shell-shocked and open mouthed by what was taking place in the MCRT bull pen.

Deciding to take a leaf out of Gibbs book – who, Vance noted, was conspicuously absent at the moment, the director strode into the middle of the room. He climbed up onto Jethro's desk and putting his fingers into his mouth. Leon whistled shrilly to get everyone's attention.

"Listen up everyone, someone explain what the HELL is going on here?" he demanded of his
people, irascibly.

Abby recommenced her shrieking at the top of her lungs that it was all Tony's fault for making Gibb mad, Balboa tried to deliver a sitrep while Fornell simultaneously tried to explain he'd arrested Abby for assault on a federal agent. Ducky attempted to tell everyone what madcap situation this reminded him of and assuring them it was all a most unfortunate series of misunderstandings which could be easily rectified by calming down. McGee insisted that it was a massive overreaction by DiNozzo, who'd been acting like a diva and caused the whole situation.

Bishop was valiantly trying to calm Tim down while Palmer had made the rookie mistake of approaching Abby to comfort her or to offer her moral support. Leon wasn't sure of his motives, but regardless of his intentions, the end result was that the medical examiner copped a Goth platform boot to the shin and he let out a girlish squeal of pain.

Leon looked to DiNozzo, expecting him to be casually comparing the melee to a scene in a movie and cracking jokes, instead he was freakishly mute. Leon noted that he had a clear bright red handprint on the left side of his jaw. Bishop had seemingly given up on McGee who was livid and she'd migrated to DiNozzo's side, hugging him encouragingly. To be honest, the agent looked as if he'd lost his only friend.

Motioning for his own protection agents to take custody of Abby Sciuto, he instructing them to adjourn to a conference room with the scientist and wait for him there. He glared and ordered the usual suspects of the MCRT to report to his office ASAP. Fixing Balboa and Fornell with a gimlet eye, he 'invited' them to attend upstairs too.

Once everyone was present in Leon's office he indicated to them to take seats around the conference table as the Director searched the features of the various participants, sizing them up. Finally deciding that Rik Balboa was the most composed one among them, he requested that he give him a sit rep. Glaring at Ducky and McGee when they attempted to interject when the SSA characterised Sciuto's behaviour as an attack on the person of Director DiNozzo, he quelled both of them with a combination of his glacial directorial glare and verbal threat.

"If you attempt to interrupt again I'll have you thrown out of this conference. You'll have an opportunity to state your case at the appropriate time. Now sit there and shut up!"

McGee pouted and Ducky looked surprised and rather offended but both subsided as Vance motioned for Balboa to continue. When he reached the part of his account where Fornell had slapped handcuffs on Abby he faltered to a stop, glancing between the FBI agent and Tony who was staring at the floor.

Receiving tacit permission to step into the breech from Vance, Fornell continued the account dispassionately.

"When Sciuto decided to continue the assault on DiNozzo, specifically intending to kick him in the dodgy knee he'd injured in college, I pulled her away. When she resisted me and attempted to continue her attack, I cuffed her and informed her she was under arrest for the assault on a federal agent. If I can make it stick, I'll throw the book at her for assaulting the head of a foreign law enforcement agency too. I'll need to consult the FBI legal department.

"Anyway, when you walked in, Director Vance, I was reading Sciuto her Miranda rights and I have a good mind to charge her with resisting arrest too." He threatened angry and disappointed as McGee, Ducky and Palmer all voiced their condemnation.

Vance looked at DiNozzo, who at the end of the sitrep, was downcast and silent. Pulling out his
smart phone and handing it to Balboa, he ordered him to document evidence of the assault on DiNozzo.

"Perhaps Tony should have his jaw and foot checked out by a doctor and the injury documented." The SSA suggested, shooting a glance at Vance as he snapped a series of photos of Abby's handprint.

Tony started at the click of the camera phone, finally appearing to realising what was going on and he started to protest. "There's no need. I'm fine – no harm done. Besides, I won't be pressing charges. This is Abby – we all know she thinks the sun rises and sets on Gibbs. It's my fault. I should have anticipated she'd react violently."

Fornell scowled. "She's supposed to be your friend, Tony. How the Dickens where you supposed to see that one coming?"

"Because it's not the first time she's done this," Balboa retorted when DiNozzo shrugged and remained mute. "She bitch-slapped David for being uncaring about him when Gibbs got blown up and was in a coma down at Norfolk in 2006. Not that I agree with his analysis that Tony's to blame for getting hit."

"So if it's not the first time, why isn't it in her personnel file?" Vance growled.

"Because Tony was filling in for Gibbs, as acting team lead and Director Shepard counselled him against writing her up for it – to leave it and let Gibbs handle it when he returned. Of course he ending up resigning and hotfooting it to Mexico and in the melee it got overlooked." Balboa explained when Tony stayed silent.

"However, I wrote her up for it but Director Shepard was adamant that Gibbs' retirement was premature and he'd be back. She didn't want him pissed off when he returned, so she buried it. But not before HR had formally counselled Abby that if it happened again, there'd be serious repercussions."

"Pity there isn't a record of the complaint." Leon observed regretfully, irritated by the former director's meddling. Jenny Shepard was quite adept with computers so burying the complaint digitally would have been child's play to her, unfortunately.

"Not a digital record perhaps but fortunately both Delores Bromstead in Human Resources and I believe in keeping old fashioned hard copies of complaints, just in case they accidentally go astray." Ric observed matter-of-factly.

The director smiled, pleased at Balboa's deviousness. "I'd like to see those copies ASAP Agent Balboa. In the meantime, I'll have my protection detail accompany DiNozzo to the ER for a medical examination. Dr Sciuto can cool her jets in our lockup while we decide what's what."

Ducky looked put out. "First off, as a medical practitioner, I'm more than capable of checking over Anthony, as is Mr Palmer. There's no need for him to attend an ER…"

"I'm fine – I don't need to see a doctor. Any doctor…and I'm not going to press charges." DiNozzo protested vigorously.

Fornell scowled at him. "Are you nuts? She attacked you in front of a room full of federal agents. Anyway, I don't need you to press charges. I can charge her regardless, and I intend to."

Ducky interjected. "Now I think that we should all take a deep breath and consider if we aren't jumping the gun here. I'll admit that Abigail was most rash and impetuous but surely that is even
more reason for us not to act hastily. We all know how inordinately fond of Jethro our Abigail is, and how she would do anything to defend his honour."

The Director frowned. "It sounds suspiciously like you are trying to blame the victim, rather than the perpetrator and that philosophy has no place in a law enforcement agency, Doctor. I trust that wasn't your intention," And he glared at Ducky and McGee significantly, daring them to disagree.

"Furthermore, Dr Sciuto is a 44-year-old woman, of high intellect, not some hot-headed child with impulse control issues. I'm inclined to agree with Agent Fornell here that she needs to be held accountable for her actions, especially since this isn't her first offence."

"But it's my bad she got away with it before." Tony objected fervently. "I didn't write her up for it, so it's hypocritical for me to press charges just because she slapped me this time. If I'd impressed upon her the seriousness of her actions as I should have as acting team leader, instead of making her apologise to Ziva, then she wouldn't be facing charges."

Leon Vance stared carefully at the man who, once upon a time, had been a thorn in his side and still had the ability to annoy the crap out of him at times. Like now! He was frustrated beyond belief by DiNozzo's willingness to turn the other cheek, but then again, he'd been the team's whipping boy for so long apparently he was accustomed to being blamed for all their bad moods and problems. Wondering about the potential for this assault to blow up into an international incident, Leon glared at the assembled group before reaching a decision.

"Special Agent DiNozzo, I admire your loyalty to your colleague but it sounds like the decision to disciple Ms Sciuto was taken out of your hands last time around. I'm leaning strongly towards doing the same thing this time too."

"Besides, Delores read Abby the riot act, Tony. She knew that hitting a fellow work mate was completely unacceptable. She just assumed she could get away with it because Gibbs and your team let her act like an emotional terrorist." Balboa contributed his opinion, not holding back.

Vance wondered if there was a personal reason why Balboa seemed intent on having Abby charged. He'd always assumed she was a much loved member of staff, kooky but beloved. Resolving to pursue the matter later he returned to the subject at hand.

"As director I'll be making the decision about whether to charge her, in conjunction with Agent Fornell - after an appropriate investigation into the assault." He glared at McGee, Ducky and Palmer, who all appeared anxious to protest his decision.

"Dr Sciuto will be detained in the NCIS lockup in the interim. Agent DiNozzo, I'm ordering you to undergo a medical examination before you're cleared to return to the field. Agent Bishop, please accompany him and my protection detail. Dr Palmer, you are excused and may return to Autopsy. Agent McGee and Dr Mallard, please remain."

Tony locked stares with Leon Vance who stared back implacably. Gibbs might have him over a barrel but Abby Sciuto was not going to get away with the same crap as her patron. Not when she was stupid enough to fly off the handle in plain view of a room full of witnesses – federal agents no less. And he wanted Tony examined by an independent doctor and Drs Mallard and Palmer were not impartial.

Evidently realising that Vance wasn't about to budge on this issue, Tony scowled and got to his feet begrudgingly.

"Fine, but I want it on the record that I'm perfectly fine to continue working and I don't think we
need to charge Abby with assault. A simple suspension would be adequate," he argued passionately, before limping out with Ellie in his wake.

"He's fine and that isn't a limp." Leon quipped cynically to no one in particular. Pulling out his phone he called Agents Fratelli and Forsyth, otherwise known around the office as Frick and Frack - his protection detail, instructing them to deposit Abby in the cells and escort DiNozzo and Bishop to the ER.

"Right, so let's start this investigation. McGee, what were you so desperate to express before?" Vance demanded.

"Um… just that Tony knew what would happen by setting Gibbs off like he did when he refused to tell him what his new job was. We all know you don't make the boss mad and we all know that Abby idolises Gibbs - he's part father-figure, part super hero and we all know that little girls will go to extreme lengths to protect their daddy.

"Sigmund Freud postulated that the Electra Complex is very strong – that girls want to kill their mothers and sleep with their fathers. Abby was under intolerable pressure and she snapped. We all know she wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Actually Dear Boy, I believe it was Carl Gustav Jung who posited the female equivalent of the Oedipus Complex which Freud did theorize about sons's wanting to kill their fathers' in order to sleep with their mothers' although Jung could be described as a neo-Freudian..." Ducky corrected as Balboa interrupted

"What a load of tripe. Sciuto has worked for a federal law enforcement agency for 17 years, give or take and knows damned well that assault is illegal." Balboa was scathing in response.

"If DiNozzo hadn't attacked Gibbs, accusing him of freezing in Iran, Abby wouldn't have snapped." McGee protested ignoring Ducky's contribution. "Everyone knew that picking on Gibbs would make Abby mad and we all know you don't make Abby mad."

Leon just stared at his agent without speaking as he stared to squirm uncomfortably. Finally, he put him out of his misery. "First off, I'm thinking that argument isn't going to carry much weight with a judge and it damn well doesn't cut any ice with me either." He speared a glacial look at McGee. "Second point, how the hell did Dr Sciuto know about the dust up in the bull pen? If I find out that you incited the attack you could be looking at charges too," he warned McGee. "You've just admitted to us that everyone knew it would make her angry. And for your information, after 15 years of pandering to Agent Gibbs temper, I'd say BRAVO to Agent DiNozzo for refusing to turn the other cheek for once and telling him what he really thought in public - if I wasn't the director."

McGee looked both stunned and anxious, shooting an alarmed look at Ducky who patted his shoulder comfortingy.

"I don't think we require your presence any longer, Agent McGee. Thank you for your contribution. You can return to your desk and compile an eyewitness account on the altercation for our legal department."

Leon glanced at Dr Mallard. "Do you have anything more to add, Doctor?"

"Anthony and Abigail have been friends for a long time; it would be a shame to see that friendship ruined because of a precipitous act that ended in a court case. Not to mention, if Abigail were to receive a criminal conviction she would be unable to work in law enforcement any longer, which
would be a real tragedy and loss to our profession."

"True, Doctor Mallard, however there comes a point when people have to take responsibility for their actions and not have people make excuses for them. Arguing that she was abnormally protective of a former Marine gunnery sergeant is not exactly mitigating circumstances likely to sway a jury or a judge. Not in the case of a 44-year-old doctor of forensics for her boss."

Ducky grimaced. "I just think it would be wise to make sure we have all the facts and that everyone is calm and composed before making any decisions that could have irrevocable consequences for the individuals involved. Both of them."

"Wise words for any law enforcement profession. Thank-you Doctor Mallard, I'll certainly keep that in mind as we investigate. You are dismissed too. Oh… one more thing. If you witnessed Dr Sciuto's actions, then I'll require a written account from you too."

Ducky rose from his seat and nodded. "Very well, I'll attend to it right away," he said heavily, before heading out the door.

Leon observed that McGee had not returned to his desk as instructed, instead he'd remained in his outer office, waiting to talk to Ducky. He watched Gibbs' junior agent and Gibbs' oldest friend at NCIS depart his outer office together. Ducky was assuring Tim that upon Jethro's return, he would be able to sort everything out satisfactorily he was sure.

Leon felt Fornell and Balboa glaring at him, suspiciously – after all, he was aware that most people thought Gibbs ran the agency and Leon just did the paperwork. Hard to be angry at his employees, since to some degree that was the case, but Abby Sciuto wasn't part of the quid quo pro arrangement he and Gibbs had. Smiling cynically, he admitted that Gibbs would try his damnedest to extricate Sciuto from the shit that she'd stepped into, but with her attacking DiNozzo in a room full of federal agents – good luck with that. There was no way she wasn't going to end up face charges.

"All right, Gentlemen. Let's prioritise. We need to collect statements from everyone who witnessed the assault today. Do you have a problem if I assign your team to handle that, Agent Balboa?"

"No Director, we can do that. I'll get right on it."

"Excellent, plus I need the paperwork from the earlier assault that took place in 2006 against Officer David. Agent Fornell – can I ask what arrangements are in place for DiNozzo's protection until his departure. Just to clarify, Legal has informed me that we're looking at five weeks to tie everything up, but under the circumstances, I'll instruct them into looking into if it's possible to expedite things. I can't believe one of our own people attacked him – I was envisaging he'd be needed protecting from terrorists."

He looked at Fornell, speculatively. "And do you think that this is going to cause an international incident? I think I need to talk to DiNozzo's new boss, ASAP. Not just to discuss what charges to impose but also how we can protect him. We all know this is going to get nasty."

Tobias was pissed off. He couldn't believe that Abby had attacked Tony. He knew she could be a brat but this was beyond the pale. So much for them being family and Vance was right. Jethro was going to go ballistic when he found out and he only needed one guess to know who would wear the crap.

"Tony was wanting to terminate the protection detail," he replied. "I'll be in touch with the minister to fill her in and I'll pass on your request to talk," he said, wondering what Hermione would have to
say. He figured she was going to be furious and would demand Tony leave immediately.

~o0o~

Ellie Bishop arrived home after an emotionally turbulent day and decided she'd heat up some leftovers for dinner that she still had in the freezer. In the last few months she'd learnt that it was one of the joys of being a divorcée - plenty of leftovers. She still cooked for two - it wasn't a conscious act, purely automatic and now that she and Jake were no longer married she always ended up with way too much food. She just didn't seem to be able to manage to cook enough for one.

The downside of ending up with too much food was that the leftovers were like a constant reminder that she was a failure as a wife and lover; an aide-mémoire that she was alone now. The plus side of being alone, yes there was a plus side, was that she could cook what she liked. That and she always had plenty of leftovers, so she didn't need to cook as often – even if there was something a bit pathetic about eating leftovers half of the week.

Still, since she'd joined the MCRT, time at home was always at a premium and she increasingly found that cooking was a luxury she couldn't afford. So at least it wasn't all bad.

Tonight she took out some chicken chasseur and steamed vegetables from the freezer and heated it up in the microwave. She consciously avoided thinking about what her mom would have to say about the amount of times she ate microwaved meals in front of the TV, before falling into an exhausted heap in bed every night. Tonight, although she ate in front of the television, she wasn't really paying attention to what was on the screen, though.

She was thinking about Tony – their talk today and also what had transpired this past year between him and Gibbs. About everything he'd revealed in the bullpen, what he'd told her during their private tête-à-tête, how conflicted he had been about divulging a secret he'd kept for six years. And of course there was the absolute pièce de résistance - Abby's total brain snap and unfathomable decision to assault Tony. She was totally overwhelmed by the events of the day.

Ellie felt so many emotions; she didn't even know how to start cataloguing and analysing them, and that was before she even figured out how to respond to them. Initially, when she heard he was leaving to take up some fabulous new job she'd felt dismayed that Tony was going. He'd taught her so much, accepted her into the team and eased her way into their close knit cadre with kindness and genuineness. Yet at the same time, she'd also felt relief that he would be gone and the terrible tension in the bull pen between him and Gibbs would be no more – that she wouldn't feel pressured every day to choose sides.

Ever since Gibbs got shot, their team, their little family had been divided. Gibbs had been punishing Tony - that much had been obvious to her - to everyone she suspected if only for the fact that they went out of their way to make elaborate excuses for him. But what she hadn't really been sure of until today was why he'd been angry with Tony. She'd hypothesised, made lists, run scenarios in her head, along with her computer simulations but hadn't come close to the revelations that Tony had laid bare this morning. She'd been torn, what Tony expounded about the op to bring down Daniel Budd made so much sense. But still, Gibbs had been really kind to her this year when her marriage foundered.

He'd come after her when she'd crawled off home to lick her wounds and he'd charmed the socks off her family. Weird since he normally hated any and all social interactions, and for that she felt beholden to him. At a time when she'd been at her absolute lowest he'd been there.

He'd gone out of his way to check up on her and yes she felt so damned special… like she was his
protégé. Yet to be fair, his behaviour while he was with her family was totally pod person.

To be realistic, he had come to collect her on a case, a mercy mission to save a dying sailor who needed a bone marrow transplant; he'd needed her to try to talk the prisoner around. It was unlikely - as in pigs might fly or Gibbs might decide to give up coffee - that he'd have come after her otherwise. Probably would have left her a voicemail telling her to get her head out of her ass and come back to DC asap.

Now looking at things with a somewhat more jaundiced eye, Ellie found herself thinking about her former husband and Gibbs. How he had suddenly become all buddy, buddy with him after she joined the MCRT. She couldn't help wondering - did he hire her so he could get an in with the NSA or had it just been an added bonus that Jake also worked there? And what about Rule 12 – turning Jake into one of his informant's kind of made Jake a part of the team didn't it. In fact, a similar situation had occurred with Delilah and Zoe too.

If Rule 12 evolved because there really some truth behind it, then why was Gibbs suddenly blatantly ignoring it. And was it a coincidence that both her and Tony's relationship had failed since Gibbs had encouraged them all to work together? Except… didn't Gibbs say that there was no such thing as coincidence.

Sure Jake was cheating on her, which certainly wasn't Gibbs fault but some of the issues that had created the rift in their marriage hadn't been helped by his actions. Jake was already disgruntled that they couldn't discuss their respective casework as a couple when it involved classified intel. They had to stick to generalities or in Ellie's case, she shared stuff from their field work with her husband, um ex-husband. She shared things like dumpster diving, shooting at bad guys, bad guys shooting at them, running after bad guys, apprehending bad guys, Gibbs driving like a lunatic.

Part of it scared the crap out of Jake when it was shoved in his face how dangerous her new job was in comparison to being a former intel analyst. It also drove home their inherent differences now and how Jake couldn't relate to her new life anymore. And it wasn't like she didn't get where he was coming from either. It rankled that he couldn't share classified chatter with her like they used to and it made their once easy interactions far more stilted, more guarded.

But add to the mix the fact Gibbs was so closed- mouthed around his subordinates that it made a lockjaw patient seem garrulous. Thinking about the idea that Gibbs had been sharing data with Jake that he wouldn't share with her or the others on the team…well the fact was that it got on her nerves. As did the thought that Jake might be trading intel with her boss (who wouldn't share that intel with her) and which her husband had refused to discuss with her anymore.

It succeeded in creating even more of a chasm between her and Jake, which was probably why he'd looked around for someone else to fill the void. It didn't excuse his infidelity…nothing could, nothing ever would excuse his actions but it did go some way to explaining the antecedents of why he did what he did.

She concluded that Tim had better watch out that Gibbs didn't try to get Delilah on side as his newest informant now that he'd dumped Jake. (She assumed he'd kicked him to the kerb). McGee might find that his relationship with his soon to be fiancée might not go the distance of working with Gibbs. It wasn't as if Tim hadn't already been insanely jealous when she'd been sharing an apartment with her male supervisor at the DoD. If Gibbs were to enter their relationship to the degree he had with Ellie's marriage, then it could put intolerable pressure on their nascent bond.

Of course, in light of what else had occurred afterwards, her broken marriage kind of paled into insignificance with all Tony had revealed. She knew that Tony felt like it was enough to have warned her about McGee and David turning down the comms so they didn't have to listen to his
monologue. She certainly wasn’t downplaying how much that honest declaration had cost him to reveal to her. And presumably he’d included Abby in the warning since she had to have been aware of the breach of protocol and covered it up.

Bishop also knew he really didn’t want to believe these people he was so fond of would ever turn off her comms like they’d done to him. Yet the fact that he felt the need to warn her told her that at least on a subconscious level he recognised that it was a possibility, no matter how slight. As for her analysis of the situation, she’d always taken the position that the best predictor of how people would act in the future was to study how they’d already acted in the past.

The question remained – what was she going to do about it? Was she just going to take it on board, as Tony obviously assumed she would do and take precautions should the need arise i.e. be reactive or should she use what she knew proactively. Should she confront one of them - Abby or McGee - with what she knew? Although considering what transpired today, probably not Abby. So should she confront Tim or maybe she should try to find physical evidence to prove definitively if they had turned off comms or just made a really unforgiveable joke about it?

Stretching out on her sofa with a glass of red wine, she debated calling Tony to see how he was doing. It had been a really horrific day for him and she wondered what she could do or say if he told her he wasn’t okay. Not that he would – he kept professing he was fine when they’d headed to the ER, under orders from Director Vance.

When they returned to NCIS with the all clear for Tony to continue working, they’d received a lead on one of their cold cases from two months ago that saw them heading out in hot pursuit of their suspect, who’d been sighted in Baltimore. They were sans Gibbs since he hadn’t returned to the office, and failed to answer his phone, a clear breech of Rule #3 which saw them head out into the field with Tony leading the MCRT and Fornell guarding his ass.

So the atmosphere in the agency vehicle on the hour long drive to Baltimore had been extremely tense – Tim was sulky and still blaming Tony for the debacle with Abby. He was also pissed off at Fornell for arresting her and Ellie suspected that Tobias blamed McGee for Abby hearing about what Tony had said in the bull pen. All in all, it had been an uncomfortable journey.

Of course, she knew that Tony was berating himself, believing that if he’d been more aware of his environment he’d never have let get Abby drop on him and she wouldn’t be locked up the NCIS cells. For some reason, the idea of her being locked up seemed to cause him deep distress. Ellie certainly sympathised with how he was feeling - if Fornell hadn't been reading her the riot act about failing to do her job properly, she might have noticed Abby's stealth attack and stopped her. She figured if she felt like that, then Fornell had to be feeling awful too and although she found it really difficult to read Tim when he was sending out harsh accusatory vibes, he surely must be feeling guilty for letting Abby go off half-cocked.

But honestly, despite Tony's self-flagellation because 'he knew Abby for so long and so well that he should have expected Abby to go ballistic after he told the boss off,' Analyst- Ellie was shouting that the forensic scientist had a Ph.D for the love of Mike. As much as Abby was her friend too, why should Tony feel guilty about her not being able to control herself? How did someone as smart, sassy and savvy as Abby Sciuto manage to make them feel so responsible for her when she was being such a brat? It wasn't fair.

It wasn’t as if the Goth was some little kid after all – she was at least ten years Bishop's senior, so why were they treating her like she was a helpless little girl? Still, despite her feeling angry at Abby for hurting Tony and making him feel horrible when he'd done nothing wrong, she couldn't help feeling appalled that a friend was currently sitting in a cell. Ellie also couldn't help feeling
Abby might have ultimately been better off if Fornell had hauled her off to the FBI and charged her before the director arrived back and took charge. The vibes Director Vance was putting out; she could sense that he was furious. If he wanted to play hard ball, Abby might ultimately find herself incarcerated indefinitely on a terrorist charge in lockup or even sitting in a cell in Gitmo.

But as if the day hadn't gone badly enough already, there was still more to endure. They'd returned hours later after chasing around the warehouse district of Baltimore for their missing murderer, becoming increasingly weary and grubby but eventually successful. Well with some very timely help of a bunch of Baltimore unies Tony had been able to call on to help them search for their UA Master Sergeant. As they entered the Naval yard she'd decided to ask Tony if she could go and pick up some personal possessions for Abby from her apartment. He'd agreed immediately that it was a good idea and gave her some cash to pick up some Chinese takeout for her, as well.

When she arrived back she'd found NCIS in an uproar. Apparently Tony had ducked down to the holding cells to talk to Abby and take her a Caf-pow and give her Burt the hippo to cheer her up, before interrogating Master Sergeant Lewis Craddock. Although he didn't admit it, Ellie was pretty sure he'd gone down to the cells with the intention of apologising for her being locked up. Honestly, it seemed Tony felt like he was responsible for everything that went wrong on the team. It reminded her of one of her friends from college who had ended up in an abusive relationship. Her mother was a narcissist who blamed her daughter for everything that went wrong in the family and took all the credit when things went well. She was always blaming herself too.

Anyway, Tony never got the chance to 'apologise' to Abby if that had been his goal because when he took her the bright red caffeine concoction, concerned she might have gone into caffeine withdrawal, he found Abby alternating between drooling and sucking her thumb, while exhibiting stereotypic rocking. After an examination by Ducky, who thought she' suffered a break with reality and she'd been escorted to Walter Reed, under guard, for a psychological evaluation. Just before they'd been ready to head out for the night – read go hang out at Walter Reed to find out what was going on with Abby – Ducky had called in to inform them that she'd been admitted to the Psych Ward for 30 days evaluation. The tentative diagnosis by the attending psychiatrist was she'd suffered a psychotic break.

The news had totally devastated Tony and much as Ellie wanted to call him up and check on him, she really didn't know what to say. She knew he wouldn't listen to her telling him that he had nothing to feel guilty about. She'd tried already and it was clear it wasn't making it through his thick skull.
Phone Calls

Chapter Summary

Hermione gets a sitrep from Fornell and her reaction to what he has to say leaves Fornell on the back foot.

Chapter Notes

Well I have to say that you're a pretty cynical bunch since the general consensus is that Abby is faking lol. Mind you, I can understand why you feel that way :D.

Hermione ended her Skype call to Sirius… ah bugger, Tony. When would she ever get used to calling him that? Perhaps she should ask him for tips - how did he handle it when he went undercover. It was so easy to slip and that would prove disastrous – perhaps some sort of charm to prevent her saying his real name. She'd have to give it some consideration when she had a spare moment.

So anyway, she'd just got off the phone with him and Merlin's ghost, he'd been hyped up, almost manic even after his run after work. He was ranting - Abby Scuito and Gibbs, James and Dumbledore, his cousins Tonks and Bellatrix, McGoo, Remus and Pettigrew, even Cornelius Fudge and his boss Vance received honourable mentions. He was raving about rules and numbers, switching off radios, poison ivy, being locked up in a cell and a whole bunch of stuff that obviously made perfect sense to him but was just plain gibberish to Hermione.

If he hadn't been quite so frenzied then she'd have tried to get more sense out of him, but seeing him like that, wild, wounded, confused and conflicted, she decided to let him vent. She figured it was better out than in as her mother's friend, an oral surgeon was wont to say or her father with his slightly more macabre dental humour took delight in informing his victims… err patients prior to an extraction – *when in doubt, rip it out*. Shuddering at the thought of having a tooth removed the muggle way, Hermione thanked her lucky stars that she had never had a tooth extracted.

Anyway she was happy to let Sir…Tony get it all out of system. At some point later on she could go back and get some clarification…okay a barrel full of clarification. So instead of shrink/confessor she'd simply been a friendly ear as he let loose.

He'd promised to call her and tell her how today had gone. She'd known that today was the day he was informing NCIS he was resigning and even with being treated like yesterday's garbage all year, she knew that it was a huge step for him. He'd worked there for fifteen years, all of them on the same team and he really felt like the team was his family. Sadly, that said a lot about the Black family and how they'd mistreated Sirius as a child and young adult as to why that bunch of lunatics at NCIS would seem like kin him.

She knew a fair amount about his new *family* because following their reunion they'd had a lot of long talks about everything that had happened to each other since his 'death' at the Ministry of Magic. She'd been trying valiantly to understand why he had stayed with this bunch of people, who
according to what Toby had shared with her, had treated Siri-Tony like dirt over the years. When she confronted him about it he'd responded that they reminded him of people he loved and left behind…forever as far as he was concerned. He'd described his time in Baltimore – a steep learning curve for the wizard-in-hiding who was trying to fit in, pretending to be a Long Island born non-magical cop.

He shared with her how he had a partner he'd thought he could trust like his former Auror partners, Frank Longbottom and James Potter during the first war. Explained that his Baltimore partner had ended up betraying him and the badge. He described how he'd gotten close to Danny Price – the first person in his new life that he'd let gain his trust in a way that only law enforcement and those who have fought shoulder to shoulder in the trenches could truly understand. According to him, constantly putting your life on the line and relying on you partner, created a bond that was as close as a marriage (depending on the health of the marriage) sometimes much, much closer. He revealed to her how devastated he felt when he discovered his partner, his brother cop turned out to be corrupt.

Hermione knew that for an honest non-magical cop, being dirty was possibly the most unforgivable sin there was. For Sirius, who'd seen the travesty of Death Eaters infiltrating the Ministry and even more insultingly, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, it was a heinous crime. Understandable really as he'd ended up being shafted, thanks to corruption, bribery and the leader of the light, Dumbledore insisting the corrupt individuals be given a second, third and fourth chance - at his expense. Hermione realised that with the subsequent debasement and bribery that inevitably followed, it made Sirius' hatred of corrupt cops totally reasonable.

Thanks to these soul-baring sessions, she was at least able to make partial head nor tail of his incoherent comments about Gibbs, James Potter who was his brother in all but blood - and Professor Dumbledore. Previously, he'd explained to her how he'd met Gibbs during the same case that had revealed that yellow bellied snake Danny Price's treachery and how Gibbs had offered him a job and he'd decided to take it. She gathered that initially it had just been a way to escape from Baltimore and the hurt and painful memories it evoked.

Yet as days turned to weeks and months, he'd slowly begun to trust Gibbs, despite of his resolve not to let his guard down again. He told her haltingly, how they'd worked together as partners, learning to anticipate each other's actions and to communicate without words. Sirius had explained how rare and magical – non pun intended – that ability was in their business; not to mention what an advantage it gave them against the 'dirtbags'. He told her that Gibbs felt like a big brother and their crime solve rate was soon the talk of the agency.

He revealed a little reluctantly to Hermione at first that Gibbs had often reminded him of James Potter – his good qualities, not the bad ones. His championing of the innocent and his support of the brave men and women who served their country and their families had struck a chord with him.

He described to the young woman who'd never known them growing up, how James had been a staunch champion of the light – not impressed with purebloods, just like Gibbs was unimpressed with politicians and officers, but championed the little people. How Gibbs wasn't interested in rising up the promotional ladder – he was all about the job and protecting those people who couldn't protect themselves. He explained to her that James had never tried to use his family connections to score promotions or cushy jobs because of his blood status – he'd wanted to succeed by his own merit.

Hermione decided her expression must have conveyed scepticism, since Tony had paused mid-stream of consciousness and studied her, wanting to know what was wrong. At first he'd feared she didn't believe what she was telling him about Harry's dad. She'd explained somewhat guardedly
that she didn't see the parallels that he clearly did between what she'd learnt about Gibbs and James Potter. The truth was that she'd started researching Leroy Jethro Gibbs soon after learning how he'd been treating Tony since the shootout in Iran last year.

She had decided fairly early on to make Gibbs pay for turning Tony into a shadow of the confident professional he'd developed into in the 'six years' he'd spent in Baltimore. Under Gibbs influence he'd been reduced to perpetually questioning himself and everything he'd done since he'd been forced to live this double live. So having expressed her desired for payback to Toby he had forbidden her getting even until after Tony had departed the agency.

Typically, she'd approached the task with her usual methodical and exhaustive research of the subject prior to solving the challenge of how. Sirius didn't know that she was investigating Gibbs – had his life under a microscope, searching for a muggle way to make him pay. She didn't want him to know either, in case he forbade her from putting her plan into practise, so she needed to be cautious.

The point was that between her own investigative methods, pumping Toby for juicy data and what Si…Tony (she really couldn't afford to slip) had shared with her over a few nights when they'd get together and chew the fat, she had her own ideas who Gibbs was like and it definitely wasn't a Marauder named James.

Honestly, the grandiose surety of the man that he was not only right but indispensable was all too familiar. The cloak and dagger antics whereby only he knew everything that was occurring, and made damned sure no one else on his team knew enough to put it all together and therefore act contrary to his plan, was another tactic which was strikingly familiar to Hermione.

The fact that Gibbs could, and did curry favour with those of questionable moral fibre when they had something he wanted or could prove useful to his needs was also spookily reminiscent of another individual of her acquaintance. As was his wrath and viciousness if anyone dared to question him or deviate from his rules.

Of course Gibbs bonhomie was severely lacking which was one very major difference – he was an antisocial grump most of the time. Plus, his eyes, although apparently a charismatic shade of blue and seductive (at least for women/men of a certain age) weren't able to twinkle benevolently, giving the impression of a genial grandfather who had your best interest uppermost in his mind. Even so, the similarities were still striking.

Gibbs with his arrogant self-belief that he always knew best – rule 51 that sometimes you're wrong - was testament to the fact it took him so many years – fifty rules worth - to reach. A fairly simple concept most children grasped relatively early in their lives, yet he'd managed to spent so long in positions of authority and power while remaining ignorant, definitely reminded her of someone else.

That someone most definitely was not James Potter. Even the former Marines hairstyle and personal style of dress reminded Hermione of another individual, who like Gibbs, seemed to revel in being outlandish and out of step with the masses. It was like he wanted to demonstrate he wasn't one of the sheep or the sheeple as Harry sometimes called them. People who act like sheep – incapable or unwilling to think for themselves.

At first Tony roundly denied that Gibbs was like Dumbledore, even taking into account the whole need to know crap, like Domino, and ignoring the day-to-day secrecy which was part and parcel of who he was and how he led the team. He also refused to acknowledge all the instances of running off alone to 'save the world' and not letting anyone know what was going on – like that whole business with Maddie Tyler. And all the crap with his former boss, Mike Franks every time they
were in the same country.

Finally, Hermione had stated neutrally that if there weren't strong similarities between the two leaders, then how had he so easily identified who she'd been taking about? She pointed out she'd never mention their former headmaster's name at any point in the conversation. He'd brought it up.

Which had put a swift stop to his protestations. He'd clammed up on the subject but maybe it hadn't stopped him continuing an internal dialogue about it. If there was any doubt that he'd continued processing the things they previously discussed, then tonight's Skype call was testament to that fact.

Hopefully, at some point she'd be able to decipher all his rantings. But today she'd only been able to glean was that he'd seemingly accepted that Gibbs was more Dumbledore-esque than like his best friend, James Potter. That and he'd poured his heart out to Ellie, and she'd had his six – which she'd learnt was a good thing. She presumed that he'd finally bitten the bullet and told her about the radio being turned off while he was working undercover, since he'd been agonising over if he should share with her for several weeks.

Finally, after he'd done dumping emotionally on Hermione and gone quiet, she'd suggested he play his magnificent baby grand piano for an hour or two to help unwind before he went to bed and he agreed. He'd played for her a couple of times when she'd had dinner at his apartment and she'd been left speechless. Apparently Anthony DiNozzo had been a more than competent musician and thanks to his memories and continued hours of practise sessions, Sirius now was too. She wondered if he'd used the Time-turner to reach such a high standard of musicianship and decided it was a query for another time.

He could also do amazing things with a guitar, although somehow Sirius and a guitar was much more in keeping with her image of him when she'd first met him. He'd looked more like a Bon Jovi wannabe, well he would have looked more like him if he hadn't been half starved and hyper vigilant. And then there was the pallor that would have done a Goth proud after 12 years' incarceration and extra time hiding out from the Aurors and Death Eater scum once he'd escaped.

She hoped that the music would help him burn off the strong emotions he was obviously feeling – so strong, so toxic that their talk had left Hermione far from relaxed herself and with the beginnings of a headache. Thanks to her psychology degrees she knew what she was feeling was a type of vicarious stress. She was resigned to spending time on the cross trainer to burn it off, before she went to bed tonight if she didn't want to spent the night tossing and turning.

Hermione got the feeling that music had become an important way for Sirius to cope with stress and too many emotions and bad memories. This was one instance where being a wizard had it all over being non-magical. He'd be easily able to shrink his piano and guitar and take them with him when he returned to London.

~o0o~

Fornell dropped a very dejected DiNozzo home at his Georgetown apartment. The day had consisted of a series of turbulent incidents, emotions and bruising confrontations. He was glad today was over but the trouble was that tomorrow didn't look as if it was going to be any better.

Which was one reason why he'd had to organise to take another day off work to watch DiNotzo's ass tomorrow. Tempers were running hot after Abby Sciuto's mental meltdown today and that was sans Jethro, who had gone missing after his tantrum this morning, failing to return to NCIS. When he found out about Abby he was going to be extremely pissed off that his precious darling Abby had been arrested and thrown in a cell. Perhaps he should be wearing a keflar vest!
While Tony had been utterly shattered by her admittance to the psych ward, feeling responsible for her supposed psychotic break, Tobias was feeling decidedly less compassionate or charitable. Of course, call him cynical but it seemed to be awfully convenient timing that immediately after the first time she'd been made to accept personal responsibility for her outrageous actions and bullying she would have what used to be called a nervous breakdown. On the other hand, the amount of shock she was likely to have endured would have been immense after she'd been forced to accept personal responsibility for her outrageous actions and bullying for the first time in her tenure at NCIS.

Still, even if Abby was playing them all for fools, Tony had called off the payback that Fornell was planning for McGee and Bishop, making it clear he just wanted to get through the next few weeks as amicably as possible and leave. He didn't want any more debacles like the situation with the Goth on his conscience. Tobias reluctantly agreed to call off his plan and he put it on his to-do list of things to attend to. Shame that the plan was abandoned but he promised.

One thing he hadn't been able to fathom in a million years is why someone like Tony would let Abigail Scuito get away with the crap she pulled today. He'd tried to explain to Fornell on the drive home how Abby had insisted on hugging the stuffing out of him when he'd started working at NCIS; which Fornell thought was a pretty lame excuse for taking all her years of abuse. So he told him that for 12 years when he was incarcerated no one touched him with any degree of affection or anything else, he'd started to see things differently. It wasn't til he'd escaped from Azkeban – the magical equivalent to Alcatraz on steroids - that he'd been hugged for the first time in more than a decade. His godson Harry had hugged him like a normal human being instead of a homicidal maniac when they'd finally been reunited at Hogwarts.

And it was essentially only Harry that ever touched him affectionately so when he'd first met Abby, he was closed off and incredibly averse to being touched. Especially after his two-year stint as a vice cop so that he'd rebuffed her attempts at affection, but in typical Sciuto fashion, she'd totally ignored him. He didn't know if she'd instinctively known that he was starved of affection or it was just a fluke because she was so used to hugging everyone, but it had helped heal some of his emotional scars. For that reason alone, he had always been incredibly lenient towards her when she acted like a spoilt brat.

Of course, because she was Gibbs favourite, if he'd tried to force her to comply with NCIS protocols and procedures he'd no doubt have felt Gibbs boot so far up his ass that he'd have heartburn. Fornell conceded that was a fair assessment and he also paused to wonder how anyone could endure what DiNozto had; solitary confinement for so many years and not be stark raving insane. He knew he couldn't endure it – would have topped himself rather than be forced to live like that when he was innocent and with no prospect of release.

~ o0o~

After heating up some day old left-over Chinese and grabbing a beer he sent a text to Emily asking if she was still coming home for the weekend, waiting for nearly an hour before she texted back to say yes, she'd need to be picked up. Finally, after eating his dinner he grabbed a second beer and sat down at the computer to make the Skype call as promised but not looking forward to being the bearer of bad tidings.

Hermione was going to be really cranky when she heard. Half the time she was fussing over DiNozzo like a wounded puppy dog and the rest of the time she was drooling over him, undressing him with her eyes but then, he'd noticed that reaction a lot. He wondered if it was because women naturally seemed to be more intuitive or at least in tune with their intuition and acting upon it. Did they sense the duality within him or was that a threesome (no that wasn't the correct word…maybe
triality, if that was even a word) or did they just pick up non-verbal cues on his hidden pain? Whatever, it was time to bite the bullet and called the British Minister of Magic.

To be honest, if someone had told him this time last year he'd be on a first name basis with Britain's most powerful witch, he'd have arranged for them to spend time in a pleasant sanatorium 'til they got their head on straight. On the other hand, if anyone had told him he was going to reconcile with Diane and then some lunatic intent on revenge would kill her, he wouldn't have believed it either. He'd come to the conclusion that fact was weirder than fiction.

When Hermione answered she seemed tense, so he asked if she was okay.

"I've just spent half an hour on the phone with Siri ah Tony and I have a headache."

"Ah good! That makes this call a lot easier since you probably already know most of what I was going to tell you." Fornell sounded relieved and he took a long gulp of his cold beer.

"Unfortunately, although Tony ranted for most of that time, he was pretty much incoherent and rambling. I didn't have the heart to ask him what he was talking about, so I just let him vent. Actually I was tossing up calling you to see if you'd heard anything."

Tobias groaned. "Oh yeah. I went with him today to watch all the fireworks. You could say I bit off more than I could chew."

"You saying your thick lustrous head of hair you have got slightly singed, Tobes?"

"Very funny, Madam Minister. It was just my eyebrows and lashes," he replied, rubbing his shiny mostly hairless pate ruefully. "Just for that, I'm going to make your headache worse," he promised, getting set to launch into his account of what transpired.

"Okay, let me grab a glass of wine," Hermione responded laughingly. "After a minute or so she was back, settling down, looking resigned. "Okay…go ahead."

Which Fornell did, proceeding to give her a sitrep while Hermione took copious notes, which he was learning was situation normal for the perfectionist witch who was very definitely a Type A personality. When he reached the end of his account, he finished up with the request from NCIS Director Vance to speak to her. He'd been somewhat surprised that she hadn't exploded in righteous anger or demanded extra details as he made his report but apart from her obsessive scribbling, she'd listened intently. When she remained silent for several minutes after he was done with his sitrep he prompted her.

"What do you want me to tell Director Vance? That you want Abby charged with the assaulting the Director of a foreign law enforcement agency? Throw the book at her if she's faking or that you want her hung, drawn and quartered?"

"No, I want you to tell him I'll be in DC on Wednesday and I'll see him then." Hermione replied brusquely."

"Ah Hermione, is that a good idea? I thought you were supposed to maintain secrecy about magic?"

"Yes we are, but I'm not going to go introducing myself as the Minister of Magic, Tobes. Nor go in riding a broom or waving my wand around."

"But they know you're the minister of the law enforcement agency that has appointed Tony director. They have security cameras up the wazoo and facial recognition software. They'll use it to
try to figure out who you work with and they find it highly suspicious when they find that you aren't a member of the House of Commons and that you don't have a digital footprint." He tried to make her see reason.

"Who said I don't have a digital footprint or have a seat in the House of Commons? I'm the Minister for International Cooperation, as were all the former Ministers of Magic too. I'm expected to floo there a couple of times a month, put in an appearance for a few sessions of parliament and or question time. As the current minister I'm supposed to ask a few Dorothy Dixers and that way I get my name recorded in the Hansard…"

"What the hell is Hansard? I thought it was a one hit wonder boy band and who or what is a Dorothy Dixer anyway?" Fornell interrupted her discourse.

Giggling at his denseness, she rolled her eyes, reminding him of his teenage Emily. "No, not Hanson, Toby, the Hansard is the name of the written transcripts of debates held in both houses of parliament in Britain and also many other commonwealth countries too. As for Dorothy Dixers, they're highly prepared questions, written by the government and posed by one of their own members.

"They have the dual purpose of using up some of the Opposition's question time or to give the Prime Minister or cabinet minister an opportunity to publicise achievements or policies it wants highlighted or enable them to launch an attack on the opposition. They're named after an agony aunt in the US who used to make up her own questions then answer them for her column."

"Anyway…" she continued, "the Minister of Magic is the king or queen of the Dorothy Dixers plus, I have to turn up for all State Dinners and the likes, so if they go poking around they'll find I'm a minister of an obscure and patently fake portfolio and rightly conclude it is a front for a classified organisation. They'll assume it is some sort of super-secret black intelligence agency and be satisfied."

Fornell was frowning. "But why go to all that trouble? Clearly it's not for NCIS."

"Because of busybodies, historians, academics, genealogists, tax collectors, squibs suddenly turning up out of the blue as adults - seemingly fully baked but with no record of them being born or educated if they've come from certain pureblood families. Obscenely wealthy investors who seem to not exist on paper – families like the Malfoys who Sirius' cousin Narcissa married into, more fool her.

"They abhor muggles but don't mind benefiting from their economy and invest heavily in companies and real estate. To the outside world the Malfoys and others of their ilk, even Sirius' family were/are reclusive and wealthy old families who are rarely if ever seen but their financial presence is felt strongly on the stock market." Hermione explained patiently.

"Mmm… like Howard Hughes and people's fascination with the man."

Hermione nodded emphatically. "Exactly! Not sure how much you know about history of magic in the UK but once upon a time, magical and non-magical folk coexisted together fairly peaceably. After all, everyone has heard about arguably the greatest wizard the world has ever known – Merlin - but when it became obvious that witches and wizards were in danger of dying out, they opted to go underground and live separate and in secret. Partly because of the persecution from non-magical humans but they also created the problem too with their pure-blood marriage. Not that the pureblood families would ever admit that of course.

"Still historians would be bound to notice a bunch of prominent old families simply vanishing off
the face of the planet, especially these days with their digitalised data bases and groups like the Mormons with their interest in genealogy. So we couldn't just up and vanish completely. It would have been highly suspicious and conspiracy nuts would have gone nuts."

Fornell nodded in understanding. "That makes sense. I guess I never thought about it like that. Okay... but Hermione, if you come out here as Tony's new boss, you are going to need an entourage befitting a UK minister to keep your cover intact."

"Well obviously, Tobes. I'm not stupid. I may not have been in office long but I've started assembling an awesome ministerial staff." She sounded like she didn't know whether to be cross with him or highly amused.

"I know Hermione, and I'm sure you have wonderful people but if they're coming here, and they don't know what a cell phone or a computer is, that's going to start ringing alarm bells, Kiddo." He took a risk and called her the nickname that Tony called her sometimes. The soon to be ex-NCIS agent had warned him in all seriousness that if he shortened her name in any form she'd likely hex him into the next state. So Fornell held his breath while the tell-tall furrow in her brow appeared.

Apparently deciding that the kiddo wasn't worth making a fuss about, she scowled at him instead.

"Hellooo. Muggle born, Toby." She responded sarcastically. "I have one pureblood member of staff – the rest of my people are either half-blood or they're muggles like me. My personal assistant is a muggle who was a former Head Girl of Hogwarts and she gave up trying to get ahead at the Ministry of Magic and went back to the muggle world. She had to go back to school and was working her way up the ladder in the Civil Service when I tracked her down and offered her a job."

"And my protection detail contains two burly muggle born classmates of mine who I'll bring with me. They also ended up going back to the muggle world - until I enticed them away. They're all well versed in muggle technology and pop culture. So it's under control."

"Okay, but let's meet prior to you heading to NCIS – work on strategy and get everyone briefed. Do you want me to make reservations for you to stay somewhere befitting your position as Minister of International Cooperation? Of course, you're welcome to stay at mine but that might raise eyebrows and blow your cover."

"Thanks, Toby but you're right. Better if I stay at the hotel with my staff. And Penelope can make the reservations when she books our flight."

"Penelope?" he quizzed.

"My personal assistant, Penelope Clearwater." Hermione responded.

Deciding that it was a weird coincidence, Tobias mentally reminded himself to call his Penelope before he forgot, then refocusing on the present. He nodded in approval, deciding that she seemed to have things under control. "Okay. So tell me you're going to insist that Tony leave NCIS immediately because it isn't safe for him to stay?"

"No I don't think so."

"Once Gibbs finds out about his precious surrogate daughter he's going to be really pissed and the rest of Tony's team, with the exception of Ellie Bishop already seem to think it's his fault Abby went off the deep end. Including Tony," he warned. "He blames himself too. Of course, a surprising amount of people want to give him a medal – Abby has her fair share of detractors who've somehow managed to get on her bad side over the years."
Hermione snorted and he heard her mumbling about being suspicious timing before responding. "Tony wants to leave the agency he's worked at for 15 years as a competent professional, not to skulk off on the sly like he's done something wrong. I know that's super important to him. Closure and validation is something he never got after 12 years of being falsely imprisoned.

"He never got the exoneration he was entitled to for what he had to endure. Furthermore, he had to spend the last years of his life hiding in the shadows and creeping around, his reputation is tatters. This job means everything to him and he wants to leave with his head held high. I want him too as well."

"Yeah… I hear you, Hermione. I want that for him too. But…what you might not appreciate, if he goes out in the field with the team and they're pissed off with him, even if it is a subconscious hesitation when he needs backup, that could cost him dearly – even his life. At least insist that he doesn't go out in the field with his team…please."

"I'm sorry, Tobes. I won't ask him to do that. That is punishing him when he's done nothing wrong. It's repeating what Gibbs has done to him, this year in particular - sidelining him, trying to make him feel irrelevant, denigrating his skills and the contributions he made to the team. I won't play into Gibbs hands for his final few weeks as an NCIS agent. I won't!" Hermione vowed heatedly.

"Dumbledore made a totally arbitrary and highhanded decision that the destruction of Sirius' life was acceptable collateral damage for the greater good. All so Harry could grow up at his Aunt Petunia's moulded into being the perfect victim who'd willingly sacrifice his life to fulfil a megalomaniac's vision of what needed to happen. Now he's being forced out of a job he loves by another egomaniac who wants to sacrifice him to his own greater good because of his deep-seated feelings of inferiority. I'm sorry…I know he's your friend but Gibbs is a menace and a prize jerk and I will make very sure that Tony wins this time."

Fornell had a brief mental picture of what a teenage Hermione must have been like. Single minded, passionate and utterly convinced she was right. It was like Emily only to the power of ten which was a truly scary thought. Of course, with her brains, she probably had been right – just as she was now. Just not exactly practical, even if her heart was in the right place.

"I understand but Tony's safety…his life is more important than his self-esteem, at the end of the day, Kiddo." He argued equally determinedly.

Hermione nodded. "I'd say that in his case they're both pretty important, Toby. But I think I have a solution…a compromise that will keep him safe and let him finish his tenure on his own terms and with his dignity and integrity intact."

Fornell was curious – it was an occupational hazard for an investigator after all. "Okay, so what's your plan?"

"It needs more work. I'll share it with you when I see you. In the meantime, can we keep him out of Gibbs way 'til I have time to get to DC?"

"I'll ask Director Vance," the fibbie promised. "Maybe he can send Gibbs on a fool's errand to keep him out of our hair for another day. That's if he decides to grace us with his presence tomorrow. Inquiring minds want to know what he's been up to today that would stop him answering his phone in direct contravention of one of his most critical rules – the bastard!"

~o0o~

Gibbs looked at his phone in annoyance as he made his way down to the basement where the good
bourbon was situated and grabbed a mason jar, knocking the dust out of it and pouring himself a very healthy measure. All of the team had been trying to get in touch with him, multiple times. Couldn't they take a hint that he didn't want to talk to them. Knocking back half of the Jack he started as the phone rang again.

Getting ready to fling the damned thing against the wall, Jethro paused and noticed it was an unknown number. "Gibbs," he grunted as he answered his phone.

"Jethro," a despised British accent replied. "I understand you've been looking for me?"

"Need some intel. DiNozzo has been appointed director of some secret agency. What have you heard about it?" Gibbs challenged his informant, not beating around the bush or bothering with social niceties, but then again it wasn't anything unusual.

"Nothing until now. Had heard you were being even more of a a bastard than usual…trying to make him leave, though. Looks like you got your wish." His caller told him mockingly.

"Listen Kort!" the ex-Marine snarled, "How can you not know which agency he's working for?"

"I've been busy, no time to keep up with gossip about agency hopping of personnel. Why do you care? He's off your team – thought you'd be dancing with joy," the CIA operative goaded him sarcastically.

"I need you to find out, Kort." Gibbs growled, pissed off with his taunting.

"Why don't you just ask your boy, Jethro," he taunted him.

"I have, he's not saying."

Laughing derisively, the one eyed spook mocked him, "Well, well, well. That's rather embarrassing. I'll see what I can find out but it's going to cost you," he warned him before ringing off before Gibbs could respond.
Something Smells Hinky

Chapter Summary

Telephones are very useful for disseminating information - although sometimes it isn't information that is welcomed by the recipient. Leon gets some very bad news and Tony takes some much needed time out.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who left kudos and comments. Had some computer issues or I'd had posted this one sooner.

“Well, well, well. That’s rather embarrassing. I’ll see what I can find out but it’s going to cost you.” Trent Kort’s despised cultured British voice ringing in his ears, his sarcastic words mocking Gibbs as he stared at his cell phone, furious that the ass-wipe had got the last word by daring to hang up on him. Smarmy Pommy prick!

Scowling at the screen of his phone, Jethro thought long and hard about breaking it, longing to fling it against the basement wall. It would feel so good seeing it shatter, but he was waiting for some contacts to get back to him. He’d spent hours today chasing down that one eyed sociopath and when he finally tracked the ass-wipe down, he’d goaded him. Gibbs vowed he’d find a way to pay him back for the disrespect – no one pissed him off and got away with it.

Gibbs was getting extremely frustrated at all the dead ends he was running into and he was starting to think that DiNozzo was full of crap. Well he was - obviously – as was apparent today. His SFA was so damned sure he had all the answers but he didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about. Jethro was also beginning to think he was a lying sack of shit when it came to his so called new job. Probably deputy sheriff of some Podunk town in the middle of nowhere or a glorified mall cop, not the director of some ultra-secret organisation. He’d clearly been watching too much James Bond – it had softened his brain.

He’d enlisted Ducky to work his contacts early on in the piece, right before he stormed out of Leon’s office, since the man had contacts; not just in the US but all over the world - especially in British Military and Intelligence circles. Then when he’d left Grace’s office he’d called Ned Dornaget’s mom, Joanna Teague and a few other spooks he’d worked with over the years at the CIA, plus touched base with Abby Borin at the Coast Guard Investigative Service to see if she’d heard anything. Then he’d contacted Henrietta Lange and Callen from OSP LA but was still waiting on their call backs. Sam Hanna hadn’t heard anything or claimed he hadn’t and Dwayne Pride promised, albeit reluctantly, to dig around and get back to him. Traitor!

Next he’d called Hollis Mann’s former second in charge, Major Robert Heckles at Army Criminal Investigative Division. He was even thinking about calling Bishop’s ex-husband Jake Malloy at the NSA – after all, if it was true that DiNozzo had been offered a directorship then surely they’d
So far – nada, zilch, nothing. It was infuriating and if he’d made a total ass of himself when DiNozzo had just been pranking them, he’d make him wish he’d never been born.

Unfortunately, the senior supervisory agent lacked the empathy necessary to realise there’d been plenty of occasions, particularly during this last year, where he’d treated DiNozzo like crap when he had wished it too. Feeling that his life was pointless and filled with loneliness, Tony often felt it would have been better if he’d never been born.

Pouring a full glass of Jack Daniels, Gibbs slammed it down, feeling the liquor help take the edge off his fury. He hated to be made a fool of. Reaching for the bottle again he poured himself another shot.

Trent smirked as he one upped Jethro for once. Pissing him off was a joy and a pleasure. Gibbs clearly thought he was still on the CIA books and he wasn’t about to disabuse him of that notion. After all, he still had a network of contacts around the globe, especially from the dark side – hell he was the dark side!

He had to admit his curiosity had been well and truly piqued by Gibbs’ call. If there were things going on in the world of spooks that he hadn’t been apprised of, he desperately wanted to know. It was like waving a freshly killed haunch of antelope in front of a starving lion and expecting it to politely decline it when offered. Never happen!

Of course the irresistible cherry on top was the fact that it was to do with Anthony DiNozzo. He’d never liked him, especially after the sanctimonious arsehole punched him in the nose. The man was too bloody soft, too fucking ethical, too afraid to get his hands dirty to succeed in this business. The man thought he was too good to get down and dirty in the muck with the rest of them but hey… look who slept with a mark to get close to her arms dealing father. Hypocritical prick!

The more he considered the situation, the more Kort was insanely curious to discover which alphabet agency had snaffled him up as their director. It seemed so incongruous.

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The more he considered the situation, the more Kort was insanely curious to discover which alphabet agency had snaffled him up as their director. It seemed so incongruous.

He was also wildly amused that Gibbs and DiNozzo had a falling out. Frankly, he was amazed they’d managed to work together as long as they had. Kort had no illusions about himself – he was an amoral predator, pure and simple. He wasn’t concerned about ethics or greater good – he was out to do what was best for Trent Kort. And as an apex predator he made damned sure he knew who his competitors were – and what they were up to so he didn’t end up as shark bait himself. The simple truth was that Leroy Jethro Gibbs had far more in common with himself than he ever would with Anthony DiNozzo Junior.

Gibbs was a predator like Kort, not just because of his role as a black ops sniper but because he’d killed without remorse in the past, killed with premeditation for his own gain, and still managed with a straight face to track down and charge individuals who committed the exact same crime he’d gotten away with. Trent had to admire that in the man – most people wouldn’t be able to deal with such hypocrisy. Shrink called it cognitive dissonance but Gibbs had managed to deal with the situation with great aplomb.

He had more than two decades as an agent under his belt and Trent felt that deserved respect. The guy was a real class act!

Mind you, he wouldn’t trust the bastard as far as he could throw him but he understood him in a
way he could never do with DiNozzo. He could anticipate how the former sniper would react in any given situation because they thought alike. But Trent couldn’t even begin to predict DiNozzo’s actions because frankly, his cloying sense of morality was anathema to everything the spook believed in or didn’t believe in.

Although they were definitely rivals who wouldn’t lose a minutes sleep over removing each other from the game - permanently if it were necessary, there was a comfortable certainty in knowing that Gibbs was just as amoral, just as ruthless as himself. The real wildcards weren’t predators like Gibbs or even his surrogate daughter cum-Mossad assassin – Ziva David.

She was another one that he had no difficulty in reading like a book, as much as she might pretend that she was a journey of self-discovery, nay self-redemption. There was a damned good reason why sociopaths like themselves were singled out by the powers that be to become career assassins for their countries. It kept them out of prison for otherwise thinning the ranks of the innocent but not too bright public, plus they performed a much needed service in cleaning up after the imbecilic, moronic elected officials and those lily-livered individuals who didn’t have the gonads to personally do the killing when needed. Everyone who refused to do what was necessary to keep the masses safe and ignorant of how close they came on a daily basis to anarchy and annihilation.

But leopards never changed their spots, nor did sociopaths and assassins, which was why when they outlived their usefulness, they would be dispassionately put down before they could turn on their former employers. That was why Ziva’s time was nigh - she was trying to redeem herself – it was a huge red flag to her former employer that she’d become a loose cannon.

Maybe he should look her up for old time sake, they could shag themselves silly, for however long it took for Mossad and the company to take them out. It was unfortunate that he’d found himself in a somewhat similar situation to Ms David – although in his case it had been his employers issuing a burn notice. It was just a matter of time before someone decided he was a liability and tried to take him out too. Of course, as pleasant as shagging David’s brains out may be, the truth was he was far too wily to let some wet behind the ears assassin-for-hire take him down.

Putting thoughts of his demise out of his mind, he returned to pondering the dichotomy of lambs versus wolves and the dangers cuddly lambs posed to people like himself. Given a choice, Kort would choose to deal with wolves, every time.

Truth to tell, the dangerous ones were the individuals who he couldn’t easily corrupt, like DiNozzo who frankly made him sick; even being near him was nauseating. The stench of saccharine sweet goodness wafted around him and made him, and others like him stick out like sore thumbs. Stick out like a meatless hamburger in a room full of ravenous slavering carnivores; stick out like a Dolly Parton look-a-like at a rapper convention.

Hell, even Rene Benoit, another morally reprehensible, top of the food chain predator had immediately recognised Anthony DiNozzo for the sickeningly whitehat that he was and had actually approved of him as a suitable partner for his precious bloody daughter. People like Trent were good enough to protect Rene’s darling little princess and to take a bullet for her if necessary or even take the blame for killing Benoit to prevent that red-headed bitch from facing a lethal injection. But he and those of his ilk would never be good enough, in Benoit’s estimation, to marry Ms Benoit or begat her precious offspring.

Thinking about the call from Gibbs again, Kort couldn’t help chuckling, The NCIS agent had been sending out feelers all day, trying to find him. He’d know hours ago that the former Marine was desperate to talk but it had amused him to watch Jethro run around like a headless chicken, trying to find him. It reminded him of the childish game of Hide and Seek.
So it wasn’t exactly a coincidence that he called him after he’d given up and headed back to his pathetic little domicile to lick his wounds. Kort just knew he was headed for the nearest bottle of booze – so predictable.

As he made contact, he thought about the delicious rumours that had been doing the rounds of the alphabets over the past months.

Scuttlebutt had it that Gibbs had his heart set on taking out Daniel Budd and The Calling all on his lonesome but the joint taskforce of NCIS, CIA and Homeland Security – including Jethro’s faithful SFA had got in his way, taking them out before he could go after them. Then to rub salt in his wounds, DiNozzo rescued a kid that Gibbs had tried to save and ended up screwing up royally by underestimating his enemy – Daniel Budd due to his arrogance.

Of course, Trent hadn’t paid much heed to the rumours; he happened to know that Gibbs didn’t have a heart!

~o0o~

More than an hour of playing piano after he finished his Skype call with Hermione, Tony switched to his guitar, playing, fingerpicking and strumming until his fingers ached. Deciding that after the shittiest day from hell, he was hopefully exhausted enough and now relaxed enough to sleep, he placed his beloved Gibson on its stand and stood up and stretched.

He glanced at the phone as he passed it on his way towards his bedroom and recalled the messages he’d found on his answering machine when he’d arrived home earlier. Seeing the red flashing indicating someone had called he’d grabbed a cold beer from the fridge before settling in to listen, wondering if Gibbs had deigned to leave a message on his landline. Depressing the button, he listened intently as a female who he didn’t recognise began speaking.

“Special Agent DiNozzo, this is Dr Grace Confalone. It is extremely important that I talk to you ASAP. Please... when you get this message call me back on 555 7600. Thank you.”

He frowned, not knowing what to make of the message but figuring it was some interfering medico from the ER today, calling to tell him his iron levels or his eosinophils were too low or that his cholesterol was too high. He had more important things on his mind. Pressing the button to listen to the next message, he grinned tightly as he recognised the caller.

“Hey Tony, this is Joanna Teague. Or should that be Director DiNozzo? I hear congratulations are in order. Well done, you! Wish you’d decided to come and work for us though. We made a helluva team, didn’t we?

“By the way, what’s crawled up Jethro’s butt? He’s been getting in my ear about your new job all day, calling to see if I knew anything about it. Anyhow... partner, we’ll have to get together for a celebratory drink before you leave. Ned would have been so excited for you – I don’t think I ever told you but he had a massive crush on you...”

“Well anyway...call me and we’ll make plans to paint the town red.”

The final message managed to make him smile nostalgically.

“Hi Tony, this is Kensi ...and this is Deeks. Hey Man. We heard your awesome news. Cops rule! He’s a fed, Deeks but for once you’re right, Surfer Boy…it’s awesome news. Congrats...we’re so excited for you. By the way, your boss Gibbs has his nose put out of joint – guess he don’t want to lose you.
“Yeah dude… he’s been calling Hetty, Callen and even Sam to see if they’d heard any chatter about your highly classified gig but it’s been super quiet about your appointment. Mind you, we’re all insanely curious now.

“So we just thought you should know in case there is blowback, Tony. And make sure you drop by next time you’re in LA. Yeah - I’ll take you down to the beach and we can get acquainted with the waves, DiNozzo. He doesn’t want to go surfing, Deeks. We’ll go shopping – get you some decent clothes like Tony’s. Hey! He’s the one that could do with some new clothes. Suits are so passé and dull…

They continued to bicker until the message timed out and Tony grinned, remembering his time working with the OPS team in LA. It wasn’t until he’d worked with Callen’s team last October that he realised just how badly things had deteriorated for him back in DC. He’d gone there to collect the money launderer, Rio Syansundin to escort him back to DC and he’d given the federal marshal who had custody of him the slip mid-flight from Singapore. The team had helped him to track him down.

Truly, it was a breath of fresh air working with the LA team – although Callen was pretty guarded around him, which wasn’t all that surprising when you thought about it. After all, he and Gibbs were buddies from way back in their black op days and Gibbs was pissed off with him. No doubt he and Callen had caught up when he’d flown to LA a few weeks earlier after the case with DEA agent Mitch Mitchell.

Sam had been less reserved and Kensi, Deeks and the two techie geeks, Eric and Nell had been welcoming and a pleasure to work with. Even Assistant Director Granger had been pretty cool, all things considered. Hetty was one scary little gnome of a woman, who clearly didn’t feel the DiNozzo charm and decided to put the boot in, a la Gibbs style. Her equating Jen Shepard’s death to the marshal losing his prisoner was specious and unfair but then again, he should be used to colleagues making below the belt barbs.

Still apart from her, and Callen’s less than effusive welcome he’d enjoyed the visit. And he’d just loved watching the team dynamic, how they didn’t feel like they had to constantly compete with each other by pushing their team mates under the bus or how Rule 12 was proudly being flaunted. It had definitely been a wake-up call, a call to arms, making him realise just what he had to put up with and even more importantly, that he’d well and truly outstayed his welcome on team Gibbs.

Due to his visit to Los Angeles, when he’d returned, he’d stepped up his exit strategy because it had made him yearn to have what they did, well after being reminded of what a good team looked and felt like. He’d always be grateful to them for opening his eyes to the possibilities of a better future for himself because he’d overlooked for too long that he deserved to be happy too.

But Deeks and Kensi’s call and Joanna’s, also answered a few questions about what had happened to their fearless leader today. It seems that Gibbs was out and about, working his contacts, trying to find out who had hired him. Good luck with that!

The question was – why? Was it because he didn’t appreciate not being in the know, viewing it as a professional slight on him or did he have a darker motive? Did Gibbs want to sabotage his new job before it even started?

Was killing Budd and seeing him freeze in the field really enough to negate 15 years of loyalty and make Gibbs hate him so much he’d try to damage his next gig? Was he really that petty?

~o0o~
Leon Vance had eaten dinner with Kayla and Jared, sending them off to finish up their homework while he loaded up the dishwasher with the dinner dishes and cookware. This was probably the time of the day that he missed Jackie more than any other – they used to work together on this task and share bits and pieces from their day with each other, making the chore their special time together. It was their catch-up time but it was kind of an unwritten rule that they didn’t discuss anything too serious or heavy.

He’d tell her what the secretaries in the typing pool were gossiping about, or the latest office pool about who was hooking up with who. Jackie would tell him about the other mothers and the gossip doing the rounds after they’d dropped off the kids or while they were waiting to pick them up. Who was seducing or being seduced amongst the parents and even sharing the little snippets of information that the kids shared with her about their day that they didn’t share with him. So not only had this time been a chance to catch up with Jackie but it was an informal way of staying in touch with the children.

With Jackie gone, Leon felt like he’d also lost a small but crucial part of his children’s lives, which made him pensive every night as he stacked the dishwasher on his own. Just as he was lamenting yet again the day he’d brought Eli David into their home without using any protection detail, his work phone rang. It was Balboa calling as promised with a sitrep on the Abby Sciuto state of affairs.

As they talked, Leon grabbed an expresso from the fancy coffee machine Jackie purchased, literally weeks before her death which was her pride and joy. It had been more than six months after losing her before he could bring himself to use it again. Now…every time he did, it felt like it was a small but important link that brought him closer to Jackie and the thought that one day, it might not work anymore caused him panic attacks, even thinking about it.

As he listened to Agent Balboa outline how his team had collected statements from those present in the bull pen when Abby decided it was a good day to attack DiNozzo, he remembered his earlier musing about Balboa’s attitude to Sciuto. As he moved onto the summary of the psychiatrist’s tentative diagnosis, he sensed a healthy dose of sceptical from him.

“You don’t seem convinced that Dr Sciuto is really ill, Agent Balboa?” he observed mildly.

Ric was silent for several moments and Leon imagined he was trying to figure out the most diplomatic response. “Let’s just say that it wouldn’t surprise me greatly to learn that her psychotic break is a fake out,” he stated neutrally.

“And what makes you say that?” he asked and heard the sigh over the phone.

“Because on more than one occasion I’ve seen Abby turn on and off her emotions like a tap, Director. It was spooky. I was in the bullpen when Ziva David returned after they captured a Marine Corporal Damon Werth who was juiced up on steroids and was in a ‘roid induced psychosis. It took all four of Gibbs’ team to subdue him and they were all beat up to some degree.

“DiNozzo had a broken nose, McGee a dislocated shoulder and Ziva had a black eye and other bruises. Sciuto came running into the bullpen, acting all hysterical and sprouting concern about Tony and Timmy – but totally ignoring David’s injuries.” He was silent as he recalled the incident some years ago.

“So anyway she was throwing this faux panic attack and talking a bunch of trash about the ‘animal’ who had hurt her ‘family’ and David calmly put her straight. Told her that they were all fine and that Werth was not an animal to be put down, he was not the devil incarnate, merely a troubled young Marine who was serving his country, and who needed help.” He took a breath before
continuing.

“Abby did not take kindly to David’s refusal to agree with her about the Marine. She was vitriolic about him and later on, Ducky had to plead with her, just to persuade her to do her job and run forensic tests because she refused to help the corporal.”

Balboa’s voice took on an extra helping of disgust if that was possible. “Sciuto had some pretty vile things to say to Ziva about her being a stone cold killer without feelings because she refused to go along with her. To be honest, I expected David to deck her. The truth is that while I was never a fan of David, I wouldn’t have blamed her one whit if she’d smacked Abby down hard, but in this case Ziva was the consummate professional. She remained calm, defended Werth and didn’t allow herself to be provoked.

“When Sciuto realised that she wasn’t going to incite her to go along with her hate campaign against Werth, she simply turned off the hysteria and became completely rational and very, very bitchy. It was freaky how quickly she turned – even David looked dumbfounded because Miss Light n Love was a cold blooded bitch.” Ric finished dryly.

“Then there was another time when McGee was attacked by drug enforcement dog who was hyped up on cocaine and he had to shoot it in self-defence. Sciuto was in the garage when McGee pulled in with the dog restrained in the back. She was all over Tim, concerned about his injuries, crying crocodile tears on him until she noticed the dog who attacked him. Ducky and Palmer had treated it at the scene but needed her to conduct forensic tests, since his handler appeared to have been mauled to death by a dog.

“The moment she sighted the dog and found out he’d been shot she turned on McGee, treating him like an axe murderer for hurting a poor innocent, little puppy dog. It was like watching two different personalities co-existing. At the conclusion of the case she even bullied McGee into adopting the dog, even though he ended up becoming phobic to them after the attack, but she was total merciless to him.” He sounded totally outraged and Leon felt pretty disgusted himself.

“So yeah, I’m somewhat dubious about her sudden break from reality – it’s pretty convenient timing as far as I’m concerned.” He stated bluntly. “She’s not as sweet and innocent as she would have people believe. She can be cruel and vindictive when she doesn’t get her way.”

Vance felt shocked. Oh he knew that Abby was something of a bully – especially where McGee was concerned but he’d assumed it was left over from their ill-fated affair. Frankly, he couldn’t have imagined a relationship more incompatible or doomed, like a great white shark going out with a white fluffy bunny.

Thinking about how close he’d come to losing his position a few years ago when Ziva killed Bodnar, giving that weasel Parsons from DoD a foot in the door, he couldn’t help wondering what the repercussions might be from Sciuto’s stunt. He was a pragmatist – Parsons was hardly likely to have shredded those files, they’d still be sitting in a file somewhere.

Mind you, Gibbs hadn’t exactly helping when it came to ruffling the Brits’ feathers. Assistant Director Granger from LA had given him a heads up that Gibbs had been using his contacts via Callen and Lange to try to find out which agency had hired DiNozzo.

He’d mentioned that Callen, Hetty and Sam had come up empty on discovering where DiNozzo was going and Leon had swiftly ordered them all to stop their digging. If that trio, with their list of informants hadn’t been able to discover any chatter, then the agency concerned was definitely not one that he wanted to mess with or make angry.
Especially since Abby decided to attack their new director. What the hell was wrong with these people? Why hadn’t she attacked Gibbs instead?

Later on, when he was getting ready to make some hot chocolate for the kids before they headed off to bed, his phone rang again. Groaning and wondering what had gone wrong now, he realised it was Fornell.

“What’s up, Agent Fornell?”

“I spoke with Director DiNozzo’s boss, Madam Minister and passed on your request. She said to tell you she’s flying to DC immediately and will meet with you on Wednesday.”

Leon’s stomach dropped. It was Monday night, so unless she was already planning a trip to the US, she had dropped everything and was flying over immediately to deal with DiNozzo’s attack. That was not good. Did she know that Gibbs was trying to dig up information about them? Had that anything to do with her sudden decision to visit DC?

“Has the minister been informed of the incident in the bull pen with Dr Sciuto?” he asked, guardedly.

“Oh yeah…she isn’t impressed.” Tobias emphasised sardonically. “She did request that DiNozzo and Gibbs not work together tomorrow if at all possible. I mentioned that Jethro was incredibly protective of Sciuto, so she has some concerns…”

An incoming call had Vance feeling frustrated until he noticed it was Secretary Porter. Cursing mentally, since this day just got better and better, he interrupted Fornell. “Look I’m sorry, I need to take this call. – Will you be watching DiNozzo’s six tomorrow?”

Fornell indicated he would and Leon told him they’d talk further in the morning and rang off.

Taking SecNav’s call, he wondered what crisis had her calling so late.

“Good evening Secretary Porter, what can I do for you?”

“Leon, I understand NCIS is losing DiNozzo?” She stated without preamble

Groaning, he wondered how she’d heard about it. He should have informed her himself, but with the drama of Gibbs and Sciuto which he’d needed to address, he’d planned to do so tomorrow. It had just been such a train wreck of a day- one he never saw coming.”

“I’m sorry, Secretary Porter. I was going to inform you of the situation tomorrow. I had a few other incidents to deal with today. Can I ask how you learnt about it?”

“Actually, that is why I’m calling. To express concern because I was contacted by a psychiatrist from Walter Reed. This is awkward because of patient confidentiality but Dr Confalone has some trepidation that Special Agent DiNozzo may be in danger.”

“Dr Sciuto has been hospitalised for observation for 30 days. I think that the immediate threat has been neutralised,” Leon responded carefully. Clearly someone had filled SecNav in on the goings on today.

“Oh Abby Sciuto…NCIS’ forensic scientist? Why was she hospitalised?” Sarah Porter asked, surprised.

Sarah Porter asked, surprised.

Oh shit she didn’t know. “There was an incident in the bull pen today when Dr Sciuto attacked
Special Agent DiNozzo.”

“Damn!”

“So if you weren’t talking about Abby who were you talking about?” Leon asked wondering if there’d been a serious security threat from terrorists.

“Dr Confalone seems to think that Gibbs feelings about DiNozzo might not be entirely rational and that he may be in danger. She felt she had a responsibility to warn us that his anger about Special Agent DiNozzo’s new job may lead to an incident.”

Vance thought about Jethro’s rant in his office this morning, his showdown with DiNozzo, which by all accounts he’d heard had been a doozy. A real bruising, knock down drag out verbal stoush and the SFA had landed one that put Gibbs well and truly on his ass – a most unaccustomed position for him to be in. Plus, his mysterious absence today and the fact he’d been trying to discover highly classified information about DiNozzo’s new employers, all pointed to an individual who was obsessed.

Clearly, Jethro wasn’t exactly playing with a full deck. Plus, the likelihood that he was likely to go ballistic about his lab rat and blame DiNozzo for her meltdown, like the rest of the gang. So it did give one pause for thought and it wasn’t a good thought!

“Okay, I can see why she might have concerns, but may I ask, Secretary Porter, why she contacted you? Why not contact me directly, if she thought DiNozzo was in danger. Wouldn’t it have been more expedient? After all, I’m in a position to take action to prevent it.” Leon pointed out, puzzled.

Perhaps Dr Confalone and Porter were gal pals.

“That’s an excellent question, Leon. In fact, it was such a good one that I asked her myself. She said that she didn’t tell you because she was worried you’d ignore her warnings. She seems to think you don’t respect psychologists and psychiatrists.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. Why would she say that?” the director demanded, highly outraged at that slander. He was nothing but respectful to the shrinks for the difficult work they did.

“She claims that you signed off on Gibbs going back to work after being seriously wounded in Iran without him completing his mandatory psychological counselling sessions and more disturbingly, that you allowed him to return to the field without him receiving psychologically clearance by the NCIS psychologist.” Sarah stated sternly. “Please tell me that Dr Confalone was misinformed about this situation, Leon.”

Vance swallowed nervously. Damn it! He was in deep shit now.

~o0o~

Padfoot was running. It was 0230 in the morning and he couldn’t sleep so he’d finally given up tossing and turning. He’d climbed out of bed and driven to a secluded area so he could shift into his canine form and run. To run, breath, feel without thinking. It was why he’d been unable to sleep.

He’d had such a tumultuous day that he couldn’t switch off his brain – it raced at a million miles an hour. And he kept having nightmares where Abby was trapped in a bare cell, reaching out to him, pleading with him not to lock her up. Her hands morphed into talons, black Dementor’s talons and he felt their freezing cold breath on his face as the attempted to suck out his soul.

DiNozzo tried to reason with his inner canine, rationalising that the Abby situation was a completely different kettle of fish from what he’d experienced when accused of betraying Lily and
James to Voldemort and killing a bunch of non-magicals and that traitor Pettigrew. Tried to reassure him that he wasn’t in danger from those horrific guardians of Azkaban. But Padfoot couldn’t or wouldn’t settle, which meant that neither could Tony. He wanted to get far away.

Now he was running in the cool night air, focusing on his pounding heart and the blood coursing through his veins, pushing himself to run faster…harder…further. Forgetting what had been said and done today, because for the emotionally inhibited man, he’d been experiencing a surfeit of feelings and he couldn’t deal with anything else.

Soon his enhanced canine sense of smell was overwhelmed by a myriad a scents, causing his canid brain to completely focus on separating out each of the individual odour molecules and identify them. Finally, Padfoot, Sirius and DiNozzo (well the vestiges of him – his memory) achieved equilibrium, a sense of peace as his brain became occupied on a far more primal, a primitive level.

While in his dog form, Padfoot’s brain was smaller than his human one, yet the part of his cerebral cortex which controlled smell was much larger than it was when he was human. As a canine, his sense of smell was much more sensitive than a human’s. In fact, Tony had read scientific studies since coming to the US that estimated it was up to ten million times more sensitive, depending upon the breed/morphology of the dog. A human had about 5 million scent receptors, compared to a dog, who had anywhere from 125 million to 300 million (depending on the breed).

As a predator, his canine brain was uniquely evolved to process scent data, permitting him to hunt and survive in his environment almost as effectively as a wolf, to which genetically, he was quite closely related. He could scent the foliage – individual shrubs, trees and their bark, sap, leaves, seed pods and blossoms. He could detect the river nearby – water molecules from the river, marine vegetation, trash that had been thrown into the water, the smell of decomposition - dead animals - plus marine life floating past.

He could scent prey animals amongst the foliage and briefly considered going off to chase them down as he felt the lure of the hunt calling to him, but he was afraid that if he stopped running, this nirvana-like sense of non-thinking about today might cease. And the truth was he desperately needed to stop thinking – well higher order thinking anyway. So Padfoot ignored the instinct to track down the prey and focused on what else he could detect, odour -wise.

He smelt the presence of carnivores – felines – domestic and feral cats, canids – domestic and feral dogs and wild canids, probably coyotes. Scat – he could smell scat. All kinds of scat, from the delightful aromas that accosted his scent molecules, he instantly recognised as coming from grass eating prey animals. He also noted the less pleasant more pungent scat of meat eaters - fellow carnivores.

When a dog smelled something they didn’t just process a smell as a whole entity, it’s like they got a report on the constituents of that scent, not unlike the reports Abby got from her babies, breaking down evidence found at crime scenes into different chemical components. For example, in his human form he might be able to pick out the most obvious ingredients of a pizza like the cheese - maybe, sausage and garlic – definitely, and possibly the tomatoes. As Padfoot, he could smell even the smallest and least odoriferous ingredients of the pizza, including the minutest constituents of the sauce and base, such as a pinch of salt, sugar and yeast.

His inner dog had long ago cracked the so called eleven secret herbs and spices recipe of KFC, and not just the ingredients; he could reproduce the constituents in the correct proportions too, so that he could make the finger lickin’ chicken any time he wanted. Luckily, as a federal agent he had a high security clearance and was good at keeping secrets!

But as Padfoot, not only was his sense of smell far superior, he also had a second olfactory ability,
thanks to a sensory organ humans didn’t possess. This structure was located in the bottom of his nasal passage called the vomeronasal organ (VNO). It was also referred to as the Jacobson’s organ by some people, although he wasn’t sure who the hell Jacobson was. Still that was neither here nor there.

What was important was that dogs and other animals used this organ, primarily to interpret chemical messages known as pheromones found in urine and faeces, skin cells and fur. Pheromones communicated all sorts of critical data such as readiness to mate - even conveying details such as if the subject had given birth lately, had a false pregnancy or even what their emotional state was. All in all, it was a much more effective means of putting yourself out there than Tinder or online dating.

Even more amazing was that the pheromone molecules detected by the VMO and processing by the brain was able to occur separate and simultaneously to detecting and processing other odour molecules. The two scents didn’t get mixed up because the VMO had its own nerves leading to a part of the brain devoted solely to interpreting its signals.

Honestly, how cool was that! It was as if the VMO had its own dedicated computer server and when it came to the sense of smell, Padfoot had a dual processor.

Plus, unlike people, Padfoot and his brethren could move their nostrils independently. Which meant that not only could he detect an awesome amount of smells but he could determine which direction they’d come from, and that came in very handy when tracking people or animals. With an ability to scent some odours in the parts per trillion, Tony decided that when he returned to London he was going to start letting Padfoot out to play more frequently.

For a start, the DMLE wasn’t exactly flush with all the whiz-bang forensics that he was accustomed to at NCIS, so it would come in handy in his job. But perhaps more importantly, he felt a whole heap more grounded when he let his inner canine out for a run.

His lips curling back in disgust, Padfoot detected what was in his opinion the least pleasant scat of all – that of humans. This one in particularly was really nasty – from it he could tell the person ate mostly processed food, the scent chock-full of chemicals from a diet of processed foodstuffs and fast food that turned the scat sour-smelling and reeking of death. No, not of death exactly – it wasn’t the odour of decomposition, more like an absence of a life force. Sneezing violently several times to clear the vile smelling odour molecules from his snout, he sighed in relief.

Veering violently away from that shitty smell, he ran away up another path as he focused on separating out more scents. He identified a variety of urine smells from different animals – full of pheromones and intel - the equivalent to chemical emails in the animal world.

Further afield and fainter, he detected the smells of civilisation: vehicles and fuels – diesel and petrol fumes and bitumen, tar, asphalt. He also detected the sounds of their engines, thrumming, roaring, backfiring, the squeal of brakes and the discordant blaring of horns in the distance but still clearly discernible to his enhanced canine hearing. All of this scent information battered away at his neurons, demanding to be processed. It successfully deflecting his thoughts and feelings about everything which had happened today and had him trapped in a thrall and unable to switch off.

While going running in his human form was a good stress reliever, helped keep him fit and was a great way to problem solve, nothing could compare to the sense of physicality he experienced when he was Padfoot. How self-aware he was, thanks to his enhanced sensory abilities which made him physically aware of himself on even a cellular level. It was something that he couldn’t really explain to anyone who wasn’t an animagus.
He often wished he could experience this degree of sensory awareness in his human form. He supposed that his highly acute sense of sight, hearing and smell was in some way linked to Padfoot though.

It was a real shame that he couldn’t have those abilities as a human – it would make life as a cop much easier. He would be so much more effective if he didn’t have to hide his inner canine and there’d be no keeping secrets. Padfoot could sniff the pheromones of another canine or to a lesser extent, another species including humans at a crime scene, providing information including what sex they were, what they’d eaten, where they’d been and what items they may have come in contact with.

At least when he was in London he wouldn’t have to be quite as cautious about his furry little secret, although he still had to be careful he wasn’t recognised. Perhaps Hermione could help him to come up with a way of changing Padfoot’s appearance to a bearded collie or a borzoi. Something to think about.

Finally, after running for what his remarkably accurate internal clock told him must be nearly two hours he knew that the dawn would soon be here and the risk of him getting caught shifting would be too great. Making his way back to his car he shifted back, climbed wearily into his car and drove home to his apartment.

He couldn’t help the piloerection of the hairs on the back of his neck and arms, feeling that someone or something nasty was watching him as he exited his car. He opened up his senses to see if he could locate someone skulking around who shouldn’t be, but all he had was a vague feeling of unease, nothing tangible. At this time of the morning, he really couldn’t wander around looking for scumbags without raising suspicions, so from now on he would make sure to be permanently on his guard.

Entering the building as unobtrusively as possible, he made his way carefully up to his apartment, keeping his eyes open for trouble. After a warm shower he collapsed into bed, utterly exhausted and this time fell effortlessly to sleep in blissful peace. There were with no dreams of pigtailed Goths bouncing off walls, pleading with him to save her and disturbing his dreams this time. It felt sooo good!

Honestly, all the people who dragged their dogs out to runs miles in an effort to exhaust them in the futile hope that they wouldn’t chew up the furnishings, would be much better off combining a moderate amount of exercise with a good half hour of letting them sniff around the neighbourhood and park, picking up scents from other dogs and non-canines. Humans, essentially reliant upon the sense of sight, had no concept of how physically and mentally exhausting it was to process scent data.

Tony slept soundly and although he only had limited time to rest he woke feeling surprisingly refreshed and ready to face another extremely difficult and emotionally challenging day.

He really should call Hermione at some point and apologise to her for emoting all over her like a hysterical teenage girl. It was going to be a long five weeks.
Yes Minister

Chapter Summary

Hermione arrives in DC with her entourage, plus a plan and a few surprises up her sleeve.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a piece of parody that I've been busting to share with you all. Hope you like it.
Also, as someone reminded me recently, not all my usual readers are au fait with the HP fandom so here are abbreviations used in this chapter. HTH

DMLE – Dept of Magical Law Enforcement
Auror – magical cops (work for the DMLE)
MoM – Ministry of Magic (governing body of wizards and witches)

Tony spent most of Tuesday hunkered down in Legal giving depositions, going over his testimonies in upcoming cases and just generally crossing his T’s and dotting his I’s on his case reports. It was dull and mind-numbingly boring, especially for someone with his mercurial personality and yet, after the turmoil of yesterday, he embraced dull and boring gratefully.

Fornell trailed along behind him at work, glaring at anyone who even looked at him sideways, never mind thought about trying to approach him. Considering that he was getting weird looks from most people, it meant that there were a lot of people who were getting the evil eye. Even Delores Bromstead, who looked like she was wanting to approach him, didn’t. Tony spent most of the working day smiling apologetically at people, especially people like Delores who he considered to be his friend, but Tobias was taking no chances in light of what happened with Abby.

Meanwhile, the director had sent Gibbs, Bishop and McGee off to Norfolk for a contraband search of the USS George Washington, based on an anonymous tip off from a member of the public. Even with the assistance of the dog squad and a bunch of MPs and some newly graduated probies from FLETC it would take them a couple of days, especially since they were down an agent. Tony figured that Gibbs wouldn’t be too happy being sent off on what essentially, should have been an assignment for one of the more junior teams. Still it made for a restful day which was what he needed after yesterday – although he’d never admit it.

After work, he and Fornell drove to the Hay- Adams Hotel on Sixteenth Street, N.W. Washington to meet up with Hermione, who'd flown into Dulles a few hours earlier. She'd brought several of her ministerial staff with her, who, according to Tobias, were from a non-magical background. Tony remembered her talking about finding a Head Girl of Hogwarts, working for some parliamentary secretary in the British Civil Service after giving up on ever getting promoted within the MoM because she was muggle born.
This was one thing that he and Hermione planned on changing – people should be promoted based on merit and their performance, not their blood status. It seemed shocking that almost two decades after the war, bigotry was still rife and along with it its inevitable companions, corruption and collusion. It sounded as if she'd made a good start when assembling her team – all were either first generation magical or else so called half-blood, which was a ridiculous label. Well with the exception of her press secretary who Toby said, had remained in London.

He was really looking forward to seeing Hermione again. To him, she would always be considered family, after helping to save him from having his soul sucked out by Dementors – existing as a soulless husk – essentially a zombie. So she'd always have a special place in his heart, even if that was the only thing she'd done for him. But she'd saved him again a few months ago when she'd found him, drowning in self-doubt and deeply depressed and offered him a lifeline. She'd given him back his life again, given him a job, family and a purpose.

Still, as much as he loved her and considered her family, he felt like she was probably going to make a fuss and try to convince him to leave NCIS immediately. He couldn't really blame her though. Not after that frenetic, emotional call last night!

At first, he'd though his wildly incoherent phone call had been solely to blame for her jumping on a plane and flying across the pond to DC at a moment's notice. However, Tobias admitted he'd spoken to her too, told her about Abby's brain snap and admitted telling her that Gibbs would be out for blood – his.

Upon reflection, Tony regretted what had gone down in the bull pen yesterday. It wasn't professional of him letting fly at Gibbs like that, despite the provocation; he regretted that he hadn't respected Gibbs position as team leader. He'd been insubordinate and he'd let himself down. So he was sure not going to let down the victims of crime by running out on their courts martial or trials just because things got a bit uncomfortable because he couldn't keep his trap shut.

Thankfully, after a horrible day yesterday, Tony had woken this morning after only a few hour sleep, feeling surprisingly refreshed after his restless night, determined that he not make the situation any worse than it already was. Going for a couple of hours run as Padfoot had definitely done the trick and when he'd sought his bed for a second time he'd slept like the dead. That was something that the average human would never be able to grasp – how much neural activity in a canine brain was geared to processing scent information since a human's primary sensory organ was their eyesight.

He'd tried for a very long time to suppress that aspect of himself, thinking it was too risky to go transforming into his animagus self - that it would be too painful. He'd tried to live without his magic and be Anthony DiNozzo, except in the direst of circumstances. Usually Padfoot only surfaced when he was too overwhelmed to resist shifting – like after Cate, Paula and Jenny had been killed and lord help him, when he'd broken off his association with Jeanne Benoit after his mustang was blown up by that CIA snake, Trent Kort. Padfoot also insisted on muscling his way through his staunch defences when all of that crazy crap with Rivkin had hit the fan.

Then last night Padfoot had refused to be silenced, insisting on making an appearance and practically refusing to take no for an answer. In the clear light of day, he was grateful that Padfoot took matters into his own hands when his inner canine recognised that yesterday had simply been too much. That he was in a state of emotional and mental overload.

Truthfully he'd felt as if he was going to combust - he only had vague memories of bits and pieces of his Skype call to Hermione but the bits he did recall made him cringe in embarrassment. Partly because he always liked to keep his emotions under control, but mostly because he was usually
much more adept at keeping the separate parts of his identity...well separate. Yesterday, they had all collided and it wasn't pretty.

His vague recollections of the word vomit he'd inflicted on the British Minister of Magic left him feeling highly uncomfortable. Even if he did know her and considered her family, it was still unbelievably awkward for an incredibly private person such as himself to lose control like that. For 17 years Tony had managed to juggle two disparate human identities pretty damned successfully, well mostly, yet after the day from Hell he'd been feeling way out of his depth. And clearly, based upon his rambling, incoherent Skype call to Hermione, he was definitely way out of control.

Thankfully, Padfoot had come along and halted the turmoil within, letting his inner wolf out to play. Said canine had centred him and created a sense of peace and calm that was sorely needed at that point in time. Now he felt almost human – no pun intended and even with only a few hours' sleep, he'd coped with the tension left over from yesterday.

So as they made their way across the lobby and into the elevator he looked around his surroundings appreciatively. He decided that Hermione had picked an excellent hotel to maintain her cover as Minister of Cooperation, although perhaps her assistant had done the research for her. Whoever had picked this particular hotel, it was a good choice – it had an olde-worlde charm about it that probably fit into the stereotypical view most Americans had about all things British. He admired all the rich wood panelling, archways and ornate ceilings, admittedly it was a world away from social media madness, selfies, RBF, duck face and all the other insanity of 2016. It felt like they'd stepped back in time to a gentler, more gracious era.

When they arrived at Hermione's generous sized suite, they entered swiftly and before she had time for more than the briefest hug greeting the two agents, they proceeded to search the premises for hidden camera and listen devices. Hermione looked on perplexed, with the tiny furrows across her forehead an indication she was trying to put it together. Luckily she wasn't such a power mad disposition that she demanded to know what they were doing. When they pronounced the room clear, they explained that Tony felt like he was being followed.

Although her suite was clear, that didn't mean they could let down their guard, since as Tony pointed out, they probably hadn't connected her with him yet. Her arrival had been pretty spontaneous, after all.

Even if they had made the connection, it was highly likely that they wouldn't have an opportunity to plant surveillance devices in the room. Once she left it vacant though, they would need to check regularly for surveillance – they'd have to train her protection detail on how to search and deal with any bugs they found.

He strongly suspected that one or more of the alphabets had gotten curious because Gibbs had been stirring up a hornet's nest. Another reason for him to regret his outburst in the bull pen yesterday.

Hearing a knock on the door, Tony found himself reaching for his gun as he and Fornell shot an enquiring look at Hermione, whose eyes almost popped out of their sockets at the sight of Tony's Sig.

She was quick to reassure them. "It's okay, guys. It's one of my team. I called him when you were searching the bathroom."

Fornell scowled, they had urgent information to discuss and had to strategize for tomorrow and they needed to be able to speak freely – something they couldn't do with her team around.

He was about to object but Hermione raced to the door and let in a raven-haired, slimly built male,
who barrelled through the door, demanding of her excitedly. "Where is he?"

She giggled, gesticulating at the tall individual with the gun levelled at him, those chameleon coloured eyes of his regarding the newcomer stonily. Gulping, since Tony was quite intimidating when required, even without the gun, the member of Hermione's entourage smiled nervously – his green eyes full of mischief though.

Pointing at the gun, he quizzed jokingly, "Is that anyway to greet your beloved godson, Snuffles?"

Shooting a rapid-fire glance at Hermione, seeking validation for what his heart was already declaring to him loud and clear but his head needed confirming, she nodded. Her expression a combination of mischievous trickster at pulling off her huge surprise and tender joy at being able to reunite two of her favourite wizards.

Chuckling, she responded emotionally. "Yes Tony, it really is Harry. All grown up and complaining about his grey hair."

"Hey! I am not," he objected laughingly as he raced towards Tony, who hastily stowed his weapon before being seized in a fierce bear hug that transported him back twenty years to the grounds of Hogwarts.

"Oh Merlin's ghost! I can't believe it's really you, Snuffles," Harry cried out enthusiastically.

And if both wizards were a bit shaky and teary-eyed when their emotional clinch finally broke up, then both Hermione and Tobias diplomatically chose not to notice, much less comment on the fact. Well apart from Hermione smiling like the Cheshire Cat at the Mad Hatter's tea party.

Longing to spend time with Harry and talk to him, Tony knew that it would have to wait. Hopefully after they had discussed Hermione's visit to NCIS tomorrow, they'd get a chance to catch up. After all, there was so much to talk about – a lifetime of catch up.

Hermione called down for room service, ordering them tea and coffee and they got down to it. Tobias started by filling Hermione and Harry in about the most recent developments - Tony feeling like someone was watching him and confirmation that Gibbs was trying to find out who had hired him by searching out his intelligence contacts. Hermione was steaming mad at the news and ready to go and have a piece of him right then, only to be disappointed to learn he was in Norfolk, as per her request to keep him away from Tony.

That snippet of information had Tony scowling when he heard Fornell and Hermione discussing it. Meanwhile Harry chuckled at his godfather's expression – forgetting how intimidating he could be when he'd been staring down the barrel of his gun.

"Alright, so now you know why we were searching for electronic surveillance devices in here when we came in. You'll need to check every time that a hotel staff member enters the room, even when you are here." Seeing that Hermione was going to say something, Tony got in first. "Don't worry, we checked again when they brought in the coffee."

Tobias nodded in confirmation. "And we'll show Harry and your other protection team members how to locate them too so they can carry out regular searches. Probably the most likely time to plant them will be when you leave the room."

Harry looked across at Tony who was smirking. "Care to share, Snuffles?" he asked him.

He laughed, "Yeah, I was thinking we should set up surveillance to see if we can catch them bugging you." He looked at Fornell, who nodded in agreement.
"Good idea, DiNotzo." Pulling out his phone he made a few calls. "Okay, my people are coming by in an hour and a half.

"So let's get to work out the logistics for heading to this meeting with Director Vance tomorrow before my people arrive." Fornell took control of the agenda. "It's scheduled for 11.00 am tomorrow. Do you want to use Granger or Wealsey professionally, or did you go with the hyphenated last name?" Fornell inquired tactfully.

Hermione chuckled, "Never bothered with the whole hyphenated surname thing, although I will admit that Weasley doesn't have the professional gravitas of Granger – at least not in the muggle, er non-magical world. Plus, I have a birth certificate, school records, driver's license and my degrees all under the name Hermione Granger, so let's go with that."

"Okay, I'll introduce you as Minister Granger. Now that we've settled that issue, I want it on record that I think you should request that Tony be released from his NCIS duties immediately. Now that we know that Gibbs is pissed off and curious, he poses a dual danger, and additionally, we have someone following Tony. I'm guessing it aint to ask him out on a date."

Hermione shook her head firmly. "We've been over this already, Tobias. Tony wants to finish up his time and he has my full support."

"Yes, I know. But that was before we knew he had someone watching him for what I'm pretty sure are for nefarious purposes, and then there is the Gibbs factor. He clearly spent much of yesterday stirring up interest in DiNotzo's new gig, which, knowing that it was classified and above his paygrade was at best, ill-advised, at worst breaking the law. That makes me extremely nervous," Fornell resolutely defended his stance.

"The man clearly has more than a few screws loose," Harry observed and the two feds choked.

"Look I appreciate your concern, Tobias but I have people depending on me. I can't let them down – they deserve justice and just because it got a bit difficult that's no excuse to run out on them." Tony stated determinedly.

"Yeah I know, DiNotzo. Federal agent here too. Just saying that we can consider alternatives. You could work from home – get set up to record depositions at your apartment – either via the computer or NCIS Legal could come to you. Or alternatively, you could fly back to London with Hermione and we could set up with The Met or MI5 to provide a video link for you to appear at trials or courts martial hearings as required. Where there's a will there's a way."

Hermione frowned. 'Toby, I get that you're worried but I told you I had it covered. You haven't given me an opportunity to share my plan."

"Yeah but that was before… now we know that Tony could really be in trouble from unknown forces."

"Nevertheless, I think between us all, we have it covered."

"Yeah but Tony needs a permanent protection detail and I don't think my boss will approve me being MIA for five weeks to watch his back, Kiddo."

"Well isn't it lucky that my plan involves Harry being Tony's protection detail for the remainder of his time at NCIS. Plus, he can help him with his packing and accompany him back to London." Hermione grinned triumphantly at Harry who looked equally please with himself.

Tony, meanwhile was conflicted. The idea of spending almost five weeks with his godson was
pretty exciting to him but at the same time, he didn't want to put anyone out.

"Harry, I can't ask you to do that. What about your kids?"

"At school…and besides, it's part of my job. You're our new director and if you might be in danger, you need someone watching your back, Snuffles."

"But what about Ginny? How does she feel about you being gone for five weeks?" Tony quizzed him.

"She knew what she was signing on for when I became an auror; she still married me."

Tony, who was often accused of being a master of deflection, prevarication and evasion when it came to all things personal, recognised evasiveness when he heard it but decided to watch and wait before challenging Harry. After all, in so many ways Harry – especially adult auror Harry – was a stranger to him.

"This is part of the job, Snuffles…but it is also more than that. All these years I thought you were dead and I felt guilty. If I hadn't been so stubborn, if I'd listened to Hermione I wouldn't have got sucked into Riddle's trap and gone racing off to the ministry that night you fell through the veil. You had to come racing to save us and ended up dying. So now I have a chance to not only repay the favour and make amends, but I'm going to make sure I watch your back so we get to be together again."

Tony reached out and squeezed his shoulder. Clearly they needed to have a long talk about blame – and it wasn't a teenage boy who'd been kept in the dark by his headmaster, but the time and place was not here and now. They would talk later – in private.

"I want you to come home and be with your family…I want you to meet my kids and Teddy – Remus and Tonks son. Teddy's awesome and he's going to be an auror like his mum and his godfather – and his mother's favourite cousin, Sirius Black. So I'm determined to make up for being robbed of all those years we should have been together. I was cheated out of having you as a replacement father-figure, not once but twice. I'm not risking losing you a third time, especially before we have a chance to get to know each other again. Got a lot of catching up to do."

Harry declared, his voice tremulous.

Tony nodded. He understood regrets and guilt and how it could take over your life. Truly, he didn't think he was in danger…well maybe from an enraged Leroy Jethro Gibbs, but he could handle Gibbs – he'd been doing it for 15 years. But he didn't want to put Hermione at risk.

"Hermione, while I'll enjoy having Harry around, if I've got myself a stalker, then you probably need him more than I do. I have my gun, plus a back-up and I also don't go anywhere without a knife; I'm trained in unarmed combat too."

She smiled at him. "It's fine, Tony. I brought over two muggle born wizards who were in our year at Hogwarts, Dean Thomas who shared a dorm with Harry and Justin Finch Fletchley who was a 'Puff. Plus, Dennis Creevey is going to fill in as my press secretary on this trip and he can help out as an extra bodyguard as well."

Harry exchanged an amused smile with Hermione, and Tony, ever the nosy investigator wanted to know what was so funny about Creevey.

'Nothing, we were remembering his older brother, Colin, who was killed in the war. He used to drive Harry nuts with his hero worship and obsession with sneaking after him and taking his
"Not to mention I was also trying to figure out how Hermione's regular press secretary would cope with muggle society."

Hermione chuckled, "Or more to the point, how muggles would cope with her – she's from a pure-blood family, and she's highly eccentric, even for a witch. I think muggles' heads might explode if they tried to follow her logic."

Harry snorted at that. "Witches' and wizards' heads explode when they try to follow Luna's thought processes. Muggles would probably start a riot."

Shooting an apologetic look at Tony, Hermione corrected herself and Harry. "Erm… I mean non-magicals."

"I prefer the term non-magical, Harry" Tony responded. "Muggle is a derogatory term meant to make first-generation wizards and wizards feel inferior and it makes it easier to call first gens unclean, and it insults their families. It makes them sound like foolish bumbling buffoons."

"Or tribbles," Fornell contributed, earning an amused laugh from Tony and a bemused look from Harry. Clearly not a Trekkie.

Tony nodded. "Plus, it creates complacency in wizards and witches about non-magicals. They aren't cute little cuddly teddy bears who aren't very bright. Many of them are very, very bright and some are very, very evil. They've come up with many inventions that make up for being unable to perform magic. After all, wizards might be able to fly on brooms but non-magicals went to the moon almost fifty years ago. Not to mention they can put satellites into orbit around the earth and have sent telescopes into deep space to study other planets.

"But even more crucial, calling them muggles makes it far too easy to underestimate how violent, how evil and how destructive some sections of the non-magical world are and that they are organised. Wizards and witches have no idea the threat that some of these groups, these terrorist groups like the Death Eaters pose to not just other non-magicals but to wizards and witches too. A nuclearized warhead would take out the Ministry of Magic and surrounds just as easily as the rest of London. Time to stop underestimating potential enemies just because you think of them as fluffy, not very bright pets."

Harry looked horrified and intrigued at the same time. "I'm guessing as Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, you'll be attending to that deficiency in our defences?"

Tony nodded. "Got it in one, Padawan."

Harry looked confused and Tony, Tobias and Hermione exchanged amused smiles. Okay, clearly not a sci-fi fan. Tony felt a movie marathon coming on in the very near future.

"Okay, let's back to business. I'm sure Harry will do a great job watching Tony's back, but Gibbs is likely to be unpredictable. Ever since Iran he's been…erratic." Fornell observed. "I still think he shouldn't risk it."

"Yes and I have a plan, Tobes. I told you that already." Hermione scolded him mildly.

Tony and Harry grinned. Hermione sounded like she was dressing down one of her kids.

"I thought that the 'plan' was Harry," he protested.
"Well obviously it was part of it but I have something else up my sleeve that I’ve been working on too."

Hermione pulled out a piece of parchment from her oversized hand bag cum-satchel. Tony raised his eyebrows since in his limited experience of Hermione, circa 2016, she preferred paper and pens or her iPad.

Seeing his reaction, she smirked. "When I'm working on charms or spells I prefer old school," she explained, pushing the parchment over at him so he could read it.

Concentrating, he frowned. "So okay, I'll admit to being rusty after all, I've spent almost two decades in the US, most of that time without magic. Actually it is more than two decades when you factor in there was 12 years in Azkaban. When you think about it, I've spend more of my life living free of magic than I have as a wizard. Anywaaay... bottom line I don't recognise this charm – it looks a bit like a notice-me-not charm but yet it's not. Sorry, but I can't identify it."

He looked frustrated and more than a bit embarrassed. Clearly he was going to need to brush up on his skills before he returned to London.

Harry laughed uproariously. "That's because Hermione created it last night."

She smiled, shaking her head deprecatingly, "That isn't entirely true, Harry. As you spotted, Tony, I took inspiration from the notice-me-not charm. So I can't take all the credit."

Fornell was feeling out of his depth. "What's a notice-me-not charm?"

Harry and Tony grinned, knowing what was coming – 'Didactic Hermione.' "It's also known as the disillusionment charm," She slipped into lecturing mode without conscious thought. "It's used to conceal an inanimate object or a person by making it act in a chameleon-like fashion – taking on the colours and textures of its surroundings. It's a way to hide in plain sight, and that got me thinking."

Tobias was trying to wrap his brain around it. "So if I had the notice-me-not charm cast on me, I could be sitting here and you would just see me as part of the sofa?"

"Exactly." Harry assented approvingly. Hermione had explained that while Fornell was a muggle… um non-magical human, his daughter was a witch and also related to the Weasleys which made them related by marriage. He was quite quick on the uptake for a mug – er non-magical human but then, he was a federal agent.

"So anyway, as I said, it made me think about ways to keep Tony safe on his team so he could work out his notice like he wants to." Hermione continued her explanation. "So I came up with a charm – a sort of emotional forgetfulness charm for strong emotions. Your team members will be able see you and be able to talk to you and interact normally but if they experience strong negative feelings they'll suffer temporary forgetfulness. What they don't remember, they can't act upon," she finished dryly.

"So Jethro gets angry and then poof, he can't remember what he's mad about?" Fornell double-checked.

"Yes."

Harry and Tony looked at each other and started laughing uproariously.

"But I thought that it was against your laws to perform magic on us non-magical people?" The FBI
agent objected.

Well technically, the charm is performed by Tony on himself, not them. They just may happen to be affected by it but only if they are feeling very strong emotions like anger, revenge, fear, or disgust which is directed at him. And it's not even a permanent effect, it will wear off again when they aren't around him. Think of it as a temporary disconnect between their feelings and their memory."

Hermione managed to look innocent and earnest. "Maybe it's a fine line but I think that under the circumstances, we can ignore it if we step over the line just a little."

"Not that different from being affected by a cologne he might chose to wear that gives others a headache," Harry mused mildly. "And don't forget its purpose is self-protection so just like you can defend yourself if someone attacks you – this only effects people who are a threat to Snuffles."

Tony started chuckling suddenly. When they stared at him, he explained in between snickers. "Gibbs will be so pissed off that he can't remember what pissed him off - then he won't be able to remember why that was, either. For someone like him whose default emotion is anger – especially at me, he'll be 'forgetful' most of the time. Unless I keep plying him with coffee continuously to keep him... mellow.

Fornell snorted gutturally once or twice, indicating for the grey-haired federal agent, extreme amusement.

"So I guess if you're the Minister of Magic, you have a pretty good grasp of what is lawful and what isn't," he shrugged. "Just to be clear, it won't have any permanent side effects or anything?"

Hermione nodded emphatically. "If someone is in close proximity to Tony while he's charmed and they experience strong negative emotions – the charm will put a mental barrier up between the emotion and the motivation that triggered it. And it is only transient in nature. Once they aren't around him, they'll be able to remember what they forgot."

She looked across at Tony, seeing he was deep in thought. "What's wrong, Tony?"

"Nothing's wrong...I'm just thinking how useful your new charm could prove to be when trying to apprehend someone dangerous. If it works, we need to experiment when we get back to London. It could prevent aurors getting injured or worse."

She looked pleased and embarrassed. "Let's just keep this between the four of us for now, it may need tweaking."

Harry laughed. "You're such a perfectionist, Hermione, even back in first year…"

Before the pair had a chance to devolve into friendly teasing or reminiscing, since they had Tobias' people coming soon Tony interrupted. "Hermione, can I ask a question?" Seeing he had everyone's attention he plunged in. "I noticed that ever since Tobias and I arrived you've called me Tony. You haven't slipped, not once have you called me Sirius. I'm impressed...so what's your secret since you normally stutter and stammer when you use it."

Hermione blushed bright red and stared at her feet.

Harry laughed at his friend's awkwardness, spilling the beans since she remained mute. "She charmed herself so she can't say Sirius anymore. She's embarrassed that she had to rely on a spell."

Folding her arms and pouting at Harry, she scolded him, "Stopping dobbling me in! You're
supposed to be on my side." Making eye contact with Tony she admitted to him, "I tried, Tony but I couldn't seem to stop calling you …that name. But I had to stop – there can't be any slips when you take over the DMLE. So I came up with a charm to make sure I didn't put you in danger."

He nodded. "Good idea. There's no shame in resorting to a spell." He assured her warmly, reaching over and giving her a quick hug.

Tobias agreed. Yep, whatever it takes to get the job done – so long as it isn't illegal or harmful. And changing the subject, since my team will be here soon, how about you call your team and get them in here so we can explain what's happening before my people get here?"

~o0o~

They wandered down to eat an early dinner at the hotel restaurant after setting up Hermione's suite with enough surveillance equipment to make sure she was safe, which made all three men feel moderately happy. They'd also threatened her protection detail with unspeakable horrors should they let anyone get close enough to so much as put a hand on her. Tony stared at the three wizard appraisingly.

Two of them were pretty imposing – Dean Thomas was impressively well built, he clearly spent a fair amount of time lifting weights because he had good muscle definition. Justin Finch-Fletchley wasn't as well defined, more like the sort that played rugby than pumped iron, but both wizards were strong and had worked as security in the years after they left Hogwarts and found their way back into the non-magical world. Apparently Dean had been working as a bouncer at a nightclub, in part to subsidise his art career and Justin had been the security consultant on several family businesses – albeit white collar ones.

The third of the trio was a small statured, highly energetic wizard – he reminded Tony of a jack-in-the-box. He was perky and eager to please, definitely shades of Ned Dornaget back when he was brand spanking new probie. Hopefully, Creevey knew how to take care of dirtbags, although being smaller often meant learning early on in life how to kick ass by aiming at their kneecaps or aiming slightly higher up. Either that, or smaller guys ended up getting their butt kicked pretty comprehensively on a regular basis.

After dinner, the plan was to return to return to Hermione's suite and have her team check the rooms for bugs that might have been planted by spooks when the room was unoccupied. Tony and Fornell would observe and advise as necessary. Afterwards, the British contingent, bar Harry who was going to stay with Tony, would retire to their room early to catch up on their sleep since DC was seven hours behind London and they were flagging. So while the food was excellent, the travellers all ate a fairly light dinner, soup and a small appetiser, avoiding heavy or rich sauces and ingredients.

~o0o~

They arrived at NCIS bright and early since Tony knew that it would take a while to get Harry's security pass sorted. Figuring that it would be best to sign him in as advance security for the minister's entourage rather than as his personal security detail. Tony thought that way Director Vance could sign off on Harry as a bodyguard so he settled for a temporary day pass – which still took time. When he led his godson up to the bull pen he noticed the visceral reaction. Suspecting it was the outlandish choice of wall colour or perhaps the exaggerated use of skylights, he decided not to assume.

"What?" he probed.
"I feel like I need a big glass of pumpkin juice."

Tony chuckled. "It is rather overpowering. After we got bombed a few years ago, everyone was excited that we could repaint it something a little less in your face. Unfortunately, our esteemed leader overruled us and had it repainted in this…awesome colour."

"So you won't be wanting to repaint our offices pumpkin orange, then," Harry remarked, relieved.

"Hell no!" Tony declared fervently. "Come on, let's go – I'll give you a tour of the joint."

When they arrived back in the bull pen 20 minutes later, Gibbs was there – pacing. Okay so they had gotten done with the contraband search in Norfolk, obviously – that was not expected.

"So glad you deigned to finally join us, DiNozzo." Gibbs greeted him sarcastically. "My office, NOW." He yelled before stalking off towards the elevator.
En prise

Chapter Summary

Minister Granger arrives to discuss the situation with Director Vance

Chapter Notes

Long chapter - not beta'ed! I hope you enjoy it. Sorry for the wait but work has been full on. Much thanks to the people who have taken the time to leave their thoughts. Because of you, this story has grown from what I intended. On second thoughts, not sure I should be thanking you since I envisaged this would be finished already ; D.

Tony leant over and murmured sotto voce in Harry’s ear. “Now seems as good a time as any to test out Hermione’s emotional amnesia charm, to see how good it is. Sit at my desk Harry – hopefully this won’t take long.” He paused long enough to perform the charm silently although he got a few strange looks at his hand motions.

Grinning widely at his co-workers, he wisecracked. “Muscular spasm. Must have slept on it wrong last night.”

Harry looked like he wanted to argue about accompanying him into the elevator but in the end he nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It will be fine.” Tony gave Harry a thumbs up and a cheeky grin, making exaggerated arm movements and groaning – playing up the idea he was trying to work the kinks out of his muscles. He also stretched his spine and his vertebra popped noisily as Ellie winced.

“I said NOW, DiNozzo!” Gibbs bellowed.

Tony chuckled at that, “Well he’s definitely pissed. Ideal testing conditions,” he quipped, looking relaxed and confident. Striding towards the elevator he grinned. “Keep your pants on, Gibbs.”

Entering the elevator car, he could feel the anger rolling off his former mentor. “You think this is a joke, DiNozzo? Abby’s in hospital and it’s your fault. How are you planning to fix this?”

Just as the elevator door closed, Harry slipped in, giving him an apologetic look before the boss glared at the unknown man, furnishing him with the infamous Gibbs’ glare. The one guaranteed to render green probie agents impotent or require a change of trousers. “Oi you! Get out. Use the stairs. I need to talk to my agent.”

Harry shook his head. “Sorry, no can do. I’m DiNozzo’s protection detail and he’s not getting into a lift with anyone unless I’m accompanying him.”

“Hallo… he’s not getting a lift – he’s in an elevator.” Gibbs’ tone made it clear he thought he was dealing with the village idiot. “Not to mention, I’m his boss. If I want to talk to him privately –
which is why I called him in here – I damn well will. And no jumped-up little minder will tell me how to run my team. So piss off!"

Harry stared at Gibbs, supremely unimpressed as he folded his arms. Tony figured staring down a dark lord who wouldn’t stay dead was probably a lot more intimidating.

“Hey, if you think that some washed up bully is going to intimidate me and stop me doing my job then think again. So, sod off!”

Tony grinned hearing the, “Stupid git!” Harry muttered under his breath. Somehow, invectives delivered in an English accent sounded so much more insulting – he’d forgotten just how much.

Tony was beginning to think that Hermione’s charm wasn’t working and that perhaps testing it out in the lift/elevator with Gibbs wasn’t the best idea he’d ever had. Nor was letting Harry get in there with him and the gunny – oh wait, he didn’t let him in. He’d told him to stay put!

That’s when he realised that Gibbs was about to get up and personal with Harry. His godson might be officially protecting him, but Tony couldn’t help getting between the two men to shield his godson – it was instinctive. He did it with his teammates, would take a bullet for them, so how could he not with Harry?

He knew his godson would be pissed off at him, but it was second nature for Tony to protect others from Gibbs temper tantrums, telling him to stand down would be like telling him not to breathe. He’d always been protective by nature too but DiNozzo had intensified those qualities significantly. After all, not many teenagers would go running into a burning apartment block to rescue perfect strangers and then become consumed with guilt for saving one child and not being able to save another. So Gibbs threatening Harry – no brainer.

Yet when the former Marine physically grabbed hold of Tony’s indigo lapel, his blue eyes became glassy and he immediately zoned out. His hand dropped from Tony’s suit and he stepped away as Gibbs looked at him, confused.

“What were we talking about?” he demanded, off-balanced as he looked at Harry without recognition.

Tony heaved a sigh of relief – it worked, but had taken longer than expected. That or maybe it needed actual physical contact or close physical proximity to take effect.

Looking Gibbs in the eye, he replied. “You were about to tell me about the contraband search, yesterday.”

Snorting in disgust, he revealed, “Oh yeah, that was a total bust. Twenty odd joints, a dozen ecstasy tabs, negligible amount of cocaine, plus ten cartons of Cuban cigars and the usual quantities of hooch that had been smuggled on board without paying tax. And a few minor antiquities that were obviously stolen but not terribly important or valuable – possibly taken on a dare. Broke up a couple of poker games and caught a few horny sailors but on a ship with 5000 odd Marines and sailors, that was a pretty inconsequential haul, as you know.”

Tony nodded in agreement. “Too true! Maybe the anonymous informant got the wrong ship?”

Gibbs growled in agreement. “I guess. Waste of time and resources.”

“Yeah – but maybe write it off as an excellent training opportunity.” Tony suggested, expecting Gibbs to blow a gasket since he was become red-faced and he didn’t think it was from embarrassment. He moved a few steps closer and then the senior supervisory agent went glassy-
eyed again. Blinking owlishly, he stared at Tony then Harry.

“What were we talking about?”

“That the search at Norfolk had been a bust,” Tony replied, mentally congratulating Hermione for her brilliant charm work.

Exiting the elevators soon afterwards, Gibbs strode out and Tony followed behind him, only to find all of the occupants of the bull pen crowded around watching the two senior members of the MCRT emerge from ‘Gibbs office.’ Tony spied Bishop amongst the throng of agents and admin staff who seemed to have congregated – waiting anxiously for the carnage. Bishop had that frowny thing going on, plus she was biting her lip, keying him in that she’d been worried about what was going on inside the confined space of the elevator.

Tony noticed Harry had artfully re-joined the crowd, he shot a look at his godson, winking. Gibbs headed toward the MCRT area and his desk. Meanwhile, all the concerned employees expecting a bloodbath when Tony disappeared into the elevator with Gibbs due to Abby’s brain snap, stood round with bemused expressions. Although they may have gathered due to altruistic motives, now that he seemed unharmed, they mostly looked like rubberneckers - wanting to view the accident by the side of the road.

Gibbs was about to sit down at his desk when he noticed that his SFA’s desk was occupied by a stranger so he detoured, stomping over to Tony’s desk and barked at Harry, “Who the hell are you? What are you doing at DiNozzo’s desk?”

Obviously he had forgotten their meeting in the elevator.

Harry stood up and Tony approached, standing right up close beside his boss. “This is Agent Harry Potter, he is my protection detail.”

Apparently the more exposure ‘angry Gibbs’ had to Tony, the more the forgetful effects of Hermione’s charm exerted its effect. Gibbs looked bemused and squinted at Bishop for clues to what he’d been saying and Tony casually moved back a few paces, away from his boss.

She stepped in. “Are you okay, Gibbs?”

Not wanting to lose face, he nodded. “Fine.” Looking at Harry he demanded, “Who are you?”

Harry reached out his hand, “Agent Harry Potter, and you must be Agent Gibbs.”

Absently shaking Harry’s hand, he corrected gruffly, Special Agent Gibbs.”

Harry nodded, penitently, “My apologies.”

He looked rather shocked when Tony and Bishop replied in unison with Gibbs, “Never apologise, it’s a sign of weakness.”

Harry started laughing uncontrollably, obviously thinking it was a joke and Gibbs glowered at him, definitely not impressed. Quickly realising his faux pas, the young wizard sobered quickly, adopting a serious face, inwardly very amused by the ridiculousness of the situation.

At that moment Fornell dashed into the bull pen from the elevator, eyeing Bishop and Gibbs nervously. “Morning. Is everything okay here?”

Tony smiled. “Hi Tobias, everything is fine. Bishop, meet my new protection officer, Agent Harry
Potter. Harry meet Special Agent Eleanor Bishop.” He emphasised the ‘special’ agent with a wicked gleam as Harry took Bishop’s extended hand and instead of shaking it, he bowed over it, catching her by surprise.

“Pleased to meet you, SPECIAL Agent Bishop.” Harry responded to an obviously charmed Ellie, who turned pink.

“Tony, can I speak to you in private?” The FBI agent requested urgently.

Moving over to the spot under the stairs where they went to find a modicum of privacy, provided voiced were lowered, Tony followed Fornell obediently. “Okay, what’s up, Tobias?”

“Why the hell are Gibbs and Bishop here? They’re supposed to be at Norfolk until late afternoon at the earliest.” Tobias exploded.

“Gibbs said it was a bust. They came back early.”

“So what happened, did he get nasty?”

“He was mad – ordered me into his office.” They exchanged smirks – both of them were very accustomed to receive a summons to the elevator, slash Gibbs’ office.

“And?”

“And what do you think? He was mad about Abby…demanded to know what I was going to do to fix it…grabbed my lapel and then he zoned out. Asked me what we were talking about. So I told him we were talking about the contraband search, he delivered a sitrep and we left the office. He got territorial about Harry sitting in my desk, so I wandered over and stood beside Gibbs and he had another vague out. It works – Hermione’s brilliant!”

Looking up as Leon Vance traversed the mezzanine level to reach the stairs, the director yelled across the room. “Special Agent Gibbs, my office…now!”

~o0o~

“This is bullshit, Leon. I’m not about to let some shrink mess around inside my head. They’re not happy unless they find some deep seated phobia or fear to fixate on.” Gibbs wasn’t about to let Vance know that in a moment of weakness, he’d caved to Cyril’s pressure to see his therapist. It was none of his business or anyone else’s.

“It’s out of my hands, Gibbs. Some pencil pusher clued SecNav in that you hadn’t undertaken you mandatory counselling after your shooting. Until you address that shortcoming she’s ordered you benched.” A blatant falsehood but a necessary one to protect Confalone.

Gibbs glared at him. “So fix it.”

“I told you, not possible. I was already on thin ice with SecNav over the fuckup with former agent Kip Klugman last October. This could easily be enough to tip her over the edge and fire me this time. I’m barely hanging on as it is - she wanted to know why I didn’t force you to attend the sessions when you came off sick leave last year.”

Jethro snorted. Like Leon could make him do anything he didn’t want to! “Not my problem, Leon. I’m not going.”

“If I go, then Secnav choses my replacement and they won’t put up with your crap, ignoring NCIS
rules and regs. They definitely won’t tolerate your breaking the law or letting your friends, team and family break it either. If I go, you go too, Gibbs. If by some form of divine intervention or miracle, you get to keep your job then you’ll have to play by the rules.

“Bottom line. You can’t get out of seeing the agency counsellor – even if I go.”

Gibbs stared at Vance’s poker face, infuriated with his blandly impassive countenance. How he longed to slap it; he kind of understood Abby’s impulse. The truth was that Leon had a point, unfortunately. And that pissed him off.

When Vance had first taken over the directorship, he’d been a permanent thorn in his side, always trying to piss higher up the wall than him, just to prove he was the alpha male. Getting a new director would be a giant pain in his ass – and they might not prove to be as easy to control as Leon.

Thinking that he could maybe talk Sarah Porter around – after all, she owed him for getting her daughter back again after the kidnapping - he capitulated. “Fine, Leon. I’ll make an appointment to go see the shrink next week.” That should give him the chance to play the ‘you-owe- me- card, with the red headed Secretary of the Navy.

“Not good enough, Jethro. SecNav has already made an appointment for your first appointment today at 1130. Until you’re cleared by Dr Carlisle, you’re benched. Until the psychologist is satisfied you’re fit for field work SecNav wants you training the latest batch of recruits from FLETC in advance firearms training while DiNozzo will assume temporary command of the MCRT.”

Damn it! That didn’t give him any room to manoeuvre – today anyway. But he was pretty adept at dealing with shrinks. If Carlisle was female, he would flash his blue eyes and his infamous half smile at her and she’d go weak at the knees and fall all over herself to clear him. If Carlisle was a guy, he’d just glare at the jerk and intimidate him to make him sign off on his psych clearance. Worst case scenario, if the doc demanded a second session, he’d drop by Sarah Porter’s home tonight and remind her she wouldn’t have her daughter if it weren’t for him.

“Fine, but don’t think this won’t cost you, Leon. And I will collect!”

As he stormed out of the director’s office, it occurred to him that he had intended to tear DiNozzo a new one for getting Abby into the mess she’d found herself in. He was going to demand he put it to rights. Damnit! DiNozzo must have diverted him somehow with his idiocy.

With a target fixation that would have put an obsessed fighter pilot to shame, Jethro vowed to confront him asap to insist that he fix the fubar mess he’d created. Meanwhile he tore down the stairs to the bull pen.

~o0o~

Tim had arrived after Gibbs had been summoned to the director’s office, looking rough. Seeing the rest of the team had had beaten him in to work he scowled at Tony. “Before you get on my case, we didn’t finish until 0115 this morning and then the boss insisted we drive back to DC instead of staying over. Maybe if you hadn’t considered it beneath you now you’re so important, we’d have gotten finished earlier if we’d had you to help. Or deflected Gibbs’ anger since it was your fault he was in such a bad mood.”

Tony went and got into Tim’s face before replying. “The reason I didn’t go to Norfolk with you had nothing to do with self-importance, McGee. I was following Vance’s orders.”
“Yeah sure…keep telling yourself that, while we have to suck it up and deal with Gibbs bad moods. Thanks for that.” Tim muttered under his breath, in his most obnoxious passive aggressive fashion. He pushed past Tony, making physical contact with him as he dropped a report on Gibbs desk before noticing Harry. Making his way over to Tony’s desk he extended his left hand, “Special Agent Timothy McGee and you are?”

Tony came up and stood close to him. “This is Agent Harry Potter, he will be my protection detail.”

“Welcome to NCIS Harry. I guess you need multiple bodyguards now you’re a bigshot,” he snarked at Tony, cynically.

Tony exchanged glances with Harry. So obviously Hermione’s forgetfulness charm didn’t work on passive aggressiveness, only more overt types of aggression. Made sense – after all no one was ever physically harmed by, ‘I was just having a joke’ or ‘can’t you take a joke’ put-downs. They were more insidious in nature and harmful - over the long term, so the forgetfulness charm probably didn’t recognise them as a threat.

Harry shot McGee a look that would have melted a Death Eater. “Special Agent,” he acknowledged, stiffly before turning to Tony. “Can I do anything for you, Director?” he enquired respectfully.

“Thanks, Potter, but I’m fine at the moment.” Tony answered sitting down at his desk.

McGee and Bishop followed his lead and sat down and logged onto their computers, Ellie looking at Tim contemplatively – not pleased by his attitude. Tim, meanwhile, was reading his email, gulping and blanching as he read the ‘invitation’ from IA to report at 1400 hours for an interview into the attack on Special Agent DiNozzo. Slumping in his chair, he wondered how things had ended up in such a mess. Only a few weeks ago he had told Tony he was one of his best friends.

~o0o~

Vance stared at the Honourable Hermione Granger, Minister of Cooperation, which he knew damned well was code for a super-secret organisation. One that he was getting unpleasantly visceral vibes that was probably part of military intelligence. His gut was telling him not to inquire too closely into who they were and to just keep them happy.

Outwardly, the young woman with the warm brown eyes and the chestnut locks of glossy long hair coiled into a French braid, looked like a fashion plate. Her charcoal business suit was expensive and impeccably cut, no doubt it was some designer label. She definitely didn’t look old enough to have reached the lofty position that she had and yet, despite her youth there was an aura about her that shrieked danger.

Perhaps it was the self-assured air she’d projected that screamed she was confident in her ability to take care of herself. Even surrounded by her protection detail and her minions, she seemed to exude a confidence that screamed ‘mess with me at your peril’. Plus, he was pretty sure that this woman was intellectually his equal, at least. Not something Leon was accustomed to encountering very often, especially in politicians. Usually they were cunning as sewer rats, had the morals of street pimps and the ambition of a Miss World contestant, but they weren’t usually intellectual giants.

Then there was Agent Potter, who was hardly the most physically imposing of specimens and yet the man had an air about him too, that Vance was at pains to identify but failed. It was indefinable but everyone on the minister’s staff seemed to defer to him, even the minister seemed to have a
relationship which was one of equals rather than superior and a subordinate. Looking at the pair who sat in his office exchanging looks that spoke of an easy familiarity, he wondered if they were a couple. They both had an almost identical air of innate capability about them but unlike Gibbs or even the minister’s own bodyguards, who exuded overt physicality and nonverbal cues that were intimidatory, their’s were way subtler and therefore, to Vance at least, far more daunting.

Hell that silent communication thing that they were doing was seriously freaky. He was definitely getting thrown off his game with their ability to read each other so easily. Even if they weren’t together, they’d know each other a long, long time to have such an extraordinary level of trust and understanding. Perhaps they’d been partners and then she had been promoted or decided to go in for politics. Still, they were definitely an enigma - since as far as he could tell by making use of ‘safe’ forms of investigating Ms Granger, such as Debretts and the UK Who’s Who, her DOB was 18th September 1979. Given that she’d completed degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge, that left very little time for such a meteoric rise up the ranks to her powerful position.

Yet he had the distinct impression that she was no mere figurehead, that she’d definitely earned her job and he felt rather intimidated. It wasn’t often that he butted heads with someone who could match him intellectual but he had the feeling -albeit a rather uncomfortable one, that she was also more than capable of taking care of him physically, should he attempt to threaten her in any way. Even though she didn’t scream assassin, unlike Ziva David had, making constant threats about paper clips that made you reluctant to turn you back on her, even when she was supposed to be on your side. No the minister’s indefinable threat was far subtler than that. It made him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Perhaps the most concerning thing for Leon was the fact that his own agents and ancillary staff had behaved both outrageously and unlawfully, putting him in a highly vulnerable and defensive position. To try to salvage the situation he needed to placate this dangerous ally or else could he kiss his job goodbye.

He was just relieved that SecNav had opted to leave him to face the music on his own. Typical politician, she was hoping to limit any fallout onto him. However, since she didn’t know everything, it was easier to keep it compartmentalised and more chance to save his job than if she was physically peering over his shoulder and getting underfoot.

He groaned when Minister Granger handed him a prepared agenda. Despite the rushed nature of the trip and their meeting, she was clearly well prepared and highly organised. Damn Gibbs and his team!

Hermione sipped her tea (how very British of her) while Potter opted for coffee and she drilled Leon with those warm brown eyes which suddenly had lost their geniality.

“I took the liberty of preparing an agenda in the interests of not wasting time, since we are both busy people. So I suggest that we start with item one, to wit, Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs. I think in the spirit of cooperation,” and here she paused, giving the NCIS director a very old-fashioned look before continuing. “We’ll show our cards upfront and admit that we’re aware that he’s been trying to identify the agency which Tony DiNozzo will head up, in spite of being informed that it was classified information to which he was not entitled.

“So far, we know that he’s reached out to sources inside NCIS who have sizable resources within the intelligence community, not to mention, reaching out to the CIA.”

She paused and Leon gulped. *This was not good – he didn’t know about the CIA. If this was a game of chess she’d effectively just taken out his Queen in the opening moves.*
“My colleagues in London have informed me that a Doctor Mallard has been making enquiries about our agency, particularly amongst the British military intelligence community. I understand that he was a part of it in the past, so he really should know better but apparently his loyalty lies with Gibbs these days rather than HRH.”

_Damn it, he did not know about Dr Mallard, either. She’d effectively just removed one of his rooks from the board, maybe two._

“Suffice to say that NCIS needs to control these people,” Hermione warned, remaining preternaturally calm.

Vance felt his testicles shrivel at her words, and although she’d opted not to sink to making melodramatic threats, somehow like the minister, it was far more menacing. The tacit ‘or we will’ was nonetheless expressed loud and clear.

“I have no doubt that they will have involved other agencies too and we have reason to believe that this attempt to gain access to highly classified information has placed Tony in imminent danger.”

_Oh shit!

“My sincere apologies for any peril he may be facing due to the actions of NCIS personnel. I’ll arrange for a full protection detail to guard him.”

“That won’t be necessary, Director Vance. We take care of our own. Agent Potter will remain here in DC and accompany him until he flies out to London.”

“One agent, 24/7 to protect him? I think you’ll need more than just Agent Potter, not meaning to insult your abilities, Potter.” Leon objected…thinking of the fallout if something should happen to DiNozzo. He couldn’t survive anything else going wrong -he wasn’t even confident he could survive what had already happened.

“Oh trust me, Harry is more than capable of defending his target and in this case, his target is also a highly trained, very capable federal agent.” Hermione replied, chillingly.

“I’m not denigrating your agent’s abilities in any way or Tony’s but this is our mess and I’d like to help clean it up. Plus, Tony is one of our own and we look after our own, Minister Granger so let me help.”

Leon noticed that Hermione had gone pale and she was chewing her bottom lip as she exchanged a silent but inscrutable communication with Agent Potter. If he’d known her better, he would have definitely feared for ‘his boys’ or even his nose since she was incandescent with rage.

“First off Director Vance, Anthony DiNozzo belongs to us now and we take much better care of our own than what you’ve managed to do, to and for Anthony DiNozzo.” She replied, her consonants clipped, although her rather plumy upper middle-class accent remained well modulated, so for strangers it was unlikely they’d understand the depth of her anger or how close he came to being transfigured into a pile of steaming crap.

“He ceased to be one of yours a long time before I snaffled him up to head our agency. You’ve totally wasted his very considerable skills – which should be a crime by the way. You’ve forced him to play the class clown because an aging, has-been leader with massive delusions of grandeur, felt threatened by his talents.

“In my humble opinion, you’d have to replaced Tony with a top notch undercover expert AND someone who could train the other team members to do what came naturally to him. Then, you’d
need to procure a very skilled investigator who had Tony’s people skills, an extensive network of contacts in law enforcement and intelligence communities and the ability to think creatively. And even then you still wouldn’t be able to replace him. Tony is also loyal, caring and self-sacrificing - he’s irreplaceable.”

Agent Potter had scowled fiercely during Hermione’s recitation of Tony’s attributes and he finally decided to contribute. “Yeah but I’m sure that Special Agent Gibbs would be much happier if he could replace him with three agents.”

The two Brits exchanged enigmatic looks. “What makes you think that?” Hermione wanted to know, and Leon was glad she asked since he wondering where Potter was going with this. Gibbs hated working with people; having three new people on his team would be his ideal of the ninth circle of Hell, surely?

“Apart from his extensive array of skills – it stands to reason. Three agents fulfilling the role of Special Agent DiNozzo would be much less threatening to Gibbs than a single agent. Plus, any kudos they earned would be shared across the five agent team, rather than three agents, with the leader getting the lion’s share, since five team members are more malleable.” Harry reasoned out the hypothetical scenario.

“Additionally, with five agents to play off against each other to gain his favour, all of them fighting to establish a pecking order with him at the top, it would allow him to keep them under his thumb much easier. Not to mention with him getting older, the more team members there are to share his workload, the less obvious that would be to the team and outsiders.” Harry observed, cynically.

“True, Harry - they’d be too busy fighting over assignment details. Like supporting actors on a television show, all jockeying to be granted a few precious minutes of screen time in a 44-minute episode. Far less chance that one of them might inadvertently or intentionally try to outshine him.” Hermione mused contemplatively and Leon recalled that she had two degrees in psychology.

And it was easier to get rid of one of them if they got too big for their boots. He could hold their termination over their heads, since five agents beneath him would mean the loss of one could be easily absorbed by the rest, Leon reasoned. He hated to admit it but it was entirely plausible, plus, it was a breathtaking piece of profiling. Perhaps it might have been smart of him not simply to limited himself to the computer science courses he’d taken when he was at ASNA.

“However, the point is that Tony is one of us now and you can consider him on-loan while he works out his notice. Until he feels his obligations to NCIS and the victims and their families has been fulfilled.” Granger stated, drawing Vance back to the present.

“All due respect Director, but an agency that left such a valuable resource languishing as second banana to Special Agent Gibbs, who’s been a loose cannon for too many years, letting DiNozzo’s potential stagnate, is clearly a second rate organisation. We’ll look after our own, thanks all the same.” Harry declared, doing little to hide his scorn.

Leon was furious and yet, it was hard to argue with anything they said. DiNozzo WAS a tremendous talent that had been squandered by Gibbs, who was a piss-poor team leader. He was far too obsessed with power and mind games and those traits became more and more pronounced with each passing year. Having the agency director over a barrel certainly hadn’t help the situation any.

Still, it hurt to have outsiders criticising his agency - even when the denunciation was a fair one. Plus, he couldn’t afford to piss them off, either. And somehow – being told to 'bite me,' in that British accent was way too effective to be pleasurable.
“If you are uncomfortable utilising NCIS personnel then I can organise with SecNav to have a platoon of Marines on standby to serve as his protection detail.” Leon offered, desperate to placate these people and to avoid harm to DiNozzo, and not just for reasons of altruism.

Exchanging another inscrutable look with the minister, Harry responded. “Thank-you, but for the moment we’ll decline your generous offer. However, should the situation escalate, we’ll revisit the matter we need to reassess our director’s protection plan.”

Leon had no choice but to acquiesce, under the circumstances although he hoped like hell that DiNozzo didn’t end up with so much as a broken cuticle should the ‘situation escalate’.

“So now that we’ve dealt with Item 1.1 - let’s move on to item 1.2 – the chances that Gibbs might assault Tony because he blames him for your forensic scientist attacking him. How worried should we be about him posing a physical threat to Tony?” Hermione stated brusquely.

Leon groaned. Should he disclose the full story in case Minister Granger already knew about Dr Confalone? While he assumed that the doctor, Porter and himself were the only three that knew about Confalone’s concerns that he might try to harm DiNozzo, Granger’s people may have an informant or be bugging their phones even though that sounded super paranoid and fairly unlikely. Best to stick to what was known, he decided.

“Gibbs certainly is protective of Ms Sciuto.”

“I was under the impression she had a doctorate in forensic science?” Hermione corrected.

“Quite right, he is very protective of Dr Sciuto – some people believe that he sees her as a surrogate daughter.”

“And considering he was not able to save his real daughter, his only child from collateral damage by a drug cartel, I’d say that if he regards her as a surrogate daughter, that is a real cause for concern.” She frowned in contemplation. “He’s already demonstrated that he views DiNozzo as challenging his position, so what mitigating procedures have you enacted to protect him from Gibbs?” Hermione demanded.

Leon was cagey with his reply. “For reasons that I’m not free to go into, SecNav has ordered Special Agent Gibbs to attend mandatory counselling and ordered I bench him from the MCRT. He will be temporarily deployed as a firearms instructor with our new recruits, graduates and probationary agents. We felt it was better to occupy him than have him at a loose end while he undergoing counselling.”

He didn’t mention that the reason why he had been removed was because of Dr Confalone’s concerns or that they’d decided to protect her from Gibbs knowing she had divulged information. Not because it was privileged – it wasn’t – not when the patient or someone else was deemed to be at risk. In that case the therapist had no choice but disclose.

No the truth was that if Gibbs was actually talking to someone, the last thing they wanted was to jeopardise that relationship, for his welfare and those under him, since it was well overdue that he sought some help. Twenty years overdue – give or take. So while they hadn’t lied directly, they had left him with the impression that it was just a clerical issue, about him failing to receive the mandatory clearance to return to field status after being shot in the field.

Their rationale wasn’t simply to protect the therapeutic relationship with his doctor either, but because they felt that it may well exacerbate any feelings of resentment that he was harbouring towards DiNozzo. Similarly, SecNav had chosen not to suspend him, because she thought he might
blame DiNozzo for it, and then frankly, they’d have less chance of controlling his actions if he was left to his own devices. More than likely he would hole up in his basement drinking and growing angrier. Grace Confalone had agreed to the plan to keep him separated from DiNozzo, remove him from field work and keep him well occupied, which is what they’d managed to do.

Hermione sized him up, undoubted she was considering what he’d told her – and looked at him somewhat sceptically. “I’m getting the distinct impression that Gibbs isn’t the only one with whom you’ve been economical with the truth. However, given the information I do have access to, I agree that suspending him might be counter-productive to Tony’s welfare.”

Harry nodded. “A loose cannon like that - I’d rather know where he is, at least during work hours. It’s one less thing to have to factor in.”

Hermione nodded. “Okay, we monitor the situation but I reserve the right to demand more draconian measures, should it prove necessary.” Her use of the word draconian with her accent conjured up images of Gibbs chained up in a medieval dungeon and Vance felt that they would probably both derive some satisfaction from that. Maybe he should offer to share his doll… urm… cloth-representation- of-a- person with her – he’d bought spares!

Leon metaphorically wiped his brow. He still wasn’t out of the woods, by any stretch of the imagination but perhaps he could weather the storm and survive this debacle, this game intact. *He still had one rook, plus his bishops and knights.*

“So let’s move on to agenda point 1.3,” Hermione specified, keen to move things along. “What action have you taken regarding Special Agent Gibbs attempts to circumvent the Classified Information Act - in spite of being specifically told that he didn’t have the security clearance to know the identity of the agency who had hired his senior field agent. And as a corollary, point 1.4. What plans, if any, do you have regarding the fact that Dr Mallard, and others in NCIS ignored the Official Secrets Act, and potentially have been responsible for placing his life in jeopardy?”

Leon sighed. “So let’s deal with point 1.4 first. We will be launching an internal investigation into the possibility that a number of our people have knowingly tried to breach classified information. Our Legal Department will be determining what, if any charges may be laid, including charges of espionage. As for Gibbs, obviously he will obviously be subject to the IA investigation too and if it can be proved that his actions have led to DiNozzo life being put in danger then I’ll ask Legal to investigate if he can be charged with reckless endangerment.”

“Of course, charging them with espionage or reckless endangerment may not be in your best interests. Not if it results in further publicity, which is counter-productive to your purposes – both organisationally and regarding DiNozzo’s safety. I suggest that we confer on the best course of action once the internal investigation into the breeches has run its course, and of course, we will be guided by your recommendations.”

The meeting was interrupted by Hermione’s cell phone ringing, with the theme song from Charmed blaring out, causing Vance to look askance at her. The Honourable Minister for Cooperation didn’t strike him as the type to go in for such a frivolous television show – although, perhaps her daughter had chosen it.

Kayla had discovered that blasted show a few years ago and while he thought it was tripe, Jackie had overruled him, saying that they presented strong female role models and that they portrayed strong sisterly love. He thought they showed too much boobs and flesh but Kayla adored them. In his humble opinion, witchcraft and the supernatural – the refuge of the feeble minded.

As to Granger’s family, the little intel. he’d managed to glean about Granger was that she was a
widow, and had two children attending a prestigious Scottish boarding school. One she’d also attended. She was certainly young to be a widowed single mother, and he’d felt a sense of simpatico with her – having to be both mother and father to two teenage kids and work full time was no easy thing.

She looked at Potter with an indecipherable expression when the phone rang before accepting the call, listening before responding, “Understood. I’ll send him down.”

Hanging up, she looked at the two men. “That was Creevey. The MCRT got a call from dispatch. Something about a hostage situation, so they are heading out.”

Harry stood up. “Fine … well I guess that’s my cue to be going, then. Apologies for having to leave prematurely… Director Vance. I’ll no doubt see you around. Minister, I’ll talk to you later,” he told Hermione as he left the director’s office hastily.

Hermione watched him go and then turned her attention back to Vance. “So let’s deal with the fluffy pink elephant in the room, shall we? Point 2 – Dr Sciuto and her attack on Anthony DiNozzo. What is her status and what is NCIS going to do about her assaulting my director?”

Leon sighed, wondering about Granger’s dogged use of Sciuto’s professional honorific. Was it a reminder that she wasn’t some unsophisticated young woman but a mature – well biologically – female with cognitive training in reasoning and logic, who should have been capable of dealing with issues without resorting to assault. Not some emotional despot who knew that she was Gibbs’ favourite and could, therefore, behave as outrageously as she wanted and get away with it. Ironic that a young, highly intelligent woman would be the one to demand Abby be made responsible for her actions.

“Dr Sciuto has been admitted to the psychiatric wing of Walter Reed for 30 days assessment after Dr Mallard and the ER doctor made a tentative diagnosis of her suffering a psychotic break. If she is deemed to be correctly diagnosed, then we will ensure she gets effective treatment,” Vance reported.

“So what are you saying – that she gets away with breaking the law?”

“Well it would be a gross violation of her rights to hold her legally responsible for her actions if she was not in her right mind.”

“Of course not. But what proof do you have that she wasn’t in her right mind when she decided to attack Tony. My understanding is that this isn’t the first time she’s done something like this. How do you know that the psychotic break – if she actually had one, wasn’t caused because you shoved her in a holding cell and Gibbs didn’t come rushing to rescue her? It could simply be that she was so out of control that finally being forced to face consequences for her actions for the first time in years was what tipped her over the edge.”

“I guess we don’t know, and maybe we never will.” The director admitted reluctantly.

“So she gets away with it,” Hermione stated baldly.

“Hardly. She’ll lose her job and that is a huge consequence for her, believe me.”

“I don’t understand. If you can’t charge her with assault because she wasn’t in her right mind, then how can you fire her for assault?”

“Because we wouldn’t be firing her for assault. Having someone with a diagnosed mental health issue would make her ineligible to work in such a sensitive job, dealing with critical evidence and
attending court to testify. The defence would question every statement she made on the stand. She would be let go because she could no longer fulfil her brief as a forensic scientist.

“Actually, if she is charged and found guilty of assault she’ll lose her job too, because again, she would not be considered to be of suitable moral character to work with sensitive evidence. The defence would make mincemeat out her in court. Her presence would make it nigh near impossible to get convictions.”

Hermione frowned. “So the only way she retains her job is if she’s faking the psychotic break and is charged with assault but found not guilty?”

“Yeah, but the chances of that happening are slim with the amount of people who witnessed her do it. While a couple of individuals may testify on her behalf, many others will want to see her get her just desserts. She’s shoved the ‘I’m the favourite bratty daughter card in peoples’ faces’ a few dozen times too many, I’m afraid.

“However, SecNav has a proposal she wanted me to present to you that she hopes you’ll consider. Although it’s true that it is very unlikely that Dr Sciuto could get off scot-free, if she is deemed to be fit to stand trial, it isn’t a done deal – not unless the doctor pleads guilty. If she were to be found not guilty then she could get off with no consequences. With your permission we could offer to drop the assault charges, in exchange for her agreeing to resign from NCIS.”

Hermione considered this proposal, stony-faced. “Why would you want me to accede to this scheme. What’s in it for you?”

Vance regarded her with reluctant admiration. He’d deliberately presented the situation so that Hermione would see that being charged with assault was the one scenario that may allow Sciuto to get away with assault and retain her job. As remote a possibility though it may be. Yet instead of exploding with righteous indignation about her not facing adequate consequences for her actions, like he’d expected, Granger had seen straight through his proposal. He’d rightly adjudged her to be a highly intelligent adversary who had immediately seen that they had an agenda in not charging the forensic scientist. As he was considering how to reply to her pointed question, she shocked him by answering it herself.

“You don’t want her charged because that could create havoc with appeals against convictions in every case she’s worked on, over what, 16 or 17 years?” she questioned him shrewdly.

Seeing his astonished expression Hermione glowered at him. “What? Hardly rocket science, Director to figure out what was your real impetus was – and it wasn’t my director, either. I’ll want to discuss this with my team before I decide – particularly Tony; although I think I know what he’ll say. He won’t want to see criminals freed on appeal because Dr Sciuto was too foolish to control herself. But I do have one stipulation if you want me to seriously consider your request.”

The minister and the director locked gazes as they acknowledged that Hermione was in an advantageous position to have her proviso agreed to. NCIS had more riding on keeping the situation with Abby on the down low than Granger did in seeing that she was made to pay for her actions.

“And what might that stipulation be?” Leon inquired, trying to pretend that he wasn’t going to agree to whatever it was she demanded. Even if he didn’t fool her, at least he could engage in some self -deception couldn’t he? Truth to tell, he was getting pretty fed up with feeling so damned impotent. For someone as well-endowed as he was, it was a very uncomfortable feeling.

“I want to see Dr Sciuto and talk to her,” Hermione stated simply.
“As you know, Dr Sciuto is undergoing psychological evaluation and will be for the next 28 days. She isn’t permitted visitors.”

“I have two degrees in psychology - as I’m sure you know, Director Vance. I’m not going there for a social visit. I want to see for myself if she is trying to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes. I’m sure that the Secretary of the Navy will be able to arrange for me to assess Dr Sciuto, seeing she’d in Walter Reed. It might be more…problematic was she in a civilian hospital.”

Leon admitted mentally that she had a damned good point. To keep Granger onside, SecNav would probably agree to a lot more unreasonable requests than talking to Sciuto, right down to selling her first born or offering his balls up on a silver platter. He could feel himself being boxed quite effectively into a corner. With just a few pawns and his knights left, he might as well surrender his king since she was in an unbeatable position.

Sighing deeply, he acceded. “True. But I’ll need to talk to Secretary Porter about this, obviously. Would you like for me to arrange for your group to take a tour of NCIS while I confer with SecNav about your request? Or alternatively, I could organise a tour of the naval base for you or perhaps arrange to have you driven back to your hotel?”

Hermione considered her options before electing to take a tour of the agency. As he escorted her out of his office he noticed that her entourage was waiting for her in the outer office. Two burly agents, her press secretary and her personal assistant all stood deferentially as they walked together. Not that he should be surprised, for all her unassuming manner she was a cabinet minister. What was more surprising was that Delores Bromstead from HR was waiting in the outer-office as well.

“Delores, were you wanting to talk to me? I have to make some urgent phone calls. Can we talk later, perhaps we could schedule a meeting this afternoon?”

“Actually, Director, I was hoping to snatch a few minutes to talk to Minister Granger. I have Special Agent DiNozzo’s medical records downstairs. I thought the minister could take them back with her.”

Leon considered her statement. He was going to see who was at a loose end in the bull pen then order them to give Granger a tour of the building, but he had a better idea. “I need someone to show the minister around while I make a couple of phone calls. Perhaps you could that that, Delores?” After all she was head of Human Resources.

The somewhat dour woman looked delighted to be asked which was surprising. “I’d be honoured, Director Vance. If you and your people would like to come with me, I’d love to show you around the agency,” the head of the Human Resources department invited the group shyly, as she led them out of the director’s office.

As he watched them depart, it occurred to him to wonder how Delores had known that Minister Granger was in the building, since, for security reasons they hadn’t announced her arrival. Plus, how the hell did she know that Granger was DiNozzo’s new boss?
Subtexts and Sub-populations

Chapter Summary

Delores takes the UK visitors on a tour around NCIS and Hermione has her eyes opened about some issues she's never before considered.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who left a comment - always very much appreciated. This beast has grown much larger than I envisioned at the start - in fact much of this chapter is the result of feedback and was never intended to be a part of the story originally. I've had the epilogue written for at least three months so this u-turn has created some headaches. Hope it was worth the wait.

This story isn't beta'd but if you notice any big faux pas I'd appreciate the heads up. No matter how many times I proof I always miss something.

Hermione followed the spare, angular woman as she escorted them towards the lift, suggesting that they might want to start their tour down in the bull pen. Delores apologised, “I can’t show you MTAC – the Multiple Threat Assessment Centre – I’m afraid that I don’t have security clearance to enter that area. It’s restricted.”

As they all squeezed into the lift together she studied the tall woman discreetly. She vaguely remembered Tony mentioning someone named Delores; he seemed to be rather fond of her. Hermione noted that Ms Bromstead had a melancholy about her that could easily be interpreted by other people as anger. She recalled a popular expression at the moment - resting bitch face - and she thought Delores epitomised that definition to a T. Her prickly appearance and dour demeanour meant that people probably never bothered to look beyond her austere outer wrapping.

Still, if she was a friend of Tony’s she must be more than a petty bureaucrat and who better to see beyond her façade to keep others at bay than Tony. A wizard who expended so much energy ensuring that no one got close enough to him to figure out what he was really hiding. Also, Hermione noticed that when the severe looking woman spoke about Tony, Delores smiled and her whole demeanour was transformed – she become less tense somehow.

So she was probably not hiding consciously, more likely hiding because someone or something had hurt her badly and she was unconsciously trying to protect herself from getting hurt again. Classic defence mechanism – sadly.

Hermione had a sudden flash of intuition that smiling – being happy - wasn’t something that came naturally to this woman.

She found herself comparing Delores to her mother – externally they were of a similar physical type. Both were ectomorphs, naturally tall and thin with little to no body fat. Hermione had also inherited her mother’s physique, but like her mother, despite their height and their slenderness, they
both had a softness about their features that was most definitely lacking with Delores.

She suddenly realised that the difference probably came down a life-well lived, a life despite having experienced great sorrow and tragedy, which had also been full of loving, laughter and joy too. Her mother, despite enduring losses over her life, including difficulty conceiving and several miscarriages, had also been blessed with a fulfilling career, home and a loving family, which included a daughter and two grandkids. Although they were of a similar generation, by contrast with her mother, the older woman seemed dried up and devoid of joy. That is, until she smiled, and Hermione felt that it was a fairly rare occurrence. Delores obviously had enjoyed professional success but Hermione wondered if she had family or people who cared about her.

“We’ll put ourselves in your most capable hands, Ms Bromstead,” she replied cordially to the Human Resources manager, responding to her question about visiting the bull pen, even though she knew that Tony wasn’t there.

Delores practically glowed as she beamed at not only the minister but her entire entourage. Somehow her bearing became proud although it was subtle, more of an attitudinal thing than a physical one. In a weird way, despite the obvious physical differences between the two very different individuals, the sheer joy at being on the receiving end of her compliment reminded her of Dobby when Harry had offered him genuine but simple praise. She teared up thinking of the little elf who’d sacrificed himself for them so bravely.

“Please, call me Delores, Minister Granger. I’m so very honoured to be able to show you around NCIS. Plus, I thought that you might be interested to see where Tony works?” She asked, seeking out Hermione’s reaction and smiling again when she nodded.

As the head of the Human Resources department led the way out of the lift and they all followed in her wake, Hermione intuition pinged again. Delores’ demeanour might manifest as angry on the surface but it wasn’t anger so much as a bitter resignation and a world of weariness. What had caused it, she wondered?

Delores led them to the MCRT work space, pointing out Tony’s desk where his beloved Mighty Mouse stapler took pride of place on his desk along with the detritus of files, reports, scribbled notes and phone messages littering his desk. “Wow, I thought Tony was exaggerating about being inside a pumpkin.” Hermione commented, spinning slowly to take in the room.

“Surely this is cruel and unusual punishment making people work in a place painted such a bloody awful colour,” Justin agreed with his boss rather emphatically, given a mock shudder. “Uhwww. Makes me feel like a pepita seed.”

“DiNozzo must be colour-blind. How else would he be able to work in such an appalling environment day after day?” Dean agreed with his former year mate unreservedly.

“It does take some getting used to. Remind me to show you the conference room – it has accents of ultramarine blue and vermillion red as well as the orange. Since victims of crime or grieving loved ones are frequently interviewed in there, I’m sure they must feel like they have woken up in a Magical Mystery Tour. Personally, I think that some soothing pastel shade would be far more conducive to encouraging them to be calm and share information to agents. However, no one ever asked me what I think.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, but also stared at Delores speculatively, wondering at her choice of words, even if she was acquainted with the Beatles album and movie since both her parents were fans. Still it twanged her antennae and made her study the woman even more intently.
As she showed them around, Delores asked if there was anything in particular they were keen to see. Considering her question momentarily, Hermione responded that she’d be very interested in seeing their forensic lab and autopsy facilities. After showing them the evidence garage with the retinal scanner that everyone was suitably impressed with but attempting to act nonchalant about, she followed up with a visit to the gym where some teams were training.

Next Delores led them back to the lift, down to the bowels of the building where the autopsy suite was located, regaling them with anecdotes about the building. She explained that over a decade ago, a terrorist gained access to the building in a body bag delivered to the morgue and how a killer smuggled himself in by hiding under the seat of a taxi cab that was driven up to the gates of the Naval Base with a corpse in the back seat.

“We even had a disgruntled lab technician get hired on who had a grudge against Tony and over a number of weeks stole evidence such as gloves that Tony had been wearing, his blood and an impression of his teeth from food he stole from a bin in order to set him up as a murderer.”

“Sounds like your security could do with being beefed up, considering you’re a Federal law enforcement building, especially post 9/11.” Penelope Clearwater observed wryly.

“Indeed.” Delores acknowledged, nodding unequivocally. “Having been partially blown up a few years ago, I’d have to agree with your assessment. However, regarding the disgruntled lab technician who was out to frame Tony, luckily, Dr Sciuto was able to find DNA from the carpet fibres he stole from Tony’s car and used to set him up. It was quite ironic that her forensic evidence finally cleared him since it was what locked him up in FBI custody, in the first place.

“Tony was locked up?” Hermione blurted out in concern. He had left out that minor detail in the telling of the tale when he’d mentioned it to her while trying to explain why they should let Abby get away with her outrageous behaviour. She imagined how badly Sirius would have dealt with that experience.

“Yes but once Sciuto discovered Sterling’s DNA on the carpet fibres and realised he was not who he claimed to be, he was released.” She assured them quickly.

“How did he get hired in the first place,” Penelope inquired curiously. “Didn’t you bother to run a security check on him?”

Delores looked abashed. “Ah well, my predecessor did run a cursory check but when she tried to run more exhaustive investigations the then director deemed it unnecessary and decided to hire him.”

As she was entering the double doors of autopsy, the head of HR looked at the visitors over her shoulder. “Despite lapses in the system though, Dr Sciuto, Dr Mallard and the major case response team have had an enviable reputation in DC for solving cases. One might even go so far as to call them the Golden Triumvirate.”

Hermione exchanged a speculative glance with Penelope and quickly checked to see if anyone else had found that comment weird but if the three wizards did, they were staying po-faced about it. As the entourage passed across the threshold into autopsy, Hermione resolved that while she desired a private chat with the famed Donald Mallard, she was also intensely curious to have an extended conversation with Delores Bromstead. Her intuition was pinging that this woman’s words were not as innocent as she seemed.

Mallard was looking at some X-ray pictures on a lightbox and pointing out some features to his younger colleague, when they trooped in. At least based upon Tony’s tales of his colleagues,
Hermione figured the diminutive older man dressed in a lab coat must be Dr Mallard. That meant the taller slightly geeky looking younger guy was his protégé, Dr Palmer, who used to be a close friend of Tony’s. Even though he was a fully qualified doctor and ME too, it seemed that no one referred to him as Doctor. Dr Mallard who for some reason addressed him as Mr Palmer and Tony, who with his love of nicknames for those people he cared about, called him Autopsy Gremlin.

Mallard looked up and smiled at Delores. “Ah what do we have here, Delores?”

She smiled back, “This is the Honourable Hermione Granger, Minister of International Cooperation and members of her staff, her assistant Ms Penelope Clearwater, Press Secretary Mr Dennis Creevey and Protection Agents – Justin Finch Fletchley and Dean Thomas. They’re visiting from the UK and the director asked me to give them a tour of NCIS. Minister Granger, this is Dr Mallard, our Chief Medical Examiner and Dr Palmer, who is also a medical examiner.”

“You’re from the UK - how delightful.” Ducky enthused. “It’s the place of my birth, you know. Welcome to NCIS, Madame Minister. I believe that must be a modern portfolio – I’m not familiar with the Ministry of International Cooperation.”

Hermione smiled noncommittally. The position was one that had existed for a couple of centuries but remained an obscure one. She didn’t intend to enlighten the good doctor though; she had a more important message to deliver.

“Dr Mallard, a mutual acquaintance in the UK asked me to pass along a message when he heard I was visiting NCIS today - Sir Edward Tippleworth?”

“Oh my goodness; Teddy Tippleworth you say? How is old Tippy doing?”

“He’s fine. Although the message is quite personal, so perhaps we could go somewhere private and have a chat?”

Ducky looked surprised. “Certainly. We could go into my office,” he replied, leading the way into a small room off the main autopsy area. “Have a seat, Madam Minister.”

Hermione shook her head. “Thank-you, but I’ll stand.” She faced the man who according to Tony, talked to his deceased patients and was obsessed with finding justice for them. Somewhere along the way though, the good doctor crossed the line and became an acolyte in the cult of L.J. Gibbs. Someone with his years of experience in Intelligence really should have called the former Marine on his behaviour instead of becoming an enabler and supporter – even tacitly.

“So… Tippy! We served together, a long time ago, you know.”

“Yes Doctor, I do know. I know all about you. Sir Edward wanted me to tell you to ‘pull your head out of your nethers’… well actually I’m paraphrasing. What he said was a good deal more profane but I try to avoid using obscene language unless absolutely necessary. He wanted me to remind you that even though you’ve become a naturalised American, it doesn’t negate the oath you took to Queen and country, including not breaking the Official Secrets Act.

“Sir Edward said to tell you they are well aware this isn’t the first time you’ve used your contacts to illegally get classified intel. but because before, it was case related - for the greater good - so to speak, they’ve turned a blind eye to it. But no more. The next time it happens, they’ll sling your backside into goal and throw away the key.”

She noted the shocked expression on the mature Scotsman’s face and went in for the kill. “Your reason for reaching out to former colleagues was petty and personal. Gibbs was told by Tony
DiNozzo and Director Vance that the information he so desperate to obtain was classified. He had no right to know, which is why he involved you and a number of others who are going to have to accept that their actions have consequences for all of you. Especially Tony, who, thanks to all of your digging into what didn’t concern you, has been placed in danger.”

Mallard looked dismayed before collapsing into his chair heavily. He went to reply and Hermione beat him to the punch. “Sir Edward might be willing to give you a warning for old time sake, but I’m not feeling so charitable, Dr Mallard. I’ve been forced to drop everything and fly over here to deal with you and this dog’s breakfast. I’m going to have to leave my most valuable man here in DC to protect my new director, thanks to all you people who should know better. Just because Gibbs couldn’t handle being told to mind his own bloody business,” she chided him.

“Oh my, I never wanted to place Anthony in danger and I know that Jethro never intended to do so either. He was merely looking out for Anthony’s interests – making sure he was going to be working with people who would take good care of him.” Ducky protested, steadfast in his defence of Jethro Gibbs.

Hermione just stared at him, wondering if they were living in two alternative realities. “If you really believe that balderdash, Doctor, then you should hang up your scalpel and retire to Shady Acres Retirement Home. ‘IF’ Gibbs cared one iota about Tony, he wouldn’t have been such an abusive prat to him over the years – most especially this last one. He made it as plain as could be, in every way he could, that Tony had worn out his welcome and he no longer had a place on the MCRT.”

Dr Mallard looked incensed at her accusation but before he could respond she fired a second salvo across his bow.

“There was nothing altruistic about his desire to find out where Tony had secured a job. His true motivation was either because he’d been told it was not his concern and that offended his grandiose opinion of his own importance or he was hoping to sabotage Tony’s new job.

Dr Mallard was shaking his head emphatically. “No, you’re wrong, with all due respect, Minister Granger. Gibbs has been harsh on Anthony this year because he wants him to grow up and leave the nest. He really cares about Anthony.”

Hermione stared at the supposedly brilliant ME and former intelligence operative, wondering if they were living in two alternative realities. “He hates the fact that DiNozzo witnessed him freeze in the field when a terrorist managed to locate his Achilles’ Heel. He hates that Tony watched Budd psych him out and then escaped by having a vulnerable, radicalised youth shoot him. Then Tony compounded his heinous crime of seeing Daniel Budd make a fool out of the All-Powerful Oz – oops I mean Gibbs. His protégé upstaged the mentor and robbed Gibbs of the vengeance he’s convinced himself he’s entitled to over the past couple of decades. To which he’s become addicted.” Hermione charged cynically.

“No, no – you are very much mistaken, Minister Granger.” Mallard protested, his still quite youthful face conveying his distress. “Gibbs has had a life-altering experience and he wants Anthony to be all that he can be. It’s called tough love,” Ducky insisted.

“Oh please, no one could be that naïve and you’re too intelligent to really believe such utter tosh.” She scoffed. “Tough love is telling Tony he’s too bloody good to just be his SFA for more than a decade. Tough love is transferring him off the team and forcing him to take a promotion – it’s also being an arsehole - but still would be tough love. Tough love would be telling him he needs to leave the team and take a promotion because Gibbs isn’t going to retire and pass on the team to him, like they’d planned when he hired him. Like Agent Franks did for him.
“Benching him for no reason or because he was trying to stop Gibbs falling back into bad habits and prevent him becoming a co-conspirator to first degree murder- that’s not tough love. Telling Tony he benched him because he wasn’t looking after the team properly is not tough love – that’s abuse and it is patently false. No one is more self-sacrificing when it comes to team mates. He gave up a promotion back in 2006 to look after the team because Gibbs’ memory was still suspect when he returned from Mexico. He let the team use him as their punching bag for years, never reported his teammates when they broke protocol and endangered his life when they were supposed to be backing him up. He didn’t report David when she assaulted him after he’d been injured and tortured and threatened his life with a loaded gun.”

“How do you know this?” Mallard demanded, visibly distraught.

Pacing up and down the small area of the doctor’s office because she was justly incensed that Gibbs had the gall to accuse Tony of not caring enough about his team mates. It would be tantamount to someone accusing Gibbs that he’d wished his family dead. It was the worst possible accusation to make of the loyal and self-sacrificing wizard and just plain cruel.

“Because I talked to him, found out why he was so depressed and why someone with his professional record would be so reluctant to take a once in a lifetime job offer because he felt like a failure.” Hermione retorted.

“I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t he talk to me or Jethro – we’re his family.” The doctor looked wounded.

“Maybe it’s not the loving family you think it is. Maybe he knew you wouldn’t support him if it came to a choice between him or them. Looks to me that he made the right choice based on the choices you’ve made over the last few days, Doctor.” She responded angrily.

“And for your information, when Tony tried to talk to Gibbs he froze him out. Refused to talk to him, acted passive aggressively when he tried to breech the wall of silence between them. That’s not tough love, Doctor. If his real motivation was just wanting Tony to ‘leave the nest’ - to further his career, how is making him question his abilities as SFA, making him feel like he is incompeten. What is that supposed to achieve it? How is causing him to become depressed and isolating him from his team mates and the job he loves, supposed to encourage him to seize a promotion?”

Dr Mallard looked deflated and old but Hermione was unrepentant. The truth hurt but that wasn’t a reason to try to sugar coat it. Not this time.

“This was never about altruism and encouraging him to engage in career advancement. If that was the case, Gibbs would have thrown him out of ‘the nest’ a good six or seven years ago when he first started sacrificing his prospects because he was too loyal to leave the team.” Hermione stated baldly. “This was all about punishing him for being able to achieve what Gibbs couldn’t do with the terrorist Daniel Budd and save the boy that Gibbs couldn’t – and lead the team successfully when he was injured.

“This was all about the fact that Gibbs physical abilities are failing as he gets older, he’s slowing down. Plus all the demons he’s held back for the last few decades with inadequate sleep, a river of coffee and enough bad bourbon to sink a ship aren’t working anymore. Fact is it’s too hard for him to admit that to himself. One wonders who he’ll blame now his resident punching bag for the past fifteen years won’t be around anymore.”

Ducky opened his mouth to argue, but Hermione had pre-empted every argument he might have used. Finally, he offered, “Jethro has had a difficult life… Endured much sorrow.”
“Oh for Pete’s sake, Doctor. Do not use that tired old excuse on me, it won’t wash.” She exploded, feeling furious that he dared to play that card. “So he lost his wife and daughter. Big whooppy-do! So have plenty of people who’ve mourned their losses, done their grief work and found the strength and courage to move on with their lives instead of wallowing in self-indulgent pity parties for more than a quarter century. I’m a widow, I’ve lost more family and close friends fighting terrorists than I can count,” she admitted candidly before waving away the doctor’s expression of condolence.

“What I didn’t do was use their deaths to treat other people like dirt or break rules in order to get my own way. I used their deaths to try to create a better place, tried to become a better person to justify surviving when they didn’t.”

“Perhaps you’re right that Jethro has used his loss as a crutch,” Ducky admitted extremely reluctantly. “But this year has been most traumatic for him. He came extremely close to dying…”

Again Hermione interrupted. “First off, if we are being technically accurate about it, this wasn’t the first time he’s come close to dying. I understand he was clinically dead when he managed to drown himself and a civilian some years ago when he drove a vehicle off a pier to try to escape two thugs with guns. And point two, Gibbs returned to work following this brush with death without being psychologically or physically cleared for field work, so that’s on him for not getting help. And you and Director Vance failed to stop him and then permitted him to run around running a major crime response team which he was ill equipped to lead. His treatment of Tony, who did nothing more than do his duty and do it with honour and excellence is testament to his psychological unfitness to lead.

Hermione suddenly sighed knowing that cognitive dissonance made it unlikely that any of the NCIS crew would be prepared to question long held points of view, even patently false ones – despite how much evidence she presented to them to support her arguments.

Figuratively throwing her hands in the air, she gave up. “Fine, I should know better than expect you to listen to reason. You can’t admit that Gibbs isn’t the Saint you’ve all made him out to be. That would force you to examine your own behaviour and deal with the reality that you support a bullying hypocrite. I’m done - just know Doctor if you or anyone tries to find out about Tony’s job I’ll personally make sure you live to regret it.”

Hermione skewered him with a look that had reduced many a wizard or witch to jelly when she’d been a Hogwarts prefect – hands on her hips, feet akimbo and a sneer that would shame both Malfoys and Severus Snape.

“And if anything happens to him because you or one of the other NCIS numpties decided to meddle in classified intelligence, I’ll personally throw you in gaol for the rest of your life. Trust me, I know a super classified one which will make Guantanamo Bay look like a Caribbean resort in comparison.” she promised, trying hard not to hex him or destroy the office.

She comforted herself by imagining these idiots being incarcerated in Azkaban, even without having to endure Dementors to torture them for years. She also speculated if they could endure it with half the grace that Sirius exhibited during his unlawful incarceration.

Stalking out of the office, the minister joined her team, fuming at the elderly ME who was supposed to be a highly intelligent individual and yet, he had for years been complicit it allowing Gibbs, an unstable individual with the emotional maturity of a toddler to essentially run the agency. Luckily she had a lot more self-control than when she saw red and punched Draco Malfoy in the nose as a hot headed third year schoolgirl. Still it didn’t mean she didn’t have fantasies of punching Gibbs or Mallard, or McGee or Vance or… well the whole bloody box and dice.
However, Hermione shouldn’t have been surprised that the ME had chosen to support Gibbs so staunchly. There was ample evidence of Mallard’s gross failure to act professionally in his support of Gibbs repeatedly hitting Tony on the back of the head. As a doctor of longstanding years of practice, not to mention being a medical examiner who got to dissect brains on a regular basis, he was most definitely aware of the dangers of repeated blows to the head. He was aware of the likelihood of experiencing dementia, brain damage and movement disorders such as Parkinson-like syndromes. There was plenty of irrefutable evidence and that it generally took several decades after the insults occurred before those symptoms manifest. Merlin knows, even lowly medical students knew the danger of continual insults upon the head thanks to boxers and athletes who played contact sport, such as gridiron - and they wore helmets.

Even if there’d only been even the flimsiest of causal links, the horrors wrought on the individual by those disorders were terrible that it should have been enough for the doctor to remonstrate and report Gibbs for it. After all, it was technically an assault and against departmental rules and regulations – and yet he did nothing. So much for the Hippocratic oath he’d sworn – first do no harm!

Delores must have noticed that when Hermione had joined them she was clearly unhappy, because the older female cut Jimmy short in his telling of stories about various bizarre cases they worked on over the years. Hustling them all out of Autopsy, the department head continued to shoot glances at the minister trying to gauge her mood. After stopping off at the Human Resources Department to pick up Tony’s personnel file - which was entrusted to Penelope for safekeeping, they were headed toward the forensic lab.

Just before they entered the lab Delores dropped another bombshell while she was promising Hermione she’d keep an eye on Tony and his protector in case he needed anything during his extended stay in DC.

“Of course, since Agent Potter has been handpicked, dare I say the one chosen to watch Tony’s back, that he’s probably highly capable of taking care of himself. But still, it doesn’t hurt to know that help is on hand should he ever need anything - even if it’s a home cooked meal. Tony’s very taken by my meatballs and its always an honour to help our cousins from across the pond.”

Hermione looked at the older woman, trying to figure out who was she was. Deciding that enough was enough, Hermione stated firmly, “I’d really like to see that conference room you spoke of, Delores.”

~o0o~

Hermione watched Abby Sciuto through the two-way mirror as she interacted with the staff. She’d been intently watching her interactions with others on the ward during their group therapy session too, looking for any tells to give her a clue about whether she was faking or not. The minister had talked to people at NCIS who knew her: Delores, Special Agent Balboa, Dr Palmer, Tobias and Tony. Delores had, after Director Vance given approval, obtained a copy of Abby’s psych evaluations plus, transcripts of her giving evidence on some cases for her to analyse. Basically, over the last 36 hours Hermione had studied her, trying to learn as much as possible in the limited time she had, in preparation to finally talking to her.

One thing she wouldn’t do would be to underestimate Dr Abigail Sciuto. The woman had an intelligence quotient of 145 and although Hermione had a higher IQ, intellectually, Abby was no pushover. The woman had completed a doctorate in forensic science and was respected by her peers for the work she did at NCIS. It would be stupid to underrate her, despite the fact that she seemed to have the emotional quotient of a toddler with the associated absence of maturity markers.
such as inability to delay gratification and her childlike egocentric belief that she was always right.

Yet for all her acting like a spoilt child, she still managed to function normally in the real world when she was working as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity and she hung out with nuns – doing good works and tenpin bowling. Hermione was certain neither group of individuals would tolerate her being selfish, violent and a brat for want of better descriptor.

This suggested to Hermione that Abby was less likely to have one of a number of personality disorders, which for example would explain her overdependence on Gibbs and her belief that he had seemingly magical powers. But since she apparently managed to hold everything together adequately enough to do her job while he was off work for four months after his near death shooting last year, that made that theory far less credible.

The fact was that her over-the-top quirkiness suddenly became problematic at NCIS, especially when Gibbs was around but she was able to conform to norms of socialised behaviour in other settings. Personality disorders don’t come and go in different settings, so Sciuto’s outlandish antics were more than likely a result of learnt behaviour. Tony had admitted as much – that the guys had indulged and cosseted Abby because she was Gibbs favourite and they were modelling his behaviour. She had taken advantage of the situation because she was manipulative by nature… well by nurture too.

The pensive witch thought back to what Tobias had found when he’d searched her apartment. It seemed that Dr Sciuto had quite the fascination with criminals faking mental illness to escape punishment, including David Berkowitz aka Son of Sam. He’d claimed to have received orders from a demon-possessed Labrador Retriever ordering him to kill six people over a three-year period. Later he’d admitted this had been a ruse to escape prosecution.

Abby also seemed intrigued by the notorious case of Vincent Gigante. He was a Mafia boss who, for decades, wandered around Greenwich Village wearing his pyjamas. He also had conversations with parking meters, drooling and mumbling to show mental incompetence. When facing racketeering and conspiracy to murder charges, he managed to successfully delay standing trial for years, fooling a number of experts.

Even after going to jail, he continued maintaining the ruse of mental insanity for another six years, and not until plea-bargaining when facing even more serious charges did he finally admit that it had been a massive hoax. Hermione knew that Gigante was considered by many in the field of forensic psychology as the most brilliant malingerer ever. Certainly he was the most infamous psychological malingerer, so it wasn’t that unusual that Abby had biographies about him or Berkowitz. Not when taking in isolation – interest in criminology was not a crime or suspicious of itself.

Fornell also found a copy of Ken Kesey’s classic, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and the Oscar award winning movie of the same name in Abby’s apartment. While both the book and the film were classics of their time, paired with her fascination with criminal malingerers, it added weight to the possibility she was faking symptoms to get out of being held responsible for her rash behaviour. She certainly had the know-how and the smarts.

The FBI… okay Fornell had, in light of the discovery, demanded that a forensic psychiatrist examine her, one who had training in diagnosing criminal malingering. Which for a simple assault case, no doubt seemed to be a definite case of overkill in most people’s opinion, but Fornell was extremely irate with the Goth and the situation. Basically he really wanted her in jail but that was looking increasingly unlikely.

So Hermione watched intently as the forensic psychiatrist Dr Jonas Leyton conducted a Structured
Interview of Reported Symptoms (SIRS). The SIRS having been extensively tested in inpatient, forensic, and correctional populations and was believed to be highly accurate in detecting malingering psychiatric illness. Leyton suggested that Hermione could if she wished, administer two scales from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Revised (MMPI-2) which were the most frequently used tests for evaluating suspected malingering - the F-scale and F-K Index. For a highly intelligent individual however, it was not impossible to beat it – hence they’d decided to use the SIRS as well. She’d ended up declining his offer, preferring to take a less adversarial role, wanting to build a rapport.

Rereading the notes she’d been making on Abby- looking for any weak spots in her defences - Hermione’s eyes’ skimmed the bullet points she’d created: adopted, adoptive parents deaf – adoptive parents loving and nurturing. She couldn’t help but compare and contrast this with someone else she’d encountered on this trip.

~o0o~

Flashback:

Once they were sitting down in the appalling decorated conference room, Hermione drilled Delores with her special Hermione/Super Mum/Minister-of-Magic don’t-mess-with-me look. “Right, I want to know who you are and what you know about us.”

Delores started to speak while Hermione’s team looked confused about what had sparked her ire so she interjected, clarifying so there could be no claim to not understanding what she meant. “A magical mystery tour…a golden triumvirate aka trio...Agent Potter the one chosen? Each on their own a harmless enough turn of phrase but all three together… a very huge coincidence and I stopped believing in harmless coincidence when it came to my friends a very long time ago.”

Suddenly Penelope, Dennis, Dean and Justin directed laser like glares at Delores too, as she tittered somewhat nervously, her hands fidgeting with a stray pen that had been left by the previous users of the room. “I was hoping you’d pick up on those crumbs I dropped, Minister Granger – or to be more accurate, I understand most people refer to you by your married name - Weasley. I can’t believe that both you and Harry Potter are here at NCIS – two-thirds of the Golden Trio – it is such an honour to meet you.”

Penelope asked somewhat bluntly, “So you’re a witch?”

A look of angst crossed the older woman’s rather plain features. “Alas no…not a witch. I’m a squib.” She replied, dropping her head; the feelings of shame pouring off her in waves.

Everyone looked at Hermione, confused by the woman’s reaction. She had encountered reactions like Delores before – just not quite as explicit as hers and she wondered what her story was. Pointing slowly to her team and her friends, Hermione stated, “All of us are from non-magical backgrounds…”

“You’re all muggle-borns? I knew you were, of course, Minister, but your staff too? I’m surprised the purebloods stood for it.” Delores interjected nervously before clapping her hand over her mouth in dismay.

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was because she interrupted her or because of her blunt, yet accurate criticism of many purebloods. “Shrugging, she nodded. “Some days I have to pinch myself too,
Delores. But the bigotry is somewhat less strident these days. Thanks in part to the losses that they suffered during the second war with Voldemort – they simply don’t have the numbers they used to.

“Many whole families were wiped out of existence. Plus, the huge embarrassment that their precious dark lord that espoused pureblood rhetoric turned out to be a pathetic half-blood wizard. Can anyone say awkward? And it took Harry, another half-blood to defeat him.”

Smiling tentatively, Delores observed, “Plus the support of his two best friends, “a muggle and a pureblood.”

Hermione nodded, “True and a half giant and his Giant half-brother, a brave and loyal house elf named Dobby, a werewolf, centaurs and a bunch of other muggle borns, half-bloods and purebloods all working together. We all played a part,” Hermione gestured to her team and smiled.

“Things change, Delores. Slowly, but they are changing. But I’m still surprised that you know who I am, after all most American Squibs would probably recognise Harry and me from the war… maybe but you clearly know about my appointment as Minister of Magic too. That’s speaks of a familiarity with current affairs in the UK.”

The head of HR acknowledged Hermione’s statement. “True but I was born in England. My family was an old pureblood family. Poor as church mice but insanely proud of their blood status – probably because it was all they possessed.”

Hermione wasn’t surprised. The United Kingdom overall was still highly class conscious, so it wasn’t so surprising that the magical population should be too. Although they had definitely taken it to a whole other level which was akin to fascism.

“So how did you come to live in America? Did your parents emigrate to the United States to escape Voldemort?” Dean asked curiously

Although Delores’ eyes filled with bitter tears she struggled mightily not to cry, blinking repeatedly. “No, I was the first squib born to my family for five generations. I was a huge embarrassment to the family name. So when I was nine and it became clear what I was, they sent me to live in the US with my mother’s side of the family. Almost forty percent of the babies born into the Bromstead line were squibs, you see. They told me it was for my own good when they sent me away; that I’d fit in and not feel like a freak, living with my cousins.”

“And did you?” Dennis asked empathetically. All of them were moved by Delores’ experience.

“Not so you’d notice. All the Bromsteadeas looked at me as if I had two heads – they adopted me since I was family but since my parents had no other offspring, they all figured that there must have been some other reason why they dumped their only child on the American relatives. None of them shipped their squib kids off like rejects, so they reckoned I had to be seriously flawed for them to not be able to stand to be in the same country as them.” Delores hung her head and Hermione noted several tears splash onto her lap.

Hermione felt overwhelming sadness for Delores. Her team and herself had all suffered from prejudice since they’d entered the magical world but it never came from their own families. That must have been such a betrayal for the nine-year-old little girl. The disappointment of not being the child – the witch that her parents desperately craved would have been difficult enough to come to terms with but to be sent away, to strangers a world away because you weren’t good enough, were an embarrassment was horrifying. How damaging was that to the young psyche of nine-year-old Delores?
Then to find yourself being judged as unworthy, as flawed by your relatives because they couldn’t understand the blood snobbery of the pure blood wizards and witches in the UK. Talk about victim blaming. No wonder Delores had such a jaundiced view of life.

Thinking about the talks she and Tony had had about the changes they wanted to make, the differences they hoped to achieve in their new positions of power, Hermione couldn’t help thinking that the whole muggle/first generation distinction was much more relevant than she’d given credence to. After all, first gens and squibs had much in common when she stopped to think about it. Both sub-populations ended up being estranged from their biological families – usually not to the extent of Delores perhaps but still, they were isolated. Muggle kids were separated from their family’s for ten months a year from the age of eleven. Then for the next seven years they were indoctrinated, not so subtly that that muggles were quaint, inferior creatures.

The unspoken subtext was that in order for muggle students to fit in that they needed to eschew their muggle ways and that of course included their families. While wizarding families were subtly shamed for producing squib offspring – like it was something they had consciously chosen. Those children didn’t get to attend a magical school even though there was nothing stopping them becoming highly skilled potion makers, apothecaries, historians, journalists or herbalists, even without magic. The more she thought about it, the more she could see that Tony’s plan to employ them in the DMLE had a great deal more merit than she’d initially given it credit.

When he’d explained how in police department, certain tasks were relegated to civilians, such as dispatchers and emergency operators communicating with the public on emergency phone lines, even intelligence analysts, she hadn’t seen where he was going with it. After all, she knew some of what he was telling her, just never really thought about the significance of it as it related to the magical world, but Tony had. He wanted to bring in squibs to do some of the work of the DMLE that didn’t require magic but still was important to the functioning of the department.

In Tony’s ideal world, Hermione could envision squibs, formerly tossed aside and devalued by the magical world, who’d been isolated and made to feel like not even second class citizen of their society, suddenly made to feel like valued members of their world.

“So that’s how you knew about us, but how did you know about our visit to NCIS?” Hermione asked, deliberately avoiding any comments about her childhood. She instinctively felt that Delores would see it as pity after dealing with Harry and Sirius, among others whose childhood’s had been neglectful and abusive.

“Well it seems as if worthless squibs sometimes have their uses. My father contacted me a week ago. He works at the ministry and he heard the scuttlebutt about the new Head of the DMLE being an American and working in muggle law enforcement, which he simply couldn’t understand. ‘Why would any self-respecting wizard choose to work in the muggle world?’”

“He knew I worked with muggle cops so he asked if I’d heard anything. First time I’ve had contact with him in 20 years,” she finished, bitterly.

Penelope looked around at her peers, confused. “What is scuttlebutt – it sounds contagious…and painful like nappy-rash.” She said seriously, although Hermione being a wordsmith hid a knowing smirk, and Delores who smiled tolerantly at her.

“Scuttlebutt is sailor’s slang for rumour or gossip.” She explained. “Plus when you hear people say they have to hit the head they really mean that they have to go to the bathroom. Hit the rack means go to bed – there are others but those are the most common around here.”

“So did you tell your father about DiNozzo?” Justin enquired curiously.
“Certainly not!” She retorted indignantly, giving him a reproving look. “As head of NCIS’ HR department I signed a confidentially clause. Besides, Tony is my friend. I would never betray that trust.”

The hesitant expression when Delores mentioned Tony’s friendship reminded Hermione of a little girl many years ago who had mended a young boy’s glasses with a spell, thrilled that she’d made a friend on the Hogwarts Express. Only to discover later on that the dishevelled muggle boy was in fact the famed Harry Potter - from an old and highly esteemed wizarding family and ‘The Chosen One’ who’d defeated Voldermort when he was a baby. In effect, he was the closest thing to a celebrity the magical world had and the plain little girl with bushy hair and big buck teeth, who’d never had a friend because she was too smart for her own good and way too bossy, despaired. She knew that Harry Potter didn’t need her friendship – Ron Weasley had already become his best friend and she was sure everyone would be falling over themselves to become his friend, too.

Fortunately, she knew that Tony, just like Harry was caring and loyal. “If you’re worried that Tony won’t want to be your friend when he finds out you’re a squib, Delores, think again. He’s not like that.”

She could hardly tell her that as an eleven-year-old boy he defied his entire family – a highly intimidating and insanely blood supremacist family, who had sided with Voldermort - to become a blood traitor. He befriended a werewolf, and Harry’s mother Lily – a muggle and was disowned by his family. No wonder Sirius was so comfortable stepping into DiNozzo’s shoes – they were cut from the same cloth. Suddenly, she had an idea what she could tell Delores to reassure her without revealing things about Tony that would endanger his real identity.

"Tony’s already been on my case about hiring people based on their ability to perform the job. If the job doesn’t require magical ability, then he thinks that squibs should receive equal consideration. We’ve talked about bringing in squibs at the DMLE to do clerical work and other tasks that don’t require magical skills to free up aurors for more hands-on-duties.”

She noted that Justin and Dean, who were ineligible to become aurors because they hadn’t gained NEWTS in Potions, pricked up their ears with interest. She knew that they both had wanted to join the auror training program after the war ended. Unfortunately, Severus Snape had been a lousy teacher, favouring students from his own house, and frequently victimised the other three houses. As a consequence, their grades, like too many others in Potions, weren’t considered to be good enough to study advanced potions in 6th and 7th year. Snape’s appalling treatment of all but his favourite students (almost exclusively snakes) had resulted in most fifth year students, even if they managed to fluke a sufficiently high grade after five years of his tutelage, dropping potions to get away from him.

Of course, sixteen year olds were not always well situated to make decisions that could affect their future career and life choices - potentially for the next hundred years. Dropping potions to avoid having to deal with the greasy haired, sallow complected potions professor at any cost was something some former students came to bitterly regret in a few short years after graduation. Just as Justin and Dean had discovered when the threat of dying was no longer an impediment to deciding their future. Still it wasn’t always easy to make good choices at that age – especially for males who despite being wizards, were still biologically slower to mature than female witches.

Not to mention there were all those students that had failed to thrive under his didactic regime of ridicule, sarcasm and lack of exposition. How many of them may have succeeded in the subject if they had received adequate instruction from a skilled teacher who was passionate about their teaching instead of a teacher who couldn’t stomach students but was a passionate and skilled potions master. Hermione recalled an analogous situation at university where TPTB decided that
the post grad psych students would benefit from having a practising child and adolescent psychologist lecture in developmental psychology. Her idea of teaching had been to read out the relevant set chapter each week from their required text.

That was why Hermione thought the oft quoted idiom ‘those that can, do and those that can’t, teach’ was ridiculous. True teaching was an art form. A good teacher could inspire and turn lives around, motivating even an average student to love learning and strive to exceed their abilities. Sticking a potion recipe on a black board and telling students to follow it, or reading a chapter out of a set text in lieu of preparing a real lesson didn’t qualify as teaching in her book.

Anyway, the subsequent drop in the calibre of candidates in not only the auror ranks but the healing profession had been felt quite sorely over the last few decades as a direct result of Professor Snape’s tenure as potions professor at Hogwarts. For the greater good, according to Dumbledore.

While the students after the war were taught by a much more competent potions mistress and the standard of new recruits was again beginning to rise accordingly, there was something to be said for also having more mature, skilled aurors and healers to call upon too. Life experiences couldn’t be replicated by the younger less seasoned professionals, no matter how well trained and earnest they were.

“Tony and I are also in discussion about allowing mature aged wizards and witches to go back and do an accelerated course in advanced potions so that candidates can sit for their NEWTS. Then they’ll be eligible to be considered for admittance to healer and auror training,” she revealed to her protection detail, noting several very interested expressions. While mature aged students going back to get the qualifications they needed was common place for non-magical people, it wasn’t in their world – at least not in the UK.

Penelope chuckled. “Oh, wow! Tony is determined to shake things up, isn’t he? Mature aged students, squibs doing administrative work that have always been considered the domain of the dim-witted but well connected purebloods. They’ll go postal!”

Hermione nodded wryly. “That they will, so let’s keep this to ourselves for now.”

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Hermione smiled as she recalled Delores excitement at being included in their conversation about a couple of the significant changes that they hoped to bring to their society over the next few years. She’d even made some really useful suggestions about how to implement them, which wasn’t surprising since it was her professional forte after all.

Plus, the squib had really touched something in the Minister for Magic – something profound. At that point she realised that with the exception of a very passing acquaintanceship with Arabella Figg and the disgusting Argus Filch, she’d never really gotten to know a squib properly. Something she vowed to resolve as soon as she could.

Delores had really opened up her eyes to the injustices of being born a squib – she’d been focused on other sub-populations, especially of the nonhuman variety. She hoped that she would become her friend as well as Tony’s, who as Hermione had predicted, hadn’t shrunk from her in horror despite his pure-blood roots. She recalled the tapestry of the Black family tree at No. 12 Grimmauld Place that had a squib relative magically blasted off the tree, along with Sirius and his favourite older cousin, Andromeda Tonks nee Black.

Even the Weasleys, who were as far from pure blood supremacists as you could get, who’d embraced Hermione’s muggle status and welcomed her into the family, had been mildly
uncomfortable about having to admit to having a squib relative. The one who’d had become a ‘muggle accountant and ultimately was related to Emily Fornell. How could she not be favourably disposed to squibs after the Weasley’s relative had indirectly lead her to finding Sirius again.

She considered how Abby, though adopted had been a much wanted addition to the Sciuto family, in contrast to Delores who’d been taken in because of familial obligations. Even if Abby had spent a lot of her childhood rather isolated as a child of deaf parents, she still had experienced all the unconditional love that every child deserved, unlike Delores, Sirius Black or Anthony DiNozzo. And then it hit her – how to apply pressure and crack her tough shell.

She was however going to need to hit the books, as if that had ever been a hardship for Hermione Granger – self-confessed bibliophile.
Hermione was sitting in the hospital cafeteria at Walter Reed, sipping her tea, wondering if she should have opted for coffee because her cup of tea really wasn’t all that flash. It had been made with a teabag and while she wasn’t such a tea snob that she didn’t use teabags sometimes, these were no frills, cheap and nasty variety, using the dregs of the leaf dust – so not a lot of love there. Watching Dean, who was accompanying her today as protection detail while she was within the hospital campus, grimace as he swallowed his coffee she decided perhaps not. Apparently the coffee was just as bad. It seemed to be a universal truism that hospitals and good food didn’t go together.

Although… the pie here wasn’t bad, not bad at all. Americans seemed to have quite the obsession with pie – sweet pies and the witches and wizards were having fun trying out the different varieties. Often the UK contingent would each order a different variety of pie and then share them – which is what they had done today. Hermione had ordered chocolate cream pie and Dean had opted for pecan pie.

While she was missing her scones, she’d decided that pie good too. The witch was truly amazed at the range of sweet pies they’d encountered while they were in America. Pumpkin pie, Key lime pie, cherry pie – which she loved and was probably her favourite – peach pie, lemon meringue, pecan, deep dish apple pie had all been hits with the group of wizards and witches. They had a list of pies they still wanted to taste, providing they were here long enough to sample them. They included some of the more exotic ones including banana cream pie, the oddly named turtle pie and grasshopper pie, coconut cream pie and sweet potato pie if they had the opportunity.

Going halfsies with her, Dean sampled his share of the chocolate pie and nodded approvingly.

“Yum…that’s really good,” he enthused, digging in for a second mouthful. “By the way, Agent
Fornell wanted me to pass on to you that they had another intruder in your suite. This one was from
the NSA – they’re the National Security Agency. He says they were pretty red-faced at getting
captured with their hands in the cookie jar, as the Yanks say.”

She scowled. “Let me guess, they wouldn’t talk?”

He nodded.

“So we have no idea if they are working under orders from their superiors or independently.”

This time he answered her verbally. “No and we don’t know if it is connected to DiNozzo’s
appointment and they’ve made the connection or they’re just curious about what we’re doing here
in DC.”

Clearly angry she growled, “I’m tempted to post the video anonymously on You-tube to embarrass
these tossers.”

Dean looked pleased at the suggestion. “Why don’t we?”

“Because it might just up the ante and still not solve anything. It’s a risk and I’m not sure I want to
get into a one-upping war leaking videos of NSA and CIA and other amorphous agencies online.”

Her so-called bodyguard nodded reluctantly, “If you say so.”

“Probably wise. These guys don’t mess around.” They looked up to find Fornell standing over the
table, shaking his head at the visitors indulging their pie preoccupation…again.

“You guys are going to need to go on a strict diet when you head home after overdosing on pie,” he
warned them, only half joking.

“Nope. Spend an hour every morning and night in the hotel gym,” the already buff wizard bragged
immodestly.

Hermione looked at them both apologetically but smirked nonetheless. “Fast metabolism.”

Throwing his hands in the air in disgust and huffing, he switched topics. Grabbing a chair from a
nearby table and depositing his cup of coffee on the table as he joined them, he asked. “So…did it
work, Kiddo?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it did.”

“So she admitted it was an act?”

“Oh yeah, she did. Although she still expects Gibbs to come to her rescue,” she explained, rolling
her eyes.

“So…did you do it?”

“Yes, it’s done.” Hermione affirmed briefly.

Tobias regarded her shrewdly, “Any regrets?”

Hermione thought about all the vile garbage Sciuto had spewed forth, blaming Tony for the mess
she’d made of her life. No acknowledgement that she had behaved abominably, no hint of remorse
or personal responsibility for how she’d acted. Shaking her head firmly she replied, “Nope, no
regrets at all.”
Dean snorted, “Ain’t karma a bitch?”

Hermione thought back to how several days ago they had been discussing Abby and how they were fairly certain she was faking it to avoid being charged with assaulting a federal agent. She had decided, albeit reluctantly to agree to SecNav’s proposal to force her to resign from the agency in order to avoid a trial and going to prison. Part of the agreement included that NCIS would keep the reason for her resignation confidential. The confidentiality wasn’t for her benefit, but so she wouldn’t endanger past convictions or pending trials/courts martial and trial hearings.

Harry had made a most sensible suggestion that a further stipulation to the agreement should be added, banning Abby from seeking employment at any law enforcement agencies. As Harry pointed out, because of the secrecy clause necessary to protect the agency’s arse, without the secondary clause she could go out and find a job with a state lab or a police department or even Merlin forbid, one of the other alphabet agencies – apart from the FBI. Everyone had agreed that Potter’s suggestion was a judicious and necessary addendum to the agreement.

Hermione still felt less than wholly satisfied with the likely consequences if/when they proved Sciuto to be malingering. This was despite Tony wanting to let the matter slide for the sake of the guilty criminals who’d been put away in part due to Abby’s testimony, and for the victims’ families who’d received justice. And she got the whole damned ‘greater good philosophy’ – she really did, but both Sirius and Harry had already been asked to bear a burden too onerous. One that neither should have been expected to assume, all for the bloody greater good. Just this once, Hermione wanted some simple recompense for Sirius… just this once.

She wanted Abby to pay, pay with more than only her job because ultimately, she could get a new job working in the private sector and earn good money. She could probably end up making a darn sight more than she did at NCIS. The Goth could start over and build a life that was fulfilling and easy, a good life. It felt like she wasn’t really paying for her actions.

No, Hermione wanted her to have to deliver a pound of flesh since they wouldn’t have the satisfaction of seeing Sciuto doing time. But what the witch had in store for the Goth, she could only impose on her in good conscience when she was positive Abby was faking. Anything less than absolute certainty and Hermione knew she wouldn’t be able to carry out her plan, even if she had the slightest doubt.

So in order to make that happen they’d all been gathered in her hotel suite for a brainstorming session on the situation. Tony had jokingly observed, “Well short of you going undercover and getting her to admit that she is faking it, I can’t see how you can be one hundred percent certain, Hermione. There’s always going to be an element of doubt, even if it’s miniscule.”

Fornell didn’t see what the problem was. “If the forensic psychiatrist is willing to state that she’s faking the psychotic break, then surely that’s good enough for us to sign off on her being offered the deal to resign. If I’m resigned to it, and I hate the idea of letting that brat get away with attacking a federal agent, particularly Tony by the way, then I don’t see why you can’t have confidence in it too, Hermione.”

She smiled sweetly at the fibbie and the others in the room groaned – they knew that look only too well. They recognised that she had a plan up her sleeve. “Because, Toby, if Abby gets to walk away with just resigning and not being able to work in law enforcement again, then I want her to suffer more than that for her actions. I don’t think that it a fair consequence when she should be sitting in jail.”

Then she outlined her plan to make Abby pay – only if she was faking – and was greeted by absolute silence as they tried to get their head around her proposal. With the exception of Harry,
who as her best friend, knew her fiercely protective nature and took her scheme in stride – everyone else looked at her with a mixture of consternation and awe. Smiling at her, Harry asked the critical question that she’d been tormenting herself with.

“So Madame Minister, exactly how do you propose to satisfy yourself categorically that Sciuto is a faker so you can implement this dastardly deal?”

And that was the stumbling block to her carrying out her plan, which was why she had been studying Abby like a predator watching their prey. She’d been observing her behaviour, her responses to stimuli, looking for tells, searching for fault lines or any intel. so that she could crack her like a nut and get at the truth. Hermione found herself falling back into girlish habits - taking copious notes, approaching the problem from multiple angles, writing the data on filing cards and then reorganising the intel she’d collected into different combinations. She distilled it, colour coded it using sticky tabs, rewrote it, converted it to bullet points and studied it until she had driven the entire team to distraction.

Dean, Dennis and Harry of all of them seemed the least fazed by her obsessiveness, having witnessed it at Hogwarts since they shared the Gryffindor common room with the witch for many years. Plus, Harry and Dean had shared many of her classes for six years.

Yet for all the effort she put into finding a way to break Sciuto, it was ironic that the moment she stopped focusing on the Goth and starting thinking about Delores that the solution hit her like a runaway train. She needed to remember this the next time she got obsessed about solving a problem that was eluding her. Actually she already knew this truism – she just had to remind herself that focusing too hard on a problem was not the way to solve it.

Hermione decided to invite Delores to dinner one night before she flew home to London, after all, it was thinking about the squib and the differences between the two adoptees that had given her the fresh perspective she needed. It was ironic that the solution had been staring her in the face since Tony’s facetious comment about going undercover to talk to Sciuto.

She remembered back in the day when Hermione Granger was just a lonely little girl with no idea that she was a witch, let alone that she would be dubbed the smartest witch of her age. She was the only daughter of two dentists, a so-called gifted child, a desperately unhappy child who had no friends her own age. In fact, her only real friends were her parents; she was convinced that she would never fit in anywhere and so Hermione chose to lose herself in books. She had started reading when she was three and by the age of ten had read every book in her bookshelf more than once.

She’d inevitably started making her way through books in her parent’s bookshelves. Her mother’s love of classic literature meant that her shelves were chock full of authors such as Charles Dickens, the Bronte Sisters, Shakespeare and her father’s favourite authors included George Orwell, Ayn Rand, Mark Twain, and more popular novelists such as Tom Clancy, and Michael Creighton. But the young Hermione also thirsted for knowledge too, not just content to reside in fantasy worlds.

She remembered her mother’s reaction to her reading her medical text books, chemistry and science books had been surprised yet proud. Her reaction when she found her daughter had read her Joy of Sex, the Kamasutra and a book on tantric sex from cover to cover had been far less enthusiastic. Hermione had been warned off reading the rest of her mother’s books on sex until she was much older.

Undaunted, she’d found a book on sign language which her mother had purchased when she started treating her first deaf patient. Her mum ended up with a significant percentage of her clientele who were hearing impaired since they appreciated being treated by a dentist who was able to
communicate with them fluently. For her part, her mother enjoyed working with her hearing impaired patients too because she could carry on conversations with them while she was working in their mouth.

Meanwhile, ten-year-old Hermione was captivated by the thought of being able to speak with her hands and devoured the book with great enthusiasm. She started having simple conversations with her mother and she recalled her father pouting because he felt excluded. Over the next couple of years until she started at Hogwarts and got caught up with the excitement of being a witch and learning about magic, her mother and Hermione continued to have unspoken conversations and she’d become reasonably fluent.

Of course, not having used sign in over twenty years, Hermione knew she would be rusty. Just like if you learnt a second language at age ten and then never used it for twenty years would mean that you were no longer fluent anymore. Although for someone as smart as she was, as determined and highly motivated as she was, Hermione knew that she could get back up to speed relatively faster than most individuals. The problem was that the sign language she learnt all those years ago had been British Sign Language (BSL) and Sciuto had learnt American Sign Language (ASL) from her parents. Spoken English being her second language since both her adoptive parents had been profoundly deaf.

Although there was some overlap between BSL and ASL, there were also significant differences as she discovered when she Goggled it on her smart phone. Which was why they’d left Walter Reed post haste to find a bookstore so Hermione could purchase a book on ASL and she’d been working her way through it feverishly ever since. Not to mention hitting Y-Tube which had lots of how-to video’s as well. In order to learn the American form of sign as fast as possible, she immersed herself in it, forcing herself to sign everything unless it was absolutely necessary to speak.

Surprisingly, Tony proved helpful in conversing with her. While he wasn’t totally fluent in ASL he knew the basics. Curious about how he’d come to learn it he’d laughed and confessed that Anthony DiNozzo had learned some very basic conversational sign when he was serving in the Police Department in Peoria. As a young cop he’d spoke Spanish and Italian which had, on occasion proved to be an advantage but early on after he graduated from the Police Academy he’d been a first responder at a serious vehicle crash. It had involved a young teen who’d been hysterical and no one had been able to communicate with her or calm her down because she was deaf and no one could sign.

It had a profound and lasting impact on the rookie cop which was why he’d taken a basic class a few months later in basic ASL – it was just an abbreviated class for emergency workers: cops, ER personnel, paramedics, firefighters and social workers. The class was designed to let them converse on a very basic level with hearing impaired people in emergency situations. Its aim was for them to be able to offer reassurance and to be able to gather crucial information until someone who was fluent in ASL could be summons to act as translator.

“Okay, so you have DiNozzo’s memories.” Hermione smiled, impressed with the cop’s commitment to people but then he’d obviously cared about people since as a college student Anthony had run into a burning building and saved a little boy. Sirius confessed that he still had nightmares as a result of that particular memory about only saving the boy and not his sister. As if Sirius didn’t have enough horrific memories of his own without being burdened by Anthony DiNozzo’s nightmares too.

“You’ve expanded your knowledge though?” she observed.

“Yeah, when I started at NCIS, Gibbs and Abby used to sign when they wanted to talk in front of
me and exclude me from the conversation. Sometimes it was so they could talk about stuff they didn’t want me to know. So I started learning more phrases cuz I’m nosy and hate being excluded. I’m still not fluent but I understand a lot more than I can speak,” he confessed.

She scowled. “Well that’s just petty and juvenile, not to mention shockingly rude. How would they have liked it if you and that Ziva David had spoken Spanish or Italian in front of them because you wanted to have a private conversation or you wanted to talk about them?”

“If I done that Gibbs would probably have torn me a new one, and head slapped me silly. Abby would punch my bicep,” he admitted chuckling.

“And Ziva too?”

“Nu uh. Gibbs rarely bawled her out and only head slapped her once or twice.”

Hermione didn’t see anything funny about being physically and verbally abused but trying to convince her companion of that was difficult, since like may abuse victims, he didn’t see himself that way. Even when admitting that Gibbs treated them differently – clearly he was a chauvinist. Hermione hoped that maybe once Tony had put some time and distance between himself and Gibbs, he’d be able to see their relationship as outsiders did, as highly toxic and abusive. Meanwhile she bit her tongue.

Instead she changed the subject. “So tell me about Abby’s eccentric beliefs.”

He frowned in concentration as the switch in topics from sign language. “Like her believing in vampires or Tarot cards?” He asked. “Or her crystals, auras, or crop circles?”

“Crop circles? As in aliens, abductions and brain probes?” She asked incredulous.

“Well I don’t know about the brain probes but we worked on a case years ago where the yokels had made crop circles to divert authorities from the fact that a murder had been committed. And Abby was convinced they weren’t man made and insisted on exhaustive samples being collected so she could prove her theories. She blackmailed McGee into collecting forensic evidence from the circles by promising to show him her new tattoo. So naturally he complied.”

Hermione looked highly affronted. “That’s highly unprofessional. I hope they were both disciplined for it.”

He shook his head, amused. “If it had been me that had fallen for Abby’s shit, no doubt Gibbs would have killed me but he has always been a sucker when it came to Abby. He kinda turned a blind eye to the whole incident.”

“So what was her reaction when the crop circle was shown to be fake?” Hermione inquired curiously, although she still felt irate about the double standards of Gibbs. She also couldn’t help but be reminded of the similarities between him and Severus Snape either. When Draco had behaved abominably towards them, he’d chosen not to notice but when they retaliated against his abuse he would immediately impose harsh sanctions.

“She was pissed. Insisted that crop circles are the real deal and that there were still unexplained aspects of the crop circle phenomenon at Smoky Corners – anomalies which didn’t add up.” Tony admitted, shooting an interrogative look at the witch beside him. “What’s with the twenty questions and the sudden interest in aliens, Hermione?

“You know that lots of those so-called encounters with aliens, are a convenient way of explaining
magic that non-magicals have encountered. Well obviously not the brain probes, I would hope.” He made a moue of distaste.

Hermione giggled and Tony grinned wondered if other ministers of magic had ever giggled girlishly. Probably not but somehow it didn’t seem improper when she did it. “It’s your fault – you told me to I should go undercover to prove unequivocally that she was faking it.”

“Yeah but I thought you were going to talk to her in ASL since she is being so guarded in English and you don’t speak Cajun.”

“Yeah but I also need a hook to get her to trust me. Crop circles and aliens are that hook, that and a huge case of paranoia”

“Whose paranoia – hers or yours?”

Hermione chuckled, “Both!”

Tony stared at her. “Next thing you’ll be wanting to wear a shiny metal hat to convince her that you think that the aliens are trying to scan your thoughts.”

Leaning over and giving him an avuncular kiss on the cheek, she grinned jubilantly. “Great suggestion! I’d never have thought of that myself. Now I can see why you have a reputation as a master of undercover work. You wouldn’t have a metal colander at home that I can borrow by any chance, would you?”

~o0o~

In the end Tony persuaded her against wearing a metal colander on her head, arguing that she would never have gotten it past the staff when she was admitted if she was a real patient. She scoffed at the suggestion but Tony explained that it could be used to smack someone in the face or the head. So if she wore it, Abby would be instantly suspicious that Hermione was a plant.

Fornell quipped that Tony just didn’t want to sacrifice his colander since it was an integral part of his pasta making. Tony smirked and threatened to stop inviting him around for pasta and Fornell had instantly quelled his sarcastic comments. Ever since dragging him home for Thanksgiving dinner, Tobias had learnt that the NCIS agent was quite adept at making pasta, among other Italian dishes – courtesy of Anthony DiNozzo’s memories of a lonely childhood mostly spent hanging out with the family’s kitchen staff.

Smirking at Tobias’ hasty backdown, since he was going to cook for Hermione and her ministerial entourage before they flew home early next week, Tony suggested she use aluminum foil instead. As he pointed out, it was far more plausible that she could have smuggled some in to fashion her hat if she was adamant that she needed it. Either that or that TPTB were more likely to view it as fairly harmless and allow her to have it.

Giggling to hear Sirius pronounce aluminium as aluminum, as an American would, he shrugged when she twitted him about it. “I’ve been an American for 17 years, Hermione.”

Looking at him stretched out relaxed on the sofa in her suite, she wondered, and not for the first time, exactly how much of Anthony DiNozzo remained in addition to all his memories. Sirius was different in many respects to the wizard she’d know so many years ago. He was less volatile and angry – was that because Anthony had a more happy-go-lucky disposition – or was he simply more adept at hiding his emotions?

In the end, they’d agreed to ditch the colander, much to Hermione’s annoyance and go with tin foil;
also agreed to ditching the aluminium v aluminium debate and just call it tin foil even if it was a misnomer. So she’d donned a pair of sky blue scrubs, and gone undercover with a plethora of hints and strict instructions from Tony ringing in her ears about how to act while she was posing as a patient.

He wasn’t happy when Tobias and Hermione had refused to let the whole assault thing with Abby drop. Still that didn’t mean that he’d let her go in without all the benefit of his years of undercover experience to ensure she stayed safe. Even after she reminded him that Dean was going to be with her constantly keeping watch, he still made her repeat his instruction verbatim to make sure she understood them.

So now, here she sat, wearing her tinfoil hat so the aliens didn’t read her thoughts, signing to herself in ASL about the alien conspiracy with the doctors to read her mind and drug her so she couldn’t talk. Ignoring everyone’s attempts to engage her in conversation, Hermione clutched a sketchbook and a piece of artist’s charcoal, sketching feverishly and hiding the book when anyone approached her.

Hermione noticed that Abby was watching her closely but Tony had insisted that she should not engage the Goth – she should ignore her and force her mark to make the first move and then rebuff it. It took several hours but Abby was curious, not surprisingly, since she knew aliens and crop circles were something that Sciuto believed in and had purposely targeted her. The witch had deliberately let her catch a brief glance of her sketchbook that had a drawing of a complex crop circle and a drawing of a Roswellian Grey type alien before slamming it shut and scowling at Abby.

Continuing to follow Tony’s instructions, when Abby approached her she snubbed the Goth, signing to her to go away - that she didn’t trust her - before stalking off and retreating into a corner. The next time that Abby approached, she accused her of trying to read her thoughts and steal her book before getting up and running away. Finally, after group therapy, where Hermione continued her paranoid act and refused to speak or even sit within the circle, after the other participants had dispersed, Abby came up and sat beside her.

When they were alone, Abby signed, ‘*Please let me help you.*’

‘*No, you’re one of them. The aliens told you to read my thoughts, didn’t they?’*’

‘*No, I pinky swear - I’m not one of them. I want to be your friend.*’

‘*I don’t believe you. The doctors are lying – saying I’m crazy so no one will believe me if I tell anyone about the aliens plans to take over the world. They’re leaving messages for their colleagues that can be seen from space but no one believes me.*’

‘*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god… the crop circles. I knew it.*’ Abby signed excitedly. ‘*Tell me what they say. Pretty, pretty please with a ginormous huge cherry on top.*’

‘*No, you’re here to spy on me. You’ll tell the doctors and they’ll say I’m crazy and drug me to make me forget. Or they’ll let the aliens probe my brain again. Go away,*’ Hermione remembered Tony’s advice not to cave too easily - to make her work for it. Getting up she left her mark looking bereft as she took to pacing the common room.

~o0o~

Abby was quivering with anticipation – it was like waving a plate of Belgium chocolate truffles in front of a chocoholic or a whole Caf-pow drink machine full of Caf-pows in front of a Goth
forensic scientist addicted to caffeine. She was so close to getting the answers to the mysteries of the crop circles, Abby could literally taste it, despite everyone poo-pooing her faith.

Oh the Goth was sooo looking forward to wiping the smug smirk off Timmy’s face when she explained that crop circles were like ginormous billboards for the aliens already here on Earth to communicate with other extra-terrestrials in outer space. Mr MIT and Johns Hopkins was going to have to eat some serious humble pie.

She just had to get that chick with the aluminum headgear to talk to her since she’d obviously had an encounter of the third kind with extra-terrestrials. And how cool was that? She wished that she could have an encounter like that too – perhaps not a brain probe but maybe a sexual encounter might be… educational.

But she had to get the chick to talk and she was like really, really flighty – like a stray dog who’d been abused by a big ol mean owner… but honestly, who could blame her for being paranoid after being brain probed. That can’t have been too nice… unless they’d stimulated her pleasure centres, which might have been pretty cool. How unfair though that the doctors immediately assumed she was cra-cra when she told them about her abduction. How closed minded was that?

As she pondered how to get that poor young woman to spill her guts, she also couldn’t help dwelling on troublesome thoughts that she was trying hard not to dwell on for the last four days, especially since that last psychiatrist had been brought in to see her. He had a cynical aura and she got the feeling he was suspicious of her – what with all the questions he kept asking her.

So she was worried and where was her Silver Fox? Why hadn’t he come to see her and why hadn’t he fixed everything so she could get out of this place? After all, everyone knew she was Gibbs’ favourite Gibblette and they all knew that he’d do anything for her. And that was why no one crossed Abby Sciuto - unless they had a death wish.

Leroy Jethro Gibbs could be one scary dude, He’d spent his whole career at NCIS sticking it to the man – getting away with doing whatever the hell he wanted, when he wanted. There was no way he would be pleased about her being treated like some common criminal. All because she’d been standing up for him and looking after their family when she tried to make Tony see reason. That’s not how family treats family and they sure as hell don’t air their dirty linen in public like Tony did either – she just wished she’d managed to get a few more whacks in before the Stormtroopers grabbed her. Such a crock!

Trying to put her doubts about Gibbs and what they might have done to him to stop him coming to save her from this place because it was only supposed to buy her some time for the Silver Fox to work his magic, she noted Aluminum-Hat Girl. She’d stopped her pacing and was once again sitting down again, sketching on the pad she refused to let go of. Deciding to have another go at convincing her to share what she knew, Abby approached her target, careful not to spook her and she briefly sighted a design of a crop circle and a rendering of a real cool looking alien.

Aluminum-Hat Girl looked up at her approach and signed. ‘Go away, Spy.’

Abby sat her butt down near her, but not too near. ‘Not a spy. I just want to be your friend,’ she signed back. ‘I believe you, Aluminum-Hat Girl.’

Aluminum-Hat Girl stared at her. ‘Why? Prove you’re not a spy. And if you’re not spying on me then, tell me why should I trust? You’re crazy!’

Abby shook her head vehemently, her black dyed hair fanning out with the momentum, although she missed having pigtails whipping through the air. They wouldn’t permit her to have elastics to
fasten her hair because they were deemed to be dangerous, as were hairpins. How ridiculous – Ziva wasn’t here.

She felt oddly bereft without her pigtails – was she even really Abby Sciuto without them? They also took away her platform boots and her favourite spiky collar. Like she was some sort of criminal. What was really criminal is how they’d forced her to dress like everyone else, mindless drones.

‘I’m not crazy, I’m just pretending to be. I’m here because the FBI want to send me to jail.’

Aluminum-Hat Girl recoiled, signing swiftly. ‘Why, what did you do?’

‘Nothing. I didn’t do anything wrong’

Aluminum-Hat Girl frowned sceptically. ‘The FBI don’t put people in prison for no reason.’

Abby huffed. ‘It was just a misunderstanding. A quarrel between family members – I was trying to make someone see sense before he wrecked everything. He acted like a spoilt brat and had me arrested. But Gibbs will fix everything…he always does.’

Aluminum-Hat Girl looked curious. ‘Is Gibbs your lawyer?’ she signed.

Abby giggled, ‘OMG no. He hates lawyers. H.A.T.E.S lawyers,’ she finger spelled each letter of the word for added emphasis. ‘Gibbs is my super sexy Silver Fox.’

Aluminum-Hat Girl signed, ‘So he’s your boyfriend?’

‘No silly, he’s like our Poppa bear and we’re his baby gibblettes. He takes care of us all. Ducky…he’s like our grampa and sage old uncle, all round into one and Jimmy’s like the cousin who is always putting his foot in his mouth and Timmy…he’s like the super geeky smart kid brother who’s always reminding you how smart he is because he can hack and Bish is the little sis…she’s super smart too and makes Timmy a bit green with envy as she can whoop his ass um I mean brain.

‘And there’s me…I’m Gibbsie’s favourite gibblette and I have mad forensic skills. Tony’s the big brother who’s super jealous of his younger smarter siblings because he’s not Gibbs favourite and he’s been acting like a tots brat lately and making my Silver Fox cranky. So of course Gibbs has to knock some sense in him.’

Aluminum-Hat Girl frowned as she stared at Abby. “If Gibbs isn’t a lawyer, how is he going to get you out of here and stop the FBI from arresting you?’

The Goth rolled her eyes exaggeratedly, giggling before signing, ‘Gibbs is kickass. He’s a tots badass Marine. He gets what he wants and doesn’t follow rules. He sticks it to the man. He can get away with murder.’

She observed Aluminum-Hat Girl’s sceptical expression. ‘No really, he really truly did get away with murder…see a dirtbag killed his family so he went all Old Testament on the perp and got away with it, so he can get me out of a piddling assault charge. It was a trumped up charge.’

Abby suddenly realised she’d let her hands run away with her, spilling the beans about Gibbs and Hernandez to a perfect stranger but hey, she was a survivor of an alien abduction. Who would she tell and even if she did, no one would believe her anyway. Still she’d best deflect the subject away from her surrogate father to be on the safe side.

‘See it’s all Tony’s fault for being a brat. He’s always been pathologically jealous of Gibbs giving
anyone else the smallest amount of attention. He’s been acting up even more lately since he got a
taste of leading the team. Got too big for his boots and didn’t like it when Gibbs came back and
took the team back again and told him he wasn’t all that special.’

~o0o~

Hermione had managed to get through the conversation with Abby – even the shockingly casual
way that she revealed that Gibbs was a murderer. Thank Merlin that Sirius had never trusted his
identity to her, back in the day when she proclaimed to be a staunch friend of his. Luckily the
wizard had been taught by circumstance that people who should be trustworthy, like friends or
family will betray you. Add to that Anthony DiNozzo’s memories of living with two alcoholic
parents and it was pretty obvious why that he was never tempted to share who he was with anyone.
It might be an incredibly lonely way to survive but at least he was safe.

Hermione recognised what she was doing – she was avoiding thinking about what Abby just
casually revealed. Gibbs was a cold-blooded murderer who spent his life locking up other
murderers for doing what he’d gotten away with. And how messed up was that? Clearly he and
Abby couldn’t see how totally amoral…immoral and totally hypocritical it was for him to be a
federal agent. Which was flat out terrifying.

Hermione had already resolved not to get into a slanging match with Abby – after her dismal
failure with Mallard to make him use his intellectual powers instead of his emotions. After all, if
anyone could be persuaded, it should have been him, so she recognised it was a waste of breath
even trying with the rest of the bunch. Having learnt that Gibbs got away with murder and Abby
thought there was something admirable about it; well that was even more proof that she’d have
better luck banging her head up against a wall than be able to reason with an emotionally immature
Goth. Actually that might be a lot more enjoyable activity.

However, Hermione found it almost impossible to remain silent, feeling like Abby had made her
complicit in the killing and she tried to console herself that her contingency plan for him was in the
wings, waiting to be implemented. But when Abby started in on Tony, blaming him for her ending
up being locked up, it was all she could do not to hex the woman pretending to be a little girl. She
sort of had a reverse Lolita Syndrome going on – a middle aged woman dressing and and more
importantly, acting like a pubescent girl.

No, the so-called smartest witch of her age had to remind herself to focus on the fact that she had
one goal in coming here and wearing an aluminium skullcap. Even if it was going to give her a
serious case of hat-hair, which wouldn’t have been a problem if they’d just let her wear the stupid
colander. But still… all things considered, hat-hair a small price to pay to get what she was looking
for.

So as half of her brain registered the childish blame game as Abby recounted how Tony had
casted all her woes, Hermione was thinking about the positive outcome of her foray into
undercover work as a non-magical. That now she was absolutely sure that Abby hadn’t had a
psychotic break she could implement her plan with a clear conscience.

Interrupting the ‘Tony bullying her poor innocent Gibbs because he’s a spoilt brat and that’s why I
attacked him’ diatribe, because if she had to listen to her a moment longer she might hex that smug,
ettitled little bitch and she couldn’t do that. Not because of it would blow the statue of magical
secrecy or because it would be wrong for a witch to use magic against a helpless muggle since it
would be an unfair disadvantage, let alone the fact that she was the Minister of Magic. The simple
truth was that it would be wrong because that would make her no better than Abigail Scuito and as
an intelligent woman, she was damned if she was going to stoop to the Goth’s level of childish
behaviour.

She grabbed both the Goth’s hands forcibly to quell the flow of her vile invective. When she stopped signing long enough for Hermione to sign she declared, albeit tongue in cheek. ‘Stop! Fine! I’m convinced! You’re not spying on me for the aliens, you’re not a spy working for the doctors. You’re not crazy – you’re just a poor blameless victim who did nothing wrong. So let’s find somewhere a bit more private so I can share my thoughts with you.’

Abby looked thrilled and she bounced up and down in her seat. ‘OMG, OMG, OMG, OMG, OMG - that’s awesome. Timmy is so going to have to eat his shorts...not that he will because he’s like Gibbsie in that he never admits he’s wrong, not that Gibbsie could ever be wrong but Timmy’s no Gibbs, so of course he can be wrong...just like he is wrong about crop circles and I can’t wait to see...’

Hermione grabbed her hands again. ‘Stop it. You’re doing my head in.’ It was true, since she wasn’t au fait with ASL she’d been studying in every spare moment she had and had little sleep the night before. Plus, having to process the language visually rather than aurally was surprisingly tiring. In fact, Abby with her visual diarrhoea had managed to give her a splitting headache.

‘Come with me.’ She led her to a spot that was fairly private in the common room. ‘After the alien abduction I found that I could pass on my thoughts to people if they just focus on my eyes.’

Proving that Abby was as suggestible as she thought, indeed as she hoped, the Goth sported a huge smile. ‘Cool!’

~00o~

Staring at Fornell and Dean’s eager expressions she deliberately looked around the cafeteria, then took another forkful of chocolate cream pie goodness. It was true, she had no regrets about her actions. Abby needed a wake-up call. If she really truly wanted to be vindictive, she could use what she’d learnt to have the Goth charged as an accessory to murder.

Besides, post hypnotic suggestions couldn’t compel anyone to do anything that was absolutely against their morals – she hadn’t brainwashed her. Although as easy as it was to hypnotise her, Abby Sciuto would be a prime candidate for brainwashing and with her OTT eccentricities, it would be hard to pick up on incongruities in her normal behaviour.

Fornell frowned. “So for the sake of a dense fibbie, can you please explain it me again in plain English exactly what you did.”

“I hypnotised her and planted a couple of post hypnotic suggestions. In the first one I may have implied that Gibbs hasn’t been to see her because he thinks she lacks empathy – is too self-centred.” Seeing the surprised expressions on both her companions features, she shrugged.

“She was going on and on about how Gibbs should have been here by now to break her out of the psych ward and ‘fix’ everything. She’s ridiculously invested in him emotionally so I decided to seize the opportunity, use her attachment to him to increase the chances this would work.

“Since she’s used him to protect her from having to face the consequences of her actions, it seemed like there was a certain symmetry. After all, with an IQ that puts her in the 99.8th percentile she should be able to figure out that he isn’t all powerful.”

“Wow Hermione, that just so incredibly Slytherin of you.” Dean declared looking torn between horrified and appreciative.
She smiled. That statement didn’t upset her like it would have several decades ago. She shrugged. “Thanks, Dean.”

“Oh bugger, that was really insubordinate of me. I’m sorry Minister Weasley.”

Hermione grinned. “No its true, Dean. It was pretty Slytherin of me so there’s no need to apologise. Besides, this little side plan is technically not Ministry of Magic business.”

Dean still looked horrified at what he’d uttered without thinking. She sighed before trying to explain why he shouldn’t feel bad about what he’d said.

Truly, I’m not offended. When I was studying the Myers Briggs Personality Inventory in university, I realised that I have quite a few Slytherin traits and also Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff ones too. We all do. It is almost impossible to just have Gryffindor or any of the other trait exclusively, either and actually be a well-adjusted individual…we need a bit of them all. It’s all a question of how the various trait combine and in what proportion that makes for individuality,” she explained earnestly.

Dean frowned, brooding on what she’d said, no doubt wondering if he had traces of the other house traits too.

Meanwhile Fornell was growing impatient. “And the second post-hypnotic suggestion you planted?” he queried.

“That when she goes to sleep at night she relives the mean, unkind things she’s said and done to people at NCIS but not experiencing it from her perspective. She feels it from the other person’s point of view, not hers.” She explained trying not to look too smug.

Bemused Tobias asked, “But is Sciuto capable of doing that? She’s emotionally immature and thinks she is always right.”

Hermione nodded. “Most of the time that’s true, but she does volunteer for Habitat for Humanity and works with her nuns. Plus, Tony says that when it’s people or animals who she identifies with, she’s extremely empathetic – obsessively so. So she is capable of seeing things from alternate points of view when she’s motivated to do so.”

Dean chuckled, “So you’re hoping that telling her Gibbs thinks she lacks empathy for others will be enough to motivate her to look at her actions from the victim’s perspective.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” She agreed, looking pleased with herself.

Fornell scrutinised the Minister of Magic closely, deciding she was holding something back. “Spit it out, you did something else, didn’t you?”

Grinning, she acknowledged the allegation. “Well I may have created an association between Tony and him being a homeless ex-soldier living in a cave, eating rats to survive. Plus, I created another association between Tony and an abused dog who escaped after being locked up and then hunted down like a criminal.” She explained.

“Why?” Dean wanted to know. He was frowning

“Because talking to people, I discovered that those are triggers for Abby to become obsessively empathetic about the person or animal. So I did the opposite of a hypnototherapist who treats someone for say an addiction to nicotine – they pair negative associations with smoking to make the person avoid cigarettes.” Which was true enough, but as Fornell knew as he exchanged a
knowing look at Hermione, the associations were also all true too, although Dean had no way of knowing it.

Dean looked impressed. “So how long are you planning on her dreaming these… uh ‘alternate-point-of-view-empathy’ dreams?”

Folding her arms and looking severe when she remembered what Abby had revealed to her, she replied, “Until she gets the message. They’ll stop when she actually says to herself or to someone else, ‘Abby, you’ve been a spoilt brat and you really don’t know what best for everyone else, so mind your own damned business,’ and genuinely believes it.

“Then the post hypnotic suggestions will lose their power,” she revealed and took a large spoonful of pecan pie, savouring the sweet and nutty flavours.

End Notes:

Aluminum is pronounced aa -loo- min - um

Aluminium is pronounced al - you - min - ee- um
Boys and Their Toys

Chapter Summary

Harry’s insights into the wonderful world of non-magical law enforcement and spending time getting reacquainted with his god father.

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, I guess apologies are in order for making you wait such a long time between chapters. I lost someone very special to me in early December and I just haven’t been in the right frame of mind to write for pleasure. Hence my absence and then after the Xmas I picked up an unpleasant virus that let me feeling like I’d been run over by a bus. On another note, this chapter has become ridiculously long and I’ve been forced to chop it up – something I hate doing, so I procrastinated about exactly where to end it. Hope you enjoy the abridged version. : )

Gibbs ambushed Hermione Granger when she came back to the NCIS office to formally agree to the one-off proposal involving NCIS’ forensic scientist, Abigail Sciuto. While she didn’t particularly like it, NCIS were going to stipulate that the charges of attacking a federal agent to be dropped if Abby agreed to resign, effective immediately from the agency and not seek any future position in law enforcement in the future. Unfortunately, the agency and the people they were tasked in serving had way too much to lose if the Goth got slung into prison.

When Vance had explained the plan to deal with Abby, Jethro went ballistic, especially since it seemed to be a fait accompli and no one had bothered to talk to him about it before making such a dumb-ass decision. When he tried to call in his usual ‘favours’ with Leon to save Abby’s butt, the director had been emphatic that there was nothing he could do to change the outcome. He insisted that Sciuto had cooked her own goose when she chose to assault DiNozzo in a room which was full of federal agents as witnesses.

Jethro snorted unconvinced by this rationale, since the deal they planned to offer her - no charges if she resigned and went quietly - meant that they had to be invested in hushing up the reason for her leaving. If they could order everyone not to talk about the assault if she left, then he didn’t see why Vance couldn’t drop the whole matter and order everyone not to discuss it and let her keep her job. It seemed like a no-brainer to him – especially when Vance had so much more to lose if Gibbs dropped him in it with SecNav.

If he were to testify against Vance, not only would the director lose his job but he’d probably end up in prison and conceivably lose his kids. And if he retaliated against Jethro…well technically, Gibbs was already over the mandatory retirement age, and had no family if Leon spilled the dirt he had on him. That said, he was damned certain Vance would never try calling his bluff since he had far more to lose.

Yet Vance had been the immovable object which was surprising. When Gibbs pointed out that the
director could simply swear everyone to secrecy who’d been in the bull pen during the altercation between Abby and DiNozzo, for the good of the agency. He’d explained to the gunny, in a pained kind of voice that since DiNozzo’s ‘new employer’ had become aware of the attack she’d demanded that they impose appropriate consequences. And since this wasn’t the first-time Abby had attacked one of her colleagues and had already been formally warned that her behaviour would not be tolerated, they really didn’t have a leg to stand on. Especially as SecNav had been made aware of the situation too and Sarah Porter wanted Abby gone.

Which was why Gibbs tried on numerous occasions to tackle DiNozzo, confident he could persuade him to stop victimising Abby. Clearly the former detective was using this whole ploy with Abby as a childish means to get back at him for how he’d treated him this past year. Since the SFA was responsible for her plight it was only right for him to fix it before he left.

The only trouble was Jethro would have to interact with him to remedy this FUBAR but honestly this last year he couldn’t look at DiNozzo without feeling unbridled anger at the agent – had done since the Iran Op. Which admittedly wasn’t a huge problem cuz after working with him for fifteen years he had it down pat because DiNozzo was incredibly easy to manipulate. All he had to do was just show him the smallest kindness and he was putty in his hands. Usually in the past all he had to do was invite the SFA back home, cook him a cowboy steak and tell him he depended on him.

Lately he couldn’t stomach having to make nice to that backstabber just to get him do what he wanted so Gibbs had to get more creative. Fortunately, accusing the former cop of failing to look after his teammates had been a helluva effective way to derail him. After all, he knew DiNozzo felt a deep-seated guilt that he hadn’t managed to save Caitlyn Todd, Paula Cassidy or Jenn Shepard. Plus, the SFA still felt inexplicably guilty about leaving a deeply disturbed Ziva behind in Israel (the dumb ass). Everyone but DiNozzo could see she was weighed down by the reality of her professional kills and all the shit heaped on her by her sociopathic father finally catching up with her.

Regrettably though, when he tried to influence DiNozzo to drop the whole ludicrous matter, it didn’t prove to be quite as easy to control the former cop as he’d foreseen. Jethro’s attempts to manipulate him had been completely unsuccessful, despite his initial confidence that he could easily sway him to drop the charges against Abby.

Trouble was that whenever he tried approaching DiNozzo about the subject he ended up walking away without bringing up Abby’s sacking – and that’s what it was, even if they were forcing her to resign. If he could actually talk to him about it, Gibbs just knew he could order DiNozzo to save Abby’s career and he’d comply but the moment he got close to the ass-hat who’d basically wrecked his team, things got real fuzzy and he forgot what the hell he wanted to say to him.

Jethro was so bothered by his very bizarre behaviour he’d even sought advice from Grace his counsellor. Especially cuz she seemed to be extremely interested in their exchanges and his feelings for his soon to be ex- senior field agent slash wannabe-but-ultimately-failed-to-become-successor. Yeah, suck that up you loser!

Grace had a theory about why he couldn’t bring up the subject with DiNozzo. *(Of course she did – shrinks had a theory about everything, even when they knew squat.)* Her half-baked ‘theory’ was that due to his deep-seated anger at DiNozzo, Jethro’s subconscious was afraid he might physically do harm to the SFA, so it was making him forget what he wanted to say to him. She called it a “defence mechanism” to prevent violence – one to save them both.

Then she wanted him to explore why he was experiencing such extreme feelings of anger at his 2IC and asking questions that made him furious. Questions about his inability to maintain an
intimate relationship with anyone and questions about his plumbing and how it was functioning; it pissed him off! It was none of her god-damned business. According to Confalone, he was feeling impotent because a) he had been shot and b) his 2IC stepped up and performed Gibbs’ job admirably. Crap. Jethro was NOT IMPOTENT – thank you very much! Damned shrinks!

He swore if she dared to ask him if he’d been bottle fed or breast fed when he was an infant or what age he’d been potty-trained; he’d shoot her with his Sig!

Plus, DiNozzo hadn’t performed his job admirably. Just like before the team was thrilled when he came back and took over. DiNozzo was the one who was furious – hated that he got himself a makeover and sulked that Bishop and McGee were exclaiming over how great he looked.

All he’d wanted were some techniques to stop him zoning out when he was around his SFA - which was why he’d brought it up in the first place. Instead, she insisted that he needed to get to the root of his ‘bad’ feelings for DiNozzo and deal with them healthily. He snorted - as if his feelings were any great mystery – the man was a pain in his ass with his know-it-all ways, when really, he was talking out his ass. After all, he’d never lost his wife and child, so what the fuck did he know about anything?

Gibbs decided that if he was going to save Abby’s job then he needed to confront DiNozzo’s new power hungry boss and persuade them to drop the vendetta against Abby. She was an innocent pawn and Vance and Sarah Porter were willing to sacrifice her job to save their own political necks. When he explained the situation, he was sure the minister would see reason.

Fortunately, Vance let slip that DiNozzo’s new boss would be coming in to NCIS on Wednesday to discuss the issues before they returned to the UK. Perfect opportunity!

~o0o~

Gibbs’ contact in security informed him the UK entourage had arrived and were headed to the cafeteria to await their meeting with the director. He promptly informed the clueless probies he’d been forced to train in advance firearms training 'to continue practising their shooting techniques until he returned.' Jogging back from the firing range, he reached the cafeteria and observed a group of five strangers wearing visitor badges and business attire. They were seated at a table, engaged in lively debate while drinking tea/coffee and stuffing their faces with pie.

Approaching them, Jethro heard the older female smile teasingly at the smallest of the three males and say. “So is butterscotch pie as good as treacle tart, Dennis?”

He chuckled good naturedly. “That’s rather difficult to judge, Penelope. I’ve eaten my fair share of treacle tarts over the years – almost as many tarts as I’ve had pumpkin pasties, so it’s not fair to compare the pie on one tasting.”

The younger female smirked at the group. “Besides, are we truly going to start comparing pies and tarts? That’s like contrasting apples and oranges?

Dennis rolled his eyes cheekily. “So where do pasties fit in the taxonomy of pies and tarts, Professor?” he joked teasingly looking at the younger female. “They have pastry surrounding by a delicious filling, so are they a pie or a tart?”

Rolling his own eyes impatiently at the inanity of their conversation and before they had a chance to get into a long discourse about the differences between baked goods, Gibbs interrupted – with all his usual charm and decorum.
“I looking for DiNozzo’s new boss.” He stated tersely, looking at the males on the team, trying to pick out the most likely candidate for the minister (UK version of the Secretary). Sure, he’d heard scuttlebutt about the boss being a woman, but when he checked out the older female, his gut discounted her immediately. She lacked the necessary toughness or authoritative air needed to oversee a secret law enforcement organisation. – unlike Sarah Porter who had it in spades. Likely it was just a fake-out to hide the real identity of the head honcho.

The five people all exchanged enigmatic looks and he decided that the one wearing the expensive suit and the slightly foppish air was the boss. The smallest guy (The Pieman) didn’t project the necessary authority either – Gibbs had him pegged as a bit of a wimp, while the biggest of the three males was really well built. That suggested to Jethro that ‘Muscle Man’ was the brawn on the team - not the brains.

So, when the young female (who he assumed was a secretary, based on her age, plus the teasing) directed two questioning brown orbs his way after silently dismissing her entourage, he was shocked. Her companions rose obediently from the table but only to move to an adjacent table where they could keep an exceedingly close eye on her and glare daggers at him.

“And you would be?” She enquired frostily in what he decided was an upper middle class English accent.

“His current boss,” he declared, managing to hide not only his shock but also his relief - DiNozzo’s boss was young. She was young enough to be his daughter and therefore he’d have no difficulty in dominating her and getting her to do what he wanted. He’d switch up his magnetic personality and talk her round easily. This should be a piece of cake to get Abby off – Leon was clearly losing his touch if he couldn’t talk this young woman into dropping the charges.

It wasn’t like DiNozzo was the only one who could make females swoon with his charm. Jethro had been married four times after all and had also a couple of very close calls with that Malison Hart lawyer and Hollis Mann; thankfully he escaped another ill-fated marriage by the skin of his teeth. Undoubtedly those unions would have ended up in the divorce courts too, since he seemed to have atrocious luck picking decent partners.

“Ah the infamous Leroy Jethro Gibbs,” the slender young woman responded sardonically. “I’m Hermione Granger, Minister for International Cooperation.”

“Minister for International Cooperation?” Gibbs repeated and snorted derisively. Lamest cover story ever. “Sure and I’m the Pope!” he returned sarcastically.

“Really?” the Minister for International Cooperation quirked an elegantly manicured eyebrow disbelievingly. “I had the mistaken impression you saw yourself as Zeus – King of the Gods, since you obviously don’t believe that laws and rules made for mere mortals apply to you.”

Gibbs recoiled as if burnt, forgetting about his first impulse which had been to use his baby blues and famous half smile to charm her pants off. He was expecting her to be shy and reserved, or for her to be a typically sexually repressed, stiff upper lipped British politician. Polite and observing of standard protocol, even if it killed her. After all, she hardly screamed sex kitten the way that Jenn Shepard had when she was director. Even as a probie, Jenn had exuded wanton sexuality, and knew how to flirt, suggesting that she manipulating men to get what she desired, which was power - pure and simple.

So, Gibbs had, on some partly conscious level, decided to flirt with the young woman, knowing he had a charismatic personality when required - that enabled him to get what he wanted when it came to women. Yet, that slip of a girl, as Duck would say, had immediately gone on the offensive
and attacked him… well his alpha personality wouldn’t stand for it. He ditched the legendary half
smile that turned females into piles of goo, in favour of his highly effective laser scowl that made
probies and other agents wet themselves.

“Excuse me?” He let her have it with both barrels, sarcasm dripping off him.

“You were informed by both your NCIS director and my new director, Anthony DiNozzo, that the
agency he will be heading up was none of your business – that it was need-to-know. I’ve seen your
jackets – the military and NCIS ones so I know you’ve done black ops. You know what ‘need-to-
know’ is and yet you ignored a direct order.” She glared right back at him and he saw a simmering
rage – a primal anger that shocked him.

“You attempted to breach the Official Secrets Act of an ally of the US. You then decided not just
to ignore orders but you co-opted a bunch of colleagues to break the law too. One can only hope
that they won’t hold it against you when they find that in doing so, they’ve earned suspensions,
permanent black marks on their records that could jeopardise any hope they have of promotions
and or even loss of their jobs. Charges of espionage are a real downer on a resume, in my
experience.”

Gibbs felt like he needed to attack this girl who’d managed to get under his skin, seemingly
without even trying. Clearly, she had a massive chip on her shoulder. She acted like he was a
naughty schoolboy rather than the famed bastard he took so much pride in being.

One thing was plain, despite appearances, she obviously was a helluva lot tougher than she looked.
The gunny wondered if she was a natural redhead.

“It’s not their fault - they didn’t know.” He objected on behalf of his sources.

“Sad, but irrelevant.” She countered dispassionately, “As I’m sure you’re already aware, ignorance
is no excuse in the eyes of the law…especially if you happen to be employed in law enforcement.
While it is unfortunate for them, they should have known better.

“Dr Mallard’s career is effectively over; I suspect although at his age it probably won’t cause him
too much financial pain. Henrietta Lange, with all her years of experience, should have known
better too. While suspension or black marks on her record are unlikely to be of much concern to her
considering her past record of transgressions, the fact that all her UK sources have been ordered to
stop cooperating with her will hurt. And more than likely, our Commonwealth cousins will follow
suit - once they learn why she’s being sent to Coventry. That will make it difficult – if not
impossible for her to do her job effectively.”

Gibbs deliberately ignored any stray thoughts of how pissed Hetty was going to be. She might be
tiny but she was a fearsome ball buster and he unconsciously crossed his legs at the thought of her
wrath. As for Pride, Callan and Hanna, Jethro seriously doubted any of them aspired to become
pencil pushers so black marks on their jackets weren’t likely to impact much… hopefully.

Hermione stared hard at Gibbs before delivering her bombshell. “I doubt that any of those forms of
censure are likely to have any sway over you, not after reviewing your psychological profile and
your personnel file. So, let me speak to you in terms you are likely to relate to.”

And there was the damned schoolmarmish attitude again – he thought angrily.

Dropping her voice so he was the only one who could hear what she had to say, she let him have
it. “Anthony DiNozzo’s new position is none of your business and if you don’t stop prying into
what doesn’t concern you, I’ll make sure that you’re charged with the 1st degree murder of Pedro
Hernandez. Plus, I’ll be forced to turn over evidence that Dr Sciuto was an accessory, after the fact, to his murder.”

*What the fuck! How did she know about Hernandez?*

“I know that the likelihood of your murder conviction placing this agency, plus every case you’ve been involved in investigating, in jeopardy of being dismissed, won’t really matter to you. If you had even a smidgeon of the honour you’re always alluding to as a former Marine, you’d never have entered law enforcement after you killed Hernández.” She indicted him, disdainfully. “If you did have any honour then you’d have considered the damage your crime would have on the agency, should… correction WHEN it came to light. It could cripple the agency.”

He rolled his eyes petulantly at her histrionics – *can anyone say Drama Queen? Although, with him not leading the MCRT and investigating dirtbags perhaps she was right, they would crumble without him.*

“I know you don’t care about anyone but yourself – your precious rules make it crystal clear that you’re an egocentric narcissist.” Hermione told him bluntly, shaking her head in distaste. “But I do know that you’ll do anything to protect your precious surrogate daughter - because she’s important to YOU. That means you’ll also do anything to keep her out of jail.” She regarded him like he was a pathetic pile of steaming dog crap.

Gibbs tried not to let his outrage, his shock, his burgeoning fear show – striving heroically to keep his features even. He’d made a real error in underestimating this Granger woman unfortunately. She was a real absolutely nut cracker and she’d coldcocked him for sure. Never in a million years was he expecting her to know about Pedro Hernandez. Had Vance ratted on him? No, Leon knew what side his bread was buttered - if he did that, he would end up in jail too.

Hermione smiled at him but it was singularly without warmth and her eyes had become hard and glittery. It was a predatory smile which he recognised as having the prey on the run type of grin – one Gibbs knew well as an apex predator himself.

The Minister for International Cooperation seemed satisfied that she’d made her point but still decided to ram the message home. “You’re reputed to cut a swathe through the law enforcement community because you know where all the bodies are buried and threaten to dig them up. Like I said, Agent Gibbs, I’ve studied your psych profile, so it’s worth repeating again.

“I know where your ‘bodies’ are buried, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. If you don’t cease and desist in your pathetic search for my agency and its personnel immediately, I’ll take great pleasure in digging them up including Dr Sciuto’s part in Hernandez’s assassination. Having sighted your jacket, I very much doubt that he’s the only victim you’ve ‘buried’ either. Leopards don’t change their spots!

“At the very least, I’ll wager that if I were to dig around just a little, I’ll find that it wasn’t the only time you’ve stepped across the line and broken the law, disregarding this particular act of espionage of course.”

Gibbs felt a familiar, almost comfortable feeling of rage at the world stir within him – it was comfortable like an old pair of ratty slippers that were so well worn they’d moulded to the shape of your foot. It was a rage that he’d felt most of the time since he learnt that his family had been taken away from him.

It had kept him company at night when he was bunkered down in his basement, drowning bourbon to get through the night. Rage was an old, dear friend and it followed him when he was investigating dirtbags. His team, who dared to be frivolous and happy, especially DiNozzo damn
Wrapping his anger around him like a snuggly blanket, he desperately wanted to defuse the threat that this woman posed to him and Abby and not surprisingly, when he felt cornered, Gibbs usually came out swinging. His default impulse, albeit visceral, was to pummel the threat into oblivion – although he knew if he tried that approach her, it would probably be the last thing he did. He glanced across at her entourage, out of earshot yes, and yet close enough to reach him if he threatened their boss in any way.

Specifically, the two large and imposing males that were in hindsight, her protection detail and looked like they’d cheerful break him in two. The bigger male resembled a tank and looked like he could bench press Jethro if he wanted to, which admittedly made him pause – Marine or not. Still even if he realised that attacking this sarcastic British bitch wouldn’t be the best idea, it didn’t negate the desire or the rage he was experiencing.

Deciding it might be best to remove himself from proximity with her before he did something he might have cause to regret later, he stood up. It said a lot about his emotional state that he’d forgotten why he’d waylaid the minister in the first place. Yet as he was preparing to beat a somewhat dignified retreat, she caught him on the back foot…again.

"By the way, Agent Gibbs,” she called, stopping him in his tracks. In his mind, she was swiftly approaching the status of his former wives in her ability to piss him off and she didn’t even have a baseball bat or golf club. “You know… you never actually told me why you were so keen to talk to me. But I’ll hazard a guess that you were going to berate me about Dr Sciuto’s plight, how Agent DiNozzo was being a jerk - demanding she face unfair consequences for her precipitous actions.”

His expression revealed his irritation. **Damn it, he hated being so predictable and yet, here was perfect stranger besting him at every turn. He hated this woman intensely, even after such a short exposure.**

“First off, Special Agent DiNozzo has already tried unsuccessfully to plead for clemency for Dr Sciuto,” Granger revealed. “And since he was the one who was harmed by her actions, I doubt very much that you have anything pertinent to say. Just save your breath and accept she’s getting off far more lightly than she deserves – personally I’d prefer she was thrown in jail to rot.”

Since he had wanted to stop Abby losing her job, he shrugged as it was useless to deny his intentions in approaching her and despite her telling him it was a waste of time, he refused to give up on his surrogate daughter. “She didn’t mean it…it was a momentary brain snap. I know Abby and she’s sorry for what happened.”

“No…no it wasn’t a brain snap.” Hermione shook her head, disbelievingly. “Dr Sciuto made that crystal clear to me when I talked with her and she told me why she did it. Secondly, she also failed to express any remorse – in fact, she placed the entire blame on Agent DiNozzo.”

Gibbs had found it increasingly difficult to keep his cool in the face of her constant verbal parrying and that last bombshell she dropped incensed him. Shaking his head as if to shake off his homicidal feelings towards her, he objected. “That’s impossible – she’s locked up on the psychiatric ward at Walter Reed. No one can talk to her.”

He knew, because damn it, he’d done his utmost to see her. He’d tried calling in favours with everyone he could think of – but no go. He’d been supremely confident that as Walter Reed was military, he’d find someone he knew or that knew someone who could pull strings and get him in. Unfortunately, Abby was being kept in a secure ward and no one was getting in to see her – not even him. Frankly he was worried about her - she must be working herself into a right state, not
Hermione shrugged nonchalantly. “Depends on who asks. I asked… I talked to her. As to your other gripe, if you want to blame anyone… other than Sciuto, seeing she’s a middle-aged woman who is definitely no kid and should be held responsible, I suggest you both stop blaming Tony.”

She’d raised her voice in frustration and the three males and one female at the nearby table turned as one and scowled at him. She turned to them and shook her head before continuing tearing him a new one.

“Here’s a thought! How about blaming yourself for giving her the impression she’s bullet proof, regardless of her uncouth and childish behaviour. But then… one could make similar observations about your own behaviour - the anger, the verbal and physical abuse, threats and intimidation that you use as a default setting. Uncouth and very, very childish! she declared mockingly.

“Not to mention, the mind games, playing favourites and ignoring chain-of command that epitomises your highly questionable leadership style. Your underlings exhibit Stockholm Syndrome – you’re the last person who I would listen to in pleading for mercy!”

~o0o~

Almost two weeks later:

Harry Potter was mostly enjoying his assignment in the United States, hanging out with muggles (oops non-magicals) as he spent time with his godfather and watched his back at NCIS. Truth to tell, it was the most time they ever got to spend together – well that Harry remembered. Apparently before his parents were killed, his honorary uncles, Remus and Sirius spent a lot of time with the Potters. Sirius gave him his first flying broom for his birthday, not just the awesome Firebolt in his third year at Hogwarts that made him an object of envy amongst his mates.

Granted, he’d spent some weeks living with Sirius at 12 Grimauld Place during the summer that the Order of the Phoenix had been reactivated, back when he was a teenager. However, others were also staying at the Black ancestral home at the time too, including the Weasleys and various other Order members were constantly popping in and out for meetings. It had hardly been conducive to Harry getting to know him intimately and forming (or reforming) familial bonds.

In hindsight, one of the obstacles for him and his godfather spending quality time together once they were reunited again in his third year had been is mother-in-law Molly Weasley and her piss-poor attitude to Sirius. She’d constantly run interference between them whenever they were together, and when she was unsuccessful at forcing them apart, she was constantly berating his godfather, criticising him and accusing him of making Harry a substitute for his father James.

As if she hadn’t been guilty of making her six sons (but most especially Ron) substitutes for her adored twin brothers who’d been killed during the first war against Voldemort. Can anyone say pot and kettle, Mollywobbles? Five of her boys couldn’t wait to escape her cloying sentimentality and overprotectiveness when they left school. Charlie and Bill fleeing overseas and taking up the highly dangerous occupations of dragon keeper and curse breaker to gain their emancipation and it surely hadn’t been their dad, Arthur they’d run away from.

Yet at the time when Harry stayed at Sirius’ ancestral home, he’d been a teenage boy; one who’d suffered emotional and physical neglect and abuse, thanks to the Dursleys, so he’d been even more clueless than most males. Molly’s verbal and emotional abuse of Sirius - who was highly vulnerable after 12 years of torture in Azkaban and a year on the run - had mostly sailed right over his head. And even if he’d had a normal upbringing, adolescents weren’t exactly noted for being
socially aware or empathetic, Ron had certainly been a prime example of that! Looking back as an adult, Harry found himself becoming angry on Sirius’ behalf, not to mention his own lost opportunity for making precious memories with his cousin/godfather.

Back then, Molly had no right to make decisions regarding Harry. She wasn’t his mother or even his guardian – by rights Sirius was supposed to have been. That was before Dumbledore decreed that Hagrid remove him from his godfather’s loving but shattered arms that terrible night when Sirius had found Harry after Voldemort killed his parents and tried to kill him.

Now as an adult and a father himself, looking back on that night, Harry was pretty certain that if Sirius had been allowed to look after baby Harry instead of having him ripped away from his protective embrace, the whole confrontation with Pettigrew would never have occurred. His focus would have remained on the distressed child who he had a close familial bond with, since not only was he Harry’s godfather but they were also cousins, related through his grandmother Dorea Potter (nee Black.) It meant Harry would have had a chance to grow up in a loving magical home with Sirius and neither would have suffered the abuses of the Dursleys and Azkaban’s Dementors.

Which of course wasn’t Molly’s fault, but still, she had no right to interfere in their interrupted relationship the way she did when they finally had an opportunity to renew it after 13 years.

It wasn’t even as if she’d known Lily and James Potter and with seven kids of her own she had no business being jealous of another adult getting close to Harry. It was incredibly petty and immature of her. Even to this day, whenever he’d talked about Sirius, his mother-in-law had always been quite scathing about him. Even knowing how much he meant to Harry and how responsible he still felt for Sirius dying when he’d been conned into breaking into the Ministry of Magic by Voldemort.

Not to mention that she was attacking someone who was spectacularly wounded, both emotionally and psychologically. Thanks, in part to his years of false imprisonment and torture and his guilt over Harry’s childhood and what he perceived to be his abandonment of his godson. What Harry had belatedly come to realise about his father’s best friend after talking at length to Sirius’ older and beloved cousin, Andromeda – Teddy’s grandmother – was he had a childhood easily as bad as his own.

In some ways, Harry decided that Sirius’ childhood was probably worse than his. At least Harry knew, when he finally went off to Hogwarts and discovered his real identity, that his parents loved and were proud of him. In fact, they’d loved him enough to die protecting his life and it had helped to know that his parents were honourable people – were heroes of the light. Yes, he’d endured abuse and neglect at the hands of his mother’s family, but Sirius had endured abuse and neglect at the hands of his own parents and much of his extended family too.

Even having to endure Sirius’ mother, Walburga Black, vicariously via her magical portrait at Grimauld Place and her unpleasant and equally twisted and utterly deranged house elf, Kreacher, was a truly horrific experience. At least they could close the curtains on the portrait and shut the crazy old shrew up when she drove them mental. Sirius, as a child couldn’t stop the witch spewing her vile, hateful filth like they could with a flick of their wand on the portrait. Surely that degree of crazy must have had a huge impact on her two poor sons – Sirius and Regulus.

Andi had confirmed that Padfoot’s parents tried beating him into submission, tried to beat the rebelliousness (i.e. the Gryffindor) out of him, especially when he became the first Black male not to be placed in Slytherin House when he started at Hogwarts. They’d even tried forcing him into taking the Dark Mark when he was just 16 years old. Half dead but unyielding, he’d fled to the sanctuary of Charlus and Dorea Potter, who were Harry’s grandparents. Dorea though a Potter by
marriage was a Black by birth and had immediately offered the battered Sirius refuge and all but adopted him. Yet there had remained sixteen years of abuse and as Harry already knew from personal experience, you couldn’t wave your wand and magic it gone.

So, as an adult wizard with the benefit of twenty/twenty hindsight, Harry regretted that no adults had told his mother-in-law, Molly Weasley to pull her head in when she’d been a bitch to Sirius. Or when she’d insisted that he and Hermione had to assist her kids in cleaning up the flea-pit that the Black ancestral home had fallen into, instead of simply letting him spend time with his godfather. After Sirius’ death he harboured a lot of resentment to Molly for her pettiness where his godfather had been concerned.

So, when he’d heard the unbelievable news about Sirius’ resurrection via his best friend, he’d literally jumped at the chance to spend five weeks as his personal protection detail – living and working with him 24/7. It gave the younger wizard a real chance to focus on getting to know his godfather properly. Harry knew that it was going to be more complicated to cement any bonds when they were home in Britain, and not just because they had to keep Sirius’ true identity a closely guarded secret.

He also had responsibilities that had to be met - as an Auror, as a husband and a father. Truthfully, this trip had caused significant tension between himself and Ginny, and he would no doubt pay for the fact he had decided to accept the assignment regardless of her ire, including her hexing him repeatedly when he brought it up. There were times he cursed her twin brothers, Fred and George for teaching her some of the more creative and painful hexes when they were kids.

Of course, while being a clueless male, Harry was aware some of the ‘negativity about his assignment’ expressed by his highly opinionated wife about him coming to the US was because Hermione was here too.

Ever since Ron’s death five years ago, Ginny had revived her childish jealousy and her obsession that Hermione was interested in him. Any time they spent together as the best friends they were (and had been since their first year at Hogwarts) he inevitably paid for it later. His wife would engage in immature and petty reprisals, usually making him sleep in the spare room or simply refuse to speak to him.

As much as he hated her hexing him and her fiery outbursts, he deplored her passive expressiveness even more. Harry was getting more and more pissed off, especially since he had no intention of cheating on his wife with Hermione, or any other witch if it came down to it.

And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t had plenty of offers – not from Hermione – but from witches of every age and physical type, even before he got married. The amount of underwear that he’d received via owl post over the years was immense, not to mention bloody annoying and being here in the States, he was enjoying being totally anonymous. No silly fan girls throwing themselves at him constantly had been a soothing experience – he wished that it could always be like that. Even Sirius’ squib friend in Human Resources, Delores had been extremely deferential and kind to him and Hermione, even though she knew who they were. Yet she treated them as normal people.

So, while he was here, Harry basked in the freedom that five weeks in the US offered him in getting to know his godfather properly; the man who’d named him as his heir to the Black House and its fortune. Luxuriated in the freedom to go about his business as a normal average wizard without all the hoo-ha that followed him everywhere he went back in the UK about being the stupid ‘Boy-who-lived.’ Not to mention the wizard who defeated Voldemort as one third of the so-called ‘Golden Trio.’

That stupid reputation followed him everywhere he went – even almost two decades later. Just
taking his kids to Kings Cross station to board the Hogwarts express turned into a logistical nightmare. People wanted to befriend him because of his fame and because, thanks to his inheritance, he was rich and had influence. These five weeks offered him the freedom to live in the muggle world and not only see how the other half lived – especially with all the technological changes since he left Privet Drive and the delightful Dursleys but to just be normal for once.

Truth be told, the first time he lived with muggles, he’d been such a down trodden little house slave, he didn’t get a chance to fully experience life in the non-magical world. He was too busy earning his keep, cooking their meals that he frequently was not permitted to eat, tending the garden and taking care of any of the myriad of household chores Aunt Petunia doled out. The only reason he’d been permitted to go to primary school was because it was muggle law and Vernon and Petunia would have been fined if they hadn’t let him attend.

Even at school, Dudley had made sure he didn’t enjoy the experience, swiftly gathering other thug-like boys and persuading them to engaging in Harry-hunting which when caught, inevitably turned into Harry-bashing. And when he was brazen (i.e. stupid) enough to get better grades than his cousin ‘Ickle Dudikins’ then his loving Uncle Vernon convinced him rather forcefully (i.e. brutally) to see the error of his ways. So, it had not been a good opportunity to experience what non-magical society had to offer and he had to admit that on this trip, he was enjoying his second exposure so much more.

Harry was also intensely curious about how muggle law enforcement professionals managed to catch bad guys without magic. He vaguely remembered how his Uncle Vernon and Dudley loved watching cops and robbers’ shows on the telly, programs like Heartbeat about a country cop set in the fifties, The Professionals, The Sweeney and The Bill. And although Vernon was scornful about most American TV shows – well all things American actually - he did have a soft spot for a show set in Hawaii about a private investigator who drove a superfast red sports car. Chasing bad guys in fast cars seemed exciting, as was the good guys exchanging gunfire with the baddies – at least it seemed to be on TV shows. Although back when he was living with the Dursleys he’d never had a real chance to watch television – he merely caught stolen glimpses of those shows.

Now here in DC, Sirius had a bunch of television shows stored on mirrored circles which the muggles called DVDs, so Harry could watch shows about cops, shows about doctors, nurses and hospitals, sci-fi shows and funny shows that made him laugh. He even had the show about the private investigator living in Hawaii and solving crimes – it was called Magnum PI and oddly enough, it was one of Sirius’s favourite TV shows; well one of them anyway.

As well as shows, Sirius also made him watch some awesome movies – Star Wars, The Matrix, Avatar, Men in Black, The Searchers, The Magnificent Seven, Twelve Angry Men, The Great Escape, Casablanca, Psycho and Gunfight at the OK Corral. He’d claimed that as his godfather it was his responsibility to educate Harry into classic films. He still had a huge pile of so called classics he insisted were ‘must-see.’

Not that they only watched movies and TV shows when they left NCIS each night and headed to his godfather’s apartment. First off, both men were damned good cooks, which had surprised Harry that Sirius knew his way around in the kitchen. After all, the reason he could cook was he’d been the Dursleys’ domestic slave – chief cook and bottle washer, housemaid and gardener from a very young age. His aunt and uncle insisted the Freak (their loving name for him) earn his keep and earn it he did many times over. However, his godfather, in the few short weeks they’d lived together at Grimmauld Place in London, had shown absolutely no aptitude for cooking. Although… to be fair, with Molly Weasley playing the part of bossy hostess, there was no way she’d have allowed Sirius to cook in his own house – even if he wanted to. She barely tolerated him living there.
Still, his godfather had turned out to be no slouch in the kitchen - when he bothered to cook, and his ability to make Italian cuisine was absolutely first class. Harry had offered to cook his extremely popular lasagne, which everyone back home raved about (when his mother-in-law wasn’t within hearing.) Sirius had thrown a massive and very vocal tantrum though when Harry went in search of store bought pasta sheets in his pantry cupboard. Then to Harry’s amazement, after throwing a hissy fit, he turned to and produced his own handmade pasta which was sublime. Other nights he created home-made gnocchi, ravioli and linguini that left the younger wizard simply gobsmacked.

When it came to other types of cuisine, they were on a much more equal footing, thankfully. Apparently, little Anthony DiNozzo had learnt how to cook Italian dishes from his Nona (his grandmother on his Italian side) plus several top-notch chefs who worked for his father when he was growing up in New York on Long Island. Since Sirius had all of Tony’s memories, that had translated to him also having his abilities in the kitchen and his musical ones too. So, his godfather was teaching Harry how to make pasta from scratch, but it was still kind of hit and miss to the younger wizard’s frustration. Sirius insisted that it was a case of practise makes perfect.

Apart from cooking, Sirius also introduced Harry to the amazing world of video computer games. Harry couldn’t believe how many there were and how exciting and realistic they were either. It had all started innocuously enough with some car driver simulation programs after the wizard expressed how awesome it had been to be part of a MCRT car chase to apprehend a bad guy (Sirius called him a Naval petty officer). While Harry wasn’t sure why his pettiness was noteworthy or why it was given equal importance to him being an officer, he shrugged, because when it was all said and done, these were muggles. They had a lot of very strange habits he didn’t understand.

As much as he thought he’d fit in when he offered to be Anthony DiNozzo’s (Sirius’) shadow for five weeks, he found that he was more of a fish out of water than he’d expected to be. In hindsight, despite living exclusively in the non-magical world for ten of his first eleven years (plus the summer holidays when Dumbledore insisted he spend with them every year) he realised now he’d lived mostly on the periphery, thanks to the Dursleys, merely looking on. They’d given him a skewed view of the non-magicals and their ways.

Anyway… sailors and their character flaws aside, he’d sort of wished out loud that he knew how to drive a muggle car and next thing he knew, he was glued to the huge television screen, the incredibly realistic graphic of the driving simulator (Sirius’ words, not his) giving him some idea of what it must feel like to be driving a high-performance vehicle, chasing down bad guys.

Then after going to the shooting range with the MCRT and watching them go through their paces with their firearms, Harry rather coveted having a go at it too. And yes, he’d admit that it might have had something to do with Gibbs’ snide remarks in his ear about UK cops not being as good since they didn’t carry guns. Okay, so Harry knew that was a simplistic statement about UK muggle cops and in the case of cops from Northern Ireland, patently wrong since they were armed. Plus, other UK cops – well British cops at least - had armed units that could be called on if required, but he wasn’t clear enough on specific details so he didn’t challenge the stupid prat.

Smug tosser! Still he was mindful that he had a cover to maintain, so he kept his mouth shut and ignored the childish taunting. But now it was getting to him. It pissed him off when he felt that their honour and competency had been unfairly called into question.

So, his godfather had produced some computer games requiring him to shoot an assortment of weapons including a crossbow, an old fashion bow and arrow in a Robin Hood game and a variety of handguns and rifles. Harry discovered, not surprisingly, that after so many years aiming his wand and casting spells at dark lords, low-lives and magical criminals that his aim was true.
Naturally, he picked up firing muggle weapons remarkably quickly and he quite enjoyed himself.

Yet even though the video games were awesome, it wasn’t the same – just like a video game where you might be able to cast spells at wizards performing illegal acts to capture them wouldn’t be realistic. Although he didn’t say anything to his godfather since that would be churlish, somehow Sirius seemed to understand how he felt because he dragged Harry off to a paintball competition with other cops on their first weekend off. It was so awesome that he couldn’t stop talking about it every chance he got. Harry even decided to take some of the other Aurors paintballing when he went home since Sirius assured him that paintball centres were located in England too.

When they talked to Hermione via the computer she’d laughed at his boundless enthusiasm and retorted, “Ah…boys and their toys, Harry. Boys and their toys.”

When she saw his hurt pout, she had rushed to reassure him. “There’s nothing wrong with you boys having some fun with your toys and no that wasn’t a crack about your…erm equipment. It’s not like you got to have a normal childhood – not for a wizard and not for a non-magical child, Harry. I’m sure the Dursleys never bought you any toys growing up. Plus, you never had a positive male role model – you barely had any time to cement a relationship with Snuffles when he came back from Azkaban and then he was gone again. You don’t remember your dad and let’s face it, Vernon Dursley was definitely NOT a father-figure.”

Harry snorted about Vernon. He knew that what she said was right, but it was more than just about the obese walrus. The truth was, that as much as Harry Potter had an abysmal upbringing with no time for playing games or making friends, Sirius had also had a less than optimal childhood himself and if you added in the memories of Anthony DiNozzo, whose memories he carted around with him as extra baggage, it added up to a whole heap of messed up psyches. Anthony apparently, was the only son of two alcoholic parents who’d abused and neglected the young boy most of his life.

While each of them had endured their fair share of beating, physical disciple or having the shit beaten out of them resulting in contusions, broken bones and even bruised organs, physical assaults heal, given enough time. Psychological and emotional damage was a whole other quidditch game though – those hurts often never truly fade away. So, considering the situation, it wasn’t at all surprising that the pair of them (or should that be the three of them) should indulge in what Hermione had called a ‘Boys Own Adventure,’ given an opportunity to spend time together and have some fun.

It wasn’t so much that they were having a second childhood, rather they were living out their first one, but as adults. Which was pretty pathetic, and the dad in Harry mourned that their inner kids never got the opportunity to be real kids when they should have. His pragmatic side though was grateful they’d been given this second chance and he decided to enjoy it while they could.
Bed Knobs and Broomsticks

Chapter Summary

Harry and his godfather finally have a couple of serious talks about the past which will affect their futures.

Chapter Notes

Re the naming of the chapter - please forgive me. I couldn't help myself. :D As many of you know, this story was born out of my need to explain some glaring errors of continuity and later blatant retconning about DiNozzo's backstory. With MW's departure it became clear to me that it would never be addressed on screen so I decided to fix it myself. As this story continued to grow, many people questioned the parody tag and I'll admit, the more I got into the plot, the more the parallels became more numerous and less of a parody. But in this chapter I couldn't help it - I got to use magic again to explain another glaring piece of retconning and thereby justify the parody tag.

I have been remiss about responding to comments lately, but I'm still struggling to cope. I'm also facing some major changes in my life and while my intentions are good, I just don't seem to get around to responding. But I do appreciate your feedback and particular thanks to everyone who sent condolences. I do appreciate your good wishes since I'm feeling particular alone right now.

The second weekend of Harry’s stay in DC they’d gone for a motorcycle ride to Virginia Beach and stopped off at Norfolk for lunch. It wasn’t all that surprising that his godfather had ended up owning a bike in the US – even going to the trouble of getting a muggle motorbike license (or perhaps it was Anthony DiNozzo who’d sat for the license previously). Anyhow, before that dreadful Halloween night where James and Lily died, Sirius had bought an old motorcycle and charmed it to fly; apparently, it hadn’t just been his mother or Hermione who excelled at Charms.

When Sirius passed through the veil that terrible night at the Ministry of Magic, Harry had inherited the flying motorcycle – along with the title of Lord Black- the head of Sirius’ Black’s so called Noble and Ancient House and its massive fortune. Now that he’d found his godfather alive again, he’d wanted to give back his bike along with the inheritance but Sirius was obdurate.

“You know I can’t acknowledge who I am…who I was, Harry…and even if it was even possible, well I still wouldn’t want to. I hated my obscenely insane family - minus my cousin Andromeda - hated everything that they stood for. Apart from having to leave you, Remus, Tonks, Andi and Ted, I didn’t miss having anyone who was living, in my life.” He confessed, looking despondent and Harry presumed that he was thinking about being with his parents, James and Lily and perhaps James’ parents too, who’d opened their home and their hearts to him when he was sixteen and
nearly died.

Harry looked as if he wanted to argue but his godfather waved away his objections.

“After all, no one stood up for me when I was arrested, or believed in my innocence – not even Remus who knew me better than anyone else in my life.” He continued, depressed. “They all believed I’d betrayed your parents, that I’d killed that prick Pettigrew and a bunch of harmless bystanders, probably because I was a Black. As far as most people were concerned, I was a mass murderer when I died. So, Harry, why would I miss that?”

“But after the war – we cleared your name,” Harry protested fiercely. “People know that you aren’t a mass murderer. The Ministry of Magic stripped Pettigrew of his Order of Merlin, awarding you a posthumous Order of Merlin for your efforts in the first war and a second one for your actions that night when you died…umm… passed through the Veil.”

Sirius had smiled at him sadly. “Maybe Cub… but the first reaction…the instinctive reaction whenever people hear the name Sirius Black will initially be fear, horror and or anger before they remember – that’s IF they remember I was framed and subsequently exonerated as a serial killer and the betrayer of James and Lily Potter. And part of that is because of the infamy that the Black name achieved – deservedly so, long before I was ever imprisoned.

“My family was guilty of horrific crimes. I know it…you know it and everyone else knows it too. Bellatrix was a monster – an abomination. It makes me sick to my stomach whenever I think of what she did and that I was related to her, closely related to her.”

Harry thought of Neville Longbottom’s parents and grimaced. His godfather wasn’t exaggerating about his cousin. Some individuals are born evil and Bellatrix LeStrange nee Black was definitely one such witch.

“It was why I rebelled against them,” his godfather continued. “So I can’t blame everyone for believing the worst of me.” He remarked, dispassionately but Harry wasn’t fooled. Sirius carried the weight of guilt on his shoulders for the sins committed by his family.

At least they’d been able to tell him that his little brother had seen the monster that Voldemort was and his dying act had been to destroy one of his chances at immortality. Still, except for Andromeda and Tonks, Sirius were right – the Black family was a write-off and unfortunately, Regulus’ courageous act must forever remain a secret so that other megalomaniacs never decided to emulate Riddle’s abhorrent acts attempting to achieve immortality.

Harry frowned before deciding to bite the bullet and ask a question which had been bugging him since he learnt of his re-emergence. “Why’d you decide to come back to London, Snuffles?”

Tony smiled at the affectionate nickname Harry and his friends had given him. “Once Hermione unmasked my secret identity and the sky didn’t fall in,” he began somewhat flippantly, then saw Harry’s confused look and he grinned widely as he explained. “Non-magical kids story – Henny Penny… anyway once I realised that the end of the world didn’t occur, I figured that as long as I maintained my new identity, I could have the best of both worlds. Do good and be part of your lives – you and Hermione.”

Harry beamed at him. “Definitely you’re a part of my life. I can’t speak for Hermione, obviously but she wouldn’t have tracked you down if she didn’t want you to come back.” Although he wasn’t the most perceptive male on the planet, it hadn’t escaped his attention that Hermione seemed to be extremely interested in his godfather and not just as the Director of the DMLE either.
Sirius nodded, pleased. “Plus, I needed a new job and after she said you turned the job down because of the corruption, I figured I could fix things up between us and fix things up for you too. Anthony DiNozzo has an impeccable reputation and I’m ready to kick corrupt magical ass and make the unpleasant changes necessary to clean up the Auror Department.”

The older wizard grew deadly serious. “I know that as a reformist, I’m not going to win any popular contests – agitators and crusaders never do. But to be honest,” he confided, leaning forward. “I’m not planning on sticking around in the job long term. Because Anthony has dual citizenship I can always get work in the UK or maybe get a job with Interpol.”

“But you won’t disappear again?” Harry demanded needily.

“Nope, I want to get to know you properly, and your family of course. Plus, I want to spend time getting to know Teddy Lupin – he’s also a part of my family too. He is the son of one of my best friends and his mother is my second cousin – that makes us third cousins.

“Then there’s Hermione - she pulled me out of the black pit of despair I was in…I owe her for that and I also owe her for the whole saving Buckbeak and me with her time-turning stunt all those years ago. Of course, I never had the opportunity to pay her back – I intend to redress that situation.”

He regarded his godson with affection. “Plus, I also owe a green-eyed, messy raven-haired wizard for chasing off the Dementors with a bloody awesome Patronus, saving my ass. So, I’ll just be hanging around to pay off my debts, if I don’t wear out my welcome.”

Harry grinned goofily, it felt good to see the mischief returning to his godfather’s eyes and the beaming smile that lit up the room.

“I’ll clean up the Department of Law Enforcement for you, young Harry and when I leave, you can take over as Director if that’s something you want to do and maybe keep Ginny and Molly happy.”

The younger wizard grimaced. One of the issues Harry had ended up confiding to Sirius was the fact that Ginny wasn’t real impressed with his career advancement, because Harry was ‘still just an Auror’ after almost twenty years on the job. She’d accused him of being just like her dad, Arthur and not enough like Percy, her prat of a brother when it came to ambition and his career. Apparently, she felt her husband should at the very least by now, be running the Auror Department. Ginny insisted that because of who he was, he could have demanded any position in the Ministry – he didn’t have to settle on simply being a humble team leader in the Auror Department of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

His godfather had listened silently but sympathetically. He’d assured him that there was nothing wrong with being an Auror – especially if that was what he truly wanted to do with his life. What mattered was that he was honest, ethical and followed his heart - so long as no one was hurt by his actions that was all that counted – that and Harry was happy.

Sirius declared that happiness was the most precious gift he could give himself and his family and Harry had been grateful for the validation of his life’s work. Relieved too that he wasn’t disappointed by what others might consider Harry’s somewhat modest career achievements.

Secretly, Harry was also incredibly grateful that Sirius hadn’t made any negative comments about Ginny. Sirius had been supportive - he hadn’t berated him, calling him out on marrying a fangirl and honestly, there were times (more frequently as he got older, admittedly) when Harry did wonder why Ginny had accepted his marriage proposal. He often felt like she regretted marrying him since she was constantly nagging him that his career wasn’t prestigious enough.
After all, Aurors didn’t get invited to attend all the glittering social events such as Ministry Balls for visiting dignitaries from overseas or society events to which she aspired to attending. Well they did, but usually because they were working as protection duty for any high-profile dignitaries and Ministry personnel, not because they were desired guests.

Now that their kids were all off at Hogwarts nine months of the year, she was also desperate to travel the world. Ginny had dreams of travelling in the style befitting the head of the Houses of Potter and Black but as an Auror, Harry could only take off a few weeks per year for holidays which totally infuriated her. Nevertheless, even if his marriage wasn’t as blissfully happy as he’d envisaged when he proposed to her, that didn’t mean he would countenance anyone, not even Hermione or Sirius criticising his wife’s shortcomings.

Still, it hadn’t stop him pondering in the wee small hours when he had trouble sleeping, why after years of shunning Ginny as a fangirl, he’d suddenly done a 180-degree turn around and started dating her in his sixth year at Hogwarts. Or why she had gone from saying barely a dozen words to him in her first four years at school, to suddenly becoming so talkative that he would want her to be his girlfriend. And sometimes he wondered what might have been if he hadn’t married Ginny or at least waited ‘til she was more mature before they got hitched.

Harry sighed and decided not to worry about the consequences of his decision to come to DC to guard his godfather when he returned home. Time enough to face his wife’s ire when he got back to London - after all, he was a Gryffindor and they didn’t run away from trouble. In the meantime, he’d enjoy the freedom that came with being able to spend quality time with Sirius without having to endure the curious gaze of the magical world. Here in DC they were wonderfully anonymous and that was an amazing gift.

So, Harry was thoroughly enjoying the feeling of the wind rushing by as they roared down the road towards the beach, the Chesapeake Bay a brilliant salty reminder that they were just a couple of ‘boys and their toys’ having fun.

Still, this trip wasn’t all butterbeer and quidditch, they also had Sirius’ work at NCIS, which was the real reason he’d been brought over to DC. While Harry felt like he was learning a lot about how muggles…um non-magicals solved crime, it had its serious side too. The ‘Leroy Jethro Gibbs problem’ had mostly been neutralised by Hermione’s brilliant charm work… thankfully.

Sure, he’d tried accosting Agent DiNozzo more than once but every time he got angry (which FYI was pretty much constantly) he would simply zone out and forget what he was pissed about. While it was hilarious to watch it unfold, he had to work hard to keep a straight face so that no one got suspicious, especially Gibbs. Harry decided the ex-Marine was so paranoid he’d suspect his own grandmother, even if she was six foot under.

Then there was Tony’s friend (supposedly his very good friend) Special Agent Timothy McGee but to be honest, Harry wasn’t all that enamoured by the guy. Stupid git was still sulky about the investigation conducted into how the forensic scientist found out about the confrontation in the bullpen between Gibbs and DiNozzo, resulting in her assaulting Sirius aka Tony DiNozzo. Despite his godfather personally requesting NCIS not pursue the matter further when McGee had been found culpable of inciting Sciuto’s attack on him, the computer whiz was still brooding. The younger wizard didn’t know why he blamed Tony for the debacle when Tim was the one at fault, especially since thanks Tony, he’d been prevented from having a black mark on his jacket.

To be frank, Harry longed to hex the prat every time he took a pot shot at his godfather, making snide remarks which, whenever he or Bishop called him out about them, always claimed they were just harmless jokes. He also pointed out that DiNozzo joked all the time, which was true but there
was a difference – when he joked he did it out loud and to the person’s face. When he teased, and joked it was perfectly clear Tony was joking or teasing and he never deliberately set out to hurt anyone’s feelings, even if he might do so unintentionally and he could be clueless at times.

McGee’s barbs though, were usually done as an aside or in an undertone so his target often never knew about it. Plus, the jabs were frequently nasty, sarcastic, even deliberately hurtful. Call him ultra-sensitive but Harry rarely found anything funny about them.

Unfortunately, since Tony didn’t want to cause further dissent on the team, he’d instructed his godson not to respond to any provocation which meant that Harry had to settle for his own passive aggressive response. Of course, with a wife who was Queen of passive aggression, he was well versed in the art. Harry had started calling him Buddy as a form of address after Bishop had informed him, mischievously, that McGee hated it.

Bishop on the other hand had been quite welcoming to him. It was rather nice to have a female treat him with kindness and not to feel suspicious that she had an ulterior motive in sucking up to him, like his fame or fortune. Truth to tell, she didn’t have the foggiest notion who he was, yet she was friendly, helpful and a professional to work with, if a little odd with her eating habits.

Ellie, Sirius and himself had even gone out for pizza and a movie last Friday night. The movie was totally amazing to Harry and he decided that he’d take his kids to see one when they were home for the holidays. He knew that Hermione often took her two kids out into the muggle world to experience things such as movies but he seldom did. Up until now. He decided to accept Hermione’s invitations for family outings out in the muggle world in the future.

Ginny preferred going out in the magical world to adult parties and galas. She showed little interest in exploring the wider muggle world and sometimes he had difficulty believing that Arthur was her father. He might be clueless about their world, despite his fascination with all things muggle, but Ginny was typical of most witches and wizards who thought muggle society was vastly inferior to the magical one.

Of course, as much as he was enjoying this assignment, both professionally and personal, there was still a very serious side to his job thanks to the heaping pile of dragons’ dung Gibbs had stirred up when he tried to find out about the DMLE. Despite the boys with their toys aspect of this trip, his main role was to protect DiNozzo’s back. Even though they’d mostly neutralised the dung-stirring Gibbs, Harry and his godfather, on quite a few occasions had experienced the uncomfortable visceral feeling that someone was watching them. Sometime it happened when they’d been at crime scenes or heading into his apartment late at night. Unfortunately, they’d failed to find ANY definitive evidence to back up those feelings.

Harry tried not to make too big a deal about it – not wanting to make either of them jumpier than they already were.

He also knew that Tony had actually picked up a familiar scent once or twice when they had been at more isolated crime scenes. The trouble was he hadn’t been able to identify it or recall where he’d encountered it previously. He’d previously explained to the younger wizard that a corollary of being Padfoot was that he also had a heightened sensory perception as a human, including his sense of smell. Unfortunately, while it was a lot better than mere mortals, it also wasn’t anywhere near as precise as a canine’s.

That being the case, they were currently debating if Sirius or rather Padfoot should make an appearance to see if he could pick up more detailed information regarding ‘the scent’ in spite of the risks inherent in his presence. So far, they’d decided it wasn’t worth risking him getting caught shifting into canine form around non-magicals, but Harry knew that Pads was getting antsy.
He suspected that now that Padfoot had been allowed to resurface again after years of being suppressed, he wouldn’t allow himself to be ignored so easily.

While Padfoot gave the appearance of being just a big goofy canine with a drooling problem, Harry had seen his protective side up close and personal when Pads fought off a werewolf (who just happened to be his best friend Remus) protecting himself, Ron and Hermione. Honestly, as much dragon dung as Sirius talked about owing him and Hermione for saving him from the Dementors’ kiss, they owed him for saving them too. It was a measure of Padfoot’s protectiveness that despite being starved almost to the point of collapse, the animagus managed to fight off a fit and healthy lycan.

Padfoot wasn’t just an extension of Sirius – he was his own person…canine…um entity too and now that he had tasted freedom again, he was keen to protect Sirius from the danger that they all sensed was near.

And that meant that the big furry canine would probably be taking matters into his own paws. Which made it inevitable that he’d be making an appearance sooner or later, whether it was wise or not.

~o0o~

DiNozzo looked around his home with a touch of melancholy, acknowledging that this portion of his life was soon coming to an end. He’d bought this apartment when he first arrived in DC at a time when his trust in others had been sorely tested, most recently at that time by Danny Price and Wendy Miller. It had become his sanctuary – a place where he didn’t invite even his team mates to hang out. It was his space to run to when his body and soul was sorely tested, when his head became too full of the demons that haunted his dreams and spilled over into his consciousness.

A place where he didn’t have to watch every move he made, even though he was now Tony DiNozzo, not Sirius Black. Although the truth was that his ‘Tony persona’ was more an amalgam of three separate entities, existing inside a single body and at the moment while he was with Harry and Hermione, he was probably more Sirius Black than Anthony DiNozzo or even Tony. It gave him insight into how people with dissociative identity disorder might feel sharing one body. Honestly, it often got way too crazy inside, thus his need for a calm, peaceful place in which to ground himself.

Senior and others who had invaded his space in recent years all intimated he was obsessive or at best, anal about his space, no doubt in part because of his going postal when Anthony’s sperm donor (the old flimflam man and sex addict) bedded his nympho neighbour in Tony’s bed. Padfoot had wanted to rip the ass wipe’s throat out after his inability to keep his libido in check for five minutes – he was lucky Tony had just thrown him out!

But the truth was that his home was incredibly important to him after living through the horrors of Azkaban.

Then having to hide out in that decaying depraved shrine to the House of Black had been the final indignity and sheer torture after Pettigrew escaped…again, damn it…. after he finally managed to apprehend him - 12 years too late. With the rat once again in the wind, he’d almost been kissed since there was no physical proof that he was telling the truth about Pettigrew. Well apart from his word and the three kids, plus a werewolf. Apparently, all of whom were useless witnesses per Cornelius Fudge, previous Minister of Magic and world’s biggest dickhead.

He looked around his light and airy bedroom and now the melancholy was tinged with wry amusement. Looking around the room as a stranger might view it, especially at the king single bed
– custom made extra-long to accommodate his 6 foot 2 length in comfort – he’d admit that his bedroom seemed austere and empty. Yet after twelve years confined to a tiny cell which was dark and dank, with Dementors waiting to steal his soul, one of the consequences of his stay at Casa Azkaban had been a serious case of claustrophobia. While it was something he had successfully managed to keep hidden all these years, it had completely dictated his search for a home when he moved to DC.

He’d instantly rejected anything dark and depressing (basically anything that might remind him of Grimmauld Place, Dementors or Azkaban) insisting on only looking at places that had plenty of natural light, were open plan and spacious. While this place had been seriously out of his price range – all things being equal – it was also the scene of a rather gruesome killing which had impacted its market value.

He’d always quipped that as a cop and federal agent, a little blood and a corpse or two didn’t put him off buying the place. The truth was a lot simpler though. After Azkaban, it took a great deal to make him feel queasy, but very little to invoke his feelings of claustrophobia. Plus, his stint as an Auror witnessing the horror inflicted on the muggles and muggle-born wizards and witches by the Death Eaters had left him with a cast iron stomach. And the fact that magical spells were damned effective at getting out bloodstains.

He’d told people that he had ripped up the floorboards and had new ones laid, since everyone knew that bloodstains were impossible to get rid of completely, which was true up to a point. Magic however seemed to penetrate right down on what he assumed was a subatomic level and absorbed the blood in its entirety – although he didn’t completely understand it. No doubt Hermione could explain the process or possibly Abby, if she hadn’t turned into such a stupid spoilt brat and thrown away any possibility that some day she might be read in on the wizarding world.

So anyway, once he’d exchanged contracts and taken possession of the apartment (and gotten rid of the blood stains) he’d deliberately furnished it sparingly, anxious to avoid feeling boxed in. He’d eschewed clutter and unnecessary fripperies including ostentatious drapes and basically anything else that might remind him of the Black ancestral home. Thus, his apartment had minimal furniture and he had comparatively few possessions. Moving wouldn’t be all that onerous a task.

His bed wouldn’t be something that he felt compelled to take with him, though. He was more attached to his books, art, his music collection – both the CDs, his vinyl records and his musical instruments and prodigious amount of sheet music. Plus, of course he would be taking his movie collection with him, but remained undecided about what to do with his furniture. He smirked, thinking about the shocked reaction people had when they saw his bed.

He’d told them that he never brought anyone back to his apartment to sleep with them – preferring to stay over at his date’s place when he wanted some action. Which was patently false but he couldn’t exactly explain to anyone from NCIS why he craved the austerity and spaciousness of the king single while he slept. For some reason, it always made him sleep more soundly and helped to keep the nightmares at bay when he was alone, though. Nor could he explain to the team that when he was seeing someone he cared about, he did indeed invite them back to his place. That thanks to his ability to transfigure his king-single into a sumptuous king-sized bed, making love or even just cuddling up together to sleep wasn’t a problem.

He might not use magic all that much since assuming Anthony DiNozzo’s identity and becoming Tony, but this was one wizarding perk that Sirius cheerfully utilised when required. Especially when he’d been seeing someone he was serious about, like E.J. Barrett for example. Since she’d been staying with a relative (later revealed to be her Uncle SecNav) when she had temporarily relocated from the Rota Field Office during the P2P case, it just made sense that they retired to his
place at the end of the day. Not just to get intimate but so they could get to know each other in a more private setting.

He’d also brought Paula Cassidy back here too – partly because she’d given up her own place in DC when she was sent to Gitmo as an interrogator then was serving as an agent afloat. But he also brought her here because he genuinely cared about her, particularly after she was abducted and almost killed by Adam O’Neill, attorney and partner-in-crime to the infamous serial killer, Kyle Boone. His sanctuary had become hers and helped to soothe her fractured nerves and aided in her healing, mentally and physically after the attack – something he also knew quite a lot about.

Thinking about his friend Paula, who’d died in the line of fire prompted thoughts about his former teammate Caitlyn Todd. She, like Paula, had also died in the field too when Ari Haswari decided to create a spot on the MCRT for his half-sister, Ziva plus piss Gibbs off. It seemed that his arrogance and autocratic attitude reminded Ari of his own sperm donor – Eli David who at that time was Deputy Director of Mossad. Anyhow, if Cate had still been alive when the team finally got to see his apartment and heard his excuse for owning king-single bed, she would have known instantly that he was lying through his teeth and called him on it.

Not because she was a crash-hot profiler – she wasn’t. Honestly, Cate was probably the worst profiler Tony had ever worked with. Perhaps she might have been an excellent theoretical profiler but the moment she’d started interacting with victims and persons of interest on the case, she got over involved and lost her perspective. No, the real reason she would have known he was lying about not bringing home his dates was his utter shock when Cate declared categorically that women preferred having sex and then going to sleep in their own beds. It was during his first encounter with Paula at Guantanamo Bay and they’d been investigating her, since Gibbs suspected her of having an affair or being in cahoots with a corrupt interpreter. When Tony had insisted, she was innocent, that there was no evidence that Paula had been in the interpreter’s room, Cate had revealed her ‘Secret Women’s’ Business about dating and sex to explain why she would have entertained Sa’id in her room, not gone to his.

Tony knew that he’d been visibly gobsmacked by her gross generalisations about the sexual predilections of the whole female gender, which if he’d proclaimed what she did, she would have promptly accused him of being a male chauvinist pig. Aside from her hubris, claiming her own preferences represented all women who were sexually active, it hadn’t been his experience that they expressed a preference for their own place over his. Some did, some didn’t and some didn’t really care where they did it, however, he did admit that he had took her sexist claim and later used it to explain why he owned a king-single bed to the team.

Of course, they’d readily believed his story since Cate had long ago labelled him a chauvinist pig. The label had stuck and Tony discovered it was not without its uses when it came to deflecting attention, so he played up the facade. Luckily, Gibbs didn’t seem to remember (or maybe he just didn’t care) that Tony had unintentionally revealed that he used his own apartment to bring dates back to all those years ago when Cate had been their probie agent. But there was no way Cate wouldn’t have remembered and called him on it.

Then there was his last lover and Anthony DiNozzo’s former partner from Philly, Zoe Keats who had stayed over fairly frequently. In fact, they were practically living together towards the end of their relationship until they decided it wasn’t working, probably in light of his funk over his unexpected reunion with his old lover - Jeanne Benoit.

Of course, he’d never brought Jeanne back here to his apartment. Not because he didn’t care about her, in truth he still loved her madly, deeply and he suspected that she still had unresolved feelings for him which was why she’d warned him off making further contact with her. But because he was
undercover as Tony DiNardo and couldn’t risk her finding out his real identity they had always met at her place, never here.

Yet as much as his apartment was a part of him, he’d agreed to get a place and move in with her… well he had before it had all fallen apart when her arms dealing father hit town.

Despite his utter panic that he’d made a serious commitment, which scared the crap out of him (thanks so much Wendy Miller) and the fact that Jeanne was only supposed to be a mark, he must have liked the idea. At least liked it enough on some level for him to have agreed to it so readily when she floated the idea. After all, he was a highly experienced skilled undercover operative, with impressive improvisation skills that might not be up to the standards of John Belushi or Robin Williams but he was still damned good. He could have easily diverted her… if he wanted to.

Ergo he had wanted (well, Tony/ Sirius/Padfoot/Anthony wanted – take your pick) a life with Jeanne, even if it was just a pipe dream. He knew it… well the rational part of him knew it – the experienced undercover operative knew that when the shit finally hit the fan that Jeanne would never be able to forgive him. Knew that even if she could, she wouldn’t be able to trust him. Yet the heart wants what the heart wants and it wanted Jeanne Benoit – badly.

It wanted the house, the engagement and wedding rings, the two point five rugrats, the dog (okay maybe Padfoot would have put his paw down on that score). Not to mention the white picket fence. The heart is an ass!

Sighing philosophically, since it was all water under the bridge now, he decided to focus on the positives – Jeanne had found a good man, an honest man that didn’t have to lie to her and he was going home to be with his godson and his family. Well maybe not Harry’s mother-in-law – she wasn’t exactly a positive, whichever way you spun it. Mollie Weasley was never going to be someone he would chose to spend time with, but still she was a cross he was willing to bear to remain a part of Harry’s live again.

He was willing keep an open mind re Ginny Potter until he had an opportunity to size up the adult witch she’d become, principally out of deference to his godson who had chosen to marry her - but not her mother. He shuddered at the thought of dealing with the matriarch of the Weasley clan and decided that as much as possible he would just avoid her.

As his thoughts turned to his imminent departure from DC, Tony thought fondly about this time spent working out his notice. He was enjoying these last few weeks at NCIS much more than he’d thought he would, given the circumstances surrounding his resignation. Of course, most of the credit for that had to go to Hermione, what with her amazing charm work, which had meant that Gibbs had left him alone and her ensuring that Abby couldn’t contact him either. Okay… so it was a sad reflection on his many years contributing to Gibbs’ team – and he realised now at the very end that it had always been Gibbs’ team. Even when they worked as partners and friends, even when Gibbs resigned and he stepped up and took over the team it was always Gibbs’ Team, not his. It may be hard to accept but it was still the truth.

And the other individual owed a lot of credit for helping make this whole process as painless as possible, since a part of him would always regret having to leave behind those people he’d thought of as family for such a significant amount of time – was Harry. Even though he’d initially argued that he didn’t need protection, having been overruled, he had to admit that it had all worked out well.

He was definitely looking forward to working with Harry when they returned to the UK although, grimacing he acknowledged that as much fun as they had, his godson, like Hermione had a way of cutting to the chase and forcing him to take off his rose-coloured glasses. In the short time since
his reunion they’d made him examine some of his long held and dearest assumptions.

One was particularly painful – for both Harry and himself. Of course, without the prior contributions of Hermione and to a lesser extent, to Probish laying the foundation for facing up to what was a gut-wrenching issue, he probably wouldn’t have been ready for the difficult conversation when Harry brought it up. He’d undoubtedly have deflected, using humour instead of dealing with some home truths that they both needed to face.

It had started off with a somewhat humorous opening salvo but his godson had quickly turned up the heat, asking questions that he had no glib answers for.

“So Snuffles, from where I’m sitting, Gibbs is as mad as a bag of ferrets. How did you end up at NCIS in the first place and what in the world made you put up with that tosser for so many years?” Harry asked the pivotal questions after they’d sat down to dinner.

Which was how he’d found himself trying to defend why he’d stayed so long on the MCRT in such a toxic situation. Frankly, he’d been trying to reconcile that conundrum himself as he prepared to leave the agency after 15 years of his life. After the Daniel Budd fiasco, he’d spent many sleepless hours trying to figure out how he’d made such a monumental mess of things, unfortunately, with not a lot of insight.

He’d been unable to explain, even to his own deluded satisfaction why he hadn’t cut his losses and got out of that toxic work place a long time ago…apart from inheriting the Black gene for insanity and or masochism. After all, wasn’t one definition of crazy doing the same thing over and over and expecting the outcome to be different? Budd hadn’t even been the first time his boss had made him feel like he was a screw up, who’s services weren’t required on the team.

So instead Tony described to his godson the chronology of their working relationship which lead him to NCIS, hoping it might provide insight to either of them. How his Baltimore PD’s homicide partner Detective Danny Price’s betrayal devastated him (which given Pettigrew’s treachery was hardly surprising) and how that had resulted in his subsequent flight from Baltimore.

He rationalised, or he tried to, how he decided not to try to bring Price to justice since the last time he’d tried to turn in a friend it had ended so well for him. He admitted, awkwardly, he’d feared that Price would set him up too. He also admitted how his cowardice had ultimately meant that Danny had been used against him and how he carried a heavy burden of guilt for his death.

He talked about how Gibbs, knowing about Danny’s corruptness, had stepped in and offered him a job; how Gibbs, back in the day, had been quite a different person.

“We worked more as partners and had each other’s backs when the going got tough. And Gibbs also kind of reminded me of your dad, James.”

Harry looked shocked and outraged. “Really? Because from what I know about my Dad, I’m not seeing it. Granted I never really knew him. Please tell me that my father wasn’t an arrogant bullying power monger, head slapping his colleagues and subordinates and playing cruel mind games with them to make himself feel important.”

Sirius smiled sadly. “As a student James could be rather arrogant – as the only heir to the House of Potter your grandparents’ kind of doted on him, plus he was a quidditch hero and damned smart too. He was also known to bully Severus when we were at Hogwarts but hey, not a case of pot/kettle here, Harry. I was no better when it came to Snivellus and I was also extremely arrogant. Still am sometimes I guess, although I try hard not to be.”
Looking pensive he continued. “I blame the inbreeding of the Black line – arrogance is endemic in us as well as madness. You do know, James mother was also a Black – yeah? And that my cousin Bellatrix wasn’t the only Black who was mad as dragon dung? She was probably the most arrogant witch I ever met. No wonder she worshipped the ground Lord Snakey Lips crapped on.”

He knew it might seem as if he was looking to make excuses for his character flaws, but the truth was that as the head of the Noble and Ancient House of Black, Harry needed to be aware of its dark and depraved history – especially as it was also a part of him as well. Sirius remembered all too well how Bellatrix bragged in Azkaban that her beloved Voldermort once ordered her to eat his shit as a punishment when she’d displeased him but he soon learnt that she considered it a great privilege and complied with gusto. In fact the depraved witch had been practically orgasmic in recounting the ‘punishment’.

If he’d had any food in his stomach he would have lost it after having to listen to her gloating, fortunately the prisoners of Azkaban only received a meagre ration of food delivered in the early evening. As it was he puked up a mountain of bile and thought very seriously about killing himself.

Listening to the filth which had spewed forth from his cousin over his years of incarceration, he wasn’t sure if exposure to Bellatrix or the Dementors had been more damaging to his psyche, especially when she gloated on a regular basis about torturing Frank and Alice Longbottom. He’d worked in the DMLE with both Frank and Alice and he mourned their loss almost as much as he did James and Lily.

Deliberately pushing those sickening memories down deep in his mental trunk – thankful for the occlumency skills he’d developed over the years that had probably been the only thing standing between himself, a strait jacket, drooling and a nicely padded room, he returned to the issues at hand. Looking at Harry compassionately, he did his best to answer him honestly, knowing that his godson deserved the unedited truth. According to Hermione, it was something that Dumbledore had made sure he didn’t get access to.

“Despite your dad having a healthy serving of the Black genes, James was essentially a kind person, especially when he matured a bit. He befriended Peter Pettigrew who was being bullied unmercifully by the Slytherins (including Severus Snape by the way) because he was such weedy, pathetic little runt that he might as well of had ‘Pick On Me’ tattooed across his forehead, since he was born to be victimised. Yet your father offered him friendship and therefore protection.

“Plus, never forget that your father was fiercely protective of Remus during a time when werewolves were incredibly feared, misunderstood and maligned, in the magical world - especially by the purebloods. It was as if they believed that Lycanthrope could be passed on by casual contact or perhaps osmosis.”

Feeling furious when he thought of Peter’s treachery and that Remus was gone too, he tried to push aside his hatred so he could continue this painful conversation.

“Peter might have been a dreadful mistake, since his betrayal of our friendship ending up costing us practically everything we held dear, apart from you. But never forget that Remus was a loyal and loving friend to your parents and a brave warrior for the force of good.”

Tony’s features soften markedly. “He was such a gentle wizard when we first meet up with him on the Hogwarts Express – ashamed and afraid of himself and what might be if others found out about him. Severus in particular, seemed to sniff out pretty quickly that he was hiding something massive and was determined to discover what he was hiding.”

Tony or was it Sirius, since this was ancient Marauders’ history (shameful dark history) which
thanks to late night discussions with Hermione, he knew that Harry had knowledge of, contemplated discussing his most reprehensible act. Even now he still couldn’t quite believe his youthful arrogance and stupidity, how close he’d come to having his best friend sentenced to death and costing Snape his life. He decided it was a discussion for another time, since it was complicated and ugly and deserved to be dealt with comprehensively, not as a minor addendum to an already complex subject. Sighing, he focused back on the topic at hand – Harry’s father and Gibbs.

“As juvenile and egotistical as he could be, James ultimately grew up – thanks in no small part to one awesome witch named Lily Evans who refused to tolerate his less endearing traits. With maturity and some less than subtle prompting from your mum, he became a courageous fighter for the light. James willingly sacrificed himself, hoping to save you and your mother. You can be proud of the man he grew into, and honoured to be named after him.”

He stood up to grab a bottle of water from the fridge for them both before he went on to describe all the good qualities he’d first seen in Gibbs’ which had reminded him of James. “Gibbs was loyal, Harry. Determined to stand up for what was right, no matter the cost, just like your dad. He had a cool head in a tight situation and watched my back; he was my friend at a time when I felt betrayed and alone. Just like James befriended me when my parents had shunned me for being sorted into Gryffindor House.

Without exaggeration, your dad saved my life – he saved my soul.

Later when they disowned me officially because I refused to join the Death Eaters, it was James I ran to and his parents all but adopted me. We were like brothers - even if we were arrogant little prats. Then fast forward all those years…when Danny betrayed my trust and I resigned from Baltimore, I had nowhere to go. Gibbs offered me a place to belong here at NCIS and gave me a purpose.”

He looked across at the younger wizard, wondering if he was doing a good enough job of explaining what in all honesty was still very much abstruse to himself. It was like he’d been caught up in a dream which only now with the unrelenting prodding of Hermione, Fornell, Ellie Bishop and now Harry had bludgeoned him over the head with the truth. It was as if he was slowly emerging from a daze.

~00o~

Harry nodded. He could see how with Sirius’ family history he was vulnerable to the sort of friendship Gibbs had held out to him. What with Pettigrew’s vile betrayal resulting in Harry’s parents being murdered by Voldemort, Sirius spending 12 years in that hellhole Azkaban, then two years as a fugitive, one living rough and the other being as good as a prisoner of his family home. Then, finally with him being sent through the veil, losing everything that was important to him, it wasn’t surprising that Sirius would then be utterly destroyed by the betrayed of his partner in Baltimore.

After all, as Harry knew all too well as a seasoned Auror, your partner was friend and family all rolled into one. Often you told your partner stuff you wouldn’t even dream of telling you better half – that was the strength of the bond that existed between partners who constantly held each other’s lives in their hands. He understood all too well the trust you had to place in them so you could do your job properly.

Plus, he could also appreciate just how much impact it would have on Sirius for someone to offer him somewhere to belong - like Gibbs had done – just like his dad had done many years before.
It was like offering delicious morsels of food to a starving man – pretty much like Harry had grasped Ron’s friendship and ignored all the times that Ron hadn’t treated him like a best mate should. Ignored his at times petty jealousy, ignored his so-called best friend calling him a liar, cheat and accusing him of wanting the limelight during the Tri-Wizard Cup.

Like he forgave his best mate for his behaviour during the Horcux hunt; his whining and constantly scoffing down their severely limited supply of rations, while he and Hermione had eaten sparingly, mindful of the others. Forgave him for abandoning his two best friends when the going got too tough for him, making a truly miserable and horrific experience even worse with his betrayal.

He’d needed his friendship so desperately that he’d chosen to focus on the fact that Ron had finally returned and pulled him from the frozen waters, that he’d destroyed the cursed locket. Focused on him being there at the final battle, standing shoulder to shoulder with him when they brought down Voldemort. Excused the lapses, writing them off as the cursed locket messing with Ron’s mind, trying to possess him. Just like Voldemort’s diary had sought to control Ginny all those years ago when she was a firstie at Hogwarts.

He’d also ignored the oftentimes strident voice inside his head that argued that wearing the cursed locket hadn’t exactly been a pleasant stroll down to Hagrid’s hut for tea and rock cakes with the amiable half-giant and his beloved Fang for Hermione or himself, either. Yet they hadn’t abandoned their friends, whined non-stop about the privations they’d endured on that terrible mission or scoffed all the food out of their friends’ mouths. Yes, he’d ignored the disparaging voice that observed that hardship had strengthened their characters and deepened their friendship. That the cursed locket had presented them with an opportunity to prove their mettle and they had seized it with stoicism and quiet courage.

Oh, yeah, Harry got it, alright. Sometimes you needed friendship so badly that others took advantage of you. And sometimes you needed someone you could trust so desperately that you ignored all the warning signs which everyone else could see, simply because they weren’t invested in the outcome.

The truth was that Harry had much more in common with Sirius than he ever would with his father. Both had been on the run, been starving and cold for months on end, not for a night or two. He would never forget how frighteningly gaunt Sirius had been the first time he encountered the escapee – how the skin was stretched tight over the planes of his face. How waxy his skin and how the tattered rags he wore hung off his emaciated frame. He looked like a corpse!

Nor could Harry ever forget how sharp the angles of Hermione’s face and body were when they finished their hunt for Voldemort’s cursed artefacts. Not that she was overly endowed before their miserable horcrux hunt, and he figured that he probably hadn’t looked any better. He remembered the years of abuse at the hands of the Dursley’s and Sirius’ own family’s abusiveness and knew that they experienced things that James Harry Potter could never fathom.

Yes, he understood why Gibbs could hold such sway over his godfather – probably understood it better than Sirius could.

End Notes:

So originally this chapter was ridiculously long - hitting the 12,000 word mark and even knowing a lot of you like really long chapters, that was ludicrous. So I had little choice but to split this chapter in two...again. Going back and re-editing it because splitting can wreak havoc on my symmetry I found that before I knew it, I added another couple of thousand words to this chapter, which fyi I think has greatly improved the original chapter. Hope you liked it.
The End Justifies the Means

Chapter Summary

More painful truths and a murder had Padfoot wanting to be let off his leash.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your feedback. FYI trying to write anything coherent in a heatwave of 47 degrees Celsius (116.6 degrees F) with just a fan is not possible. Thoughts are with those who lost their homes during our catastrophic bush fires.

Chapter 18

Tony and his godson, Harry Potter, were seated on his ludicrously comfortable leather lounge after eating a quick dinner using up the marinara sauce Tony had in his freezer. Harry had been wanting to try out his new-fund pasta making skills again, anxious to prove that the last two successful attempts hadn’t been flukes. Tony didn’t mind – after a difficult day, he ready to relax and had even considered suggesting they get some Chinese takeout before Harry volunteered to make the pasta.

They’d been working on a tedious case of embezzlement at Norfolk and although fraud wasn’t his favourite area to investigate, the MCRT did their fair share of working the less glamorous crimes when the office was shorthanded or the other teams were busy. It wasn’t so much the case, which they’d closed out tonight that had bothered him. It was that McGee had been particularly vitriolic about Abby losing her job and being barred from getting another position in a government law enforcement agency.

He suspected that Gibbs had put a flea in his ear about Tony, or that Abby had been crying all over Tim and guilt tripping him into trying to get her job back. Although Abby and Gibbs for that matter had to know that wasn’t going to happen. After she signed that agreement there was no going back and even if he had it in his power to get her job back again – which he didn’t – he wasn’t sure that he would even want to at this point.

No, it wasn’t about petty revenge for perceived wrongs done to him or even childish pique that she’d once upon a time proclaimed herself his ‘best friend.’ It was about his newly achieved awareness right at the end of his tenure as a NCIS agent that Abby Sciuto’s professional comportment was well...less than professional. And no, it wasn’t the Goth demeanour at work, the overattachment to her Silver Fox to the detriment of her job or her increasingly juvenile mien as she grew older. How screwed up was that, by the way?

It was that Abigail Sciuto was an emotional terrorist and a bully who routinely held the field-agents’ hostage on their cases because...well he wasn’t really sure why. Probably because she could, although it didn’t explain why she’d want to.

Since her arrest by Fornell and Balboa he’d been astonished at the constant stream of agents who
had come to him in private, wanting to offer commiserations and their support. They all wanted to assure him that Abby’s situation wasn’t his fault – that she had no one else to blame but herself.

They’d shared stories of her bullying and emotional vampirism – how she refused to work without receiving constant payment in addition to her monetary salary, which big surprise, consisted of fawning adulation about her “mad skills” and a never-ending stream of Caff-pows. Then there were the accounts of her overly familiar behaviour, including hugs when people didn’t wish to be groped and her expressions of displeasure when people ‘broke’ her rules. The sequelae to which usually consisting of her putting their evidence processing to the bottom of the priority list or at the very least, delivering a forceful punch to a bicep, shoulder or torso.

Having been on the end of her enthusiastic thump to his torso on more occasions than he cared to recall when he sparked her ire, he questioned why no one had put in an official complaint of bullying against her. Mostly he received identical answers. ‘Because Sciuto was Gibb’s favourite… she was Gibb’s surrogate daughter and she threatened that he would make anyone who hurt her feelings or her career regret it…because they were afraid that Gibbs would get them fired.’

Shaking his head in disgust at the crap people felt they had to put up with, he wondered much how it had affected agents and their ability to their jobs properly. Thinking back to the many stories of his years at Hogwarts that Harry had shared with him over the last two weeks he couldn’t help but draw the parallel between Abby Sciuto and Harry’s nemesis – Draco Malfoy. What with his bullying behaviour and his catchcry, ‘Wait until my father hears what you’ve done,’ whenever anyone dared to stand up to the little shit (and Sirius’ second cousin), the similarities were blindingly obvious.

The difference was though that Draco Malfoy had been an underage wizard who had a Death Eater for a father and inherited Black genes from his mother which really didn’t give him a great example to follow. Abby although adopted, had been brought up in a loving family by decent folk who’d taught their daughter right from wrong – and she was a grown woman in her mid-forties. So, with all that in mind, even if he could help her get her job back again, there was no way that Tony would and Abby only had herself to blame for that.

Ruthlessly he pushed Abby’s childishness and McGee’s sniping resolutely aside, he squinted across at Harry sprawled across his lounge, pensive and taciturn after Tony’s attempt to explain how he’d been persuaded to join Gibbs at NCIS 15 years ago. He’d tried, albeit clumsily, to portray how the former gunny had reminded him of James Potter back in the early days when he first encountered the NCIS agent. Not sure he’d done a great job, based on the silence from his godson, he realised that there was yet another parallel he hadn’t shared with him yet.

Chuckling, despite everything, he glanced at Harry affectionately. “Hell Harry, even Jethro’s love of red-headed, feisty women reminded me so much of ‘lovesick James’ with his seven-year Hogwarts obsession with your mother, Lily. Honestly though, when I first started here it had been all good.

“Oh, sure we had close calls and worked cases that were horrific but the comradeship had been amazing and our partnership was incredible – intuitive and natural. Although Gibbs had no way of knowing it, and I couldn’t tell him I’d had my own fair share of military experience too (well, guerrilla warfare fighting against Voldemort and his cohorts) plus law enforcement training as an Auror. But I liked to imagine that on a visceral level, Gibbs the Marine recognised and respected a fellow warrior.”

Harry snorted disparagingly, he might understand how Sirius had tolerated the crappy treatment but it didn’t make Gibbs behaviour any more acceptable. Nor did it make Harry like or respect the
bloody prat, either.

“So what happened? Because the arrogant wanker parading around in the bull pen… he’s nothing like what you described!”

Tony looked disheartened, acknowledging the truth of Harry’s observation.

“All I know is that after a case where terrorists had attempted to kill the US President on board his plane called Air Force One, things started changing. Other agents had come and gone and it hadn’t interfered with our partnership. I’m not sure why but when Caitlyn Todd joined the team, everything changed.”

“You investigated the President’s attempted murder, Snuffles? Wow!” Harry interjected, impressed despite himself.

“Yeah. Ducky and I even got a photo of each of us sitting in the POTUS’ chair at his desk, Cub.” Tony responded, the name he used to call Harry as a kid slipping out accidently as he tried not to use the childhood nickname.

“POTUS?”

“The President of the United States, Harry.”

The younger wizard nodded his understanding.

“Anyway…at first the changes to the team were slow, insidious.” He revealed. “There’d be times when we questioned suspects or were working together in the field when the easy camaraderie between us – dare I say ‘the magic’ seemed as strong as ever. The banter – the ‘Good Cop/Bad Cop or the Bad Ass Cop/Even Badder Assed Cop’ roleplay when the need arose. Then at other times when the newbies were present or even by this point, even Abby Sciuto was there, Gibbs seemed to be deliberately going out of his way to be a hurtful jackass to me.”

“In the good old days, we’d joke and tease each other, much like James, Remus and I use to do. Easy banter but never intended to draw blood and belittle.”

He told Harry about the time when he’d been on the way to a crime scene with Vivian Blackadder and Gibbs and he’d told them a story from his time on the Baltimore PD homicide squad about a rookie who freaked out when a corpse started moaning. The rookie emptied all his bullets into the body.

“Gibbs chuckled and teased me that I was the rookie in the story but it felt like good-natured banter. Exactly the sort of teasing the Marauders had always done with each other – friendly and even handed, everyone taking a turn at being the butt of the joke, including Gibbs and taking it in good spirits.”

Suddenly though, after Cate’s appearance and Gibbs dramatic change, Tony making a joke at Gibbs expense had led to him physically threatening him…and not in a joking sort of way. Threatening him with his fist sort of way when he was ribbing him about his age and the stubborn idiot’s refusal to acknowledge he needed glasses. It had been downright spiteful, especially since the jokes he was making at Tony’s expense weren’t in the least affectionate or even-handed.

No longer were they all fair game – Tony became the sole target, the whipping boy and butt of all the jokes in the office and out in the field. At first he didn’t realise the dramatic shift in the team dynamic because he’d always been a prankster and expected to get pranked in return. It took a while (okay it took far too long) for him to realise that it had become a grossly one sided affair
though.

Harry considered what he’d said for several minutes before replying. “Okay, that all sounds perfectly reasonable when you explain it but when you did finally realise that things had changed dramatically, why didn’t you leave?”

“You know Harry, looking back I’m not really sure what had kept me at NCIS,” he flashed a grin at the younger wizard, part sad, part wicked. “Although there’d been a series of encounters with a feisty agent, Paula Cassidy who intrigued me and might have diverted me for a while. Plus, as vicious as Gibbs could be by then, often making me feel like a piece of disgusting shit, pretty much like the guards back in Azkaban, he’d turn around sometimes and do or say something kind. It would put me on top of the world and make me think that maybe…just maybe, all the crap he was giving me was just a phase he was going through and we’d go back to being peers and partners again.”

Tony, with the benefit of hindsight (yes okay so it was Anthony DiNozzo’s hindsight, courtesy of the psychology courses he’d taken at OSU) had recognised the phenomenon he’d just described to Harry as intermittent reinforcement. Getting rewarded 100 percent of the time didn’t strengthen behaviour nearly as effectively as if the reinforcement occurred on a sporadic and unpredictable basis. The more sporadic and unpredictable, the more the dumb sap became determine to illicit that damned reward.

Not sure if Harry knew anything about psychology- specifically learning theory, he explained the basics to him before continuing.

“When Gibbs went out of his way to tear me down, making me feel useless and stupid and I ended up second guessing myself, questioning my ability to do the job, I’d think about walking away, leaving all the crap behind. Then Gibbs would do something or say something out of the blue that let me feel like I mattered to him – not often but still, apparently, it was just enough for me to think that maybe they were family after all.”

Enough to believe that Gibbs had something on his mind…something which could explain him acting like such a jerk to him.

To believe that he still respected his ‘partner’ and believed in Rule 5 – Don’t Waste Good. To believe that he saw Tony as more than a means to solving cases.

“So anyway, the years went by. The intermittent reinforcement became more and more intermittent until it was virtually non-existent,” he confessed sheepishly. “But the dumb sap thought if he worked harder, longer, solved more cold cases, if he pleased him that he’d earn that precious word of praise that made him feel like he was worth something. That he wasn’t a screw up.”

And Tony finally realised (far too late) as he was spilling his guts that Gibbs et al might have managed to achieve what twelve years of Dementors and their foul attentions hadn’t been able to – the ruination of his spirit and self-belief. When he looked back on the agent who he used to be when he first joined the agency - his fierce sense of ethics, the DiNozzo /Black enthusiasm for life, his fire and refusal to be silenced, he was proud of his integrity. Examining the shell of the man he’d turned into after being on Gibbs team for 15 years, he conceded that he barely recognised himself. To be honest, he was disgusted with who he was now and all he had let go.

He’d watched on passively as Gibbs, Ziva, Vance, Franks and Shepard all abused their oaths and used their position and their badge to pursue personal revenge; breaking the law with impunity. He hadn’t stopped them, nor did he walk away like he had done in Baltimore, despite knowing what
they did was wrong. How pathetic was that?

At this point in the post mortem process with Harry, Tony recalled having a somewhat similar conversation with Hermione over a month ago. In fact, in an almost identical fashion to Ellie Bishop with the Royal Woods undercover debacle, Hermione had lobed a grenade into the conversation when she’d cut through all the bullshit, all the blah, blah history between Gibbs and himself, the rationalisations and half remembered recollections to force him to see things through the eyes of an outsider. She’d been totally merciless – like ripping off a painfully stuck-to-the-wound bandage without warning or sympathy.

Flashback:

“Seems to me that your premise about Gibbs reminding you of James is faulty on a number of fronts. From what I know and what you’ve told me, he’s far more like another person of our mutual acquaintance, Siri-ah-Tony.”

He looked at her, not understanding – or perhaps more accurately, not wanting to understand what she was hinting at.

Hermione adopted an expression that was much more reminiscent of a young Hogwarts Hermione, the overachieving, sometimes overweening and insufferable Gryffindor student. The teacher’s pet (well apart from Snape who absolutely despised her since she was smarter than Draco or any of his prized Snakes) about to answer a complex question in class.

Adopting her didactic tone – and yes she most certainly had one - she continued to hold forth. “The grandiose certainty he is not only right but indispensable, the cloak and dagger exploits meaning he was the only one in the know, the one who is pulling the strings? That doesn’t seem even a little bit familiar to you? How about making sure no one else knows enough about the situation to be able to put it all together and therefore act contrary to his grand plan.”

She eyed him mercilessly as she continued to drive the stake into his heart.

“The fact that he can and often will curry favour with those he supposedly despises when they have something he wants or he decides can help him to achieve his goals. Then there’s his wrath and ruthlessness if anyone had the temerity to question him or dared to deviate from his rules. None of that rings any bells?”

“C’mon Hermione. He’s nothing like the so-called leader of the light who was a manipulative, power hungry hypocrite. Who wasn’t troubled by the notion of placing a baby in an abusive, neglectful home and leaving them on the doorstep in the middle of the night in October. Not even bothering to make sure they were prepared to take him in, for Merlin’s sake. All so the child would grow up as a malleable, submissive victim – experiencing learned helplessness and ready to go meekly like a lamb to the slaughter, all for what he’d decided was for the greater good.” Tony declared angrily.

“Gibbs isn’t anything like the individual who had the power as the Head of the Wizengamot to demand an innocent individual, a former student, a loyal Auror no less, receive a trial to answer vile accusations against him and yet never did. He isn’t someone who allowed the blameless individual to be falsely imprisoned just so he could protect his plan, ensuring a small boy could be forced to live a life of poverty, neglect and abuse. All to fulfil his grandiose plan for the greater good.”

He stood up and started pacing like a restless canine. Times such as these he regretted his human form lacked a tail and ears that he could move independent of each other with which to express
Turning to spear the witch with a laser-like glare of a canine predator, that annoyingly, didn’t appear to faze her one wit he growled at her. “Gibbs may be many things, Hermione, but he is nothing like Professor Albus-Percival-Wulfric-Brian -Too-Many-Bloody-Names-Dumbledore. He would never do anything like that. Perhaps I made a huge freakin mistake about Gibbs being anything like James but there’s no need for you to commit character assassination, either.”

Hermione had smirked at him, commenting dispassionately as she delivered the coup de grace of her demolitionist. “I didn’t even mention the Leader-of-the-Light or Albus-Twinkley-Eyed-Dumbledore, so if there aren’t a whole bunch of similarities between Gibbs and our esteemed former headmaster, then how in Merlin’s ghost did you know who I was talking about?”

Tony had been flat out furious as he considered Hermione Granger Weasley. The pretty young girl on the cusp of womanhood who he’d known 17 years ago would have flogged that dead horse to death, beating home her win, determined for him to concede the argument and declare her the victor. Then just to make sure he got the point she would have done a victory lap around the Gryffindor common room.

Now though, that super smart, slightly gullible teenager who believed implicitly in authority figures had long gone. She’d well and truly matured into an astute and empathetic woman, one who knew when it was time to retreat. Prudently, after scoring a direct hit, she changed the subject, letting her previous, passionate yet pertinent argument continued to erode his protestations as they worked on his subconscious.

Instead of flogging the dead horse, she’d shared some of the exploits of her kids – Rose and Hugh who were at Hogwarts before they swapped stories of mischief managed in the two previous generations. Laughing at the exploits of their loved ones, Tony especially appreciated hearing the tale of the Weasley twins Fred and George. Their outrageous emancipation from Delores Umbridge’s Hogwarts was a tale particularly worthy of the exploits of the Marauders. He’d never heard that story before and it was a great one.

She’d also managed to crack him up laughing with her account of courage and quick thinking perspicacity, enabling Hermione and Harry to lead Umbrage, aka The-Simpering-Toad in the pink cardigan, out into the Forbidden Forrest. The dynamic duo had managed to ditch her there after she caught Harry and his six loyal lieutenants of the DA trying to use her fireplace to floo to London. Hermione described how they’d left that abhorrent piece of muggle-hating filth to the tender mercies of Hagrid’s half-brother – a full blood giant – plus the furious and war-like centaurs who had a legitimate bone to pick with the bitch.

Shame they hadn’t squished her like a bug when they had the chance! How many lives could have been saved if they hadn’t shown her far more mercy than she deserved.

He realised later, with a sense of deep melancholy, exactly why he’d never heard those two awesome stories about getting the better of ‘The-Simpering-Toad.’ Sirius Black ‘died’ at the ministry trying to save Harry who had been tricked into going there with his friends, believing that they were saving him, literally hours after Harry and Hermione’s triumph over Umbrage. Then when he’d been brought back to life, he’d spent the following two decades living a double life in America.

End of flashback:

Of course, over the past few weeks, Tony found himself stewing on Gibbs and the hitherto unrecognised similarities to Dumbledore; just as Hermione had probably hoped he would, sneaky
minx that she was.

After all, she didn’t end up elected as Minister of Magic without learning to be conniving and persuasive – especially since she was a so-called muggle born witch and needed to use every possible advantage to get where she was today. Such a meteoric rise to power was still unthinkable to many purebloods, he was sure. Which suggested that there was something distinctly Slytherin about her mental abilities.

She also knew enough to back off so that he couldn’t help to return to the issue in his own good time and worry the issue like a dog with a bone. Oh, yeah – she knew him too damned well!

Of course, initially he was all fired up defending Gibbs against the thought that he was anything like Albus – after all, Gibbs was a Marine. He didn’t leave his people behind in a stinking hellhole of a prison, especially when they were innocent, but then a naggingly, annoying inner voice started a mental dialogue. Was it Anthony or Padfoot or simply Sirius’ own conscience? Whoever it was, they’d pointed out to him that Gibbs had been perfectly happy to send him and Ziva into a life-threatening situation for that Domino crap - it wasn’t even a real situation in the end.

_You were just bait he used as a diversion for his real plan. Clearly you weren’t good enough or a valuable enough resource to be read in on what had been going down – screw Sempre Fi. There was no way on earth that the former Marine didn’t know his team well enough to predict with a high degree of certainty that once physically restrained, Ziva would go berserk, or that you would try to have her six. Which was exactly what happened. So, essentially he’d sacrificed his pawns for the sake of the mission i.e. for the greater good._

Then he admitted that Gibbs’ hadn’t just overlooked Sempre Fi – he’d shat all over it and his precious Rule #1 when he’d allowed Vance to drag Tony’s wounded butt over to Israel. They’d permitted Ziva’s psychopathic sperm donor to torture him – trying to make him take the fall for the whole Michael Rivkin clusterfuck. It hadn’t been a coincidence that Eli had targeted his bruised trachea and larynx plus his broken shoulder during the interrogation, all caused when Rivkin had resisted arrest.

Despite him following orders issued by the all-seeing all-knowing Gibbs to keep his eye on Ziva due to her deceptive behaviour (if you were being politic) or outright lies (if you were being blunt) Gibbs had thrown him under the bus. No doubt for the greater good!

Even Albus and his sycophants hadn’t tried to torture a false admission out of him. No, they’d just ignored him and his guilt or innocence – so who was the more ethical? Frankly he wasn’t sure – both stank!

Once again that irritating internal discourse was running amok in his head, stripping him of long held illusions as he recalled the events he’d chosen NOT to focus upon for way too long. _The champion of ‘sempre fi’ stood by mutely and let you be dragged unlawfully and without benefit of legal advice to a foreign country and physically interrogated by the director of a foreign intelligence organisation whilst you were injured. All because you followed his orders and his rules and you somehow managed to survive an attack by a trained assassin intend on killing you._

_‘Meanwhile, Gibbs completely ignored Ziva’s flaunting of US laws, not to mention his own damned rules, treating her like some wounded precious hothouse orchid rather than the Kidon killer she truly was.’_

And as much as he didn’t want to admit it, Gibbs had always given Ziva chance after chance to redeem herself. Just as Albus had bent over backwards, offering redemption to Death Eaters while allowing him to languish in that hell hole for 12 freakin years with the ever delightful Dementors to
keep him company despite him doing nothing wrong. Ignoring for the moment his innate loyalty to his team mates and to Gibbs, he couldn’t help asking the crucial question, now that Hermione and Ellie had disturbed the slumbering dragon he’d tried so hard to keep from stirring. *If it had been expedient, would Gibbs have left him to rot in an Israeli jail to further his own agenda (i.e. to save Ziva’s ass) and/or for the agency’s greater good?*

He didn’t want to think so, but deep, deep down Tony suspected the Marine probably would. He’d seen Gibbs’ absolute ruthlessness when required and his somewhat elastic moral compass. Oh, he had no doubt that the Boss would have rationalised it, claiming that he did it because he knew that Tony could ‘handle’ it. He’d probably argue that they had all signed on, knowing they might be called on to protect others by giving up their own life. It was finally acknowledging that suspicion that felt like he’d been torn apart.

Nor was it only the parallels between Gibbs and Dumbledore which Ellie, Hermione and Sirius’ belated but spirited internal dialogue had stirred up. He found himself comparing other people from his former life in the magical world with other people who he’d encountered in his new incarnation of Tony DiNozzo. He suddenly was seeing patterns and parallels (mostly negative ones) between the people in his past and present, where previously he’d seen none. It was like when you learn the meaning of a new word and suddenly, you see it is everywhere you look, whether you are looking for it or not. For example, he’d suddenly noticed the similarities shared by his cousin Nymphadora (and truly Andy deserved flogging for saddling her infant daughter with such a shocker of a name) and the geeky but mostly endearing Ellie Bishop.

Unfortunately, they weren’t the only significant parallels between individuals in his life that he’d come to realised he’d been blind to, either. There was Ziva and her sheer savagery, when he’d gone to her place to find out why her address had shown up on a terrorist’s computer. Finding Rivkin there, when he’d attempted to arrest him the Kidon assassin tried to kill him and Tony ended up shooting him in self-defence. Her ferocity when she found her lover mortally wounded had been spine chilling. He’d observed that same violence when she physically attacked him in Tel Aviv, coming within a hairsbreadth of pulling the trigger of the loaded gun she’d held at point-blank range at his body. Remembering the situation, albeit reluctantly, he’d felt a shiver run up his spine.

He’d seen a ferocity, an empty madness in her eyes and the truth was he’d tried very hard all these years NOT to think about the psychosis he’d see while he was prone on the ground with a freakin big gun jammed against his ribs and his thigh. He’d honestly expected to die that day after staring into the abyss of her insanity – it had been an incredibly close thing.

Now, examining his actions and his memories, parallels suddenly leaping out and hitting him in the face, he acknowledged it was also way too reminiscent of another violent female that he’d known. Sadly, he’d seen the same empty lunacy which incidentally had been the last thing he saw before his cousin, Bellatrix Le Strange (another stone-cold killer like Ziva) sent him plummeting through the Veil of Death in the Ministry of Magic. Finally admitting that Ziva David had been similarly obsessed by madness, most recently during the whole hunt for Ilan Bodnar, culminating in her killing him in cold blood.

He’d never seen the parallels before. No… not true – he’d never WANTED to see the parallels between them. Both assassins. Both were ruthless, both ‘got off on’ violence.

Sirius winced at the obscene memories, not wanting to remember how aroused Bella became when she was torturing poor unfortunate victims and reluctantly recalled how aroused Ziva had been after the fight with disgraced Marine Corporal Werth. How she wanted to jump his bones because of how ripped he was – how strong – which wasn’t all that surprising since he was self-dosing on steroids.
He really, really didn’t like thinking too much about the level of psychosis she’d revealed during the trip to Tel Aviv. It sickened him now, wondering if it had aroused her with him lying on the ground, injured with her straddling him, a gun aimed at him and coming within a heartbeat of dying as she squeezed the trigger.

~o0o~

Harry seeing his godfather had become lost in his thoughts, didn’t push him but when he turned a shade of green and looked like he might puke, the younger wizard decided to intervene.

“So, what’s going on inside your head, Sirius. What do Anthony and Padfoot have to say about things?”

Sirius barked out a surprised laugh at the question. ‘Yeah he really shouldn’t be that surprised he’d had such a strong internal dialogue raging within since Tony DiNozzo was a complex character.’

They’re both telling me that my attempts to deny that Gibbs is more of a ‘carbon copy’ of Albus Dumbledore than he ever was like my beloved friend, James Potter have failed miserably. They’re telling me that my refusal to acknowledge it resulted in me downplaying all the crappy Dumbledore-esque things Gibbs has done over the last 15 years that should have showed me that I was an idiot.”

Noting the mulish look on Harry’s face he recalled that his godson was still singing Dumbledore’s praises nearly two decades after his death, despite everything that old fraud and megalomaniac did to him as an orphaned child. He sighed mentally since they’d both been dancing around this topic ever since Harry came back into his life. And having gone through his own painful epiphany when it came to his 15 years of self-deception regarding Gibbs, he understood that process better than most. Knew that he couldn’t force Harry to face what he wasn’t ready to face so shrugging, he decided to share some anecdotes rather than arguing.

“It took place after I’d been kidnapped and trapped down in the sewer system in a cell-like room by a psycho serial killer. She drugged me and incarcerated me with a near corpse and a badly decomposing corpse. After I regained consciousness I realised the killer hadn’t found my knife,” he revealed, pulling out the blade disguised as a belt buckle and handing it over for inspection.

Harry’s eyes widened with surprise before he exclaimed in admiration. “That’s bloody brilliant, Pads.”

Sirius nodded, grinning at him. “It’s saved me more than once and it helped me and the half dead Marine to escape, although the killer still ended up chasing us through the sewer system.”

“So how did you escape? Did the Marine survive?”

Sirius explained how they’d escaped and how their chief suspect ended up giving his life trying to save them. He revealed how the female killer, afraid that he’d seen too much had drugged his drink with BRON, an over-the-counter cough suppressant that contained methyl ephedrine, dihydrocodeine, chlorpheniramine and caffeine - cocktail that left him feeling manic and anxious. Of course, he was also feeling shaky due to the memories it provoked of his years spent rotting in Azkaban – the sewer - shock horror had been quite reminiscent of the charmingly rank atmosphere which was Azkaban.
Combined with Anthony’s childhood neurosis thanks to his alcoholic father’s semi-regular prediction of him ending up in the gutter, it had re-awakened a heap of terrifying demons he’d hoped he’d consigned to his mental trunk – the ones he’d hoped would never again see the light of day.

“So that must have been terrifying but what did Gibbs do?” Harry wanted to know.

Tony pulled a face. “To say that I was in a bad way, emotionally and psychologically, would be an understatement, Cub.” He admitted sheepishly. “I was close to having a panic attack, in dire need of some comforting physical contact - tangible reassurance I was safe and free of the sewer system. So, while it wasn’t exactly smart, I was trying goad a response out of Jethro – to get him to admit he’d been worried about me – that he’d miss me if I wasn’t there.”

Harry was curious. “Why wasn’t it smart?” he asked, genuinely puzzled. “That was a perfectly normal response for any law enforcement professional, let alone someone from your background, Sirius. Any partner worth their salt should have understood that – and not needed begging to provide you with some paltry reassurance and comfort”

Tony looked sour as he acknowledged to himself the truth of Harry’s statement. How had he not seen that back when it happened – apart from the drugs that had still been coursing through his system.

“Because forcing him to do anything always results in payback,” he explained wryly. “Even before the kidnapping, I’d started questioning if I had a place as Gibbs’ partner, so you can imagine my feelings when he’d planted his hands on both sides of my face and looked me in the eyes and told me I was irreplaceable.”

He was in his safe place – his own apartment and with family. He let down his masks and let his vulnerability show. The hurt, the uncertainty that his death would matter to Gibbs or anyone else on the team and the sheer pain and betrayal made Harry breathless with its depths. He wished that Gibbs was there for him to hex with one of Ginny’s special curses.

“It grounded me, it calmed my fears about my long-term role on the team and made me feel ten feet tall,” Sirius confided sheepishly. “And Gibbs, as soon as he saw my dumb grin at his rare praise, gave me a jubilant smirk before yelling out across the squad room at McGee, ‘He’s still alive, so you can’t have his desk.’ Talk about a pricked balloon.”

At that time, McGee wasn’t even a regular on the team; he’d been called in TAD after Tony’s disappearance. But Gibbs’ cold-hearted remark had been more than enough to take him down from the dizzying heights of his euphoria to the depth of despair and self-doubt, negating the compliment and Gibbs’ had physical comfort had brought him. It made him question his importance and place on the MCRT once again.

It hit him all of a sudden - just like Bellatrix and Ziva got off on killing and torture, Gibbs undoubtedly got a hard on by messing with others psychologically.

The damage done was considerable. Hell, even looking back to when he’d been battling The Black Death (and by the way, how ironic was that for Sirius Orion Black to get the plague) Gibbs order not to die wasn’t anywhere near enough to shore up Tony’s self-worth. Not after the harm that so-called throwaway line about him being still alive caused him.

Tony suspected that Gibbs saw him as nothing more than a tool - a means to an end in solving cases. Someone who pissed his boss off ninety five percent of the time but had his uses. He also knew that if he died while on Gibbs team, it would ruin his perfect record (until Cate had the
temerity to wreck it) – not to mention the paperwork involved with the death of an agent.

Harry looked furious, no doubt directed at Gibbs, but was confused too. “So I don’t get it. How is that dumbass’ actions anything like Dumbledore? He was a great wizard.”

“Because for Dumbledore, his Order of the Phoenix followers, and the so-called witches and wizards of the Light were all merely tools. They only existed for him to be able to move them around on his labyrinthine chess board and if he deemed it necessary, to sacrifice their lives too, just like he did with you and me. Their hopes, dreams and their aspirations simply didn’t matter when stacked up against his greater good. All so he could save murderers and sociopaths, which was a crock of BS, Harry.”

Looking at his godson with compassion and gentleness he continued.

“The truth was that Dumbledore hated himself so much that he needed to save others. Others who were also beyond redemption (because it was how he viewed himself) so he could metaphorically save himself. But Harry, it was all done at the expense of lives of those who were moral and good, the innocents, the children and the blameless and that was not acceptable…never ever.

“Gibbs also sees everyone else around him, including his colleagues and his team as simply tools for him to use and if required, abuse then throw away. All for him to fill his obsessive need to stalk and trap his prey. He’s a predator who needs to be out in the field hunting ‘dirtbags’ so he doesn’t drown in coffee, guilt, bourbon and self-pity down in his basement. Dumbledore tried to save the irredeemable while Gibbs wants to wipe them off the face of the earth. Both charismatic individuals, not to mention extreme narcissists, utterly convinced of their own infallibility and everyone else’s mediocrity. Which probably explains why they tend to treat others like they’re a particularly nasty pile of crap they’d stepped in.

Looking sombre he observed, “Both believe in the greater good and that the end justifies the means and that is never, ever acceptable, Cub. Whether you’re on the side of the light and the angels or you’re a despotic dictator makes no difference. The end justifying the means is the pathetic excuse that allowed a baby to be left on a doorstep. It’s what got an Auror imprisoned for 12 bloody years despite being innocent. It’s what permitted a grieving husband and father to mow down in cold blood, a man he blamed for the death of his beloved family. It’s also what Grindelwald, Voldemort, Hitler and others of their ilk used to justify unleashing unprecedented hatred and violence on innocent victims. All for these psychopathic terrorists to achieve their selfish need for power and to feed their deluded fantasies of Utopian purity.”

Looking nothing like the affable agent who people constantly underestimated, DiNozzo stared off into the middle distance, contemplating all the evil acts and violence that had been his misfortune to see, both as a law enforcement professional and as a survivor of two wars. His eyes hooded and filled with pain, he observed softly.

“No doubt they all claimed they were acting for the greater good too when they came up with their plans for ethnic/racial cleansing. So, I say to that…tell that to the survivors of the concentration camps. Tell it to the women who were gang raped while their men and children were rounded up and massacred. Tell it to the indigenous people who have lost their culture and their heritage because of ethnic cleansing. Tell the children who grew up without their parents it their suffering was for the greater good

“Tell me Cub, was it really justified that you and Neville and others like you all lost your parents? Was it ever worth it?”

Both wizards stared at the scented candle which Sirius had lit when they first sat down to begin
this awkward conversation. The flame flickered in the silence as both tacitly acknowledged that despite there being so much more they needed to say to each other, they were done. At least for tonight.

~o0o~

Two days later:

Tony was practically jumping out of his skin, his sixth sense that telling him someone was watching him, making him anxious. Harry argued strongly he should keep Padfoot well and truly leashed since the risk of someone outing him if they saw him transforming was too high. Unfortunately, the cool, calm and collected part of his brain which agreed in principle with Harry, was warring mightily with the more primitive instinctual part of his nature.

Although everybody had an instinctive nature, it was much more finely honed in an animagus. When he’d escaped from Azkaban to save Harry from that rat-bastard Pettigrew, he’d had to live for a year on the run as a dog with the Dementors, Aurors and regular non-magical cops all hot on his heels, trying to hunt him down. He’d learnt early on that to survive on the run, he needed to trust his senses and think less like a wizard.

Luckily, only the Marauders had known about Padfoot and Pettigrew was in no position to be talking to the Ministry, since he was hiding out in his animagus form too, supposedly dead at Sirius’ hand. It only left Remus in a position to tell the authorities about Sirius/Padfoot and although Remus had at that point believed he had betrayed them all, somehow he hadn’t shared Padfoot’s furry little abilities with the DMLE. Sirius liked to think that perhaps a tiny bit of Lupin’s faith in him had remained.

So, with Pads basically whining and wanting to be let off the chain, he’d learnt to trust his inner-canine, especially if he reacted strongly to a situation. And his animagus was ready to go postal. Plus, as an ex-cop and Auror, he was totally convinced that something was very wrong with the crime scene they’d been called out to. Staring down at the female with the bleached blonde hair (and dark roots) dressed in the uniform of a naval ensign, DiNozzo has strong misgivings that this was a real crime scene. It felt staged.

Oh, sure the young woman was dead – there wasn’t a shadow of a doubt about that. While Ducky and Jimmy were not yet on scene and therefore unable to declare her dead, the female was clearly deceased. She had the curiously huddled appearance that the dead often seem to take on in death. Plus, the savage bruising around her throat, large handprints standing out in clear relief against skin which was Goth-white told the story of how she met her death. Someone (almost certainly male) had throttled the life out of her.

No, what had tipped him off that this was a setup had to do with the ‘Ensign’ who, going by his experienced eye seemed fake. Unless the yet to be identified female was UA from the navy and had been for an extended period of time, he didn’t think she was military at all. She looked like she was a street kid – a sex worker, an addict, a runaway - probably all three. She had that ‘look’ Tony had come to recognise during his time as a cop in Baltimore and Anthony DiNozzo concurred with his impression – since he’d spent quite a few hundred man hours in undercover operations in the Philly and Peoria Police Departments on the streets too. Although hard to define to a civilian, even in death the youngster had a hardness about her that spoke of long-term time spent on the streets and made her so much older than her biological age.

Plus, apart from the questionable identity of the victim, the setting for the murder (if indeed it took
place here, and he had his doubts about that too) was highly suspicious. A highly remote section of Rock Creek Park had been selected – the clearing at the dead end of a track and the rock-strewn gully with plenty of cover for their stalker just screamed ‘ambush.’ Not surprising then that Padfoot was virtually howling to escape the confines of his human form. Even though McGee and Ellie were standing there awaiting his orders to begin processing the crime scene, it seems that Pads didn’t care – he wanted out and didn’t that speak volumes about the danger they were in.

Glancing across at Harry he could see the young Auror was disturbed too. Perhaps because he knew about the stalker that his godfather was convinced was dogging him or maybe his own gut was telling him that this was a trap too. After all, he’d been in his fair share of dangerous situations, too.

Deciding that if this was a trap, then he was going to be the one springing it, he started issuing orders very quietly. “Tim, Ellie, this situation feels off. Go back and meet Ducky and Palmer and escort them down here. I don’t want them to be left alone for a second. I’ll call for backup. Be careful – watch out for them and each other. We’ll wait here and secure the scene.”

Ellie frowned. “What about you?”

“There’s two of us. We’ll watch each other’s backs.” He looked at McGee. “Take good care of Bishop and the docs.”

McGee looked sceptical but finally nodded acquiescence.

Raising his voice, he issued orders to his team, “Bishop, McGee, head back to the main track and wait for Ducky and Palmer. They’ll probably take the wrong fork in the track and end up hopelessly off course. I swear they could get lost between Autopsy and the head.”

Bishop laughed nervously, obviously understanding they were playacting for anyone that was watching them.

As the two agents hurried back towards the road, he approached Harry before speaking sotte voce – barely moving his mouth. “He’s here – I can feel him. Let’s get the sucker.”

Raising his voice, he looked at his godson. “I sent McGee and Bishop to retrieve the ME’s make sure they don’t get lost.” He chuckled casually. “Can you taking photos, I’m going back to the truck to get the digital fingerprint thingy to scan the ensign’s fingerprints. McGee must have left it in the truck,” he lied, heading into the back of the truck so he could shift to his animagus form.

Once in the truck he closed the door and whipped out James...no Harry’s cloak of invisibility from his pocket, wrapping it around himself before he shifted into Padfoot and emerged noiselessly from the truck. Cautious, since the last thing he wanted to do was to tip his hand...um paw, he began to make his way towards Harry. His soft pads enabling him to move silently over the ground like the predator he was.

Now he was shifted and able to use his impressive senses to their fullest ability he was positive that the threat was real. ‘He’ was here, slowly making his way towards Harry who appeared totally immersed in his task of taking photographs of the body and surrounds.

While it felt good to know for certain that he wasn’t paranoid it was an unpleasant shock to find out that the threat was one which was extremely familiar to Padfoot – unpleasantly so. He cursed his human side for talking him out of shifting earlier, since if he had, he would have recognised the scent signature instantly. Perhaps he could have prevented the ‘Ensign’ from dying – although there would be plenty of time for recriminations later, after he took care of this deadly threat.
He’d scented this individual many times during his incarceration in Azkaban, although Padfoot
never knew this scum’s identity. Sure, it was one of Old Snakey Lips bunch of murdering Death
Eaters but the exact identity of the group of murdering psychos had remained a mystery and
truthfully not something he wanted to remember.

Since Gibbs dumb ass attempt to discover his future agency, Tony had felt a vague sense of
familiarity when he was being followed. With Tony’s superior senses (although they were nowhere
near as acute as when he was Padfoot) he couldn’t help feeling that the threat was from someone
he knew. Now Padfoot realised why that was. It was someone he knew really well – and not just
from Azkaban but much more recently."

About the time he received his epiphany, his acute hearing picked up a slight rustle as the stalker
ghosted into view before taunting the younger wizard as he drew close. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t
the Boy-Who-Lived. Although you’re hardly a boy anymore, Potter,” he sneered.

“The question I really want answered is why is Dumbledore’s obsequious little puppet here in the
US and exactly what’s your connection to Anthony DiNozzo Junior?”
Day of the Jackal

Chapter Summary

Tony's stalker moves to ambush him but Tony turns the tables with a little bit of help from his friends and a little magic.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank-you to all who are supporting this story. I was going to post this chapter in its entirety - until I realised at the last minute that it had ballooned out to 12,000 words. I know some people love long chapters but I'm trying to keep it down to roughly 8,000 words. So this chapter gets cut in half - 6,000 words but the cliff is solved...mostly. And on the bright side, creating the extra chapter gives me a buffer as I'm still working on the next chapter.

Warning: This is quite an action based chapter and so there is quite a lot of questionable language, particularly from one character.

Padfoot had gotten a snoutful of a scent that made him want to keel over in disgust.

It had become crystal clear why the faint scent he'd picked up when he was in his human form had been familiar to him on a subconscious level. It was one he'd unfortunately, been very conversant with since he'd spent many years forced to breathe in that stench of moral corruption. Imagine the vilest smell you could ever conceive of – in this case it was a human coprophagic (an individual who eats their own scat) and cross them with the juiciest of rotting corpses and multiply that odour by roughly 5,000. Then you'd get a vague idea how offensive the scent assaulting his sensitive odour molecules was for the canine animagus.

Not that he'd known precisely who belonged to that specific highly offensive scent during his sojourn in Casa Azkaban. Unlike a non-magical prison, the inmates didn't get out for daily exercise – their incarceration in their tiny cells were more analogous to being in solitary confinement.

So it had all fallen into place, and like a single raindrop in a puddle creates a pattern of ever increasing concentric circles, his quick brain had begun assembling the puzzle – microcosms morphing swiftly into the macrocosm as he drew the bigger picture. Why 'Padfoot' recognised the scent as familiar yet 'Sirius' hadn't. The dank mouldy air in Azkaban would have made it difficult for the wizard to identify individual scents, apart from the all-pervading smell of mould and mildew – even with Sirius' enhanced sense of smell. Padfoot's olfactory abilities were so much more sensitive (canines' ability to smell was between one thousand and ten thousand times more sensitive than a human) so it shouldn't come as a surprise that he'd recognised it instantly as belonging to a Death Eater from Azkaban.

However, he never got an introduction to all the Death Eaters who were inmates in Azkaban. Some of them he knew, obviously, since as a former Auror, he'd arrested quite a few them. Plus, his delightful cousin – Bellatrix, her husband Rudolphus Lestrange and his brother Radastan were
incarcerated too. The trio's continual bragging about their exploits in the name of Voldemort totally sickened Sirius.

Apart from the fact that Dementors had much less effect on his emotions when in his animagus form - the Lestranges' were why Padfoot had convinced Sirius to let him bear the brunt of their depraved boasting over the years. Mind you, with such a highly developed sense of smell, his sacrifice for Sirius' emotional well-being came at a cost for Padfoot too.

Nonetheless, there remained more than a dozen Death Eaters who's names he'd never known and frankly, didn't care to, either. So, this threat to them was from an unknown Death Eater who'd served in Azkaban and that was bad because it raised a whole heap of questions. The most critical ones at this moment were – had this Death Eater been hiding out under a rock in the non-magical world over here in the US all these years? Had they somehow discovered his MOAS? Or had they'd followed Harry here from London and were they after his god son

Either way, he'd concluded, this situation was about to get very messy when they apprehended him. He had Sirius yammering in his ear that they'd have to call in the American magical police.

As he'd worked his way stealthily towards Harry, he'd suddenly experienced a secondary burst of recognition. Not an Azkaban alumni but someone he'd known since becoming Tony DiNozzo and it was an individual he hated passionately. On the up side, at least this answered one of his questions – the toxic pile of filth must have been hiding here in the US since the end of the second Blood War. Just like him! Plus, if he'd needed confirmation of the stalker's non-magical identity, the Death Eater spoke.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the Boy-Who-Lived. Although you're hardly a boy anymore, Potter," he sneered.

"The question I really want answered is why is Dumbledore's obsequious little toadie here in the US and exactly what's your connection to Anthony DiNozzo Junior?"

If only Padfoot had put in an appearance years ago when Tony was having to deal with that steaming pile of dog crap. Then he'd have instantly recognised the douche-bag as an escapee from Azkaban. The loathsome jackal had always made Tony's skin crawl and now he finally understood why that was.

Damn it, Pads was so glad Tony had cleaned his clock after the bastard tried to blow him up. Now, all the animagus could think about was how much he wanted to rip him apart, slowly and painfully. While Padfoot might seem like a docile and roguish big lug of a beast, underneath the thin veneer of domestication was a wolf with all its primitive instinctual drives. One of which was that the protection of his pack was paramount.

Knowing the lethality of the wizard they were dealing with; he'd zeroed in on his enemy as the killer crept up on Harry. Clearly the jackal assumed Harry was blissfully unaware of his presence. He was in for a very nasty surprise.

Padfoot assessed the situation via his dual scent processing systems which let him process two types of scent simultaneously, thus enabling him to detect a sharp rise in testosterone levels and a massive spike in pheromones. That indicated his preparedness to attack Harry and his depraved sexual arousal at the prospect, and seriously if that hadn't been disturbing enough to his canine perceptions, the foulest of smells was even more offensive up close.

Padfoot was in no doubt about of the assassin's murderous intent and he had no compunction in targeting his enemy's most vulnerable area. Flinging off the Potter cloak of invisibility he'd sprung
After he hung up on Gibbs several weeks ago when the bastard had called him asking for a favour, Kort had been shadowing DiNozzo. At first it was simply professional curiosity at knowing why on earth he'd been offered a directorship. Who in their right mind would offer such a nauseating white-hat as Gibbs' former 2IC such control over a federal agency? After all, if you wanted to sit in the big chair you needed a healthy streak of ruthlessness – plus the ability to look at the big picture and accept that collateral damage happened.

A good director needed to play the political game and DiNozzo was too damned idealistic to lie, cheat and tell people what they wanted to hear just to get a few steps ahead. He was a naïve, principled, credulous bleeding-heart who didn't have the balls to command an agency.

Truth be told, Trent absolutely hated that precious little snowflake ever since the bastard punched him and broke his nose. He'd vowed to make DiNozzo pay for that one day.

Naturally he was insanely curious about who'd be stupid enough to hire DiNozzo, especially since there had been absolutely no chatter about it. It was extremely odd and just whetted his interest even more. He'd checked all his usually sources and they were as much in the dark as Gibbs and the former Marine's other intel. sources. Not being able to find out where he was going to, had stirred Trent's determination even more.

After a couple of days of shadowing the ex-cop and still being none the wiser about the agency that had hired him, it ratcheted up his curiosity tenfold. Kort also learnt about the soap opera-like farce which was occurring on the Major Case Response Team, which had amused him greatly since Gibbs was always so damned bloody smug. The shambles had kicked off with Gibbs' outlandish lab rat ending up in the freako ward at Walter Reed. The rumour mill was raging about her attack on DiNozzo and whether she'd flipped out or was just faking it to get out of being charged with assaulting him.

Next, Gibbs was stood down as team leader until he received the psych clearance he should have obtained prior to his return to field duties after being shot in Iran last year. Kort smirked at hearing that news – typical bloody Gibbs. The man had balls the size of a bull pachyderm and a memory to match – never forgot a slight or forgave a grudge. Since the former Marine was a predator, Kort sometimes wondered if his outsized testicles ever got in his way while he was stalking his prey. Of course, as a Marine Scout Sniper waiting for hours just to take the shot, he probably dug them their own trench so they didn't get in his road.

However, they must be damned annoying dragging on the ground when he was running down a perp; did he ever get road-rash? And did that ever lead to road-rage? Stupid question – the man was born angry! The midwife probably took one look at little Leroy Jethro's furious visage and she burst into tears.

Still, road-rash probably explained why Jethro kept DiNozzo around – it was for the chase and take-downs, while he ran them down in the car. Trent wondered who would do the legwork now that DiNozzo was leaving? Inquiring minds want to know since McGee looked like he didn't have the strength to hold his head up, let alone run down a perp.

Remembering the pudgy younger version, Kort concluded the NCIS agent either had an eating disorder or a wasting illness. Oh, well…not his problem.

Still it was highly entertaining watching the sanctimonious old bastard's team self-destructing; the
former CIA operative couldn't take his eyes off the train wreck. There was also the highly amusing situation that Gibbs had gotten his closest contacts into hot water when he'd asked them to find out who had hired Anthony DiNozzo. It just got better and better – can anyone say schadenfreude?

Bottom line - it seemed that anyone who was close to Gibbs was in danger of imploding as he flailed around like a human wrecking ball in the aftermath of a 14-year-old kid getting the better of him out in the field. It was like watching a trashy celebrity reality show; no… it was way better than that! And since Kort had been cut loose by the CIA, it wasn't as if he had anything more pressing than watching it unfold.

Plus, he really had to discover where DiNozzo was going because wherever it was, they carried one hellacious big stick if they could knobble that wizened old troll, Henrietta Lange so easily. She normally didn't kow-tow to anyone.

Imagine his surprise when he tailed DiNozzo and his ridiculous protection detail consisting of that has-been FBI agent, Tobias Fornell to the Hays Adams Hotel to meet with an entourage from Britain. An entourage who proved to be none other than the Minister for International Cooperation and her lackeys. He had to laugh when he heard that – how fortunate as a former Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries (DOM) that he knew her designation was nothing more than a cover for the Minister of Magic when they needed to interact with pathetic little muggles.

The question remained, why was DiNozzo meeting with such a powerful witch when there was no indication he had any connection to the Wizarding world, not here in the US and definitely not in the UK. Was he working on a case that was somehow connected to magic?

When one of the wizards from the Minister's entourage ended up staying with DiNozzo at his apartment and shadowing him at NCIS, the plot thickened. Clearly he had replaced Fornell as DiNozzo's bodyguard, which prompted him to do some digging on the fibbon. He was gobsmacked to find that his daughter, Emily Fornell was a witch, enrolled at a magical boarding school and suddenly the unthinkable began to be less incredible. Well no…it was still unbelievable… but it seemed that perhaps DiNozzo, had been hired by the DMLE to take over the directorship, since he had a dual American/British passport.

Trouble was that Kort couldn't find any suggestion that DiNozzo had any magical blood – there were no magical relatives. Trent resolved to surreptitiously try to check out his Paddington relatives in England and his Italian relatives back in the old country. That was before he noticed something distinctive about the bodyguard that made him forget everything else.

Kort had thought that the wizard looked kind of familiar but then, British magical society was quite insular and most pureblood wizards and witches were all distantly related. It was also relatively small in number and birth rates were in decline – or they had been before his precipitous departure from the UK after the war. When he worked in the Department of Mysteries as a spy for Lord Voldemort it was quite probable that he'd know and/or killed the wizard's father or shagged his mother, either voluntarily or with a little persuasion – thank Merlin for lust potions.

That was his thinking so, although he noted his familiarity in passing, the former CIA agent really didn't think that much about the bodyguard. His target was DiNozzo – he was still fretting, wondering how the hell he could've missed the fact that he was a wizard for Gellert's sake! Then everything had changed the morning when the pair emerged from DiNozzo's up market apartment to a rather blustery wind. While the NCIS agent clearly had product in his hair (hardly surprising since the vainglorious tool was highly invested in his appearance) the bodyguard didn't, judging by his unruly mop.

So, when he caught sight of a Zorro-like scar on the wizard's forehead, Kort realised straight away
who he was looking at.

Instantly, he forgot any plans he might have had to investigate Anthony DiNozzo since the reason he had to flee magical Britain was standing about 20 metres in front of him. Harry Fucking Potter had killed Lord Voldemort and started a mass panic amongst the Death Eaters. Not surprisingly they'd understood instinctively that without Dumbledore there to intercede on their behalf and plead for them to be giving a chance to redeem themselves, they were in deep shit. If the DMLE caught up with them post Dumbledore – they all faced the kiss or at best, life in Azkaban. Having already experienced the joys of Azkaban, and not been impressed with the facilities offered, he'd cried with joy when Voldemort had broken him out.

He knew that without the goat -loving old numpty alive to argue for his salvation, as an Azkaban escapee he would likely be sent through the veil. Luckily, when he was an Unspeakable in the DOM he'd worked with a half blood colleague fascinated by the muggle dark lord - Adolph Hitler. As a Death Eater and a spy, he'd immediately recognised similarities between the philosophies and had become a student of all thing related to the Fuhrer. That included how it was that so many of his underlings managed to slip under the radar when he topped himself when cornered.

When the Puppet Master's little lapdog achieved the unthinkable, managing to defeat their Lord, he'd already known that he only had one option. If he wanted to have a life, he had to disappear!

When he surfaced in the US he'd discovered that the CIA wasn't fussy about what he'd been getting up to prior to them hiring him as an assassin. He suspected that the Central Intelligence Agency were completely aware of who and what he used to be – they just didn't care. Not while he was doing their dirty work for them but suddenly when he had a couple of ops go arse over tits, they'd terminate him. And when you were an assassin in the employ of the CIA, terminated didn't just mean fired.

He was currently watching his back – keeping track of all the company's on-the-books and more important, their off-the-books assassins (freelancers) knowing that sooner or later he would have to disappear again. This time he planned on heading to South American (where many former Nazi's had fled after the fall of the Third Reich) complete with a new identity. He was waiting for new ID documents and then Trent Kort would tragically die so he could assume his new identity in one of several military juntas, who'd in the past expressed an interest in acquiring his unique services.

Seeing that pissant little wanker so close he could kill him, Kort understood he'd been presented with a once in a life-time opportunity. Making Potter pay for ruining his life and forcing him into living as a muggle was too much of a temptation. He subsequently became obsessed with getting revenge but he wanted to be up close and personal when he killed him so the stupid fool realised that a Death Eater had gotten the last laugh, even if it had taken him 20 odd years to do it.

He wasn't sure if he would use his favourite muggle means of dispatching his prey – garrotting since you didn't get more up close and personal – or to take him out using a Killing Curse. It would be poetic justice to kill him with the very curse that Voldemort had twice tried and twice failed to dispatch him with! Then there was the delicious irony of him killing the wizard that had been sent to protect DiNozzo – it was wonderfully seductive. Kort felt himself growing hard at the mere thought of it.

Of course, since he'd failed to kill DiNozzo when he'd planted that bomb in his car, perhaps it would be amusing to kill him too and be a further insult to Potter's reputation that he failed to protect the future Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Perhaps he would vent his feelings with a cruciatus curse or two at him first, though.

By killing DiNozzo, he could easily justify it as a community service to future generations of pure
blood wizards in Britain. Clearly he was a muggle-born wizard and his obnoxious father was at best, a con artist and a pecuniary vampire, sucking his friends, family and associates out of any money they possessed, although more accurately, Senior was nothing more than a white-collar crook. Plus, he was a pathetic gold-digger – marrying into the North Sea oil fortune of the Paddingtons. Not to mention, both his parents were drunken sods. A fine pedigree for the future Director of DMLE…NOT! Anthony DiNozzo Junior wasn't fit to shine a pure-blood's dragon-skin boots – Trent was merely taking out the trash.

Still, he couldn't say he was all that shocked that he'd been hired…not after learning the identity of the current Minister of Magic. She'd come to the US to meet with DiNozzo and he'd made it his business to snoop around in her suite as well as those of her team. After all, even though he was no longer working for the CIA, once a spook always a spook.

He'd been utterly appalled when he discovered her identity; Hermione Granger, a bloody muggle who had helped Harry Potter to defeat his master – they'd even awarded the little bitch an Order of Merlin for it! What the fuck had the magical world come to since he'd left it; since when would they ever elect a mudblood to rule over purebloods, in the highest office in the realm? It was obscene…it was absolutely disgusting and she wanted another mudblood to become director of the DMLE because it to was patently obvious she had a secret agenda. She'd even gone so far as to only hire other mudbloods for her entourage – clearly her plan was for her 'filthy kind' to overthrow pureblood society and seize power. Voldemort and his minions must be having pink Kneasels.

As he watched, DiNozzo and Potter approached and open the car doors to travel in to NCIS. A part of him desperately burned to pull the trigger on his gun and kill them immediately, however caution prevailed and he quelled the impulse – though with difficulty. His sense of propriety demanded that he put a crimp in that vile witch's political agenda, even if he wasn't living in magical Britain any more. And Potter and Granger were largely to blame for his exile so it was justice.

However, he'd never been one of Voldemort's imbecilic Death Eaters - brainless lumps of testosterone and muscles who did as they were told like Edgus Crabbe and Walgert Goyle, Lucius Malfoy's sidekicks. No doubt that pair would have had a brain infarct if someone asked them to add two and two together. Trent, on the other hand, had been one of Voldemort's most successful spy's during his first reign of terror, until he was sold out by that scrotum-scum Karkaroff, desperate to save his own miserable arse by dobbing in his fellow Death Eaters.

The former CIA assassin knew that the only sane way to do this was to wait until his new identity papers were ready and then to take Potter and DiNozzo out it a lightening attack, just before he hopped on a plane to his new residence. Still, he continued to stalk the two wizards' every move, watching, waiting, fantasising about their deaths whenever he saw a perfect opportunity to ambush them, even while exercising ironclad self-control, knowing his time was nigh.

And today was the day…finally. He'd picked up his false papers last night for a small fortune - which was worth every cent but also meant he was going to have to get a job in his new country. Working ensured that he'd continue to live in the style to which he'd become accustomed over the years in the muggle world. And the new identity papers couldn't have come at a more opportune time. It was time to go – he'd learnt only yesterday that an ex SAS freelancer had been hired by the Company to take him out.

Although he cursed his bad luck, as he was now pushed for time to be able to carry out his final kills in the USA as Trent Kort, he knew that acting prematurely would have been disastrous. Unfortunately, with his time running out fast, literally if he didn't haul arse he'd be dead – for real. He didn't have time to wait around for the perfect opportunity. He also wasn't foolish enough to try
to strike when the conditions were less than perfect.

Since he had no intention of scuttling off, tail between his legs and letting the complacent little prick and the pious bleeding-heart twat off the hook, there was only one option. He needed to engineer a crime scene and lure the MCRT out into the open and ambush them. Luckily, for someone of his extensive talent and experience this would not pose a problem.

Acquiring the 'body' of someone was easy enough. He picked her up off the street luring her into his car; it was as easy as shelling peas. If time hadn't been so damned tight he might have shagged her stupid prior to strangling her but there'd be plenty of time for recreational activities once he relocated further south.

After dressing the bottle-blonde whore in a navy ensign's uniform he'd acquired, and placing the bait in a very remote area of Rock Creek Park, he'd made an anonymous call on one of his burn phones to the cops, reporting the dead body. Waiting up in a tree as first the cops arrived and called in NCIS, he heaved a sigh of relief seeing DiNozzo pull up with his team, plus Potter.

Now it was simply a case of waiting for the opportunity to present itself but he was confident he would get a chance – even if he had to make one. While he preferred just to take out the two wizards, if it was at all possible, he was also prepared for collateral damage if that's what it took to achieve his goal. Truly the only one that he might feel a flicker of regret about was the pretty little blonde former NSA analyst who'd replaced David. She looked like she would be a great lay if only he had more time, especially if she was as kinky about food as the rumours suggested.

Trent decided that it must be his lucky day when DiNozzo sent McGee and the new chick back to the main track to guide the MEs to the crime scene. While Trent felt a momentary flicker of suspicion at how serendipitous that seemed, he swiftly discounted his misgivings since it was a well-known fact that the doddering old chatterbox, Donald Mallard was famous for getting lost on his way to a crime scene. Considering there were several forks in the trail it was entirely credible that the ex-detective would send the two others to escort them back to the crime scene. The ridiculous regard that the old ME seemed to be held in by the entire team, which considering what he knew about Mallard's Army background, was rather laughable.

Luck continued to be on his side when Potter started taking photos of the crime scene and DiNozzo set off to the crime scene truck to locate the digital fingerprint scanner. McGee probably hid it to get under DiNozzo's skin since word was that he was furious that Sciuto had been fired. Not that he minded, since it gave him the opportunity he'd been waiting for.

That said, he would need to be quick. Once DiNozzo took the whore's fingerprints and realised the 'Ensign" was not in the navy, they'd turn the case back over to the coppers. Using his impressive stealth skills (honed through a great deal of practice pursuing his targets) Kort stalked the clueless wizard taking photos. Honestly, he couldn't understand how this fool had managed to defeat Voldemort, who was a first-class duellist and a vicious predator to boot.

Unable to resist a little gloating before he killed Potter he sneered at him, "Well, well, well. If it isn't the Boy-Who-Lived. Although you're hardly a boy anymore, Potter.

"The question I really want answered is why is Dumbledore's obsequious little toadie here in the US and exactly what's your connection to Anthony DiNozzo Junior?"

Apparently, Potter wasn't totally stupid since he whirled around, his wand already in his dominant hand, ready to cast. Not that Kort was worried. This was Harry Potter. He'd been trained by Albus Bloody Dumbledore - unlike predators such as himself, Ziva David and Jethro Gibbs who would always shoot first and ask questions later. The goody-two-shoes wizard, the Hero-of- the-Light
would attempt to talk him down and that would prove to be his downfall.

Potter, when all was said and done, would forever remain Dumbledore's faithful little acolyte – so of course he would attempt to arrest Kort. All Trent had to do was to engage him, keep him off balance with what he knew about him, make him lose his temper and strike when he'd gain the upper hand.

Seeing Harry's momentary look of panic – no doubt worried about how his identity was known - Kort reached for his own wand. Of course, he could shoot Voldemort's killer, but he wanted Potter not just dead. He needed the rest of the magical world to know that the Boy-Who-Lived had been taken out by a wizard who was better than he was. Trent couldn't wait 'til the split second the obsequious twat realised the Avada Kedavra curse heading towards him was going to kill him, just as it killed his blood-traitor father and mudblood mother.

Plus, firing a shot would tip his hand and put DiNozzo on his guard, which was not a desirable situation - that man had proved annoyingly hard to kill. Of course, if he was a bloody wizard that might explain a lot about his ability to survive. Better the soon-to-be former agent not know in advance that his time had come. He'd been trained by Gibbs to shoot to kill, so it made sense to take him seriously.

As Trent divided his attention momentarily to check out the NCIS crime scene truck, making sure DiNozzo was still inside, out of the corner of his eye a large black blur come flying through the air. Instantly he had a flashback to Azkaban and the Dementors pouncing on an unfortunate escapee pleading for mercy, except in this case there was no freezing cold breath accompanying the blur.

The next thing he knew as he drew his wand out of his anorak was an excruciating pain crushing his throat. It rapidly began to making him lightheaded as oxygen into his lung started to run out. Intellectually, Kort recognised that his larynx was being savagely crushed in the brute's iron jaws and in a last-ditch effort to save himself, he tried to aim his wand at the monster's bloody maw.

Unfortunately for him, he'd forgotten about Potter who'd kept his cool and used the summoning charm 'Accio' to disarm the assassin, summoning Kort's wand and leaving him in dire straits. Feeling frothy blood collecting on his lips, he choked, desperately trying to access air and shake off the fiendish grip which was crushing the life out of him; he knew 'it' had fractured his larynx. The assassin knew he had very little time left to free himself; his life was hanging in the balance.

In a superhuman effort, he managed to reach his knife and stabbed the demon-like predator before his vision greyed over and finally he knew no more.

~o0o~

Harry watched in horror as Padfoot dropped the murderous wizard like a piece of garbage on the ground, shaking his head to rid his muzzle of the killer's blood and flesh. Noting that the blood and tissue spatter landed in an arc which unfortunately included himself, he quickly stowed his wand on his person. Ignoring the obviously dead piece of scum, Harry quickly rushed to check on Sirius. He was distressed to find that the haft of a knife was sticking out of his godfather's upper torso.

Harry was starting to panic – wondering how in Merlin's beard he could explain this tableau to the rest of the team who were likely to return any minute now. He could deal with a crime scene as an Auror but this was not the magical world and he was out of his depth. Seemingly reading his mind, his godfather shifted back into his human form, looking pale and shocky as he dragged himself a few feet away from the corpse.

"What are you doing, Pads? You know you'll heal quicker if you stay in your mutt form." He
joked, rather shakily. This attempt on his godfather's life was far too close for comfort.

"Yeah… and how do we explain Padfoot to the team? Plus, how do you explain where I am and Kort's dead body?"

"Yeah, good point. Wait… do you know who this is?"

"Unfortunately, I do. CIA spook and assassin. But Padfoot recognised his scent from before… from Azkaban."

"When was he imprisoned and what was he in for?" the Auror queried automatically

'He was in the same wing as myself and the Death Eaters and I think he was sent away about the same time as the Lestrange - give or take. Not sure who he was though. Guess we need to find out who's still on the DMLE most wanted Death Eater list."

"After we clean up this pile of dragon dung," he indicated the body, "What's our next move – apart from getting you some help for that bloody knife sticking out of you." Harry frowned, feeling unsure what to do since if he was home he'd be calling in Auror reinforcements.

Tony told him to retrieve his cell phone from the truck - which Harry did magically, not wanting to leave his godfather on his own. "Call Fornell to explain the situation. He can liaise with the magical cops here in the US and call Hermione, too. Plus, Tobias is the best one to run interference with Vance and the CIA."

Harry nodded. He called in reinforcements and following Sirius' instructions, also called NCIS dispatch to request a secondary team to help process the crime scene and called for an ambulance. He then had him call McGee to find out their ETA with Ducky and Palmer to the crime site and deliver a SitRep.

While they were waiting, they discussed what to say, agreeing that they would say that Kort tried to kill them both. A huge black dog appeared out of nowhere, leapt to their defence and killed the CIA spy who unfortunately had still managed to stab DiNozzo just before he died. All of which was true – they would just leave out a few crucial details because it was need-to-know. Last, but not least, he had Harry confiscate Kort's wand and per Sirius' instructions, slipped it into an evidence bag before hiding it on his person so he could surrender it to the magical cops for testing later.

Looking at his godfather, Harry hoped he hadn't been too badly injured. He wished he could call in magical healers to treat his wound. Unfortunately, as Sirius pointed out, that would raise far too many suspicions if Tony didn't go to a hospital, especially with the two medical examiners and Vance. Still, he was horrified that Sirius was going to have to endure such primitive nonmagical treatment.

"From here on in, we're going to be under enormous scrutiny, thanks to that slimy sack of excrement," Tony grumbled, with a wave of his hand at the corpse as sweat started materialising on his forehead.

Harry grimaced. "Hermione will go feral when she finds out that you got injured," he predicted darkly.

Tony chuckled carefully, since he had a knife sticking out of his chest. "Not when she finds out we caught ourselves a real-life Death Eater. That's gotta count for something on my CV – make all the critics who didn't want her hiring a foreigner, eat their words."
Seeing Harry's shocked expression, he grinned viciously. "C'mon Pup, I don't need to be a seer to know that the naysayers are going to be criticising her bigtime for not giving the job to someone within the ministry. Things haven't changed that much, have they? All the Debbie Downers haven't drowned in their own negativity since my departure, have they?"

His godson shook his head before snickering. "Debbie Downer? Really Snuffles!"

He was saved from responding by the appearance of the ME's van pulling up at the perimeter of the crime scene – the original one – not the new one. Being prewarned, they avoided contaminating the area where Harry and Tony awaited assistance.

Despite having a knife sticking out of his upper chest, Tony swung into agent mode – relating what had happened (as much as they could reveal of course) and in the intervening hours, didn't the NCIS bunch pout when informed that some of the facts were above their pay grade. He thought Director Vance would swallow his toothpick he was so put out, and Gibbs, who turned up at the hospital demanding to be read in wasn't any happier. He threw a massive wobbly - his rationale being that the MCRT was his team so it was his rules. When Tony refused to share, Harry half expected them both to stroke out.

Frankly he was thankful that Tony seemed to be as quick on his feet, despite being injured. It was a relief, since Harry was absolute rubbish at duplicity unless he had time to rehearse and a script to follow. He couldn't just make it up as he went. Maybe that's why Ginny was so furious about his five-week trip to the States – she knew that he was hiding something.

She wrongly assumed that he and Hermione were planning to have a torrid affair while they were overseas, when the reality was he was keeping secret the fact that Sirius had been found alive. He was going to have to do better at hiding it when they went home. Thank goodness 'Tony' was a wizard, or she would assume the worst and get jealous, although on second thoughts, knowing her pathological jealousy she'd probably still think that they were shagging.

Putting aside her jealousy, he really wished he wasn't such an open book for Ginny to read sometimes, since he often couldn't discuss missions with her. That inevitably created dramas. He supposed that Sirius' excellent poker face and his ability to be convincing was part of what made Sirius so good at undercover work. Lucky, since it was a skill he'd needed so perhaps he'd consider giving the benefit of his wisdom.

End Notes:

* A Kneazle is a magical feline creature which is a relative of the cat. They have fur which is speckled, roan or spotted, large ears and plumed tail.
Tony finally gets to talk to Harry and set him straight about a couple of things, plus share some plans for the future.

This chapter is a fairly shortish one, by my standards anyway. LOL! The reason is that it is the second part of the previous chapter and when I divided it, it didn't exactly split down the middle evenly. Still at 5,000 + words it is still quite substantial. Thanks for those of you who left kudos, comments and bookmarks - they are always appreciated. I'm away from home and have been for over a week so writing is problematic. As is the fact that this story isn't cooperating in my desire to draw it all to a satisfactory ending. I've had the epilogue - a two part - written months ago but the last few chapters keep ballooning out. Anyway each chapter completed is one step closer to the end, I guess.

Just a reminder this one isn't beta'ed.

I should also warn that if you are a dedicate Severus Snape fan then my advice would be to give this chapter a miss.

They were still at the hospital. Tony had been transferred to a private room at the behest of the director who was suddenly very solicitous about his welfare. Vance had also arranged for a team of Marines to remain outside his hospital room to make sure he was safe, and they were also preventing the FBI and CIA from hassling him. It was the middle of the night and he'd woken up after sleeping off the effects of the anaesthetic and the pain medication that had him out for the count for most of the evening.

Despite telling Harry he didn't need to stay awake too, he'd refused to rest. So, after casting a privacy charm they'd been discussing the Auror Department and the DMLE, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the personnel and their procedures. As Harry was one of the most experienced Aurors, the future director was keen to get his opinion on the most pressing problems within the department and why corruption was still rife. Tony had noted how few Aurors there were in the cohort between those who'd trained in the group which included Alice and Frank Longbottom, James and Sirius and the group that included Harry and his peers, who'd entered the ranks in the aftermath of Voldemort's defeat at Hogwarts.

Unable to curtail his disgust or unfortunately his tongue – more than likely due to the cocktail of chemicals still rampant in his system – he railed against Severus Snape for the decline in the number of recruits which lowered Auror standards as there weren't enough graduates to enable the department to pick the best suited candidates for the job. They were forced to accept the ones who applied. Snape's campaign preventing far too many students from obtaining their NEWTs in Potions, unless they had received an Outstanding grade in their OWLs was outrageous. Especially
when potions professors both before and after him had only required students gain an Exceptional or higher to study for their NEWTS. Which after all, was consistent with prerequisites needed for recruits to enter post Hogwarts training for both healing and law enforcement.

Snape had single-handed managed to decimated the Auror and healer ranks of a specific cohort (all those educated during his tenure as potions master) within their society and Sirius felt compelled to question if he'd deliberately been attempting to weaken two crucial areas of their magical society. Even if it hadn't been intentional, it was outrageous and high handed of him. He'd ended up calling Snape a narcissistic, cruel bully who enjoyed making others suffer.

Truthfully, he'd been biding his time to express what he thought about Severus Snape - based on his hindsight – always a wondrous thing. Because of retrospection that he'd gained via physical and emotional distance, which included him having a new life and doing a bunch of growing up. However, lying in a hospital bed while his liver was busy detoxing a variety of drugs probably wasn't the best time to choose but hey, it was what it was.

When Harry staunchly defended Snape, he realised it was time to bite the bullet.

"Sirius how can you say that about Snape? He was undercover – he had no choice."

"So, because he was undercover, after he decided he didn't want to be a Death Eater any more he what…gets a free pass on being a miserable arse? C'mon Harry, it doesn't work that way. He was so filled with hate that he betrayed you – an innocent 15-month-old toddler and your parents, and let's not forget he betrayed the Longbottom family, without a qualm. He left you all like goats staked out on a rope for his master, Voldemort – no one forced him to do that."

Harry winced visibly. "He regretted it… and he paid for his actions. He loved my mother." Harry protested.

Leaving that argument about Lily alone for the time being, Sirius (and it was definitely Sirius in the driver's seat right now) continued their difficult discussion.

"So we should ignore the fact that Snape was a vindictive bully? Is that what you are saying, Harry? That all the wizards and witches that he bullied in his time as a professor at Hogwarts… those students he terrorised… all the students that failed potions because they were freakin terrified of him, they don't matter? Let's just forget about those poor wretches who failed potions because he took a dislike to them and set them up to fail or those he just flat out failed without justification because he hated them? They don't count either I guess!"

Harry looked pained, and as someone who'd done his own unpleasant soul searching regarding one of his own sacred cows by the name of L.J. Gibbs recently, Tony was trying not to get too heavy handed. This was a sensitive topic after all. Harry had called one of his offspring after Snape and Dumbledore for pity's sake – he had both wizards up on a massive pedestal.

"But he had to act like that. It was all just a sham," he protested weakly.

"The ranks of both the healers and Aurors were decimated because of his refusal to let anyone who failed to receive an Outstanding in potions to go on and study it at NEWT level – you're saying it doesn't matter because he was undercover. Notwithstanding he made it nigh near impossible for most students to pass his course unless they were the lucky few he favoured ( or they were geniuses like Hermione) because he was a) a bloody awful teacher and b) a damned bully. So, that was okay?"

"No it wasn't okay… but it was for the greater good and he had no choice… he was pretending to
be Voldemort's spy. He's a hero, Sirius – he was in danger so he had no choice but to pretend to be a bully and a hippogriff's arse. We should be thanking him for his sacrifice," Harry said reprovingly.

"Even if his educational expectations weren't related to Voldemort's implicit or explicit doctrine, goals or orders such as excluding muggle born students, so therefore they were completely superfluous to retaining his cover? Really? And let's not forget that the DMLE and St Mungos had a less stringent educational requirement for their recruits than Snape imposed? C'mon Harry, there is no reasonable justification for that other than he was vindictive narcissist who got off on ruining other wizards and witches dreams because he'd ruined his own by joining the Death Eaters, even if he regretted it later on."

Seeing the stubborn set to Harry's jaw, Sirius recognised that look. It was an exact replica of the one worn by Lily Potter when she was bawling James out for being a prat and he dug his heels in. Mentally shaking his head at such woolly-headed thinking, Sirius decided to shake things up.

"You know, one of the new courses I intend to introduce at the Auror Training Academy is a course on undercover work. I want to set up a specialised department inside the DMLE for stings and I'll be looking at recruiting specially trained operatives."

His godson looked momentarily off balance at the shift in topic before looking interested. "That sounds bloody brilliant. Who'll run the course for the trainee Aurors, and can existing Aurors like me enrol in it too?"

Sirius nodded. "Trainees will need to meet certain psychological criteria, Aurors can take part too, provided they pass the psych. screening and I'll be teaching the course. After years living undercover as a non-magical male plus years of working undercover as a cop, I'm more than qualified to run it."

Having achieved his objective of deflecting Harry and subtly reminding him that he was an expert on the subject of working undercover, he parried elegantly. "Oh and by the way… that is absolute dragon dung about Severus having no choice but behaving like a bully because he was undercover. It would have had the exact opposite effect."

Harry frowned. "What? How do you figure that?"

Sirius stepped back and pushed his Tony persona back into the spotlight as he began to educate Harry about the basic tenets of working undercover. "Seriously Cub? Let's run through 'Undercover for Dummies' then."

Harry looked discouraged. "You think I'm a dummy?"

Sighing, Tony realised just how wide the gulf still was between himself and most of the wizards he'd be encountering after almost two decades in the States. He had a lot of re-acclimating to do. "Nope, not what I meant; the 'For Dummies' refers to a series of self-help books. They give a very basic overview of a topic – often they take a complex topic and dumb it down so that a newbie can grasp the basic principles."

Seeing Harry nod in relief he realised furiously that the 'damage' done by years of Durlsey, Snape and Dumbledore's abusiveness to Harry's fragile self-esteem, was still very much alive and residing in the adult's psyche. It was easy to see, should you scratched just below the surface. More good reasons to hold a grudge against them all.

Taking a sip of water, he manoeuvred around, trying to get comfortable as Harry sprang up,
fluffing up pillows and helping him resettled. Waiting until Harry settled back into the padded hospital chair before he began to explain the basics of undercover work.

"Okay, so you're a cop and you get to take down the bad guys – let's say it's the mob. So, you go undercover and have to act like the group you are trying to catch and put away. There are variations on this theme but remember we are distilling this right down to its essence."

He waited until his listener indicated his understanding before continuing. "So, your backstory is that you're Italian – your father is an Italian-American mobster in Philly. You speak fluent Italian and obviously, you respect the culture of the mob. So, you need to be able to speak Italian and be able to fit in with mobsters if you want to survive, since they don't like spies in their midst.

"What you don't want to do is go in claiming to be Italian and a mobster and then start acting like someone who doesn't fit in. To act like say the Russian Mafia, drinking copious quantities of Russian, not knowing what a cannoli is, or speaking Italian with a Russian accent."

Harry nodded. He was following the rationale but couldn't see how it related to Snape. "Yeah because you want to fit in – be one of the guys, not draw unnecessary attention to yourself."

Tony grinned approvingly. "Correct, since no matter how good you are, or how good your cover is, it can always be broken, given enough scrutiny or if you are put under the right amount of pressure." Tony declared firmly. "No matter how good you are you can be broken. The trick is to avoid attracting suspicion so you stay under the radar."

Tony (and it was Tony driving this particular conversation) paused, thinking about how he'd learnt this particular fact-of-undercover-life the hard way. "Okay, so if you're lucky…if your cover story holds up to scrutiny… then you can do your job. That's providing you're good enough at bluffing and improvisation, and you don't get asked to do something too abhorrent and or illegal like murder. Let's say, for the sake of this discussion that you gain their trust and they tell you enough classified intel or you find a way to collect it without them knowing. Then you get to set them up… catch them breaking the law and arrest them."

Harry smiled. "How does that feel? It must be bloody brilliant when they find out you've fooled them?"

Feeling his stomach clench with anxiety, he disagreed. "If it's the mob – Russia Mafia or the Cosa Nostra – then hopefully they never find out it was you that ratted them out. Or if they do, then you pray that they never learn your real identity, because they will hunt you down and kill you if they can."

Seeing Harry's horrified expression, he explained. "The mob is like Voldemort in as much as if you betray them, they'll hunt and kill you without losing any sleep over it." Recalling how the Macaluso family had dispatched men who they thought were spies during his time undercover, Tony shivered involuntarily. The constant fear that he might be next had been all encompassing and made it difficult to close his eyes at night.

"They're ruthless, Cub and they'll never forget a betrayal… even if they take more than a generation to collect the debt. So, the standard operating procedure is when the cops move in and arrest everyone that the undercover operative also gets arrested and charged too. Sometimes they might even go so far as to chuck you into jail and then they'll arrange for you to be transferred out or set up a fight where you're killed in the shower block. Just so they never find out who ratted them out."

"But if it's a cop it's their job…"
"Doesn't matter, Harry. To them, you wormed your way into their organisation and gained their trust, then betrayed them."

The young Auror looked considerably less enthralled by the romance of undercover work and to be fair, not all undercover work was as dangerous as going undercover with the mob or Death Eaters – but it was always potentially dangerous. Sometimes it was your own side that put you in danger. Tony thought about how close he and Jeanne had come to being killed by the bomb planted in his car by Trent Kort and the CIA. Of course, when you worked undercover you relied on your backup to be ready to get you out if you got into trouble.

Sighing since that debacle was all water under the bridge now, he concentrated on the topic at hand. "Right, so we looked at how you carry out a basic no frills undercover mission as a cop. Let's switch it up and look at being a double agent. Let's say that the Mob decides that it needs someone in the police department to act as an informant, so they choose you because you're the son of a Mob guy to go to the police academy under a false name and they give you a cover story."

His godson looked intrigued as he stretched his legs out and crossed them. "So if I'm a kid growing up in the mob I'd have to infiltrate the cops, act like a cop, talk like a cop. I'd need to graduate from the training academy?" he asked.

"Yep…the Police Academy. And once you got your badge you might have to arrest members of the mob to allay suspicion as the need arises. Now let's say that one day you do your job (your real mafia job) and deliver Intel to the mob boss telling him that the police are getting far too close to closing down their drug and extortion ring. So, the mob decides to eliminate the main threat – the police lieutenant who is driving the whole operation and they decide to kill him. There's a shootout as he's leaving the police station to get into his car and drive home and a child who is walking past gets killed in the crossfire."

Tony took a sip of water and shifted uncomfortably in bed, wishing he was home in his own custom made bed with its super thick mattress and high count sheets. He noted Harry was captivated by the scenario he was painting and he grinned.

"Suddenly you have a huge attack of conscience, since that little kid wasn't supposed to be killed and you start making mistakes on the job because you aren't sleeping at night. Your police Captain is on the warpath about the Lieutenant's death and the kid dying… he starts putting two and two together and coming up with four. He confronts you and threatens to make sure you go away for premeditated murder and then he turns you. You agree to work undercover as a spy for the cops and set up the mob because if you don't, then you'll end up in prison for a very long time."

Harry frowned. "But if I've become a spy because I might end up in prison for 30-odd years, can you really trust me?"

"Maybe… or maybe not. But your captain doesn't just have the threat of prison hanging over your head – he can also make sure that the mob learns that you've turned if you step out of line in the slightest. That might be enough to keep you in line…or not."

Tony let him digest that information and then pressed. "Okay…so how do you act undercover now?"

Concentrating, he ran his hand through his already unruly black head of hair. "I'd umm… I would continue to act the same way with the cops." He said looking for validation.

"Why?"
"Because apart from my Captain, no one knows about me and the Mob?"

"Yep…well maybe a few bigwigs like the Chief of Police know about the operation now because it would be stupid if the Captain was the only one. All you would need to do is to kill him and the threat would disappear with him, so there would need to be a limited number in the know and help run the op. But not too many, because it could endanger the undercover operation if word leaked out, so most cops don't know you are a mole."

Harry nodded. "Yeah…makes sense."

"Exactly. And if I was your Captain, I'd make a point of telling you that I'm not the only cop who knows the mob planted you and that you're an accessory to murder…just so I didn't end up dead. And now you've been turned, how would you act around your Mob buddies?" Tony questioned.

"Well…they don't know I've been turned, so I'd just act normally."

"So you wouldn't start acting like a corrupt cop or getting slack in the job because you were being forced to become a mole against the mob?"

"That would be dumb. It would call undue attention to me from the cops who might suspect I'm dirty," Harry protested.

Tony nodded, pleased that Harry had grasped the basics. "Good, so let's look at a slightly different scenario. Let's say that it wasn't your Captain that figured out that you were a mole placed in the department by the Mob. What if it was Internal Affairs who had you under surveillance and arrested you in a blaze of publicity. They charge you with two counts of murder and your links to the Mob are emblazoned across the media, so everyone knows about it.

"Just when you are getting ready to have to go to trial your Captain and the Drug Enforcement Agency come to see you with a proposal. They promise to vouch for you with the cops and say that the IA cops framed you. Plus, they'll get the charges dropped if you spy on the Mob for the Drug Enforcement Agency and help bring it down."

Harry looked a little hesitant. "Yeah okay?"

"So, how would you act?"

"How do you mean?"

"What's changed from the last scenario?"

Well the cops are going to be highly suspicious of me and now they'll examine every single little thing I say and do." Harry replied, looking at Tony for affirmation.

Tony nodded. "Plus, the Mob also know that you've been suspected of spying on their behalf and you getting off so easily probably will make them suspicious. That complicates things completely." Seeing Harry's questioning look, he probed. "Okay…so, do you act like you're part of the Mafia? Blackmail your fellow cops? Rough up witnesses to make them talk, threaten to provide them with concrete shoes and feed them to the fishes? Do you start openly associating with the Mob types because if you don't they might get suspicious that you aren't their mole anymore?"

The younger wizard looked befuddled. "No, if you started flouting the rules as a cop then you blow your cover as a cop obviously. Especially if you associate with members of the Mob."

"Yeah but the cops don't matter, do they? It's the DEA who continue to vouch for you no matter
what you do. Your police Captain does too, so because he wants to put the mob away, he'll ignore it every time you break the law or act suspiciously."

Harry stood up and stretched out his muscles. 'Well then I supposed that would work. Although the cops would probably start to suspect that I was spying on the Mob because I could get away with so much. Which might make it more dangerous for me personally, plus if any cops had loose lips or they were corrupt too, it could get tricky."

"Yes they might and that is a concern but the real problem is not that the cops find your actions suspicious. Tell me Harry, if you are the Mob boss, wouldn't you find it suspicious that the cops were letting the mole you'd placed in the police force to spy for you get away with breaking the law, blackmail other cops, rough up suspects and not do their job properly? Or would you think it was suspicious if they were disciplined or even fired for behaving contrary to the good of the police department and the citizens that cops are supposed to be protecting. If I was the Mob Bosses, I'd think it was bloody suspicious if they didn't discipline my mole and protect innocent people who he harmed.

"In fact, being the nasty cynical person that I am, I'd be so suspicious that they didn't throw him out on his ass I'd immediately suspect that my mole had been turned by them. Nothing else would explain why they were letting him get away with so much crap."

Harry was silent for the longest time and Tony let him reflect – figuring he would get the point in the end. Finally, the younger wizard rose from his chair, reversed the privacy charm and disappeared from the room. He returned with an armful of snacks from one of the vending machines in the hospital, including drinks and packets of chips. He'd managed to grab several mixed sandwiches too, all of which he dumped down on the rolling bedside table.

"Feeling a bit peckish, Harry?" he queried, unable to stop himself from chuckling before wishing he hadn't. For some reason a stab wound to the upper chest wasn't conducive to hilarity.

The younger wizard shrugged. "You slept through dinner so I thought you might appreciate a snack."

He watched with amusement as the younger wizard opened the various packaging containers as Tony had an IV line in one hand that Harry was convinced was an object of torture and excruciatingly painful, in spite of all his reassurances. He couldn't help remembering that scene from Star Trek IV - The Voyage Home, where Bones goes to a 20th century hospital to rescue Chekov, who is near death. But the Doc stops to help heal a patient with his 23rd century skills because he's appalled by the primitive treatment methods employed by the hospital doctors who he thinks are barbarians.

Harry gestured for Tony to help himself to the sandwiches, handing him a bottle of soda. The Auror had developed quite a taste for the non-magical drink since he'd been staying with his godfather in DC. He seized his own drink, taking a long desperate pull before scoffing down his sandwich. Finally, after a manly belch he drilled Tony with a look.

"So what you're suggesting is that Voldemort suspected that Professor Snape was a mole who was spying on him."

"No… I'm not suggesting it, Harry. I have absolutely no doubt he was certain of it. Riddle was evil incarnate, but he also was not stupid – unlike Dumbledore or Snape. You'll recall he tried to get the job as the defence against the dark arts position at Hogwarts when he was younger and the then headmaster, who coincidentally just happened to be Dumbledore, refused to employ him because he felt that Voldemort or Tom Riddle as he was back then, was delving into dark arts and Albus
wanted to protect the students from him. Voldemort knew that the only way that Snape would be permitted to act in such an unprofessional manner and have no punitive action meted out or his position terminated was if Dumbledore had some other agenda which was even more important to him.

"Being a massive narcissistic personality, old Tommy Boy would have immediately glommed onto the notion that nothing and no one was more important to Dumbledore than defeating him and in this estimation, he'd be right. To Dumbledore, nothing WAS more important to him than beating Voldemort. Not my innocence, not even your life."

"But hang on, if Voldemort knew that Snape was Dumbledore's spy, then why wouldn't he have killed him? He hated his minions being disloyal and deceiving him. You said so yourself," the younger wizard protested.

"True, but if there's anything worth its weight in gold, it's using your enemy's mole to disseminate disinformation." Seeing Harry's confusion, he clarified, "False information. Plus, he had Snape between a rock and a hard place. He got to make him do a lot of things that he would have baulked at when he was interacting with him and the Death Eaters, except that he had to keep his cover intact – or so he thought at least.

"And don't forget that he was a potions Master and Voldemort made use of his skills to create potions for healing his Death Eaters. He must have been laughing his snakey butt off with the mind games he got to play with Snape and Dumbledore. They thought they were putting one over on him but he was laughing his ass off at them."

"So it was an impossible ask for Snape to be a spy, then?" Harry asked, rhetorically as he reached in and grabbed a handful of chips.

Shaking his head at his denseness Tony responded curtly. "Don't be dense, Cub. All Snape had to do to be convincing, was 1) to publicly renounce his Death Eater past and adopt a blameless life as an earnest potions professor. 2) Go about his business of educating all the Hogwarts students without fear or favour. 3) Crack down on the Slytherins and NOT engage in bullying James Potter's son. They all would have been an excellent start!

"And when I had to face Old Tommy again, I would have explained I was lying through my teeth so Dumbledore thought I was a reformed character and let me stay in the castle so I could spy on him. I'd also point out that a real Slytherin would con his enemies into believing that he was a reformed wizard and therefore was not a threat to Dumbledore and his asinine little Order of the Phoenix. That meant pretending that I didn't hate his so-called secret weapon- that smug, spoilt Harry James Potter - even though I'd never forgive him for surviving instead of Lily. I'd tell him that I hoped Albus would invite me to join his merry little band of minions so I could deliver intel on their plans and that's why I'd been sucking up to Dumbledore and making myself invaluable as his potions master."

Tony's voice died away and he looked at his best friend's son cautiously. He could go on about how he would have pulled off the undercover op. and made a compelling case that he was still Tommy-boy's mole spying on Dumbledore. But he didn't because he could see from Harry's stricken face that he'd already made his point more than eloquently.

After another pregnant pause that lasted several minutes at the least, Harry had one last objection. "If Voldemort truly knew that Dumbledore had turned Snape against him, why on earth would he appoint Snape as the Hogwarts Headmaster after Dumbledore died?"

"A few reasons in my opinion. Most everyone in the castle believed he'd murdered 'ol
Dumbledumb' in cold blood and they were terrified of him, so he helped keep the students under control. Don't forget, even when he was only the potions professor and Head of Slytherin House, he had Albus' blind support no matter what he did and at least three quarters of the Hogwarts students either despised or were afraid of him for his treatment of them. Probably even more importantly, Voldemort decided it was a politic decision to have him at the castle. Have you ever heard the phrase - keep your friends close and your enemies closer?

"Oh yeah, that was in the Godfather II movie that we watched the other night, right?" Awesome movie," he enthused "but stupid plan."

"Barking out a laugh that sounded somewhat like Padfoot, he nodded. "Yeah it was in The Godfather II but the writers pinched the quote – it was first attributed to a famous ancient Chinese military strategist – Sun Tzu. And it's far from being a stupid plan, Harry. The closer you are to your enemy, the more you have the chance to study them and get to know their strengths and their weakness, so you can mount an effective attack.

"But more than that, by appointing him as headmaster of Hogwarts, he knew where he could be found, practically every minute of the day. So, if he ever needed to find him urgently, he could. Plus, by giving him Hogwarts to run, it meant he had less time to be plotting against him. It was a very clever way to control him."

When Harry attempted to argue, Tony scowled at him. "Have you ever heard of a figurehead? That was Snape – he had no power. Tell me Harry, who did Voldemort appoint as Snape's 2ICs?"

"The Carrows."

"Exactly. Apart from Lucius Malfoy, the vile LeStrange brothers and Bellatrix, , Amycus and Alecto Carrow were his most vicious and trusted Death Eaters, part of his inner cadre. Why have them mouldering away at a castle full of children in the Scottish Highlands as Deputy Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress if he trusted that Snape was totally loyal to him?"

Tony saw the questions in Harry's emerald green eyes as he considered his rationale. "So they were keeping their eye on him?"

"I have no doubt that Tommy Boy fully intended to kill Severus during the final battle, or terminate him if he'd survived until the end. Let's face it, Voldemort was such a narcissist that he would have never considered he could be defeated. Snape just caught him off guard when he struck out at him when he did… but he was always going to die for betraying his Dark Mark and his Dark Lord." Tony sniffed disdainfully at the moniker as he lay back against his pillows, done in and deciding that sleeping for a few hours sounded great right about now.
What - No Mea Culpa?

Chapter Summary

Tobias offers a suggestion about how to investigate Kort's true identity and Tony gets an unexpected visitor.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for everyone who leaves feedback. I should have the next chapter up in the next day or two.

Unfortunately, Tony woke up in the hospital at the butt-crack of dawn. The nurse checking his vitals and his surgeon’s freakishly early post-surgical rounds put paid to any hope he might have had of grabbing a few hours’ sleep to make up for the late night they’d had. Harry had been roused by the nurse entering the room too. One look in his direction and Tony knew he was not in good shape, physically or mentally.

Their chat about Severus and the mental gymnastics Harry had fabricated to make excuses for Snape’s years of bullying students, himself included, had been a very difficult one. If Tony needed more evidence of how off kilter Harry was feeling, his hair all awry was a good indicator. Not that his hair was all that obedient at the best of times – he’d inherited his mother’s eyes but got James totally unruly mop. Of course, him running his fingers through it in his agitated state most definitely had not improved its appearance this morning.

Adding to his generalised air of disreputableness were the dark circles under his eyes that reminded Tony of a Giant Panda, and rumpled clothing that he’d been wearing for over 24 hours. It wasn’t surprising that they both looked disreputable (he didn’t want to know what he looked like) was because they’d probably only been asleep for an hour or two when a young nurse named Amanda woke them when she bounced in the room. Her perky good nature was difficult to tolerate when they were still half asleep although she didn’t seem fazed.

Worse, she brought them both a depressingly sad breakfast consisting of lumpy oatmeal and lukewarm coffee, scrambled eggs that could have down dual duty as hockey pucks they were that rubbery accompanied by soggy toast. After being tortured by far too many hospital meals over the years, Tony was sure that the food was deliberately prepared to provide a strong incentive to patients wanting to get out the hospital as soon as possible before they starved. It sure wasn’t cooked to promote healing.

Looking at Harry playing with his rubbery eggs unenthusiastically, he took pity on him.

“Hey Harry, you could go down to the hospital cafeteria when it’s open and try to find something to eat that isn’t completely inedible.”

Seeing his half-hearted nod of acknowledgment, Tony felt like a monster for causing Harry’s mental anguish but it was necessary – at least Hermione had insisted that he needed to talk to him.
The trouble was though that Tony knew how it felt to have to totally revaluate something (someone) you believed in implicitly, even if you were a deluded fool. It sucked!

Clearly, today was going to be a day to coddle Harry and give him a chance to regroup. He knew that Hermione hoped that by giving them this time together that he might help straighten her best friend out about some of his illusions. It wasn’t easy though - he needed to do it without destroying him. Last night he’d essentially swept the rug out from under him and now the younger wizard was trying to figure out which way was up. So, Tony needed to back off or he’d drive his godson right back into defending Snape even more staunchly.

It was always a lot easier to debunk someone who was still alive – maybe it was the whole never speak ill of the dead etiquette. Although the older wizard knew that there was more at stake in this case. Finesse was an imperative to winning the overall war.

So, in between grabbing naps and having nurses come in and out, he’d studiously avoided mentioning the ever-present elephant in the room. Although he was depressingly aware that he needed to talk to Harry about his indefensible stunt back in the day when Snape was nearly attacked by Remus because Sirius had been a stupid jerk.

On a cheerier note, the doctor seemed happy with his medical status and he said that barring complications, he could be discharged tomorrow. Tony was thrilled to hear that as he was already climbing the walls and he had only been here a day. He couldn’t wait to return to work - lying around brought up way too many unpleasant memories.

Tobias arrived to give them an update on the investigation, bring deli sandwiches, pastries and coffee, making sure he was welcomed with open arms, as Harry moaned blissfully as he bit into a pastrami on rye. The FBI agent had called into his apartment to collect Tony’s laptop so they could give Hermione a sitrep too. After eating lunch Tony dialled up Hermione on a videocall. Once they’d exchanged greetings and she’d gotten an update on Tony’s medical status, Fornell started his briefing.

“Right… well the CIA have finally confirmed to the FBI, after ducking and weaving for most of the day that they’d terminated Trent Kort after a couple of his ‘jobs’ didn’t go to plan. He was cut loose from their employ, six weeks ago.”

Tony frowned. “Okay…so why was he still alive?”

Harry looked shocked and Hermione demanded. “What do you mean?”

Tobias rolled his eyes. “It’s the worst kept secret amongst the alphabets that assassins who are employed by the CIA never get to hand in their notice or retire if the Company has anything to say about it.”

“They enforce a really harsh non-competitive clause on all its assassins.” Tony quipped flippantly.

“Not the only employers who have a less than compassionate retirement package, for assassins, Tony.” Fornell observed wryly.

Tony flashed back to the ex-mossad assassin, Namir Eschel, who’d faked his own death for the Israelis and then went on to work for the Iranian Intelligence. He’d set Ziva up when Gibbs was down in Mexico marinating his brain cells with cheap hooch. Eschel was murdered by the Iranians when he’d outlived his usefulness, even though he thought he was a valued asset. As smart as assassins were in lots of ways, when it came to their own worth they were usually incredibly short-sighted, if not downright idiots.
They all thought they were too smart...too valuable...too good for it to happen to them. They were wrong! They were just as liable to be taken advantage of, and taken out with the trash as any other mere mortals.

Tony sighed, noting that Harry and Hermione didn’t understand the subtleties of Toby’s speech, so he decided to stop with the beating around the bush. “He’s saying that if they get fired, the CIA doesn’t want them to end up working for anyone else, especially their enemies so they disappear them. Basically, people like Trent Kort end up in an unmarked grave somewhere remote, taking a long dirt nap or else they become shark bait.” he stated bluntly.

The witch and wizard both looked suitably sickened and Tobias exchanged a cynical half-smile with Tony before cautioning them. “Don’t waste too much sympathy on them, guys – almost without exception, career assassins are sociopaths. While some sociopaths may be channelled into occupations where they can subjugate the worst aspects of their personality and contribute positively to society, they’re in a very elite subset.”

“Professional assassins develop a taste for killing – they become addicted to the thrill of the chase and the kill. In this case, clearly Kort was a war criminal who somehow managed to make his way into the States,” Tony refused to feel any guilt for the Death Eater’s demise. “Who knows how many victims he murdered over the years.” Tony pointed out dispassionately.

“So have you managed to ID Kort yet, Hermione?” Fornell asked her curiously.

“Not yet. I have a number of people working on it, though.”

“I’ll ask the FBMI to run his face through the age regression facial software. In case he had plastic-surgery done.”

“Thanks, Toby. That’s a great idea. Our Aurors here would look at me like I was a crumple-horned snorkack if I suggested that,” The Minister of Magic observed dryly.

Tony sniggered. “Considering that a lot of them have no idea what a computer is, that’s not surprising.”

~o0o~

Tony poured himself a juice from the fridge before wandering over, gingerly sitting down on his sofa. He was feeling mildly pouty since everyone insisted he stay home today and rest instead of going into the office. He’d always hated being forced to take sick leave; it gave him too much time to think about things that he considered were better off being ignored. It was a failing of his that most people would be shocked at – undoubtedly declaring that he wasn’t capable of deep thoughts, but then most people would be wrong.

At least when he was working, he could employ his never-in-the-off-switch brain to help catch criminals and solve puzzles. However, in their infinite wisdom, after he got stabbed the day before yesterday everyone decided that following his discharge today, he should be at home resting. So, with time on his hands he was desperate to know what was happening regarding Trent’s botched assassination attempt. Instead he was stuck at home with nothing to do but obsess.

Harry, meanwhile had offered to go and get some food, since the cupboards were looking rather bare. Although well intentioned, it also meant Tony was currently alone in the apartment with only his thoughts for company, and that was always dangerous. Mostly because it was way too crowded in his head with his various personas – each of which were highly opinionated and wanting their viewpoint heard. Time was running out before he left his team of 15 years behind, so
it wasn’t surprising that without a case to occupy his time, his focus had turned inward to the less
than cordial way his teammates had handled news of his job. Not that he was blameless either
about the way he reacted.

Looking back, Tony was reviewing his own actions and he wasn’t all that happy with himself.
Good as it felt at the time to confront Gibbs about Luke and his behaviour and deliver some long
overdue home truths, that wasn’t how Tony DiNozzo/Sirius Black operated. Disrespect of a
superior, especially in front of subordinates was simply not his style. He’d felt almost intoxicated
when he delivered the long overdue smack-down to Jethro but ultimately, he was disappointed in
himself. Disappointed in what he saw as his own weakness and his lack of restraint. Gibbs was a
bastard, but that didn’t give him license to be one too.

Tony felt ashamed that he’d let Gibbs get under his skin, causing him to lash out and publicly
expose the Marine’s vulnerabilities. Even experiencing the heady and euphoric feelings of finally
getting back at him for all the public humiliation and disrespect he’d endured from the man over
the years, didn’t disguise the fact that it had been bullying behaviour by doing it in public. Nor did
it excuse it, for that matter.

Tony had spent so many years compartmentalizing his feelings, his identities, hiding his real self
and keeping a lid on his emotions. He’d always avoided taking pain killers, which alarmingly,
loosened his tongue and steered clear of drinking too much alcohol. Tobias’ blunt analysis of
Gibbs’ mistakes in Iraq that morning on the way into NCIS to hand in his resignation had seemed
like insurgency and therefore seditious. Unfortunately, it had been wonderfully liberating too.
As a seasoned agent and Gibbs friend, Fornell pointing out that he’d screwed the pooch, shattered a
ball of guilt inside of Tony. He’d been consumed by it for months for not preventing the almost
shooting in Iraq which was almost fatal. Fornell’s absolution and punting the blame back onto
Gibbs had set him free. Even though Tony and Fornell both understood why he’d frozen, the point
was that he had still frozen in the field with a kid attempting to shoot him and thus, had ended up
creating a huge mess for everyone else to clean up.

Still, Tony should have handled it better. He should have ignored his baser instincts.

Someone banging on his door interrupted his process of self-recrimination. Even if he hadn’t
known who it was at his front door - thanks to his enhanced sensory abilities - plus 15 years of
listening to his unsolicited visitor announce himself while working in the field together. The kicker
was the irritated yelling confirmed the identity of the angry door banger.

“Open up, DiNozzo! I know you’re in there. Let me in!”

Sighing, he swiftly cast Hermione’s charm because he didn’t want this turning ugly and besides,
Harry and Hermione would kill him if he let Gibbs get close enough to lay a hand on him – even if
it was just a head slap.

Wondering briefly if he should let Harry know, he decided there was no need. Gibbs was all bluff
and bluster but he wasn’t physically a threat, at least not when Tony was charmed. The bigger
threat was Gibbs using his network of cronies to dig into a matter what didn’t concern him…or his
contacts. Tony was pretty sure Gibbs had tipped off Kort – like he’d alerted so many others in his
spider’s web of contacts too. Trent and Gibbs also had some weird frenemy-esque bromance crap
going on – at least they did until Tony killed the smarmy prick. Okay maybe bromance was a tad
too strong of a description. Maybe it was more of a ‘I scratched your scaly back, now you can
scratch my slimy back’ sort of relationship.

Making his way slowly to the entrance of the apartment as Gibbs continued his demands to be let
in, Tony opened the front door up and waited as Gibbs got that goofy ‘what was I going to say’ look on his face. It was rather funny!

Scowling at him, Tony demanded, “What are you doing here, Gibbs?”

Looking around bemused, he frowned. “I think I wanted to talk to you or… did wait… did you call me?”

Shaking his head, he stepped aside, letting the silver haired agent into his apartment. Gesturing him to take a seat, he decided not to offer him coffee. This wasn’t a social call and Gibbs hadn’t been invited over to have a chin-wag. Plus, the doc had told him to take it easy today – to rest. So, the quicker he could get this over and done with the better.

“Okay Gibbs, what was so damned important that you had to go banging and yelling at my door?” he enquired sitting down at a distance which allowed Jethro to think independently and state his business. “Oh and by the way, thanks for asking, I’m fine – it was just a scratch. Just like the time Ziva decided to fire her gun in a metal shipping crate and the wooden crates jumped up and gave me a splitter.” Tony retorted snarkily.

“At least you’re alive…unlike Kort. That would be the second highly skilled assassin you’ve gotten the better of. How do you explain that?”

“Gee, I guess dumb luck…or maybe, just maybe I’m not the bumbling dumb cop you all believe. You know, Jethro… at one point in our partnership, you used to know that it was all an act so people would underestimate me. It’s a damned useful tool when trained killers think you’re not a threat…makes them sloppy. What happened to you…to us? Care to explain that to me, Jethro?”

Gibbs blood pressure was visibly rising as Tony spoke. The undercover wizard anticipated that soon Gibbs would find himself in a mental haze once more as the charm kicked in.

Ignoring his query in typical Gibbs style, he directed his laser-like blue eyes at Tony. “What is your damned secret that was so damned important that it cost Trent Kort his life. Who hired you, DiNozzo?”

“As you’ve been told several times before, that information is so above your pay grade, Gibbs and always will be. Get over it and move on!”

It hit him that failing to mention Padfoot’s involvement in Kort’s death was a huge miss step but then he was not feeling up to scratch, mentally or physically. He scrambled to deflect Gibbs from is mistake by doing what he did best - pissing him off!

“And for your information, I didn’t go looking for Kort – he set up the crime scene – killed that girl to ambush me. Luckily that feral dog attacked him or he’d have killed me. Did you ask him to take me out?” Tony deflected, knowing that Kort was acting on his own.

Not surprisingly, the former Marine turned bright red and the vein above his left eye was pulsing as he moved closer, clearly intending to head slap his former SFA and triggered Hermione’s charm. Looking around befuddled, he held up his hand that had been going to hit Tony, examining it before turning it over to stare at his knuckles before he curled it into a fist and shoved it into his lap as he cast a helpless look at Tony.

“What was I saying?” he asked exasperatedly.

Tony smiled tightly. I was just going to apologise for losing my temper with you in the bull pen the other day when I called you out for freezing right before you were shot. Don’t get me wrong…I’m
not prepared to carry the can for you letting yourself get shot in Iraq. Not anymore! But still… I shouldn’t have done that to you in public. It was disrespectful to your position.”

Gibbs looked like he didn’t know how to respond, although his default emotion of anger was probably waring with his feeling of bewilderment while Tony experienced a sudden insight into Gibbs behaviour. Could the reason why he’d been such an asshole be because he honestly expected he’d be allowed to clean up his own mess… because after all it was one of his ridiculous rules? Like you could force the world to follow your asinine rules if you acted pissy enough.

Even though Gibbs ignored his rules on a daily basis – and in this instance, he ignored Rule 10 which is why he froze in the first place - he could be such a hypocrite sometimes. Okay – maybe Rule 10 wasn’t the sole reason he froze, but it was a huge part of it.

Truth to tell, Leroy Jethro Gibbs never had the guts to dealt with his overwhelming grief and guilt over the loss his family, dragging it around with him as excessive baggage instead. He’d even hauled it into work with him for the last quarter of a century and made everyone else suffer along with himself because he refused to deal with his feelings by seeking help. This time though, he’d dragged a 14-year-old kid into his screwed-up vortex of misery and pain too.

All because he couldn’t take a simple shot to disarm a confused, messed up kid. One who needed saving from himself. Gibbs failed him because he was even more messed up than Luke and he couldn’t or wouldn’t even save himself. Luke had no chance.

Standing up carefully so he didn’t pull on his stitches, he hoped Gibbs would get the message that he was throwing him out. “I have to go and take my medication now Gibbs. Thanks for stopping by and if I don’t see you before I leave, I’ll say goodbye and good-luck. I’d say thanks for everything but in the scheme of things, I think I’ve more than paid you back for you dragging me out of Baltimore.” Tony stated, thinking that it was a sad state of affairs that they’d let what was once a strong partnership and friendship come down to this farewell.

Although really, what the hell had he been thinking – hanging around like a bad smell for way too many years. He should have left Gibbs’ team years ago; certainly after Ziva had replaced the agent who had been killed by her brother. Back in the day, that had seemed just a bit too pat for him but then he’d let a lot of things slide over the years that he shouldn’t have because he trusted Gibbs more than was prudent – more fool him.

Looking like he wanted to argue but evidently unsure what he’d already discussed, Jethro stood up grumbling about finding out what DiNozzo was hiding. Letting him have the benefit of his patented icy glare, Gibbs stomped off without saying another word and Tony felt sad and empty. No acknowledgement of all he had done for Gibbs over the years, not even a good luck or stay safe. Just plain old-fashioned pique because Tony refused to tell him what he wanted to know. How sad was that?

After seeing him out of the apartment Tony wandered into the kitchen to swallow his antibiotics with a glass of water. Despite his sadness he felt heaps better for admitting to Gibbs that his behaviour in the bullpen wasn’t professional and that he regretted his insubordination. He’d never understand how Gibbs could believe apologies were a sign of weakness. He felt empowered when he did what was right. In this case by admitting his mistake and saying he was sorry rather than what was easy and pretending that nothing was wrong or hoping it would just go away. Plus, if you viewed everyone as your adversary, then you tended to treat them as antagonists, which made it highly likely that’s how they would respond to you too.

Feeling sad that he and Gibbs had probably had the last conversation they were ever going to have, since they’d reached an impasse. Frankly, he was tired of always having to be the one to make the
first move and he wasn’t willing to do it any longer. It was highly improbable Gibbs would ever be willing to admit he’d made mistakes, either to himself or Tony and at this point in his life, he needed a genuine mea culpa to even begin mending what was broken between them. Hence his very strong conviction that they’d spoken their last words to each other.

Trying to put the shared past with Gibbs behind him, Tony still couldn’t help wondering if Jethro had the fortitude of a true Marine and got help to deal with the loss of his family, how it would have affected those people around him.

Honestly, Tony wished his own messed up headspace and emotions could have been addressed so easily by going to see someone and talking about what ailed him. But if he’d shared his shit with a shrink – the whole dying and being given a second shot at life thing, the sharing his new body with an emotionally messed-up cop’s memories and huge black dog who was the animal side of his personality. How would have gone down?

‘Oh, and yeah… by the way, Doc, I’m a freakin wizard and yes, magic is real but you can’t tell anyone this stuff cuz you’re not supposed to know that! In fact, the ‘magical powers that be’ will wipe your memory if you reveal it’. Odds on he’d have ended up in a padded room so damned fast, drugged to the eyeballs. If he was lucky! More likely, his pact with Destiny would be declared null and void and he’d cease to exist.

Now with Toby, Harry and Hermione to share his crap with, or some of it, because in good conscience it was too overwhelming for him to dump all of it onto them, things were a heap better than they used to be. And that was fortunate since his leaving had stirred up so much repressed stuff that he’d ruthlessly shut up tight in a bottomless trunk for nearly two decades. Not to mention all the other stuff that he hadn’t had a chance to deal with, prior to his little trip through the Veil. Truth to tell, he was one very messed up individual - thanks to his family and years of incarceration. Then there was all of Anthony’s shit too and they’d held everything together by ignoring it as much as possible.

It made him wonder how different his life might have been in the US if he’d had someone he could confide in. Plus, he realised just how selfish and cowardly Gibbs was to take out his pain on his colleagues when he could have worked through his anger with assistance if it was too hard to do on his own. Not that it would have been easy but then again, that wasn’t an excuse to avoid doing the right thing.

His cell phone pinged, and he checked it. McGee was informing him that his report on the crime scene had been completed and emailed to his work inbox andCc’d to the Director. Ellie reported Vance was furious that they hadn’t realised that the scene had been faked to draw him out. He’d reamed the two juniors out for not preventing the attack on Tony; no doubt he was expecting it to cause an international incident.

Since he was under no illusions who had placed himself and Harry in mortal danger with a former CIA assassin, Tony felt like Leon should have been ripping Gibbs a new one instead of junior agents, but unfortunately they had no conclusive proof that Jethro had tipped Kort off, only his intuition. Still, it wasn’t fair to blame Tim or Ellie.

Shrugging philosophically because he had finally had the last laugh with Kort, he briefly considered letting Jeanne Woods nee Benoit know the man who tried to murder them both had finally got what he deserved. Further reflection, he decided instead to respect her request for him not to have any further contact with her.

Sitting down at the piano, he began playing a mix of Beatles’ songs pianissimo, his thoughts turning to his team. He’d been deliberately avoiding addressing his feelings about how deeply he’d
been hurt by McGee’s attitude towards him, not to mention the bad blood that he’d never realised existed between them. Tim’s terse text, not even asking how he was doing had reopened that festering sore that he was trying to ignore.

Truth to tell, it hurt him a helluva lot more that Kort’s attempt to kill him again…because he already knew that Trent Kort had hated his guts. And it was mutual- even before he’d realised Kort was a Death Eater. He’d always felt particularly close to Timothy McGee but he was starting to realise that the feeling hadn’t been reciprocated, and that hurt - like a cutting curse that never healed itself.

Tony had finally been forced to accept, courtesy of Hermione’s insightful talks, that he was a pathetic idiot trying to recreate his family from back in the day when Sirius Black was alive in magical Britain. Since joining NCIS he didn’t have time to form normal relationships which could have led to a proper family, due to the punishing hours his boss made them work. So, he’d cast his NCIS team mates into the role of his de facto family since he spent so much time with them. He done it partly because of loneliness but also because it was in Padfoot’s nature to want to form a pack – he was not a lone wolf.

While he hadn’t allowed Pads to physically express himself by transforming into a huge black dog, he was nevertheless an intrinsic part of who Sirius was and right from their first days in the US, he’d refused to stay mute, insisted on voicing his opinion on virtually everything. Bottom line, Pads needed pack – family to stay sane. Twelve years of Azkaban had been torture for the social canine to have to endure and even though it was Padfoot who saved Sirius from the Dementors by making it difficult for them to feed on his emotions, the cost for the canine had been extremely high. He was still feeling the consequences of twelve years of solitary confinement, which expressed itself in his desperation to have a pack and lots of social interactions.

So, in creating a pack, he’d foolishly cast Gibbs in the starring role of James Potter and look at how well that had worked out for him. Then to compound his cockup even further he’d sought out an equally ludicrous matchup in Timothy McGee, casting him to play the crucial role of Remus Lupin, his other brother/best friend, based solely on a handful of traits and some superficial resemblances.

Remus had been a gentle wizard, shy and retiring. He was the intellectual one of their pack who’d managed all their plans so that they always had an escape clause or alternatively, he took the original plan and honed it so they never needed one. Remus was also obsessively studious – being turned into a werewolf had a profound impact upon his friend’s personality insomuch as he knew “His Kind” was feared and despised. So, Lupin sought from a young age to make sure he was as unobtrusive, as non-threatening as possible.

When they’d made friends with Remus on the Hogwarts Express, he and James protected the gentle werewolf (even though they didn’t know about his lycanthropy until some years later) and encouraged him to believe in himself.

In return – he always had their back. Even when they were idiots and ran headlong into trouble, he stood by them. Incredibly, Remus never blamed them when the shit hit the fan - unfortunately that occurred far too often for all concerned. And yet, for as different as they were in so many ways - family background, disposition and his tragic affliction made it difficult to truly understand each other’s experience, they’d been bound together by a bond of comradery, empathy and respect that was unshakeable.

They, along with that miserable turncoat Pettigrew, who he tried hard not to think about, had made a career out of playing pranks at school – no one was immune from their wicked humour and sense
of the ridiculous. Not the staff, not the students and most especially not each other. And under their tutelage and influence, the far too serious Remus learnt to let his hair down (figuratively speaking) and to enjoy life at Hogwarts instead of fearing it.

Even after they’d discovered his darkest ‘that-time-of-the-month-secret,’ they’d vowed to stick by him and their friendship had grown even stronger. They’d even developed into animagi, just so they could support him during his lunar transformations since transformed, an animagus couldn’t be infected if he bit them while he was a werewolf. Of course, they’d had to learn the skill illegally, since they couldn’t afford to let Remus’ secret get out into the public. Even if public hysteria wasn’t a factor, it was highly unlikely that the adults would have permitted them to spend the full moon with him as animagi. It was a secret that bonded them even more tightly to each other.

Now, once he went looking for comparisons it was easy enough to see how he’d come to adopt McGee to fill Remus’ role because of his superficial resemblances to his friend – his shy, awkwardness. The outsider who stuck out like a sore thumb, the green newb who threw up at crime scenes. The nerdy, studious kid who was way too serious (no pun intended) for his own good, desperately wanting to be one of the cool kids, aka a field agent.

Despite experiencing some initial feelings of jealousy and insecurity, fuelled especially after Gibbs’ below the belt crack about giving McGee his desk, he’d adopted McGee. Just like he and James had embraced Remus, making the shy werewolf one of their family.

Afterwards, just like the Marauders had pranked each other mercilessly and made endless jokes at each other’s expense, he’d treated Tim like a favourite kid brother - basically like Remus - minus the lycanthropy. He chivvied him and pranked him, trying to make him stand up for himself and grow a much-needed backbone, an absolute necessity for anyone working in law enforcement. Pads defended Tim with his fierce canine loyalty and protectiveness because he’d already lost far too many people who were important in his life - the last thing Tony had ever wanted to see was the baby-faced probie agent lying naked on a slab in Ducky’s morgue with a Y incision in his chest.

Sirius had always felt that he’d failed James and Regulus, so he could see, upon reflection, he’d always been far too over-protective with McGee, even if to others, some of his methods to try to train him were at best, unorthodox. One thing he finally realised was that the main difference between Lupin and McGee was that Remus always had his back. He never would have switched off comms if he’d been his backup on the At-Home case.

Nor would he have ever dreamed of joking about something so earth-shattering as turning off comms because Remus would have understood exactly how crucial trust was – that it was more important than anything else in his relationship with his team mates. The relationship hinged, after all upon being able to trust your partner to have your back when your life was put at risk. You depended on them so you could do your job and save lives.

There was no doubt that Probish had caught him very much off guard, making him re-examine long held assumptions about The Royal Woods incident. Specifically, why he’d let Tim off the hook for Ziva’s supposed hurt over Rivkin. Why he’d always made excuses for him and not held him to a higher standard of behaviour? McGee knew better because he had trained him better.

Even though turning off mics was never acceptable behaviour in law enforcement, no matter what, Tony had still rationalised Ziva’s behaviour. Her grief over Rivkin’s death, her jealousy when she made Gibbs choose between them and he left her in Israel, plus, the trauma of her being held captive in Somalia. His own guilt that she’d ended up in a terrorist camp even though he wasn’t responsible for her choices or her behaviour. Although he was responsible for the team dynamics because he let Gibbs disrespect him and the chain-of-command.
Bishop had rightly pointed out that Tim had none of Ziva’s extenuating circumstances to hide behind. Truthfully, as devastated as he was that he couldn’t trust either of the juniors to have his six in the field or undercover, McGee’s betrayal hurt much more than Ziva’s. Hindsight told him that was probably because he’d always thought of Tim as a little brother…someone who needed to be protected. The Mossad liaison had bludgeoned her way onto the team after spying on them all, ultimately helping to get Cate killed with her intelligence dossiers for Ari. He’d worked with her out of respect and loyalty to Gibbs because everyone could see that he loved her as a surrogate daughter but Tony had never truly trusted her.

And Ellie had been at least half right in her analysis. Much as Tony had refused to admit it, a part of him did fear that Gibbs would take the side of the junior agents and defend the indefensible, because like Tony, he felt guilty for what Ziva had endured in Somalia. But unlike Tony he had chosen to leave her to the tender mercies of her father because she’d given the Boss an ultimatum – an admittedly very foolish move - one which had guaranteed the gunny would choose him over her. Stupid really, if she’d played her cards right, Tony wouldn’t have stood a chance against her since Gibbs always played favourites with females on his team.

So, if he’d reported her flagrant disregard of procedure, Tony knew he would have been forcing him into having to choose between them again.

Logically, he knew that as a SAS the Boss would be forced to side with him, since what McGee and Ziva did was inexcusable but Gibbs never liked being forced into doing anything - as Ziva had discovered at her peril. Factor into the equation that Gibbs was already wracked with guilt over her capture in Somalia and by what she’d endured so Tony was damn sure who he would have sided with this time.

He’d already felt like couldn’t trust McGee and Ziva, so if Gibbs had sided with them then he had no one who he’d be able to trust. He couldn’t risk losing that trust – it was all he had left. So, he didn’t report it and he tried to brush the situation off as just a minor bump in the road. As Tim and Ziva just joking about shutting off the comms but not actually doing it. Although in truth, he’d never gone into an undercover assignment after that without knowing that he needed to watch his own back because secretly he didn’t believe they were just joking.

He’d coped – after all, he was used to taking care of himself – he was a capable agent.
Released from the hospital earlier that morning, Tony had already had to deal with an uninvited guest and spent time obsessing about his stupidity. He decided to make a cup of herbal tea – partly because he had a slight headache and just because he wanted to short circuit his ponderous thinking. Unfortunately, it proved to be only an interlude to his thoughts. This time, prompted by his godson.

As he sipped on rosehip tea, Tony’s phone pinged indicating the arrival of another text. Checking it he saw that this time it was, Harry texting him from the store.

**How do Americans call themselves a civilised society when they don’t even have coriander? And how am I supposed to make my Harissa baked fish with bulgur wheat, when I can’t find it?**

Tony snorted in amusement, noting that Harry didn’t get the whole text-speak phenomenon. Calling his godson, he waited for him to pick up.

“How Tony, you got my text?”

“Yeah, I did. What sort of coriander do you need – fresh or dried?”

“Fresh – it’s the hero ingredient of the dish,” he whined, disgruntled. “I invited Ellie over to dinner tonight, you know.”

Tony was amused at how quickly Harry and Ellie had become buddies. He was relishing having a female friend who wasn’t impressed by his fame or fortune (not surprising since she had no idea who he was) and Ellie was happy to have a male friend who didn’t know all about her messy divorce from Jake. Plus, Harry was happily married and didn’t try and hit on her. Although, Tony wasn’t entirely convinced that the wizard’s marriage was a happy one, based on some things Harry had let slip. However, he also knew that his godson would never cheat on Ginny either, so Ellie was safe with him.
“Okay, they don’t call the fresh herb coriander. Ask for cilantro. And Harry, FYI ‘Herb’ with an aitch is a guy’s name here in the US and the aitch is silent in the plant form,” he informed him helpfully.

“Why is the aitch silent? Is it a rule? If so it’s dumb!” he declared. “Is it the same with Harry? The aitch is sounded for Harry Potter but when you hound and harry someone you drop the aitch?” his godson snarked grouchily.

“I don’t know, no and no. The aitch is pronounced for Harry James Potter and verb harry.” He chuckled, “Sounds like you’re regretting going shopping on your own,” he observed teasingly.

Harry snorted. “I think I’ll cope. Did you remember to take your meds?”

“Yeah I took them when ah… the movie ended,” He prevaricated, realising that admitting that Gibbs had dropped by was a factoid that he should probably share with Harry in person, not while he was on the phone.

Hanging up, his thoughts soon turned to Harry and Ellie. It was a shame that Harry’s marriage hadn’t worked out how he’d hoped – he deserved so much more happiness after everything he’d been through. It was becoming painfully obvious that he and Ginny didn’t have a whole lot in common apart from their kids. And perhaps spending time in Ellie’s company was a wakeup call about how it could have been if he hadn’t married a fangirl who bought into that whole Boy-Who-Lived crap.

Something else for him to hate Albus Dumbledore for, on his godson’s behalf since the kid thought that the narcissistic old fool walked on water. Having been responsible for secreting Harry away with those vile Dursleys for a decade without giving a fuck about his welfare, he’d allowed those ridiculous stories about a baby who defeated Voldemort to flourish when he should have stamped them out immediately. Except that this fabled Boy-Who-Lived shit had suited his purposes - it added to his own mystique and made sure Harry’s eventual return to the magical world would be as uncomfortable as possible for the guileless eleven-year-old, isolating him even more. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that the headmaster intended for it to drive him into his arms and strengthen his power over him.

Of course, it was hardly surprising that after the battle at Hogwarts those ludicrous stories would grow ever more outrageous. Hermione had explained quite a bit about what Harry had endured in the aftermath of the war. The so-called historical and biographical tomes written by daft bloody writers who eulogised Harry James Potter until he reached god-like status. Instead of a wizard who was gifted at duelling and defensive magic, in part because he had a freakin lunatic trying to kill him… not to forget Voldemort who was desperate to end him too, they extolled him until he was unrecognisable.

Depending upon the source, he was a Magi, a sorcerer with unmitigated power, a wizard that was as powerful as Merlin, he was a freakin elemental warlock - the likes of which the world had never known before. Plus, a whole heap of other ludicrous bullshit was written about his super human magical abilities that made Tony long to track down these idiots. He hesitated to call them authors, unofficial biographers or dodgy historians and make them suffer as painfully as possible for writing so much unmitigated tripe.

Hermione reported that there were the sappy romantic novels written about Harry that made him into an awesomely epic lover out of a tacky D-grade romance, or toilet novel (crap that you might read while on the toilet and wipe your butt on if you ran out of toilet paper). Plus, those sexually obsessed (perhaps repressed or regressed) witches and wizards who wrote erotica/porno-fiction about the major players in the fight to rid the world of Voldemort. Hermione informed him with
tight lips and her magic tamped down tight, that slash novels were the most popular of this genre – often pairing Harry with Dumbledore, Draco Malfoy and or Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape.

That morsel of information had prompted a rage so furious that he’d been forced to leave his apartment and hit the gym - resulting in several punching bags being destroyed. He vowed he would find a way to ensure these sickos who thought pairing his godson with such abhorrent monsters was fun would contract the magical equivalent of herpes.

Hermione, when he confessed his evil intention, suggested that they should also cast a self-lusting potion combined with paralysis every time these fools tried to self-pleasure themselves. They came up with more evil methods of making these twats suffer – such as a horny compulsion charm paired with a secondary charm that would make them sexually repugnant to anyone who they tried to sleep with. Not surprisingly, they’d both ended up drinking several bottles of red wine between them, getting totally intoxicated and giggly, although he staunchly denied the latter charge (since it wasn’t manly) once he was fully sober.

Of course, as Minister of Magic Elect (as she was at that time) and Tony being future Director of the DMLE, they couldn’t indulge their sordid but extremely comforting fantasies since they were illegal and unethical, unfortunately! Still, waking up with a raging headache and hangover (which Hermione thankfully had a hangover remedy for) he vowed to find a legal method of hunting down every single one of these douchebags who’ld thought pairing Harry with dark wizards such as those four was hot - even in works of fiction - and ruin them financially. Hermione had sworn to help in any way she could…within the letter of the law, obviously.

Between the shite written about the Boy-Who-Lived which ensured when he went to school at Hogwarts that witches and wizards either resented him for his fame and fortune or they fangirled/fanboyed over him, Harry should be a massive whack job or a megalomaniac. Add to that the ten years he’d been forced to spent growing up with Lily’s emotionally constipated, bitter, shrew-like sister, Petunia and her whale-like husband and son, and it was hardly surprising he married at such an inappropriately early age. They’d all ensured he was emotionally ill equipped to make decisions that would affect him for the rest of his life.

Considering how young Harry’s parents were when they got married, Sirius supposed he sounded hypocritical for criticising Harry for doing what they’d done but there was really no comparison between his marriage and theirs. Although Lily and James had been reared in homes that seemed superficially similar to Harry and Ginny – non-magical versus magical – there were some very fundamental differences. Lily’s parents were loving, supportive and proud of their daughter even if it unintentionally created a very jealous sibling in Petunia. Harry was seen by his aunt, uncle and cousin as a mutant aberration and an embarrassment and they had no compunction in telling him so. In fact, they felt it justified them trying to beat the freak out of him.

And while James had been spoilt rotten by Charlus and Dorea Potter, they’d never tried to interfere in his life (or more importantly his love life) plus they brought him up to treat purebloods, half-bloods and first generation witches and wizards as equals. Ginny, as the seventh and sole girl in a family of wizards was cosseted and treated like a princess who, if she wanted something, she got it. Basically, what she learnt from her adoring family from a very young age was that wizards fell over themselves to do her bidding and she’d had her father twisted around her little finger probably from the moment she could crawl.

Tony had to admit that there was something else that Hermione had innocently let slip about her mother-in-law caused him to hate on Molly Weasley, if in fact it was true and not hyperbole. Correction… to hate her even more because he wouldn’t ever forgive her for trying to interfere in his relationship with his godson. Hermione quite blasély informed him during one of their talks that
Molly had laughingly admitted to herself and Ginny back when they were teenagers, that while she was still Molly Prewitt, she’d used a love potion on Arthur to ‘catch’ him.

Tony was extremely relieved that he wasn’t the head of the DMLE when she’d divulged that bombshell or he’d have been duty bound to investigate the information and arrest Molly if he could prove it. While witches tended to joke about witches using potions to ‘catch’ a wizard, the same could not be said for wizards if they used love potions on witches. It was rightly seen as sexual assault. Maybe the double standard when it came to witches was because of the archaic and sexist belief that wizards used potions to obtain sex and witches used them to ‘help’ them to persuade commitment phobic wizards into a relationship.

That was such a crock – having worked a total of ten years as a cop (thanks to his trusty time turner) Tony had spent a lot of time with rape victims – both male and female and gender wasn’t a factor. Rape while ostensibly about forcing someone to engage in sexual activity but the truth was that for many rapists, it was as much if not more to do with power and forcing someone to submit for some sexual predators.

A love potion, regardless of who used it was wrong, it was still used to rape someone whether it was date rape or rape that took place within an established relationship or marriage. While using a love-potion was technically against the law, if he charged someone like Mollie (a witch) with rape he would have had a very difficult time getting a conviction, unfortunately. The likelihood of Arthur Weasley agreeing to testify against his wife, even if he could be persuaded that he was a victim, was negligent.

The cultural belief in the magical world of witches not being capable of sexual assault, who were harmless, weak individuals who just needing a little assistance for them to land a wizard was abhorrent. It was also something he was determined to change. Along with the extremely outdated concept that males couldn’t be raped because they climaxed during an attack so they must have wanted it, although he recognised that one would be an even harder sell. He intended to begin by educating the younger generation of wizards and witches who were more open to new concepts – hopefully!

Unfortunately, that didn’t even begin to open the Pandora’s Box on sexual assaults for gay and lesbian wizards and witches.

Tony knew it wasn’t going to be easy to change long entrenched and frankly, bigoted attitudes. Even Hermione, who had acculturation in the non-magical world, which (while still biased against sexual assault victims) was light years beyond that of magical Britain, was desensitised to the wrongness of witches using love-potions. Perhaps it was because if a motherly figure like frumpy, nurturing Mollie Weasley, who epitomised family life was laughing about using a love potion, admitting she’d done it too, it must be harmless, surely. So clearly Tony had his work cut out for him.

And aside from the wrongness of love potions in general, he also couldn’t help wondering if Mollie might have encouraged her daughter to use a similar method of ‘catching’ Harry. Either through her own loud and proud example or by more subversive means. He speculated about Hermione too – had she ever considered that maybe her mother-in-law might have messed with her and Ron since they seemed even more ill-matched than Harry and a fan girl, if that was even possible.

Sighing, because the who thing was such a freakin mess that it made his head pound to even think about all the ramifications. Sometimes he thought he was crazy to have taking on the job.

One thing he did know – Harry, even if he’d effectively been forced to marry Ginny Weasley sans
his own free will - wouldn’t see it that way. He wouldn’t appreciate having his wife and his children’s grandmother charged as sexual predators, supposing it was possible to prove that they did use a love potion. Let’s face it, Tony told himself grimly, his godson also thought that Dumbledore and Snape were noble self-sacrificing heroes instead of abusive douche-bags, so it was highly unlikely he would think that Mollie and or Ginny were rapists if they used a love potion to ‘persuade’ him to marry her and have a family.

Trying to focus on other things because otherwise he would drive himself mad, Tony thought of another difference between Harry and Ginny, Lily and James’ relationships. Neither of his friends had grown up achieving legend status simply because a homicidal lunatic succeeded in killing their parents, and them surviving a death curse. Plus, Lily Evans had never been a giggly, fangirl obsessed with becoming Mrs Potter. She’d seen James with all his flaws and spent most of their Hogwarts years slapping him down every time he asked her out, so he didn’t get a big head. When she finally agreed to go out with him, it was knowing his faults and she never hesitated to stand up to him when he stepped over the line, which was one reason he was so besotted with her. Their marriage was one of equals and their love was realistic – they were both stubborn idiots at times. Lily had also loved that James had chosen to serve the community as an Auror, unlike Ginny, who’d grown up filled with fairy tales of the Boy-Who-Lived and wanted to live like a princess with her rich prince.

Tony wished it had worked out better for him. Harry’s dream for his adult life had seemed so very humble – he just wanted to have a family to love him and which he could love back and yet it seemed that even such a simple desire was too much for him to ask for. Obviously, Harry loved his three children more than life itself and he clearly loved Ginny but Sirius suspected that Ginny couldn’t love him the way he needed to be loved – she loved Harry Potter the hero, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Wizard-Who-Defeated-Voldemort.

What Harry needed was to be loved for being the wizard who had messy hair, who sometimes wore mismatched socks, who forgave dickheads who had no business being forgiven. The boy, now a man, who still believed he was the cause of his parent’s death, the ‘Seeker’ was still obsessed with quidditch and took his duty as a Auror extremely seriously. THAT Harry need acceptance; he need Ginny to love him for being a real, flawed wizard, for being his godson who didn’t give a crap about his dual titles as Head of the Potter and Black Houses or the huge amount of money that went with the Black family fortune. He needed someone who understood that he was full of self-doubt and self-recrimination and wanted and needed to be loved unconditionally.

Realistically, he doubted that Harry would have found the sort of normal marriage he’d craved with any witch brought up in magical Britain. As far as Sirius was concerned, possibly the only chance Harry would have had of finding someone who saw beyond the idiotic fairy tales about him would be a witch that wasn’t exposed to that shit – a foreigner or else a non-magical female. Seeing the way that his godson and Ellie interacted, he realised that even with all the difficulties it would have caused, a female who wasn’t a witch would have been preferable to the fangirl witches that Dumbledore’s manipulative shenanigans created.

The Boy-Who-Lived was the magical world’s equivalent of Prince Charming and while there was nothing wrong with fairy tales, Prince Charming didn’t have to live in the shadow of the myth. Harry did and it stunk!

As his smart phone indicated another incoming text message he snorted in amusement as he picked it up and saw it was from Harry…again Who knew that shopping in the non-magical world would prove to be such a challenge for his badass Auror godson. Looking at the screen he read:

**Pads, where can I find rocket?**
He called and waited ‘til Harry picked up. “Hey Harry. You need to ask them for arugula. What do you need it for?” he asked curiously.

“I’m making a pear, rocket, walnut and parmesan salad for lunch,” he replied.

Tony chuckled. “Who’s coming to lunch?”

“What makes you think someone’s coming to lunch?” Harry deflected.

“Because that is a lunch that you make when you want to impress your guest. Your female guest. It isn’t Bishop, is it?” he queried, hoping he hadn’t misjudged their friendship and that Harry had developed a crush on her. He knew they were good friends but neither Ellie or his godson would ever forgive themselves if they cheated on Ginny.

“No Snuffles, Ellie’s coming to dinner – didn’t I tell you? My bad…and you’re right. Delores is coming over.”

Sighing in relief, he laughed. He was really off his game today. “Oh yeah… you did mention it. So why is Delores coming? She isn’t fangirling on you, is she?”

“Ewww…she’s old enough to be my mother, Pads.” He replied reproachfully. “No, if you must know… she’s coming over to make sure you’re okay and following medical orders. Ellie too. Apparently, you have a reputation of not being a good patient.” He accused, ignoring the huffed outrage on the other end of the phone.

“They were going to come to visit together but I thought if they came separately we could talk about stuff with Delores.”

“Talk about stuff?” Tony enquired stupidly but to be fair, he was starting to experience pain from his chest wound. The pain potion that Harry made him take had began to wear off. “What stuff?”

“The sort of stuff that Hermione, Tobias, you and I talk about when we’re alone, Pads.”

“Oh right. What time is she coming?”

“At 1 pm. I’d better get my arse into gear, Pads. Later.”

Tony was looking forward to seeing Delores and Ellie; he’d miss both ladies presence when he left and he really hoped that Bishop wasn’t prying into why Kort had tried to kill him. At present, everyone had assumed that he was the target but Tony wasn’t so sure – he’d sounded full of hatred when he’d engaged Harry that he suspected the younger wizard had been his real target. Tactically, if Kort just wanted to take him out so he could focus on Tony then he would have done so from a distance since it was much less risky. That he wanted to get up close, suggested to Tony that it was personal between them.

Hopefully, Ellie would use her curiosity to dig into the whole Royal Woods debacle instead, and leave this case alone. It turned out that his intuition had been right and the victim at Rock Creek Park wasn’t an ensign. Heavenly Goodtymes (her professional name) had turned out to be a DC sex worker and Fornell claimed jurisdiction for the FBI – citing the attempted murder of a federal agent. The actual case would be turned over to the Federal Bureau of Magical Investigations – a branch of the FBI which was the equivalent of the DMLE in the UK - to investigate her death but the team wouldn’t know that snippet since they didn’t know the existence of the FBMI.

The danger was that if Ellie didn’t follow orders and went prying into this case the Federal Bureau of Magical Investigations would alter her memories in a flash if she stumbled onto any information
that she shouldn’t. With a brain chock-full of neurons as unique and complex as hers, Tony really preferred that some unknown and potentially ham-fisted wizard didn’t end up rooting around in there and causing untold damage. Bishop, like himself thought outside the box, although their methods for assimilating and analysing data differed markedly.

Still, talking to Ellie and Hermione – two of his favourite people - about the Royal Woods case had made him realise how much he’d been romanticising his partnership with McGee. Subconsciously he’d been trying to recapture his lost past with James and Remus, attempting to recreate his most significant relationships. Which was beyond dumbass. Dragging McGee into his pathetic need to recreate his family, all based on a couple few disparate traits he’d possessed was ridiculous…it was just plain sad and pathetic of him.

He’d finally realised today that Tim probably had far less in common with Remus Lupin and a lot more in common with Harry’s best mate and deceased brother-in-law, Ron Weasley.

From what he’d observed of their relationship, plus what Hermione and Harry had revealed during their recounting of stories about their time together, he could see quite a number of similarities now that he bothered to look for them. Both Ron and Tim were very insecure individuals and inclined to jealousy. Ron resented Harry for his fame and wealth and Tim resented Tony because of the DiNozzo fortune. The pair erroneously believing that money had made their lives easier, happier - that wealth made up for them being abused and neglected by their families.

Tony thought about all McGee’s sarcastic put downs about him which he’d let roll off his back over the years. The lack of respect Tim had shown for his investigative skills – putting them down to blind luck. And there was the probie’s fawning all over Senior, despite knowing some of the terrible things that he’d done to Anthony when he was a little kid. With the benefit of hindsight, Tony realised that Remus had never resented him despite him being born into the Black family with its gaudily ostentatious displays of wealth and bad taste, even though he came from a much more modest background.

Remus had possessed the depth of character to look beyond the superficial and realise that money didn’t equate to happiness. In fact, even though he wasn’t a trained investigator – unlike Tim- he’d still realised that Sirius was subject to a toxic mix of abuse and neglect that all the money in the world didn’t make up for. Sadly, Tim had not made that leap.

These factors left him weighing up his friendship with McGee with a far more jaundiced yet accurate eye.

Since learning that Tim had lied to Probish, putting the blame on Tony for getting covered in poison ivy and trying to make him look bad, he couldn’t help wondering what else the computer expert said about him behind his back. Just how much did McGee hate him? Was it really just a few weeks ago that McGee told him he was one of his best friends when Tony was having a crisis of confidence. Was Tim having a good old laugh at him behind his back for being weak and pathetic?

It made him wonder – was Tim lying to him too when he told Tony that he had achieved meaningful goals – that his life mattered when he’d been all existential and angst-filled. As proof of his achievements, McGee offered the proof that DiNozzo had a) saved Gibbs from drowning b) survived the plague and c) he was one of McGee’s best friends. Thinking about the list of accomplishments he’d chosen to focus on, Tony realised Tim never mention he’d also saved Maddie Tyler’s life after Gibbs managed to drown them both.

Was that because McGee didn’t want to be seen to be criticising Gibbs by pointing out their boss had screwed the pooch that day on the dock? After all, Tim remained pretty mute about how much
of a prick Gibbs had been this past year when he’d been treated as little more than an irrelevance. He’d never spoken up when Tony had been frozen out of investigations, or when he was benched if Tony dared to voice an opinion contrary to the Great-And-Powerful-Leroy.

Perhaps McGee didn’t bother mentioning Maddie Tyler because he thought Tony was so shallow, all he only cared about was saving Gibbs’ life. If so, that was pretty insulting, both to Maddie and himself. Seeing Tim had never tried to hide his opinion that Tony was superficial and a lightweight, he’d hazard a guess that it was some of column A… and a healthy dash of column B too. He didn't want to piss Gibbs off and he also thought that her life didn't matter to him.

Thinking back to McGee’s pep-talk a few weeks ago, it dawned on Tony that Maddie Tyler wasn’t the only person he ‘d neglected to mention. Tony had also saved McGee and Cate’s lives from a car bomb too. If their roles had been reversed and it had been him trying to bolster Tim’s self-confidence, reminding McGee that he’d saved Tony’s life would have definitely been one of the top three things he’d have mention.

Surely it wasn’t something Tim could have ever forgotten– after all, he’d never forget dangling by his fingertips in that carpark when he was chased over the edge by the perp in the car. Since he still had nightmares about plunging to his death, it would have been the top of the list of things he’d point out to McGee as having making a significant difference to his life by saving it.

Yet Tim hadn’t mentioned the car bombing at all during their recent talk - come to think about it, he’d never mentioned it. Not in the whole time they had been team mates. Not that Tony expected a medal or a parade and a big brass band, but some form of basic acknowledgment that it took place would have been nice. A simple heartfelt thank you would have been much appreciated. Yet Tim had never once recognised that Tony had taken his place holding the trigger to the car bomb he’d accidently triggered.

Tony had already been feeling sore and sorry from his premature return from the plague, even before he suffered from the bomb’s impact. After the bomb blast he was in significant pain and Tim and Cate (who’d never thanked him either, although she died a short time later) had played a mean-spirited prank on him, despite not bothering to acknowledge his act.

They’d tipped a bottle of water all over him when he’d been ordered to lie down and rest (because he’d been blown up) and was in pain. It shouldn’t have needed saying but it had been an extremely inappropriate time to prank him. He might play pranks but never knowingly on someone who was hurt, distressed or out in the field.

When the ‘turned down radio comms’ was viewed in light of that incident – it seemed like a pattern of highly inappropriate pranks was emerging. With a common denominator in both cases!

In contrast, Tony could vividly recall what his first impulse had been when McGee helped haul his ass over the edge of the wall… just as clearly as if it was yesterday. The first thing he’d done was to acknowledge Tim’s help and thank him sincerely and emphatically for saving him. The Probie might not have put his life on the line but his fear of heights had made it truly difficult for him to approach the edge and lean over to assist. Tony had appreciated how difficult it would be for him, even while he was dangling and wondering about Gibbs’ choice to go after the dirt bag over having his six.

Looking at Gibbs choice logically, not only was McGee severely phobic about heights but he was also a considerable distance away from him and had to run up several levels to get to him. Plus, back then McGee had puppy fat and was not exactly in the best physical condition to have to cover the distance on foot – meaning Tony had to hang on even longer. Gibbs on the other hand, had been in a car and could have reached him far sooner. It was not a foregone conclusion that McGee
would reach him in time to affect a rescue, especially with his fear of heights.

Good to know even way back then, that his life wasn’t as important to Gibbs as the former Marine catching his prey. Tony wondered if it had been Cate, Ziva or Ellie in peril of plunging four or five levels down onto the concrete below and hanging by their fingertips, would the Boss have been so gung-ho about capturing the perp. Would he have risked their life for a moment longer than necessary? Would he have trusted Tim to run down several floors of a carpark, while battling a crippling fear of heights to save one of Gibbs’ girls so he could catch his dirt bag? Doubtful!

Tony gave himself a mental head slap... *dumbass question you idiot – of course he wouldn’t!* His unresolved grief for his *girls*; his love-hate antagonistic relationship with his lovers for not being Shannon and treating his female co-workers as surrogate daughters was screwy, to say the least. Bottom line - Gibbs had such a fucked-up relationship with women but he would move heaven or hell to save them.

Tim saving his life had been a massively big deal to Tony, one he’d acknowledged gratefully because, truthfully, it had been far too close for comfort. So now that he was leaving NCIS it hurt that in all the years they’d worked together, Tim never even conceded his volunteering to take his place holding the bomb so Tim and Cate would survive. But McGee was perfectly happy to acknowledge Tony had saved Gibbs ass.

Did it gall McGee that much that he’d saved his life? Was it because Mr MIT/ Johns Hopkins had done something stupid and rookie-ish (i.e. accidentally triggered the bomb) or was it because Tony-the-jock had saved his probie-ass? So, did it all come down to jealousy, insecurity and resentment?

If that was the case, how the hell had Tony failed to see the deep-seated antagonism Tim clearly felt for him? All these years he’d genuinely believed that they’d had a relationship built on mutual respect, friendship and, soppy as it sounded – brotherly love. What a damned fool he was! Blind to the years of disrespect, all the passive aggressiveness and the contempt for his experience and his position, claiming he was joking when confronted. And wasn’t hindsight a marvellous thing – if only he bothered to look at what had been right under his nose all this time, especially this year.

Tim had after all been very careful to do nothing that might invoke Gibbs’ ire but he’d also be careful to avoid even the appearance of criticism of the boss, even in private, effectively making Tony feel even more isolated and lonely. Not exactly the actions of a so-called best friend in his humble opinion.

Honestly, would a best friend tell him on Valentine’s Day, right after a painful break up with Zoe that ‘*in his opinion Tony enjoyed being alone?’* It sure wasn’t something he’d say to a friend who was hurting – but then it wasn’t the first time he’d done something like it either. It was hard to go past the time when Tony discovered that Ziva had a dinner party and invited everyone on the team, except him. Tim had made no attempt to hide his absolute glee at Tony’s hurt feelings with a massive shit eating grin. Ziva had even invited the ancillary staff like Jimmy, who back in the day had been very much on the outskirts of the team.

It was not exactly Tony’s idea of what a friend would do. Especially after he’d spent hours locked in a freezing shipping crate after only just recovering from the plague and he’d been injured to boot. But then Tim had always been very gleeful whenever Senior turned up and created havoc at for him at work. Like he enjoyed watching Tony being humiliated, which didn’t make a lot of sense since he claimed to have a troubled relationship with his own father. Call him stupid, but he’d expect him to be empathetic not taking pleasure in his pain. Unless Tim hated him.

He knew he could be a pain in the butt to work with. But hey, none of his fellow-agents were
exactly paragons of virtue nor were they without their own annoying traits too. So why was it
always only him that was described as annoying, infuriating, maddening?

Standing up to go to the bathroom to take a leak, Tony wondered why the hell he was doing it.
Why put himself through this painful soul-searching journey and what the hell was it was
achieving, anyway. Banging his head numerous times against the wall, hoping to short circuit the
never-ending loop of thought, Tony wondered if the meds were to blame but he knew it wasn’t – it
was him. He totally should have ignored everyone and headed into the office like he had after he
cought the plague.

Looking ruefully at the indentation in the plaster work caused by his head, he rubbed it and
wondered if perhaps he was crazy. Maybe McGee was right. Maybe he was a masochist. Maybe he
enjoyed causing himself extraneous pain. Maybe he didn’t want to be happy. Maybe he did enjoy
being all alone. Trapped in a deep well of negativity he finally received a mental kick up the butt
from his alter-ego ‘Anthony’.

‘We’re doing this Doofus, because both of us are fundamentally flawed, fucked up individuals. We
keep stuffing our hurts down inside a mental box or in your case, a magical trunk and pretend it
doesn’t affect us. But it does, and until we can acknowledge it and deal with the fallout, we’ll be
doomed to repeat our history – good and bad. You know as well as I do that our jack ass families
are why we keep trying to create the perfect family – and why we keep on picking douche-bags like
Danny Price and Timothy McGee to be our kin.

‘Now that we’re leaving NCIS, soul searching and acknowledging all of the bad decisions we’ve
made, instead of shoving them in the trunk, will hopefully help to prevent us repeating the same
mistakes when we start over. We owe ourselves some closure, even if it hurts like a bitch.’

Tony rolled his eyes. ‘Have I told you how much I hate it when you act like an ass and get all wise
and preachy on me, Anthony? Stop it!’

His inner voice chuckled. ‘Yeah… because I’m right and you know it. We are both victims of our
crappy childhoods and burying all the pain didn’t work. So, let’s stop with the pretending that
we’re fine.’

“So what, this wallowing about, dissecting our relationships and holding a pity party’s going to
miraculously change all that?” Tony snorted cynically. “Get real!”

Anthony gave a mental shrug. ‘Maybe…maybe not. But you can’t say that what you always do is
working for us, can you? You always end up with douche bags as your friends and family. Go on –
give it a go – it can’t end up any worse than this crap fest we ended up with as our family.’

Sensing Tony still wasn’t on board Anthony pressed on, trying to convince Tony who was being a
stubborn dick. ‘You remember Lara Donnelli don’t cha, we dated her for a few months, the year
after that bitch, Wendy dumped us? Remember how Lara was into making woollen yarns.

‘Yeah, she was a spinner – had an antique spinning wheel. Not just wool; she used to spin all sorts
of stuff: camel and alpaca fleece, mohair and cashmere. She made some pretty amazing yarns.’

‘Yeah… I’d forgotten about her spinning camel hair and she also spun a whole lot of natural plant
fibres as well. Remember how she used to spin those silks, bamboo fibre and cotton. Plus what was
the hinky one she spun that long weekend when there was that blizzard and we had a blackout and
we only had a fire to keep us warm and cook on?’

‘Wasn’t it banana…yeah banana fibres,’ Tony replied nostalgically. ‘What’s with our walk down
You're like Lara, a gifted spinner. She works her magic with fibres, creating yarn that make clothing and fabrics. You work your magic with people. You take disparate individuals, eccentrics, oddballs and somehow you spin them into a team that shouldn’t work but it does, Sirius. You’re a people person - that’s a damn good thing! You’re only fault is that like me, you grab onto the people around us and turn them into family.’ Anthony observed astutely.

‘You and I have this desperate urge to create the perfect family, but dumb asses that we are, we frequently pick the wrong people to form a family with. And once we’ve spun them into our family it’s damned hard to let them go when they don’t fit in cuz their lives and ours are intertwine like yarn.

‘Teasing apart the threads – that’s real difficult, man. A part of us is scared shitless that we’ll be weak and vulnerable without them.’

Tony thought about what Anthony was trying to say. ‘Back in the day, Ducky told me I was the heart and the lungs of the team. Abby used to call me the glue that held them all together.’

‘That’s one way to look at it. Although...heart and lungs, while an awesome feat of engineering performs its functions like a pump, and glue? Well no one ever accused glue of having a skill set. Glue is... sticky and gloopy. Personally, I think you’re so much more than a pump or a pot of adhesive. You’re a people whisperer.

‘Some people spin fibre and make yarn and fabric, some spin dreams, some spin songs or stories and then there are people like you who can create strong, resilient teams of people. Never underestimate the skills and talent it takes to be able to work with people the way you can.’

Honestly, the last thing Tony wanted was to admit that Anthony’s woo-woo, touchy-feely metaphor resonated with him. But it did...damn it! It also helped explain why he’d felt so strongly compelled to revisit ancient history. Basically, he needed to tease apart the individual lives he’d painstakingly spun together to create his unorthodox family. Albeit a painfully dysfunctional family as he’d recently realised, consisting of seven disparate strands: Gibbs, Ducky, Abby, Tim, Jimmy, Ellie and himself spun tightly together to form the MCRT. He finally understood that’s what he’d been doing, gradually pulling apart the family yarn into seven separate strands so he could let them go and move on.

Wishing that it wasn’t such a painful process, he felt so damned tired. Teasing apart all the connections between himself and his team was mentally exhausting. Not to mention arguing with himself. Damn it, he hated getting injured and feeling weak and emotional.
Deciding to snatch a power nap before Harry came back he allowed himself to slip into a light doze when Anthony decided he wanted to have the final word. Typical!

‘Besides, if you want Harry to rethink how he sees Snape and Dumbledore, you have to set him a good example. Show him you’re prepared to do the same when it comes to your own crap, Tony.'
Harry hung up the phone to Sirius, rather disgruntled. He'd offered to go shopping and get some food but what he thought would be a simple expedition to the supermarket was turning into a nightmare of misunderstandings and miscommunication. You'd have thought that since English was spoken here in the United States it should be an easy enough errand yet when it came to finding food it was like they spoke a completely different language to back home.

For instance, when he asked what aisle the potato crisps were in, after getting a bunch of blank looks, a helpful but clueless shop assistant directed him to the savoury biscuit section (except the Yanks apparently called them crackers and fyi they called biscuits cookies.) So, he wandered around aimlessly until he finally found the crisps which it seemed, weren't called crisps but chips. In the UK, chips were hot fried pieces of potato, except that they weren't called chips here but French fries – so no wonder he couldn't find potato crisps.

Knowing he had to get a move on since he was making lunch for Delores Bromstead, a squib who worked with his godfather who was stopping by at 1pm, he knew he had to get back to the apartment to start preparing. He'd also undertaken to cook dinner tonight for Ellie Bishop, who was coming over to see Pads, too so there was a lot to do and he wasn't finding shopping as simple a job as he thought. First he couldn't find the damned coriander but now that he knew to ask for cilantro he was a man on a mission. He just hoped that Ellie loved his Harissa baked fish with bulgur wheat.

He thought about how much he was enjoying spending time with the kooky NCIS agent. It was one thing he truly missed after getting married– having platonic female friends. Apart from Hermione, he had none, ever since Ginny became so jealous if he spent time with other witches – even his former school friends like Lavender Brown, Katie Bell, Alicia Johnson, Angelina and Luna – convinced he was cheating on her. Ginny didn't approve of his friendship with Hermione either, but she was family in the truest sense of the word like Sirius, James and Remus had been brothers, and she was officially family too since they were brother and sister-in-law. Plus, thankfully, Hermione refused to be chased away like all the other former school friends had done when Ginny turned into a terrifying Green-Eyed Monster.

Of course, once Hermione had married Ron, Ginny had been fine about his friendship with his best friend but after her brother's death, Ginny had become super jealous of them spending time together again. She'd gone postal when Katie Bell, his old quidditch teammate had been appointed his new
work partner about five months ago, even though Bell was in a long-term relationship. According to Ginny, Katie was a gold-digger who would do anything to have his love-child so she could demand child support from him. So, his possessive spouse would definitely not approve of him becoming friendly with Ellie, especially if she knew she was single, female and pretty.

It wouldn't matter that she had just undergone a painful divorce from her cheating ex-husband and had no desire to start dating anyone since she'd been badly hurt and didn't want to be hurt again. Never mind that that Bishop would never cheat with a married man like Harry and subject Ginny to the same pain that she had experienced. They were just good friends but sadly, there was no reasoning with his wife when she got an idea into her head. So, the bottom line was that even though he would like to stay in touch with Ellie when they went home, it was all too difficult.

Still, the friendship he experienced here in DC had given him a lot to think about. The fact that Ellie didn't have a clue about who he was and had liked him for who he was, not for his fame was refreshing. It emphasised how different it was between himself and his fangirl wife. He really didn't have a lot of experience dating before he got married – Ginny was the only one he'd dated seriously – because the disastrous time he spent with Chang didn't fit the criteria of a date. Nor did taking a girl to the Yule Ball at Hogwarts because he had to have a partner didn't really count either – especially since that night was pretty much of a catastrophe too.

So, he was making the most of this experience, knowing that all too soon he would have to say goodbye to Ellie Bishop, and their friendship. Because even if she wanted to keep in touch with him, and he had no reason to expect that she did, it simply wasn't going to happen. It would cause way too much trouble if they tried staying in touch. He'd have to make some excuse to her about his 'clandestine job' precluding him staying in contact – although hopefully Tobias Fornell might be able to let him know how she was doing from time to time. He knew that Tony and Hermione intended to remain in touch with Tobias and his daughter. There'd even been some talk of the Fornells taking a trip to the UK to visit Emily's mother's relatives at some point, including the Weasleys.

Frankly, he wished that Ellie would look for a job elsewhere when his godfather left the team. Gibbs was clearly no longer fit for field work from everything he'd seen and heard… and McGee! Well it was no secret that Harry wasn't a fan of the cadaverous looking agent and a part of that was because he was smug. Smug people were dangerous people because they usually thought they were smarter than everybody else. Plus, he kept making snide remarks about Tony behind his back and if he got caught out, McGee claimed he was just joking around. But as far as Harry was concerned, sarcastic people rarely joked about something unless they already thought that way to begin with.

It was like drunk people always tried to excuse the shit that came out of their mouths when they were blind drunk because they weren't responsible for what they said or did. But the truth was that being drunk didn't turn you into a totally different person – one who did or said stuff that was totally foreign. Alcohol simply removed filters and inhibitions, be it aggressiveness, lust, attractions or expressing thoughts and emotions. People often said or did exactly what they were truly thinking or feeling but felt obliged not to express because it wasn't polite or politic, so when alcohol removed their social filter, they let rip.

Plus, Harry had quickly noticed Tim's habit of standing around questioning orders that Tony had given him, not responding to the direction immediately. Harry considered that to be bordering on idiocy and defiance if it happened once but when it happened continuously it was full blown insubordination. In the experienced Auror's eyes, questioning orders or not responding promptly was totally unforgiveable for a trained law enforcement professional. People could get hurt or die when agents hesitated in a crisis. And clearly that hesitation was because he felt that Tony wasn't
competent to give him orders.

How could the team's computer expert genuinely believe he was more competent, more experienced, more skilled than Sirius who had fought drug and gang wars, was an undercover specialist and spent years honing his investigative abilities. For someone who was fond of reminding everyone he was a genius, Tim could act like a dick.

Okay… so all that was true. But it wasn't the only reason he'd developed a major antipathy for Special Agent Timothy McGee. Someone (he honestly wasn't sure which NCIS agent it was) had left him a few magazines and a paperback to read while Tony slept off the after effects of the barbaric operation to stitch him up like a piece of clothing. The book was called Deep Six – The Adventures of L.J. Tibbs and was about a team of federal agents who worked together under the rule of a megalomaniac team leader called L.J. Tibbs and his team. Agent McGregor was the hero of the team and Agent Tommy was the buffoonish jock who somehow managed to stumble onto leads through sheer luck.

The more of the cheesy story that Harry read, the more convinced he became that someone was writing about the major case response team as enough of the superficial details meshed for him to know who the author was writing about. The Medical Examiner was called Goosey for Merlin's sake, who was an overly chatty individual from Edinburgh. That could hardly be a coincidence. He also had a trusty sidekick called Pimmy Jalmer who liked to have sex with corpses. (Wow, he wouldn't have thought Palmer was into necrophilia). Plus, there was a lab technician called Amy Sutton who was a Goth, as well as a female Mossad liaison officer on the team called Lisa who went around killing people or threatening to kill people with a paper clip. When she wasn't killing, Lisa was busy shagging Agent Tommy in the agency lift.

While that female character clearly wasn't Ellie, he knew there had been a female agent who was from Mossad before Ellie joined the team. So, it must have been written prior to Bishop's joining the team two years ago. He was wondering if the MCRT knew that someone had written a tacky fiction about them that made most of them out to be freaks or jerks, when a nurse came in to check out Tony…something about checking his vitals. 'Vital whats, he mused.

Laying the book on the bed, Harry kept a close eye on the nurse to ensure she wasn't an associate of CIA spy Kort slash Death Eater. He watched her suspiciously while she tried to squeeze the crap out of Pads' bicep (although she said she was taking his blood pressure) and stuck a weird device in his ear and wrote down numbers on his chart. Harry thought the magical way of measuring health was a lot less invasive.

At least they'd finished giving him a blood transfusion though. That was a little too creepy for Harry, thinking that someone else's blood was circulating around inside your body – what if they had some sort of infection or disease? What if they were an idiot or a murderer? He snorted - the pure bloods would have Kneazel kittens at the very thought of diluting their blood with those who weren't pureblood. Maybe they could threaten blood transfusions to frighten the crap out of criminal purebloods in interrogation.

Honestly, Harry thought taking magical blood replenishing potions was a lot less confronting than being given a stranger's blood. Could you feel someone else's blood inside you? It seemed a bit too much like a vampire for Harry but Pads hadn't seemed to be too fazed by the transfusion - said it wasn't his first. Harry didn't speculate too much about the cryptic comment he'd made about the drugs though. How much worse could it get than having a needle stuck into your arm or stitches holding stab wounds together?

He couldn't imagine and he wondered briefly, did he really want to know. Sometimes ignorance
was bliss.

Since his godfather had remained deeply unconscious and he had nothing better to do while he waited he'd picked up the Deep Six book again, snorting at the ironic title. Whoever had written it was after all, anything but deep – shallow, trite and posturing perhaps – but hardly profound or complex. Nor was the story multi-layered - the writing style came off as a whiny teenager who had a huge chip on their shoulder. Perhaps written by a huge fangirl/boy of the book's protagonist, Agent McGregor. Maybe even a family member.

As he picked up the book again, Harry noticed the photograph on the back-jacket cover and studied the non-moving muggle photograph. He realised with a jolt that the author, Thom E. Gemcity was none other than NCIS Special Agent Timothy McGee. The very same person who expressed such contempt for Agent Tommy (who was obviously a thinly veiled portrayal of DiNozzo) was the same individual who purported to be his godfather's best friend. Odd idea he had of friendship!

Harry felt outrage – if one of his partners, or even if it was just a fellow Auror had published a less than flattering book about him and his colleagues he would feel hurt, furious and completely betrayed. Knowing that McGee had written Deep Six, a detached part of him identified traits of Ron – his dead best friend brother in the snotty tone whenever McGee wrote anything about Agent Tommy. Ron, like his sister, had always battled his own green-eyed-monster which had impacted negatively on their friendship. He'd been stubbornly convinced that Harry deliberately courted publicity and enjoyed throwing his 'wealth' in everyone's face.

Ron had felt that he was hard-done-by because his family was a large one and galleons were tight. Like his sister, he grossly underestimated the riches the Weasleys enjoyed which couldn't be quantified – being a part of a loving family full of siblings. Plus, two parents who showered their kids with unconditional acceptance.

Yet as much as his best male friend had resented the crap out of him sometimes, he'd never sunk to the depths of writing a book betraying his friendship and making him out to be a hippogriff's arse while at the same time 'bigging' himself up as the hero. The truth was that everyone had flaws - Ron had quite a few, as did Hermione, he definitely was no saint (which Ginny was always eager to point out to him) and he was equally sure that Padfoot was no paragon either. Well he knew that he wasn't perfect, but did he deserve Gemcity's scathing portrayal that made him out to be little more than comic relief and a pain in the arse, while Special Agent McGregor was depicted in the book as the second coming. Merlin's beard, Agent Tommy didn't even get the respect of a last name!

Having watched Timothy McGee working for almost three weeks while Harry had been guarding Tony's back, he didn't think the junior agent was anywhere near as competent as Agent McGregor had been portrayed in Deep Six. True, Harry really didn't understand any of the computer stuff McGee/McGregor performed and he was probably very good at it. Sirius always said he was and he trusted his godfather's judgement. Although, Harry DID know how critical it was to have situational awareness and to follow the chain-of-command when you were in the field. Moreover, while he didn't understand computer hanking, Harry knew that complacency, especially when it was coupled with inexperience and arrogance were never good attributes for an Auror.

Harry was many things, a loving husband and father, a staunch and caring friend, a hardworking honest wizard, a messed- up orphaned kid who'd never gotten over losing his parents or being forced to live with relatives who hated and feared him. Fundamentally, he was a protector who needed to defend the weak, save souls who were in danger, to right wrongs and see justice done. He was an Auror, striving to be the best he could be, to have the backs of other Aurors, who, like himself lived to serve and protect. Harry knew serving as an Auror was never about individual
glory, personal aggrandisement or garnering laurels – it was about being a part of a team who shared mutual goals. A team which was like a chain and a chain was only as strong as its weakest link.

Primarily, all relationships when you boiled them down to their barest essence, were built on trust – trust that your partner, your team, your colleagues would have your back – that they wouldn't betray you. Law enforcement was a dangerous job; you knew every time you put on your Auror robes that you could die doing your job. So, trust was central to being able to do the job effectively, and frankly, Harry couldn't fathom how a law enforcement professional could betray the trust of their fellow cops so badly and not understand what that meant. And make no mistake, writing a book which Tim based on his own team and the unfortunate people whose cases he'd helped investigate was a massively huge breach of trust.

In his opinion, it was a far worse betrayal than cheating on your partner/spouse. As crazy as it sounded, in many ways, law enforcement professionals trust in their work partners and teams was even more inviolable than a romantic relationship. After all, betraying your spouse resulted in broken hearts but betray your law enforcement partner and lives could be lost. McGee's betrayal, by writing a prosaic novel, was in his opinion an unpardonable act. He couldn't understand how 'Tony' could forgive him for such massive breach of trust - unless he thought of McGee as family and then, suddenly all bets were off, apparently. If he considered you family, he'd forgive you almost any transgression.

A rash trait which was new, and honestly an unwelcome development following his rebirth in the US. Harry figured it had to do with Anthony DiNozzo's abusive upbringing and his desperation to find a family. So, Tony had been acting like a doormat and letting his pseudo family, his grossly dysfunctional pretend family walk all over him. He'd even confessed to Hermione and Fornell one night when they'd gotten blotto, that the former Mossad officer attacked him when he was injured and held a loaded gun against him, threatening to pull the trigger and he hadn't reported her and continued working with her. In addition, Tony own up that he'd never reported Miss Mossad and McGee when they'd turn off a communication device that they'd been supposed to be monitoring to ensure his safety as he gathered evidence after a mass murder. It was wrong on so many levels.

Still, after the debacle with Pettigrew and the rat's betrayals of his 'brothers' – Remus, James and Sirius he couldn't understand how his god father could be so gullible…okay stupid as to see McGee as a brother despite Anthony and his pathological need for a family. It was something a young Harry could easily relate to because it was one reason why he'd overlooked a lot of Ron's less admirable qualities as a friend, plus the Weasleys had made him feel like part of their family.

That being said, even if Tim had a lot in common with Ron, Harry thought he also shared some vile characteristic to Peter Pettigrew. They both had a massive superiority complex – or was it an inferiority complex? He always got those two mixed up. Anyway…they both thought they were better than Sirius i.e. smarter. They were both envious individuals, jealous about the supposed privileges he received as a member of a wealthy family, even if it was all a bunch of crap.

Both were cowards who didn't even have the guts to attack their 'family' face to face – one chose to betray them with a pen and the other by betraying a secret so imperative that it was only entrusted to family members. Ron, for all his faults as a friend, brother and husband always had the guts to complain and whine about him or Hermione to their faces.

So, for obvious reasons, he obviously hadn't exactly taken a shine to McGee initially. Partly because he had trouble dealing with people who were passive aggressive, partly that he was treating Tony like crap. That opinion nosedived severely after he read Deep Six and he wanted to hex the agent with something painful and embarrassing.
However, Pads was leaving soon; couldn't come soon enough for him. Harry was glad because he didn't think that NCIS deserved to have Tony's services and they certainly hadn't done right by him but Ellie was staying and that was a real source of concern for him. She was going to be very much dependant on Gibbs and McGee to watch her back and train her, as she was still very much what he'd consider a rookie when she was in the field. That plus Pads had made a few disturbing comments about her becoming quite foolhardy this past year and Harry knew he was worried about her welfare when he left. He'd said that being a female and close to Gibbs was not conducive to a long life.

Harry was also worried – he'd hate it if anything happened to Ellie Bishop.

~o0o~

Tony watched with amusement as Harry stomped around his kitchen, putting the shopping away. He was definitely in a shitty mood and Tony worried about what had caused it. Initially he wondered if Gibbs had accosted him after he'd left the apartment but when his godson started ranting about the stresses of shopping in the US he heaved a sigh of relief. He was apprehensive that the former Marine might try to intimidate Harry into telling him what had really happened at Rock Creek Park.

Listening to Harry gripe, Tony gathered it wasn't just the arugula and cilantro that had him so badly stressed out. So, he made a tactical mistake and asked what had pissed him off so badly, sparking an impassioned outburst on British/American differences in nomenclature by his normally even tempered godson.

"The US is barking mad, I swear Sirius! Do you know that I spent hours looking for packets of potato crisps because they don't call crisps crisps here? They call them chips and they call chips French fries. How mental is that? Plus, they call courgettes zucchinis or summer squash, a swede is a rutabaga…"

"Ducky calls rutabaga neeps," Tony proffered helpfully, stopping Harry's tirade momentarily.

"Ah yeah, we used to have neeps at Hogwarts with haggis. I'd forgotten that. So anyway, they're barmy…they even mess with breakfast foods. Porridge is oatmeal, semolina is creamed wheat, muesli is granola and don't get me started on muffins," he harrumphed dramatically.

Tony who had long ago gotten used to the different terms used by Americans, probably in part because he had inherited Anthony DiNozzo's memories, tried not to laugh at Harry's outrage. He suspected that Harry would explode if he did.

Settling for a comforting tone, he replied. "Yeah, it's confusing but some of its got to do with the Franco Spanish influences. Anyway, thanks for doing the shopping. I'm looking forward to lunch, it sounds delicious. Can I do anything to help?"

Harry slumped. "No… it's going to suck!" he grumped childishly.

Looking at the pears, parmesan cheese, walnuts and rocket (arugula) on the island benchtop, he was confused.

"Problem, Cub? Looks like you managed to find everything," Tony observed.

"For the salad. In honour of Delores' British roots I was going to have a cream tea too. I've always sucked at making scones but Ellie said you could buy them here. He produced half a dozen in a bakery box, throwing them on the bench despairingly. "Look at them, Pads. They're triangles,
they're flat…and huge and have crap in them. Some of them even had icing on them or chocolate chips." He raved, greatly incensed.

"Frosting." Tony interspersed mildly.

"What?" Harry pulled up, bemused.

"Icing is called frosting here," he explained patiently.

"Exactly my point and don't even talk to me about mince steak. They call it ground beef, for Merlin's sake. Like it's ground under an old boot or buried under the ground instead of put through a mincer." The younger wizard snarked grumpily.

Ignoring the change of topic, Tony brought it back to the problem at hand. "Okay so apart from the scones did you get the other fixings for your cream tea?" he asked, hoping that Harry wouldn't be disappointed with the US version of clotted cream. In his own experience, it never matched up to the Cornwall or Devonshire versions – the kind you got here lacked the nutty, silky sweetness of the real deal. He always preferred using double cream for cream tea here in the US when he baked scones (UK scones).

Unfortunately, Harry dragged out one of the varieties that was certain to fail his high foodie expectations – but to be honest, once you'd had an authentic cream tea, the American version couldn't measure up.

Not privy to Tony's musings on clotted cream he produced a smallish jar of strawberry jam with a flourish. "And another thing," he griped. "Yanks don't call jam 'jam' they call it jelly. So, what do they call jelly I hear you ask," even though Tony hadn't? "They call it jello…and how dumb is that?" he demanded, frustrated.

"K so I'll admit it's confusing Harry, but even in Britain they can't agree on their cream teas. Cream tea aficionados from Cornwell insist you put jam on your scone and then the clotted cream, while those from Devon traditionally assert that you dollop clotted cream and then the jam." He stated calmly.

Harry glared. "Yeah. Okay. But look at these monsters, Padfoot. They're nothing like a scone should be."

Tony smirked. "Are you or are you not a wizard, Harry James Potter?"

Glaring at him, Harry sighed. "And your point, Pads?"

"Chuck the scones," he advised, pronouncing it scones to rhyme with phones. "And ditch the clotted cream too. Trust me! Transfigure a cream tea with Scottish scones," articulating it to rhyme with Johns and proper clotted cream."

"What about the strawberry jam… um jelly?" Harry queried scornfully.

"Up to you, Cub. That brand is pretty good."

"So you don't mind if I use magic instead of making it myself?" Harry checked.

"Of course not. Besides, don't see much difference in buying scones and the fixings to you transfiguring a cream tea. Do your worst. Of course, I could probably transfigure a better cream tea than you – I was awesome at transfiguration at Hogwarts. If you're not up to it, I'll give it a go," he teased.
Harry laughed and Tony was relieved to have restored his good humour. "In your dreams, old man." He taunted. "Besides, technically and to all intents and purposes, you're more Yank than British." Seeing Sirius' affronted expression, he accused, "You call football soccer, Sirius."

Rolling his eyes at his godson he replied. "Yeah Harry...because I'm undercover," he said, slipping effortlessly into Sirius' upper class British accent. "But if you think you're up to it then go for it," he challenged him good-naturedly as he wandered back over to the lounge area and sank down cautiously onto his sofa.

The whole altercation with Gibbs had left him feeling more exhausted than it should. Perhaps they were all right and he had needed the day off after all. The last thing he needed was someone to tell him I told you so!

Later, after lunch - that had Delores had raving about the Pear and Rocket salad and drooling over the cream tea – the conversation turned to Tony's imminent departure.

Delores looked sad. "Things won't be the same when you go, Tony. You were the only one who managed to see past my gruff exterior. Everyone else at NCIS thinks I'm a troll," she observed shrewdly.

Tony didn't bother to deny her assessment. "Hey, I wasn't Mr Sensitive either at first. But once I started snooping I found a kindred spirit. I act like clown and you act like a porcuswine so we can keep everyone at arm's length," he joked, utilising one of his favourite Ziva-isms.

"True," she admitted, chuckling. "Never could let my guard down and trust people after my parents' rejection, it crushed my spirit – not to mention my trust. I told myself that I didn't need anyone; then you were my Secret Santa and tracked down that doll. You smashed my protective shell and made me realise that not everyone was out to hurt me." She smiled, seeing how uncomfortable Tony was when someone praised him for anything which was deep and meaningful.

Looking across to Harry who was watching silently she continued. "And then you and Hermione arrived and threw my world off its axis, Harry." She smiled at the younger wizard. "When you found out my secret shame, it didn't make a bit of difference to any of your team – you treated me as an equal and you offered me your friendship. This has been the best few weeks I've ever had. I'm going to miss you all so much."

Delores reached out hesitantly and grasped both the wizards' hands, giving them a brief squeeze before letting go, primly placing her hands in her lap.

Impulsively Tony spoke. "You don't have to miss us, Delores. Why don't you blow this popsicle stand and come with? I need to hire a personal assistant – someone with your HR experience and skills would be invaluable. Especially with all the innovation and the anti-corruption measures we plan on implementing at the DMLE."

Although his offer was impulsive, in that he'd planned on speaking to her privately and formally, it just seemed to be the right time. Besides, he couldn't stand how sad she seemed at the thought of being left alone again. Looking at her tearing up and becoming emotional, he immediately regretting not making the job offer in private. Knowing she was a very self-contained individual, she would hate for them to see her getting emotional; he knew this because he was the same.

But what he wasn't prepared for was her reaction. Bursting into tears, Delores rose from the table and crossed the floor to hug Tony tightly, forgetting his injury as she sobbed on his shoulder. Exchanging a helpless look with Harry, he patted her ineffectually on the back, murmuring nonsense phrases to her. Finally, the normally taciturn squib gave a hiccup that sounded like a
cross between a giggle and a gasp, before releasing him.

"Oh Director, I'm so so sorry. Forgive me!" She apologised, horrified by her emotional display and her familiarity with such an important wizard.

Tony gave a somewhat nervous chuckle. "Well I didn't mean to upset you, Delores and clearly, I think maybe I should be apologising to you."

"Oh no, I'm flattered, Tony. That you would ask me – a squib to be your personal assistant when you could choose a bright young witch or wizard to fill the position. I'm sure that it would be more politically expedient than me."

Tony shrugged. "I asked you because if you agree to be my assistant then I think I'll be extremely lucky to have someone of your calibre on my six," he said sincerely. "So what do you say, Ms Bromstead? Have I filled the position of Personal Assistant to the new Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

Sitting back down at the table and pouring herself another cup of tea, she looked penitent. "Tony, you know I'd do almost anything in the world for you. You're my friend, even though women like me don't have friends like you. But I can't...you don't know what you're asking of me. I'm a squib and my parents threw me away like rotten garbage. To go back and face them and all the rest of my relatives...to know that I'm not good enough – that I'm a squib, an embarrassment. I just can't...I'm not strong enough."

"You underestimate yourself, Delores. You're a strong and incredibly capable person and a loyal friend. I don't care about you being a squib – you're worth ten of most witches or wizards. Please say that you'll at least think about the job before you say no." He pleaded with her gently.

Tearfully she shook her head. "I wish I could but I'm not half as courageous as you think I am. You don't understand how difficult it would be to go back to Britain and become a part of the magical world again. You're an outsider and even though it will be difficult to gain acceptance as an outsider, it still isn't as hard as going back to the place that rejected you. Where they made you feel useless like a pile of steaming hippogriff dung, Tony. I just can't."

Harry grimaced at his godfather. If only Delores knew that Sirius indeed knew just how she felt to be rejected – disowned by family – to be judged as wanting. But even though Delores was a friend and knew about the magical world there was no way they could risk telling her his secret. A secret that only three people were privy to which was probably three people too many already.

Sighing regretfully Tony nodded. "No Delores, you're right. I didn't think about what I was asking of you. So, we'll stay in touch – I'll expect lots of emails letting me know how you're doing."

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It was later in the afternoon that the FBMI got back the results of the age regression facial software. Fornell organised another transatlantic video conference with Hermione at 1700 hours to discuss the findings. Tony decided he might as well stay for dinner since Harry was already cooking for Ellie. Of course, they couldn't discuss anything classified but at least the single dad wouldn't need to get his own dinner tonight.

Tony was feeling deflated that Delores had turned down his job offer. She would have given the Ministry of Magic a real kick in the pants and it would have also been great fun to help her stick it to her family. According to Hermione, who had done some digging into the Bromsteeds when she returned to London (or more likely asked Penelope to look into it) they were a fairly insignificant
family. Oh, sure they were pureblood still, but since Delores and one other cousin had been born in their generation and the cousin had fathered a squib and a wizard who barely qualified for Hogwarts, it wasn't looking good. Chances were that the UK Bromsteads would cease to exist within the next generation...maybe two at the most.

So, it would have soothed his soul and no doubt Delores too to have had her as his PA since her father still worked in some obscure but pettifogging clerical department as a drone. As his PA, she would have had a high-profile position befitting her abilities to organise workplaces in her sleep. He'd have given a lot to see Nilbert Bromstead having to kowtow to his daughter at the Ministry. Still, he'd never been a squib so he couldn't truly understand what he was asking her to do. Never mind – he'd get Penelope Clearwater to find him a nice squib who'd worked in HR in the 'outside world' to come and sort out the DLME with him. He put it on the list of tasks to see to when he arrived in London – along with finding some temporary accommodation.

Right on time Hermione appeared on screen, her mien serious but she smiled in greeting. Tony looked across at Harry – he didn't know adult Hermione well enough to read her expression. The messy haired wizard shrugged at him and whispered that it looked as if something had come up.

After they'd exchanged greetings Fornell took charge. "Right, let's get this show on the road. The FBMI ran photographs of Trent Kort through facial regression software that the FBI use and I sent the results to Hermione. They regressed Kort so he was 20 years younger, 30 years younger and forty years younger - hoping we'd get a hit on who we are dealing with."

Hermione took over at that point. "So, I had Harry's Auror partner, Katie Bell check on who was incarcerated in Azkaban at the same time as Sirius and escaped when Riddle organised the mass breakout."

"One thing she discovered was that the record keeping of the prison commandant wasn't flash. Something we'll need to attend to in due course," she observed, looking at Tony speculatively. "Anyway... when the software regressed photos arrived, I had Kingsley Shacklebolt take a look at them too since he was an Auror 30 years ago. I figured he would recognise Kort if anyone would."

Harry leaned forward eagerly. "Did he recognise him?"

Hermione nodded gravely. "Yeah Harry, he did. So, I guess if he did have some cosmetic surgery when he arrived in the States it wasn't extensive, more subtle."

Tony was not getting a good feeling about this. Sighing mentally, he sucked it up and asked. "Okay, so who is he?"

"Augustus Rookwood. He was an unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. Igor Karkaroff gave him up as Voldemort's spy in the ministry when he was trying to wriggle out of a life sentence as Casa Azkaban. Apparently the DMLE had no ideal about him, he was a most successful mole and Rookwood was tried, unlike Sirius and thrown in Azkaban."

Tony wasn't that surprised – they always suspected that there were moles in the Ministry – aside from the obvious ones like Lucius Malfoy with his pathetic claims that he was acting under the Imperious Curse when he committed crimes as a Death Eater. Honestly – the ministry deserved to be shot for swallowing such ridiculous tripe and it bothered him that Lucius was still out there now, free and clear.

While he wouldn't play by Gibbs rules, Tony was going to find a legal means of making his cousin's husband pay for his crimes – his war crimes against British wizardry. Knowing criminals and unfortunately being familiar with Malfoy from his stint as an Auror, he was pretty damned
sure that he was still breaking the law – just being a bit more careful. As a well-known TV shrink was fond of pointing out – the best predictor of future behaviour was past behaviour. Apart from the Death Eater’s murder and mayhem, his Lucius thrived in the role of a manipulative corrupt wheeler dealer. He’d preened and paraded around as a political advisor to Cornelius Fudge for years.

Tony was almost sure that he would be unable to resist using nefarious means to make more money. He was the type of individual who couldn't resist using illegal means to create more wealth. He reminded him of Anthony DiNozzo Senior when it came to wheeling and dealing and his love of money and influencing those in power and leopards don't change their spots they just learned to camouflage them more effectively.

However, just as some of the worst American criminals had ended up being ensnared by the IRS for tax fraud, perhaps he could catch Lucius with his pants down. He had fantasies of him being tried by a non-magical court, because while Malfoy was a pureblood to his bootstraps, he didn't mind bilking non-magicals to put more gold in his Gringott's vaults and galleons in his pockets. Perhaps Tony could have him made a squib as punishment and confiscate his fortune – that might go some way towards making up for all the misery he caused over the years.

Taking away his fortune and magic would probably be a much harsher punishment than life in Azkaban or going through The Veil. Plus, if Malfoy was up to his old tricks within the Ministry (knowing him the way he did, there was every chance he was) then he would be helping to clean up the bribery, graft and corruption which was the job he'd been hired to do. If he was keeping his mitts out of the Ministry he'd be dipping them in somewhere else – so Tony would be patient and catch him in the end.

Realising he'd zoned out, he tuned back in to find Harry, Tobias and Hermione were all staring at him in concern from which he concluded that that they been trying to get his attention and that they were worried about his reaction to the news that Kort was Rookwood. Not really sure why.

Smiling widely, he apologised. "Sorry, was just fantasizing on cleaning up all the moles and corruption in the Ministry. What were you saying?"

Hermione took control – her natural authority shone through when the two males seemed to be loath to continue. "Did you hear what I said about Rookwood, Tony?” she asked, glaring at the two males and making them glad she wasn't with them in the same room.

"Um that he worked as an unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries as a mole and Karkaroff shopped him, along with a bunch of other Death Eaters to save his miserable skin." Tony responded obediently.

"That's it?" she queried.

"Well... I'll hazard a guess that he was part of the mass break out when Riddle lured the Dementors to join his side and they left Azkaban unguarded?" Tony theorised.

Shaking her head on the screen, she sighed. Must have been some fantasy, Director," Hermione retorted wryly.

"Yeah, it was about Lucius Malfoy," he confessed, grinning before sobering up at the serious faces of his co-conspirators. "Okay…what did I miss? It looks like bad news!"

"Let's just say it's going to hit you and Harry hard, Tony. After the mass breakout from Azkaban in 1996 he disappeared from sight until the night he appeared at the Ministry of Magic with the other
Death Eaters." She said, trying to be delicate.

"What night? Was it during Riddle's overthrow of the government?" Tony enquired, not seeing what all the fuss was about.

"No, the night that he conned me into believing that you had been trapped in the Ministry of Magic and then I insisted in going off half-cocked to save you, walking right into his trap for me. The night I got you killed because you had to come to my aid. The night that I almost got Hermione killed when Antonin Dolhov hit her with a Curse and everyone else who came with me from Hogwarts was injured too… except for me. All because I was too damned stubborn to listen to Hermione about it being a trap and insisted on checking it out. If I'd only called you on the mirrors or stopped by Grimauld Place to see if you were there, you wouldn't have died and the others wouldn't have been injured."

Tony looked solemn. "Maybe, Cub… we'll never know and your heart was in the right place. But if Sirius Black had lived then Tony DiNozzo wouldn't have had the chance to keep on saving lives and helping people," he stated calmly. So, while I didn't want to leave you alone, at least I was still able to continue to save lives. Last year when Joanna Teague and I brought down Budd and his terrorist group, there was no way to tell how many people's lives we saved," he stated baldly, glancing over at Fornell to acknowledge him. Tobias had made him realise that he'd done good work while he was living as Anthony DiNozzo.

Although it was painful remembering that night when Bellatrix forced him through the Veil of Death, he was trying to be strong because Harry obviously carried around an enormous amount of guilt over what happened. Refusing to wallow, he sucked up his anguish, focusing on Kort aka Rookwood.

"So, what happened to Rookwood after the showdown at the Ministry? Did he escape?"

Hermione answered after glancing at Harry who was acting far too maudlin. "No… not then, Tony. He was imprisoned again. He escaped a second time, in 1997. The last known sighting was Aberforth Dumbledore who defeated him during the Battle of Hogwarts. Kingsley talked to Aberforth today. He's getting a bit forgetful but he identified the photos of Kort as being Augustus Rookwood. Said he killed him at the Battle of Hogwarts but when Auror Katie Woods searched back through the records, there's no record of his death or a funeral for anyone fitting his description."

Fornell who was quiet up to this point piped up, "So it seems pretty conclusive, Trent Kort was Augustus Rookwood."

Harry managed to focus on the present. "I guess that explains why he recognised me and decided to kill me. He clearly blamed me for having to go on the run after Voldemort was defeated."

"Especially once he'd learnt that he was on the nose with the CIA and that they'd be looking to tuck him into a nice dirt bed for a long sleep." Tony observed fatalistically. "Seeing Harry with me and putting two and two together about me being appointed as director of the DMLE, he must have gone postal. Encountering the person who made him leave the UK must have felt like rubbing salt in the wounds."

"Do you think you were also one of his targets, Tony?" Fornell queried curiously, "Or were you just collateral damage."

"Well… considering that we couldn't stand each other because he tried to kill me and Jeanne by blowing up my mustang and failed, then I busted his nose. So, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he
decided to take me out too. Like icing on the cake," he quipped with a grin at Harry who chuckled at his joke. "I guess we'll never know," he mused - although his brain was already occupied with more pressing thoughts.

Hermione finished up their call soon after that – with time differences she was anxious to finish up and get some food. After praising her new director and Auror for apprehending one of the most dangerous war criminals and Death Eaters still at large, she dropped a bombshell as she was signing off.

She issued an order for Tony to take at least one more day before returning to NCIS, signing off before he had a chance to protest.
A Sleepless Night

Chapter Summary

The revelations about Kort’s real identity stir up painful emotions ins Harry and everyone finds it difficult to sleep afterwards.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is beta’ed most kindly by Faldo. Having her proofing my chapters should speed up the process greatly and help curb my obsessive redrafting of chapters. Thank-you for kudos ad comments.

Later that night, Tony lay tossing and turning – as much as he could with his chest held together by stitches. Actually most of his tossing and turning was inside his head.

Ellie had come over for dinner and Fornell had stayed too. Obviously there hadn’t been any talk of Augustus Rookwood, magic or the DMLE but they’d still found plenty to talk about. Harry and Ellie were great friends and although his godson was still rather clueless about pop culture and social media, any deficiencies in that area were obviously put down by Bishop to him being from a different country. Tony hoped that Harry could remain in touch with her once they left the States – she was good for him. Harry needed real friends who liked him for who he was.

He was thinking about Kort and the issues that had been raised today vis-à-vis Harry’s depth of guilt over his death the night Bellatrix ‘killed’ Sirius by sending him through the veil. He knew he needed to have it out with his godson. Guilt was a terrible yoke to bear. Some individuals seem predestined to lug around more than their fair share and were taken advantage of because of it. As someone who automatically took responsibility for everything bad which happened in his life including things he couldn’t control, Sirius understood Harry only too well.

Which was why he was going to give him a damned good kick in the pants (metaphorically speaking) and also because of the long and difficult talk he’d had weeks ago with Hermione about Harry’s overwhelming guilt issues. Sadly, it affected every facet of his life almost two decades after defeating Voldemort.

The night Sirius passed through the Veil had affected Harry deeply - more guilt for Sirius to bear (as if he didn’t have enough already) for not taking his cousin Bellatrix seriously enough that night at the Ministry. He’d been too focused on gaining revenge for the harm she’d caused and so he’d ending up estranged from Harry for the second time in his godson’s life. He’d messed up comprehensively when it came to his best friend’s son so he had to do this right - he couldn’t afford to let him down a third time.
Today, it finally, truly hit him just how deeply his best friend’s son still blamed himself for Sirius’
dead, even now he knew Sirius/he’d survived. Harry was still inconsolable about being lured into
the Ministry of Magic by Voldemort trying to get hold of that damned stupid self-fulfilling
prophesy in the Department of Mysteries. The truth was though that the culpability for his ‘death’
could be laid fairly and squarely at three individuals’ feet: Voldemort for the ambush, using him to
lure Harry to the Ministry, Bellatrix for pushing him through the veil and Dumbledore for
deliberately moulding a young wizard who felt that he had to handle Voldemort on his own and
couldn’t call on adults to be…adults.

Tony had been biding his time, trying to find the best time to deal with these extremely delicate
topics. He realised a couple of things as he lay awake thinking about everything that went down
today. First off, if he was looking for the perfect time to try and talk to Harry regarding his
misplaced sense of guilt, then he’d never get around to it. There would always be something to get
in the way – right now it was his injury, thanks to Kort’s skill with a knife. And second, if he
waited until they returned to London then Harry would be far less open to listening to what he had
to tell him. He would have other crap on his mind and he would also be more likely to fall back
into entrenched patterns of thinking and feeling. In that environment, a change in attitude was
much harder to achieve. Here, Harry was less sure – even a trip to the shops was something that
had made his think about what he was doing…what he knew.

So really, he needed to bite the bullet and get it done. Tomorrow… umm today was D-day. Time to
use some tough love to help Harry see that he had nothing to feel guilty for. Perhaps that was the
real reason Hermione wanted him to stay home today.

The harsh truth was that the whole FUBAR debacle at the Ministry of Magic would never have
occurred if Dumbledore had done his job properly. Fobbing off his responsibility to teach Harry
occlumency onto Snape was inexcusable. After all, he had ample evidence that a) Severus Snape
was a pathetic tutor and b) Severus hated Harry’s guts for surviving Voldemort’s attack instead of
Lily, and looking like a mini James. The old fool should have damned-well taught Harry how to
organise and shield his thoughts from Voldemort himself. Occlumency was a highly intimate
undertaking since it wasn’t possible to learn it without the tutor carrying out or attempting to read
the student’s mind, whether they wanted them to or not.

How could Albus honestly believe that Harry could cope with Snape forcing his way into his
innermost thoughts and memories and rooting around in there. Even more relevant – how could he
assume that Snape was principled enough not to abuse those memories to help him psychologically
and emotionally denigrate and abuse Harry’s fragile trust in adults.

If Dumbledore was so damned afraid of Voldemort that he couldn’t fulfil his duty of care to Harry
and teach him occlumency, he had a responsibility to ensure he received instruction from a
competent teacher (competency defined not just by ability but emotional and psychological
stability). Sirius would have found a way to pay for it if he’d had an inkling of what Snape had
done to Harry. Even if as an escapee, he couldn’t access the Black family fortune he’d have sold
off some of the Black Family heirlooms in Knockturn Alley, if it had come down to it. Whatever it
took; he’d have done it!

Failing to give him the proper tools to be able to shield his thoughts meant Harry paid a terrible
burden for their incompetence and neglect. Even after the war ended, the guilt he carried was
slowly but inexorably crushing him. Tony (because, after all these years undercover it was how he
thought of himself these days) hoped Dumbledore was roasting in hell for letting it happen. But
then, his godson, in Dumbledore’s grand scheme wasn’t supposed by survive the war, so he
probably never considered the legacy he’d left his young student to live with.
Unable to sleep, Tony rolled carefully out of bed and padded out to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of iced tea which he sipped, trying to calm his angry thoughts. He ambled over to the baby grand piano which belonged to Anthony DiNozzo’s mother, Charlotte Amelia DiNozzo nee Paddington, which strangely enough had become almost as important to him as is had been for Anthony. Even though Charlotte had been from a blue-blood family she was also an alcoholic but Anthony had fond memories of her teaching him to play piano and going to see movies with her. They were pretty much his only positive memories of her. Still, the only positive memories he has of Lady Walberga Black was the day he ran away from home and decided he’d never see her again.

Playing seemed to calm him and even Padfoot settled down and when beset by chronic nightmares and insomnia, he would spend hours playing to chase away the ugly images inside his head. Casting a privacy charm so he didn’t wake Harry, he sat down at the piano bench, his fingers roaming across the keyboard, softly playing an eclectic mix of music from classical, blues and jazz pieces. Finally, he moved onto Anthony’s all-time favourites - classics from the Rat Pack era including Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Junior and Frank Sinatra.

As usual, it helped soothe his troubled thoughts.

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Tony wasn’t the only person who couldn’t sleep that night. Hermione was thinking about Harry’s comments during their last intercontinental Skype call. Even over the laptop, the weight of his grief was obvious to her. She wasn’t a violent witch, despite her war record but she wished she could line up the people who had hurt Harry so badly and make them feel even a fraction of the pain that he endured for all their massive trespasses against him. They’d committed crimes that they should be paying for but unfortunately most of them were beyond her reach – already dead. There were many people who had hurt him over the years but honestly, she’d settle for the main participants: Voldemort, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, Dumbledore, Severus Snape, Bellatrix Lestrange and Peter Pettigrew paying their karmic taxes. As far as she was concerned they all deserved to reside for eternity in the circles of hell for what they’d inflicted upon him.

If Harry had been older and more worldly when he defeated Voldemort, he might have realised that much of what he was feeling was survivor’s guilt and PTSD. If Mad-Eyed Moody had survived the battle he would probably have taken him in hand, and in his rough and ready tough love fashion, kicked Harry’s arse up hill and down dale over his survivor’s guilt, explaining that it was a normal but unjustified reaction to all he’d been through. Unfortunately, the veteran Auror died valiantly on the battlefield and no one else had the foresight to understand what a young Harry, barely an adult was going through – especially when all the other casualties who died in the final battle were added into the equation.

Hermione when she was older, had returned to the non-magical world to study psychology in the non-magical world. Belatedly, she realised that he was a victim of the phenomenon where the survivor experiences feelings of deep guilt for surviving a catastrophe which took the lives of many others. It was now considered to be a symptom of PTSD rather than its own separate syndrome and there was little wonder that he would be battling both. She also observed how he’d transformed some of his feelings of guilt into the canonising of Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore, neither one who survived the final battle. Over the intervening years, she watched on in dismay as they both became larger than life and could do no wrong in Harry’s eyes.

Since neither wizard was a saint, this had disturbed her greatly, she wished that her best buddy would talk to her about his guilt instead of ‘shutting it up inside a trunk and not dealing with it.’ Alas it was a topic Harry wouldn’t discuss with her…or anyone.
So, when she found out by accident that Sirius was still alive she’d jumped at the chance to bring him back into their lives, again. She truly believed if anyone had a chance of getting through to him and helping him recover, it would be his godfather. In fact, while she believed that Harry refused to accept the position of director of the DMLE because of the entrenched corruption in the Ministry and the community, she also felt that a part of his refusal stemmed from his overwhelming guilt. He probably felt he didn’t deserve the top job when he ‘let’ so many others die, or he felt like he had too much good fortune already with a job he loved and a family he adored.

She had no doubt that Sirius could run the DMLE well and help her to combat the entrenched corruption and entitled purebreds who thought they should have carte blanche to run their world. But she was also desperately hoping that he could help Harry to heal and find the peace that she knew he was still seeking. Having his godfather around to help him face his demons was going to be a crucial step to his letting go of the guilt that was drowning her best friend.

Family was important to Harry James Potter, as it was for Sirius Orion Black. Both wizards would die for their loved ones…had died for their loved ones and carried around way too much baggage because of what life had thrown at them. There were spooky parallels to their lives and Hermione was firmly convinced if anyone could relate to Harry and help him it would be Sirius. She just hoped that he’d take the hint when she ordered him to stay home from NCIS for another day and he’d tackle the touchy topic of the Marauders, Lily and Snape at Hogwarts.

She knew it wouldn’t miraculously cure what ailed her best friend but it would hopefully let him take the first step in what would be a long and painful journey. Maybe even a lifelong one.

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Meanwhile, back in Sirius’ DC apartment not surprisingly, Harry was also far too wound up to sleep. In the last few days, his world had been turned upside down. First by the fatal run in with Rookwood slash Kort, and Auror Potter couldn’t help wondering how many former Death Eaters had done what Kort had done and escaped overseas into the non-magical world. Hell, with the current acceptance of tattoos, no one here would even think twice about their dark mark – except to try to copy it. Then he’d been caught off guard by an explosive conversation he and his godfather had in the hospital that had shaken him far more than he wanted to admit.

Turning over in the very comfortable bed with what Sirius said were Egyptian cotton sheets, trying to settle and persuade his overactive brain to switch off so he could sleep, he heard his godfather getting up and wandering about the flat …um apartment. Harry knew he often got up when he couldn’t sleep to play the baby grand piano in the living room, although Sirius always cast a privacy charm so he wouldn’t wake his godson or disturb his neighbours.

Which Harry found beyond weird, since Sirius hadn’t played the piano when he was in Britain; he’d changed a lot since being in the US although some things remained the same. Padfoot was still like a huge daft puppy. Well he was until his protective side was engaged and then he became lethal – as Trent Kort had belatedly discovered.

Life since Kort died had been full on and Harry hadn’t had time to properly process the whole conversation at the hospital with Sirius about Severus Snape’s undercover career. Truthfully, his emotions were all over the place – as a kid at Hogwarts he’d hated Snape for all the horrible comments he uttered about him and especially his venomous vilification of his father. Plus, he been appalled by him fouling his and other students’ potions during class; it had been damned petty of him. Then there was Snape’s unfair detentions for every house BUT Slytherin and his inequitable deducting of points for the most pitiful excuse - such as breathing too loudly. In
contrast, Severus’ precious Snakes got away with the most egregious behaviour without punishment – often he gave them bonus points.

Then much later, he discovered Severus was undercover, that he hadn’t murdered Dumbledore, that he had been such a hateful person. He learnt that he’d acted like a total berk because he was Dumbledore’s undercover mole, a spy for the light, and had to protect his cover. It radically and dramatically changed his perception of the potions master – Merlin’s Beard – after the war Harry had called his son after him and Dumbledore when all was said and done. He viewed him a hero of the resistance – someone of integrity and great courage who the son of James Potter, (who was his mortal enemy) looked up to and greatly admired.

Years later, he was in the US with Sirius who was supposed to be dead but was alive and asserting that Severus hadn’t been protecting his cover as Dumbledore’s mole from Voldemort and his Death Eaters at all. Or else if that was his motivation, then it had been the dumbest undercover operation ever executed and Voldemort would have known exactly what he was up to - so it had all been for nothing. All the pain and suffering Snape and Dumbledore had inflicted on several generations of witches and wizards and the fallout -it affected so many careers after wizards and witches left Hogwarts (which was supposed to be the best magical school in the world). Truly it had impacted negatively on all their society.

Now, given all the information about working undercover that Sirius had dropped in his lap when he explained how to protect your cover, moles, double agents and Chinese military strategists, Harry felt like his head was about to explode. He’d badly wanted to argue with Sirius, tell him he was wrong, that Snape had no choice, because if Pads was right, then Harry had to rethink so many of his assumptions and opinions. It was truly a nightmare for him to contemplate and with a head pounding like a bunch of house elves were inside hammering in tandem on his skull, he wanted to avoid thinking about it at all costs.

Of course, part of the reason why he’d desperately needed to believe that Severus Snape was a dyed-in-the-wool genuine hero of the light was because of his knowledge that James had tormented him unmercifully when they were in the same year at Hogwarts. He also knew that Sirius set Severus up with Remus in his lycan state during a full moon and Remus aka Mooney could easily have killed Snape or turned him. When Harry found out about the Marauder’s behaviour he had been appalled and ashamed by their actions – having been the victim of bullying himself. He also felt terrible guilt because James was his dad and his dad was a bully, as was his closest friend.

Then he discovered that Snape had been his mother’s special friend. Her first magical friend after she found out she was a witch.

Severus was Lily’s Hermione and Ron. Snape had been there for her when her sister had had a difficult time accepting her as a witch, long before she went to Hogwarts. Harry had also learnt that Snape had loved her romantically; that he’d vowed to keep her son (him) safe because of his unrequited love for Lily Evans. He learnt that she’d betrayed Snape by marrying his bitterest enemy - the wizard who had bullied him unmercifully.

Harry felt confused, he was ashamed that his mother would treat her friend like that. He would never have done that to Hermione or Ron, even when things had been difficult between them. Ron had said some ugly things to him during the Tri Wizard Tournament and also when they had destroyed the locket together but Harry had forgiven him because they were mates. When Hermione had dobbed him into McGonagall and had his new broom from Sirius confiscated their friendship had been strained for months but he had absolved her because she was his best friend. So, he couldn’t understand how Lily could let one little comment sour years of friendship and he felt overwhelming guilt because clearly, Snape had never found someone to replace her.
That knowledge that he was his mother’s best friend had completely changed his attitude to the potions professor – and Lily too. Suddenly, he saw him as a tragic figure who’d sacrificed his life for Lily’s memory. He’d become a spy, trying to save the wizarding world from Voldemort - all to honour her memory, despite her betrayal of their friendship.

His death had been another tragic sacrifice, along with his parents, Sirius, Remus and Tonks, Dumbledore, Fred and everyone else who died. Especially since Harry died, and yet out of all the deserving individuals, he’d been given a second chance – getting to return to life again. He’d gone on to get married and have kids, achieving his dearest ambition – to have his own family and live a peaceful, prosperous life. Severus lay cold and dead in a grave – where was the fairness in that equation?

Hermione had tried over the years to talk to him about his guilt but he’d shut her out since she couldn’t possibly understand what he was going through. He refused to talk about it – thought he’d come to terms with everything and moved on with his life.

Until the night at the hospital, when Sirius made his strike upon the huge elephant in the room that they’d both been steadfastly ignoring ever since their reunion, he held his tongue - mostly. So far, he’d been quite cagey, re his feelings about Snape, focusing purely on Harry’s contention that Snape behaved the way he did because he was under cover and had no choice but to be an arsehole. Yet, while remaining narrowly focused on his time as the potions master undercover, Pads had systematically and surgically demolished Harry’s long held belief that Snape had been acting to protect his cover as Dumbledore’s spy.

Finding out that the foundation upon which he’d created a Professor Snape who was noble and self-sacrificing – who treated him and others like dragon shit because he had no other choice if Voldemort was to be defeated – was a rocky one, left him in physical pain. Thinking about it, his gut burned, his throat ached and he felt like his head was going to explode. Plus, his anxiety levels spiked when he allowed himself to examine his long held assumptions and see them for the faulty logic they were. Even the monumental pedestal he placed Snape and Dumbledore on began to developing some serious cracks in the foundations. As it crumbled his guilt ratcheted up, teetering towards panic attack level. Desperate, he found himself grasping at straws. Looking at someone… something else to blame for Severus’ behaviour.

‘Okay so he was undercover but Riddle knew he was a mole because he couldn’t control his anger, prejudice and his hatred for me specifically.

But... when he looked at me, all he saw was my dad James...the man that tormented him for seven years at Hogwarts and stole the love of his life away from him and then she died. It’s understandable he was so angry...you can’t really blame him.’

Tony knew how much Harry idolised Snape and Dumbledore although he’d made his opinion clear when it came to Dumbledore. Snape was a much more complicated proposition and it was because of his own troubled relationship with the greasy-haired wizard, who he’d gone to school with. His own guilt made him hold his tongue about Harry’s gushing adulation of the murderous bastard. Well he’d remained silent until he’d called Harry out about Snape’s decimation of the Healer and Auror ranks while he was the Potions Professor. Although in all fairness, he still had some drugs on board when he decided it was a good time and perhaps it had been the right time – who knows?

Nevertheless, he’d tried to demolish some of Harry’s bizarre assumptions about the former Death Eater, particularly the notion that his obnoxious and patently unprofessional behaviour as a teacher was not something he had a choice about. That he had to behave that way to disguise the fact that
he was Dumbledore’s mole in Voldemort camp even though most of the Death Eaters had attended Hogwarts themselves and would have known that the Headmaster wouldn’t protect Snape’s terrible teaching record unless he was getting something reasonably valuable in return. After all, Dumbledore had refused to hire Tom Riddle because he felt that it would not be in the student’s best interests to be in contact with him.

It left anyone who chose to analyse the situation with the conclusion re Severus Snape’s tenure at Hogwarts: 1- He was such an emotionally immature/narcissistic individual that he was incapable of controlling his behaviour (and therefore had no business being granted the privilege of teaching children). 2 - He and Dumbledore had the combined intelligence quotient of a stinging nettle plant (and therefore neither should ever have been let within 10 furlongs of a student). 3 - Snape and Dumbledore were so arrogant and incapable of logical thought that they never bothered to consider the implications to their deception of letting Snape throw a ginormous tantrum for two decades. Which was why they endangered the students with such a blatantly obvious attempt to trick Voldemort.

Tony’s private opinion was that it was a little of number 3 and a lot of number 1. And while he was prepared to accept that Snape had regretted becoming a Death Eater and had changed sides, it didn’t necessarily mean that he accepted that Snape was reformed or he was truly remorseful. Privately, he felt that the only reason he fell out with his fellow Death Eaters and Voldemort specifically, was because his precious Dark Lord broke his promise (big surprise there) and killed Lily Potter. They had a bargain that Voldemort would kill Harry and James and leave Lily alive because Snape had always believed that Lils belonged to him and that James stole her away.

However, knowing Harry’s feelings about Snape, thanks to several prior conversations with Hermione, Tony knew he had to proceed with caution, lest he drive his godson further into worshiping on the altar of Saint Severus. Of course, Harry was an adult and if he wanted to believe that Snape was Merlin reincarnated then it wasn’t anyone else’s business, normally. The only problem was that Hermione had confided in him that she believed that he suffered from survivor’s guilt which was a symptom of PTSD and to Sirius’ jaundiced eye, he could also see the signs himself. Her estimation was that Harry’s way of dealing with his guilt was to elevate Dumbledore and Snape to the status of almost demi-gods instead of work his way through all the anger, the conflicting, complex emotions and his feelings of betrayal from all they’d done to him.

Sirius and Anthony DiNozzo and their melded persona - Tony - who was a mix of them both, with some Padfoot along with his goofiness and protectiveness thrown in for good measure - had more than their own fair share of not dealing with their emotions and deluding themselves. So, he also knew how debilitating it could be to live like that.

After delivering his Working Undercover for Dummies Lecture, he probably would have left well enough alone, since he hated people messing with his head except for what he learnt from Harry’s best friend. He’d mostly decided to deliver the lecture because it would form the basis of his new training course for baby-Aurors, as well as his planned new squad of undercover Aurors and he was pretty sure that Harry would be signing up for the training anyway. The last thing he wanted was to wrong foot his godson in the middle of a classroom surrounded by his peers. So, when he saw Harry’s shattered expression and heard his anguished attempt to justify everything he’d told himself for so long, Tony knew he had made the right call to deal with this topic in private.

Listening to Harry’s defence of Snape had made Tony mad. Not just mad – it confirmed for him the things that Hermione reported and her suspicions about his PTSD and Survivor Guilt.

Flashback:
Tony and Hermione were seated on his sofa, in the days following her discovery of him living in the US along with his new identity catching up on all the things that had happened since his ‘death.’

They were demolishing some Indian takeout and drinking ice cold beer. Hermione had ordered in a heap of dishes and Tony had no idea what they were. Indian food was not a very popular cuisine in the US and although Sirius was from the UK, his knowledge of Indian food had been pretty much restricted to carnivore curries. Hermione as a non-magical child had grown up amidst a multicultural melting pot of cuisines in Britain and as the daughter of two dentists had been brought up to eat healthy foods. As she explained to him, Indian food had won a tick of approval from her parents as being both healthy and incredibly flavoursome.

So Hermione had done the ordering. They had samosas – spiced vegetables in a pastry, pakora – battered vegetables (potatoes, cauliflower, onion, spinach, eggplant) naan bread, red tamarind chutney, green mint chutney and raita – a cooling yoghurt based mint condiment, dahl – lentil, tomato, ginger and coriander spiced stew, Tandoori chicken, Rogan Josh a mild beef curry and palak paneer – a spinach and soft cheese dish. When the various mains and starters where laid out on Tony’s dining table he stared at the food and started laughing.

“Feeling peckish are you, Hermione? How the hell are we supposed to eat all this food?” he inquired in amazement. “And where do you put it?” he demanded staring at her petite and lithe stature.

Chuckling, because according to Hermione, Ministers of Magic Elect didn’t giggle (although Tony swore that it sounded more a giggle than a chuckle) she shrugged. “Yes I was hungry and I couldn’t make up my mind so I ordered it all. I’ll take some home to Toby and you can take leftovers into work for lunch, tomorrow. Curries tastes better the next day, anyway,” she contended.

“I guess,” he conceded, loading up his plate with a bit of everything to try.

The food turned out to be excellent. It was just unfortunate, due to the nature of their discussion, neither of them properly enjoyed the wonderful assortment of dishes.

Hermione was explaining to him what had gone on in Harry’s tutoring session with Professor Snape.

“I’m telling you Snuffles, he forced his way into Harry’s mind…he mentally raped him.”

Hermione huffed angrily at the thought of her friend being hurt. “Dumbledore ordered Snape to teach him occlumency after Harry dreamed about Arthur Weasley being attacked by Riddle’s familiar in the Department of Mysteries when he was after the prophecy about Harry and himself.

“Snape refused to teach him anything – just told him to protect his mind and then he’d proceed to attack Harry mentally, forcing his way into his thoughts and his memories…time after time. He spied on his most private thoughts…his fears and his nightmares. He battered down his teenage mental defences and he mocked him, told him he was weak and useless.”

Sirius was furious. Not that he disagreed that Harry should have been taught occlumency – he needed to be protected from a maniac. When he learnt that Harry was going to receive tutoring in occlumency he was in hiding, having pretty much exchanged one prison (Azkaban) for another (Grimauld Place) and Dumbledore had essentially become his new gaoler. The truth was that mentally, emotionally and physically he’d been a mess and no one had done anything to try to help him heal, so it wasn’t surprising that he’d never noticed how much Harry was suffering during his tutoring sessions. At the time, he agreed that it was vital for Harry to learn to shield his thoughts to
protect himself.

The trouble was now that Tony had 20 20 hindsight it was a close call which maniac he needed protection from more – Dumbledore and Snape were arguable as bad as Voldemort as far as he was concerned.

“Why for Merlin’s freakin sake, didn’t Dumbledumber teach Harry occlumency himself? He was an expert in occlumency as well as a legilimens.”

Hermione scowled. “Because as near as I can figure out after putting together the pieces, he was terrified that Riddle would use Harry as a conduit and get to him and discover he knew about the horcruxes. So, he told Snape to do it instead.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, this was the Brains Trust - supposed to lead wizards and witches to the Light side. No wonder it took so bloody long to defeat Voldemort and his band of Merry Death Eaters. Probably also accounts for why he was happy to recruit children to fight for the cause and make sure Aurors and child soldiers could only deliver non-lethal spells while Death Eaters were free to use killing curses and Unforgivable curses against us. Honestly, I swear that Albus Dumbledore was depriving some poor bucolic village of their idiot, Hermione.”

At that point, the thought of the torture Harry had endured in a futile effort to learn occlumency was more than Tony could bear. He couldn’t stop himself from changing into Padfoot and killing a throw pillow, ripping the expensive linen material to shreds as he growled at it, shaking the filling like he would prey before he carried the filling into the laundry in his muzzle. Finally, he cocked his leg and pissed all over it, continuing to growl fiercely, his fur pilo-erect and his ears and whiskers flattened.

Hermione figured he was imagining that the cushion was Dumbledore or Snape. It looked cathartic. Frankly she envied him his animalistic outlet for his feelings.

When Sirius finally shifted back to his human form he stalked back out to the living area and sat down at the piano, playing classical music moodily for a while before he finally managed to gain control of himself. Hearing that Snape had been in Hermione’s words ‘mentally raping’ a naïve 15-year-old boy-wizard – Lily and James’ precious baby boy – enraged him. He wished he could resurrect Snape and Dumbledore for Harry’s sake and inflict even a little of the torture they’d wreaked on Harry. Albus, the old narcissist had known damned well how much Snape despised Harry and yet he let him loose to give private lessons, effectively giving him license to mentally rape his godson’s mind. And even if he didn’t have a freakin clue. he had to know that Snivellus Snape absolutely sucked as a teacher.

He growled, “Okay, so do you suppose that’s why Harry’s in denial about the Greasy Git and tells everyone that Snape’s bullying crap was all an act because he was undercover?” he interrogated Hermione closely. “Because that’s behaviour totally consistent with quite a lot of the victims of rape and domestic abuse that I’ve worked with. Survivors justify and excuse the inexcusable. They convince themselves it was their fault – that they were asking for it.”

Hermione looked thoroughly disgusted. “I wish it was that clear cut, Sirius. From what I finally managed to get out of Harry after his last ‘occlumency lesson’ with Snape, I knew something totally catastrophic happened. He was in a perilous state although I didn’t understand at the time – I know now that he was on the point of having a psychological breakdown. Hind sight – what a wondrous gift!”

“Why didn’t he say something to you or Ron. You were his best friends. He told you about the fake vision of me in the Ministry?”
“Yes but Dumbledore told him he couldn’t tell anyone about the connection or the occlumency.”

Sickened, since Tony had seen similar tactics employed by paedophiles and sexual predators against their victims, he started snarling as Padfoot struggled, wanting to transform again. Having Harry worship these two monsters was almost more than he, than Pads could endure and even more he cursed his stupid desire to gain revenge for Lily and James death all those years ago. He should have refused to surrender baby Harry to Hagred, Hogwarts salt of the earth ground keeper and Dumbledore’s loyal general factotum. He could have just disappeared to Europe, America or Australasia with the toddler and left the old fool to save the world.

“So Dumbledore left him utter defenceless and he couldn’t even ask for help.”

Hermione looked as angry as he felt. “It took ages before he confessed what had happened. I finally managed to wear him down when we were on the hunt for Horcruxes and Ronald had left us in the lurch to go home to Mollie and get his belly filled. After he’d eaten all our food,” she confided, dryly. “I was pretty adept at nagging you know, and weakened by lack of food, tired and cold, Harry caved and admitted to what had happened in the occlumency lessons” she concluded gravely.

Tony stared at her. He could tell by her tense posture and by the furrows between her eyebrows that the Minister of Magic Elect (as she had still been at that point) was not just upset, she was furiously angry. Hell, he could smell the anger oozing out of her pores. So, knowing her explosive temper, (she’d punched Draco Malfoy and broken his nose after all) he decided to just let her tell him what she needed to, minus a lot of dumbass interruptions. His nose had already been broken numerous times, so he decided it was probably better for them both if she told him what she wanted to in her own time.

“I’m truly not sure if Snape was such a pathetic teacher that his strategy to teach him occlumency consisted of brutally attacking Harry to motivate him to fight back, or he was just a sadist and enjoyed torturing him.” She observed dispassionately, ignoring Sirius’ silently snarling since it was the only way she could recount what Sirius needed to know to help her best friend heal. It was ugly and hard to talk about but necessary, unfortunately

Standing up, the witch stalked across to the kitchen, retrieving two more bottles of beer from the refrigerator and took a healthy slug of the cold brew. Walking back to the sofa, she offered him another beer.

She returned to the dining table and gathered up the naan bread, chutneys and the raita and brought them over to the coffee table so they could pick at them and sank back down again and began to speak once more. It wasn’t that she was hungry after the large dinner they’d eaten but honestly, she thought the raita might help cool the burning anger in her gut.

“Anyway… Harry found himself alone in Snape’s quarters one day and his personal pensieve was just sitting there, out in the open and he couldn’t help himself. He snooped into it, which was wrong, obviously, but he was resentful and feeling victimised. And he saw something bad, something so personal that Snape flipped out (because yes Snape caught him red handed) and refused to ever ‘teach him’ occlumency again.”

She looked at him – waiting for a response.

He scowled. “And this was bad news? How?”

“Well not the cessation of the occlumency lessons, clearly, but what Harry found out when he saw of Snape’s memories in the pensieve. It damaged him deeply.”
Looking at her blank expression, Sirius gathered it was bad. “Okay… what did Harry find out about.”

“He learnt why James and Snape hated each other… learnt that the Marauders taunted and teased Snape unmercifully.”

Sirius paled, knowing she was holding something else back. After all, he was a skilled interrogator and he had a fair idea where this was going. “What else did he see, Hermione?” he asked gently but firmly.

“You and Snape… and then James saving Snape from Remus during the full moon when he was in his werewolf form and he nearly killed Snape.”

“Sirius winced, his features ashen. “So you and Harry know my deepest darkest shame. How totally, idiotically stupid… impetuous and unable to control my anger I was as a teenage wizard – how much of a Black I truly was.”

Hermione nodded. “I studied developmental psychology, Sirius. I know how immature the teenage brain is, especially the male brain and therefore how it can make some appallingly bad decisions. Its why the justice system treats minors differently to adults, after all – and at first when I learnt about what you’d nearly done, I was very judgemental about it. However, I was still a teenager myself and while I was smart, I wasn’t wise or worldly.

“By the time I did my psych courses, I had the emotional maturity to be able to put it into context. You were an awful idiot, which is part of being a kid -especially one from a background where you had such poor role models. Just like Harry choosing to spy on Snape was wrong and dumb or going charging off to the Ministry of Magic without talking to an adult first. Like me deciding to brew polyjuice and stealing the ingredients from Snape’s supplies,” she confessed ruefully.

“But… Sirius, you matured and made something of yourself, despite having some pretty major obstacles put in you path along the way. You entered law enforcement in the service of others, joining the Aurors to help others, which showed that you had grown and learnt from your mistake. You weren’t much more than a kid when you were framed and incarcerated but you still didn’t let it ruin you. Although Harry was disappointed in you, he was utterly shattered by learning that James was a bully and a prat. James, who he’d put on a pedestal.”

Tony went to defend his best friend… his brother in all but blood but then he decided to stay silent and listen to what Hermione had to tell him.

“First he was told by his aunt and uncle his parents were drunks and losers and then when he finally arrives at Hogwarts he learns they are heroes – that they and himself have achieved practically mythical status. Snape makes constant jibes about him and his father – everyone else is lionising Lily and James. Naturally Harry hates Snape and big surprise, he defends his father staunchly.” Her slight smirk a tell, indicating to the experienced cop that Hermione’s choice of descriptor about the former Gryffindor was not coincidental.

“Then Harry, presumably in a flood of righteous anger at how Snape has been treating him and seeing the antipathy between you and him decided to get back at him. So, snooping into Snape’s memories in the pensieve after he’d been violently forcing himself inside Harry’s head must have seemed like poetic justice. Then Harry sees James for the first time in his conscious memory (aside from photos) and he discovers that his own dad is a bully – like Snape. Like Draco. Like Lucius Malfoy. Like Vernon and Dudley. Everyone who has made his life a misery.

Sudden, Harry starts to see Snape not as a bully but as a pathetic, weak little weasel – a victim,
rather than a cruel, egotistical predator and the bully that he always thought he was. He feels empathy for him because Snape’s been bullied too and Harry feels disgust, shame and anger at his own father. And since Severus has spent his entire time at Hogwarts telling him that Harry was just like his father, he feels guilty and takes on the sins of the father.”

Hermione glanced at Sirius, seeing the barely contained rage and put a calm small, surprisingly strong hand on his bicep.

“But Harry only got to see one side of the conflict between James and Snape.” The furious wizard growled out at her. “There’s an idiom that I learnt while I was here – that no matter how flat you make a pancake, there’s always two sides.”

“Yes I’m aware of that – that not only are there at least two sides to every situation or argument; there are often multiple ones. And like you Sirius, I know very well that when we’re dealing with memories – especially those which involve strong emotions that they can be unreliable. Memories can be greatly influenced. Strong emotions can alter a memory.”

Sirius nodded “Yeah, witness testimony is notoriously unreliable in investigating a crime, for example. Especially when there are heightened emotions involved – like fear or anger and even excitement and joy. Lots of false IDs of killers have occurred that illustrate that phenomenon perfectly.”

“Which brings me to the other part of Harry’s problem.”

“What, that isn’t enough for him to have deal with? There’s more!” Sirius snapped irritably before giving her his huge pleading puppy dog eyes in contrition. He knew that he shouldn’t be taking out his own anger and guilt on Hermione – it wasn’t her fault. And, she was trying to help Harry; he had to stop shooting the messenger.”

“Sorry, Hermione. I know you’re not to blame. The trouble is the people who are to blame are all dead…apart from me.” He replied contritely, deciding to take a leaf out of Abby Scuito’s book when she’d created mop-people to keep her company. They were substitutes of the MCRT, with photos of their faces stuck to the janitorial mops in her department. Instead of mop-people he’d create punching-bag-people; it wasn’t even close to having the real douche-bags there in the flesh to make them pay, but it could, perhaps, lower his blood pressure somewhat.

“It’s okay, I know how much you care about him.” Hermione assured him. “And to answer your question, he’s had more than enough to cope with. But then Harry has always had bad luck when it comes to anything regarding his family. Makes you wonder if someone placed a curse on him when he came into the world.” She shrugged, her manner non-committal despite her observation but it didn’t fool him. Tony knew how much she cared about Harry.

Tony nodded, he’d had similar thoughts himself.

“I already told you that night we first found you again that Harry saw some of Snape’s memories just before the final confrontation with Voldemort - he viewed them in the Headmaster’s office in the pensieve?” she asked.

“Yeah, his memories of Dumbledore revealing his grand plan for dealing with that pesky horcrux named Harry James Potter.” Tony sniped sarcastically. “That was Dumbledore’s oh so wonderfully empathetic way of telling Harry he was the final one of the horcruxes that Voldemort created to make him immortal,” he fumed.

“Dear Harry, now you’ve hunted down all the other horcruxes - good job. I may have neglected to
mention that you are one too! Surprise! Now be a good little sacrificial piggy and go and find Tom Riddle, who I could have stopped, back when he was just a student needing guidance. Please let him strike you down with a killing curse so you can go on to the next great adventure and everyone else can go back to being selfish, insular and backward thinking twats living happily ever after. You’ve served your purpose and elevated me to the status of greatest wizard since Merlin. Good show. Your brilliant but never humble mentor, Albus Dumbledore.”

She laughed, somewhat sardonically. “That sounds so ridiculous but it’s true.”

The two friends sat in silence for what seemed an age but what was in reality but a few minutes and they tried to master their fury before the witch broke the angry silence.

“Dumbledore didn’t have the gonads to tell him face-to-face that he expected my best friend and your godson to meekly go out and stand in front of that caricature of a wizard who called himself a Dark Lord and let himself be killed. He didn’t want him to have time to think about what he was being asked to do. He knew he was dying and he handed the job over to Snape instead of doing the dirty work himself,” Hermione stated contemptuously.

“Makes you question who was the real Dark Lord, doesn’t it?” he mused dangerously.

“True. Voldemort was like Hitler but Dumbledore was more like Rasputin, although they both were highly Machiavellian in some respects.

Hermione looked at Sirius, seeing a furrow between his eyebrows. It was one of his rare tells that he was troubled about something or trying to put a puzzle together. He had a way of thinking far outside the box and came up with insights that were shocking to her. She wasn’t exactly a creative thinker but she admired anyone who was.

“What are you thinking?” She asked him curiously as the silence stretch out although it wasn’t an awkward silence – rather one where he wasn’t mentally present.

“I’m not sure.” He said musingly. “I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

Nodding in acceptance she returned to her account of Harry’s issues. “Okay…I’ll hold you to that. So, Snape’s method of delivering the news which Dumbledore refused to tell Harry, consisted of viewing them in the pensieve since he was about to drop off the twig too. Harry saw him admitting to Snape that he’d deliberately forced Harry to live with Petunia because he wanted him to be humble and unhappy. He knew they treated him like one of the Malfoy’s house elves so when the time he’d willing accept the fact he needed to die when he was told to.

“And if that wasn’t enough to deal with - just before he went and let Voldemort kill him, Snape also included some other extremely traumatic memories too. Not just that his scar was a horcux but that Severus was Lily Evans best friend, even before he went to Hogwarts. That he was in love with Lily Evans and that they had a minor spat and how, when he tried to apologise, she rejected him. How Lily broke his heart forever by turning to James Potter, cruelly punishing him by marrying his tormentor – his worst enemy and having his baby.”

Sirius snorted. “Calling your so-called best friend a mudblood is a little more significant than a minor spat, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded. “I agree. If Harry or Ronald had insulted me so grievously after proclaiming they were my friend and ‘loved me,’ I’d damned well have rejected them too. There’d be no way on earth that I could ever accept their apology or remain their friend. Trouble is that Harry can’t imagine just how derogatory that term is. He feels like his mother let Snape down by not forgiving
and moving on.”

“There was a lot more to it than that one ugly comment.”

“That makes sense,” she replied. “From all I know, Lily was a brilliant witch – she must have had a damned good reason to sever their friendship.”

The witch pulled a piece of naan bread into two and used a piece to dipping it in the raita before going to place it in her mouth. Hesitating, she dropped the bread back on the plate and chugged down a mouthful of her beer instead, looking slightly green.

“You know how easily Harry forgives people,” Hermione observed. So, I suppose it shouldn’t be a shock that he thinks that Lily should have accepted Snape’s apology because he feels guilty that both Lily and James made Severus’ life a misery. He’s probably convinced himself that’s why Snape betrayed them to Voldemort when he was a Death Eater, telling him about the prophecy. Therefore, in that flawed thinking, it was their fault, not Snapes’ that they died.”

Sirius wasn’t about to comment about his godson’s readiness to accept blame for things he had no control over, since he was still trying to overcome that failing himself, but Hermione wasn’t done with her analysis just yet. She’d saved the best ‘til last.

“So not only does Harry battle survivor guilt but Snape messing around with his mind has created the perfect storm for fucking up his already complicated relationship with Lily and James.”

Sirius stared at her gobsmacked. Not only for the bombshell she dropped about Prongs and Lily, but her letting fly with the F-bomb. That spoke absolute volumes about how pissed off and worried she had to be, since Hermione abhorred the use of foul language.

“So what do you suggest we do?” He asked her finally after a pregnant pause.

“I think you need to talk to him,” she replied. “Give him an alternate point of view – as someone who was there.”

“Yeah but as far as Harry’s concerned, Snape is the martyred, unsung hero and James and I are the bullies, Hermione. He’d hardly be ready to listen to me, let alone care about what I think about it. I wasn’t exactly an impartial bystander.”

Hermione was silent – clearly she was thinking about what he’d said and he remained quiet too. He really appreciated that about her – she actually cared enough to listen to his concerns. Didn’t try to fob him off with platitudes or tell him to suck it up. He remembered Gibbs lack of empathy when he ordered him to use Jeanne to help get information on a case (and didn’t that end well with her thinking he’d lied to her again and telling him never to contact her again).

Gibbs didn’t give a shit about how much angst it had caused him, so long as it closed the case – but when Diane Sterling, one of his exes were involved in a case it was fine for him to palm her off because he couldn’t or wouldn’t suck it up and deal with her. He’d bullied McGee into taking Diane home for protective custody when it would have been way more expedient for Gibbs or Fornell to simply take her back to one of their houses – not a one bedroom apartment jammed to the gills with tech stuff. But then rule # 1 of Gibbs should have been – Do as I say, not as I do – instead of Never screw over your partner.

Getting up and disappearing into the kitchen, he returned after several minutes with two cups of steaming aromatic chai tea. Handing one cup over to Hermione, he sat while she continued to regard him intently.
“So if this was a case you were presenting to a juror instead of talking to Harry, what would you do?” She asked, finally.

He thought about that carefully. “Honestly? I’d try to find another witness because the juror wouldn’t like me when they heard about the history between Snape and me,” he replied candidly.

Hermione nodded. “Okay but that’s not an option in this case, Sirius. Everyone else is dead. So, I’m sure sometimes you’re forced to use less than perfect witnesses for the prosecution. How do you go about making them over for the trial if you’re the prosecutor?”

Tony didn’t even hesitate. “Disclose anything upfront that the defence would bring up to try to discredit the witness,” he answered promptly. “So I should get in first and confess about James and my history with Severus? The only problem with that strategy is that he already knows about it Hermione,” he pointed out dispiritedly.

“No… he knows ONE side of the story and like I said, I doubt that Snape was totally blameless. Even if he was, Harry still needs to hear your side of what happened.”

Tony thought about her advice – she was after all an incredibly smart witch. And with maturity had come wisdom. What she said made sense.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right…but it’s not going to be easy. He reveres Dumbledore and Snape so much. I’m sure you know about cognitive dissonance?”

Hermione smiled slightly, “I’ll refrain from making the obvious snarky rejoinder not to teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Snuffles,” she commented drolly and breathed in the spicy scent of her tea. “Instead I’ll say, good point! So, you need a multi-pronged attack. Maybe you shouldn’t hit him with it all at once. Tackle it in stages and then let it settle. If you hit him with it all at once he’ll feel besieged and shut down,” she advised as Tony nodded in agreement.

“So let’s practise,” she suggested.

“What?” he squawked, caught off guard by her suggestion.

“Don’t solicitors…um attorneys rehearse testimony with their witnesses?”

He nodded.

“So make me your guinea pig instead of Harry. Tell me about when you almost managed to kill Severus.” She commanded, getting comfortable on the sofa - her eyes sympathetic but firm.
Reminiscing and Rehearsal

Chapter Summary

Tony prepares for his eventual confrontation with Harry over what occurred when the Marauders, Lily Evans and Severus Snape attended Hogwarts. Hermione acts as his sounding board.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was beta’ed by Faldo and I’d just like to take a few moments to thank her for her help and encouragement. This crossover may be outside of her comfort zone but she offered to help me finish the story so I could get back to writing the story she had been my awesome beta reader on – Rising to the Bait which was stuck in Writer’s Block Land. Thanks to her assistance I have finished the first draft of Serieux. She has proofed this chapter and chapter 26 too and all that remains is for the last chapter - 27 and the epilogue to be redrafted and beta’ed, all thanks to her assistance.

Beta readers are unsung heroes who take someone else’s unruly but much-loved child and with great tact and care, help mould it into the end product you get to read and they do it with little fanfare and even less acknowledgement.

It has been a long time since I last posted - I want to thank people who left comments for me from the last chapter. Although I didn't reply, I just wanted you to know that it was your kind words and encouragement tipped the balance and enabled me (in the face of some thoughtless and entitled readers' comments getting under my skin) to write the last two chapters of this story. But for your thoughtful feedback, this would have been the last chapter, bar the epilogue, as I’d come to the end of my rope, which was why I needed a time out and thus my failure to respond to you. Good news is that in my self-imposed timeout, I was able to finish writing the last two chapters of this story. Chapter 27 has been beta'ed and chapter 28 and the epilogue (which I wrote a long time ago) only need redrafting and beta'ing and I will hopefully have that done soon.

“So let’s practise,” she suggested.

“What?” he squawked, caught off guard by her suggestion.

“Don’t solicitors…um attorneys rehearse testimony with their witnesses?”

He nodded.

“So make me your guinea pig instead of Harry. Tell me about when you almost managed to kill Severus,” she commanded, getting comfortable on the sofa - her eyes sympathetic but firm.

So, okay what Hermione said made perfect sense…intellectually. But damn it, she had no idea how
difficult it was to sit here and discuss his youthful indiscretions, especially when he was already in a highly emotional state because of everything she’d revealed about Harry. Although Tony hadn’t seen his godson for 17 years (23 years if he factored in the extra six years of using the Time-turner) it was still a highly volatile emotional trigger for him.

People who knew Tony saw a joker – someone who didn’t hold grudges. An individual who was even-tempered, easy going and didn’t take anything seriously. Most people had no idea that he possessed an extremely explosive temper since he worked extremely hard to keep it in check. It had caused him far too much heartache in the past and, more importantly, it had hurt people who he loved so he’d worked hard on supressing it. His anger, his need to chase retribution had enormously negative consequences for Harry, an innocent kid, had paid a terrible price for his inability to control himself.

Talking about what a stupid, arrogant jerk he’d been was the absolute last thing he wanted to revisit, especially with Hermione. Still, if it could help Harry to move on then how could he begrudge his godson his chance to overcome his survivor’s guilt? Just because he didn’t want to relieve his biggest mistakes and regrets. Nuh uh, he’d already caused enough harm to his godson, so it was time to suck it up.

He’d look at it as an opportunity to help gather his thoughts and memories into an account that was cogent to Harry. He should be grateful for the kick up the butt and he was. But…

Taking a deep breath, Tony closed his eyes and thought about what he wanted to say before he began to speak. “The Marauders had always been fierce with our teasing and joking and it wasn’t only the innocent who were victims of our often very juvenile sense of humour. We also gave each other as good as we gave everybody else but it had always been good-natured hi-jinks, even if it was immature behaviour. Well, except for our treatment of Snape.”

“So why’d you treat him differently to everyone else?” Hermione prompted curiously.

“You know what? Looking back on it now with the benefit of hindsight - largely my embarrassment and shame when I think about what we did…what I did, I’m struggling too trying to understand why. Even with the extra insight from Anthony’s memories of being badly bullied at boarding school and the fact that both Snape and I were from abusive families, growing up, I don’t honestly know why.”

He stood up so he could move and get rid of the tension he was feeling and looked at the young woman, hoping she had the answers he didn’t. “See here’s what doesn’t make sense to me, Hermione. If we’d been out and out bullying little shits, James and I would have zeroed in on Peter Pettigrew as the perfect target to bully and torment.”

“So why’d you treat him differently to everyone else?” she asked.

“Trust me, he possessed the archetypal victim profile and then there was the proximity angle – he was in our dormitory for Pete’s sake! It would have been so damned convenient if all we were looking for was to have a target to bully. Plus, even then, he had an unfortunate rodentlike appearance that honestly, made him every bully’s wet dream. Yet James, Remus and me all staunchly defended him, physically and verbally. We extended the hand of friendship to him. And we didn’t just explicitly protect him from other would-be bullies either,” he mused.

Hermione cocked her head on the side. “Okay, you want to explain what you mean by that, Sirius.”

“Yeah, well by accepting him as a Marauder, Wormtail instantly became one of the cool students by association. The Houses of Black and Potter were old and venerable pureblood houses,
influential with a lot of the other pureblood wizards and witches, not that James or I gave a damn about that, by the way. Yet we were admired by our fellow-students despite our disinterest regarding all that pureblood snobbery, not just for our tomfoolery and our inventiveness when it came to playing pranks either.”

Hermione nodded. “I figured since you and James’ best friends at Hogwarts and then after you finished school were a half blood Pettigrew, a werewolf and a muggle who James married and had a half blood wizard with, and also that you agreed to be Harry’s godfather, you weren’t pure blood bigots. You were very far from perfect but you sure weren’t bigots, Pads.”

“We didn’t care if we were popular with all the other purebloods and that was a hugely powerful lure for those people aspiring to be what they saw as cool. Somehow, there isn’t anything as cool or a sexy as people who honestly don’t give a fu… fig, give a fig,” he caught himself just in time, knowing that his younger companion didn’t appreciate gratuitous swearing.

“Those tossers wanted to be like us, and wanting be accepted into our clique – purely for the prestige, I’m guessing. Peter, by association when he became a Marauder became one of the cool kids that the others wanted to be like and they felt like they had to impress him, to help win James and yours truly over. The irony was that we weren’t interested in the Marauders expanding.”

Sirius stood up and cracked his vertebra, wishing he could shift into Padfoot and go for an all-out blood pumping, muscle hurting run and stretch out his body properly. Dropping back down on the couch, the federal agent with quick-silver in his blood, continued his recitation even if it made him feel queasy in the stomach.

“Trust me, Pettigrew would have had a miserable time of it if we hadn’t adopted and championed him. – especially with many of the Slytherins who were terrible bullies.” He thought about Bellatrix – she was incredibly cruel, even as a little child. Her torturing of toads and bats was legendary and quite the source of pride to her doting parents. Sirius thought about Archibald, Narcissa’s beloved Kneazel which Bella killed. It was found horribly brutalised and when challenged, Bella justified it because she was jealous of her father hugging her baby sister too much. Even after all these years, thinking about Archie and how she’d tortured and mutilated him, made him want to puke.

Hermione was frowning in a way that Tony was learning meant that she was either thinking about something or remembering a past event. “I’ve no trouble believing that Pettigrew would have had a miserable seven years at Hogwarts if he hadn’t been a Marauder. In my time at Hogwarts, the girls from Ravenclaw bullied my Press Secretary, Luna Lovegood unmercifully. Just because she was a little different.”

Tony raised an eyebrow but didn’t speak.

Hermione absorbed the gesture and re-evaluated what she’d just said. “Okay Luna was more than a little different but that isn’t an excuse for hiding her belongings, laughing at her constantly and making her life a living hell. It only got better when Harry befriended her and became her protector. And closer to home, my own first few months at Hogwarts had been pure Hell until Harry and Ron saved me from the Troll and I lied to the teachers to save them from seven years of detentions.

“Once I was hanging out with The-Boy-Who-Lived, I was suddenly off limits when it came to bullies. Except for Draco, Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle and the rest of his Slytherin toadies, but then, they picked on Harry and Ron too - pretty much everyone, actually. So I can easily understand how Pettigrew was lucky James, Remus and yourself adopted him as a Marauder since kids, no matter if they were muggle or magical, Claws, Puffs, Lions or Snakes would have bullied him. Which only made Pettigrew’s betrayal of you all that much more unforgiveable.”
Tony glanced at his companion, thinking about everything she had said. It was true; kids magical or not could be unspeakably cruel to anyone who they sensed was even slightly different or even a little vulnerable. He thought about Anthony DiNozzo’s experiences as a little kid who’d just lost his mother, being brought up in a highly dysfunctional home by two alcoholics who abused him in their own ways and then had he’d been shipped off to boarding school. Where the cruel little shits had stripped him to his underwear to humiliate him and ran him up the flagpole, as if he were a scrap of material and then after laughing and degrading him, they left him there.

It had been so deeply traumatising to him, that Anthony had buried it deep in his subconscious, even convincing himself he was the perpetrator. No doubt, the shame and abhorrence of being a tormenter was more palatable than being a victim who was weak and pitiful. Tony fumed as he understood how that crap of Senior’s, about DiNozzos not crying or fainting because it showed weakness, had impacted on Anthony and made him repress the bullying. He’d blamed himself instead of the bullies because if he blamed the bullies, in his twisted logic then he was weak and being weak was a worse sin.

Once the memory that had proved to be false, resurfaced, Tony found he was piecing together more episodes of bullying that had occurred to Anthony DiNozzo at school. Plus, he’d begun to wonder how many of those automatic thoughts that Senior had created in Anthony as a child, had influenced Sirius too. Reinforced by Gibbs and his whole macho crap, especially his Rule #6 over the years had helped to beat him down. Certainly, when he first left Baltimore he’d never had put up with the crap of Jethro and the rest that he did as time passed by. Shrugging, he returned to the issue of kids bullying kids, as opposed to fathers bullying and browbeating their son’s or team mates and mentors bullying, hounding and harassing their colleagues.

Tony recalled a variety of horror stories that Ducky had recounted over his fifteen years at NCIS. Donald Mallard was an old boy at Eton College and in his stories, the exploits of the Etonians would curl your hair. All in all, he concluded that if these kids that Ducky had gone to school with had a wand, they’d probably have wiped out half the school population, considering that their brains were still maturing (particularly the frontal cortex) and therefore were not good at predicting consequences. Some of the stuff the Etonian’s got up to in Ducky’s day kind of made most of the Marauders exploits seem almost tame by comparison - with the exception of his unforgivable brain snap.

Looking up, finding Hermione watching him, he realised he’d been trapped inside his head instead of sharing with her.

“Sorry, guess I zoned there. So anyway, I’m not sure what it had been about Snape that had evoked such violently aversive feelings in us, especially since neither James or I were pureblood bigots. Idiots, arrogant brats but definitely never bigots. We couldn’t care less that Snape was a so-called half-blood, although I suspect that the other wizards and witches in his own house would have reacted much more negatively to him for just that reason alone. Slytherins believed, or liked to believe, that students in their house were exclusively purebloods, after all even if that wasn’t the case.”

“True – Tom Riddle and Delores Umbridge are two others who immediately spring to mind,” she observed with a moue of disgust.

He nodded. “Yeah the Black family would be rolling in their graves at the thought of that infamous duo! Imagine if they’d gotten together and begat.”

They looked at each other and chorused, “Eew,” as they imagined the mental image of snakey, toad-like offspring. By tacit mutual agreement they quashed the hideous picture of a baby
UmbVold and moved on. Hermione muttered something about needing to bleach her brain.

Tony knew that a part of why they’d hated Snape was because he was a Slytherin. “James and I had a pathological hatred of Snakes because so many of the pureblood bigots and Death Eaters ended up there. If Snape been sorted into another house- say Ravenclaw – it might have been different since historically, Gryffindor and Slytherins are like oil and water together. It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy that we must despise each other on principle. Not that I believe we’d ever have been best friends if we belonged to other houses, just maybe…just maybe we might not have automatically become bitter enemies.”

“Trust me, Sirius, I’m well acquainted with the enmity that exists between those two houses. Ronald and to a lesser extent, Harry were highly prejudiced when it came to anyone from Slytherin. Harry became more tolerant as he matured but Ron had a pathological hatred of them ‘til the day the bludger killed him. It was so deeply entrenched in him… in the whole Weasley clan, but especially Ron that there was no shaking it,” Hermione observed, somewhat exasperatedly.

“I know what you mean. The level of antipathy between the so called dark pureblood families and those that considered themselves to be of the light was well engrained over generations of being sorted into Slytherin versus the other three houses.” Sirius yawned as he thought about the situation. “But in the Black family, generation upon generation was sorted into Slytherin and their contempt for all the houses but especially Gryffindor was infused into all their offspring’s DNA. I’m sure that scores of them were rolling over in their graves when I was sorted into the enemy’s camp.

“But since all my family also belonged to the same house as Snape – including my little brother Regulus and Andi, my favourite cousin and had done for many generations, it still doesn’t really explain my over-the-top reaction to The Git. Yes, it’s true that I’d been sorted into Gryffindor and that the Slytherins, including Severus, were all highly derogatory about my so-called fall from grace. But my bucking the trend of being sorting into Slytherin was a source of great pride to me, not to mention enormous relief that I wasn’t going to spend seven years with a bunch snakey gits. Especially since many of them would end up volunteering to become Death Eaters. Even if it resulted in the final estrangement of my eleven-year-old self from my family. So it doesn’t explain my loathing of Snape, not really.”

Tony stood up and gathered their mugs, taking them into the kitchen and switching on the kettle to make another cup of chai tea. He wasn’t truly desperate for another cup so much as he felt the urge to move. He often found he did his best thinking when he went running, or when he was doing other things and stopped focusing exclusively on a problem at hand and turned it over to his left brain to work on.

“Mind you, the philosophical divide between Slytherin and all three of the other houses, especially Gryffindor, has always been actively encouraged by the staff, and by the school culture,” he observed from the kitchen. “It was looked on as totally natural and normal for us to hate each other.”

“Well both Heads, Dumbledore and Minerva were Gryffindors and Phineas Nigellus Black and Severus Snape were from Slytherin. Perhaps if the Heads had been chosen from Hufflepuff, then it might well have been different,” Hermione mused aloud.

“Excellent point – or Ravenclaw - maybe Luna should become the Headmistress – that would really shake them all up. Plus, can you imagine her Care of Magical Creatures classes?” he joked, fondly before becoming sober again. “But there were plenty of other Slytherins that I… um… we didn’t end up hating with such a burning passion as Snape. Nor did we try to find ways to make
their lives as unpleasant as possible.

“In the end, Snape’s Slytherin-ness wasn’t enough to explain our antipathy or the fact it was equally reciprocated by him. We were real little shits to him but he was a vitriolic jackass too - convinced of his own superiority and certainly not known to reach out a hand of kindness to those less capable.”

He gazed at Hermione who was looking just a little sceptical. “C’mon Hermione, did you honestly think that his attitude to so-called ‘dunderheads’ had just appeared because James was a prat to him, or Remus nearly attacked him because of me? If that was so, then why didn’t Harry turn into a selfish acid tongued little prick with all the shit that Severus and Draco put him through at school?” Tony demanded heatedly.

Harry’s best friend was frowning with that I’m trying to figure something out look, although she responded to his question. “Because he’s got a big heart and always puts other people’s needs before his own.”

“Severus always was snidely superior – convinced he was smarter than everyone else,” Tony stated calmly.

“Harry found a potions text book when he was in sixth year that belonged to someone who called themselves the Half-Blood Prince,” Hermione spoke slowly. “It had some pretty disturbing potions and spells and it caused a lot of arguments between us. In hindsight, I can see that it pointed to an extremely arrogant student who was incredibly negligent to write down some of the dangerous stuff that was in it. Harry only found out whose book it was by accident when he used that potentially lethal spell against Severus in anger.”

“Snape’s mother was Eileen Prince.” Tony said conversationally.

“Yeah, that would have been really good to know back in 1996 Hermione noted wryly. I can’t believe he left that book lying around for students to find.”

“What was the spell Harry used?” Tony inquired curiously

“Sectumsempra.”

Tony winced. “Harry found that in The Git’s potions’ text book?” he asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded gravely. “Yes. You know… from everything that Harry has told me about Tom Riddle at school, the similarities between him and Severus is spookily similar. The bad, abusive childhood, his hatred of muggles, his lack of empathy, his poor social skills, his obsession with the dark arts and his obvious skills in not just performing magic but creating spells. With the benefit of hindsight – why didn’t Dumbledore step in and take Snape under his wing at school, try to guide him away the joining the Death Eaters?”

“Good point, but Albus was good at turning a blind eye to kids from abusive homes,” Tony pointed out, thinking of Riddle and himself and who knows how many others. “In some ways, it parallels the abuse of house elves. Children are viewed as being owned by their parents, much the same way they own their house elves, so if they want to beat them black and blue – then that is their right. They’ve even convinced everyone, including house elves that they need to be indentured to wizarding families for their magic to thrive. That cannot be allowed to continue, Hermione or more Voldemort will simply rise up to replace him until you do. Laws must be changed…attitudes radically changed, wizards and witches at risk of abuse and neglect at school identified and dealt with.”
Hermione nodded. “Oh I completely agree with you. It is better to identify kids at risk and take remedial action before things are…”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is FUBAR,” Tony chimed in helpfully, ignoring his companion’s reproving frown. “Anyway I guess we kind of veered off topic there. We were talking about Snape as a Hogwarts’ student and the fact that red flags should have been raised and Dumbledore should have stepped in. But I think your comparison with Riddle has merit. Truthfully, the only real compassion I ever witnessed from him was the gentleness he showed Lilly Evans – his best friend.”

He was silent for a while, clearly lost in thought and Hermione didn’t push him. Finally, he looked across at her speculatively.

“You know, Hermione, in hindsight, I’ve often thought about their friendship and came to the conclusion that Lils was more of a plaything or a possession to Snape rather than a friend of equal standing. Like he was the wizarding world’s version of Professor Henry Higgins and Lily Evans was his Eliza Doolittle – to be made over into his idealise form of the perfect witch. One that was worthy of - to borrow his own moniker – the Half-Blood-Prince.”

“If that’s the case, then when his ‘Eliza’ had gotten herself sorted into a different house to Severus he must have been disappointed,” she ventured slowly.

“I guess so but surely he never expected that a first-generation witch would stand a chance of being sorted into Slytherin – the most pureblood conscious house in the damned school. After all, he always was telling us he had superior intellect, for Merlin’s sake.” He snorted cynically.

“And everyone knew that muggle born wizards and witches were never sorted into Salazar Slytherin’s House. If the Sorting Hat had gone against all known precedence and sorted Lily into Slytherin House, the ‘Snakes’ would have, at the very least, made her life for seven years at Hogwarts an absolute misery,” he retorted angrily, and Hermione remembered that Lily had become a good friend of his too, even if their initial relationship had been a rocky one. After all, Lily had made him Harry’s godfather.

Hermione couldn’t help thinking though just how much Sirius had understated the situation of a muggle-born witch in Slytherin. “It was much more probable that with the likes of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Black, plus the Lestrange brothers among other less than compassionate alumni, they could easily have killed her and not lost any sleep over it, Sirius. Or hurt her badly enough so she was sent home, permanently disabled.”

He nodded. “Yeah, knowing Bellatrix that would have been highly likely, Hermione. She was always crazy as a loon.” He decided there was no point in oversharing Bellatrix’ history with her. “Lucius never liked getting his hands dirty if he could avoid it. Preferred to have someone else to do it for him,” he said with evident revulsion.

“So anyway, surely if Severus cared for Lily as much as he claimed, he wouldn’t have wanted her to be sorted into a house which was patently unsafe for her to be in, just so she was in the same house as him. Why was he so pissed off with her when she was happy and successful in Gryffindor?”

Okay, Hermione conceded that was a very salient point; as was the whole observation about Pygmalion too. There were many types of love, love where you put the wants and needs of the one you loved before your own – like a good parent did for a child or a lover did from their partner. But there were also many forms of love which were obsessive, often resulting in stalking and domestic violence, even murder suicides where an individual, often male, was insanely jealous and
incredibly controlling. Where they decided if they couldn’t possess the object of their desire then no one else would either, so they decide to kill them. Was Sirius right – was Snape’s love for Lily Evans obsessive?

Oblivious to her thoughts, he continued his thinking out loud.

“And it’s not like he could expect her to espouse pureblood propaganda to fit in with the other Slytherins either. Despite maintaining a friendship with Severus and loathing the Marauders for our arrogance and juvenile humour, it didn’t mean that she wouldn’t support a more inclusive Gryffindor-like philosophy of magic being a first generation witch. After all, it supported her very right to exist in the magical world, unlike Slytherin and the pure bloods. Yet when she didn’t respond the way he wanted her to, Snape was bitter and cruel to her, calling her the worst possible epithet that a wizard or witch could call someone born to non-magical parents.”

Hermione thought about Lily Evans. She often found herself identifying with Harry’s mother. They were both first generation witches, highly intelligent and therefore gifted at the more intellectual side of witchcraft. Often to their detriment, when it came to being a target to the likes of Voldemort and his ilk. Although she’d had friends in other Houses, Hermione decided that having a best friend in Slytherin would have been exceeding hard for her to manage. Even if she’d gotten along okay with several of the Snakes who were in classes with her which Harry and Ron weren’t, friendship was problematic for both of them.

She didn’t know if personally she could have a Snake for a best friend – especially one who hung out with the likes of such students as Bellatrix, Narcissa, Crabbe and Goyle Seniors and Lucius Malfoy. All were, when said and done, purebloods and future Death Eaters in the making. And honestly, how could a best friend who truly loved Lily think that she’d have been happy to survive after Voldemort killed her husband and baby Harry, which was what Snape had intended for his ‘best friend.’ How could a best friend believe that Lily would thank him for her life (when his hatred had killed her family) and expect her to then become his lover. That degree of self-delusion spoke, in her professional opinion, of a jealousy and obsessive love, not the pure self-sacrificing love where you put the person who you love’s personal happiness before your own.

Sirius stood and began to pace as he talked out his thoughts.

“Snape’s connection to Lily may have contributed to the rivalry and hatred between Severus and James, but it couldn’t be blamed for the bad blood between me and him, except perhaps peripherally. As reprehensible as our teasing was and Snape’s own equally snotty-nosed attitude, I’m deeply ashamed of my own bigoted, vindictive behaviour towards him at Hogwarts.” He walked over to the piano and started gently playing single notes on the piano – like an accompaniment to his thoughts. His expression became tortured as he started to talk about the situation that he most regretted during his seven years at Hogwarts.

“I can’t make excuses for my criminally dangerous prank - setting Snape up with Remus at the wrong time of the month had been indefensible. I won’t excuse it! All I can say is that it was an impulsive and totally dumbass move but it wasn’t a premeditated act against Severus – more of an impulsive brain snap. If you need evidence to back it up my assertion, just think about what would have happened if my idiotic stunt had succeeded and James hadn’t saved the day by saving Snape’s miserable arse. Remus would have been locked up for life in Azkaban for attacking a wizard or they would have sentenced him to death. Plus, Dumbledore and the staff would have been charged for endangering the students.”

Hermione, knowing how much Sirius loved Remus agreed that someone who had spent blood, sweat and tears for several years secretly learning how to transform into an animagus to help his
friend, wouldn’t put him in danger if he’d actually stopped for a minute to consider the consequences. Family was everything to Sirius, and James and Remus were his brothers.

“Okay I think that’s a really salient point to highlight to Harry. Not as an excuse but honestly, he should be able to identify with doing stupid stuff that wasn’t thought out properly. The Fight at the Ministry was a classic example of not engaging brain before responding to a situation emotionally.” She exchanged a meaningful look with him. “And other people paid a huge price for his impulsiveness.”

Changing the subject, she asked, “So what exactly led up to you sending Severus off after Remus when he was in his werewolf form, Sirius? Did you just walk up to him and say ‘Why don’t you go to the Shrieking Sack, Snape,’ and why would he listen to anything you told him, anyway? Not as if you were buddies – surely he was suspicious.”

Frowning he sighed. “Severus hated all of us and the feeling was mutual – well at least it was reciprocated for James and me, but Remus usually tried to get us to give him a break. Kept telling us Snape had a difficult life, yet for some reason Severus was always making snide remarks about Remus when the truth was that Moony was the most meek and mild wizard.

“He definitely didn’t deserve to be hassled by Snape. He knew Remus had a secret and trust me, he was absolutely determined to find out what it was, just so he could expose him. He was pathologically jealous of Moony. He kept sneaking around trying to catch Remus in his “full moon state” and I got tired of having to hide it. I know…stupid but I just snapped one day and thought if he was so desperate to find out what we were hiding, then let him crapped his pants in fright, it would serve him right.”

He looked at her candidly. “Yes, Mooney could be pretty damned fierce when he transformed, although by that stage we were playing with him during his Mooney times and thought of it as the Marauders’ playtime. I sort of forgot just how dangerous he could be.”

Knowing she’d seen just how scary Remus could be when he became a werewolf, he knew she had a good idea what would have faced Snape if James hadn’t raced to the rescue, he shook his head, disgusted.

“As I said…idiot that I was, I guess I thought…no I didn’t think… I was far too pissed off with him always making snide remarks and I snapped. Maybe I felt like if Remus got a chance to frighten the crap out of him it would serve him right for not minding his business and leaving him alone. Didn’t think about what the ramifications would be for Mooney.” He got up from the piano stool and stalked out to the kitchen and put the coffee maker on.

Hermione muttered about the male brain, immature frontal cortices and how it translated in a lack of insight into consequences in teenagers.

“ Took a long time for him and Prongs to forgive me,” he confessed remorsefully as he came back into the living area. “I’ve never managed it myself though! All those years of learning to transform to help him, and that included wanting to help keep his secret and stupid idiot that I am, I threw it all away in my frustration. All for a few moments of childish gratification.”

Hermione thought about how Remus’ monthly absences from teaching had been a tip off that he was hiding something – especially when it coincided with the full moon. Snape was an abysmal teacher, but with a Mastery in Potions he wasn’t stupid by any means. She had put two and two together when she was only thirteen, figuring out about Remus’ lycanthropy, not because she was desperate to expose her Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, but just because she was a puzzle solver. She reckoned Snape had to have put Remus’ absences and the full moon together and come
up with four although, unlike teenage Hermione, she was fairly sure that solving a mystery wasn’t what had motivated the teenage Snape.

“Why was Snape so fixated on Remus?” Hermione pressed. “Was Moony an arrogant little git like you and James?”

“No, I told you. He was a really humble and unassuming wizard. As a werewolf, he was terrified he’d be found out, so he was obsessive about keeping a low profile. Which was why my brain snap was so unforgivable. Bad enough to be betrayed by an enemy but by a best friend… it was inexcusable. Apart from which, he was a genuinely nice kid, kind to others, polite to the teachers, loyal, humble and trustworthy.”

“So Severus’ determination to expose him, and chances were he’d already figured out about the lycanthropy because he wasn’t a fool, wasn’t because Remus was a jerk and he wanted revenge. So, why?” Hermione mused curiously

“If I had to hazard a guess I’d say Snape was jealous of him.” Sirius replied. “Remus was smart and studious and Severus was one of the top students in our year. If he was in any other form he’d probably have been dux of the year but he had some fierce competition across the houses. Lily was brilliant at Potions and Charms and… really, she was good at everything she studied. She was pretty much acknowledged to be the smartest witch of her generation. Professors Horace Slughorn and Filius Flitwick swooned over her, both offered her apprenticeships when she left Hogwarts.

“James was brilliant at Transfiguration and Athrimancy but to be honest he was no slouch generally and Remus was like Lily, an excellent student right across the board, but he really excelled at DADA and Care of Magical Creatures. If Remus and Lily weren’t in his year, Snape probably would have been top of the class, especially in Potions and DADA – they were his top subjects.” Sirius reminisced. “Instead he was pipped at the post by that pair in his two best (favourite) subjects”

“And since Lily was his best friend he could hardly resent her for beating his ass in Potions, not consciously. So he blamed Remus for it instead,” Hermione hypothesised, nodding slowly. “Was Snape especially invested in being top in Defence Against the Dark Arts?”

Sirius chuckled somewhat bitterly. “Are you kidding? DADA had always been seen as the crème de la crème of magical subjects for wizards and witches, particularly if they intended to become an Auror. But for wizards there was also something of a virility aspect to it, for some wizards anyway. You know… the whole duelling aspect. Someone like Lily was more concerned about the theoretical side of spell work or the strategic aspects of duelling though.

“Remus wasn’t exactly into all the machismo crap but I think as a werewolf he had dreamed from the day he was attacked that someday he would make sure that no other witch or wizard suffered the scourge of lycanthropy from Fenrir Greyback. He always saw it as a curse while some werewolves revelled in the enhanced senses and the incredible physical that it brought them. Moony took everything about DADA incredibly seriously.

“As for Snape, when it came to Defence Against the Dark Arts, he always thought he was hot stuff but he could never best Remus when they duelled. He was always really sneaky, always sailing just this side of illegal - but he could never match Remus’ reflexes. Probably because of his lycanthropy, he was preternaturally quick on his feet, so no matter how down and dirty Severus became, Mooney was faster.”

Hermione remembered how during the Duelling Club that Gilderoy Lockhart had started, how Snape who was assisting, had adroitly paired Draco with Harry and suggested the serpent spell
which was ethically reprehensible for an adult wizard, let alone a Potions Master, Professor and a Head of House. She recounted the story to Sirius, explaining that it had rebounded on Draco and Snape when they discovered Harry could speak to snakes.

“Severus always was desperate to become the DADA professor at Hogwarts,” Hermione observed. “Plus he was always quite derogatory to Remus when he was appointed to the position.”

He nodded grimly. “Must have pissed him off badly to see Remus get what he wanted so badly. And when Moony forgot to take his wolfsbane because he saw me and Peter on the Maurader’s Map, ‘The Git’ must have thanked his lucky stars, since it gave him a legit excuse to rat Remus out. It must have seemed like poetic justice to get him thrown out of the job that he coveted so badly.”

“There was a rumour doing the rounds that Severus put in an application every year to become the DADA professor at Hogwarts and got knocked back,” the new minister mused. “Guess Dumbledore wouldn’t take the chance that the DADA curse would strike his ultra-secret spy,” she retorted scornfully.

“Of course, the other thing that he could have been pissed off at Mooney for was that while Lily had nothing but scorn for James and me for the longest time, she adored Remus,” Tony said slowly. “They were always good friends – they’d often be found together in the library or the Gryffindor common room, heads bent over their school books. And why wouldn’t she want to spend time and be Remus’ friend - he was smart and kind, not an arrogant jerk like James, Snape and me.”

Hermione was getting a much fuller picture of how it had been at Hogwarts for the Marauders, Lily and Severus. In lots of ways it wasn’t all that different to when she had been there. But instead of the enmity between her, Harry, Ron and Draco and his followers, it had been the Marauders, Lily, Snape and his Snake mates butting wands. Voldemort had been more of an overt menace back in the Marauder’s time but still he’d hovered over her time at Hogwarts too.

“You know Sirius, I was thinking that it might help you in talking to Harry about you and James ‘picking on’ Snape if you were to let him see your memories in a pensieve. He’s only seen Snape’s side of what happened and as you pointed out, there are at least two sides to everything. I think that if he saw your memories too, rather than just hearing about them, it might make that point more impactful. Don’t forget he’s had twenty years of believing Snape’s version of the past is the gospel truth.”

“That’s a pretty good idea about the pensieve, Oh-Incredibly-Wise-One, but I don’t have one. I’ve never really bothered to venture into the magical shopping enclaves in any of the cities I’ve worked in – not unless I followed a suspect in there once or twice, if I thought they were magical. I tried hard kept away from the wizarding world until I accidentally got taken home for dinner by Tobias.”

Hermione decided not to respond to the nickname he’d called her. Shaking her head, she focused on the problem that had been identified. “That’s easily fixable – we could go out shopping while I’m here if you want to, Snuffles. By the way, you never told me about the rest of the Marauders. How did you get on academically? I know you and James were on the quidditch team together but what were your best subjects?”

If she’d been better acquainted with his facades, she would have realised he’d been deflecting, leading her away from a topic he didn’t want to talk about. But she had seen him as a broken, angry individual who had escaped from a terrible experience and was not able to contain his emotions. Now he was much more together, very different in demeanour, although there was
sometimes a brief flash of something emotional on rare occasions. Something that hinted that he
wasn’t quite as self-possessed as he appeared to be – like Throw-Pillow - Destructor-Padfoot. Still,
most of the time he was generally an emotional iceberg over things that he felt strongly about.

“Pettigrew’s best subjects were Muggle Studies and History of Magic,” he revealed reluctantly.
“He was always rather lazy – took soft subjects when he could. Plus, he managed to copy off Lily
when he could get away with it. He was good at playing the victim card when he saw she had a
soft spot for birds with broken wings…”

“I didn’t realise he was a first-gen wizard,” Hermione interjected on his account, surprised.

“He wasn’t. Oh… I see, Muggle Studies? Well that class has always been a bit of a joke – you
must know that, Hermione. The professor who taught it was completely clueless and Wormtail was
a real fraudster. He would make up all the most fantastic stuff about non-magicals and the professor
fell for it, hook line and sinker. Since the professor wouldn’t have recognised a muggle if she’d
fallen over them in the street and they’d shouted their non-magical status in her face, Peter found it
dead easy to hoodwink her. Just needed to flatter her about how smart and pretty she was. Should
have clued us in about his morals back then, eh?”

“Why didn’t the first gens or even the half-blood students call his bluff?” she demanded, clearly
incensed about the thought of someone getting a grade that wasn’t deserved. That was anathema to
the studious witch.

“Why didn’t you take Muggle Studies, Hermione?”

“Because it was about a century out of date and taught by fools,” she harrumphed indignantly. “I
tried to tell them about the Moon Landing and the Mars Probes by the Russians and the Americans.
And space shuttles and how there were planes that travelled beyond the speed of sound or that
doctors were doing heart, kidney and liver transplants. The professor and the students accused me
of being a liar or being crazy. Ah yes…I see. First-gens don’t enrol in the class in second year as an
elective because it’s a complete farce.”

“Exactly. And the only half-bloods taking the class were weasels like Pettigrew who were bone
lazy. So, they weren’t about to blow the whistle on him because they would have been cutting off
their noses to spite their faces.”

“And you? Were you hoping I wouldn’t notice that you never mentioned your academic
achievements, Pads?”

“Ah…I was kind of a Jack of all trades… master of none,” he answered. evasively she thought.

“But you were accepted as an Auror. So, you must have had reasonably good NEWTS. C’mon
Pads, you know I’ll go and look you up in the DMLE archives when I get back home if you don’t
tell me.”

Scowling at her with a glare he’d learnt from Gibbs, reluctantly he revealed, “I got four Es and
seven O’s.” He got up and started clearing the vestiges of their Indian meal and carried it into the
kitchen to begin rinsing the plates before loading them into the dishwasher.

Hermione was more than a little dumbfounded by his reply; she got 12 Outstanding Owls in 5th
year and it had nearly killed her. When she went back to school to do her 7th year after the Battle of
Hogwarts she decided not to be so Type A and take things easier, only sitting for eleven subjects
for her NEWT exams. She’d performed adequately, gaining ten Outstandings and one Exceeds
Expectations, topping her year. but then she was constantly referred to as the smartest witch of her
age and the expectations for her to do well had been enormous.

Creeping up behind him, she jumped when he growled at her without turning around. “Grab the cream out of the fridge for the coffee if you want one or do you want something stronger?”

Making an inelegant eeeping sound in surprise, she asked. “How did you know I was there?”

“Your perfume,” he replied simply. “Vanilla, honey, orange blossom.”

Hermione giggled – more to let off steam after he scared her by pre-empting her prank. “It’s Armani Code and I guess I should know better than trying to catch you with your pants down, Snuffles,” she joked.

Watching as he dried his hands on a handtowel before moving to the fancy coffee maker, looking at his face, which was unusually grave, she decided not to pursue the topic of his pants or lack of them. She knew that Sirius had a reputation as a lady’s man back in the Marauder’s era, but she’d tried flirting with him a few times since coming to the States, so far without success.

Toby had warned her that he’d endured a painful breakup with a federal agent from the DEA and an even more painful reunion with the love of his life, who was now married. Still, with someone as hot a Sirius was, she couldn’t help fantasizing about him, but she’d try harder to keep her thoughts to herself. She was starting to feel like a sexual predator and if Sirius was clinically depressed as she suspected, apart from the pain his broken heart, depression could really put the kibosh on a sex drive.

_Maybe he just isn’t attracted to you, Hermione_ she remonstrated sternly. And it wasn’t as if he didn’t have enough on his plate right now with the betrayal he feels with his boss and his treatment of him. _Leave the poor guy alone._

She also resolved to look up his NEWT results when she returned home, since he was so reluctant to discuss them with her.

Instead she responded to his previous enquiry about after dinner drinks. “What about both? Can I have an Irish Coffee?”

Sipping her coffee which was perfect, she decided that there was a mystery to be solved and she wouldn’t be able to let it go until she found out why he’d sat for eleven NEWTs.

_End of Flashback:_

Once she’d returned to London she’d checked the DMLE personnel archives for Sirius’ Auror record. Sure enough, he’d obtained 11 NEWTS in his final year at Hogwarts just as he said. Contrary to what she’d been expecting to find, he hadn’t opted for any soft (easy) electives. He’d selected Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology, Astrology, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Alchemy and Magical Theory.

Alchemy and Magical Theory? How come she wasn’t given the option of taking Magical Theory or Alchemy? After further investigation, she discovered that Alchemy was offered as a 7th year elective if enough students wanted to take it. Although in Sirius’ case, because there weren’t enough students who were interested, James Potter’s parents had paid for him to be tutored privately in both Alchemy and Magical Theory. Apparently, Dorea Potter nee Black had encouraged his unusual study choices after they’d adopted him into their family when he was sixteen after his parents disowned him.

She’d asked Sirius on a subsequent Skype call why he’d decided to sit for 11 intellectually
challenging subjects and he’d given her some trite answer about how because James was the Head Boy, Lily was Head Girl and Remus was a Gryffindor prefect, he’d had too much time on his hands in his last two years and was bored. But considering that Pettigrew was only sitting for seven NEWTs and three of those were considered by academic types (no, not intellectual snobs) such as herself to be cakewalk, being bored was a pretty flimsy pretext since he could have hung around with Peter. Finally, he’d admitted that he’d always coasted at Hogwarts, not wanting to be seen as too smart but his parents had still tried to force him to join the Death Eaters anyway.

Voldemort it seemed, was desperate for someone from the Black line which was well versed in Dark Magic to come up with even more heinous curses and spells in his war on Muggles. Apparently, some of the Marauder’s pranks at Hogwarts conveyed by the children of Death Eaters, convinced him that Sirius could be an asset to his side. Hermione considered this, shivering in dread when she thought not just about the Marauders and how much harm could have come from their dubious ‘talents’ as anarchists but also Fred and George Weasley if Voldemort had ever recruited them.

Sirius explained that once he was finally disowned by his parents and the Potters gave him sanctuary when he was beaten nearly to death, he decided it was time to actively fight against Voldemort, especially when his little brother joined the Death Eaters. So, with Dorea’s gentle encouragement, he chose subjects that he thought would be beneficial in his law enforcement career.

Hermione didn’t know whether she felt more proud of Pads or insanely jealous that he studied two subjects she’d never had. He was clearly much deeper than anyone gave him credit. She wondered why he was so closed mouth about his achievements. Even now, Tobias had discovered that he’d studied a Masters in Forensic Psychology and graduated without any of his teammates being aware of it. Not that it was classified or anything – since Fornell found it when he was doing his check about how Tony had been in three police precincts at once. Likely he’d used the time-turner to help him complete the degree in five semesters while still working full time, especially for someone like Gibbs, who Toby had assured her was a tyrant.

And as someone who loved to learn and was justifiable proud of her own academic achievements, she struggled to understand why Sirius wouldn’t want everyone to know. Her psychologist side also noted parallels to Harry and how the Dursleys encouraged him to strive for academic mediocrity since when he did succeed, he’d showed up the repugnant Dudley, his cousin. Sirius, like his godson had chosen to deliberately underachieve academically. Still his team mates had to be fairly gormless to take him at face value – weren’t they supposed to be the best of the best investigators?

Once again, Hermione gave thanks for her wonderful, supportive parents.

She thought about the mess between Snape and the Marauders. It wasn’t just Severus and Sirius’ deplorable home lives that had contributed – Hogwarts had taken on a huge responsibility for their socialisation, not merely the magical education of its students and therefore had to accept some culpability. Hogwarts – the jewel in the UK wizarding world’s crown, like most boarding schools, magical or non-magical, had a deeply entrenched culture of bullying, often tacitly rewarding students who engaged in it.

However, stupidity and institutional cruelty aside, adversity tended to test the mettle of an individual and show their true worth. Anthony DiNozzo, from what Sirius had shared with her - was neglected and abused, brought up by alcoholic parents in a mansion in Long Island New York. He was educated at schools, where he was bullied and lonely, yet he’d chosen to became a cop to help other people. Harry neglected and abused, grew up to be equally self-sacrificing, kind and
caring about others.

Which wasn’t to say that either man was a paragon of virtue or was perfect by any means. They were not, they both were deeply flawed individuals yet they didn’t hate the whole world for what they had endured through no fault of their own. Like Sirius, they chose not to take out their pain and anger on innocent bystanders. Sirius and Harry both made conscious decisions not to become Death Eaters unlike Snape who decided that other people, innocent people should be made to suffered for what he’d endured.

Still, bearing in mind the mutual antagonism that Snape and Sirius shared for each other, she wondered, could it have just come down to a clash of individual personalities, pure and simple. Plus, two individuals grievously damaged by their families who should have expected that Hogwarts wouldn’t let them down by perpetuating pathetically outdated forms of bigoted bastardry disguised as rah-rah house competitiveness

And its consequences - ugly – so very ugly in the fallout for so many!
Conspiracies

Chapter Summary

Tony decides to ask a friend's point of view on something that has been bothering him.

Chapter Notes

My condolences to those affected by the terrible event in Barcelona, Spain and Charlottesville, USA.

Reaching the end of the story now - two more and the epilogue to go - I think! Many thanks to Faldo for proofing this chapter. Any mistakes are my bad.

After Hermione had dropped all her bombshells about Harry, back when she’d first ferreted out Tony’s existence and decided to offer him a job on her first trip to DC, he’d been totally overwhelmed. He continued processing all the information she’d imparted about his godson; there was so much to take in, not just in terms of the intervening years since his unexpected departure either. Hearing her analysis that her best friend and his godson was suffering under the weight of PTSD and survivor’s guilt from the war had impacted upon him deeply.

It was a large part of why he’d finally decided to go ‘home’ to London and take up the directorship of the DMLE – that and yes, he’d had a gutful of Gibbs and the team over the years. He’d already guessed that his ‘death’ or rather Sirius’ demise had had a deeply negative impact on Harry even though he’d never really had enough time for Harry to truly bond with him as a teenager, what with Harry attending Hogwarts for most of the year and him being holed up in that tomblike prison aka Grimmauld Place. He only knew how much it had truly it impacted on Harry though because Hermione had painted a graphic picture of how much and how deeply Harry was affected the night Bellatrix pushed him through The Veil.

It had however paled in comparison to being able to listen to Harry express his guilt yesterday though which proved to be an unbearably painful experience for him. It was one thing to know a truth intellectually but quite another to hear and feel Harry’s pain first-hand. He couldn’t let it go on a moment longer without doing something about it.

He wandered into his bedroom, retrieving his pensieve from his walk-in closet, plus the box where he’d carefully deposited the vials into which he’d extracted and stored over twenty memories and had placed it in his home safe. There were reminiscences of his time at Hogwarts, containing memories of Lily, James, Remus, Pettigrew, Severus and himself over the seven years they spent at school.

Some of them were just memories that he thought Harry would get a kick out of watching – how he and James had met up on the train and discovered they were related since James’ mother was a Black. There was their sorting into Gryffindor and Lily’s, and the very amusing one of how James made an absolute prat of himself the first time he met Lily. How she was so not impressed by James for the longest time. He’d included his memory of an epic quidditch game James and
himself had played in between Gryffindor and Slytherin, which had lasted six long hours, where they beat the Snakes and won the Quidditch Cup.

There were also the memories that were so shameful for him to watch, of their teasing of Snape plus the one that showed just of how close he came to making the most egregiously stupid mistake of his life. The time when he decided, in a fit of rage at Snape’s unrelenting determination to ‘out’ Remus with his wolf clothes on, so he’d told him about the Shrieking Shack. After running interference for Moony all those full moons, how could he have been such a prat? There was also the memory showing how James saved Severus’s butt and Sirius’ too… and a bunch of other memories to put things in context. For example, how Severus hated the gentle Remus and was always trying to reveal his secret because he was insanely jealous of the werewolf.

Memories of how Snape tried to stop Lily from spending time with anyone else but him and how patient and loving she was with her friend, even when he didn’t deserve her loyalty. He’d extracted memories of Severus tacitly or explicitly supported the other Slytherins when they trash talked her and other first generation born witches and wizards, instead of standing up for her like a best friend should do. There were memories showing just how shattered and hurt she was when he called her a mudblood and how it had been the last straw for her, not just a one-off mistake by Severus as Harry seemed to think. Last but not least, he’d included memories of Lily as a Gryffindor prefect with Remus in fifth and sixth year, and then in their final year, James and Lily as Hogwarts’ Head boy and Girl.

Staring at the assorted vials containing so many memories Tony remembered the day eight weeks ago when Hermione had dragged him down to the commercial magical shopping precinct in DC to purchase a pensieve. It was right before she’d mysteriously disappeared on ‘personal business’ for ten days, remaining tight lipped about her absence. He’d figured she was meeting other magical politicians and as such was classified. Tobias had been worried about her because she was a high-ranking individual from one of their closest allies. Tony reassured him that Hermione was very capable of taking care of herself. Still his incurable nosiness made him wonder what she was up to.

Anyway, they’d picked out a pensieve that looked like an expensive Murano glass bowl, just in case a non-magical person should get curious about it. Immediately after they’d purchased it, he’d started the process of removing his memories for Harry and he’d felt deep regret that he hadn’t thought to do this for him back when he escaped from Azkaban. Although admittedly, after 12 years hiding from those damned Dementors as Padfoot, he been half way to Crazy Town and hadn’t exactly been thinking too clearly. Not to mention hiding from the Death Eaters and the Ministry who believed he was a mass murderer and the betrayer of James and Lily had left him with very little time for touchy-feely activities.

So, he’d worked away steadily at his project over a period of several weeks, watching as the memories began to mount up. He decided that one day soon, he would start creating memories of the Marauders, Lily and finally Baby Harry after they’d left Hogwarts, but for now, he was just focusing on their time together in Hogwarts. When he’d completed his somewhat painful project, even though he’d included some good times too, he’d finally figured out what it was that had been bugging him when he’d been talking to Hermione. It was to do with her account of how Harry’s occlumency tutoring had come to a stuttering halt.

To wit, what the devil was Snape doing with those particular memories of James bullying himself and Sirius sending him to the Shrieking Shack where Remus was going through his transformation to werewolf? Why were they, of a lifetime of potential memories he possessed, including the terrible atrocities he’d seen and taken part in as a Death Eater, been the only ones left lying about in the pensieve? Seemed extraordinarily coincidental and while a lot of Gibbs’ rules were just plain ludicrous, coincidence…not so much. There was really only one reason he could think of but then,
he was also totally biased when it came to Snape and his godson.

Although he’d promised to let Hermione in on his thoughts once he figured them out, Tony was still trying to figure it out if he was over-reaching or not. He wished he could ask someone unbiased to run his assumptions by them to see if his analysis was sound, or if it had been completely clouded by his hatred for what Snape had done to Harry. Given his feelings about him, it was quite possible.

He supposed he could organise a Skype call to Hermione but she wasn’t a trained investigator and she would also have preconceived opinions of both parties involved, too. He really wanted a fresh set of eyes – someone who didn’t have preconceived opinions on what had gone down because they liked or disliked the participants.

That had been when he remembered Tobias Fornell, who knew about magic, knew about his past but had never met Snape or Harry and could be much more impartial about the facts and check Tony’s assumptions to see if they were logical. So, Tony had invited him over to dinner – cooking him veal parmigiana and tiramisu so he could bend his ear and get his opinion.

Flashback to dinner in his apartment with Tobias six weeks ago:

“Okay, explain to a dumb non-magical such as myself the differences between pensieves, occlumency and legilimency to me again, Tony,” Tobias requested looking bemused and a little bit lost.

“Sure, I can do that,” Tony agreed agreeably. “Okay… so, Legilimancy is essentially the ability to invade another person’s mind and stroll through their thoughts and memories… even if it’s against their wishes or without permission. Although doing it without consent is illegal.”

“What, like a mind reader?” Fornell interrupted him, intrigued.

“Yes, I guess so. Occlumency is the skill of being able to organise your memories and thoughts, and to protect them from a being attacked by a legilimens. I’ve also used it to keep my memories ordered so I don’t slip and get confused about whose memories are whose – and to make sure some thoughts and memories never see the light of day,” Tony admitted, before leaping up and clearing the table so Fornell couldn’t press him for more information.

“I’ve found it a useful tool when working under cover, helping to keep my identities straight and not getting confused under stress,” he explained.

Fornell nodded. “Yeah, I can see why that would come in extremely handy.”

Returning to the table with the coffee he’d brewed a bit earlier, he suggested they should move to the sofa in the living area. Fornell complied eagerly. Tony sniggered – the FBI agent would probably have agreed to run through the building stark naked for a decent cup of coffee. Truth to tell, he was almost as much of a coffee addict as Gibbs, except he had better taste.

As they sipped their coffee, Tony resumed their discussion. ‘Okay so, where were we? Oh, yeah, well a pensieve is a magical device that is used to replay memories.”

“Like a camcorder?”

Tony considered the question and wondered how to explain. “No not exactly. I could extract a memory that occurred a few minutes ago or when I was five years old. I could watch the memory taking place as a third person, as could other people.”
He looked at the fibbie struggling to grasp the concept and decided to just demonstrate it, seeing he was now the proud owner of a pensieve. Heading into his bedroom he retrieved it off the top shelf in his wardrobe and carried it back and placed it on the island benchtop dividing the kitchen from the living room. He figured it would probably be easier for Tobias to experience if he was standing up.

“Wanna see for yourself?” he invited as he carefully used his wand to extract a memory of himself, Regulus and his parents when he was nearly 12 years old and placed the silverly-white wisp of memory into the bowl of the pensieve. The runes that powered the device had been obscured by a notice-me-not charm in case it ever fell into non-magical hands if it was stolen. Hermione’s suggestion.

Explaining to Tobias how to watch his memory, the father of a teenage witch was keen to learn as much as he could about Emily’s world, so despite being a little perturbed by the swirling mistiness wafting out of the bowl, he followed Tony’s example and shoved his face into the bowl.

Pensieve memory:

Tobias found himself a part of a disturbing and disorientating tableau. Unlike watching a video or a movie, he was actually a part of the scene. He swiftly realised that while he was physically part of what was taking place, none of the other individuals were aware of him. Which was of course highly logical considering he was experiencing something which had taken place in the past And yet it felt so real – not like a Three-D movie but that he was actually present, simply invisible to the participants except for Tony who was aware that he was there.

Of course, said participants didn’t look like your typical family. There was a horse-faced woman and her husband had inky black hair which was long and tied back by a leather thong, who had a pinched rather sour faced and he was scowling at his eldest son. The youngster looked to be about 12 or 13 years old and he was being lectured about the heinous crime of being seen alighting the Hogwarts express at Kings Cross Station in the vile company of a blood traitor, and two half-blood wizards. The final member of the group was a younger version of his brother.

The older boy, who Tobias assumed to be Sirius Orion Black looked singularly unmoved by the spiteful tirade, until the horse-faced witch began screeching about him staying away from mudbloods, who were trying to steal magical power from the purebloods and take over the world. Then he looked furious at the racial slur, although by then she moved on to other monstrous transgressions. Apparently, the bitch um witch (who was also presumably his mother) was throwing a fit because he had left photos of muggles stuck to his bedroom walls when he went off to school and she hadn’t been able to remove them.

Screeching, “creature,” at the top her lungs, Tobias wasn’t sure if she was offering an opinion on the muggles on Sirius’ wall, or if she was trying to insult Sirius. Suddenly someone...something appeared. It looked somewhat similar to that character Gollum in The Lord of the Rings trilogy who was possessed by the ring which he called Precious. He looked similar, but this creature...ah could this be what that horrid female had been referring to? Anyway, this creature had huge ears...talking Dumbo-like proportion almost, and huge bug eyes overshadowing the whole of the little dude’s sallow face. His arms and legs, although scrawny, were much shorter than Gollum’s and he stared at Sirius (little Sirius) not Tony, with a curious intensity that bordered on hatred.

“Master Sirius wicked for making Mistress mad. She told creature he could punish hisself...but only after I make Master Sirius tell me how to get filthy muggles off his wall.” He stared at the vile woman with a sickening mix of devotion and fanaticism. “Creature knows very dark elf curses...elf curses hurt Master Sirius a bunch.” He gave a blood chilling cackle that make Tobias want to...
Sirius’ mother went from foul mouthed, shrieking harridan to gushing sycophant, praising the obnoxious creature lavishly before asking eagerly. “Would that be like a Cruciatust Curse, creature? “ she asked him eagerly.

Nodding happily, the creature’s ears flapped and his eyes gleamed with madness. “Oh yes Mistress Black. Creature make it hurt baaaaad,” he promised gleefully.

“Nasty, nasty horrid Master Sirius, lover of blood traitors and mudbloods. Be an honour to hurt him,” he crowed evilly while the horse-faced bitch simpered joyfully.

Then Tobias felt everything turn misty and found himself back in Tony’s apartment. “Wow… that’s incredible. It’s better than an eyewitness testimony, cuz I can see it too,” he raved. He contemplated what he’d seen before asking cautiously. “Your family, Tony?”

Tony chuckled bitterly. “Loosely speaking. Although if you want to get technical, I was disowned when I was sixteen – blasted off the family tree. Don’t look so appalled, Tobias. My mother, well she was crazy – I was glad to escape. And at least I had somewhere safe to go to. James’ parents took me in. Anthony DiNozzo was only twelve when he was disowned and had nowhere and no one to go to. Funny, really…we had a lot in common.”

“Was that your brother?”

Yeah, Regulus Arcturus Black. He was a couple of years younger than me and the apple of my mother’s eye,” Tony said wistfully. “He’s dead. They all are. Just my cousin Andy and her grandson, Teddy - my first cousin twice removed - left alive.” Okay, technically Narcissa and her son Draco and his offspring were related to the Blacks. She was Sirius’ first cousin and Andromeda’s sister, but he didn’t count Death Eaters or those that had lived off the proceeds of their crimes as family. Not that they would ever know who he was of course. “He’s also Remus’s son. Hermione says he’s a rookie Auror, like his mother Tonks.”

Tobias was silent as he thought about what he’d seen. Finally, he asked, “That creature, what was he?”

“Not a creature. That was Kreature with a K. That was his name and he was a house elf. He had the misfortune of being owned by my human incubator, Walberga Black, who I think I mentioned was as mad as a hatter – generations of inbreeding. My father’s grandfather and my mother’s grandfather were brothers,” he gave a moue of disgust. “Anyway, she abused that house elf appallingly, and he was a sick masochist who got off on it, plus he hated me just because his beloved Mistress loathed me,” Tony admitted, candidly.

“Did he hurt you that night?” Tobias asked hesitantly.

Tony looked unconcerned. “I goaded them into it. I knew what I was getting myself into when I stuck the non-magical celebrities on my bedroom walls.” Seeing the appalled expression on the FBI’s agent, he shrugged nonchalantly “So worth it!”

“What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger. Like I said, I knew what I was getting myself into and it definitely toughened me up. Never would have survived Azkaban without the seasoning by my beloved family and the delightful, Kreature.” He chuckled lightly. “Although he got his revenge, since he ensured I would die at the Ministry, even if I was the heir to the house of Black and his Master.”
Tobias just stared at him, horrified that he could be so blasé about being beaten and tortured by his own family as a 12-year-old kid. That’s when Tobias received a blinding flash of insight. Cruelty had always seemed to be like water off a duck’s back to DiNozzo. His weak spot was kindness – he didn’t understand kindness when directed towards himself. He hated it when people were nice to him, or praised him – after all, he interpreted Gibbs’ head slaps as a sign of affection for pity’s sake and often thanked Jethro for hitting him. To be perfectly honest, it had always disturbed Fornell to see that – not the head slaps although that was just so wrong on so many counts, but that Tony thanked him for hitting him because it reminded the FBI agent of an abused child who thought they deserved violence.

Guess he wasn’t so far off the mark, he just never imagined that a vile house elf had helped beat the crap out of him. Made Gibbs seem like a warm, kind person. Yeah, no!

So, Tobias could understand why kindness blind sighted him - he’d never learnt to deal with kindness, it confused him, unbalanced him – it was his Achilles heel.

And he suspected that DiNozzo would find it even more confusing if people who offered small kindness, like Gibbs giving him a job and Abby professing deep abiding familial love had succeeding in getting under his skin, then pulled the rug out from under him. Which was what they’d been doing more and more over the last few years.

~o0o~

The memory ended and the pensieve had ousted them both, a bit like an old fashion VHS tape in the video recorder when you hit the eject button, Tony thought amusing himself. He was deliberately trying not to think about seeing his little brother Regulus. He hated his parents for a lot of reasons but Reg was probably top of the list. He was such a great little kid until Sirius had gone away to school. Then Walberga (he refused to call her Mother) managed to corrupt Regulus and turn him against him. Apparently, the final straw was his being sorted into Gryffindor, although he was probably ‘bad’ enough in his biological womb’s eyes even before that camel backbreaker. As it was, she was determined to ensure her younger son wasn’t tainted by his wickedness.

“Wow!” Fornell remarked, looking dazed as he stumbled back a few steps, reminding Tony of Harry’s graceless exit from the floo when he was a teenager. Hopefully the experienced Auror had conquered floo travel in the interim.

“That’s incredible. It’s better than an eyewitness testimony, cuz I can see it too,” he raved. He contemplated a bit on what he’d seen before asking cautiously. “Your family sure are something else Tony!”

“As I said before they’re all dead except for my cousin Andy and my third cousin Teddy.

Tobias was silent as he thought about what he’d seen.

“Did he hurt you that night?” Tobias asked hesitantly. Obviously, he realised he was treading on thin ice.

Tony looked unconcerned even if his stomach clenched with the memory of that night and he was wondering whatever had made him choose that particular memory to show Fornell. Trying to downplay it, he explained, “I goaded them into it. I knew what I was getting myself into when I stuck the non-magical celebrities on my bedroom walls.” Seeing the appalled expression on the FBI’s agent, he shrugged nonchalantly. “So worth it!” He chuckled lightly, definitely not
comfortable talking about the years of abuse he’d endured at the hands of his parents and the hated house elf, Kreature.

He guessed that Tobias must have picked up on his reluctance to discuss his family.

Tony wandered over and collapsed on the sofa, deciding he was going to take it with him when he left. He’d need to shrink it down, along with the baby grand but it was too comfortable to leave here in DC and he had happy memories on it.

“It would still be really useful for us to use in law enforcement,” insisted Fornell.

“Remember that a memory is not necessarily a one hundred percent accurate record of what happened. As you know as well as I do, Tobias, a witness or a victim’s recall can be faulty.”

“Well, yeah…but still to be able to see it as an impartial observer would be a huge advantage,” Fornell stated, his enthusiasm barely dimmed.

“True and actually that’s why I wanted to pick your brain, since you’re an impartial bystander. I want to run something by you to get your take on it,” Tony explained as Fornell joined him on the lounge.

“Sure, but it might cost ya some more coffee,” he joked as he swallowed down the remainder of his cup.

What about the veal parmigiana and my tiramisu? Surely that was incentive enough?” he bantered back with the FBI agent.

“Ah but coffee will help me keep my focus,” he argued.

Sighing loudly, Tony rose and went out to the kitchen to organise more coffee. Returning with another cup for his guest, plus a couple of brandy glasses, he broke out the cognac, pouring two generous glasses.

Grinning in appreciation at DiNozzo’s hospitality, Tobias made himself comfortable as he sipped his excellent coffee. “Okay I’m feeling much more focused already. Hit me!” he instructed his host.

So, Tony did. He explained about how Dumbledore became convinced that his godson Harry had a link to Voldemort. He kept the details simple since he agreed with Hermione that the less people who knew about the horcruxes the better. That Harry needed to be taught how to protect his thoughts from Voldemort, who like Snape and Dumbledore, was a skilled legilimens, which was essentially the truth. As was the detail that Harry and Snape hated each other passionately, which made the prospect of him teaching Harry occlumency highly problematic.

“Okay, call me dense Tony, but why is that such a problem? I’ve had instructors who hated me and I hated them, but hell, they still managed to teach me the fundamentals of hostage negotiation or content analysis.”

“Same here, but this was different. First off, Snape was a lousy teacher. His method of imparting knowledge involved telling Harry he was an idiot and a weakling, before telling him to clear his mind without explaining how to do that. Then without warning, he would force his way violently into his mind and root around in Harry’s private thoughts. After he withdrew from Harry’s mind, he’d taunt him for how pathetic he was – how he was failure, just like his father.”

Tobias frowned. “How could he do that to a student? To a kid?”
“He was a bitter, angry wizard. Plus, he hated Harry and he hated Harry’s father, James and he hated me. We all gave each other a hard time as kids but James and I double teamed on him and made him look foolish and I nearly got him killed because I was an idiot.

“And to add insult to injury, James got the girl he loved – Harry’s mother because Snape hurt her badly and betrayed her friendship. Snape’s the reason why Voldemort killed James and Lily and spent seventeen years trying to kill Harry. He had this pathetic fantasy that Voldemort would kill James and Harry so he could get Lily back again,” he growled. Even after all this time, he was still pissed off with the greasy Slytherin bat for the death of his friends.

The FBI agent started at him to see if he was joking – as if anyone would joke about something as sick and twisted.

“Seriously, Tony? Fucking hell, who in their right mind would let him within a hundred miles of Harry after he’d tried to kill him, let alone let think that someone like that teaching children in any way shape or form was a good idea?”

“I know, alright. I’m with you and that’s why I can never forgive him for what he did to Harry – as a baby, and for his behaviour towards him later on. But Dumbledore insisted he was reformed and everyone believed him.”

He was silent as he marshalled his thoughts. “Snape was supposed to be undercover as a teacher because Dumbledore didn’t believe that Voldemort was dead, so instead of doing anything active, he hid Harry away with horrible people who he knew would abuse him, and kept me in prison, just in case he was right. He didn’t tell anyone or try to find a way to defeat him or remove his minions from society or change the political climate that made it possible for him to flourish when he returned,” Tony stated contemptuously.

“We were all just chess pieces on a board; there in case we were needed and any personal suffering was just collateral damage.”

Fornell’s brown eyes flashed dangerously. “Sounds just as arrogant as Jethro was over Domino when he moved you all around without telling you what was going on.”

“Yeah, the similarities haven’t escaped me, either. So, back to the teaching method - the theory is that because Snape was a real jerk, a bitter and twisted wizard, once he was reformed, reborn, rehabilitated but undercover, he still had to maintain his vile persona or Voldemort would be suspicious of him if he should ever turn up again. Bear in mind, that when Severus was first employed it was a decade prior to Voldemort making an appearance.” Seeing Fornell was going to comment, he waved him aside.

“But there are a whole lot of things wrong with those assumptions, not just ethically but logically. And apart from those flaws in the stupid assed plan overall, there are a lot of parallels to the Ari situation. During the whole hostage situation in Autopsy at NCIS when Ari shot Gerald, ostensibly it was because he was undercover. But that’s a crock! He could have done that easily enough and still given Gerald a flesh wound – he was a fully trained doctor after all and studied anatomy. Ari freakin well knew what putting a bullet into a shoulder joint would do.

“And he would also have known that Ducky didn’t have the equipment he needed in Autopsy to save his arm and would have no choice but to clamp the artery – threatening the integrity of the arm. Haswari made a conscious and deliberate choice to make sure that Gerald, who was completely innocent and undeserving, would be left with a permanent disability. If not lose his limb!”

He saw Fornell frowning and became more adamant.
“I’ve done a lot of undercover work in my career, Tobias and there was absolutely no tactical excuse for Ari NOT shooting him somewhere he could have recovered from physically without disability. It was the act of a monster – even if he had been undercover and not a rogue agent. It was a huge fucking red flag that should have tripped warning signals the moment we knew he was supposed to be undercover.”

Shaking his head, Tobias was silent as he thought about what Tony said. After all, if anyone was an expert on being undercover it was Tony.

“How come none of the idiot powers that be and analysts never saw that? Why didn’t you speak up?”

“Because I never knew that he was supposed to be undercover until it was too late and Cate was dead. You know that Gibbs never shares a piece of Intel with his minions unless he absolutely has to, let alone that one about Ari. No doubt it was need-to-know about him over at the FBI too,” Tony answered angrily, because even after all this time Ari still had the power to piss him off.

“True,” Fornell conceded. “But damn it, you’re right. He played everyone like a fiddle.” Evidently Tony wasn’t the only one who was still harbouring bad feelings about Haswari. That whole episode continued to be a blot on the reputations of both agencies, not to mention DHS. “And… Snape?”

“Exactly the same thing with Snape, he took delight in making Harry suffer. By that point Harry knew or suspected he was a double agent working with Dumbledore. Hell, the fact he was teaching him occlumency so Voldemort couldn’t read his mind was a secret he’d been told to keep to himself. So, if he was undercover, there was no reason to keep up the act of being a cruel vindictive bully when they were in private and trying to teach Harry how to organise his thoughts to make him impervious to attack. It was counterproductive and just plain dumb. Shooting yourself in the foot dumb!”

“You said before that he forced his way into your godson’s mind ‘violently’? So, is that unusual? Can you read someone’s mind non-violently?” Tobias asked and Tony nodded affirmative. “Can you show me how? Can you do occlumency and legil… ah read minds?” Fornell inquired.

Tony nodded. “My family was pretty dark” he confessed uncomfortably. “No big surprise that I found books in the Black family library on occlumency and legilimency, or that I thought with all the pranks and tomfoolery the Marauders got up to at Hogwarts, occlumency might come in handy,” he noted, almost too casually.

Thinking about the memory he’d just seen of young Sirius Black’s domestic bliss, he made an intuitive leap. “Maybe it would, but I guess that it might have come in handy around your family too – to keep your secrets. They never knew about you and your friend’s animagi abilities or that Remus was a werewolf, did they?”

“I couldn’t run the risk around any of them, apart from my cousin Andi – she was cool – but the rest? No way! And as for legilimancy, we studied it very briefly as Aurors but I never got a proper opportunity to get really skilled,” he admitted coyly. “Not then!”

“So when then?”

“Ah well…I started applying what I knew while I was in Azkaban to stop me going completely crazy. Used it against the other inmates who shared adjacent cells…plus the guards. It’s illegal to practise against anyone who doesn’t give their permission but I was already in prison for life for a crime I hadn’t committed without benefit of a trial. Plus, I was an unregistered animagus so I
figured…what the fuck – I didn’t have anything to lose. Later on, when I became Tony, I would sometimes use it when I was undercover and I was in life threatening situations; against terrorists or murderers to save my life or other innocent people.”

Fornell considered the information. “Okay, but seeing as I’ve given you my permission, can you demonstrate the differences for me?” Tobias requested again.

Shrugging, Tony agreed. “Okay, if you really want me to.” He told Tobias to clear his mind and resist him before crudely and forcibly pummelling the FBI agent’s mental walls (which weren’t too bad for a non-magical and untrained individual) and then he deliberately went tripping around in his thoughts and memories like a bull in a china shop. He made sure that Toby knew he was in there, before leaving again as roughly as he’d entered it. Evidently, he was successful as the federal agent staggered, almost fell to his knees before dropping down onto the sofa.

“Oh wow, that was brutal,” he grimaced before knocking back half the cognac that Tony had poured him previously.

“Sorry, but you asked for a demonstration. Now try to imagine you’re a 15-year-old kid, who’d been abused by his family and felt responsible for your parent’s death. And imagine how that would feel if I’d been someone who you hated, who’d bullied you constantly for the last four years, yelled at you and told you that you were stupid and weak – that your father was a lowlife piece of scum.”

His companion just took another slug of liquor, his brow furrowed as he thought about it. “I’d feel defiled to know YOU had been rooting around in my head. My thoughts, feelings and emotions are private and having someone I violently despised, especially if they hated me too, go inside my head to read my thoughts would be nothing short of being violated.”

Tony nodded. “Hermione described it as a mind rape and I’m inclined to agree.”

His fellow agent agreed. “Yeah, that was bad. I feel defiled and I don’t even hate you, DiNozzo. So, can you show me how it’s done normally?” he asked, breathing deeply and preparing for another onslaught. After several minutes, he shot a glance at Tony.

“What’s the matter, can’t you do it again so close to the first attempt?” he wanted to know.

“Yes, I can and I did. You’re thinking about having another piece of tiramisu before you head off but thinking you might have to put a new hole in your belt if you do. You’re worried about the squirrelly looking wizard that Emily has a crush on who is trying to get too friendly with her,” Tony teased him. “If you do have another piece of tiramisu, you’ll have to do an extra couple of miles on the treadmill tomorrow.”

Fornell started at him, shocked. “I never felt you at all. That’s incredible,” he yelped, ignoring what he’d been thinking about. He didn’t want to know what else DiNozzo had picked up while he was inside his head. If that pervert wizard ever turned up dead, he might end up as the chief suspect.

“Can everyone who does legilimancy do it as stealthily as that?”

“Nope, it takes skill, practise and experience but Snape and Dumbledore were both supposed to be highly skilled.”

Fornell thought about that snippet of information while he drained the balloon glass of his cognac thoughtfully.

“Right so you wanted my opinion on why Snape chose to treat Harry like shit?”
Not exactly,” Tony stated slowly. “It’s part of it, now that I think about it. No, I actually wanted to get your spin on a couple of other things but you needed to understand the background. You see, one occlumency lesson everything went pear shaped when at the last minute, Snape cancelled the session. Harry found himself in Snape’s private quarters unsupervised and saw Snape’s personal pensieve on a table.”

“Ah… I see.” Fornell commented sagely. “Did Harry know what it was and how to use it?”

“Yeah he did, Tobias.”

“So let me guess what happens next. Harry decided to look in the pensieve, didn’t he? And did he get caught by Snape or he saw something he shouldn’t?”

“Both!” Tony admitted with a grimace. “Hey, are you a mind reader?”

“Nope, just the father of a teenager. What kid could have resisted the temptation to get some dirt on a teacher or a parent, even if they didn’t utterly despise them or they weren’t an obnoxious bully?” he asked rhetorically. “So what happened?”

“Snape came back and found him with his head in the pensieve and went feral. Abused him before screaming at him that the lessons were over and to get out.”

“Damn! So…what? Harry never learned occlumency even though it was crucial to the war effort?”

“Yes! Nailed it!”

“And so… what was the memory that Harry saw? Snape was reading Fifty Shades of Grey? He was jerking off to Barry White? He liked little girls in school uniforms?” he asked, his eyes going dark and dangerous as only the father of a 15-year-old witch could achieve.

“Harry saw Snape getting teased pretty badly by the Marauders, especially James – Harry’s dad. He also saw me sending Snape down to the Shrieking Shack where Remus was riding out his full moon transformation.” He watched Tobias’ trying to put the pieces together. “Remus aka Moony was one of the Marauders and a werewolf who was bitten when he was six.”

“Oh yeah, it’s hard to keep you all straight,” he commented.

Tony nodded. “Yeah I can see that.” He started to chuckle. “Fifty Shades of Grey, Fornell – really?”

‘Hey man, I listen to water cooler gossip in the office,’” he protested before returning to the problem. “So what do you want my opinion on? Obviously, Harry shouldn’t have been snooping but chances are, you or Gibbs would have done the same. Nosy bastards!

“I probably would and most kids would too and someone who deals with kids every day of the year surely should have known that, too. Expected it! Oh okay…I think I see where you’re going with this.”

The fibbie reached over and grabbed the cognac bottle and poured himself a healthy measure and topped up Tony’s glass who had only drunk about a third of his. Sipping his own this time and savouring it while Tony simply regarded him with interest he started speaking again.

“You think Snape set Harry up? That he left the pensieve out with those specific memories for Harry to find? But why?”
“Maybe so he had an excuse not to teach him occlumency. He knew that theoretically Dumbledore could have taught him, but the old goat was paranoid that Voldemort might learn his secrets. If he didn’t teach him he wouldn’t learn it.”

“But if Snape was undercover and Voldemort had a connection to Harry’s mind, surely it was in Snape’s own interests to bend over backwards to teach him occlumency, not leave him unprotected.”

“You’d think. Instead he set him up to fail, week after week with his pitiful tutoring sessions. And is it just me but why would he leave just those few explicit memories in the pensieve? He’s a grown wizard who’s done a lot of questionable stuff but those specific memories are special to him? Really?

“According to Lils, his dad beat the crap out of him as a kid and Voldemort makes him and all of his flunkies kiss his butt and totally demean themselves. Yet he wallows in the stupid shit that went down when we were at Hogwarts. Doesn’t that seem weird to you? Very self-indulgent and childish to play the victim when he’s not blameless by any means. He was willing to kill an innocent toddler to get vengeance on James, get rid of her husband and baby to get the witch that he wanted yet he couldn’t let go of a feud that he had some responsibility for creating as a school kid years before.

“Anthony DiNozzo was bullied at boarding school too but even when they ran him up the flagpole in his underwear, and you don’t get much more humiliating than that, he didn’t dwell on it. He actually managed to repress it to such a degree that he’d convinced himself that he was the bully, not the victim.”

“I see what you’re saying, I think. Me…I stew on all the things I’ve fucked up or wish I could do over. I don’t dwell on crap stuff that someone did to me. And you?”

“Most definitely. It would be all the things I wish I could do over too, everyone I wish I hadn’t hurt. The people I’ve let down. The people I didn’t save,” Tony replied thinking of James, Lily, Harry, Remus, Cate, Paula, Zoe, Jenny, Jeanne and even Snape when he nearly died back at Hogwarts.” Afterward…not so much since his actions lead to him being wrongly incarcerated, not to mention his failure to teach Harry occlumency was directly responsible for the debacle at the Ministry of Magic that lead to his trip through the Veil.

Knowing he couldn’t change the past, he tried to shrug off his anger. “If Remus had attacked him they would have hunted him down and killed him; not that they would have needed to because it would have destroyed Remus and he’d have taken his own life.

Both males were silent as they sipped the expensive cognac contemplatively before Tobias finally responded.

“Even if you made Snape’s life a misery, he took revenge that was totally lacking in proportion to the crime. James and Lily died and you spent 12 years incarcerated and tortured for a crime you didn’t commit. At least he got parole for getting Harry’s parents killed. How many years did he serve – it couldn’t have been much?”

Tony shook his head. “He was never held accountable – he never served any time. Dumbledore vouched for him.”

“Did he know what his precious student had done?” Fornell demanded incredulously.

“Oh yeah, he did but the old fool was big on giving Death Eaters a second chance. This was the
head of the Wizgamot, he ensured that while they were running around throwing out Death Curses and other Unforgivables, that the Aurors could only stun them. If we killed them, they couldn’t be given a chance at redemption.”

“Didn’t anyone ever think to make that guy pass a mental status exam. Sounds like he shouldn’t have been permitted anywhere near vulnerable kids, let alone to be educating them or given the power to make far reaching decisions about the whole of your society. I guess that’s what attracted you to working with Gibbs, his rule of shoot to kill if someone threatens you.”

Tony thought about Danny Price and shrugged noncommittally, “I guess.”

“So this miserable sod, who was an adult wizard not a child, who had managed to escape punishment for his very serious crimes, was reliving how terrible it felt to be bullied by his peers, years ago? Poor Didums!” Fornell retorted scathingly. Sounds to me he should have been thanking his lucky stars for how damned fortunate he was to get a second chance. His victims didn’t get a second chance.”

“I think he considered having to teach at Hogwarts for 15 odd years to be cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Humph…I bet you would have swapped with him in a nanosecond. How come you didn’t get a shot at redemption, too? Seems like Dumbledore liked murderers – not that you were one of course.”

“Because if I was around I wouldn’t have let the Dursleys raise Harry and for his plan to succeed, Dumbledore needed an abused and neglected child who would allow himself to die when his kindly old mentor told him it was necessary to save everyone else.”

“Like I said, that guy should have been in a psych ward for the criminally insane,”

Taking a bigger gulp of his cognac this time, he tried to calm himself because after all, these guys were dead and Sirius had been the one who was fucked over by what had occurred, not him. It wasn’t his fault and he didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of Tobias’ ire.

“So anyhoo, Toby. I was wondering what you thought about my suspicions.”

“I don’t think you are crazy, if that’s what you mean. He should have been bending over backwards to make sure your godson learnt occlumency because making sure Harry’s thoughts and memories were secure would have helped to protect his own cover. If he had the ability to use finesse instead of attacking him mentally, then why would anyone with an IQ higher than a cactus do something so dumb and damaging?”

Tony stayed silent and let the experienced investigator talk. It was why he’d invited him for dinner after all.

“If you want a building to withstand a hurricane, ya don’t build it using wood that’s been attacked and weakened by termites and expect it to be able to resist the wind force. Only conclusion that makes any sense is that Snape didn’t care because he wasn’t undercover, or that prick Voldemort already knew about him. Then there’s door number three – he was having a bet each way and was hindering both sides ‘til he could figure out which side gave him the best outcome.

“As to leaving the pensieve deliberately so he would have a legitimate excuse to break off the lessons – I think that it is scarly plausible. Although there is no way to prove it…but you already knew that.”
“Yeah, you’re right. I did. I just wanted to know if I was being biased by our bad history – wanted a fresh eye on it.”

“So is that it? Apart from the fact that a very unpleasant excuse for an individual was obviously dwelling in how terrible his life was and it had nothing to do with the choices he made as a mentally competent adult?”

Tony considered before replying. “It kind of occurred to me that after having access to Harry’s innermost thoughts for weeks, he would leave a memory of James in the pensieve that was particularly unflattering. Isn’t that a freaking big coincidence?”

Tobias stared at the NCIS agent steadily. “You’re saying he deliberately tried to screw up Harry’s relationships with his father and to a lesser extent, to you? That’s a long bow to draw, isn’t it? To what end?”

“To mess with him, maybe.” Tony replied diffidently.

“Okay, what else have you got, Tony? Tobias sat up and looked at him sternly. “You might think that, but I know you. You wouldn’t express it if that’s all you had. There must be more evidence or information for you to go out on a limb like that.”

Nodding, the wizard smiled, glad he’d decided to share his thoughts with Toby.

“Just before he died at the Battle of Hogwarts, Snape told Harry to collect his tears and told him to look at the pensive in the headmaster’s office. In it Harry saw a memory of a discussion that Snape must have had with DumbleDumber before he died. The old goat told Severus that Harry had to die (assuming he’d achieved certain tasks he’d set him) in the final battle with Voldemort, because of my godson’s connection to him. Dumbledore explained that he’d been grooming him from the time of his parent’s death (and possibly before) to die in the final battle to defeat Voldemort.”

Ignoring the outraged exclamations of Tobias and trying to tamp down his own fury, he continued. “He admitted without any prompting that he’d been fully cognizant that Harry wouldn’t have a happy childhood being raised by Lily’s sister and her husband. But the arrogant old fool simply justified it because if he’d organised to have him brought up in a happy home, Harry wouldn’t be malleable enough to ensure that his plan was carried out i.e. die selflessly at Voldemort’s hand. Snape observed that he’d been rearing him like a pig who was going to be slaughtered and he agreed with the analogy, saying he did what needed to be done.”

Fornell cursed fluently and violently, his expression one of outraged disbelief. “Was this fucker trying to recreate the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Who was the most dangerous wizard…really?” he demanded heatedly.

Personally, Tony thought he had a damn good point. He shrugged, because in some ways he thought Dumbledore was actually a lot more dangerous because he pretended to be kind and benign. Frankly he was pleased that the wizard was dead. At least Voldemort was upfront about his criminality.

“I take it once he heard that, your Harry refused to be manipulated into committing suicide?”

“Oh no, he did. He was so riddled by grief and guilt that he believed that vile old wizard’s propaganda that it was necessary for him die to save the world. He was a 17 year-old-kid who had endured semi-starvation and deprivations most of his elders would never dream of for months on end like sleep deprivation, along with Hermione. Combined with the abuse of his childhood and the mind games Dumbledore played with him during his years at Hogwarts, he was putty in that
monster’s hands.”

Fornell leapt up and started pacing in his agitation. It wasn’t hard to figure out what had him so het up. As the father of a witch who attended a magical school he was identifying with the teenage boy. Striding over to the bottle of cognac he poured himself another glass. Tony vowed to take Tobias’ car keys and call him a cab to take him home and ducted into the kitchen to pour more coffee. He also decided to put more on to brew.

“Okay Tony, I’m beginning to understand why you and Hermione are so angry at Dumbledore. This guy is revered in your world? He’s evil…a monster!”

“I don’t think he’s the legend that he saw himself as, not in the rest of Europe anyway despite him serving as the Chief Warlock in the Wizagamot in Britain, and as Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards – which is a bit like the magical equivalent to the United Nations. But in the UK magical community, most people won’t hear a bad word about him or consider he was less than perfect.” He replied, pushing the cup of coffee towards the scowling fibbie.

“You might want to drink a few cups of that rather than the cognac,” Tony observed wryly, thinking about the mother of a hangover Toby would have tomorrow morning.

Tobias grimaced, probably thinking the same thing as Tony since he started sipping on the coffee and put his cognac down, although he kept looking at it longingly. “Okay, sign me up the Dumbledore Haters Fan Club but how does this tie in with your suspicions about Snape deliberately leaving memories for Harry to find?”

“Yeah I was getting to it. Amongst the memory of Dumbledore’s grand plan for rearing his little sacrificial Harry Lamb, there were memories of Snape and Lily – how they were friends, best friends, before they went to Hogwarts. How he loved her, how he was deeply IN love with her. How she’d ‘wronged’ him by breaking off their friendship when he insulted her and stood with the blood supremacists. How he forced him to become bitter and to betray her.

“It showed how he plotted so Voldemort would get rid of James and Harry and obtained Voldemort’s promise he could have Lily for his own amusement. How Voldemort double crossed him, killing Lily and James and inadvertently leaving Harry alive – who incidentally, was a constant reminder to Snape that he was James son, who he despised. And not just for James taunting of him at school but for marrying the girl he desperately wanted. How Snape made a vow to Lily upon learning of her death to protect Harry, which to his mind, he fulfilled by protecting his six but obviously didn’t feel that protection included not harming him emotionally and/or psychologically.” Tony reeled off the details of the memories, finding it hard to contain his anger and sarcasm.

The FBI agent and father of a teenage witch tried desperately to process the heap of intel Tony had spewed at him, almost like a machine gun in its rapid fire. It was a helluva lot to take in. Luckily, Tony seemed to realise how much he was expecting of Tobias and stayed silent to let him think.

Finally, he made eye contact with Tony. “So that’s pretty shitty to dump all that on the kid with his last dying breaths. Did Snape know he was dying when he overshared his memories, do you think?”

“Yeah I would imagine so, but I’m not absolutely certain,” Tony responded briefly and neutrally.

“So, he might easily have been having regrets and thinking about Harry’s mom,” Tobias observed trying to be fair.
“Yep, it’s quite possible,” Tony conceded.

“This happened right before Harry confronted Voldemort; and Snape would have known that?”

“It would be a reasonable assumption but impossible to confirm it since he’s dead,” Tony stated in a matter of fact manner, trying not to influence Fornell’s thoughts.

“And there were no other memories that were included in this second foray into the pensieve?”

Tony shook his head. “Not as far as I’m aware – Hermione didn’t mention them… so unless Harry withheld it, that’s a no.”

If I was dying and knew I was taking my last breaths, I’d be thinking about my regrets – the whole life flashing before my eyes thing. So, in that sense, if he felt Lily was the love of his life I guess it makes sense that he’d be thinking of her but I’d also be thinking about all the crap I’d done and wondering if I was going to be forced to pay for my sins. Sounds like he’d had quite a bit to be fearful about - yeah?”

Tony shrugged his shoulders. “I’d say so, but I guess it depends on his perceptions – was he capable of understanding how much harm he created by what he did. Could he realise just how much pain he caused? I think he saw himself as a victim – I’m not sure he ever took responsibility for the crimes he committed, even if it was just in his mind. He sure as hell was never held to account in real life or apologised. Why else would he blame Harry for surviving and looking like his father…it’s not as if he had any choice in either matter.”

“True, but that would make him a monster – a sociopath. Could he have filtered his memories, do you think?”

The wizard mentally congratulated Tobias for his comprehensive examination of the issue he’d asked him to consider. Maybe he was being so painstaking because he was a dad and could identify with a 17-year-old kid with the weight of the world on his shoulders. So, it made him examine the facts from every conceivable angle.

“Could he? Yes, it’s possible to separate out your memories and clearly, he did separate them to some extent – at least as far as delivering the crucial ‘you must die plan’ information. But was he able to consciously include or exclude other memories at such a highly critical point in time – well that’s a great question. Truthfully, I don’t know, Tobias. I just don’t know.”

Fornell nodded gravely. “I guess if it was just this one-off occurrence I’d think that it was just bad luck that Harry got to see painful or unflattering information about his mom and Snape. But see, and I’m guessing as a seasoned investigator, it’s what bothered you too, the coincidence of Snape’s memories and a pensieve involving his Dad and to a lesser extent yourself. Therefore, the memories of his mother, father and Snape seems highly coincidental.

Tony grimaced. “Honestly, if this was a movie instead of real life, I’d say it was a really lazy use of a deus ex machina by the writers because they wanted the protagonist to have some intel before the climactic scene. That they couldn’t be bothered finding a more plausible method of exposition, such as a journal where he could read a whole bunch of other thoughts and memories too.”

Fornell stood up and headed into the kitchen, grabbed the fresh pot of coffee and brought some more in for them both. Tony accepted it gratefully, wrapping his hands around the mug to warm his hands. He was going to be up all night, either peeing or being too wired to sleep. Gibbs would make him pay if he was slightly below par in the morning. Ever since the mess in Iraq with The Calling, the ex-Marine made the term hard-nosed bastard seem like a soft cuddly teddy bear when
it came to Tony. Still, he appreciated Fornell letting him bend his ear and brain tonight.

After five minutes or more lost in their own thoughts, Fornell broke the silence. “So, I agree with your assessment, DiNotzo. I think that it is highly probably that the wizard known as Severus Snape didn’t want Harry to learn how to protect himself and set him up for failure. That he laid a fairly obvious trap and Harry fell for it, and he wanted to taint and debase the kid’s relationships with his parents. Even if it was only his idealised images of them (which he found out about when he was rooting around in his thoughts) because he resented Harry for existing. It’s damned crappy man, but what do you want to do about it? What can you do about it?”

Tony considered what Tobias had said as he sipped his coffee. “I don’t know, to be honest. I need to talk to Harry at some point if what Hermione tells me about his survivor guilt and PTSD is true. She believes that he feels guilty for surviving, even though he willingly died to save everyone. He feels that Dumbledore and Snape were two courageous wizards who sacrificed themselves and weren’t given a second chance; that they were more deserving than he was so why was he spared.”

“Kid needs to stop idolising those douchebags,” Fornell opined sturdily.

“I know, but it’s not that simple. He’s been brainwashed by a master manipulator who, even two decades after his death, is a beloved figure in magical Britain.”

“Maybe we need to get him to a deprogrammer,” Fornell suggested.

“Nice idea but I don’t think that there are any in the wizarding world. So, that leaves it up to us to try to manage as best we can.” Tony replied, knowing it would be an uphill battle.

Still this was his godson Harry they were discussing. James and Lily’s boy - failure was not an option.
Tony's long awaited confrontation with Harry regarding his parents relationship with Severus Snape plus Harry does his own interrogating. Both wizards learn things that they weren't expecting to.

This was supposed to be the penultimate chapter before the epilogue but after the final redraft before sending it to be beta’d, the chapter had ballooned out by a few thousand extra to be approx. 17,000 words which was ridiculous. Therefore, I decided to split it and fortunately it had a natural break that made it easy - so enjoy the second last chapter before the epilogue which is on the final redraft as I write.

As sad as I always am to finish as story I’m always excited to be able to move onto other projects – in this case it will be completing my WIP Rising to the Bait.

Harry had been watching the memories that Sirius had extracted of his mother Lily Evans, as a school girl. Especially her friendship with Severus Snape, at least from Pads point of view. Plus, a score of other memories of his mother, father and Marauders at Hogwarts. There was a quidditch match that had been an epic grudge match between Gryffindor and Slytherin that he was still to witness because it was six hours long and he was going to watch it at his leisure, savouring the opportunity to see his dad playing the game he loved. From all that he’d heard, James Potter had been a gifted player, if not at quite the same standard as Hogwarts’ youngest seeker in a century. Harry couldn’t wait; he was going to make some popcorn, kick back and enjoy it later.

Suddenly he emerged from the pensieve and stared at his godfather speculatively. Finally, he spoke with a touch of anger.

“Severus… he was a dick to Lily. He was controlling. Like that Professor Higgins with Eliza Doolittle.“ He broke off, staring at Tony in realisation. “Hang on, is that why you dragged me off to the theatre back when I first arrived Pads?”

Tony nodded. “Busted. After I arrived here and fell in love with movies and head over heels for the gorgeous Hepburn leading ladies, Katherine and Audrey, I saw the movie version of My Fair Lady. Even though Audrey got dubbed for the musical vocals, I still thought she was totally awesome.”
His eyes took a faraway look as he reminisced.

“I guess being set in Britain and watching Eliza at the races yelling at the horse to move his blooming arse and watching all the blue-blood upper crust crowd have apoplexy, it was really funny but it also struck a bit too close to home. Made me think about what if your mum had met Orion and Walberga Black, my sperm donor and egg incubator. She’d have done her best to shock them because she was proud as punch of being a first gen witch, not ashamed as they would have her be. She was awesome!”

His eyes were now sparkling with mischief as he remembered Harry’s mother and he chuckled happily.

“So then I had to see the original play the musical was based on - a Greek myth about Pygmalion who fell in love with his sculpture of a beautiful statue. Pygmalion pleaded with the Goddess Aphrodite to bring his creation to life, and I think that version was maybe closer to home.”

Harry looked torn between irritation, fascination and revulsion. “That’s why you made me watch that lame movie, Mannequin with you? It was complete tosh Pads”

“Well yeah, it’s a remake of Pygmalion and Pretty Woman was a remake of sorts of My Fair Lady. I’m fascinated by the theme even though it’s sort of depressing that this is a non-magical phenomenon too.

“We had a case once when I was a homicide cop in Baltimore where this plastic surgeon who by the way, was fat, balding and had a face that looked like it had collided with a bus. He’d married a pretty young wife and then decided to ‘fix her’. Gave her a nose job, pumped up her lips, had her teeth straightened and whitened. Gave her a breast job and finished it off with liposuction, dermabrasion and fillers. He even removed a piece of her jaw, would you believe – ending up with this barbie doll of a wife and then he became convinced that with all the attention she got from men that she was cheating on him, so he killed her.”

Harry looked sickened. He thought having blood transfusions was horrific but letting someone, especially someone who professed to love you, remove a piece of your jaw to improve your appearance was just plain sick. He wasn’t entirely sure what all the other stuff was but it sounded horrendous.

Returning to the images he’d seen in the pensieve he stared at his godfather. “You honestly believe that Snape didn’t love my mother?” he asked him dubiously.

“Oh no, Harry. I do accept that Snape believed he was in love with Lils but that doesn’t mean he did love her. Not real love. He was obsessed with her, wanted her to only be friends with him, but only when it was convenient for him. He wasn’t prepared to stand up for her against the other Slytherins, maybe because his own place amongst the purebloods was so precarious – being a half blood himself. But still…”

“It used to hurt your mother so much when he’d act mean to her whenever he was around the Snakes but then expect her to just pretend it never happened when they were alone together. She used to confide in Remus sometimes.”

“But I SAW his memories. He loved her, Pads.” He looked torn before demanding somewhat abruptly, effectively changing the subject. “Have you ever even been in love, I mean really truly in love?”

Tony shifted uncomfortable, very conflicted by that topic before taking a deep breath. “Yeah, I
Harry honestly didn’t notice how uncomfortable Tony was, but then he was experiencing almost unbearable turmoil – like he was being intensely disloyal to a brave war hero, who his mother had already treated appallingly. To believe for the last two decades that Sirius, Lily and James had treated Severus badly and he’d been the innocent victim and then having had his perspective about Snape’s undercover role turned on its head, he now didn’t know which way to turn.

He was confused. Somehow seeing his parents and their friends and Severus had been an equal participant in the bad behaviour, not the completely innocent victim he’d led him to believe, was making him feel totally unsettled and uncomfortable. If Hermione had been around she would have diagnosed that he was experiencing a phenomenon called cognitive dissonance, but he just knew he was feeling nauseous and tense as a spring. Plus, aside from being uncomfortable it was outrageous - it was like someone declaring that he and Ginny weren’t childhood sweethearts, weren’t star-crossed lovers destined to be together to the grave and beyond.

“What was her name? Were you at school together?” Harry probed about Sirius’ true love unremittingly employing classic avoidance tactics. He rationalised it by questioning if Pads was qualified to hold forth on romantic love – he’d never been married.

“Her name was Jeanne Benoit and I met her about nine years ago and fell madly, stupidly in love with her,” Tony said reluctantly.

“What happened to her, did you marry her? Did she die?”

“No, I didn’t marry her and no she didn’t die.”

“What happened?”

“She married someone else,” Tony re-joined bleakly.

Sensing there was a lot more to the story, and wanting a break from his own troubles, he pressed Tony. “So, what went wrong, Pads? What was she like?”

Looking indescribably sad, Tony withdrew a memory and dropped it into the pensieve indicating Harry should proceed him. Entering, he found himself in a car park outside a hospital and Sirius was sitting at a card table, like the one his Aunt Petunia used to own. It had a fancy tablecloth covering it, and was set with candles, a fancy meal and wine in crystal cut glasses while he and a very pretty brunette woman with the most incredible blue eyes Harry had ever encountered gazed at Sirius lovingly, even as he gazed back. Harry didn’t listen to what they were talking about, it seemed like prying but he could see that Pads adored her.

Exiting the pensieve, his godfather followed soon after, his eyes inexpressibly wistful and sad.

“Wow, she was gorgeous,” he blurted out and Tony laughed.

“Oh yeah and smart, too. She was a doctor…is a doctor.”

“She loved you …that was obvious. So why is she married to someone else?”

“I hurt her and then she hurt me. It was too much for a relationship to cope with, even though we love each other.”

Harry noted the use of the present tense. Curious, he dug. “What happened Pads, what did you do to her? What did she do to you?”
Sighing, Tony realised the inevitability of having to bare his soul and withdrew a number of bittersweet memories.

Harry saw how Tony DiNozzo was working undercover and was ordered to get close to and date Jeanne Benoit in order to get close to her father, a well-known arms dealer. It was clear his daughter wasn’t involved in her father’s business and obvious that Jeanne and Pads had fallen hard for each other. He saw how the federal agent was under orders, keeping his undercover mission secret at work while getting treated like dragon shit. He instinctively understood how that had also driven him deeper into the arms of Dr Benoit – his forbidden love.

He watched as she conned him into meeting her mother and Harry suspected part of Sirius’ obvious reluctance, apart from the fact he wasn’t supposed to fall for her, was that he had an abhorrence of maternal figures, thanks to that old hag, Walberga. Harry couldn’t blame him! He’d never met her, thank Merlin, but having encountered her magical portrait back at the London house, 12 Grimmauld Place, Harry thoroughly detested her. She was a blight upon witches everywhere.

Harry also saw how Sirius went to the hospital to be with Jeanne on her tea-break, riding up in the lift with two very unsavoury characters, a male and a female who had turned out to be drug dealers, and had a run in with them.

He saw how they’d been smuggling in drugs inside another guy’s body, who had ended up in hospital with a fractured leg. Then on the way to having his leg fixed, the drugs leaked from whatever was supposed to keep them quarantined and killed him. He watched as the drug smuggler tried to get to the dead body so he could retrieve his precious drugs and how he’d taken Jeanne and Sirius hostage in the morgue. How Jeanne had cleverly tricked the guy and Sirius, who’d been injured, had managed to shoot the smuggler and end the siege.

Leaving the pensieve, Harry looked at his godfather’s back disappearing into the kitchen to make coffee. When he returned and handed the steaming mug to the younger wizard he smiled his thanks.

Steeling himself he asked, “What happened to her? She found out about your mission, didn’t she? Your move with the gun was pretty telling.”

DiNozzo nodded sadly and drew out a number of new memories for Harry to watch. He saw how Pads had been swept away by Jeanne just after the siege to meet her father, how Rene Benoit had insisted that he leave his car and join him in the limousine and the arms dealer had his own minder drive the cool Mustang sports car. Harry saw Rene Benoit informing him that he knew Tony’s real identity and then the next thing, Tony’s car blew up, killing Benoit’s bodyguard. Then most painfully, he saw the confrontation when Jeanne learned who her lover really was and who her father really was.

He watched Rene desperately try to convince Pads that he wanted asylum with NCIS, wanted to get out from under the thumb of the CIA who had been controlling him for the longest time. He explained that the director of NCIS blamed him for her father who was corrupt, and had committed suicide when it all became too difficult for him. He begged Tony to protect his daughter from his enemies, claiming that the bomb in Tony’s car was an attempt to kill Jeanne and a warning to Benoit not to mess with the CIA.

Then he saw Tony headed back to the Naval Yard and NCIS. Saw him in the lift when the Death Eater, Augustus Rookwood aka Trent Kort accosted him, demanding to know what he’d done with Rene Benoit who seemed to have disappeared.

Dragging his head out of the pensieve, Harry gapped at his godfather. “Rookwood?”
“That’s where I first encountered him. He was Benoit’s CIA handler – pretending to be his second in charge.”

The young Auror looked ill. “A Death Eater in charge of an arms dealer. How wrong is that?” he gasped.

“What’s even more disconcerting is that when Benoit disappeared, Kort took over his business.”

Harry was outraged, stomping around as he ranted about how wrong it was and they needed to make sure there weren’t any more Death Eater Korts hiding in the non-magical world as soon as they got home, before he stopped and stared at Tony.

“What happened to Benoit? Did Rookwood kill him?”

Tony shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Although the CIA probably would have snuffed him, they just didn’t get a chance to kill him before someone else did. He was found floating not far from his boat. The one that he was planning on escaping from the CIA in and we figure out he was probably killed within days of my car being blown up. Jeanne accused me of killing her father but Gibbs blackmailed Kort into saying he did it under order in exchange for a favour. And the director made Jeanne admit that she didn’t see me kill her dad like she claimed.”

“Why did Gibbs blackmail Rookwood to take the blame? Did he believe you’d killed Benoit?”

Harry asked.

“I think that he suspected that our director, Jenny Shepard killed him and he was trying to protect her. She was his probie at one point and I’m pretty sure they’d been lovers. As much as she pissed him off most of the time, he is incredibly protective of female agents on his team.”

“And lab techs. Do you think she killed him, Pads?”

“Yeah, yeah I do but I couldn’t prove it. She hated him, Harry. Means and motive.”

“So, she blamed him for her dad killing himself?”

“No Harry, she thought that he’d murdered him. Damned revenge again. Shepard set her sights on the director’s chair so she could make Benoit pay for her father’s murder. I went on the undercover assignment believing I was trying to get enough evidence to arrest a dangerous arms dealer, when the truth is that it was a one-hundred-percent unauthorised op that I wouldn’t have touched with a bargepole if I’d known. Plus, to add insult to injury, Rene had been a CIA’s stooge for years and they didn’t want anything to happen to him.”

He could see the young wizard frowning. “What Cub?”

“So apart from when Jeanne accused you of killing her father, why didn’t you try to fix things. You two were made for each other.”

Sirius looked sad. “Oh yeah, I saw her twice after that. In November, last year and then earlier this year. She’s married to another doctor and they work in third-world countries.” Seeing the lack of understanding in his godson’s eyes he explained, “Poor countries that don’t have healers and hospitals, often because those in power are corrupt and don’t care that their people are starving. Sometimes they’re poor because natural disasters such as droughts leave them with no crops to trade or because wealthy countries have snapped up all their natural resources for a pittance or all of the above.

“Anyway, Jeanne’s husband was taken by insurgents – bad guys - in Sudan and we helped get him
out.”

“You did, Pads?”

“It’s a part of my job.”

“But didn’t you think about if her husband died, that you two could get together again? Weren’t you tempted to not try too hard to save him?”

Sirius looked at him as if he had grown two heads. “No… I never did, Harry. She loved him. If he’d died she would have been shattered. He made her happy and yeah, I still love her. I’ll always love her but I knew that I could never make her happy because of her father and the fact I’d lied to her about who I was. The only way to make her happy was to help her to bring her husband home. Besides, they were doing something meaningful – saving lives.”

“So are you, Pads. You save lives and I’m really sorry that you lost her. That isn’t fair.”

Harry wondered if a part of why Sirius accepted the directorship of the DMLE was to get away from Jeanne…far away after running into her again. Looking at his godfather, he suddenly realised how hard it had been for him to open up and talk about the love of his life.

Standing up and stretching, he thought about going back home. For some reason, when he thought about returning home, he thought not of the love of his life, but the rapidly approaching departure and how much he would miss Ellie’s friendship. Not that he was in love with her… he was in love with his wife. They were just friends so why should a friendship with the NCIS agent feel so real? He should be ecstatic to return home.

“What does it feel like to you to be in love, Pads?” he asked a little wistfully.

Tony shot him a glance that was full of emotions. Harry wasn’t sure which ones specifically because his godfather could be very difficult to read when he chose.

Finally, he replied, cautiously. “It’s hard to put into words, Cub. You think about her all the time, want her to be happy even if it makes you miserable. You want to be with her for the rest of your life. You do things to make her happy that you would never normally dream of doing… like meeting her mother, who is looking at you like you are shit because you aren’t anywhere near good enough for her princess. You would die for her or you let her go, because being with you is causing her pain and you can’t bear to hurt her. You think of her every day and even after the pain dims a bit, everyone who you try to go out with is just a pale imitation of her. You know that you will never find anyone to replace her. It sucks,” he finished sadly.

“Why don’t I feel like that about Ginny?” Harry asked, helplessly. He loved her, he did. They had a beautiful family and she was gorgeous and was a clever witch. How could he not love her? Of course he did – there were all sorts of love, wasn’t there?

*If that was so, why haven’t you been homesick? Why haven’t you asked Hermione to help Ginny Skype call you in the last month? When you did think about her it was all about her less than perfect qualities, like her jealousy. But surely Ginny’s fierce possessiveness was proof positive of how much she loved him, how much they loved each other. She wouldn’t be threatened if their love wasn’t so special, would she?*

“Did you feel jealous of Jeanne?”

“Once, when her former fiancé tried to get her back.”
“What happened?”

“I’m not sure. She told him to take a hike and he disappeared.”

“So, did you hate it when she worked with guys, and tell her to only work with other females?”

Pads looked at him strangely. “No Harry, why in the world would I do that?”

“Because someone might steal her away from you. Didn’t you worry she might cheat on you?”

“If someone did steal her then she never really loved me in the first place. I loved her, so I trusted her, Cub. Jealousy destroys love. You can’t just work or be friends with people who are the same gender, just because you’re in a relationship. Apart from which, attraction can happen between people of the same gender too. What are you going to do – have no contact with other people?

“If it’s real love, then you trust your partner not to cheat. But if you constantly expect to be cheated on, then you’ll just drive them away and into someone else’s arms.” Sirius proffered his opinion as tactfully as he could.

Seeing Harry’s frown, he asked. “What’s up, are you jealous of Ginny?”

“No, she’s jealous. She won’t let me work with other witches. Or let me have female friends either. She’d flip if she knew that Ellie and I were mates…um I mean friends…obviously we aren’t mates,” he stuttered. “But then everyone says what a perfect marriage we have and how lucky I am to have her. “

The NCIS agent (for a few more days) was silent for a long time as he regarded Harry. Several times he appeared to be about to speak but then thought better of it. Eventually, he spoke – choosing his words with great care.

“You must be missing her, Cub.”

Seeing the pain on his godson’s face, Tony was probably expecting a tearful acknowledgement but Harry surprised him by admitting guiltily. “Hardly at all, Pads. I’m a terrible husband. Clearly I don’t love her as much as she loves me.”

Sirius digested that information quietly before venturing to ask, “Who tells you how perfect your marriage is Harry?”

“What?”

“You said everyone tells how lucky you are and what a perfect marriage you have.”

“Oh… ah Mollie and Ginny and all Ginny’s girlfriends.”

“Do you feel different when you’re with her?”

Harry thought that was an odd question. “Well yeah… we’re good together. Happy. Ginny didn’t want me to go away and leave her. I guess she was right.”

“But Aurors must go away sometimes, Harry. It’s part and parcel of the job.” Seeing his expression, Sirius seemed to make a mental leapt. She doesn’t want you to be an Auror, does she?”

Harry shook his head and the other wizard was silent for another extended period before asking cautiously. “Was Ginny your only girlfriend before you married, Harry?”
Looking like he’d been caught off balance, he stuttered and blushed. “What? No…no of course not! I had Cho Chang too.”

“You went out with her?”

“Um…no…not exactly. We kissed once,” he said, self-consciously.

“Did she feel the same way about you?”

“Yeah… I think so. Who knows how girls think, Pads. I still haven’t figured it out, even with Lily,” he stated, referring to his daughter who was named after her paternal grandmother.

“So… what happened?”

“It kinda fizzled out. And then suddenly, Cho had the hots for Cedric Diggory.”

“Did Ginny know about your crush on Cho or how she felt about you?”

Harry considered the question carefully before answering. “Well she was a member of Dumbledore’s Army, so maybe.” He frowned at his godfather. “Why are you asking me this stuff?”

Sirius shrugged. “Just wondered if she was jealous.”

“Why would she, Pads. We weren’t going out then.”

“Yeah but she had a massive crush on you, Harry. You must have known.”

Now it was the younger wizard’s turn to shrug his shoulders. “I guess. I just don’t see why it’s important.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” They were silent for a moment, but it wasn’t entirely a companionable silence before he confessed hesitantly. “You know, you’ll probably laugh, but all these years, I’ve imagined you and Hermione would get married. Did you ever get together?”

Harry went red as a tomato. “Um I thought we might once. We came close. After Ron stormed off and it was just the two of us, something changed. But then he came back and that was that. I couldn’t betray my best friend with his girlfriend and I realised she was like my sister.”

Sirius nodded and didn’t say anything. Eventually he mused. “The only other witch that I could picture you with was Luna. After all, you were her protector, you understood what it was like to be bullied.”

“If you knew that Ginny had a crush on me, how come you didn’t think we’d be married?” Harry demanded.

“Because she had a crush on you, Cub but you weren’t pals. With Hermione or even Luna, you were their friend and they were yours, which is a good foundation to base a long-term relationship upon. Infatuations burn out quickly. Ginny Weasley had bought into that Boy-who-lived crap, probably knew you were the last heir of the Potter house and then it was no secret that you were my heir.”

“Romanticised ideas of reality, dreamt up by little girls who think they want to marry Prince Charming and live in a magnificent castle with a horde of servants to do their bidding are destined to crash and burn when exposed to the light of day. In fairy tales, the handsome prince doesn’t fart
in bed or have bad breath when he kisses his princess good morning when they wake up.

“He always accedes to all his princess’ wishes because he adores her so much and she’s always right. Her Price Charming knows exactly what she wants as presents for her birthday, anniversaries and Christmas and he’ll shower her with presents at other times too, just because he loves her so much and she deserves it. He never disagrees with her and their life is absolutely perfect.”

Harry’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He didn’t speak for several minutes. In the end, he decided to ignore what Sirius has said about fairy tales.

“But Ginny was different. She is just like my mum, everyone said so,” he protested. “And every wizard wants to end up marrying someone just like their mother, don’t they?”

Seeing the look of horror on Sirius’ face before he started choking violently made Harry wonder what was wrong with his godfather. He’d heard stories about his weak lungs – was something not right with them? Should he call an ambulance or maybe he should call Ellie or Fornell and ask them?

When Sirius was finally able to speak, he chuckled weakly, holding onto his chest. Harry realised that with that thread still holding his chest together, it was probably very painful to be coughing up his lungs.

“Harry, I truly don’t know who has been giving you relationship advice but you should fire them asap. Based upon your ludicrous theory, that means that Jeanne Benoit was not my soul mate… that I needed to find someone just like Walberga Black to settle down with. And trust me Cub, that would be enough to turn Sirius Orion Black to adopt life-long celibacy or at the very least, to go bat for the other team,” he declared, dramatically.

Harry started choking violently too. The idea of Sirius marrying his mother or someone just like her was debauched and disgusting. No wonder Pads still looked like he wanted to spew his guts up. As he was deciding that he needed to bleach his brain to get rid of the mental image of Pads marrying his hideous mother, the younger wizard was completely blindsided by the next question.

“And who in Merlin’s arse told you that Lils and Ginny were alike, Harry?” Sirius asked him sharply.

“Mollie Weasley and her cronies and Ginny and…er her friends.”

“As if Mollie or Ginny knew Lily.”

“But Mollie was at Howarts with my mother.”

“Harry, Lils was ten years old when Mollie had Bill. She was barely out of school when she had you and was twenty-one when Voldemort killed her. Mollie and Arthur never went to school with us and she was never Lily’s friend. Pandora Lovegood and your mother were good friends, along with Alice Longbottom. Plus, your parents were pretty friendly with my cousin Andi and her husband Ted because he was a first gen wizard too, and understood what your mum faced after they got married.

“So, believe me when I say that Mollie Weasley nee Prewitt didn’t know squat about Lily, apart from them both being members of the Order of the Phoenix after we left school. But seeing she had you when she was nineteen, she didn’t get to attend a lot of meetings after you were born.”

Leaving Harry with rather a lot to ponder, his godfather stood up and went into the kitchen to start getting lunch. Harry thought he looked drained but done. Personally, he could sympathise – he felt
like he had been hit by a giant bludger – repeatedly.

~o0o~

Tony was a bit bemused. That had definitely not gone like he thought it would. Harry had handled his memories of Snape, the Marauders and Lily at Hogwarts better than he’d expected. Hermione was a damned smart witch. Being able to watch his memories at least made Harry realise that Snape’s memories weren’t the only side to the story. He had no idea who his godson would ultimately choose to believe but right now Harry was at least considering that what Severus had shown him might not be completely true, and that was massive progress.

He knew that all of Harry’s grief and guilt wasn’t going to be miraculously cured by what they’d dealt with today but it was a start. He’d been a little disconcerted with how his godson had managed to railroad the proceedings way off course so that Tony had talked about Jeanne Benoit. He knew what Harry was doing though – since Tony used a similar defence mechanism to divert attention onto another topic of conversation. Still, at the end of the day, Harry had seen the memories and he couldn’t unsee them now.

That said, talking about Jeanne had been incredibly painful, especially reliving it via the penseive – it had hurt. Tony wouldn’t have done it for anyone but Harry. He owed him though and he’d felt that if he’d prevaricated or tried to flip him off, Harry would have known and felt that it made his account of what had happened at Hogwarts to be less credible. Still, Jeanne was in his past and he did not want to go over it again. His heart could not handle it.

Then finally, that discussion about Ginny and her jealousy. He did not see that one coming.

He was beginning to think that Hermione’s reluctant suspicions about love potions were not as fanciful as it may seem at first. Harry’s loosening of the bonds of affection, and Ginny’s opposition to him going away could be interpreted as her not being in a position to be able to dose him regularly. He couldn’t help wondering if Cho Chang, Harry’s youthful dalliance might have been chemically diverted onto another wizard to clear the road for Ginny to make a move on her crush.

But the piece de resistance must surely be, filling Harry’s head with rubbish about him marrying a girl like his mother. Mollie pretending to know what Lils was like was an affront that he couldn’t forgive.

Thinking about how antagonistic Mollie been about him taking up a role in Harry’s life after his escape from Azkaban, he’d always assumed that she didn’t believe that he really was innocent of James and Lily’s death and the murder of 12 non-magical humans plus Peter Pettigrew. But what if she was afraid that he might hold sway over Harry as his guardian, godfather and his heir to the House of Black, and therefore might scupper any marriage between her daughter and Harry.

Percy Weasley aka Percy the Prat obviously got his fanatical ambition from somewhere and it wasn’t from Arthur. Perhaps Mollie and Percy should have been sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor.

Tony figured he’d make something for them to eat. Using the extra pizza dough from a few nights ago, he quickly put together a couple of pizzas for their lunch, feeling like he could do with a reward for the last couple of hours. And Harry looked like he’d been through hell too.

Fifteen minutes later, calling his godson over to the dining table to eat, he handed him a sparkling mineral water, plate and paper napkin before sitting down. Serving them both a piece of pie which was so damned hot, he decided to spare the roof of his mouth and wait. Harry picked up his piece
briefly, burning his fingers before deciding to let it cool.

“Have you given any thought to what might happen if you run into Anthony DiNozzo’s English relatives, Snuffles?” Harry queried catching him by surprise.

Obviously, his godson wanted to avoid any awkward topics which was fine with him. “Oh yeah, but luckily for me, the English relatives weren’t/aren’t a part of Anthony’s life. You know - I always have trouble with which tense to use since in a tangible way Anthony is very much a part of me. You know, I still hear his voice inside my head,” he confessed.

“Anyway, the Paddingtons essentially ignored Anthony for most of his life. Apart from a summer holiday when he was seventeen when he stayed with his uncle, Clive Paddington, they’ve never had anything to do with him. Plus of course Anthony’s cousin, Crispian who was pissed off that Clive left Anthony an inheritance.”

“Why was he pissed off? His mother was a Paddington – he was family.”

“Harry, you should know by now that no matter how much money people have, they always want more. Some people, and Lucius Malfoy is a great example of that, as is Anthony DiNozzo Senior, equate money with power and they crave both, no matter how much they have. And when it comes to families and inheritances, it can get really ugly – like Crispian demanding I pay back a £10,000 gift from Clive to his sister’s son, Anthony to help him get through college when he was seventeen.”

“If it was a gift, then how could he demand it be paid back?”

Tony chuckled. “Anthony was a stubborn, proud SOB. He never wanted to accept charity so when his uncle gave him the money to help him through college, and it was just a drop in the bucket for him (but it was a huge amount for Anthony) he insisted on giving him an IOU. He tried to give back the money to him periodically over the years, but Clive refused to accept it. I guess he knew that Senior had disowned him when the kid was twelve years old.”

“Okay, so let me guess…after Clive died Crispian found the IOU. So, why’d he keep it all these years? Why didn’t he just throw it away?” Harry asked.

“Dunno, maybe for sentimental reasons, like a birthday card or something. A reminder of what Anthony had achieved in spite of what he had to overcome.”

Tony took a cautious bite of the pizza, before taking a larger bite of the now cooled pie, letting all the delicious flavours dance around his mouth. He knew that when he moved to London, his favourite brand of mozzarella cheese would probably not be available since he bought his at a little Italian delicatessen which sold a boutique brand of cheese. So, he was savouring every bite but still he rationalised, being able to see Harry and Teddy, (Tonks and Moony’s boy) was compensation enough. He’d cope with regular mozzarella.

“Anyway,” he continued, returning to the original thread of the conversation, “Bottom line, they wouldn’t recognise Anthony if they fell over him in the street. The Paddingtons are the least of my concerns about returning to London, Cub,” he declared, taking a second slice of pizza and placing it on Harry’s late before grabbing one for himself too.

Harry nodded and then switched topics yet again. “So before, you said you accept that Snape believed he was in love with my mother but that doesn’t mean he loved her. What exactly did you mean? I saw his memories, Sirius. He was thinking of her as he was dying. He loved her and he never got over her dying.”
I know he believed he loved her, Cub. But you should know better than anyone that beliefs are not truths. Your Aunt and Uncle believed that all witches and wizards are sick perverted freaks but just because they believe it with their entire being, does not make it the truth.”

Sighing because he knew that this conversation was far from over, he took a deep breath and ploughed ahead, knowing this was going to be hard on them both but that it was necessary.

“Tell me Harry, did Snape ever accept that he was responsible for your mother’s death? Or did he blame her dying on your father, me, Moony, Voldemort, Wormtail,” Tony cynically enumerated a litany of protagonists and antagonists. “Maybe he blamed Trelawney for having the ‘vision’ or Dumbledore for holding her job interview in his brother’s pub?

Did Severus ever accept that in becoming a Death Eater and telling Riddle about that damned prophecy, he signed James and Lily’s death warrant and effectively Alice and Frank Longbottom’s, too? Alice, Frank and Neville had done nothing to deserve his betrayal. And here’s a question that always bothered me, he hated you and made your life a misery because he hated James and Lily shunned him but why did he single out Neville and make his existence a living hell?

He stole a glance at Harry and witnessed first-hand the pain he was feeling – that Tony was causing. A part of him knew though that Harry was already experiencing pain and guilt; he was trying to help him come to terms with his survival. Pressing on, he hardened his heart.

“Perhaps he blamed you for being born, causing her to die protecting you? Did he blame Lily for dying because she refused to accept his friendship anymore when he called her a mudblood in anger and expected her to forgive him, like she’d done so many times in the past? Sorry but that’s not real love…not in my book anyway.”

There was silence, not even the sound of pizza being consumed as Harry tried to deny everything he’d believed in for the last twenty years. It was too much to let go and he protested.

“But I saw him, Pads. I watched Snape with Lily. He adored her since before they went to Hogwarts. He taught her all about magic and being a witch. He loved her! But now you tell me that it wasn’t love. You see my problem - I’m confused.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t love, Cub. Just that it wasn’t real love – healthy love. And you as an Auror should know better than anyone that just because someone remembers something that happened, it doesn’t automatically mean that it’s true.”

Seeing Harry’s puzzled look, Tony took a deep breath. “There’s been a lot of research done into peoples’ memories by scientists in the past decade. And a lot of it was provoked by DNA testing, witness testimony and even by questionable interrogation practices. For example, in a research project called Project Innocence, researchers discovered that of the 239 convictions overturned by DNA testing, proving beyond doubt that the accused weren’t guilty, one third had been convicted based on wrong eyewitness testimony. What was even more shocking than that statistic Harry, was that they found 33% of those cases that had been overturned had rested on the testimony of TWO OR MORE mistaken eyewitnesses.”

His godson looked astonished. “How can that be possible?”

“That’s what helped prompt the research into memories. See we tend to think of memories as a series of facts stored pristinely in our brains. We think about our memories as if they are stored just like they are files in computers.” Tony darted a look at his godson. “Okay, so maybe magicals don’t but you do tend to think that if you see a memory in a pensieve, then it must be the truth. But
memories aren’t like data or a photograph that’s stored away for safe keeping and easy retrieval.”

“Like socks in a sock drawer?” Harry struggled to understand the analogy.

Chuckling a bit, Tony nodded. “Sort of. Anyway, scientists who study the brain have demonstrated that when we recall an event we’re actually reconstructing it, putting it together from various traces of data throughout the brain. Not retrieving the memory like a computer file.” Realising that Harry was struggling with the explanation he returned to the sock draw analogy.

“Okay, so think of a memory as recalling an outfit you wore some time ago. You need to reassemble it perfectly, so you take the socks you wore out of the sock draw and the t-shirt out of the t-shirt drawer and the jeans out of your jeans drawer but you make a mistake because you were wearing black jeans, not your blue denims. And then you grabbed your blue hoodie but hang on, the problem is that you like blue hoodies so you have five blue hoodies. You grabbed the royal blue hoodie rather than the cobalt blue hoodie that you actually wore; you think its same outfit you wore but it isn’t.

If you had the whole outfit stored together then it would be easy to retrieve it (unless there was a fire and the whole outfit would be destroyed) and there’d be less opportunity to make mistakes. So say we store a file on all the intel we had on a crime in little bits and pieces in a whole bunch of different files in different locations all over the Ministry. Then when we wanted it, there would be a much greater likelihood that bits of it might get lost, or destroyed, for instance, someone might spill coffee on their bit and render it unreadable.”

Harry nodded, “Yeah I think I get what you’re saying. So, when we look at a memory in a pensive, we’re looking at the reconstituted elements of what happened which have been stored in a number of locations…like the assembled outfit, not one that was stored perfectly and in pristine condition altogether.”

“Yep that’s about the size of it. And even before this research, we already knew that we tend to suppress horrific memories or painful ones, especially if they aren’t flattering to our self-esteem or how we see ourselves. Memory can be flexible when it suits us. We remember things that makes up feel good and which paint us in a positive light and equally tend to forget stuff that makes us look or feel bad. That’s why we need to keep such detailed notes about our cases, so we don’t just rely on our memory to convict someone who may be innocent.” Tony finished gravely.

Harry was still looking hot and bothered and disappeared into the kitchen to clean up the lunch plates and put the kettle on. Appearing he asked, “Do you want a coffee?”

“Tea, please,” Tony responded.

After rinsing the plates and stacking the dishwasher, Harry wandered out with two steaming mugs of tea and a frown.

Sighing, since Tony sensed they weren’t done, he playfully bumped shoulders with the younger wizard. “What’s up, Cub?”

Harry rubbed his eyes, a nervous tell that Tony had noticed when he was feeling conflicted. “I saw Severus’ memories of how much in love he was with my mother but now you’re telling me that memories aren’t necessarily an accurate record of what happened and you show me your memories that contradict Snape’s. You’re saying he was a jerk not a hero and I shouldn’t believe him but I should believe you.”

Tony shook his head. “Absolutely not. I’m not telling you who to believe, I’m simply pointing out
that his memories are different from my memories when it comes to certain elements of what happened when it comes to your mother. I’m not trying to deny that James and I were dumbass jerks to Snape when we were at Hogwarts and I almost got him killed. I’m just saying that his memories seem rather selective – I’m pointing out that my memory is that he wasn’t just a victim of our bullying – that he often gave as good as he got. From where I am standing, he was determined to get Moony chucked out of school because he was jealous of him.

“And I have other memories that I didn’t share with you because they were memories of things that Remus told me about Lily after she’d died and I escaped from Azkaban. But they are what’s called in legal terms, hearsay, because I didn’t hear them directly from Lily but indirectly via Moony. However, he was a good friend of Lily’s from the day they were both sorted into Gryffindor.”

Harry looked intrigued. “What did she tell him?”

Apparently, Harry had less difficulty in finding Moony’s memories more reliable than Sirius’. Shrugging philosophically, he began. “When she’d left school, she talked to Remus about how in hindsight, she realised that their friendship before she started at Hogwarts, helped in a way to destroy her already trouble relationship with Petunia. She said that Snape was so possessive that any time she tried to sort things out with her sister, he’d come between them, telling Lily that Petunia had been bad mouthing her and riling her up. He kept telling your mother how special she was- how special they both were and Petunia was jealous.”

“Well she was special, they both were. They were magical,” Harry protested.

Yes, they were magical but that didn’t mean they were better than non-magicals…only different. Just like non-magical people aren’t better than wizards or witches either.”

“Or house elves or goblins,” Harry responded slowly.

“Exactly, special different. Anyway… she realised after they became estranged, when she looked back on that time that Severus was so jealous that he really didn’t want her to fix her relationship with her sister because that would mean she spent less time with him. Remus thought perhaps his jealousy was in part because he was afraid that if Lily and Petunia reconciled their differences, she wouldn’t be friends with him, which wasn’t true – your mother wasn’t like that.

“Lily told me once that Petunia was shattered when she found out that Lily was a witch and she wasn’t. She even wrote a letter to Dumbledore, begging him to let her attend Hogwarts with her sister.”

Harry looked shocked. As well he might, seeing his mother and aunt’s inability to resolve their differences as children impacted upon his own childhood dramatically.

“Aunt Petunia wanted to go to Hogwarts?” he blurted out, astounded.

“Yeah, so she could be part of Lily’s life. For what it’s worth, Cub, I’ve thought a lot about how wizarding society tries to isolate first gen witches and wizards from their families. Like they had to separate them off from the dumbass muggles to protect them from them. That typifies a point of view Severus espoused to Lily when she first found out she was magical – that wizards and witches were special and superior to muggles just because they can perform magic. It may have even affected how Lily related to her family on a subconscious level, exacerbating the rift between the sisters.”

He flashed a glance at Harry who was thinking, a frown furrowing his brow.
“Snape completely embraced that mentality of how special he was – perhaps he was at war with his own heritage since he was part muggle too.” Tony shrugged. “His specialness was something he honestly believed in all his life – not just compared to muggles but his peers too. To him, they were all dunderheads – people of low intelligence, magical or muggle alike. Riddle believed himself to be special too, just like the purebloods consider themselves special. There’s a fine line between being confident in yourself, possessing healthy self-esteem and being deluded and a danger to others.”

Tony stood up, stretching carefully since he still had sutures in his chest and wandered over to the sofa, sinking down into it with a sigh.

“There’s no way to know if things might have different between Lily and Petunia,” Harry rationalised, joining him on the sofa.

“You’re right, there’s no way to know if things might have different between Lily and Petunia, but according to Remus, your mother had regrets and doubts. I brought it up more to show you that even back then, Snape seemed to think he owned Lily, that he could dictate who she spent time with. A mind healer would call that obsessive love and it wasn’t just Petunia that he was jealous of, either. It was Lily’s whole family.

“Severus was also jealous of Lily’s friendship with Remus too once she was at Hogwarts. It was one of the reasons why he was determined to get Moony expelled from Hogwarts, because he was such a good friend to your mother – she saw his gentle soul, just like she also saw the good in Snape. The trouble was that Severus didn’t want to share her with anyone else.”

Seeing the torment in the younger wizard’s expression, he felt fresh guilt for causing him anguish before reminding himself that Harry already felt guilty. He was trying to help.

“Look, Cub, despite what you think, I’m not trying to make you pick sides, but the truth as I see it is that Snape has negatively affected your relationship with James and Lily which has already been stolen from you. You blame your parents for treating him poorly but bottom line is that they are dead because of the choices and decisions he made. Yes, your mother probably broke his heart when she refused to accept his apology, but it wasn’t just about a onetime racial slur as you seemed to think. Lily forgave him time and again for his failure to stand up against the baby Death Eaters in Slytherin when they taunted and tormented her for being a first gen.”

“Okay, say I accept that. But Ron was my best friend and he did some pretty horrible things to me too,” he objected. “But I still forgave him.”

“Yes, you did, but you were also abused and neglected as a child. You didn’t have a friend, let alone a best friend until you went to Hogwarts, nor did you know what it was like to be loved while you were living at the Dursleys. You were starved of affection, Harry, so I don’t think you can use your own experiences as a yardstick in determining what normal social behaviour is. Your mother, on the other hand was no door mat. She had a normal happy family life and friends before she went off to Hogwarts so she didn’t have the self-esteem issues that you did. She valued herself more highly,” Tony countered, thinking of Lily who was a gentle soul yet she’d easily stood up to the Marauders. She most definitely was not a shrinking violet.

“You’re saying I’m a doormat, Pads?” Harry looked shocked.

“Nope, I’m saying that as a kid you had a desperate need for friendship; that you lowered your standards and accepted crap you didn’t deserve. And my qualification for making that assessment is that in hindsight, I did exactly the same thing for the last fifteen years at NCIS. Between Anthony’s experiences with an abusive upbringing thanks to his two alcoholic parents and being
sent to abusive boarding schools, my own charming family and twelve years of solitary confinement with only Dementors wanting to suck out my soul for company, I think I’m eminently competent to comment. My…our self-esteem, my…our need for social interaction… for a family had me accepting abuse and disrespect that I…we didn’t deserve.”

Harry stared at him bleakly. “Ah…okay. I don’t know what to say, Sirius.”

“It is what it is, Cub. Don’t have to say anything,” Tony replied neutrally. “We both copped a raw deal in the karma stakes – maybe now it’s time for our luck to turn. And it has for me – I’ve got you back in my life!”

Harry approached and gave him an awkward manly hug and Tony pretended not to hear him sniffle.

“Anyhow… as I’ve said before, as much as Snape hurt her feelings, when he chose to join the Death Eaters it was the last straw. It was a slap in the face to their entire friendship since those murderers fervently believed that first gen witches and wizards were a threat that needed to be obliterated, yet he couldn’t understand why it upset her so much. That’s what destroyed their relationship; his lack of empathy for others, not just one very ugly, very hurtful mudblood comment about her from her best friend.”

Harry, you might have let Ron get away with some pretty shitty crap, but you can’t tell me in all honesty that if Ron had joined the Death Eaters, if he called Hermione a mudblood or he’d supported Voldemort’s philosophy of pure blood supremacy and extermination of first gens and their parents that you’d have continued to be his best friends either, because I’ll call you a liar!”

The Auror stared at him, gobsmacked because it was true. He’d just never thought about it like that before. It would kill him, he’d feel utterly betrayed but no, he would have ended their friendship before you could say ‘Chudley Canons sucked bigtime.’

“And yes, I’m the first to admit that James and I could be jackasses. Yes, your dad hated Snape vehemently, but know this, Severus was no innocent little lamb. He gave as good as he got; seriously his tongue and his acid putdowns should have registered as a lethal weapon which he used to humiliate and belittle others. But Harry, please don’t take my word for it,” he entreated his godson intently.

“There are plenty of people still here who can tell you what they remember,” he reasoned. “There’s Minerva McGonagall, Horace Slughorn, Filius Flitwick, Pomona Sprout, Rubeus Hagrid who were all staff when we were all students, and there’s all the other students who were attending Hogwarts at the time – they know what really went on. Plus, don’t forget to ask the Hogwarts elves, either. People always forget that the house elves know everything that’s going on in the castle.”

Harry nodded; it was so true! Dobby had known what was going on in the Malfoy family, hence his frantic and somewhat painful attempts to keep him from returning to Hogwarts in his second year when the basilisk was released. Wizards and witches spoke frankly when the house elves were present because they saw them as servants, slaves or possessions.

“True…plus there’s the ghosts, too.”

“Yeah, especially Moaning Myrtle, she was a real busybody,” Tony agreed. “I’m sure she knew your mother. So, act like the trained investigator that you are, and investigate – then make up your mind about all the memories that Snape showed you are accurate or not,” Tony urged him firmly.

“Why Sirius? Why are you so gung-ho? Why does it matter that I believe Snape?”
“Because he made you believe he was a totally blameless victim, who sacrificed everything to defeat Voldemort and now you feel guilty for surviving when he didn’t. You feel he deserved to be given a second shot to live instead of you because your parents wronged him. The truth is he was far from blameless, even though he blamed everyone but himself for all the bad things that went wrong in his life. Bad things happened to him, yes but he also made bad choices he wasn’t prepared to accept responsibility for. He doesn’t deserve you tying yourself up in knots with survivors’ guilt – you’ve earned your life and your happiness. Harry. You were truly blameless and you absolutely, positively deserve your second chance more than anyone.”

Tony paused, then raised his voice.

“You don’t owe him anything!”
Leaving...On a Jet Plane

Chapter Summary

Tony leaves his old life at NCIS behind and returns to his old, old life. Time will tell if he has made the right call or not. Meanwhile Harry experiences a revelation of sorts.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for their comments and kudos and thanks to my beta Faldo. I’ve tinkered a bit so any mistakes re my bad.

Tony’s last days as a federal agent flew by. He returned to NCIS to finish up his time and complete the last of his depositions. He made sure all his reports were finalised and ensured that Delores knew how to contact him, just in case something had been overlooked. More likely at this point, a past conviction could be thrown out on appeal and then it may have to be retried, or a cold case which he’d previously investigated might be solved further down the track and he may be required to give evidence.

So, Delores was informed that Fornell knew how to contact him via Hermione during work hours. He also slipped her an open business class plane ticket to London, hoping that one day she might come to the UK, if only for a visit. Facing her demons might seem insurmountable right now, but he really hoped that she would harness the inner strength he knew she possessed and face down her DNA donors. Delores was much stronger than she knew. Maybe she’d be persuaded come over for a visit at Christmas, especially if the Fornells came too, as was the current plan.

He’d also been kept busy packing up his possessions, working out what to take and what to leave. He’d decided to leave most of his kitchen gear behind. He was taking his piano of course, his guitar, his collection of CDs and DVDs, plus most of his books. The only other thing he was taking with him were his clothes, everything else he would replace once he found a place to live. Which just left him to figure out what to do with his apartment. He was vacillating between selling it to sever his ties with DC or keeping it as an investment and leasing it out. A former cop he’d worked with in Baltimore had become a DC realtor, and he’d offered to lease it for him.

He was stunned when McGee had the gall to approach him in the bullpen to ask him what he was planning on doing with his apartment.

“Are you just making polite conversation, Tim or do you have an ulterior motive for asking?”

“What? No, no… ah well it’s just that Delilah and I want to find a bigger apartment. Yours is just what she had in mind.”

Tony was not going to rent his place to anyone at NCIS – he needed to make a clean break from the people and the place. He might be persuaded to rent it out to someone from DHS or even the FBI if Fornell recommended them, but McGee? Not just no – but hell no!
Still he decided to hold his tongue for now. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m still weighing up whether to sell it or keep it as an investment,” he revealed, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

McGee withdrew a cheque from his pocket. “I could buy it off you. I’ll give you a good price, Tony,” he said eagerly. “This is double what you bought it for,” he observed, reminding Tony that McGee had been hacking not so long ago to discover his private financial details.

Tony had no intention of selling the place to McGee, certainly not for what he was offering. He’d bought the place for a song thirteen years ago because of the triple fatality but it was worth a hell of a lot more than McGee just offered him. If he decided to sell, he would get as much as possible for it – crazy not to. Real estate was pricey in and around London.

Barely glancing at it, he handed the cheque back to McGee and he shook his head. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m going to discuss it with my accountant tomorrow but I had a realtor I know do a valuation last month and the property is worth considerably more than that.”

“Yeah but you bought it cheap and I thought you’d give me a good price. We are best friends after all.”

Harry snorted cynically, and Tony felt like McGee had plunged a knife into his back and his good intentions not to get into it with McGee fled out the door. Sure, when Tony had something that Probie wanted they were BFFs but seriously, where was he when Gibbs was being a prick this year or when Abby attacked him when he couldn’t take Gibbs shit anymore. Oh yeah, that’s right - he treated him like a leper for refusing to suck it up and take the abuse so that Gibbs didn’t bite Tim’s head off too.

“Are we really best friends, McGee? I must say that it’s good to know. While I was off on sick leave, I had time on my hands and I did start to wonder. Tell me, do you honestly think that a best friend would run off and leave their partner to deal with a bunch of vicious attack-trained dogs that their owner has instructed to attack us and lock his partner out of the car while safely ensconced inside. And let’s not forget leaving me without backup while investigating a triple homicide slash domestic terrorism threat to the nation. With a good friend like that I’m really going to miss our friendship… NOT!”

“Don’t be an idiot, Tony. You know I have a phobia to canines after getting attacked by Jethro the dog,” he argued, quick to blame his screw ups on someone or something else. As per usual!

Getting right up in McGee face he interrupted, “You mean ‘don’t be an idiot, Acting Senior Supervisory Agent.’ If you’re going to be insubordinate when you insult me, at least respect the position, if not the person. And second point, if you’re going to blame your cowardly reaction on a phobia then at least be man enough to go get treatment for it. You owe it to anyone you go out into the field with because if there are dogs around, you won’t have your partner’s six. But Jethro attacked you back in 2008 for Pete’s sake, Tim and since you never did bother getting treatment, don’t just DON’T use it as an excuse.”

“How do you know that I didn’t get treatment for it?” McGee demanded sarcastically.

“For the same reason, you never sought treatment for your fear of heights Tim. You never think about the fact that your phobias are a danger to the team because you aren’t prepared to admit that you have weaknesses.”

“You can’t talk, you have a needle phobia.”

“True I do, but my phobia isn’t one that will prevent me backing up my partner in the field. I’ve
never been confronted by an injection wielding dirt bag and run away screaming like a frightened kid. Nor have I ever had to barricade myself in a work vehicle, endangering my partner because I was too freaked out to unlock the door.” Glaring at Tim he stated, “Needle phobia is also a very different kettle of fish to every other anxiety-based phobia since it is the only one that can also manifest in vasovagal syncope; which makes it damned difficult to treat.

“Fainting makes it much harder to treat with graded exposure since passing out interferes with the treatment. You have to combine the treatment with applied tension which involves tensing the body's large muscles to push blood pressure up and resist blacking out. Ask me how I know this, McGee.”

“How do you know about vasovagal syncope and applied tension?” he asked sulkily.

“Because I’ve gone and sought treatment for it when it affected me so badly that I couldn’t even go to the dentist to get my tooth filled,” Tony snapped irritably.

“Frankly, if I’d had my way, you’d have been benched until you got treatment for both phobias but Gibbs thought psychological treatment was a bunch of BS, as were phobias. He said it was all a matter of not being a candy assed baby, just suck it up and get on with it.”

Tony thought it was ironic the number of times Gibbs had benched him in the past year for some lame excuse, but someone who had a recognised psychological condition who posed a direct and measurable threat to the team and the investigation was BS.

“That other thing with the radio was just a joke,” McGee protested, hurriedly changing the subject and alluding to the Royal Woods comms debacle. “And it was a long time ago.”

Tony laughed mirthlessly. “Yeah…see I always told myself it was a joke. A very stupid one since it destroyed my trust in you, but a joke nevertheless, which was why I never reported you because if IA had heard about it, you’d have lost your job, joke or no joke. Some things you just never ever joke about and you should have known that if you were half as much of a hot shot as you thought you were. Just like you never, ever call in a fake bomb threat about an airline flight – fake or not, that will get you thrown in jail for a long time.” Tony shook his head in mock disbelief. “Those pesky aviation authorities just don’t have a sense of humour, dang it!

“Lately though, I’ve started to doubt that it was a joke. Abby would have covered for you both, just like you tried to cover for her when she attacked me.” He glanced over at Harry who was listening in very closely, an expression of disgust on his face as he listened to Tim’s rationalisations.

“You’re become so damned cocky; you think you can get away with anything. Even getting investigated by Parsons and the Department of Defence hasn’t taught you a modicum of sense – has it? You still think you’re untouchable. You honestly think that you too damned smart to get caught, so you decide just for the fun of it, to hack into the IRS and delve into my private financial affairs. Just like you thought that you were too smart to get caught when Ziva had you tracking down Ilan Bodnar for her when she cried on your shoulder – or was it more than that?”

McGee turned bright red. Tony wasn’t sure if it was embarrassment or anger but was leaning towards the latter. Feeling sad that their years together had come down to this farce, he decided to offer him one last piece of advice along with one reason why he didn’t want him anywhere near his place. Not that he was sanguine about him taking the advice since he never did before.

“One thing I do know, Tim. Your luck will run out sooner or later. As good as you are, there’ll always be someone better and faster than you are. As for my place, let’s be honest, you aren’t an ideal tenant for the director of an ultra-secret agency to lease their apartment to. I’d be tainted by
association and I’m not prepared to do that any longer.”

~o0o~

Sitting in a super roomy first-class seat on the British Airways flight to Heathrow, Tony thought back about his run in with Tim. If he’d been prepared to admit that he’d stuffed up, Tony might have been able to put all the animosity aside – after all, no one was perfect. He certainly wasn’t perfect – far from it. But McGee didn’t seem to think he had done anything wrong and had no intention of taking responsibility for his screw-ups. He’d tried to put the blame of the Royal Woods fiasco on Ziva when the truth was that he was the most senior agent in charge of the surveillance and the buck stopped with him. And he constantly bragged about graduating top of his FLETC class so he couldn’t plead ignorance about what he had done.

Still, he had to give credit where credit was due. McGee was incredibly dogged when he decided he wanted something, refusing to take no for an answer. In his last days, he kept bugging Tony about his apartment, even after he informed him his accountant recommended holding onto his place as an investment. Which was the truth – Deanna Burns, another ex-cop turned financial advisor had suggested holding on to it and if he needed cash, to liquidate some of his other assets. McGee wanted to lease the apartment but Tony told him again that he wasn’t going to risk having his apartment used to commit crimes, since he knew full well that McGee wouldn’t stop hacking. Getting into the IRS database and not getting caught would have been like cocaine to a crackhead and it had been done off the clock at home.

So, McGee, having decided he wanted to rent Tony’s place, spun Wheels a sob story about Tony being pissy with him over Abby and sent her in to charm him. It was sneaky because he knew that Tony liked his girlfriend. Tony had ended up explaining that he refused to let McGee rent out his apartment because he didn’t want his property used to commit crimes, namely illegal hacking. When Wheels defended Tim fiercely, he explained how weeks ago, Tim got a bee in his bonnet about how Tony had afforded such an expensive property, so he’d hacked into the IRS to find out about his financial situation.

She’d been shocked, thinking he was joking initially, but Tony was serious. He told her that McGee never received any discouragement from Gibbs, so he felt free to hack even when there was no need to when working cases. Not getting caught had made him think he was invincible which was dangerous, because sooner or later he would get careless. There would always be another Richard Parsons waiting in the wings to make his name by bringing Tim down.

Tony hoped that by giving Delilah a heads-up, she might be able to get in his face and sort him out but he wasn’t holding his breath. Hacking was addictive behaviour and Tim didn’t see that it was wrong. Still, at least when his luck ran out, and it would because, as good or smart as he was, there would always be someone else just a little bit smarter or faster than he was - it wouldn’t come as a complete shock to Delilah. Hopefully it wouldn’t hurt her career too.

Leaning back in his seat he looked at Harry who was looking happy to be heading home. Sighing, he decided to put all the hurt and regrets out of his head right now and look to the future.

Hermione had organised for him to stay with her parents for a week or two while he sorted out somewhere to live. Harry was apologetic, wanting to put him up in his own home but that would look highly suspicious since he was supposed to be a stranger. Frankly, Tony was also wary of running into Ginny or Mollie and he assured him that he didn’t expect his godson to let him stay at his home.

Settling down, he decided to watch a movie, although the stress from such a momentous move had taken its toll, making him drowsy and he soon found himself drifting off to sleep.
Harry leaned back in his first-class seat with a sense of relief – in more ways than one. Personally, because he was heading home to his family; to Ginny and his three kids, although the kids were away at school. He knew that things would be tense between him and Ginny initially. After all, she hadn’t wanted him to go and he couldn’t share with her why it was so important that he go to the US for five weeks, since he, Hermione and Fornell were the only ones that knew about Sirius.

He couldn’t help wondering if Luna would know who Tony was. He was pretty sure his friend was a seer, although Hermione was more sceptical about such things. Time would tell, he supposed.

Still, once home, he knew that Ginny would give him the cold shoulder for his sins, knowing that he would prefer screaming stand-up rows any day of the week to being sent to Coventry. He was no mind healer but he strongly suspected it harked back to being locked up in a cupboard under the stairs and ignored. One thing he knew though, their issues weren’t going to be resolved until he went home.

Plus, to be honest, he was relieved to be going home because the visit to DC had been an unsettling experience. What with his questioning his feelings about his wife and her jealousy, and then there was his experience of platonic friendship with a female who liked him for who he was, not WHO he was. It had left him feeling confused.

While he was going to miss Ellie Bishop and was grateful for what she had offered, for what she’d taught him, he knew that keeping up their friendship would be fraught with difficulties. It might even cost him his marriage and while he treasured the gift she’d given him so casually, he wasn’t going to jeopardise his marriage in any way. He took his vow very seriously, marriage was for life.

Then there was his professional satisfaction of a job well done. His godfather and the new director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was sitting safe and sound beside him and heading back to take up his new post. Frankly, Harry wasn’t sure if the Wizarding world was ready for the shakeup Sirius was going to bring to the job, but boy he was looking forward to watching what was going to happen. Sirius had ready flagged a program to track down war criminals i.e. Death Eaters like Augustus Rookwood who had escaped and were hiding out in the non-magical world. As he pointed out – he was uniquely suited to chasing them around the world and had already established contacts with the American magical law enforcement community to help him track them down.

Then there was the relief that a Death Eater and former CIA assassin hadn’t succeeded in killing Tony, who luckily never learnt his true identity. Had Kort aka Rookwood had a clue who Tony really was, he would have taken him out years ago; as it was, Tony had ended up saving Harry’s life which was sobering and a bit humiliating since he was supposed to be protecting him. Still as dangerous their job was, Harry couldn’t help but be more relieved that he’d managed to separate him from NCIS still in one piece. Frankly, when he’d accepted the assignment – it was Sirius so how could he not – he had thought Hermione was being overly dramatic.

She told him about the toxic work environment at Sirius’ workplace and he’d discounted approximately ninety percent of what she said. After all, Sirius had been on the same team for 15 years, if it was that bad, why would he stay? Sirius had already served twelve years in Azkaban for a crime he didn’t commit and then been forced to hide in his family home that he regarded as almost as bad as the infamous magical prison. Also, as brilliant as his sister-in-law was, she’d never worked as an Auror.

As an outsider, she couldn’t possibly hope to understand the banter, the off-colour humour, the juvenile pranks and joshing that went on in a workplace where they knew that everyday might well be their last. Hermione might misunderstand that Aurors, who simultaneously might have to deal
with horrific violence and depravity from the public, could also act like juvenile twats, just to let off steam. From an outsider’s perspective, the Aurors when they were not in the field, often looked to civilians, like they belonged in kindergarten not law enforcement.

After five weeks shadowing Tony DiNozzo at NCIS, Harry was forced to admit that he owed Hermione a huge apology when they got home. She’d been right all along; the agency was downright toxic and what was inconceivable, Tony had stayed in that hell-hole for 15 years. Harry couldn’t help wondering if Pads was right about him suffering from survivor’s guilt, but if so, he sure as hell wasn’t the only one. Sirius, in his humble opinion was in a similar situation – the only one of his friends to survive, and like Harry, dying and being given a second chance must have been a huge burden to cope with. Plus being forced to keep it a secret – at least he had been able to reclaim his life and friends – well those who hadn’t died.

Pads was clearly still carting around his own caldron-load of guilt over not being around to bring Harry up. Although, if Snape and Sirius were correct about Dumbledore’s motives, Albus would have found another way of wresting control of Harry away from his godfather, in order to fulfil his grand plan for his prized little hog.

So, survivor’s guilt went a long way to explaining why Tony had remained at that place for so long, putting up with that abusive prick Gibbs, the crazy Abby who looked like a vampire and the way she sucked the life out of people’s auras made him wonder if she actually was part vampire, plus that smug bully, McGee. In Harry’s admittedly highly biased opinion, since he couldn’t stand him, the agent was pure poison. Best friend indeed!

He’d been less than impressed by what he’d learnt about him - the whole Deep Six novels had been an unforgiveable blight on his character as far as Harry was concerned. He’d already learnt about Tim’s proclivity to blame Tony for his own screw-ups, such as the debacles over his poison ivy. In the last week though, he’d discovered that McGee had a nasty habit of not just blaming his partner for his own blunders, but failing to back him up in the field, too. Running off and leaving him with vicious dogs was bad enough but being so freaked out that he’d locked him out of the company vehicle was inexcusable. There was no way that tosser should be allowed to keep his badge, let alone be promoted to Tony’s old job; he was a disgrace to law enforcement professionals everywhere.

But to find out that the manky knob headed pillock had left his godfather – left any Auror - without backup in a dangerous undercover mission, was beyond belief. McGee was always muttering under his breath about Tony being a jerk and being juvenile but you really didn’t get anything lower as a cop than not backing up their partner, especially when he was questioning suspects about a triple homicide deemed to be a domestic terrorism attack. Harry honestly didn’t get how McGee was still working as a cop and why he’d want to, since he obviously failed to understand the absolute fundamentals of being a cop anyway.

So, succeeding in getting Tony away from that joke of a law enforcement agency was a huge weight off Harry’s mind. As far as he was concerned, NCIS was a joke, although not in a good way, and he felt grateful to have managed to get Sirius out of there in one piece. He did wonder about the damage that team had done to his godfather’s psyche and his mental health. Hermione felt he was clinically depressed and he couldn’t think of any other reason why he’d stay in a place where he was treated him like shit for fifteen years. Unless he was deliberately trying to punish himself – perhaps he had a death wish.

As Harry stretched out luxuriously in his seat, he was pleased that he’d decided to upgrade their business class tickets to First Class. The extra leg room was welcome, especially for Sirius at 188 centimetres tall. Harry wasn’t one to flaunt his wealth but he felt that a little extravagance as a
celebratory gesture was appropriate. His godfather was alive and coming home again after almost two decades and if that wasn’t a cause for celebrating, he didn’t know what was.

As he thought about McGee’s feeble excuses in their last few days as he tried to get Sirius to sell his apartment to him for a song, Harry suddenly felt a eureka moment, like he’d felt when Sirius’ scathing yet scarily accurate commentary on Ginny’s Prince Charming fantasy was being recounted. The picture he’d painted of their life together was so freakily accurate, unfortunately. And he was reminded of the words his godfather had used about Snape. It had struck a nerve and he’d put it out of his mind until now.

‘Tell me Harry, did Snape ever accept that he was responsible for your mother’s death? Or did he blame her death on your father, on me, on Moony, on Voldemort, or Wormtail?’ Tony had spat out that hated name of the former Marauder. He still had so much pain from the betrayal of a friend.

‘Maybe he blamed Trelawney for having the ‘vision’ or Dumbledore for holding her job interview in his brother’s pub?’ To be honest, Harry had never wondered why Dumbledore hadn’t interviewed Trelawney at the castle. It was odd.

‘Did Severus ever accept that in becoming a Death Eater and telling Riddle about that damned prophecy, he signed James and Lily’s death warrant and effectively Alice and Frank Longbottom’s too? Alice, Frank and Neville had done nothing to deserve his betrayal.’ Harry honestly didn’t know if Snape had accepted his role in his parent’s death and most of the time to be honest he tended to blame James and Lily for treating him so badly that he’d felt like he had no other recourse – but that wasn’t strictly true.

Then there was the accusation Harry really didn’t have an answer to. ‘And here’s a question that always bothered me, he hated you and made your life a misery because he hated that James and Lily shunned him but why did he single out Neville and make his existence a living hell? Alice and Frank had never done anything to inspire his hatred – apart from joining the Aurors when they graduated. Why was he such a prick to Neville who wouldn’t say boo to a goose when he started school?’

Thinking of all he had learnt over these last five weeks, Harry realised that the truth was there, right in front of his nose if he took the time to think about it for just a few minutes. Timothy McGee, never took responsibility for his screw ups, always blaming others for them - up til now he usually managed to blame Tony. Just like Snape was never at fault.

And he realised that McGee thought he was way smarter than everyone else… just like Snape had. And that the similarities didn’t stop there, either.

Both blamed their arrogant attitude, their vitriol, their inability to work with others on the fact they’d been bullied and yet had turned into the very thing that they’d professed to abhor, bullies lashing out at innocent people.

All this time he’d been tying himself up in knots over who he should believe – Snape or Sirius over what had happened between Snape and his mother. Yet it had been staring him in the face.

‘Did he blame you for being born, for causing her to die protecting you? Did he blame Lily for dying because she refused to accept his friendship anymore when he called her a mudblood in anger and expected her to forgive him, like she’d done so many times in the past? That’s not real love…not in my book anyway.

It wasn’t a sign of how much Severus loved his mother that he hated you for surviving when she died protecting you. You were just a baby.
If you’re going to believe someone, surely it should be someone who was able to put the happiness of the person they loved before his own needs? Sirius had the perfect opportunity to get Jeanne back again by failing to rescue her husband who would have died like the other doctors and nurses he worked with. Yet he saved Jeanne’s spouse.

Snape on the other hand saw nothing wrong with swooping in and ‘rescuing’ Lily after Voldemort was supposed to kill James and her only child. Merlin’s flowing beard, Sirius was right - how could Severus think that was love?

How could he ever think that Snape’s inability to let the bullying that his dad or Sirius had inflicted upon him as stupid gits at Hogwarts (in much the same way he and Draco had taunted and tormented each other for six years) ever be justification for telling Voldemort about the prophecy? That was as lame as McGee feeling that his being bullied at school gave him carte blanche to act like a smug superior wanker with his colleagues now, and justify him breaking the law with impunity.

As a kid who was bullied from the day he’d been left as an orphan at Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Harry had an excellent excuse to blame the world for his miserable life but as bad as it had been at times, he recognised even as a kid, he still had a lot to be thankful for. He was able to learn, he was alive, able to take care of the people who were important to him and able to take responsibility for himself. He wasn’t a burden to anyone else. There were many people in the magical and non-magical world who didn’t even have that much going for them.

Of course, now he had a lot more, a family that loved him, friends who had stood by him when he’d needed them, more wealth than he could ever reasonably spend -although that really didn’t get him excited. What did excite him about his wealth however was that he was able to make life better for those people he loved, for example he already had plans to purchase a house for Sirius as a welcome home present. Hermione had enlisted her parents to start checking out non-magical properties since Sirius had explained he wanted to live in non-magical London.

Looking over at the wizard who had also known bullying, abuse and endured terrible injustice and still had grown into a caring, nurturing person, who still chose to laugh in the face of pain and saw his glass as half full. Harry realised he felt comfortable in accepting his godfather’s opinion of his mother and father. After all, he’d made no attempt to pretend he was perfect – in fact, he was probably the most supercritical person Harry had ever known – which with Hermione as a best friend, was a huge achievement. That girl second guessed everything she did.

Of course, Hermione, while all about personal growth and knowledge, didn’t take on the sins of others. Sirius in contrast, shouldered so much guilt that belonged to others that Harry was constantly astounded he could get out of bed each day. Hopefully being back home with family might help him to heal a little.

His godfather looked surprisingly serene and Harry realised he was sleeping. Shrugging, since that sounded like a good idea he closed his eyes and pictured heading home to Ginny and the extended Weasley clan. He missed hanging out with his brothers-in-law and Arthur. Molly and her fierce hugs and overly dramatic demonstrations of affection…not so much. It kind of made him uncomfortable…but she meant well!

Drifting off to the happy thought that he couldn’t wait to introduce his godfather to the youngest Potters and his own godson and Sirius’ cousin, Teddy Remus, he slept until Tony shook him awake just before the plane landed at Heathrow. Getting off first was a perk of flying in First Class and he was excited to be nearly home. He knew that Hermione was meeting them and that she would have first-gen bodyguards, Dean Thomas and Justin Finch-Fletchley as her protection detail accompany
He was half hoping that Ginny would be here too, but he knew better than that; she hadn’t inherited Arthur’s wide-eyed enthusiasm for the non-magical world. She simply couldn’t envisage that there were things that ‘muggles’ could do better than wizards and witches. Therefore, even if she wasn’t angry with him for not acceding to her wishes for him to not go to the US, she would have no desire or curiosity to see how the other half lived.

Clearing customs and glad that Sirius was accompanying him, since he felt out of his depth dealing with all the non-magical red tape, he simply followed his lead. Still, he was pleasantly surprised to see not only Hermione and her minders, but also her parents too. Miranda and Grant Granger also had Arthur Weasley sandwiched between them as he looked around him with the enthusiasm of a toddler seeing his first airplane. Which he probably was. Hermione rushed up to them and giving them enthusiastic hugs, she stood on tip-toes to whisper in Sirius’ ear that she didn’t have the heart to refuse Arthur’s request to meet their plane.

Tony shrugged philosophically. “Have to start meeting people sooner or later, Hermione. To be honest, the one I’m truly nervous about is your press secretary.”

“Luna? Why would you be worried about her?”

“Because unlike that old fraud Trelawney, I suspect Luna is psychic…a seer. Her mother was too.”

Hermione frowned. “Ah. Okay that is a bit concerning.”

Shaking her head, she looked across at Harry quizzically. “Where is she?”

“Where is who? Ginny? Was she supposed to be here?” Harry asked, confused and shooting a glance over at Tony who looked equally baffled.

“No not Ginny. Delores.”

Tony jumped into the conversation. “Delores didn’t come, Hermione. I explained to you before that she couldn’t face her demons here. I’m hoping that with a bit of time to process things, she might decide to make the trip at Christmas, particularly if Tobias and Emily come over for a visit.”

Hermione looked confused and showed him the text message she’d received with the flight details and ETA plus a brief explanation which read: Changed my mind, took some vacation days. Coming home to visit.

He looked at Harry in astonishment. “She was on the same flight as us. Why didn’t she tell us?”

Dean Thomas who had come forward to welcome them both, looked confused. “How come you two didn’t see her?”

“Yeah but she had a business class ticket. Harry decided when we got to Dulles to splash out and upgrade our tickets so we were up in First Class. Plus, we were first ones off the plane. Why didn’t she tell us she was on board?”

Harry nodded. “We’d have gotten her upgraded as well if we’d known.”

Tony shook his head, “I guess she didn’t want to put us out. She still thinks she’s less valuable because she is not a witch.” As another thought occurred to him, he looked over at Hermione, “Where’s she going to stay. Can we put her up at a hotel near me?”
“All taken care of. She’s staying with my parents for tonight. Luna wants Delores to stay with her whiles she’s here, so we’ll take her over there tomorrow.”

Harry looked puzzled. “Why does Luna want to put her up? She doesn’t even know her?” he asked Hermione.

She smiled, seeing that the squib was now making her way beyond customs and headed toward them, somewhat shyly. “Because apparently, their mothers are distantly related so she wants to welcome her back home.”

“On second thoughts, I’ll bring Luna over to my parent’s house tomorrow to collect Delores. It will give us a chance to see if she recognises you, Tony,” she said sotto voce in his ear so Dean didn’t hear her. Originally, she was going to drop Delores off but decided that this was a good opportunity to test out Tony’s suspicions. Harry would take great pleasure in telling her ‘I told you so,’ if he was right about her psychic abilities.

Nodding his agreement at her suggestion, Tony hurried back to his friend and grabbed her bags after giving her a brief hug, knowing her reticence at being the centre of attention. Nevertheless, he grasped her hand and hauled her toward the welcoming committee.

Scolding her affectionately, he told her, “You should have let us know you were on the plane, you goofball. We’d have gotten you an upgrade. At least that way, we could have chatted since Harry slept his way over the Atlantic. Worst travelling companion ever!”

Harry, realising that his godfather was taking the spotlight off Delores, who was socially awkward around groups of people and covered up her awkwardness by acting haughty and officious, manfully played along with him. “Well, hello there, Pot. I only decided to sleep because you nodded off as soon as we got settled in our admittedly supremely comfortable seats. But’ you’re right - Delores and I could have had a great old chat about my new boss. By the way, do you know that he drools in his sleep?”

Tony snorted dismissively, “Says he who snores like a freight train,” he teased Harry, pleased to see Delores looking much more relaxed. If things worked out well, perhaps he wouldn’t be needing to look for a personal assistant after all.

Harry, seeing Justin Finch Fletchley accompanying Hermione’s parents and his father-in-law, Arthur coming towards them, grabbed the balding, slightly portly looking ginger -haired wizard. Genuinely happy to see him, he briefly wished Ginny had come too before giving Miranda and Grant a quick hug. He’d always gotten along well with Hermione’s parents who manage to blend in with the wizarding world much better than Arthur did in the non-magical world. Justin, it seemed, had been tasked with keeping track of Arthur – any faux pas would be explained by the cover story that Justin was his private nurse and he was an ‘eccentric’ - read crazy recluse. Miranda and Grant had also been watching over the muggle loving, but dreadfully clueless wizard.

Pulling him forward, Harry introduced his father-in-law to Delores Bromstead.

Arthur immediately put his foot firmly into his mouth. “Bromstead? You’re not related to Percilious Bromstead are you? Oh, silly me, of course you’re not. You’re an American. Well you’re very fortunate since he’s a bumptious, officious clerk who works at the Ministry of Magic with me. Thinks he’s Merlin’s gift to the wizarding world,” he grumbled crabily.

“Actually, Arthur, I’m a dual American and British citizen, even though I haven’t been back here since I was a child. And I really must agree with you Mr Weasley, Percilious is a self-important, smug little prat. “ Seeing Arthur’s expression, she explained. “He’s also my father, unfortunately.”
Laughing at Arthur’s look of horror, Hermione dragged the angular squib towards her parents and beckoned Tony over too. “Tony, Delores, please meet my parents, Miranda and Grant Granger and my father-in-law, Arthur Weasley. Mum, Dad, Arthur, this is Anthony DiNozzo, our new Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and his friend and former colleague, Delores Bromstead, who hasn’t been back home since she was a child.”

Tony used his charm to smooth over Arthur’s faux pas, quickly deciding that he liked Hermione’s parents – they were down to earth and friendly. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. Although he was going to start looking for his new home asap, it was nice to know that the Grangers were personable and intelligent people. Not that it should be surprising, given their daughter but still, if they had been overbearing or boring it would have made the next couple of weeks very awkward. Grant held out his hand and Tony grasped it firmly.

“Pleased to meet you both. Please, call me Tony.”

Miranda smiled. “Welcome home, Delores. Tony, Hermione tells me you are part English?”

Tony nodded. “My mother was English.” (Which was no lie). I spent time here as a child but I haven’t been back in a very long time either.”

Delores chimed in, “Tony’s mother was a Paddington,” she told the Grangers, knowing that the information would mean nothing to Arthur.

“North Sea oil Padдинgtons?” Grant asked, impressed.

Tony nodded. “Yes, although the only Paddington I really had a relationship with was my Uncle Clive who died quite a few years ago.”

Miranda started corralling the group. “Alright people, let’s get your luggage and head home for something to eat before you all split up and go your separate ways. Harry and Arthur, you’ll come too, I hope.”

Smiling happily, Hermione slipped her arm through Arthur’s, knowing he would be thrilled to visit her parent’s home. Without Molly to try to take charge of proceedings, she knew he’d be a gracious guest, even if he did tend to put his foot in his mouth at times.

Having Harry and Tony home finally, especially after the assassination attempt by Augustus Rookwood was a win. With both of them backing her up, the magical world was about to get a very major shake-up.

Tony grinned at Hermione as Arthur wanted to know if he could go back to the Grangers in a real muggle car before embarking on a story to Delores about his enchanted muggle car that sadly, his son Ron and Harry wrecked when they were going into their second year at Hogwarts. He could see Harry’s ears turning pick with embarrassment as Delores chuckled at the story.

Trying to do the maths on fitting nine people into vehicles, he briefly thought about hiring a car before leaving Heathrow. After all, he would need a car sooner rather than later but Hermione must have guessed what he was thinking because she mentioned that although Justin and Arthur had apparated from the Burrow, she had driven her Kia Sorento and her parents had brought their BMW 320i that could seat 5 comfortably.

Settling in Hermione’s vehicle with her minders and Delores, he felt excited and nervous about finally coming home. He was actually looking forward to the challenges of modernising the DMLE and he hadn’t felt challenged for a damned long time. Truthfully, he hadn’t felt anything
but maybe despair and numbness in forever. It was good to be home and he knew that he had a busy two weeks before him, getting a car and a place to live. He was also going to meet up with the non-magical law enforcement directors he’d agreed to consult with on difficult cases. Partly it was because he wanted to ensure that Anthony’s years of professional experience and expertise continued in the non-magical world but it was also because he didn’t want the non-wizarding part of his persona to become bored and resentful.

Anthony DiNozzo’s memories had impacted on him significantly, changing who he was – he wasn’t Anthony obviously but he also wasn’t just Sirius either. He was Tony, an amalgam; maybe not equal parts of both individuals’ personalities, memories and morals with a good side-serving of Pads thrown in too. He’d be the first to admit it was weird and difficult to explain, perhaps the easiest way to envisage it was like a recipe. Not every ingredient was required in equal quantities to work synergistically – like truffles – a very small amount impacted on every other element of a dish, enhancing them. Anthony and his memories was the truffle oil that ensured that Sirius and Padfoot would never be the same again, not even returning to magical Britain.

He’d made them better and Sirius was grateful to the cop for giving him a new life. Going back to England, he was patently aware that even aside from the changes that twenty years had wrought, he was significantly different from the wizard who was pushed through the veil. The part of him that was Anthony deserved to be fulfilled and acknowledged and the best way he could think of was to continue to use his abilities to help solve non-magical crimes.

So, Tony really wanted this move to work out - for them all to thrive and be happy. Time would tell if it had been a good idea or not. Give him him six months and he would be better placed to judge if he’d made the right decision.

End Notes:

So just the epilogue to go now. Unlike the infamous epilogue in HP, the majority of mine takes place six months hence. The epilogue also lays the basis for a short sequel that I will write at some point in the future.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

It's six months since Tony left NCIS and there have been many changes...

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well this is the last chapter of a story that started out as a snark at the NSCI writers for all their mindboggling inconsistencies, retconning and character assassination of the Tony DiNozzo character - particularly that abysmal finale. It was straight out of an angst ridden TIVA teenage fanfic where Ziva has Tony’s love child and keeps it a secret. Honestly, the holes in the plot would have been laughable except that it wasn’t a fan fic – what it was, was an insult to the character, the actor and his loyal fans. Particularly after they had a whole season to write it. (It will be interesting to see if Paulie Perrette gets a better exit from the writers and EPs since they are saying the same things about having a season to write her departure. Wonder who had her secret love child – Burt the Hippo?)

Anyhow, as I wrote Serieux, improbable as the plot was to begin with – deliberately so, as it was meant to be a parody, I found myself discovering parallels between the two shows and their respective characters that I’d never considered. More importantly, I also found myself falling in love with the characters of two fandoms, especially how they related to each other and inter-related. It often happens when I write a long story - the characters become my imaginary friends ;) or sworn enemies, as the case may be.

So here is the very long epilogue which will tie up a lot but not all the loose ends of my story, including what Hermione got up while she was staying with Fornell and she disappeared for a couple of weeks to organise a dose of comeuppance for Gibbs. Some readers may be unhappy with part of my ending but do remember that I plan on writing a short sequel at some stage – the seeds of which have been planted within this epilogue – actually all throughout the story.

I’d like to thank Faldo for beta’ing this chapter in the midst of some family health issues but I’d also particular like to thank her for stepping in and offering to beta the last half of Serieux. Thanks also to Arress – who is from the US and checked over the first scene set in a small southern town in US to make sure my Aussie-isms as we call them didn’t sneak in while I was writing it. (It did by the way, who knew that offsider was an Aussie-ism?)

Finally, thanks to those people who took the trouble to leave feedback. I appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue:

May 2016
Gloria Culpepper entered Jackson’s General store, although technically it wasn’t called Jackson’s General store anymore, even if all the locals still called it that. Mr Gibbs had passed on several years ago and his only kin, his boy Leroy wasn’t fussed about running his pappy’s store. Seems he was a high and mighty federal agent, too important to run the store now Jackson was dead, although Gloria still remembered when he’d been a sullen little punk, getting into trouble and breaking his mother’s heart.

Then after years of ignoring Jackson, Leroy had turned up some years ago with a bunch of federal agents kowtowing to him and throwing the whole town into an uproar during a murder investigation. Leroy had riled up Chuck Winslow (just like old times), had his people go through dumpsters and demanding that the Winslow clan and Chuck’s minions surrender their DNA for comparison. It had made Leroy even less popular with the townsfolk. The upshot was that he’d uncovered Chuck Winslow’s illegitimate son, Ethan La Combe, who’d unknowingly been intimate with his own half-sister, Emily. And if that scandal wasn’t enough, it turned out that her husband, Nick Kingston (Chuck’s son-in-law and heir apparent) had murdered Emily’s half-brother, believing Ethan was the father of his wife’s baby. The town still hadn’t recovered from the shame and dishonour.

Then, several years after his return for the murder investigation, Leroy had nearly gotten his own father killed by the head of a Mexican drug cartel he’d managed to run afoul of somewhere along the way. She’d stormed into Stillwater in a righteous fury, and shot up Jackson’s store, narrowly avoiding killing Leroy’s father. Apparently, all for the sake of getting revenge on the truculent federal agent. Poor Jackson, has been forced to take refuge with Leroy for several months, sitting around twiddling his thumbs. Just so the cartel couldn’t find him and finish the job.

Those two incursions had certainly set the cat amongst the pigeons. Stillwater hadn’t seen so much drama in a long time – if ever. It had left the bucolic little town with plenty to flap their gums about. Seemed as if trouble with a capital T liked to follow Leroy Jethro Gibbs around.

Anyway, Leroy had given away his father’s store - his legacy, to Billy Ray Huckabee, Jackson’s young assistant who’d helped out in the store, but to the locals of Stillwater, Huckabee’s General Store would always be known to all and sundry as Jackson’s General Store. Jackson was a real salt of the earth kind of guy, no false airs and graces about him and always ready to be neighbourly. At least his assistant had the sense not to go changing the store – getting it all gussied up would not have gone down well. Folks around here like it fine, just the way it was.

Hearing the cheery sound of laughter in the canned goods section, Gloria noticed several of the ladies from the Stillwater Quilters Association were in attendance. Those gossipy old biddies were having a fine old chinwag while picking up their staples for the bake sale for the local church. While they generally worked cooperatively on quilting projects, competitiveness often got the better of many of the locals when it came to bake sales. Gloria was justifiably proud of the Key Lime Pies she’d produced for bake sales for going on thirty years now.

Some of her contemporaries and locals had been known to stoop to some highly unneighbourly methods to one-up each other, including sabotaging their competitors and indulging in domestic espionage. For example, they had been numerous invitations to luncheons attempting to get Gloria befuddled on one Long Island iced tea too many to gain her secret recipe for the pies, passed down from mother to daughter in three generations of Culpepper women. Fruitlessly she might add, since she had a real hard head for liquor – she could drink all the men in Stillwater under the table. All that happened was that her co-conspirators ended up with horrendous hangovers and no wiser about her recipe.

Maudeen Wilkins and Carol Ann Yancy, two of the biggest gossips on the planet were twittering
away about recipes, which didn’t exactly surprise Gloria, given the upcoming church bake sale. But then she heard them mention something about fundraising and publishing. That piqued her interest, having written the odd book or ten of historical bodice rippers - back in her heyday under her nom de plume, Cora Lee Quartermaine. She decided to join in their conversation to see what those foolish old biddies were up to now.

“Morning Maudeen, Carol Ann.”

“Gloria, you’ll contribute of course?”

“To what, Ladies?”

“Our next fund-raising project, Glory. That nice young woman who was here back in the Spring, the historian, she suggested it,” Maude explained.

“Historian? I thought she was a geneticist – researching people’s family trees,” Carol Ann objected. “She was researching all the old families in Stillwater – the Fieldings, Phillpotts, Gibbs, Hunnicutts, Abernathys and the Culpeppers.”

“Genealogist,” Maude corrected her crony automatically. “I thought she was researching a book on small towns in Pennsylvania.”

“Well anyway, Hildegard suggested that we publish a book full of local history and folk remedies plus recipes for some of our famous baked goods, jellies and preserves and sell it to raise funds for our local charities,” Carol Ann explained to Gloria.

“I don’t think her name was Hildegard, was it Honoria?” Maudeen inquired.

Gloria shook her head. “No, it was Hermione. I definitely remember her saying that her parents named her after the character of Queen Hermione of Sicily, in Shakespeare’s A Winter’s Tale. But regardless of her name, it sounds like a fine idea, Ladies.”

Maudeen glanced at her slyly. “So, you’ll be contributing the Culpepper’s family recipe for Key Lime Pie, Glory?”

Gloria, feeling like she’d been outmanoeuvred, scowled at her associates, but made no promises. As she made her way home she decided, should they manage to get the book off the ground, that she would offer them her prize winning recipe for Lane Cake. She’d come across it in an old journal she found in a second-hand book shop in Alabama when she was doing research for one of her romance novels. Gloria liked to think that the journal may have belonged to Emma Rylander Lane who first introduced the white four-layer cake with a bourbon -laced raisin and custard filling in a cookbook in 1904.

Then again, perhaps her recipe for Lady Baltimore Cake would be more fitting for the publication since many Pennsylvanians insisted that its origins could be traced back to Pennsylvania, although honestly, it’s provenance was a lot less clear cut than the Lane Cake. Still this cake, often a favourite at Stillwater nuptials, it had a delectable Seven Minute Frosting with chopped nuts and candied dried fruits. When asked for the recipe, Gloria might just have left out a teeny tiny step when people had asked her for her recipe. Honestly though, Maudeen and Carol Ann could hardly be casting calumnies since they weren’t exactly innocent when it came to deliberately passing on recipes and leaving out a crucial ingredient or step and sitting back and laughing from the fall out.

8th July 2016
Three identical manila envelopes containing a file were delivered to Naval Criminal Investigative Services, DC. One was addressed to Director L. Vance; the second one was addressed to the head of the NCIS legal department and the final one was addressed to the head of the NCIS human resources department.

On the same day, identical packages were also delivered to the Navy’s Judge Advocate General’s Office marked Confidential. A fifth package also arrived simultaneously at the J. Edgar Hoover building in DC addressed to the Deputy Director of the FBI.

When Leon opened the envelope, and studied the contents he wasn’t completely shocked – not really. Angry but honestly not all that surprised that evidence had finally surfaced proving that Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs was in fact, not 52 years old as stated in his personnel file but fifty-nine. Which was well beyond mandatory retirement age for field work. While it seemed that Gibbs had somehow managed to have his age digitally altered making him appear younger, at least on paper, apparently, he’d been tripped up by a good old-fashioned paper trail.

There were certified copies of birth and marriage certificates, hospital records of his mother giving birth to Leroy Jethro, school records including high school graduation pictures and a school year book. Statutory declarations (all duly witnessed and signed by a notary public) from age mates who went to school with Gibbs. Plus, a copy his marriage certificate to Shannon Gibbs nee Fielding and the birth certificate for Kelly Ann Gibbs, corroborating the other documents in proving that Leroy Jethro Gibbs age was clearly a lot older than he purported to be.

How ironic that Jethro, who was a hoary old dinosaur when it came to technology should end up being tripped up by good old-fashioned paper trail. Clearly, he must have retained someone techno-savvy enough to alter his personnel files digitally – and whoever it was had done an excellent job. Yet for all his efforts it had been brought undone by the fact that Gibbs home town’s records, at least past records, were still stored physically on paper.

Someone with an axe to grind, instead of taking pot shots at him which was the norm for his enemies that were pissed off with him, had decided to really hit him where he lived. Leon surmised that this concerted attack on him would hurt him a helluva lot more that losing a bossy ex-wife or paying a butt-load of alimony. He wondered which of Jethro’s exes or ex-lovers had decided to rat him out. Personally, he suspected that it might be Dr Samantha Ryan’s hand in this payback – it had all the hallmarks of a Machiavellian type like the former Psy. Ops psychologist all over it. The three exes would use blunt objects like sporting implements and Hollis Mann would probably just pull out her sidearm and shoot him, then bury him in a quiet grave somewhere.

No, Dr Ryan playing mind games was the most likely suspect – not that there was anything illegal about proving that Gibbs had committed fraud in altering his age. But choosing to get back at him in this way demonstrated an individual who had a keen understanding of how to hit him where it would hurt the most. As Gibbs had confessed to Leon after his father’s funeral, this job was all he had – take it away and he had nothing!

Vance also recognised immediately that his Faustian bargain wasn’t going to be enough to keep Gibbs ass out of the fire this time. Whoever had collected the evidence that Gibbs had doctored records had also Cc’d the file to the Agency’s Legal and HR departments of NCIS plus he learnt later on, sent it to the JAG office and the FBI too. Gibbs was going to be in a shit load of trouble and he’d worked his last day as a field agent.

Even if he wanted a desk job, after being outed so spectacularly committing fraud against a federal agency, then he was going to be feeling a world of hurt. He had zilch chances of working in law enforcement ever again. Hell, he’d be lucky to stay out of jail and despite his distaste regarding
lawyers, Gibbs would need to get himself a damned good one.

Vance didn’t really have much sympathy, not with the past four years-worth of cases being contaminated by Gibbs’ fraud; the agency was in deep do-do thanks to the former Marine. Which meant he was in deep do-do too. Lord knows, he’d barely managed to survive Sec Nav’s attempts to force him out last year over the messy business with Forme NCIS agent Kip Klugman. But it was also quite possible that Gibbs’ deception would be the coup de grâce that cost Leon his career.

22nd December 2016

Tony DiNozzo was hanging out at Heathrow Airport, waiting for the flight from the US to clear Customs. The holiday crush added to the sense of stress that accompanied this time of year – especially at a major international airport. He was here to pick up Tobias and Emily Fornell, who’d decided to accept the invitation from Hermione and himself to spend their second Christmas, post Diane’s death by flying to England for a Magical Christmas.

The first year they were still reeling from her death and had been too numb to really care about Christmas – basically they’d ignored it but this year they couldn’t pretend that it wasn’t happening. So, Hermione decided that a first trip to England to spend with her mother’s magical relatives might make it easier for the father and daughter to endure the holiday. The Fornells had accepted gratefully.

Tony had invited them to stay in his new house, seeing that he had more than enough room to put them up. Plus, he figured that as Tobias was non-magical, it would be less of a cultural shock for the FBI agent than staying in Hermione’s magical home, not to mention the constant drop-ins of the entire Weasley clan. He guessed he and Emily would also feel less like they had to be polite around Tony if the whole Christmas thing got to be too much. If they were staying with Hermione they’d feel obliged put on an act, even if they were struggling to cope.

And while Emily didn’t know him that well, ever since she’d learnt that he was magical like her, she’d been dogging him, wanting to know all about him. This seemed to be as good a time as any to spend some one on one time with her and help her with her own magic. Also he was finding his house a bit too empty now that Delores had purchased a cute 2-bedroom terraced cottage with a tiny paved back garden. It had lovely period features which his personal assistant had fallen hopelessly in love with and even though she’d been looking to buy a flat or even a 1 or 2-bedroom mews, this one spoke to her. Plus, as it had fireplaces it had earned his approval since if it was ever necessary, her terrace could be connected to the floo system – at least connected to his house.

Once the purchase had been finalised, Delores was impatient to move into her house and really, Tony couldn’t blame her. Even though his place was more than big enough for them both, he understood that she didn’t want to be seen be existing due to her boss’ largesse. Not when she worked in the fishbowl of the Ministry of Magic where she had to prove herself to a bunch of unhappy witches and wizards who felt her job should have gone to someone better qualified. And for better qualified, read witch or wizard, not squib, not foreigner. Mind you, Tony loved to take her into the staff dining room and sit her down next to Hermione, Harry and Luna. Her sperm donor Percilious nearly had a seizure since he’d never had an invitation to eat at the Minister’s table and he was a pureblood wizard.

Still, after Delores was safely ensconced in her own home, it left Tony to his own devices in his large home – not that he spent that much time in it. He was too busy working.

When he started out, he decided if he could find one, he’d like to buy a free-standing house with a garden and figured he’d probably need to buy a three-bedroom place. Although he didn’t need
three-bedrooms he’d decided that having a garden for Padfoot to be able to stretch his legs and muck about in, and being able to scent stuff in private would be nice. He’d started his search already when Harry casually announced that he was going to buy a house for his godfather, despite all his protestations to the contrary.

Tony knew that Harry felt guilty because he couldn’t spend more time with him off the job or that Tony had to maintain his distance from Harry and Ginny’s three children. However, camping out in Harry’s back pocket would be suspicious since as far as anyone knew, they’d first met when Harry went to DC. So, Tony understood that he felt guilty about it and guilty about inheriting all the Black Family’s wealth and giving Tony a house was a way of making things right. Not that Tony wanted or needed Harry to buy him anything. He could afford to buy his own place and as far as he was concerned, Harry deserved to inherit the Black title and wealth for what he’d been through. He certainly didn’t begrudge him any of it.

Tony finally relented though because he figured that by being stubborn he was just adding to Harry’s issues of stress and guilt and it was contrary to his objective in coming back to London. If it relieved even a fraction of his guilt then Tony would swallow his pride and accept it as the generous gift that Harry had intended it to be. Especially when Harry assured him that the 1.8 million pounds price tag was chickenfeed and wouldn’t attract the suspicions of Ginny. Although the house that Harry initially wanted to buy him was way over the top – a mansion with ten bedrooms and ten bathrooms. He’d dug his heels in over that one because it was excessive and extreme. Then his godson showed him a place with five bedrooms and three bathrooms and had an establish back garden where Pads could loll around and smell the roses’.

The real estate agent had described it as a small but charming cottage, which struck Tony as pretty damned funny – since when was five bedrooms small? However, it did have generous fireplaces and since he was determined to live in non-magical London, he needed to be connected to the floo system – Hermione’s stipulation – and he hated using cramped fireplaces to floo. The five-bedroom place was an interesting fusion of old and new - the main reception room had a beautiful timber vaulted ceiling, a rather grand marble fireplace and wall panelling and the back part of the house had a predominately new addition, modern glass and light. But he still thought it was excessive; his DC apartment had technically had two bedrooms but the second bedroom was little more than a walk-in closet.

But Harry was so enthusiastic about the place and had enlisted Hermione and Delores to plead his case for him. He also pointed out the gorgeous modern open plan kitchen and that Blackheath Village was a short walk away with several really good Italian restaurants and pizza places to keep Anthony happy. Hermione explained that Blackheath common had one of the largest areas of protected land at 85 odd hectares for Padfoot to run in and she also kind of clinched the argument when she pointed out the irony of Blackheath becoming home to Sirius Orion Black.

Somehow it seemed like destiny and Tony had given in, but when Delores moved into her own cute little place, he rattled around on his own. So, he was looking forward to hosting some of the Christmas festivities in his new house, especially having some awesome movie nights in one of the reception rooms he’d turned into a media room. One of the perks of his friendship with the Fornells and the fact he was putting them up, meant it would be easy enough to spend a lot of time with Harry and his kids and Hermione and her family too. Although because the Grangers had put him up when he’d first arrived it was less suspicious to spend time with her family.

By mutual agreement they’d all agreed that Emily wouldn’t be let in on Tony’s secret – only Hermione, Harry, Tobias and Luna Lovegood knew that was probably four people too many. Hermione was quite pissed off that Harry was right about the eccentric witch was indeed a seer
and although Tony wasn’t thrilled she knew who he was, even if she slipped up and spilled the beans, the chances that anyone believed her was miniscule. Plus, Luna tended to refer to him as Stubby most of the time – a joke because her father Xenophilius had been convinced he was Stubby Boardman, the lead singer of a musical group called The Hobgoblins. Although having yet another person know about his secret was risky, he did appreciate that now he had a few people who knew who he really was, which was a comforting thing when he needed a sympathetic ear.

Anyway, the feisty teenager had been excited to have a magical adult to ask advice and been disappointed when she learnt that he was accepting the job in England, which he’d found strangely touching. So henceforth he’d issued the invitation for them to spend Christmas with him.

As the red-headed young witch barrelled towards him, flinging her arms around his neck and apparently attempting to strangulate him, he realised two things. First off, Emily and Tobias had obviously cleared Customs, and two, he must have zoned out momentarily. So much for keeping his eyes open for trouble. These days, major airports combined with a significant holiday such as Christmas and Easter were an invitation to terrorists to attack such a major soft target.

That was why Heathrow was crawling with security and law enforcement personnel, all on the lookout for individuals acting suspicious or known persons of interest. He really shouldn’t have let his attention lapse but right now he had more immediate concerns. He had a 15-year-old girl hanging around his neck and his main concern was extricating himself from her stranglehold before he asphyxiated.

Once he was finally free and able to breathe freely, he greeted Tobias – a little less effusively to be sure before herding his charges off and proceeding to the carpark. Hermione’s parents, Miranda and Grant, had offered their car for the pick-up – a BMW 380i but although Hermione was comfortable straddling the magical and non-magical world, she was flat out. Not only with Ministry business but picking up her two kids at Kings Cross Station plus Christmas shopping, so Tony had volunteered to do the honours. However, picking up Tobias and Emily, plus luggage, wouldn’t have fitted into his pride and joy, his baby – an Aston Martin DB5 like Sean Connery drove during the filming of the James Bond movies.

It was his pride and joy. One thing that both he and Anthony DiNozzo shared was a love of cars, especially sports cars. So once the Fornells and their luggage were safely situated inside the BMW saloon and they exited the car park, Fornell turned to Tony and examined him carefully, noting his greenish blue eyes which were sparkling with mischief but had been flat and dispirited by the time he resigned from NCIS.

“You look well, Tony. London obviously agrees with you.”

Tony laughed. “Londoners might disagree with you, Tobias. The good old DiNozzo charm at work – I’m making friends where ever I go.”

“Yeah, Hermione mentioned something about weeding out corruption, even before you were officially supposed to take up the directorship. She mentioned something about pulling a Brubaker. Is that some sort of a spell?”

Smiling broadly, his eyes crinkling in genuine amusement, he shook his head. “No, a movie. Hermione was horribly ignorant – I’ve been educating her. Robert Redford circa 1980, based on a true story. He was hired by the Arkansas State Governor as the warden of a prison that was rife with corruption, to weed out the vice and corrupt officials. Brubaker went in undercover as an inmate to find out which prison officers where dirty. He witnesses widespread abuse and corruption, including rampant and open sexual assault and torture, food not fit for human consumption, insurance fraud and charging inmates for medical treatment they didn’t receive. He
ended up discovering a killing field full of the bodies of inmates that was the final nail in his coffin as Governor.”

Fornell looked across at him quizzically. “I remember now. Damned depressing movie. Redford… ah Brubaker didn’t last a whole year – he did too good a job of uncovering corruption and they fired him. So, what… you got yourself arrested and went undercover?”

“Not quite. Impersonated a rookie Auror, thanks to polyjuice - disgusting muck - and hung out with the rank and file for a week. Wouldn’t you think that someone would have come up with a way to make it taste less like four-week old stinky socks and elephant crap?”

Interrupting, Tobias gave a bark of amusement. “And tell me Tony, how the hell would you know what elephant excrement tastes like or stinky socks for that matter?”

Ignoring the interruption, Tony ploughed on with his story. “So anyway, I ended up firing almost thirty-five percent of the senior Auror rank and file because they were either corrupt or too dumb to know when to keep their bigoted opinions to themselves. Then I hired about 20 experienced cops who’d left the Aurors to join the regular police because they were from non-magical families and discriminated against and/or they couldn’t stomach the discrimination or the corruption. I found another 5 who couldn’t even make it into the Aurors in the first place who were excellent and honest cops and hired them too. Plus, I really got up certain people’s noses by hiring on seventeen cops who are classified as squibs, too.”

“You hired sailors? Fornell queried, confused.


“You! You said you hired squids.”

“Squibs, Daddy,” Emily rolled her eyes at her parent’s dimness as only a teenager could pull off. “I’ve told you before…squibs are born into magical families but they don’t have magical ability… like Mom.”

“Almost right, Em. Some squibs have limited ability – they might seem telekinetic, for example, but just not have sufficient power for them to practise purposeful magic or pass their NEWTs.” Tony corrected her definition, kindly, smiling his heart melting grin at her to take any perceived sting out of his correction.

“Anyway, there are lots of investigatory tasks, especially forensic methods of collecting evidence that so-called squibs can perform and they’re perfectly capable of questioning witnesses or taking care of victims. Plus, they’re brilliant at coordinating with the regular police department, especially with all the terrorist threats.

“They already know about magic, and since they were working as cops I was able to replace the bent Aurors immediately. So now, half the magical population hates my guts for firing a bunch of influential but dishonest Aurors who were on the take, or they hate me for hiring ‘muggle cops or squibs. Apart from the minister, the only people who support me are my troops – they love me.”

Fornell shrugged. “It’s a thankless job, weeding out corruption, DiNozzo. But then… I’m not telling you anything you didn’t already know.”

Tony nodded, “True.”

Glancing at Emma he saw she was watching him admiringly. To a teenager his anarchic actions were probably seen as pretty cool, he supposed. Just not very smart politically, not that he cared.
After putting up with 15 years of Gibbs, Shepard and Vance’s crap, not to mention the various Secretaries of the Navy, he was in the mood to rock the boat.

He badly wanted to ask Tobias about his old teammates but Emily wasn’t privy to a lot of the details. Not wanting to wait until they reach his house he decided to make himself less interesting to the teenager. Switching on the radio that he’d already tuned to a jazz station on the drive to Heathrow, the teen rolled her eyes in disgust and pulled out her iPod. She turned up the volume loud enough for them to hear/feel the bass, before inserting her ear buds and tuning them out.

Fornell smiled approvingly. “Smooth, Tony.”

Winking in acknowledgement, he cut straight to the chase. “Thanks. So, spill. What the hell happened to the team?” He had the bare bones but there was so much that he didn’t trust to email, phone calls – even letters weren’t safe these days. “What did you do to Gibbs?”

“Me?” Tobias asked, sounded mightily offended. “I didn’t do anything. Blame a certain brown-eyed witch who seems inordinately fond of you. She decided some payback was due for his shitty behaviour.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

“Hey, I had no idea what she was planning, Scouts honour.” He held up his hands in his defence.

“But you knew she was up to something? What did she do? Did she blackmail him? I can’t think of any other reason that would cause him to resign like that.”

“No… she didn’t blackmail him, and Jethro didn’t resign. It’s just what the masses were led to believe. He’s been charged with fraud and altering federal documents. Hermione discovered at some point that he’d changed the age on his birth certificate, military records and NCIS personnel file. He couldn’t go back and wipe out all the paper trails in Stillwater since most of the records weren’t digital but paper. Like his birth at the local hospital, his marriage to Shannon and his attendance and graduation from various schools – they left a clear trail of breadcrumbs about his true age. Not to mention he couldn’t wipe the memories of his fellow schoolmates or girlfriends, many of whom were happy to sign Statutory Declarations to verify he was the same age as they were.

“Plus, she located Shannon’s death certificate and the first couple of marriage certificates that he never thought to have altered since I doubt Jethro ever expected he’d get caught. I guess he never expected to be on the bad side of a stubborn and brilliant witch. He’s used to the people he pisses off pointing a gun at him and shooting. Also, Jethro apparently had some sort of thing going with Vance which meant the director never probed too deeply into Gibbs affairs.”

“Even when he suspected he’d done something wrong?” Tony demanded.

“Especially when he suspected Gibbs was doing the wrong thing. Seems they covered for each other on other occasions and Jethro was pissed that he didn’t cover this up too.”

“Why didn’t he? They started off as mortal enemies but they got chummy pretty damned quick,” Tony observed, checking that Emily was still occupied by her music. He thought back to Domino, Michael Rivkin, the case of the Chicago boxer and the mob madam, Gibbs abduction by the Reynosa’s, Gibbs looking the other way when Ziva avenged her father and Jackie Vance’s killing. Oh yeah, it made perfect sense alright.

“Hermione circumvented their ‘I’ll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine’ arrangement. I can see
why she was described as the smartest witch of her age – she planned it like a military strike,” Tobias commented appreciatively.

“She sent the file she’d collected to Vance, proving that Gibbs had committed fraud and here’s the truly brilliant bit. She Cc’d it to NCIS Legal and HR departments too, plus she sent it to the Assistant Director of the FBI and the Judge Advocate General. No chance of Leon covering that up. JAG and FBI turned feral and launched simultaneous investigations. The JAG is horrified that all his cases in recent years are going to need to be retried when or if the shit hits the fan.”

Tony frowned. “Why?”

“Because the defence lawyers will launch appeals, arguing that since he altered his own personnel file, knowingly committed fraud for personal gain, he was perfectly capable of altering evidence to convict someone he thought was guilty. That or he wouldn’t have a problem perjuring himself to convict them. I think they’re hoping to keep it quiet and do the reviewing on the down low. Fat chance!”

“I heard on the grapevine that Gibbs had dropped off the radar after he resigned…um was fired,” Tony commented.

Fornell smirked sardonically. “Disappeared into the basement and tried to drown himself in that gawd-damn awful bourbon of his, more like it. Dr Mallard found him collapsed by the stairs with severe alcoholic poisoning and called a bus. He was diagnosed as suffering from jaundice, pancreatitis and malnutrition – all according to Ducky are signs of some really serious alcohol abuse. The doc called his old CO Will Ryan, hoping he’d talk some sense into him.”

“The colonel - he still stable and on his meds?” Ryan had been diagnosed with late-onset schizophrenia back when Cate Todd was a newbie.

“Yeah – he’s doing good.”

“And did he manage to talk some sense into the stubborn old bastard?”

“Nope, no talking. Ryan ripped him a new one, shouted so damned loud I bet he thought he was back in boot camp. Then he put his boot so far up Gibbs ass he got stomach cramps. Not content to rest on his laurels, Will dragged him to AA meetings and for good measure, put him to work at his charity foundation he volunteers with, working with young offenders.

“Ryan insisted he teach them carpentry and shipbuilding skills. He’s moved into the spare room at Gibbs house so he can kick his butt and make sure he’s staying on the straight and narrow while he waits for the court case.”

Tony sighed. What a waste…

“Okay, that Gibbs. What’s with the rest of the team. I heard that the whole team was replaced. Was Hermione responsible for that too?”

“No, Bishop decided to go back to the NSA after the shit hit the fan with Gibbs. Said he wasn’t who she thought he was and something about not being able to depend upon McGee if she was undercover. She’s fine.”

“And Tim?

“Okay I know once you calmed down a bit you told me to forget about him and Bishop hacking into your tax records. But honestly, McGee can’t help himself – he shot himself in the foot. Both
feet! I might have already let him overhear me on the phone talking about the FBI doing the probity and security checks on you for your new job. Seems like he and Gibbs weren’t happy that you wouldn’t tell them which agency had hired you as director. And I might have already set a cyber trap, thanks to Pen. So, anyone snooping around making enquiries into your data at the FBI triggered an alarm.”

“Pen? Is that Penelope Garcia?”

“Yeah, the woman is a genius with a keyboard and totally evil. Bit like a cyber version of Hermione - if they ever teamed up they’d be master criminals and rule the world.” Both men exchanged a glance, shuddering at the thought of them joining forces.

“She’s kind of adopted Emily since she heard about Diane’s death. Having a female that can be a sounding board has been really helpful for her and she’s enough of an anarchist to appeal to a teenager whose angry and grieving. Plus, she lost her own parents and can relate.

“Anyway, when Tim made the first unsuccessful attempt to hack into my computer I ignored it, because of what you said. But the trouble was that he wouldn’t give up, he kept on trying. See Pen had created this evil trap when she was staying at Quantico in protective custody earlier in the year.

“She had a bunch of cyber nasties were trying to kill her and a lot of spare time on her hands and was feeling evil. It was designed to draw in hackers and keep them coming back so she’d have a better chance of tracking them down.

“Near as I can tell, it’s brilliant,” he confided, admiringly. “The hacker thinks they’re getting through all these complex firewalls to reach their prize and right at the last minute – BAM - they get thrown out and have to start all over again. Except after each failure she ups the ante and makes it a bit more difficult. She’s designed it to be more addictive than crack cocaine except it’s like a game, something about neurobiology and CT scans she utilised to make it even more addictive. So, when I asked her to set up a trap on my computer at work, she decided to have McGee beta test her new baby.”

Tony grimaced, thinking about how McGee was always bragging about the software he got asked to beta. How ironic he was unknowingly helping Garcia to catch Black Hats because of his own compulsion for hacking. Not sure he’d have appreciated the irony when he found out, though.

“So?” Tony asked, not sure he wanted to know.

“Pen let it go, because I told her you didn’t want to pursue it anymore and I figured that his constant failure to crack my computer must be driving him crazy, which was punishment of sorts. So I didn’t insist she remove it from my computer. It seemed harmless and he was helping us out… even though he had no idea.”

“But?” Tony prompted because he sensed a humungous but.

“But... Penelope was having way too much fun with the beta test and kept it going, taunting him - driving him nuts. Said she was obtaining invaluable data to fine tune it…and then unfortunately it came to the attention of the FBI cyber-nerds that someone at NCIS was making repeated unauthorised attacks on my computer. They set up a sting of their own, gained remote access to his computer and started an exhaustive investigation into his activities, including past ones. They turned over evidence to various agencies he’d been hacking into, including that stupid foray into your tax records.”
Tony groaned. *Oh crap*, he was glad he wasn’t around when the shit hit the fan. That would not have been pretty. “And?”

“And Vance managed to claim that most of his hacking was for National Security purposes and made various deals with directors of other agencies. I reckon his lips must have gotten pretty chapped from all the ass-kissing.”

Tony snorted at the gross image. “Eww Toby. Was that necessary? I meant your comment – some thoughts simply aren’t for sharing. And why do I sense another but?”

“Because you’re no fool, DiNozzo. The IRS weren’t convinced that McGee hacking into their records to gain details of your tax return so he could figure out how you afforded your Georgetown apartment was a matter of National Security. Imagine that!” Tobias exclaimed theatrically.

“Similarly, the FBI weren’t convinced that over 60 hours of trying to crack an encrypted file on your probity and security checks for MI5 and MI6 was a matter of national security either. They charged him with a raft of indictments and the judge threw the book at him.”

Tony looked at him, shocked. “McGee’s in prison? This is my fault – I set him up in the first place. Can’t we appeal?”

“C’mon Tony. This isn’t your fault – Tim made way too many enemies with his hacking over the years – and mostly within the law enforcement community. You know he hacked - even when there was no need; hell, the guy routinely hacked into the DMV rather than make a phone call or get a warrant. He was always living on borrowed time – but to hack into the IRS and for a non-work query was grossly arrogant and downright stupid. Even Al Capone learned the hard way that you don’t mess with them.”

“Yeah but if I hadn’t been whinging about it to you, he wouldn’t be in prison.” Tony pointed out guiltily.

“You didn’t force him to try to break into the IRS for your tax records, or for that matter, break into my computer to try to read the encrypted file. His own arrogant belief that he was too good to be caught was what really tripped him up and honestly, it was just a matter of time before he pissed off one person too many. Besides, Tony, he’s not going to be in prison for too much longer. Seems that the FBI’s Cyber Crimes Division adheres to Jethro’s Rule # 5.”

“You don’t waste good?” Tony parroted without thinking. “What does that even mean in this context, Tobias?”

“It means that Deputy Director, Aubrey Ryan has a delicious and perverse sense of irony. First, she catches the hackers and she takes great personal satisfaction in throwing their asses into jail and then she gives them the chance to stay there and serve out their sentence (which in his case was a damned long time) or work for the FBI Cyber Crimes division.

“McGee spent a couple of months sitting on his ass in a federal penitentiary before he got a visit from Aubrey and an offer to work for the light side. It also means he can’t afford to put a foot out of line or his ass will be thrown back in jail, permanently. Obviously he accepted the job and he’ll be out in the new year, maybe February or March if all things go smoothly.”

“What about Bishop?”

She’s fine, Tony. She admitted being an accessory to the IRS hacking and testified against McGee because she refused to take part in the subsequent accessing of the encrypted files on my computer.
She got a rap over the knuckles and a black mark on her record. As I said, after Gibbs was forced to resign she decided to return to the NSA, although I hear that the DEA are trying to recruit her.

“Vance on the other hand... Dead Man Walking. Rumour has it that Sarah Porter is just waiting for the mess with Gibbs and McGee to die down a bit and then he’ll be shown the door.” Tobias shook his head but he didn’t exactly look upset about Leon Vance – the man was a loose cannon.

“And Ducky?” Tony inquired softly.

“Dr Mallard had a belated epiphany about how short-sighted he’d been and decided it was time to hang up his rib cutters and his Stryker saw. Now that he’s retired from NCIS he consults part-time and is an expert witness. He was shaken up by all the crap that was going on right under his nose and he decided he was past it. Of course, call me a cynic, but the fact he was sent to Coventry by most of his former UK Intel. contacts might well have contributed to his Road to Damascus moment. It was a pretty major wake up call.”

The director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement sighed. They were silent for several minutes as both men contemplated the ignominious end to what had been a most illustrious career in law enforcement for the esteemed medical examiner. Fornell was hoping that would be the end of Tony’s inquiries. Knowing Tony’s inclination for blaming himself for things he wasn’t responsible for, Tobias was willing to bet he was already castigating himself over the demise of his former team. Unjustly, in Tobias’ opinion.

The brutal truth was that every individual on Gibbs team had their fair share of faults and personality traits that made them difficult to work with, including Gibbs – especially Gibbs. A good leader should have been able to compensate for all the quirks and flaws of their team members, though. But Gibbs with his micromanagement of his team, his paranoia - not letting his right hand know what his left hand was doing, let alone deliberately keeping his agents out of the loop even while making them to compete against each other, magnified all their shortcomings. However, in Fornell’s opinion, perhaps Jethro’s most serious failure as a supervisor was his stubborn refusal to uphold or enforce the chain of command, constantly undercutting his second-in-charge’s position within the team, effectively rendering DiNozzo impotent as SFA.

Any wonder the highly experienced and gifted investigator had turned increasingly to irritating his team when he failed to receive the respect that was his due as second in command. A position he’d held for well over a decade.

If Gibbs had just ensured that the junior agents had known their place when he’d brought them onto the team, even if he hadn’t addressed all the other issues, Tobias was sure that the whole tenor of the team would have been very different. It would have been far more positive – and more than likely, it wouldn’t have imploded like it had when DiNozzo left. But the fault wasn’t Tony’s, or if he bore any responsibility, then there was plenty of blame to go around, with each and every one of them on or associated with the team at least as responsible.

Finally, the silence was broken between them by Tony’s melancholy sigh. “And Abby?” he asked in a monotone. “Where is she?”

Groaning inwardly, the FBI agent shared what was common knowledge - which wasn’t a lot. “She was working in the private sector for a bit, but she refused to observe the dress code, wanted to work with her ear-splitting music and expected her superior to keep her juiced up on caffeinated drinks. That wasn’t going to fly anywhere but NCIS, no matter how damned good she was. Word got around pretty damned fast about her unprofessional attitude and now none of the major labs or corporations will touch her. Last I heard, she was working a few shifts a week for that Ancestry crowd, running DNA tests and managing a Goth club that’s reputed to be in danger of foreclosure.”
Privately, he’d heard that Sciuto was starting to act erratically, possibly affected by the post hypnotic suggestion that Hermione had placed whilst she was in the psych ward at Walter Reed more than seven months ago. She’d been writing long rambling letters to all the various team members including Ducky, Vance and Palmer, berating them all for their behaviour regarding Tony. Thus far Abby showed no sign of being capable of, or perhaps willing to acknowledge her own culpability in what had gone down. He was not about to share that data with Tony at this point in time however. She was every bit as stubborn as Gibbs when it came down to believing that she was right and everyone else must be wrong.

Tobias wondered why it was so hard for her to see things from other peoples’ point of view which inevitably led on to similar musings about Jethro, too. But knowing that would take a truckload of profilers to figure out, he resolved to put it out of his mind and just enjoy this precious time with Emily and get to know all Diane’s magical relatives instead. Life was too short to worry about people who refused to help themselves.

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Fornell watched Emily as she and the other teenagers played with Tony’s Wii, they were using a ten-pin bowling game. Fornell figured it was probably a fairly easy game for the magical kids who weren’t au fait with technology or computer games to grasp how to play and join in on. While Hermione’s pair, Hugo and Rose had grown up straddling both worlds, especially since their father’s death, they still weren’t as comfortable with technology as Emily who practically had her cell phone and iPod grafted to her person.

Harry and Ginny’s kids were definitely far less comfortable than their cousins, probably because they spent the majority of their time with their magical cousins and grandparents who, frankly, were clueless when it came to all things non-magical. Even their grandfather, Arthur who was supposed to be an expert on items used by non-magicals was woefully unfamiliar with some of the simplest things.

Still despite their differences, Em seemed to enjoy getting to know the other magical teenagers who were distantly related to her mother. She was getting on well with Albus and Hugo, although she’d really seemed to hit it off with Lily and Rose. Seeing her smiling and laughing made him glad they’d decided to spend Christmas in England. Well mostly happy. It was the fifth one of the group of English teens and also the eldest, who had Tobias’ blood pressure soaring off the charts.

He was a young, handsome looking kid with cobalt-blue coloured hair, which Fornell immediately labelled as a sign of rebellious self-expression. Another black mark against him – and it was a biggie - Em was totally besotted with the kid whose name was Teddy Lupin. While he was still trying to sort out everyone and who they were related to, he knew that Teddy was Harry Potter’s godson. That said, he was equally sure that he must also have some connection to Tony by the complex and contradictory way DiNozzo looked whenever his name was mentioned. Fondly affectionate, yet also pained; absurdly proud yet guilt-ridden.

Tobias had gathered that the young man, who had just finished school, was a trainee Auror. Apparently even now, very few magical youngsters in Britain attended regular tertiary education. Hermione’s brother-in-law, Harry and her husband, Ron had never even returned to school to complete their final year at the end of the war. She was something of an oddity, having obtained post graduate degrees at university as the Brits referred to College.

So, he was not real thrilled that Emily had a crush on a boy with blue hair who was going to be a cop but hadn’t gone to college. Call him a hypocrite, since he was in law enforcement too, as Diane had been, but he was hoping Emily would end up with a nice doctor or a lawyer. Hmm on second
thoughts, perhaps not a lawyer…maybe an architect, an orthodontist or even an aeronautical engineer.

Someone flopped down beside him; Harry Potter, who handed him a beer. “He’s a really good kid. You don’t have to worry about Emily,” Harry assured Tobias, indicating Teddy.

“I’m sure he is but Em’s my little girl, and she’s had a tough time. It’s a father’s job to hate all her male friends, especially when they are significantly older.”

Harry chuckled. “Hey, I’m the father of a teenage girl too. I get it. But honestly, Teddy is a great kid. Besides, I don’t know if you’ve noticed but he’s got a bit of a bromance slash hero-worship going on himself at the moment; so, I think Emily’s reputation is safe.” He motioned to Teddy who was joking with Tony.

Fornell watched as Tony was explaining something about the Wii to the blue haired young man. Anyone who knew him well could see how terribly pensive he seemed as the youngster lapped up the attention with an expression of rapt concentration.

“Who is Teddy to Tony. He’s not his father, is he?”

The black-haired wizard erected a privacy shield and shook his head. “He was extremely close to Teddy’s parents. Remus was one of his best friends at Hogwarts along with my father, James Potter. Plus, Teddy’s mother was Sirius’ favourite cousin, Andromeda’s daughter – Nymphadora Tonks. She was an Auror too and if you dared to call her Nymphadora she tore your arm off and slapped you with it.” He looked incredibly sad and he took a long swig of his drink before continuing. “They were both killed in the war, not long after Teddy was born.”

“Does Teddy know who Tony is?” Fornell asked softly, wincing at the tragedy that Teddy had endured.

“That Tony is his first cousin twice removed? No, but maybe someday he will. Tony has started mentoring him with his Auror training. He was identified and recruited in the nascent training program for his undercover potential even before Tony officially took over the department. He’s begun giving him special one-on-one training. Hermione says that when she checked him out she learnt that Tony was an expert in undercover work in the US?” Harry stated it as fact, although Fornell sense the query.

“The best I’ve ever worked with. He brought down a mafia boss and his whole family, even though it took almost a year to do. Another case…took over a team full of rookies – had to do the lion share of the investigating. Still managed to work on an undercover case at the same time and not one of his team had a clue that for almost a year he was also pretending to be a college professor. He can slip in and out of new personas’ in the blink of an eye.”

“But isn’t Teddy a bit too young for undercover work at this stage of his career? He’s not even qualified yet,” Tobias asked, returning to the earlier topic.

“Teddy shares a unique gift with his mother, who was great undercover too.” Seeing the open curiosity in the FBI agent’s eyes, Harry yelled, “Cadet Lupin, report!”

Teddy jumped to attention and marched over. “Something I can assist you with Auror Potter, Sir.”

“Emily’s dad used to work with Tony as a federal agent. He’s curious about your potential undercover abilities. Rather than trying to explain to him what a metamorphmagus is – I thought you could just show him, Teddy.”
Teddy grinned and nodded. Suddenly the kid’s overly long, cobalt coloured hair turned salt and pepper before Fornell’s eyes and his hair line receded dramatically. Fornell found himself looking at his doppelganger before suddenly he was looking at a carbon copy of his own beloved daughter. Finally, he found himself looking at Tony or a Tony clone. Seeing Fornell’s astonishment he started laughing, before shifting back into Teddy once more, complete with blue hair that could do with a trim.

Emily squealed like a fangirl. “OMG, you’re an metamorphmagus. That’s so cool. Dad you have no idea how rare it is. Wait ‘til I tell the kids at school that I met one. Hang on …we’re not related, are we?” Seeing her look of hero worship, Tobias snorted, not comforted by the tangible evidence of his teenage daughter’s crush as she stared adoringly at Teddy.

Hermione chuckled as she smacked her father’s knuckles playfully. “Well you’re distantly related to the Weasleys who are distantly related to the House of Black. Plus, you’re distantly related to him through James, Albus and Lily because Harry is also related to the Black family on his paternal grandmother’s side. She was Dorea Black before her marriage and Teddy’s Gran, Andromeda Tonks nee Black was Sirius’ cousin before she was married.”

Seeing Emily’s woe begotten, kicked puppy-dog face she chuckled harder. “But everyone is related to someone in English magical families… if you go back far enough. But not enough to stop you two dating or marrying though,” she smiled, seeing Teddy looking bashful while Emily looked relieved, but blushing.

Fornell glared daggers at her and she smiled back brightly, since she knew that Teddy’s bashfulness was probably related to rumours that he was keen on Bill and Fleur Weasleys’ eldest daughter. Victorie was more closely related to him than the American teenager whose relationship was tenuous. No doubt he was probably relieved by her explanation that no matter who he ended up dating, in such a small population he would be distantly related to them and it wouldn’t be a problem. Unless he wanted to marry a close cousin.

Meanwhile, Harry was enthusiastically nattering on to Fornell about the changes Tony had introduced to combat corruption and Tobias concluded that Teddy wasn’t the only one who seemed to have a bromance going on with Tony. Harry was describing how Tony had introduced annual lie detector tests and random drug tests to ensure that Aurors weren’t under the influence of drugs or alcohol on duty. Fornell was impressed by how much Tony had achieved in such a short time but he figured that after cooling his jets on Gibbs team for so long, Tony was feeling energised facing the challenge of cleaning house.

One thing did catch him by surprise – Harry mentioned how Tony had set up a DNA and fingerprint database so that if the Aurors accidentally contaminated crime scenes, they wouldn’t waste time chasing false leads. Fornell knew the database could also be useful in identifying dead Aurors who might have been beyond being recognised physically but it also could help catch Aurors who committed crimes. All were laudable reasons for having a database but Tobias was caught off guard by the fact that Tony had collected not only blood and epithelial cells (mouth swabs) but Harry innocently mentioned that Tony had collected a hair sample too.

Frankly, that was a bit unorthodox – you could get mitochondrial DNA from the hair shaft that provided information on the direct maternal line of mother to daughter but the more useful DNA testing – autosomal and Y-DNA testing required access to the hair follicle. But as Tobias was well aware, you could also use hair samples for other types of testing such as hair analysis including toxicology. The FBI agent wondered what the hell Tony was up to.

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“Honestly, Tony, we’d be perfectly fine alone here tonight. We could watch a DVD in your movie room – after that magnificent lunch today, we’re more than happy to look after ourselves. You and Hermione should go to the Weasleys for Christmas dinner with the kids.” Tobias maintained and Emily nodded her agreement.

“Yeah, we’re good,” she concurred.

Tony chuckled. Hermione had flooed to the Weasleys to put in a brief appearance and accompany her two kids, although she wasn’t staying for dinner, just some celebratory drinks. She had begged off attending the large Christmas dinner, pleading she had her guests from America to entertain. He’d politely declined an invitation for the same reason, especially since the Fornells were staying at his place.

“Trust me, Tobias, you’re not an imposition. I’m glad of the excuse. Between you and me, Molly’s not sure what to make of me, being American and all, and its awkward,” he stated cryptically, giving him a look.

Fornell decided not to question him further. Emily and the Grangers who were here too didn’t know Tony’s real identity. He could only imagine how difficult it must be to have to be with people he knew well like the Weasleys and to pretend not to know.

“Okay, I get that you probably feel like an outsider and that red-headed mob, no offense intended Em, can be a zoo with all the spouses and grandkids. But Hermione’s family. There’s no reason why she shouldn’t go be with Hugo and Rose and enjoy herself.”

Grant Granger chuckled and exchanged a look with his wife Miranda. “No need to feel guilty, Tobias. Confidentially, Hermione and her mother-in-law are a bit like oil and water. She’s a traditionalist to her bootstraps and our daughter is, as I’m sure you’ve already gathered, a reformer, so they often clash. Molly’s also a tad xenophobic, as her eldest daughter-in-law Fleur can attest. She’s still not happy that the Head of the DMLE is a foreigner and that Hermione was the one who appointed him.”

Fornell looked at Tony who shrugged and smirked but it was what the FBI agent had come to think of as him ‘having his game face on.’ It was impossible to tell what he was really thinking or feeling.

“Doesn’t she know that you’re half English, have a British passport and come from a highly influential bunch of bluebloods?”

Yes, but I’m half American too and that side of the family was originally from Italy and therefore I’m a foreigner. She thinks that Hermione should have given the job to Harry.”

“Hermione must have had a good reason for choosing you.”

“She did,” Miranda championed her daughter. “Apart from them both having concerns about the appearance of nepotism, Harry was becoming jaded by the endemic corruption. He thought when they cleared it out after he killed Riddle that was the end of it.”

“Plus, Harry is tossing up whether to change careers. He’s thinking of teaching,” Grant commented, clearly in Harry’s confidence.

“The truth is, that it’s easier for an outsider to come in and make the sweeping changes that are needed to ensure that corruption doesn’t have a chance to become entrenched,” Tony declared. “Since this is something that non-magical law enforcement have had to struggle with in the last
few decades, bringing transparency and accountability into play, it made sense for me to do it. Plus, you told Hermione how much I despised betrayal and dirty cops, Toby.”

“Well it’s true, you’re disgustingly incorruptible, DiNozzo. Even fifteen years working for under ‘Gibbs’ Rules’ never managed to smash your moral compass. You know the system is far from perfect but that if you don’t work within the system we have, warts and all, you end up becoming everything you hate, end up just as bad as the perps.”

Tony shrugged, not so sure he was such a good guy. He’d let stuff slide with Gibbs and the team when he should have reported it. “Well anyhow, upstart foreigner comes in, makes sweeping changes, gets rid of corrupt but politically connected Aurors and hires ‘muggle-trained’ cops and squibs in their place. Everyone hates his guts but if it had been an insider who pulled this shit, it would have been so much harder on them, more pressure brought to bear.

“Hermione would also have copped way more criticism in her new role than she has. Being a foreigner and ‘from the muggle’ world, it is easy for me being the scape goat. Plus, I don’t give a rats about popularity or my political future.”

It was true, he could always get a full-time job with MI6 or the cops. Alternatively, he could always go back to the US. He could also take his time finding a job - Harry had already insisted on giving him a portion of the Black Fortune despite his protestation, in addition to purchasing his London home.

Tony had left the money sitting in an account, untouched, just like he had DiNozzo’s trust fund from Tony’s mother in an account earning interest. Tony had tried handing it back to Anthony’s father but Anthony had been adamant that he’d just blow it on a dodgy deal or drink the proceeds. He insisted that Tony keep it and although it felt wrong, he had never actually touched the principle though.

He’d taken some of the interest earned to buy his beloved mustang that had been blown up and then when he came back to London, used some more of the interest to purchase his Aston Martin. The trust fund had also come in handy as collateral when he decided to buy his apartment in DC, since as McGee had discovered, it was a bargain due to its unfortunate history. Of course, having magical spells available to him to clean up all the blood and gore from the crime scene had been a decided advantage when he’d purchased the property. So now he had a second big bank account just sitting there should he ever get into difficulty and need to find a job.

Not that he hadn’t enjoyed cleaning up the department that almost three decades before had incarcerated him without the opportunity of a trial. He’d tried hard to be dispassionate and not let bitterness and revenge rule his decision-making process. He channelled his inner Anthony with his deep abhorrence of all things corrupt to help Tony rid the department of the entrenched graft and corruption. One of the first things Tony had done in conjunction with Harry was to quietly investigate every single prisoner to ensure that there wasn’t any other witches or wizards who had been incarcerated without receiving a trial.

Since his appointment, Tony had brought in a whole raft of reformist measures such as biannual lie detector tests - in line with some of the most innovative non-magical law enforcement agencies. The only difference being that the DMLE could use veritaserum instead of measures of galvanic skin changes. Mind you, thanks to Padfoot, he had a huge advantage when it came to liars. He remembered a television show called The Sentinel about a guy who had extraordinary sensory abilities. It was of course, the result of someone’s fertile imagination but Pads had extremely sensitive taste, hearing, scent. All of which could assist in him detecting a liar - although to be perfectly honest, licking someone’s skin to detect miniscule changes in biochemistry was a bit
gross albeit fairly normal canine behaviour. Being able to let Pads out to play on the common on a regular basis he found his human sensory abilities had become even better, and they had always been better than the average human, magical or non-magical. Of course, as a wizard he couldn’t exactly rock up and lick someone to determine if they were lying or not but smell and hearing was still pretty accurate indicators of someone trying to deceive him.

In addition, he’d also introduced a raft of financial anticorruption measures that included mandatory declaration of any services or goods offered to the Aurors in the course of their job. They also had to declare and agree to oversight of any bank balances just like he’d needed to when he was at Baltimore PD or NCIS with Anthony’s inheritance. And he’d also made it mandatory to declare financial affiliations upon being hired to avoid any perception of impropriety.

Another important anticorruption measure that he’d instituted was a long overdue scheme to protect his Aurors’ financially, should they be injured or killed in the line of duty, so that their families were taken care of. It was also in line with other law enforcement agencies and imminently reasonable, given the life-threatening risks they ran. Tony knew it would make it easier for them to resist criminals attempts to corrupt them if they knew their families would be well taken care of if they weren’t around.

It was just the start – Hermione and himself were working on ways of increasing Auror salaries, simultaneously raising their standing and the standard of applicants. It would mean that he could have his pick of the crop of young wizards and witches and train them the way he wanted. With his new initiatives, Tony was hoping that they would soon be on par with the rest of their law enforcement brethren in the UK.

He’d noticed since his return that there was an air of smugness surrounding the magical community that was way too familiar. They believed themselves to be far superior to the normal population because of their magical abilities which had lead them to rest on their laurels for way too long. Now that the rest of society had entered the technological age, they were no longer inferior – in many ways they’d far exceeded the magical world. Space travel or forensic science being but two examples of how far superior they were in lots of ways.

Tony was keen to incorporate forensics into the Auror training program – he figured that it would be easier to educate the trainees rather than trying to change the perceptions of older more closed-minded individuals. He still had the cops he’d hired who were accustomed to working with the benefits of forensic science to help solve cases. Which wasn’t to say that he was opposed to using magic to solve crimes – he’d found some creative ways to get to the bottom of a few cold cases that none of his colleagues thought could be solved.

Sighing, knowing change didn’t happen overnight, he wandered into the kitchen to organise their dinner. Hermione should be back soon and then they’d all sit down and eat before watching Tony’s favourite Christmas movie – It’s a Wonderful Life – together. It was one of Anthony’s few happy memories with his mother – that and the caramel popcorn.

As far as Christmas dinner was concerned, it was just going to be a simple meal – soup and sandwiches and Miranda had supplied a plum pudding and brandy custard. He’d made the minestrone soup the day before – it was one of those dishes which always benefited from having a day or two to develop its full flavours. And the turkey or honey cured ham sandwiches were leftovers from a glorious lunch today.

Grant came into Tony’s ultra-modern kitchen and offered to help, so he had him start buttering bread and assembling various condiments for people to add, depending on personal preferences. Meanwhile, he kept watch over the soup and shaved some fresh parmesan cheese. Miranda drifted
in to heat up the plum pudding and warm the custard while Tony transferred the steaming soup into a tureen and began to locate the soup plates. Heading into the dining area, he yelled at Grant to stop nicking the slices of ham and he grinned as Hermione emerged from his flooed fireplace.

Hermione had insisted when he decided to live in a non-magical locale that the house he purchased needed to have a working fireplace and he’d duly obeyed. She was after all his boss.

Watching her emerge gracefully, he chuckled. Even after years of practise, Harry still ended up on his butt. “Perhaps you should give Auror Potter pointers on how to floo without looking like a buffoon,” he suggested hopefully. “It is hard to instil the appropriate level of gravitas for our Auror Corps into the public when he arrives on his butt.”

Hermione shook her head in defeat. “I’ve tried; for someone who was the youngest ever seeker at Hogwarts in a century, he can be surprisingly ungainly. He tried claiming it was because he grew up with the Dursleys but I put the kybosh on that pathetic excuse, since I never flooed until I was at Hogwarts and I don’t end up on my bum.”

“Maybe Harry could put a cushioning charm on his butt, so he bounces back onto his feet,” Emily suggested, amused.

She had been fascinated with the form of magical transportation since it wasn’t available back home. Although the retail savvy American teen had taken great delight in dragging all the Weasley cousins including Harry’s kids and Rose and Hugo to Harrods and Harvey Nichols on a retail therapy outing. They’d been suitably gobsmacked by the store escalators and surprised that muggles had lifts (elevators for the Americans) too, like at the Ministry of Magic but were even more amazed at the vast array of foods available there in one place.

Hermione’s kids were pretty accustomed to non-magical society since they were taken out into it regularly, not just by their mother but by Grant and Miranda as well. Harry occasionally took his kids into London to the theatre, restaurants or the movies but the rest of the Weasley mob relied mostly on Arthur and his rather quaint knowledge of non-magicals. Emily was quickly proving to be a subversive influence, with her love of retail therapy; she’d also dragged them all off to The London Eye.

After bowling on Tony’s Wii set-up, it had been decided to take the rest of the Weasley cousins ten pin bowling at a real bowling alley. Emily had a list of other places she wanted to go including: crazy golf and attending the ballet at Sadler Wells, attend a show at the West End, visiting Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London. The teenager was determined to drag Tobias and as many of the Weasley kids along with her as possible.

Tony had also promised to take them to see a pantomime – Aladdin - tomorrow night, since none of the Weasley kids or Teddy had ever been to see one. It also wasn’t common in the US so he doubted if Emily or Tobias had been to one either. The Grangers thought it was a wonderful idea and volunteered to help chaperone Rose and Hugo’s cousins, although Tony suspected that like him, they were secretly happy to have an excuse to attend without looking pathetic. Delores Bromstead, his personal assistant had also offered to help with transportation and chaperone duties.

Harry was coming of course with his three but Ginny had begged off, supposedly because of her pregnancy, although Hermione had commented rather archly that she hadn’t let her previous pregnancies interfere with her social engagements. Apparently, Ginny wasn’t a fan of non-magical entertainments, rarely accompanying Harry when he did take the kids out -usually with Hermione and her kids. According to the kids, their mother was permanently in a bad mood since she fell pregnant five months ago and Harry was bending himself into a pretzel to try to mollify her,
Although her pregnancy had been a shock to everyone, Harry was over the moon with happiness. Frankly the timing sucked and Tony was more than a little bit suspicious. When he arrived, he’d decided to have Harry tested to see if Ginny had been potioning him or she had just taken advantage of his lack of experience in affairs of the heart. He’d finagled a hair sample from Harry under the guise of setting up a DNA database and sent it away for toxicology. It had come back with some anomalies, unidentified substances that he was having analysed but even if he had irrefutable proof, with Ginny expecting a new little Potter, he didn’t reckon it would make a bit of difference.

There was no way that Harry would consider leaving her with a baby on the way. Still, Tony was cynical. It was if Ginny knew he suspected her and had deliberately fallen pregnant to thwart him. Although he loved Harry’s kids, part of him chaffed at the thought that the heir to the House of Black and Potter for that matter might have been begat via a love potion. Unfortunately, it looked as if Ginny held all the cards so Tony turned his thoughts back to the pantomime.

They’d invited Molly and Arthur to the pantomime too but the Weasley matriarch declined politely though Tony had been able to persuade Arthur to come, knowing the eccentric wizard would adore pantomime. After all, song and dance, slapstick comedy and cross-dressing actors all combined with topical humour and a plot which was loosely based on a well-known fairy tale, fable or folk tale – what’s not to love? With its highly participatory form, where the audience is encouraged, expected even, to sing along and shout out phrases to the performers – Tony expected Arthur to really enjoy himself since he had a child-like naiveté that could be quite endearing.

He had to admit he was looking forward to it too. While as a member of the House of Black, he’d never attended one before, Anthony DiNozzo had gone one year with his mother when they’d been visiting her Paddington relatives at Christmas. He was five or six at the time and it was one of his only truly happy memories of Christmas, so now Tony couldn’t wait to go and experience it for himself. He was looking forward to watching the kids watch the pantomime too.

He’d initially been tempted to book seats for Peter Pan because he was curious about the cross dressing. It was a tradition for the theatrical productions of the show to cast a girl to play the main character of Peter Pan but because panto tradition was for the opposite sex to swap roles, Tony was curious to see if panto Peter would then be played by a real boy.

Then he remembered how Cate had frequently accused him of being an X-rated Peter Pan and he decided Aladdin was a better choice. Christmas was a happy time for him this year and he didn’t want to spoil it by thinking about the past too much.

~o0o~

As Tony, Emily and the Grangers were putting the finishing touches to Christmas dinner, Hermione sat beside Tobias, sipping some mulled wine.

“So why does Tony dislike your mother-in-law? Is it just because she doesn’t like ‘foreigners’ and thinks you should have appointed Harry as the head of DMLE?” Fornell asked bluntly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Well spotted, Toby. You should be an investigator! No, it isn’t because she’s xenophobic – and she is, by the way,” she confirmed, standing up and checking to make sure that her parents and Emily were otherwise occupied before gaining her seat once more.
“It’s because she interfered in Padfoot’s relationship with Harry. It was while he was out in hiding at his ancestral home, and a grim and depressing place it was for someone who’d spent 12 years of their life in Hell in the company of Dementors. Anyway, the Weasleys, Harry, Ron, Ginny and I were all staying there with him too, since it was starting to get dangerous by then. So anyway, the Weasleys had put Harry up a few times at the Burrows - that’s their home - and suddenly Molly’s acting like it made him their seventh son and she should get to say what happened to him.

“She undermined Pads and was disrespectful of his attempts to re-establish his relationship with Harry, which from what I understood was a close one. He’d certainly spent a lot longer than a few weeks with him, which was Molly’s claim to fame. Padfoot was Harry’s father’s best friend and his parents had chosen him as his godfather, not Molly who they didn’t know from a bar of soap,” Hermione said, full of indignant rage on someone’s behalf. Tobias just wasn’t sure if it was Harry’s, Sirius’ or both.

“Aside from trying to come between them, she wasn’t exactly empathetic to Padfoot, didn’t like him. I realise now that he was suffering from PTSD but she didn’t even try to understand or help him. She wasn’t even particularly grateful that he was letting them stay in his house where they were completely safe – it was under a fidelis charm and the Death Eaters couldn’t find it. If she’d shown him some kindness, even if she or Dumbledore sought the assistance of a mind healer, he might not have behaved so impulsively and with such little concern for his safety that night at the Ministry and Harry would have still had his godfather.”

Hermione scowled fiercely, sipping the chianti with its array of spices and clementine before she stared into the flames of the fire that Tony had burning. She looked around Tony’s main reception room with its beautiful vaulted ceiling, grandiose marble fireplace and wall panelling, sighing.

“Hell, what am I saying? If she’d been half the mother to Harry she thought she was, she would have made sure he got the help of a mind healer after Cedric’s death. A mind healer might have prevented the whole fiasco at the Ministry but then again, the Weasleys didn’t even get help for Ginny after she’d been possessed by Voldemort for months in her first year at Hogwarts. Although, I guess to be fair, it’s possible that Dumbledore never told them all the details of Ginny’s possession – he always did like to keep things close to his chest.”

Fornell raised his eyebrows. Such a lot of tangents to pursue. Deciding that time was limited and he could go back later and clarify details, he kept it simple.

“So how did Harry feel about her interference in his relationship with his godfather?”

“To be honest Toby, I’m not sure he was really aware of it. He was always fairly clueless about relationships. Not surprising considering his impoverished background, but then he was so starved of affection that it made him ill-equipped to deal with conflict or betrayal. Even the smallest kindness had a huge impact on him.

“He named his son after Dumbledore, a wizard who raised him like a farmyard animal to be broken and malleable, so at the appropriate time he would sacrifice himself. He gave his son a middle name of the man who betrayed his parents because of jealousy and revenge and despite what Snape may have done to help out in the war effort, he and Dumbledore don’t deserve his forgiveness or his admiration. That should give you a clue how easy it was to win him over.”

Sensing how strongly she felt, he decided to change the subject since it was Christmas night. “So, from what I heard, Tony seems to be succeeding in reforming your law enforcement procedures? Is he happy in the job?”

Hermione grinned. “He’s been busy in the six months he’s held the job. Even though he’s taken a
few cases with MI6 and one with the Met, he’s ripped through the DMLE like a whirlwind. He’s made a fair few enemies along the way but his Aurors love him and would walk through fire if he asked them to.”

“He said he got rid of a lot of corrupt Aurors?”

“Yeah, I think it shocked people to their core to realise that even though we cleaned the department after the war, that we had corruption again. They think that Voldemort was the cause, not that he simply took advantage of corruption that was already there. I suspect there is just as much corruption in the Ministry, if not the Wizengamot too – just like in the non-magical government and houses of parliament. Corruption will always flourish where ignorance and greed exist and power is entrusted to a few individuals who think that their tenure means there is no need for accountability.”

Tobias nodded. “True. Power tends to corrupt…”

“And absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Hermione finished the famous quote by Lord Acton.

“And that’s what makes you such a cool Minister of Magic. Most of your brethren wouldn’t have a clue what I was talking about…you Hermione finish the quote.”

Hermione shrugged and returned to the topic. “Anyway… even if Tony has managed to make a lot of enemies he’s pretty much taken the wind out of his detractors sails too. And the baby Aurors all think he walks on water. He solved some old crimes – like over ten years old that the old-timers said were unsolvable, just by reading the case files. He also solved a couple of extremely dangerous cases without a spell even being fired by anticipating what might happen and having backup in place. He’s an amazing investigator – just like you said.”

The FBI agent nodded. “That’s why I tried to recruit him for years.”

Hermione nodded knowingly. “Yes, I can see why. He’s formed a new section within the DMLE – undercover specialists and he’s training those recruited in undercover techniques. Many of the group are Animagus who excel at surveillance.

By the way, did he tell you, he and Teddy did some undercover work for the Met on a serial murder/ rape case. Teddy disguised himself to fit the victim’s profile – a petite blonde, out walking her black Irish Wolfhound mix at night. They trapped the killer after he followed them, and Padfoot turned the tables once he had his scent and tracked him down.

“They often do surveillance together where Teddy is a little old lady or a kid walking his dog and everyone ignores them, thinking they’re harmless. Plus, Tony’s already worked with MI6 to track down a major terrorist cell.”

“How come I didn’t hear anything about it?”

She smiled. “Because it was authorised at the highest levels, Prime Minister to Minister of Magic. Tony came up with a plan to find all the members of the cell using a time turner, and it was strictly need-to-know situation. I’ve consented to him using the time-turner on a case by case basis, with my approval.”

Seeing Fornell’s expression, she became slightly defensive. “What? There are safeguards. I have to approve its use every time based on merit. We only use it to gather intel., not change anything that’s already occurred. Don’t forget Tony’s used a time-turner for extended periods of time in the
past for law enforcement purposes, as have I when I was at Hogwarts, without wreaking havoc on the universe. Its use is always to be one of last resort, not the first line of defence. And in this particular case, we had prime ministerial approval too.”

“Why get involved in this case, Hermione?”

“Because they were threatening all of us. Terrorists kill witches and wizards just as easily as regular people. They don’t discriminate and besides, it might be my mum and dad who were targeted. I’m first and foremost a Brit, Tobias. I care about non-magical people too. I have other family…cousins, aunts and uncles who could have been killed.

“And besides - you know Tony. He cares passionately about the innocents, and he doesn’t ask them to cast a spell to prove they are magical before wanting to help them. Between Padfoot and DiNozzo, he feels driven to save lives. He didn’t stop being a cop when he returned to our world, and I doubt he ever will after close to two decades. When MI6 requested his help, there was no way he would say no to them.”

Fornell did know Tony and she was right – he wouldn’t turn his back on MI6 when innocent people might be threatened. “Okay, you’re right. Just… please be careful, Hermione. I know you’re the Minister of Magic and a helluva smart witch but messing with time is serious stuff.”

“Yeah, I know. But since it is classified, it will be used sparingly,” the young politician assured him earnestly, before adroitly changing the subject.

“Hey, did Tony tell you, we hired a forensic scientist and set up a forensic laboratory. We found a squib who was top notch, so now we can run fingerprints and basic trace particulates evidence to help us solve crimes.

“Of course, at this point only the cops that Tony hired understand how to take advantage of the information and the trainees are learning of course. Still, he’s dragging us kicking and screaming into the late twentieth century at least. And he’s made a lot of people think, reuniting squibs with their magical families in a way that benefits everyone, even if the traditionalists are violently opposed to using muggle technology.”

“So, it sounds like you and Tony have been working pretty closely together. How’s that working out?” Tobias wanted to know more but decided to use some diplomacy.

“We have been. I’ve been helping to set up the disability and death scheme with him and set up the forensic labs.” Seeing the question in his eyes, she decided to give him what he was after.

“Yes, I still want a relationship with him but no I haven’t put the moves on him. Harry told me about that doctor – Jeanne and how he fell in love with her, even though he shouldn’t have since he was undercover. He told me how Tony met her again, how he saved her husband’s life, how much it hurt seeing her again and realising he still loved her. And then Padfoot told me little bit about her one night when we were drinking a bottle or two of red wine. He also said he and his girlfriend Zoe broke up soon after, partly because she was jealous of Jeanne.

“So yeah, I understand why you gave me the shovel talk now, and you were right, he is broken from everything that’s happened. Hence I’ve decided that I’ll concentrate on just being his friend for now.”

Tobias smiled and gave her an affectionate hug. “Honestly, I’m happy to hear it. Tony could do with a good friend right now, much more than a short-lived affair. Trust me, it wouldn’t have lasted if you’d managed to start anything right now. Focus on supporting him while he starts to put
“I can see he’s doing better, even if being around family and not being able to tell them is hard for him. On the positive side, the job is challenging and he seems to enjoy the mentoring of the baby Aurors. He’s a born teacher,” Hermione said.

Tobias looked bemused. “Even the younger kids seem to adore him. He always claimed that kids hated him.”

Hermione frowned as she slipped into psychologist mode. “Yeah I have a theory about that. Kids are highly perceptive – even non-magical children and I think they picked up that he was holding back something huge – that he was pretending. Admittedly he is still hiding things – big things but not a huge part of himself anymore. And since he started letting Padfoot come out to play regularly, I think he feels freer, happier and kids sense that and accept him.”

“Makes sense. Makes a lot of sense. Anyway… be his friend just because. When he’s ready to move on, perhaps your friendship will deepen into something more.”

Hermione was about to reply when Emily rushed in, throwing herself in the space between the two adults on Tony’s leather sofa which had been in his apartment in DC. He looked at the identical sofa and the numerous comfortable armchairs arranged around the fireplace and he had to laugh at his daughter. Normally she didn’t want to spend time with him but then teenagers were fickle creatures. At least this Christmas had been a been a helluva lot better than last year had been.

Smiling at his daughter, he inquired, “Everything okay, Em?”

Nodding contentedly, she announced, “Dinner is ready, guys and Delores just pulled up in her Mini Hatchback.” Emily had fallen in love with Delores’ yellow and black Mini Cooper. Tony was miffed because he thought his car was way cooler.

Emily grinned at the most powerful witch in the UK and asked the Minister of Magic, “Hey Hermione, are you coming to see Aladdin with us tomorrow night?”

“Yes, Emily. Tony invited me too. I haven’t been to a panto in a very long time. I’m looking forward to getting dressed up for something that isn’t work related. I can’t wait!”

“Me too. Maybe we can go shopping. I have nothing to wear.”

Tobias rolled his eyes at the blatant exaggeration but since Emily was her mother’s daughter he decided that discretion was the better part of valour and kept his mouth shut. Besides, he was so happy that she was enjoying their vacation.

Figuring she missed going clothes shopping with her mother, Hermione nodded. “Sure, why not. We’ll invite Rose and my Mum along; have a girls’ day out at the Boxing Day sales.”

Sniffling with mixed emotions, Emily threw her arms around the warm-hearted mother. “Thanks, that sounds awesome. Your mom is really cool, by the way. And thanks for inviting us to spend Christmas with you and Tony. I just wish Mom was here, too. It’s great to have such a big family.”

As Tony carried in a couple of plates of sandwiches into the dining area, Emily looked at him pensively and smiled. “Hey guys, can we make Tony a part of the family too. He already feels like one of us.”

Hermione smiled at her parents who’d also come in behind him, carry platters of yummy smelling food before she glanced at Tony in amusement. “What do you say, Tony? Want to be adopted?”
He snorted, laughing. “Make me sound like a stray dog that is looking for a furever home, why don’t you, Madame Minister.”

“Well you do have that whole puppy dog expression going on, Tony.” Hermione teased him gently. Plus, when you’re on a case you’re like a dog with a bone.”

“Yeah and let’s face it, a collar and leash might just keep you out of trouble. You know you’re a trouble-magnet, DiNozzo.” Fornell joined in the teasing fondly, although there was more than a modicum of truth to his statement.

“Oh, that’s hysterical, Guys. So, aren’t you worried that if you lie down with me you’ll end up with fleas? Well save it cuz I’m top dog now. Besides there’s plenty of life in the old dog yet. What… you honestly think I haven’t heard every pun using a dog metaphor or had them used against me? Think again, you two.” Tony smirked back at the pair affably.

“Why would people want to liken you to a dog, Tony?” Miranda asked, curiously as Delores came into the room carrying the trifle she’d made along with the pumpkin pie for the visitors and expats from the US to stave off any homesickness.

Hermione and Tobias stared at Tony, wondering how he’d field that tricky query – would he explain Padfoot to the Grangers and Emily. But Tony was a great undercover operative for a damned good reason and not only was he quick on his feet but he was extremely agile mentally as well.

Without missing a beat, he grinned his very fake grin at Delores – and replied. “Because as Delores can attest, when I was at NCIS it was a huge joke that I was a Loyal Saint Bernard to my boss for 15 years, or his lapdog. But dog-gone-it, in a dog-eat-dog-world, it looks like the last laugh is on me, since no one thought I had the dog’s bollocks to leave him.”

Finally shooting a look at Hermione and Tobias and smiling, this time contentedly he observed. “So… I guess it isn’t true what they say…you really can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Chapter End Notes

Well there you have it – 32 chapters, just under 240,000 words and a lot of author angst and joy as I say goodbye to these characters. Another story done and dusted!

As I usually do at the end of my stories I usually mention what is next on the agenda. I plan to resume writing my stalled fic – Rising to the Bait and complete it. The problem was that I was actually planning on redeeming Gibbs in that story and then the season thirteen debacle happened. I was just so angry with the Gibbs character and the actor who plays him. He is an EP on the show which means that he pretty much signs off on every story arc including that awful season13 including the whole Tiva secret love child. In good conscience, I just couldn’t write an ending redeeming him after MH decided to be petty and pay back an actor who was leaving by giving him and his fans such a pathetic send of after 13 years of loyalty. I just couldn’t do it and I didn’t know how to write myself out of the corner I was in. Now, thanks to my good friend, Arress, who is always a great sounding board, I have a few new ideas about where to go and will start working on it soon.

As to other projects, I was also half way through two other fics when I began writing
Serieux. Thinking at the time it was only going to be a fairly short story I stopped writing them, so now I can go back and finish them off. One is a redux of season 4 and yes, I know it has been done many times already but I like to think I have a fresh take on that arc. The second story is a tag to The Admiral’s Daughter – with a difference. :) Of course, I still have my ongoing series of tags There’s Always Tomorrow that I will continue to add to.

Until the next one...

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